

## MADE IN CHINA

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An abandoned factory building with a nail in the wall from which a framework of neon tubes is hanging. The words 'Made in China' fluoresce pallidly in the midst of the red glow.

Anything that is made is made by people – always, somewhere – and this object ends up finding its way to us and we derive pleasure from it. As a child I had a toy car with the words 'Made in England' on the underbelly, between the suspension and the exhaust pipe, in minuscule but clearly legible raised lettering. One day, once I had grasped the words, I understood that this little car also came from somewhere, namely from England. It was like a home address: the car was on a journey and right now it was here. This address also implied that it actually belonged somewhere else. I had until then developed no conception of the origin of things that were part of my life; I was aware of their presence, but not of their provenance. I thought toys came from the shop, in the same way many children in Europe think that babies are flown to their fathers and mothers through the sky in the beak of a stork or are simply found under a gooseberry bush.

The question about the origin of things is in general a question about the beginning, a source.<sup>(1)</sup> Provenance is a major factor in the significance attributed to an artwork; the meaning anchors it in time. **Made in China** is explicit about its provenance, but it is not precise about the meaning; for this we must turn to the artist. The artist is the maker and he derives his freedom from what he does, from what he makes, yet he is also conscious that what he creates is a consequence of what the people who preceded him have produced. The artist belongs to a tradition in which deeds, techniques and methods are perpetuated and developed further. The artist knows this and such an awareness makes it possible for him to transpose the might of a whole country into a work of art, equating his imaginative ability with the productive might of the whole of China. The artwork gives 'Made in China' an identity. These three words no longer denote globe-spanning distribution and trade in goods; they have become an image which is autonomous and self-referential, hypnotically generating a universe in which the dynamism of an entire nation is palpable.

**Made in China** is at the same time a personal statement, an existential enunciation by the artist: 'I am.' As a counterbalance to the Western world's Cartesian credo of '*Cogito ergo sum*' – 'I think therefore I am' – it asserts, 'It is made in China and it is me.' **Made in China** has become a signature, and the statement is by extension an intentional provocation as well as an undermining of the myth of the unicity of works of art and the artist. It replaces the artist, who disappears in three words and is simultaneously subsumed by a country that is huge. Only the artist who understands the freedom of being unattached, the unconditional, can proffer this ultimate token of solidarity with his nation.

By employing the vehicle and stipulations of being public, **Made in China** constitutes the perfect artwork, obscuring what in the first instance seemed to be self-evident. Identity, whether this is a national identity or the way everyone interprets this personally, is a fleeting and flexible notion. Since 1999 the work **Made in China** has at intervals been re-created several times, but it always features the same three words: 'Made in China.' It is a work that accompanies the artist throughout his life, coincides with it, evolves in parallel with his personality and thus repeatedly incorporates the shifting social context. It is a work that presents an ongoing commentary on the

artistic calling and its relationship to the world. It is a work that establishes a network in which everyone participates. It says something about life, because it is an organic construct that thrives on the dynamism of social developments and is always topical. It is a work that cannot grow old. It is the perfect artwork, made in China.

Note:

1. But there is no beginning; the beginning coincides with the start and cannot be isolated from it. In the same way that knowing cannot precede the known, because they come into being simultaneously, they exist only as a pair. In the West, the inquiry into an artwork's provenance is the equivalent of searching for meaning, for significance, as if an artwork without an origin can have no meaning.