Experimental Beijing

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The early years of the twenty-first century served as a turning point for Chinese contemporary art. During the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the censorious attitude that characterized post-1989 official response to contemporary art gave way to a new market-driven, culture industry valuation of art. At this conjunction of the international art market and neoliberal restructuring in China, experimental artists who once felt the brunt of Cultural Bureau control found themselves in the reverse position of being courted, sometimes by state-supported entities, to advance China’s national image on the global stage. Market-reform exhibition spaces generating new middle-class distinction gradually eclipsed state-controlled museums whose mandate had been to exhibit the art of proletarian revolutionary nationalism. This activity centered in China’s rapidly transforming “global” cities and occurred in tandem with revaluations of rural and urban space, public and private boundaries, and masculinity and femininity. My ethnography, based predominantly in Beijing, presents Chinese contemporary art as a zone of cultural encounter in which these revaluations were represented, worked out, and questioned. Its participants included artists, officials, urban planners, cultural consultants, and art professionals from around the world who, in repeated encounters in China and abroad, negotiated what counts as Chinese and what counts as art. In debates about women and art, they also negotiated what counts as feminist.

Experimental Beijing examines the social role of art and competing ideas of aesthetic, cultural, and market value in reform-era China. It does so with a feminist attentiveness to power dynamics in the work of art under the cultural conditions of late socialism–late liberalism that characterized China’s shifting position in the world. As new monuments to China’s global future reiterated and remade symbolic orders of the past, other visions of being in the world glimmered at their powerful edges. Like monumentality, ephemerality also memorializes, not the victor, but his shadow histories, their radical potential and their precarity.

Read the Prologue and Introduction HERE.

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