

Main Title

Guerrilla Living Syndrome: A Social Micro-Practice of Alternative Living

forget art, Beijing, China

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forget art is a loose collective initiated in 2009 by Chinese artist Ma Yongfeng, focusing on intervention-base work through situations and shows often with a touch of the absurd. Their work promotes small-scale, subtle disturbances in the fabric of society, which they describe as a “social micro-practice.”

Working by and large outside of recognised gallery spaces, the creation and value of social space has become an important material for them. *forget art* keys into the long history of nomadism with particular attention to the local experience in China with its mass population of migrant workers as well as the more international development of the itinerant white-collar worker. So in their “situations” they display ambivalence towards the fixed location, and that feeds into their approach to production and presentation, feeling that sometimes it is necessary to “forget” in order to proceed. As Ma quips “... that’s also why we don’t need any space – because we “forget art,” why do we need any space to do this?!”

forget art made its first appearance at the *Dragon Fountain Bathhouse* in September of last year, with a group show inserting a collection of minimal works into a temporarily *détourned* bathhouse in Beijing’s Caochangdi Art Village, the light touches of the pieces infusing the rooms without asserting their presence or nature, the male and female areas open to all for a few hours only.

The works present in the bathhouse appeared as small situations expanding on the idea of an artwork, but always with a stand point somewhere between the object and the situation. At the time Ma explained to me that “An ‘object’ is just this thing [indicating a cup], but if we draw a circle around it, it’s an expanded object, developed, and it becomes a situation. But we don’t want it to become bigger and bigger, we’re just in the middle, in-between.”

This sensibility has laid the groundwork for *forget art’s Guerrilla Living Syndrome* that began in April. *Guerrilla Living Syndrome* (created by Ma Yongfeng, Yang Xinguang and Wu Xiaojun) will be a series of projects continuing to attend to these subtle displacements of spatial and social constructions but applying to wider forms of subject matter. As the name suggest, all the sub-projects will build up to a renegotiation with our social relations based on lived space.

A starting point for this new project is the effect of the *Hukou* system on life in China. As a Chinese citizen, you must possess a *Hukou* for the particular area in which you permanently reside, giving you rights in that area. While not preventing you from moving around, a *Hukou* make things like healthcare more convenient in that area and treatment for serious health issues can only be received in your *Hukou*. Although certainly not as draconian as it used to be, the *Hukou* system represents a strong tie to a “home” area.

With the *Hukou* system, the psychological and practical issues of accommodation outside of your area becomes an issue, so the first *Guerrilla Living Syndrome* project *Youth Apartment Exchange Project (YAEP)* picks up on the issues of nomadism seen in the previous projects while providing practical accommodation possibilities for the participants. As Ma says: “People move many times in their lives, and there are also a lot of temporary spaces in the city – Starbucks, hotels, restaurants. We want all spaces to become temporary.”

On a practical level YAEP takes the form of social website that allows the participants to find others who want to exchange apartments, and then share the experience and stories behind the exchange. The site is not just for apartment swapping though, anything can be shared through this open barter system.

One effect of this system is to bring people together, promoting social interaction through exchange. Ma worries about the contemporary tendency of people to live their lives online, weakening real world social bonds. As Japan has its *otaku*, China has its *zhainan* (宅男) and *shengnu* (剩女) which are recognised

as potential problems for society. YAEP addresses this by providing an arena for real-world socialisation through the exchange format, in what Ma characterises as “from Facebook to face-to-face.”

When I put it to Ma that in practice exchanging apartments would perhaps not be easy for many people, he was pragmatic about the issues involved, and also pointed out the part traditional Confucian family values will play on participation. These emphasise your family as your top priority while those outside of it are seen as less important or trustworthy. This background will make exchange with strangers difficult for many people, so to begin with the project will bring existing friends together to exchange with each other.

These social barriers are the things that this project seeks to address with its small interventions, which *forget art* see as a way to adjust society as a whole: “Chinese civil society is not like Western civil society. [Chinese society] can be very cold and selfish... We want to make our projects the starting point to let people accept their value as a citizen, to care about strangers, to care about society, about social responsibility. This is not an art project: it’s a social thing.”

Reflecting the nomadic ways of life, YAEP represents alternative living practices, and although Ma recognises this is “a very utopian way of thinking about society in the future,” nevertheless he feels that taking a lesson from art practice can provide new possibilities in the wider field:

“In the art world we talk about alternative strategies, but we can expand this to everyday life. In the traditional Beijing *hutongs* we have shared toilets in every alley; it’s more sociable (but maybe less convenient). But modern life says that having a toilet in your house is the only acceptable value, but that thinking is very much like what Marcuse addresses in ‘One-Dimensional Man.’ We want this society to have many different values of living, not just one.”

Appropriately, this is a long-term project for *forget art* which they see lasting 10 years (or more), and the results very much depend on circumstances; Ma is happy to leave that aspect of the project open: “China has a very sophisticated society, so the results of this are really unknown.”

Starting from the minimal roots of the *Dragon Fountain Bathhouse* project, *Guerrilla Living Syndrome* shows that the approach of *forget art* will always be subtle but with big aspirations: “We want to make a very small change – to find that critical point, where we can try and get some more interesting things to appear.”

forget art: <http://www.forgetart.org/>

Youth Apartment Exchange Project: <http://www.yaep.net/>

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