

Facts about the empirical basis of the dissertation

My primary methods to enter the large and unruly field of socially engaged art projects in the Chinese countryside have been repeated fieldwork visits to Bishan Village of longer and shorter duration, interviews with villagers, artists and intellectuals as well as a close reading of the articles and essays coming from Ou Ning's hand.

About Mai Corlin Bagger-Petersen

Mai Corlin has an M.A. degree in China Studies from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. She produced her PhD dissertation at Aarhus University, Department of Culture and Society, China Studies. As a visiting PhD fellow Mai spend time with Prof. Grant Kester's group at the Department of Visual Arts, University of California, San Diego and became part of the editorial collective behind FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism.

Time and place for the defence

October 7, 13.00

School of Culture and Society Aarhus University
Building 1441, Auditorium 1, room 012 Taasingegade 3, 8000 Aarhus C
(also entrance from Fredrik Nielsens Vej 7)

Contact

Mai Corlin Bagger-Petersen
Mail: maicorlin@gmail.com

DEFENCE

TROJAN HORSES IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE

THE BISHAN COMMUNE
AND THE PRACTICE OF
SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART
IN RURAL CHINA



PhD thesis by Mai Corlin Bagger-Petersen

TROJAN HORSES IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE THE BISHAN COMMUNE AND THE PRACTICE OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN RURAL CHINA

This thesis is concerned with socially engaged art projects in the Chinese countryside – with the artists and intellectuals who are involved, the villagers they meet and the local authorities they negotiate with. The arrival of urban artists were followed by negotiations, clashes of imaginaries and conflicting visions of the future and of how Chinese society is best organized for all parties involved. I thus explore these projects as practical examples of what happens when urban artists practice in the face of power and people in rural China.

How to Start Your Own Utopia

The vantage point of this thesis is the Bishan Commune; a socially engaged long-term art project initiated in the Chinese countryside. In 2010 artist, editor, curator and filmmaker Ou Ning drafted a notebook entitled Bishan Commune: How to Start Your Own Utopia. The notebook presents a utopian ideal of another way of life withdrawn from Chinese authorities and based on the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid. The main question, fed by curiosity and wonder, is thus exactly the question of how the Chinese countryside (and political landscape) can provide the backdrop for an anarchist, utopian community? In other words: How do you start your own utopia in the Chinese countryside?

The Bishan Commune Project

In 2011 the commune was established in Bishan Village in rural Anhui Province and in 2013 Ou Ning left Beijing and moved permanently to Bishan with his family. The primary activities of the project unfolded around a yearly large-scale art festival as well as dialogues and collaborations with the villagers, reading groups, smaller exhibitions, researcher-in-residence programs, concerts, publication of magazines, preservation of local handicrafts traditions, a community supported agriculture (CSA) project and many other kinds of activities.

Trojan Horses

I explore the Bishan Project as a Trojan Horse – in the sense feminist art critic Lucy Lippard evoked, when she called the Trojan Horse the first activist artwork. Within the Trojan Horse, I argue, an aesthetic dialogue takes place. The conversations taking place in the village between the arriving artists, tourists, the authorities and the villagers residing in Bishan thus provide for the centerpiece of the Bishan Project – and as this thesis will show the dialogues slowly but surely changed the perceptions of villagers and artists alike as to which direction the future of Bishan should develop in.

Closure

In February 2016 the local authorities closed the Bishan Project, supposedly on verdict from the central government. They claimed that the Bishan Project was “politically incorrect.” However, what actually brought about the closure should be understood as a hodgepodge of issues and concerns related to local governance. My argument is that it was not unilaterally the “incorrect” ideological sentiments that closed down the project, because as the Bishan Project ventured deeper into the power dynamics of Bishan Village, substantial conflicts with the local government were revealed – something, I argue, that becomes the beginning of the end of the Bishan Project – along with increasingly harsh and more frequent crackdowns on intellectuals and artists operating in contemporary China.

Conclusion

After the arrival of the Bishan Project in 2011 and the opening of the Bishan Bookstore in 2014, Bishan Village began to experience a steady influx of tourists. This in effect meant, that the Bishan Project's endeavors in rural Anhui to a large extent laid out the groundwork for an elaborate high-class tourism industry, an infrastructure that can be readily overtaken by the local government as life in Bishan Village goes on without the presence of the urban artists.