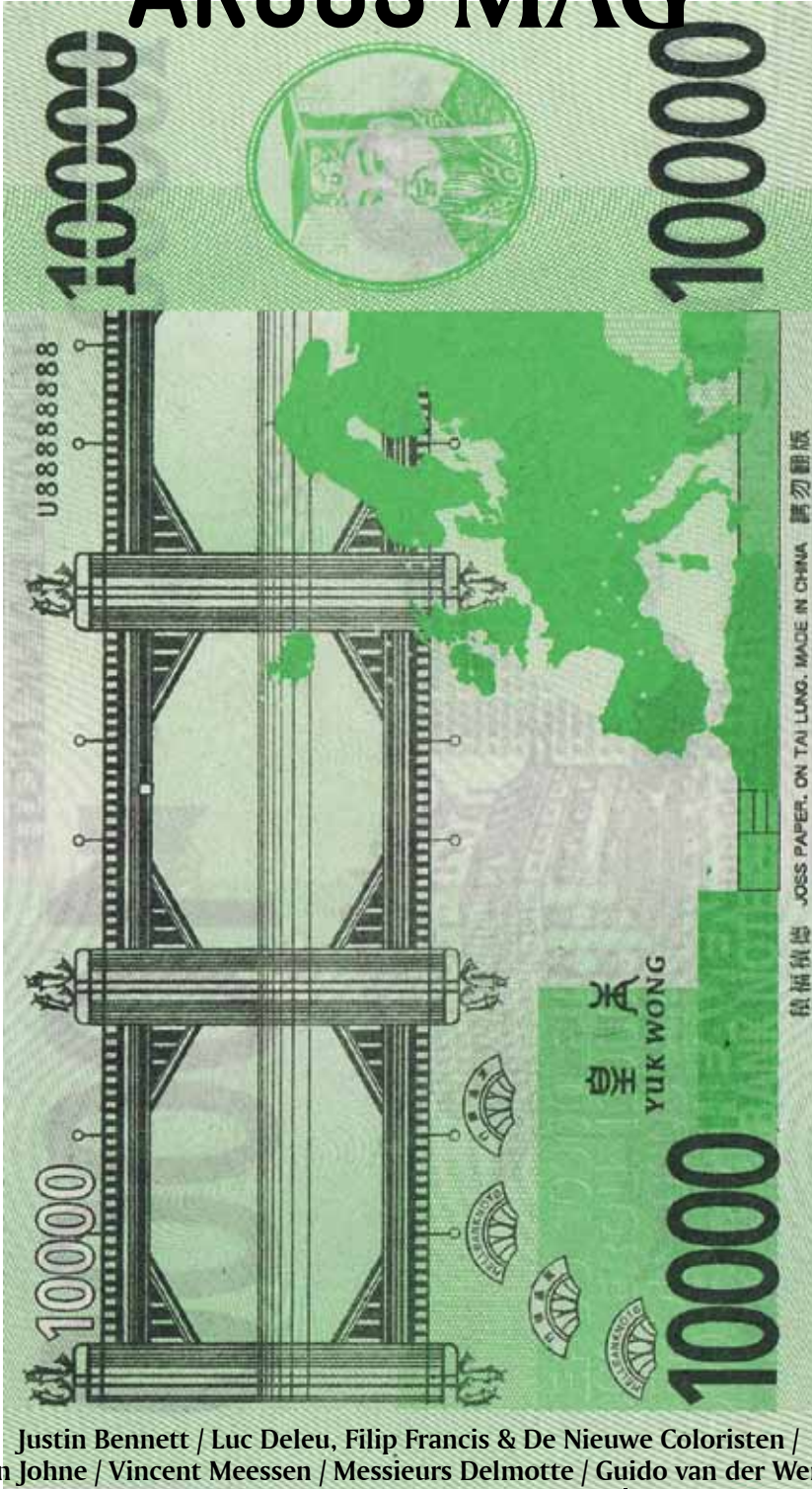


ARGOS MAG

Carol Yinghua Lu on Vermeir & Heiremans
Philippe Kern: Rendons l'Europe empathique et altruiste
Ive Stevenheydens in discussion with Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson



Justin Bennett / Luc Deleu, Filip Francis & De Nieuwe Coloristen /
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Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

ARGOS CENTRE FOR ART AND MEDIA ARGOSMAGAZINE N°04 JAN — MAR 2012

29.01 – 01.04.2012

**VERMEIR &
HEIREMANS
THE RESIDENCE
(A WAGER FOR
THE AFTERLIFE)**



OPENING NIGHT
28.01.2012 18.00-21.00

(NL) In 2006 startten Katleen Vermeir (1973) en Ronny Heiremans (1962) A.I.R. ('artist in residence'), een samenwerkingsproject dat de dynamische relatie tussen kunst, architectuur en economie thematiseert. Deze praktijk ontwikkelt zich in verschillende projecten waarin architectuur het projectieveld voor consumentendromen vormt. Hun loft-appartement in Brussel is het uitgangspunt voor de productie van wat ze omschrijven als "gemedieerde extensies" van deze privéruimte. Vermeir & Heiremans zien A.I.R. als een platform voor samenwerking. Hieruit ontstond bijvoorbeeld op uitnodiging van Arnolfini (Bristol) het research-based video werk *The Good Life* (2009), een meditatie over de onontwarbare relatie tussen kunst, vastgoed, kunstinstellingen en de economie in bredere zin, zoals die tegenwoordig is ingebed in de creatieve industrie. Het werk behoort tot de Argoscollectie. Hun nieuwe videoproject *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* zoomt in op de kunstenaar als ondernemer binnen een geglobaliseerde maatschappij waar de economische context als maatstaf geldt. Het werk inspireert zich op *Faust II*, waarin Goethe Faust als projectontwikkelaar opvoert. Het project werd ontwikkeld tijdens een residentie in China (2009-10). Vermeir & Heiremans initieerden er een samenwerking met Ma Wen, een Chinese kunstenaar / architect, met wie ze inzichten

deelden over het concept 'creatieve clusters'. Ze documenteerden Ma Wen's praktijk als culturele producent. In *The Residence* figureren Ma Wen en twee fictieve personages. De zeer rijke investeerder Hilar verzoekt Ma Wen een huis voor zijn leven na de dood te ontwerpen. Zijn personage opent een wereld van economisch fetisjisme. De andere figuur, een 'mysterieuze vrouw', is veeleer allegorisch van aard. Vertolkt door eenzelfde actrice in een klein dozijn naamloze rollen, verschijnt de vrouw niet alleen als Ma Wens kantoorassistente, maar verpersoonlijkt ze ook de vrouwen in Hilar's wereld. Op die manier loopt haar veelvuldigheid parallel aan de wispelturigheid van de financiële markt. Voor *The Residence* werkten Vermeir & Heiremans eveneens nauw samen met de Britse geluidsartiest Justin Bennett. Naast de geluidsarchitectuur ontwierp hij een aan de geld- & goudmarkt verbonden algoritme dat een oneindige transformatie van het Hilar-beeldmateriaal genereert. (IS)

Parallel aan de tentoonstelling in Argos presenteert Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen *The Residence (reading room)*, een discursief programma naar aanleiding van het project (zie ook pagina 19).



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

(FR) Katleen Vermeir (1973) et Ronny Heiremans (1962) ont lancé en 2006 la pratique A.I.R. ('artist in residence'), qui explore la dynamique entre l'art, l'architecture et l'économie. La pratique englobe divers projets, dont l'un définit leur habitat privé comme une œuvre d'art. Se livrant à un travail de réflexion, les artistes emploient leur loft bruxellois comme du matériel, produisant des "mediated extensions", des espaces communs, de leur espace domestique. Vermeir et Heiremans utilisent la pratique A.I.R. comme plateforme de collaboration avec les personnes les plus diverses. Cette approche débouche sur des œuvres vidéo expérimentales comme *The Good Life*, commandée par Arnolfini, Bristol en 2009 et qui intégra plus tard la collection d'Argos. La vidéo est une méditation sur la relation inextricable entre l'art, l'immobilier, les institutions artistiques et la vaste structure de l'économie, aujourd'hui exploitée par la 'classe créative'. Leur nouvelle installation vidéo *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife) - La Résidence (un pari sur l'au-delà)* (2012) porte son attention sur l'artiste comme entrepreneur dans une société mondialisée qui considère l'économie comme unique mesure des choses. Elle s'inspire de *Faust II*, œuvre dans laquelle Goethe fait de Faust un promoteur. Le projet a été conçu au cours d'une longue résidence en Chine (2009-10). Vermeir & Heiremans y sont entrés en collaboration avec Ma Wen, un artiste et architecte chinois, dont ils partagent les vues sur le concept de *creative clusters*, de *complexes créatifs*. Ils ont documenté sa pratique artistique de producteur culturel. *The Residence* présente Ma Wen et deux personnages de fiction. L'un est Hilar, un très riche investisseur qui demande à l'architecte chinois de créer une maison pour son *au-delà*. C'est l'univers du fétichisme économique qui s'ouvre à travers le personnage de Hilar. L'autre personnage – la Femme Mystérieuse – est plutôt allégorique, revêtant une douzaine de rôles, tous tenus par une seule actrice. A la fois assistante dans le bureau de Ma Wen et incarnation de toutes les femmes dans l'univers de Hilar, elle reflète par sa multiplicité la volatilité du marché financier. Vermeir et Heiremans ont étroitement collaboré avec Ma Wen et le musicien britannique Justin Bennett. Mis à part la bande-son, les artistes ont demandé à ce dernier de créer un algorithme lié aux marchés des devises et de l'or et produisant une édition sonore sans fin du métrage Hilar. (IS)

Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen présente en parallèle à l'exposition *The Residence (reading room)*, un programme discursif autour le projet (voir aussi page 19).

(EN) In 2006 Katleen Vermeir (1973) and Ronny Heiremans (1962) initiated A.I.R. ('artist in residence'), a collaborative practice that examines the dynamics between art, architecture and economy. The practice encapsulates different projects, one of which defines their private habitat as an artwork. Working reflexively, the artists use their loft apartment in Brussels as source material, producing 'mediated extensions' of their domestic space. Vermeir & Heiremans use A.I.R. as a platform for collaborating with a variety of people. This approach led to research-based video works like *The Good Life*, that was commissioned by Arnolfini, Bristol in 2009 and later became part of the Argos collection. This video is a meditation on the inextricable relationship between art, real estate, art institutions and the wider structure of the economy, harnessed today by the 'creative class'. Their new video installation *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* (2012) focuses on the artist as entrepreneur in a global society that qualifies economy as the single measure of things. The work relates to *Faust II*, in which Goethe presents Faust as a project developer. Conceived during an extended residency in China (2009-10), the project initiated a collaboration with the Chinese artist/architect Ma Wen. Sharing insights on the *creative clusters* concept, Vermeir & Heiremans documented his practice as a cultural producer. *The Residence* features Ma Wen and two fictional characters. One is Hilar, a very wealthy investor who commissions the Chinese architect to develop a house for his *afterlife*. Through Hilar a world of economic fetishism opens up. The other one – the Mysterious Woman – is a rather allegorical character, enveloping a dozen roles, all of them performed by one actress. Appearing not only as assistant in Ma Wen's office but also as the embodiment of all women in Hilar's world, her multiplicity aligns with the financial market's shiftiness. Vermeir & Heiremans collaborated closely with Ma Wen, and with British sound artist Justin Bennett. Apart from the soundscape, the artists also commissioned the latter to design an algorithm that is linked to the currency & gold market and that generates a never ending edit of the Hilar footage. (IS)

Parallel to the exhibition in Argos, Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen presents *The Residence (reading room)*, a discursive program on the project (see also page 19).

The Residence is a production of Limited Editions vzw supported by Flanders Audiovisual Fund and the Flemish Community. Coproduction: Argos (Brussels), C-Mine (Genk), Cultuurcentrum (Bruges), deBuren (Brussels), Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen (Antwerp), FLACC (Genk), Manifesta 9 Limburg (Genk) and Triodos Fonds. Research support: artist residencies TIM (Beijing), CEAC (Xiamen).

The Residence is a video project by Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans in collaboration with Ma Wen, Justin Bennett, Amir Borenstein, Mieja Hollevoet, Salome Schmuki, Karlijn Sileghem, Wim van der Grijn. Photos: Kristien Daem.

THE RESIDENCE IS SOMETHING IMMATERIAL

Essay: Carol Yinghua Lu

EN Like an architect, I will start with some basics even though you might already know of them. In 2006, Katleen Vermeir (1973) and Ronny Heiremans (1962) initiated A.I.R ('artist in residence'). A.I.R. is about using their loft apartment, which was built and furnished by themselves through an extended process of labour and time, in Brussels, as a platform and source material to explore "mediated extensions" of their domestic space. It's a reflexive practice on the engineering of life styles by social, political and economic structures and ambitions, imbedded in various channels of information dissemination, not least life style and fashion magazines, which the artists refer to repeatedly in their work. Their fascination with places where buildings are created driven by a certain economic philosophy, as well as with domestic spaces that house people and desires, led them to the creation of *The Good Life*, which was commissioned by Arnolfini, Bristol in 2009. Like any good architects, Vermeir and Heiremans developed the project with the specificities of Arnolfini and the immediate surroundings of the port city of Bristol in mind. *The Good Life* emulated a strategy commonly employed by property developers to activate certain fantasies and aspirations within their clients by resorting to the use of catch phrases, elaborate descriptions of extra attributes, such as the added value of having artworks around. Only that it took place within the bare walls of an art centre. This is an experience that many have encountered to some degree when embarking on an attempt to acquire a new apartment that is yet to be built. After being greeted by the receptionist at a sales office, we would then be led to a property agent, who would show us to an elaborate architectural model that's often the centrepiece of the sales office. Often the foam model is a miniature of a gated community, a group of buildings,

and its immediate surroundings with interactive lighting device that can light up a certain feature when pointed to by a remote control held in the hand of the agent. "It will be very close to a kindergarten. There will be a supermarket with lots of variety. It will be close to a subway stop to be completed in year 2016. There will be a beautiful garden in this part." Promises are made. Temptations are offered. Emotions and excitement are evoked. Deals are sealed. We have been invited to join the imaginary of the sales agent, usually oblivious of the bigger capitalist fantasy of our society that urges us to own and then be happy. We are too absorbed into our own desires and projections of what a good life could be, to see the bigger picture. We would then end up buying something almost as intangible as a dream, prescribed to us by the agency and his/her scripted sales pitch, without even having a chance to see the actual building or apartment. Behind the façade of large-scale billboard ads advocating high fashion way of living there are endless scenes of exposed soil and underpaid and poorly equipped construction workers. It's a formidable attempt by the sales agents to create the right pitch, the right script, knowing which buttons to push and what kind of aspirations, sentiment, and vanity to evoke within each of us, steering us away from the bare facts right in front of us. We have been convinced that what we buy is what we want and hope for. What we want as individuals is often shaped by what is communicated to us through the media, not least in life style, design and architecture magazines that stipulate models of the perfect settings for living. This familiar scenario was re-enacted in *The Good Life* in an extreme fashion. The upscale property that a well-dressed property agent is trying to sell to a group of potential customers in the video is actually the gallery spaces of Arnolfini but the artists made no attempt to hide the nakedness of the white walls, the crates, the wrapped up paintings and the noise of technicians installing works in the background. Instead, the presence of all these elements is emphasized throughout the film, juxtaposed with the agent's unperturbed introduction of the up-market architectural proposal and lifestyle that she is promoting and trying to sell, describing and inviting them to imagine with her the interior, the grand views, the artworks on the wall, and ultimately, a 21st century landmark building. As absurd as it seems in the film, seeing *The Good Life* feels like stepping out of our own reality to look at something from afar, a moment of deliberation, reminding us how we have actually all subscribed to a certain logic of an ideal life that is not exactly of our own intention but a collective unconsciousness formulated by media languages and commercial interests, the interests of others. It was only fitting that the words spoken in the film to describe the

estate were all taken from various life style magazines, architecture and urban planning publications that the artists had come across. It revealed how these terms have become almost empty signifiers on their own accord. They can practically be applied anywhere. The property, and perhaps, the good life as embodied in the ownership of such property, is the emperor's new clothes, something existing in articulation, not in truth.

The Residence, a new video work by Vermeir and Heiremans, can also be considered one of the "mediated extensions" of the artists' home, a reflexive exercise on the collective psyche of our society and time that motivates us to claim, to build, to expand, to sell, to own, which constitutes an endless cycle. As the title suggests, the plot of the film is a housing project commissioned by Hilar, an investor modelled on a real person based in Xiamen, Geneva and Hong Kong whom the artists had met while doing a residency in Xiamen from 2009 to 2010. It was during this residency that *The Residence* was conceived and planned. The story evolves as the Chinese architect Ma Wen receives a commission to design a house from Hilar and alternates his positions and thoughts between his role as an architect and his alter ego as a painter. The role of the investor in the film, Hilar, can be any top-level businessman in fact, who according to the research of the artists, operate relying on such references as the 'I Ching for investors' and 'the planetary predictions' for decision making. His sense of certainty though can be found in the act of owning; an insatiable yearning that is extended to his afterlife. *The Residence* is one that Hilar intends to be created for his afterlife, but it really speaks of many of our current obsessions: one of them being cultural activities and the role of artists implicated and instrumentalized into the scheme of city marketing and property branding. In the film, there is a former mining site that has been transformed into a cultural centre with oversized artist studios and gallery spaces.



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Good Life (a guided tour)*, 2009.
Photo Michael De Lausnay.

As the video opens, we follow Ma Wen, who ponders about life and his determination to leave his marks on the earth by embarking on an ambitious housing project for a million residents, from where he stands by the seaside of Xiamen, where he lives in real life as a practicing architect, into the sleek steel elevator that takes him into his architectural office. It is in this office that we are introduced to Hilar and his vision for his fantasy home project for his afterlife. Hilar appears not in flesh but in photographs, dressed in a white suit and wearing a white tie. In these pinned up photographs on the walls, Hilar, an older Western-looking man, looks down at the torn out magazine pages that cover a long table. On his left, a woman lies face down on top of an even bigger pile of torn out magazine pages on the floor. In another image, Hilar sits in front of a desk in a rather boring room, looking at two computer screens simultaneously, perhaps checking on his stock performance while trying to figure out what he wants for his afterlife. We then wander into Xiamen's scenic botanical garden with Ma Wen, after he has giving a brief order over his phone to someone, asking him/her to entice as many workers as possible for the project, to make them work hard and to update him with daily news concerning the progress of digging a trench, recalling the ambition he pronounced at the beginning of the film to "make room for a million to live"... "on green fertile fields where men and herds may gain swift comfort from the new made earth." In the garden, as Ma Wen seeks inspiration for his architectural plan, we hear Hilar narrating what he dreams of for his house, "with splendid gardens all around."¹ He continues to pronounce his vision to Ma Wen, communicating through computer screens, while dressed casually in what appears like pyjamas. As the film unfolds, a larger ideological context is slowly revealed to us. Ma Wen as the painter performs his act of painting in what appears to be an art event. The artist and the act of art making become something for the spectator, something not valued on its own but being projected with a certain value to be added to a life style or the gentrification of an area in the name of developing a cultural district. To quote Ma Wen: "People come with great curiosity to see how avant-garde artists live and create their work..." "Some artists oppose the excessive commercialization that turns the district into a supermarket where art becomes an object of speculation"... "I think this question of opposition, firstly, is a misunderstanding of creative progress and of a city's progress. In fact this opposition to productivity is really nothing more than another type of productivity."² In the editorial introduction to the #29 issue of *e-flux journal* that focuses on Moscow Conceptualism, the editors wrote, "In this world, communist ideology had already converted objects to ideas (collective property)

and citizen-subjects to (non-professional) artists, so the found object, the privileging of idea over material, and the disappearance of the artist's hand were already indistinguishable from an ideological landscape taken for granted by the artists." It is in the mixture of fictional and factual accounts of *The Residence* that the complicated mingling and conspiracy of both capitalist and communist ideologies, the ideological landscape we inhabit in our societies, is seen clearly. In *The Residence*, to place something meant for the afterlife as the seed for the growth of a story is to stress the complexities in which we find ourselves no longer able to make out whether what we want is the material or the immaterial, whether what we want is something fictional or truthful, and whether we are the prey or the conspirator of the system. Or perhaps both the material and the immaterial have become derivative and redundant and we are already indefinitely implicated in the pact made by Faust as in Goethe's *Faust Part II*, a key reference the artists had cited for their production. What Ma Wen says at the opening scene of the video, for example, are quotes taken from Goethe's *Faust Part II*, in which *Faust* is seen as a project developer. "We think the narrative of progress and continuous development in Faust has become the official discourse in China, hence we asked him to speak like a party official when he quotes Faust."¹³ In fact, all that Ma Wen says in *The Residence* are quotations Vermeir and Heiremans have selected from various sources, not only Goethe, but also the Chinese writer Lu Xun, when his alter-ego the artist speaks, as well as magazines such as *Urban China 33*, a special issue about Creative Industries in China that was edited by Ned Rossiter, Monica Carriço and Bert de Muynck. "But it comes close to what he speaks about in his classes (he teaches at Xiamen University) and with his clients for his architectural proposals when they want fancy bars or hotels."¹⁴ The blurred line between facts and fictions, the present and the future, quotes from fiction and actual speeches, Ma Wen's engagement with the society as an architect and his dealing with the metaphorical as an artist, the switching scenes in the film between China and Belgium,



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

among cities such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Xiamen and Brussels, resonates with the displacements in our societies. By placing itself aptly on multiple structures of time and space, the virtual and the factual, *The Residence* establishes its lines of thought beyond the dichotomy of the real and the fictional, the past and the future, pro-development or anti-development. It implicates all of us in the repeated traverses and oscillations of the 'in-between' and gives rise to a critical examination of our own position and desire. In *The Residence*, the Bloomberg talk in the background contains quotes from the 18th century – Hume, Defoe, Burke – all of them reflecting on the economic crisis and bubbles of their time. It is here when we are reminded again that not much has changed since then and we are a mere repetition of what has happened before.

This quote is from Defoe: "That substantial non-entity called CREDIT, seems to have a distinct Essence from all the phenomena in Nature: it is in it self the lightest and most volatile Body in the World, moveable beyond the Swiftness of Lightning; the greatest Alchemist could never fix its mercury, or find out its Quality; it is neither a Soul or a Body; it is neither visible or invisible; it is all consequence, and yet not the effect of a cause; it is a being without matter, a substance without form - A perfect free Agent acting by Wheels and Springs absolutely undiscovered; it comes without call, and goes away unspent; if it flies, the whole nation cannot stay it; if it stays away, no importunity can prevail for its return."¹⁵ We soon discover that the residence being discussed in Vermeir and Heiremans' film is actually something immaterial, something almost tantamount to Defoe's description of CREDIT. In a discussion about the commission of the residence for Hilar's afterlife in the film, Ma Wen describes the house as such: "The client conceived the house as a stage, as a new domestic interior where he could enjoy the privileges of public space without being subjected to its dangers or law. Inside, the client would have absolute control over his environment. He could change night into day, screen a film at noon and order dinner at midnight. He could have appointments in the middle of the night and romantic encounters in the afternoon. It was to be his haven and sanctuary. There was no front, no back, no sides to his house. The house could have been anywhere. It was to be immaterial."¹⁶ It is rather a projection, echoing a certain human sentiment and desire to have absolute control, something that the economy keeps promising us. The more we own, the more control we have. So it doesn't matter what it will be, what form it takes, with "no front, no back, no sides", as long as it is something onto which we can project what we envision to be worth having. The globalized market economy that Ma Wen refers to casually in the video can freely move manufacturing to "other continents" as if it is something intangible, like a gust of wind. In those better developed cities that



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

manage to rid themselves of manufacturing and are ready to move up another step further in the ladder of social classes, art becomes an index for a romantic pursuit of creativity, and more importantly, an aura of the elite. Like economy, art is able to generate money out of nothing. In the frequent reference to developing creative industry and art districts in cities, *The Residence* exposes the real danger that art, our personal worth and our own projections are in, which is that all are being instrumentalized in an effort to keep us in the deal. "By associating himself with the project the client can at one and at the same time be a stock market speculator and patron of the arts. The Residence will be a monument to his sense of refinement."¹⁷ At the same time, one only need to spend just a little on doing up a few warehouse, invite artists to move in and just wait for the land to rise in price. Such a low-investment/high-return project is, according to Ma Wen, real-estate alchemy. At a certain point of the film, we've lost track of whether what Ma Wen describes is in the present or the hereafter. The formula of mixing commerce and consumption with art, fashion, creativity seems to be a time-tested one. We've also lost ourselves in terms of whether what he talks about is just China-specific or simply relevant to the globalized world. The "young crowd of internationalization" represents "a cosmopolite and ideally mobile clientele, who likes to spend time and money at trendy places."¹⁸ After all, material desires are something universal. The cross-references to Goethe's *Faust* and Lu Xun's

stories, such as *Diary of a Madman* (1918), in *The Residence* constitute two parallel narratives throughout the film. One is allegorical to the kind of agreement we have signed ourselves into, which becomes a consumption of ourselves through our own endless acts of consumption. The other exposes a certain despair and vanity in attempting to break out of a dilemma and a given condition. We know well though, both have no remedy, even in the afterlife.

Carol Yinghua Lu is a Chinese curator and writer from Beijing. She is a contributing editor for *Frieze* and writes frequently for international art journals and magazines including *e-flux journal*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Yishu*, and *Tate*. She has recently been appointed one of the Co-Artistic Directors of the 2012 Gwangju Biennale.

- 1 Narratives in *The Residence*.
- 2 Ma Wen's words in *The Residence*.
- 3 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 4 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 5 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 6 Ma Wen's words in *The Residence*.
- 7 Ma Wen's words in *The Residence*.
- 8 Ma Wen's words in *The Residence*.

A WAGER FOR THE AFTERLIFE

CELEBRITY REPORTER LUCY CHEN MEETS THE MAN BEHIND MA WEN STUDIO

Photography: Kristien Daem
Text: Lucy Chen



(EN) Summer of 2009. After finishing his education in Germany, Ma Wen returns to China. He sets up Ma Wen Studio and starts a business that embodies his fundamental artistic ideas and beliefs. After his Journey to the West, Ma Wen finds himself in a much-changed environment. His straightforward way of doing things, his talent for self-promotion and headstrong energy regardless of criticism position him lively against the monolithic conservatism of the state-run design houses. Not yet quite as prestigious as the international firms, his studio is in tune with the Chinese speed, which demands a just-do-it approach and ad hoc strategy.

Lucy Chen: Ma Wen, at the moment you live and work in Xiamen, but you were born in Henan, in the

North of China. And if my memory serves me right, from 2002 till 2009 you lived in Germany where you studied art at the Fine Arts Academy in Munich. That was even before Beijing gave the go-sign for its abroad policy in 2004. How did that extended stay in Europe affect you? Was it important in your decision to become an architect?

Ma Wen: Lucy, I have to say I don't really consider myself an architect. I am a person who does different things. I don't want to be in a position that a priori defines what I do. The same reasoning goes for what you've named my 'Journey to the West'. Of course it had a certain influence, but more important for what I do, seems to be my awareness that the China I left when I moved to Germany and the country I returned to after my German training are two different countries. And even more important is my ability to respond to this new situation. Upon returning I came back to a China that in a way had been remodeled into a capitalist nation. That process had already started when I left, but the speed with which 'the new way' had installed itself during my absence... Incredible! Maybe that's why being here I feel a bit schizophrenic... I have this double sensibility. It was like returning to a country I had not seen before. So many things had changed.

Not only places, but also the people. I could feel the change in the people. I remember saying to myself "Where have all the communists gone..."

LC: Modern, urban, affluent, international... I've read that the successful artist is surprisingly fit as a role model for the new China. The profession is even in the top 10 of preferred professions, as selected by middle class parents for their children. How did it begin for you? Was it a deliberate choice or...

MW: You see, I've had this 'bastard' training. I studied architecture in China. My training as an artist I got in the West, and what I absorbed during those years is based on a western social condition. This probably gave me an edge in China when I returned. As you know, we have this old saying here: "The blossom inside the wall is usually appreciated from the outside." Ever since the Open Door Policy, whatever comes from abroad has been quite influential. I'm not sure how long this will still be the case, and of course we are all aware of the situation in China, which does not exactly allow you to produce without restraints. A single spark could start a prairie fire, so the path is still filled with obstacles, not mentioning self-censorship. You yourself are probably familiar with all of that.

LC: By the way, did you work on something specific in Brussels? You told me on the phone that you were designing a house for some rich investor.

MW: We did lots of things, but the main thing was the work on a new niche product. Actually the whole thing's a test case. What I learned in Germany is the need to maintain a strong focus in order to reach a goal. What's more, I have become rather adroit in shifting between reality and imagination. If you concentrate only on the limits of reality, you may be able to realize a project, but it simply won't be that interesting. Your imagination can prevent you from simply implementing your ideas. Only by going beyond physical boundaries you can produce something new and interesting.

LC: Sounds pretty surreal. What form does it take then?

MW: It takes the form of a film, but we did not edit the film. Then we developed

an algorithm, a set of rules that precisely defines a sequence of operations. Since it was inspired on computerized trading operations in the world of high finance, we wanted our algorithm to be fed by real time financial news. For that we choose the currency market. We had to figure out a way to define tick size and currency equivalents for the video images. That was a very tricky process, but in the end we pulled it off. The news feed made the algorithm into a kind of continuous present that contextualizes the footage. Applying it to the footage generated an edit that would renew itself every time you would watch the film. Actually you could never watch the film twice, since every time the algorithm would generate a new combination of images. It would be like a continuous edit.

LC: Fabulous. How would you define the project? I suppose The Residence is not meant to be built.

MW: It's a representation of our client's way of living. The client's

individual worth is measured by the rise and fall of the stock market. By associating himself with the project the client can at one and the same time be a stock market speculator and patron of the arts. For the client art functions as an index, suggestive of his urge to explore the unknown, of innovative energy and the guts needed to be part of an esoteric, privileged and elite sphere. This aura can be attributed to the inexplicable ability to conjure money out of nothing, which exists both in economy and art. The Residence will be a monument to his sense of refinement.

Shanghai, April 2011.

The previous text is an extract of the complete interview, available as prepublication on www.in-residence.be. A physical copy is available in the exhibition The Residence (a wager for the afterlife) at Argos as well as during The Residence (reading room) at Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen.

ARGOS CENTRE FOR ART AND MEDIA ARGOSMAGAZINE N°04 JAN — MAR 2012



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

CALENDAR

ARGOS CENTRE FOR ART AND MEDIA

WED – SUN 11.00-18.00

WERFSTRAAT 13 RUE DU CHANTIER

B-1000 BRUSSELS

EXHIBITIONS

Vermeir & Heiremans -

The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)

29.01 – 01.04.2012

OPENING NIGHT 28.01.2012 18.00-21.00

Cantemus – Choirs, the Sublime and
the Exegesis of Being

29.01 – 01.04.2012

OPENING NIGHT 28.01.2012 18.00-21.00

BLACK BOX

Sweet Protestations –

Performing Reality In Public Space

29.01 – 01.04.2012

OPENING NIGHT 28.01.2012 18.00-21.00

EXTRA MUROS

The Residence (reading room)

02.02.2012 – 01.04.2012

EXTRA CITY KUNSTHAL ANTWERPEN

TULPSTRAAT 79

B-2060 ANTWERP

Festival Van De Verwarring 2012 – Sapere Aude

21.03 – 31.03.2012

BEURSSCHOUWBURG

A. ORTSTRAAT 20-28 RUE A. ORTS

B-1000 BRUSSELS