

mother's annual 2016

Cui Jie *Latter, Former*
May - July

Metabolising the city

Cui Jie lives and works in Beijing, which - despite being home to approximately 21.7 million people - is not even the biggest city in China. With each new decade since the sixties, its population has averaged an increase of twenty percent.ⁱ Some forecast that its population will more than double, to 50 million, by 2050. But, despite the city's first Five Year Plan (2016) being introduced to keep that number below 23 million until at least 2020, the Chinese government is coaxing its citizens out of rural areas, and into its cities. One report claimed that some 100 million new urban residents were needed just to sustain economic growth.ⁱⁱ As hard as it is to believe, China's megacities need more bodies, more production, more consumption: we, the so-called West need them too.

The question is: how to build a city adequate for fifty million inhabitants? If it were to begin anew, how would we start? These are two vital questions, and ones not only relevant to China: as it stands, half of the world's population live in urban areas; by 2030 this proportion will likely rise to two-thirds. The importance of planning these increasingly paradigmatic spaces of contemporary life cannot be underestimated, and yet one sixth of the world's population currently lives in (specifically urban) slums. Something is clearly going very wrong.

Cui Jie's response to this situation is two-fold: first, she gives form to the mega-city, as it is, as it changes; secondly, she details lost glimpses of the city, grand utopias that point to other kinds of building and forms of habitation: constructivism, totalitarian monoliths, and metabolism in particular. With these two elements in tandem, *Latter, Former* is as much a speculative fiction of the city as its representation: a 'what if' rather than 'there are'. The exhibition comprises paintings, drawings, and a sequence of seven small print works. Together, they detail the task of her subjective adjustment to Beijing, being a relatively recent transplant from Shanghai. The former is a city that seems to shirk representation: too much change, her paintings are composites, outlines of scenes made in transit. In fact, it is the city that's shifting: Cui's paintings are created over a long time, sometimes years, firmly antithetical to the restless flux they so admirably capture.

The city has always been rich material for artists. Indissociable from the first charge of modernity, it both fascinated and repulsed the avant-garde that strove to represent it. The city of *Latter, Former* is similarly bound to modernity, but of a strangely opaque nature: simply put, the city here adheres to a logic of *more*, at one with the ceaseless stasis of capitalist accumulation. Buildings are rendered phantasmagorical, miming the volatility of capital itself. In one painting, *S House #3* (2015), a candy-coloured fantasy-building hangs, seemingly disembodied, against a cityscape backdrop that is filled in to varying degrees. Reminiscent of the cavernous setting of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), the central building is part neo-classical, part Jetsons,ⁱⁱⁱ a lurid temple to consumption. An iridescent blue helix form unfurls down one of its sides, like DNA or the ramp of a somewhat extreme multi-storey car park. At the building's apex, there is a huge golden sphere, its function unknown. The tableau's insistent verticality means the eye is drawn up and down its surface, as though the image is but one within an endless roll of film.

Most likely, *S House #3* bears only a tangential or imaginative relation to the actual city of Beijing. As with the other paintings in *Latter, Former*, it might be better to consider it an architectural portmanteau: an amalgamation of mega-city detail that coalesce in terrible, visionary, symphony. Nonetheless as these details converge a particular style becomes apparent, one that is omnivorous and always hungry. With ceaseless change and a lack of formal coherence, it is a style without a style. Another painting, the almost-monolithic *Crane House #4* (2015), appears like a monument to this sensibility. Stretching far above head-height, it totally engulfs the viewer, its expansiveness mirroring the scale and outlandishness of much of the (real) city's recent construction. Two birds - the eponymous cranes - perch atop a pair of columns that reach up past the building's half-way point, and another two entwine around the huge building itself. The crane, though, similar to the heron, is significant in Chinese culture, and often associated with immortality. In *Crane House #4* styleless style becomes a marker of transcendence: it might even be a shrine to capitalism.

One of the key points to consider when looking at this work-is the idea of late capitalism as an 'aesthetic problem',ⁱⁱⁱ or something that eludes easy representation. Particularly in its contemporary guise, the task of representing capital alongside its fullest expression, the city, has become almost impossible: its borders are porous, its totality resistant to any one viewpoint. Often, and as the following exchange with an anonymised Swiss investment banker ('LG') demonstrates, such grappling abdicates to an almost transcendental or sublime register:

LG: You know it's an invisible hand, the market is always right, it's a life form that has being in its own right. You know, in a sort of Gestalt sort of way (...) it has form and meaning.

KK: It has form and meaning which is independent of you? You can't control it, is that the point?

LG: Right. Exactly, exactly!^{iv}

One way of resisting the seductiveness of capital's sublimity, however, is to rethink it as a system. And, though no easier to circumscribe, the city-as-system means that its particular nodes are graspable: the ways that buildings and space are organised becoming one crucial means of shaping the system more broadly. Such systems-thinking was a key consideration of architectural Metabolism, a movement which emerged in early sixties Japan, and a key reference point for Cui. Comprising a group of architects, theorists, and critics, the group was one response to the trauma of Japan's recent past. The events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, alongside the country's preponderance of natural disasters, and a massive growth in its urban populations, meant that a city should be both resilient and flexible with regard to a changing landscape. For them, the city had to become like an organism or a body within an environment that was, more often than not, indifferent and cruel. The Metabolist plans were certainly grand: in one famous example, Kenzō Tange's plan for Tokyo Bay (1960), a spine-like structure bisects the eighteen kilometer wide bay, from which a web of elevated linkages extend; in another, Kisho Kurokawa's 'Helix City' (1962) the city is imagined as a series of gargantuan coil-like forms springing up around a circular nucleus. For the metabolists, the magnitude of the challenges that faced Japanese society demanded similarly ambitious thinking: as one metabolist, the architect Arata Isozaki, put it: "*I am no longer going to consider architecture that is below 30m in height... I am leaving everything below 30 meters to others. If they think they can unravel the moss in the city, let them try.*"^v

The city as envisaged by Metabolism never came to pass, of course, in part because it necessitated a complete overhaul of private property: a very different kind of system. For architects like Rem Koolhaas, such failure is commensurate with the failure of urbanism itself, which - as distinct from architecture - is dependent on its willingness towards totalisation and collectivity, ambitious plans and follies. In the contemporary city, he says, its inhabitants are instead like "*chess players who lose to computers,*" adrift from the determination of public space.^{vi} Though within it, they are alienated by and from the city-system. For Cui, instances like Metabolism provide a moment of luminous possibility, a mode of representation that reintegrates the subjective within a wider, holistic system. In *Untitled #2*, a series of seven small prints, pages from a recent revisitation of the movement - Rem Koolhaas' and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (2009) - are overlaid with printed sketches made by the artist. Some of the book's text, which comprises mostly of the thoughts of the metabolists themselves, is redacted in swathes of canary yellow masking-tape. Its illustrations, speculative plans now imbued with a sense of loss, are overlaid with meticulous renderings of new ones, made by Cui. Hers, too, are fantastical, much like the ones that occupy the surrounding paintings. Here historical plans swerve out through time, mutating - almost like a body - to form new ideas and beginnings. The contemporary approach invariably tends towards the local, the small-scale or domestic. However, it might be that such thinking does not go far enough; what is needed, instead, is big-thinking, bordering on ludicrous. Cui's speculative plans work to extend and resuscitate a body thought long dead.

That the mega-city itself should be conceived as an organism was the fundamental basis of Metabolist thought. The city is a living and breathing entity that, sensing possibility, grows. The question is: what kind of organism is it? As it stands, the contemporary city, and the mega-city in particular, might not be wholly benign. Indeed, in one well-known article,^{vii} the physician and epidemiologist Dr. Warren M. Hern went so far to describe the city as a *cancer*, its population growth shown to track the same lines of a

malignant process, namely: '*rapid, uncontrolled growth; invasion and destruction of adjacent normal tissues (ecosystems); metastasis (distant colonization); and dedifferentiation (loss of distinctiveness in individual components)*'.^{viii} When Hern compares the growth of Baltimore with that of a pulmonary carcinoma, it's clear that the city is indeed a body; just, perhaps, not one that we would want or ever hope for. For me, Cui's works pick apart and scrutinise the language of this current body, in so doing hypostatizing a new genus.

What is suggested by this understanding of the city-as-cancer is that it does not differentiate between public and private space: it colonises it all. The earliest and certainly most thematically distinct work in *Latter, Former* retreats back towards compromised, subjective space; specifically the artist's place of work. *Studio* (2010) is self-enclosed, a small painting, oil on linen, its buttery yellows and warm greys almost the antithesis of the other works in this exhibition. Empty, both its content and pace are markedly different. This place *is* representable: imbued with the warmth and generosity of familiarity, it is the most figurative of the works within this exhibition. However the artist's studio exists as but one node in a wider, more opaque system; its boundaries are porous, capital slipping through like a window's draught. It seems to me that including this work within the exhibition attests to the fallacy of isolation or separateness: the studio's intimacy is no less private than the city streets outside, or those sublime, built apotheoses of finance. As with the trio of small pencil drawings (*S House #3 (sketch)*; *S House #3 (sketch)*; *Dove House (sketch)*, all 2016), sketches of the future that hang on another gallery wall, there is an indubitable, causal link between the artisanal, the handmade and artistic, with the mercurial city of Cui's paintings. Not one space is immune to its influence.

Adroitly, *Latter, Former* extends its metabolic allusions to the very bodily reaction it initiates. As I stood before its paintings, in particular, I became very nearly lost: pleasurably so. In front of *S House #3* I could feel myself tripping into its space, my eye pursuing a feverish path between its planes that was then reciprocated in a very bodily sense of disassociation. The paintings' spaces are seductive; they enthrall, seemingly infixing the viewer in a distended present. Such might also be the appeal of late capitalism, which condenses an experience of time into a series of presents, without past or future: more, and then more, and then, more. Urbanism, by contrast, is defined by its orientation towards what comes after: the present only emerging on the condition that it pre-empts and brings forth a *specific* future. Urbanism is, by this understanding, always ideological. The insatiable body of capital - its spaces and places, cities and studios - reach out, likewise, into the human body. How the former behaves and looks determines its effect on these other, minor bodies. That monstrous body - Capital - alongside its spatial synonym, the City, can be caused to mutate through artistic representation. Tears and moments of possibility can emerge, puncturing its fabric. The work in *Latter, Former* holds up a dark mirror to the body of global capital, unsustainable growth, inequality, and overcrowding: it speaks to its baselessness, which is not the same as its sublimity. Cui's work seems to ask: *what if* there was a point?

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ⁱ "Beijing sees slower population growth". *China Daily*, 20 January 2016: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-01/20/content_23160880.htm Just to put that in some perspective, the population of Australia is just over 24 million people.

ⁱⁱ Chris Weller. "China is moving forward on a radical plan to move 250 million people to cities". *Tech Insider*, 4 August 2015: <http://www.techinsider.io/heres-chinas-big-plan-to-move-a-population-the-size-of-the-phillippines-from-farms-to-cities-2015-7>

ⁱⁱⁱ Alberto Toscano & Jeff Kinkle. *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2015)

^{iv} Karen Knorr-Certina (2003), quoted in *ibid*, p. 46

^v Quoted in Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks* (Köln: Taschen, 2011), p. 52

^{vi} Rem Koolhaas. "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?" (1995), available at http://www.arhns.uns.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Arch432_koolhaas.pdf

^{vii} Dr. Warren Hern. "Has The Human Species Become A Cancer On The Planet?: A Theoretical View Of Population Growth As A Sign of Pathology" *Current World Leaders* Volume 36, No. 6,(December 1993) pp 1089-1124

^{viii} *Ibid*, pg. 1089