

**Frieze**, *City Report: Shanghai*, Text/Alvin Li, February 15th 2017.

frieze

**Alvin Li**

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When I moved back to Shanghai three years ago, after studying in the US, the city was producing more DJ wannabes than artists. I dived into the underground to run queer film screenings and parties; art came later. But a shift in power from Beijing – a city long acknowledged as China's art capital – to Shanghai has been well under way since the turn of the decade. This past November, which saw the simultaneous opening of a biennale, two art fairs and a dazzling number of gallery exhibitions, served to trumpet the city's ascendance. However, the news stories have tended to focus on sizes of buildings, sums of money and superstar curators, seemingly forgetting the artist's *a priori* role in any art scene. While my attempt here to sketch the city through the practice of three local artists is necessarily both personal and partial, I hope it will serve as a reminder that, without the artists, nothing could be written, curated or sold.

Artist-run spaces may be everywhere in centres like New York, but they are only just coming into their own in Shanghai. Amongst the first of these was am art space, founded in 2008 by the artist Yu Ji and her partner, fellow artist Deng Yeming. Initially, am functioned as a kind of salon, in which young local artists like Lu Yang and Zhang Ruyi could test out their ideas. In 2010, it relocated to its current basement venue and has since housed international residencies – including artist-duo Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho – as well as more developed projects. Defining am as a 'room for introspection', Yu reflects that the revamped space has allowed her a more profound appreciation of artistic labour, which has fed back into her own sculptural and performance practices. These are often reflections on the durability of materials and memory, and the elasticity of time. A recent highlight is *Etudes-Lento III* (2016), an installation in the mountains surrounding the Sifang Art Museum in Nanjing, for which the artist spent a month hand painting pine resin on to a floating structure suspended in the upper branches of a tree. The piece will remain there indefinitely, until it degrades or is overgrown.

## LEO XU PROJECTS



Photograph: Li  
Shen, part of a  
specially  
commissioned  
photography  
project for *frieze*

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Although aaajiao is not a Shanghai native, and now spends half of his time in Berlin, he so perfectly synchronizes with the tempo of the city that it would be an oversight not to include him here. aaajiao moved to Shanghai in 2007, after some fruitless attempts to navigate the then-booming Beijing art world, which tended to favour conventional media such as sculpture and painting. In comparison, Shanghai – historically more hybrid and perhaps, therefore, more sceptical of ‘authenticity’ – has provided new media artists, such as aaajiao, Hu Weiyi and Miao Ying, with the space and resources to experiment. From his early interactive installations through running Xindanwei (a short-lived ‘innovative company’ that was part social-media platform, part creative hub for startups) to his more recent projects, speculating on the future of human societies driven by technology, aaajiao is a cyber *flâneur*. His work addresses themes ranging from data processing and the country’s internet usage to electronic music and medicine, to envision contemporary Chinese consciousness in a way that is both emblematic of artists of his generation and distinctly his own.

Born in 1980 in Gansu Province, Zhang Ding is the oldest artist on my list; yet, he is arguably also the most engaged with the present. Having lived in Shanghai since 2004, Zhang has developed his artistic practice out of a documentary filmmaking career that focused on local marginal communities, such as migrants and homosexuals, and has since evolved into an elaborate maze of multimedia installations and happenings. His strand of institutional critique is particularly provocative: a recent project, *Devouring Time* (2016), saw him turn the Rockbund Art Museum into a jail where art world A-listers are locked in gilded cells and forced to finish a lunch typically served in Chinese prisons. Preferring the moniker of producer to artist, he has also been actively involved in Shanghai nightlife, organizing parties and live shows where he can observe the city’s indefatigable youth culture.



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With museums mushrooming in Shanghai, the real question is whether artists will also establish themselves here; otherwise, there may soon be as many institutions as artists. But that in itself deserves a whirl as a thought experiment: Shanghai's skyline is made for dystopian fantasies.

Photograph: Li Shen, part of a specially commissioned photography project for frieze



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