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Article

Praying for Blue Skies: Artistic Representations of Air Pollution in China

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Abstract

This article examines how artists have engaged with the issue of air pollution in Beijing, where poor air quality has become a serious public health matter. Artists have utilized various mediums including performance art, photography, and painting to represent smog. Through generating media and online attention this work has contributed to a relatively vibrant "green public sphere" (Yang and Calhoun, 2007) of air pollution discourse. In contrast to much resistance in China that relies upon making specific claims to government officials, artistic expression bypasses the authorities and appeals instead to public opinion. Artists utilize ambiguity to portray air pollution in novel ways that subtly question the structures that produce and sustain it. In this way, artists can challenge popular perceptions of smog and raise public awareness, thus intensifying support for policies that tackle smog. Yet art can also embody deep frustration at the powerlessness that artists, and the public more widely, experience when confronted by severe air pollution. Art therefore serves both as a form of activism and as an expression of curtailed agency in a politically restrictive environment.

Keywords

air pollution, art, activism, China, protest

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Figure 1. Praying for Blue Skies 祈祷蓝天.
Source. https://www.chinadialogue.net/culture/6769-A-prayer-for-clear-air/en.

One smoggy Beijing morning in February 2014, twenty-three local artists rendezvoused at the city's ancient Temple of Heaven 天坛, which in Chinese culture represents the meeting place between heaven and earth. After entering the grounds, they donned anti-pollution face masks before prostrating themselves in front of the temple's Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests 祈年殿 to carry out a piece of performance art called *Praying for Blue Skies* 祈祷蓝天 (see Figure 1). The performance came about spontaneously after the artists had bemoaned Beijing's serious and unrelenting smog during a gathering the previous night.[1] Well-known photographer and former journalist Wu Di 吴迪 captured the performance and sent his dramatic images to several newspapers. The next day one of them, the *Xin Jing Bao*, reported on the story as an example of "using performance art to call on the public to strengthen their environmental awareness [. . .] and to pay more attention to their health" (Xin Jing Bao, 2014). But the artwork could also be interpreted as a criticism of the government for failing to tackle severe air pollution. Participants admitted to having been frightened during the performance, and several were subsequently invited to "drink tea" with security officials, a euphemism for interrogation and warning about future conduct (Interview 1). Yet they considered the performance a success thanks to the wide-ranging media and online coverage it received, with one participant describing it as the most widely distributed 传播最广的 example of artistic representations of air pollution in China (Du, 2015).

China's severe air pollution has generated unprecedented levels of public concern (Aunan, Hansen, and Wang, 2018). This has often been cited as a crucial driver of a major policy shift, beginning in 2013, aimed at improving air quality as part of a "war on pollution" (Wong and Karplus, 2017; Ahlers and Shen, 2018; Tilt, 2019). According to Anna Ahlers and Yongdong Shen (2018: 316), "what we can see, at the very least, is a remarkable environmental policy change, which reflects the accommodation, to a certain extent, of enormous public anxiety and mushrooming civil engagement." Yet the ways in which this heightened public concern is manifested are not well understood in the academic literature. Compared with the relatively widespread and extensively documented "not-in-my-backyard" (Nimby)-style community opposition to localized pollution (Johnson, 2010; Lang and Xu, 2013; Steinhardt and Wu, 2016), political space for collective action against smog—an issue that transcends local politics—is heavily constrained. This increases the importance of subtler, less confrontational forms of expression that risk being overlooked by mainstream social movement literature, with its focus on overt forms of contentious collective action (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune, 2015).

To date, the literature on environmental activism in China has analyzed green non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers, journalists, and localized protest movements as key non-state forces for environmental change (Geall, 2013; Lang and Xu, 2013; Stern, 2014; Fürst, 2016). However, recent studies of what Meiqin Wang (2017) terms "socially engaged artists" suggest an extant civic consciousness among creative communities concerning serious social problems, including environmental degradation, that warrants further investigation (see also Callahan, 2014). Rather than focusing on artworks as objects, socially engaged art is concerned with improving the human condition through awareness-raising and policy influence (Wang, 2018; Callahan, 2014; Wang, 2017). While some artists, most famously Ai Weiwei, adopt overtly critical stances that problematize China's one-party state, most work within the confines of the Chinese political system. In this sense, "[socially engaged art] is not an intellectual dissident movement, and those who engage in it do not adopt a strong antagonism or an openly anti-authority attitude" (Wang, 2018: 262). The common ground these artists share is the belief that art can contribute to solving pressing societal problems (Wang, 2017).

As Stephen Duncombe (2016) argues, art and activism are analytically distinct phenomena: activists seek to generate *effect* by changing the status quo, while artists aim to achieve an emotional reaction in the audience, an *affect* that changes how people see the world. Clearly though, these two goals are closely intertwined. In the environmental field, visual representations of environmental

degradation, including artistic creations, have long been a crucial part of activist repertoires (DeLuca, 2009). They perform various functions including stimulating public environmental concern, challenging people's perceptions of environmental issues, and generating dialogue (Desai and Chalmers, 2007; Dunaway, 2008; Duncombe, 2016). For example, Kevin DeLuca (2009: 2–3) quotes a Greenpeace activist who said that images should not be judged on "whether they immediately stop the evil—they seldom do. Success comes in reducing a complex set of issues to symbols that break people's comfortable equilibrium, get them asking whether there are better ways to do things." In this way, what we might broadly refer to as "art activism" becomes less about directly challenging power structures and more about transforming public consciousness in ways that may ultimately lead to societal change (DeLuca, 2009; Brunner, 2018). Bringing such interventions into focus requires an expansive definition of politics that goes beyond a simple control/resistance dichotomy to examine instead how dominant societal discourses are contested. In authoritarian political systems, where the risk of repression is heightened, this often happens in understated ways through activists who "tear tiny fissures" into hegemonic discourses (Gleiss, 2015).

In this article, we adopt an agency-oriented approach (Gleiss, Sæther, and Fürst, 2019) to show how artists in Beijing have engaged with the issue of air pollution within a restricted political space. We argue that, in contrast to much of the resistance documented in the literature on China that relies upon making specific claims to government officials, artistic expression bypasses the authorities and appeals instead to public opinion. The primary function of artistic creations such as *Praying for Blue Skies* is to raise public awareness and generate discussion about smog—a topic that is no longer considered taboo—within the "green public sphere" (Yang and Calhoun, 2007). Through highlighting the absurdity of smog in original and often humorous ways, artists subtly question the structures that produce and sustain it while contributing to broader struggles over meaning in Chinese society. At the same time, we find that art often embodies a deep sense of frustration at artists' and the public's lack of agency in the face of an air pollution crisis. Artists face considerable political constraints and struggle to move beyond awareness-raising to engage more deeply with the public. Artistic expression therefore straddles the boundary between a new form of environmental activism in China and an expression of powerlessness to change the status quo in what is becoming an increasingly restricted political environment.

This article is based on visual sources, documentary evidence, and insights gleaned from nineteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artists and curators conducted by the authors in 2016 and 2017 in Beijing (see Appendix: List of Interviews Conducted). Interviews typically lasted for at least one

hour, and some continued for several hours. We first contacted an art curator and then employed snowball sampling to access other interviewees. Our sample is not intended to represent all examples of this genre. Instead we focus on prominent artists and artworks that are likely to have exerted the biggest influence in order to explore the potential and limitations of art as (environmental) activism in China. We chose Beijing both for its serious air pollution and high concentration of artists—it has several well-known art districts, including Songzhuang, which is home to an estimated 10,000 artists. As the capital city, Beijing also attracts artists seeking to influence government policy. The next section reviews the literature on public engagement with air pollution in China. We then examine a range of smog art examples and discuss artists' motivations for producing this work. The article then focuses on interactions between artists and the state, highlighting some of the opportunities and limitations that artists face.

Public Contestation of Air Pollution in China

Although air pollution has long been a serious problem in China, it only recently emerged as a topic of significant public concern (Li and Tilt, 2019; Ahlers and Hansen, 2017; Aunan, Hansen, and Wang, 2018). As Samuel Kay, Bo Zhao, and Daniel Sui (2015: 354) note, "in the period of a few years, air pollution went from a taboo subject with data either not collected or shrouded in secrecy to a sensitive but widely discussed issue." In that time public awareness about the health effects of air pollution has markedly improved (Kay, Zhao, and Sui, 2015; Chen, Tu, and Zheng, 2017), and the central government reframed smog as an issue of shared concern for officials, the media, industry, and the general population (Ahlers and Hansen, 2017: 84). For example, the State Council's *Ten Measures for Prevention and Control of Air Pollution* (Office of the State Council, 2013) stresses the need to "guide the public to take action starting from the individual. [. . .] Start with small things close to oneself, establish the societal principle of 'together we breathe, together we fight [against air pollution],' and improve air quality together."

The central government's acknowledgement that tackling air pollution requires coordinated action across a range of stakeholders has facilitated new modes of interaction, or "interfaces," between state, market, and non-state actors (Ahlers and Hansen, 2017). Yet high levels of public concern about smog in China have not translated into overt forms of political contention. Although environmental protest has proliferated in China, these events tend to be highly localized conflicts in which local communities attempt to expel what are often easily identifiable polluting facilities from their neighborhoods (Johnson, 2010; Steinhardt and Wu, 2016; Lang and Xu, 2013; Hansen

and Liu, 2018). In contrast, the smog that engulfs large swathes of China transcends local politics and is altogether much more complex. It is "pollution caused by coal combustion, vehicular emissions and perhaps biomass burning (altogether called 'complex air pollution'), plus regional haze" (Fang, Chan, and Yao, 2009, cited in Ahlers and Hansen, 2017: 85). This complexity was highlighted in 2015 when the Chinese government held a military parade in Beijing marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two. To ensure clean air for this high-profile event, the government exerted temporary control "in power plants, on construction sites, and in more than 10,000 factories, not only in Beijing but in six neighbouring provinces as well" (Aunan, Hansen, and Wang, 2018: 292). Tackling smog therefore requires coordinated actions from higher government levels, most notably the center, as well as multiple other state and non-state actors. It cannot be resolved through localized Nimby-style campaigns.

In addition, because smog concerns a much bigger "directly affected public"—defined as "individuals and nonorganized groups that will experience positive or negative effects from the outcome" (Dietz and Stern, 2008: 15)—compared with pollution from a chemical plant or waste incinerator, overt public protest against it is risky. Public demonstrations against smog are almost unheard of, and when they have emerged, the authorities have rapidly suppressed them. For example, in 2015, two protestors were arrested in Xi'an after they held aloft placards with slogans such as "smog causes cancer and harms everyone" and "the government has a duty to control smog" (Phillips, 2015a). And in December 2016, Chengdu city authorities preempted a planned mass protest against severe air pollution by closing down the proposed venue, Tianfu Square, and censoring online communications on the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo. Local blogger Liu Ermu was detained for several days after posting a scathing criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its development model, which he claimed was responsible for China's air pollution problems. In an "unusually heavy-handed response," they also instructed local photocopy shops to report anybody trying to print anti-air pollution flyers and ordered suppliers to report anyone attempting to purchase a large quantity of face masks (Haas, 2016).

Instead of expressing their concerns and grievances via traditional forms of contentious collective action, Chinese citizens have engaged with the issue of smog in alternative ways that have created a lively public discourse surrounding air pollution. Over a decade ago, Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun (2007: 212) documented the emergence of a "green public sphere of environmental discourse" in China, in which publicly generated environmental discourse heightens citizen awareness and sometimes influences government policy. Largely an online phenomenon, the green public sphere

emerged thanks to the Internet's popularity and commonplace use of social media in China (Cui, 2017). While Yang and Calhoun viewed environmental NGOs as the most important actors in producing and circulating this discourse, or "greenspeak," recent studies show how China's green public sphere has become populated by a range of new voices, including celebrities, journalists, netizens, and artists (Kay, Zhao, and Sui, 2015; Fedorenko and Sun, 2016; Cui, 2017). As the following examples show, air pollution has become a widely debated issue within this contested virtual space.

Smog-related activism has focused on raising public awareness and government transparency. A key example is public attempts to improve air quality information disclosure through online campaigning (Fedorenko and Sun, 2016; Chen, Tu, and Zheng, 2017; Kay, Zhao, and Sui, 2015; Xu, 2014; Zhang and Barr, 2013). The main stimulus for this can be traced to 2008, when the United States Embassy began tweeting hourly $PM_{2.5}$ (particulate matter ≤2.5 micrometers in diameter) statistics and a corresponding Air Quality Index (AQI) reading based on data collected from monitoring equipment within the embassy compound. In contrast, the Chinese government's Air Pollution Index (API) did not include measurements of any particulates smaller than PM_{10} (Chen, Tu, and Zheng, 2017). Public disquiet over this discrepancy came to a head in November 2011, when the US Embassy's $PM_{2.5}$ readings were so high as to be deemed "off the chart." Well-known property developer Pan Shiyi 潘石屹, who has over sixteen million Weibo followers, set up an online poll asking whether $PM_{2.5}$ data should (a) be released to the public this year, (b) be released to the public next year, or (c) not be released. Over forty thousand people responded, with 91.1 percent agreeing that the data should be made public "this year" (Fedorenko and Sun, 2016). In March 2012, the State Council adopted national air quality standards that required $PM_{2.5}$ monitoring and reporting for the first time (Kay, Zhao, and Sui, 2015). Fedorenko and Sun (2016: 2080) describe this as "a milestone and the biggest victory of civil society in the history of environmental campaigning in China."

Online discussion of air pollution in China must, as Shuqin Cui (2017: 43) puts it, contend with "the brute fact of media censorship and social-political constraints." For example, after his campaign Pan Shiyi was subsequently accused of having been manipulated by "hostile foreign forces" and was coerced into admitting his "irresponsible social media usage" on state television (Economy, 2018: 154). State ambiguity towards critical public discourse concerning air pollution was also evident after journalist Chai Jing's 柴静 2015 documentary *Under the Dome* 穹顶之下 went viral on the Chinese Internet. It was allowed to remain online for a full week before censors removed it, likely due to fears that it could spark offline collective action (Cui, 2017).

Other types of public engagement with air pollution appear relatively prosaic and attract less attention, but nonetheless contribute to societal discourse within the green public sphere. Weixian Pan (2017) draws attention to the mundane, everyday practice of sharing images of air pollution through social media. Some images are captured through mobile phones, while others are doctored, sometimes to humorous effect. For example, netizens have added hand-drawn outlines to photos of famous landmarks shrouded in smog in order to render them recognizable again (Pan, 2017). Pan argues that,

> These mundane aspects of capture still constitute a way for citizens to engage with the smog pollution and hold the state and various stakeholders responsible, even though they are often not easily translated into on-the-ground activist practices or familiar forms of online activism such as petitioning and clicktivism. (Pan, 2017: 24)

Pan (2017: 24) goes on to argue that widely circulated images of smog helped to "generate a condition of emergency" immediately before Beijing officials issued a red alert warning for the first time in December 2015. Other examples include art students putting face masks onto statues at Peking University during a period of heavy smog, students in Xi'an attaching face masks to lion statues adorning over eight hundred hitching posts to "raise awareness of tackling smog" (China Daily, 2016), and fashion designer Zhang Chi 张弛 designing a range of clothing titled Fxxk Air Pollution. Taken together, these examples encourage us to reconsider what constitutes environmental "activism" and to recognize the fluid interactions that occur between activism and grudging acceptance of the apparent inevitability of a degraded environment (Lora-Wainwright et al., 2012).

Artistic Representations of Air Pollution in China

After marginalizing artists for many years, in the past decade the Chinese government has tolerated and even encouraged their proliferation to bolster its international image and derive economic growth benefits (Zhang, 2014). At the same time, enthusiasm for art has been tempered by the adoption of increasingly sophisticated control mechanisms that police the boundaries of acceptable expression. These include preventing the exhibition and distribution of politically controversial artworks within China, creating art districts for easier monitoring of artists, and co-opting leading artists into official art institutions (Zhang, 2014: 831).

Figure 2. Marrying the Blue Sky 嫁给蓝天.
Source. http://world.chinadaily.com.cn/2014-10/20/content_18771877.htm.

The following section documents some examples of how Chinese artists have engaged with air pollution. These are not intended to be representative of this type of art—rather, we are interested in deciphering artists' motivations for engaging with air pollution and understanding how they perceive their own work. Most of the artworks introduced below were created between 2013 and 2015, when air pollution in Beijing and other parts of China was particularly severe. However, as noted below, some artists began focusing on air pollution much earlier, and artists continue to address this topic in their work at this article's time of writing. The early 2010s was a period of heightened public and media interest in China's air pollution, and many media outlets focused on citizen responses to smog during this time, including artistic expression.

The aforementioned *Praying for Blue Skies* example suggests that performance art can be especially effective in dramatizing air pollution. Another artist, Kong Ning 孔宁, has also produced visually striking performance art on Beijing's streets. Kong was born in 1958 and worked as a lawyer before turning to art in her forties. Concern for the environment is a major theme throughout Kong's work, which includes public performances and paintings. In her October 2014 *Marrying the Blue Sky* 嫁给蓝天 performance she wore a wedding dress constructed from 999 white 3M anti-pollution face masks and posed for photographers in front of several landmarks and propaganda posters extolling the CCP's "Core Socialist Values" (See Figure 2). In this artwork,

Kong's "smog bride" 雾霾新娘 was desperate to meet the blue sky so that they could marry. Sadly, this was impossible, as the emergence of blue sky signals the death of smog and, by extension, the anti-pollution face mask. On another occasion, in December 2015, Kong wore an orange dress made from plastic horns to symbolize "orange alerts" that the Beijing government issues on polluted days when it is inadvisable to leave home. She used the horns to make warning sounds about the danger of polluted air. This performance, titled *Orange Horn Bride* 橘色喇叭新娘, came about after a period of poor air quality in which Kong noticed that many people were not wearing face masks. Her performance can be interpreted as an attempt to (literally) amplify and dramatize the government's warnings about poor air quality. She said,

> I want to use this type of approach to remind people, to urge everyone to take care of themselves and to pay attention to environmental protection. This is because controlling smog isn't just the government's business. Everybody can take action to save energy and reduce emissions. (China Radio International, 2015)

Both of Kong's performances generated media and online attention during a period of heavy smog and presented the air pollution issue in a novel way that captured public attention.

Shenzhen-based artist Wang Renzheng 王仁征, publicly known as Nut Brother 坚果兄弟, produces artworks that engage with a range of societal issues including the human impact of over-consumption, pollution, and industrialization. When he visited Beijing, he was shocked by the poor air quality and felt like "a human vacuum cleaner" as he breathed the polluted air (Jiemian Xinwen, 2015). This inspired Nut Brother's return to Beijing in 2015 to perform *Dust Plan* 尘埃计划, which involved him roaming the Beijing streets for one hundred days armed with an industrial vacuum cleaner that he used to "clean" the air. He was photographed in front of various locations for this, including back alleys, famous landmarks, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection. The futility of Nut Brother's act highlighted the powerlessness and frustration that many ordinary people feel during heavy smog. Although Nut Brother claimed that "what I've done is like Sisyphus rolling his giant stone. [. . .] There's no use" (Buckley and Wu, 2015), his piece of performance art, created during a period of severe air pollution, stimulated public reaction. Nut Brother said, "I want to show this absurdity to more people. [. . .] I want people to see that we cannot avoid or ignore this problem [and] that we must take real action" (Phillips, 2015b). Similar to the *Praying for Blue Skies* example, his performance generated considerable media (domestic and international) and online attention, particularly through

Figure 3. Dust Plan 尘埃计划.
Source. https://www.visiontimes.com/2015/12/02/chinese-artist-creates-unique-symbol-for-chinas-pollution-issues.html.

Weibo (Xu, 2015) (see Figure 3). Following his performance, Nut Brother sent the 100 grams or so of particles he had collected to a factory in Hebei, where it was mixed with other materials and turned into a brick. Nut Brother explained that he wanted to make smog tangible and visible, and to promote the circular economy—a key government policy—through using material that might normally be viewed as a waste product (Jiemian Xinwen, 2015; Xu, 2014). This generated a further round of online discussion, with several people offering generous sums to purchase it (Jiemian Xinwen, 2015). Nut Brother refused to sell the brick because this would have undermined an important idea underpinning his whole project, namely that economic activity was responsible for harming the environment. In this sense, *Dust Plan* can be viewed as a wider critique of China's development model, although this was not explicitly articulated in the artwork. In the end, Nut Brother arranged for the brick to be included in a construction project in a *hutong* on the west side of Beijing. He did not reveal the location of the brick because he wanted it to disappear into the city just like smog (Jiemian Xinwen, 2015).

The rendering of "everyday" smog unfamiliar by using smog particles as a raw material in artwork is a common theme among several artists. It serves to call into question people's relationship with dust particles and capture public attention. For example, artist and academic Li Tianyuan 李天元 magnified pollution particles for an exhibition titled *Air* 空气. According to Li, "There are two goals. [. . .] The first is to make clear what this smog is. The

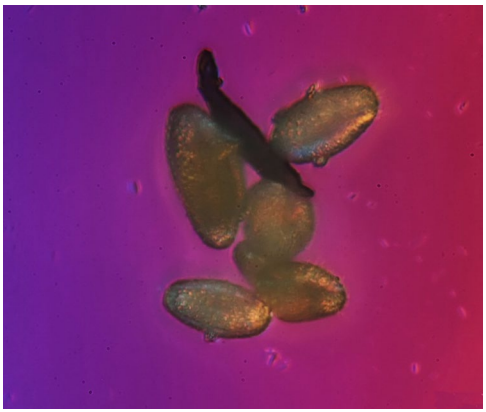

Figure 4. One of Zhang Chao's pictures of "magnified smog."
Source. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beijing/2014-04/02/content_17398747.htm.

second reason is to help everyone in society to protect themselves individually, to give them that awareness" (Whelan, 2014). In a strikingly similar example, Zhang Chao 张超 placed a microscope slide on his Beijing balcony for several hours and then magnified it one thousand times before photographing it and sharing the image online in order to reveal "smog's true character" (see Figure 4). According to one media report, Zhang's aim was to "'deconstruct' Beijing's smog and unveil its shroud of mystery" (Wang, 2014). In theory, this enables people to get up close and personal with smog particles and view air pollution in a new way. Even though Zhang's microscope was not powerful enough to reveal $PM_{2.5}$, his work still encouraged people to consider the composition of smog more deeply (Wang, 2014).

In a similar vein, the Dutch artist and designer Daan Roosegaarde, whose work focuses on environmental problems, designed a seven-meter-high solar-powered outdoor air purifier as part of his Smog Free Project. The tower, which Roosegaarde launched in China and displayed in Beijing, Tianjin, and Dalian, as well as locations in several other countries, sucks in air and filters out pollutants. Although installing an outdoor air purifier invokes Nut Brother's futile vacuum cleaner, Roosegaarde claims that it cleans 30,000m^3 per hour, providing "a bubble of clear air where people can think, meet, and work together how [sic] to make a whole city smog free" (Studio Roosegaarde, n.d.). Similar to Nut Brother, this raises the question of why such a facility should be needed in the first place. In Roosegaarde's words, "pollution: it's really weird that we accept it as something normal and

take it for granted" (Studio Roosegaarde, n.d.). He then transformed particles collected from Beijing and Rotterdam, which were approximately 32 percent carbon, into diamond "smog free rings." Roosegaarde stated, "As a designer, I'm like, this [the Beijing smog] is something we should use, this is something interesting. [. . .] In the future waste should not exist" (Hallett, 2016). Roosegaarde's work shows how China's smog has captured international attention. It may also have served as inspiration for a much bigger 100-meter air-purifying tower that researchers constructed in Xi'an in 2015. This tower has been credited with improving air quality within a ten-kilometer radius, and plans are afoot to create a 500-meter-high full-size version (Chen, 2018).

Liang Kegang 梁克刚 is an artist, curator, and critic whose work has addressed social issues including lack of affordable housing. Liang has used dark humor to highlight the absurdity of air pollution. When he visited Europe, Liang was struck by the cleanliness of the air compared with his home in Beijing. On one trip to France in 2014 he spontaneously took an empty glass jar outside and filled it with clean air. For a joke, he auctioned it on the Chinese social media platform WeChat in a private artists' group. The jar generated significant interest among group members and eventually sold for 5,250 RMB. Similar to previous examples, Liang's story generated considerable media attention. The more serious message underlying Liang's humor was that "air should be the most valueless commodity, free to breathe for any vagrant or beggar." He continued, "This is my way to question China's foul air and express my dissatisfaction" (Saul, 2014). Liang's work shows how artists can attract public attention through taking a new slant on an issue. As one interviewee stated, humor can generate public attention because "everyone is clear about air pollution, so directly talking about it is not interesting" (Interview 2). The idea that air could be commodified appears outlandish, yet several Chinese companies have already begun selling cans of fresh air, and the market in air purifiers has surged (Zhang and Barr, 2013; Aunan, Hansen, and Wang, 2018). Liang's art imitates life, encouraging people to pause and think about the commodification of clean air.

Another artist, Song Yongping 宋永平, views his work as historical artifact that will enable future generations to remember China's air pollution. Song is a well-known Beijing-based artist who has worked with paintings, photography, and performance art. In 2014 Song attempted to create a new color, *Zhongguo maise* 中国霾色 (literally "China haze color"), to represent the hue of the country's polluted air. Underlying this work is the message that smog has become so ubiquitous that it deserves its own color. It can also be viewed as another attempt to exert control over smog by pinning it down and rendering it more tangible or "speakable." Song selected seven photos depicting China's smoggy air in reference to the seven days of creation because

"God created the world, humans created smog." In this way, he emphasized that smog stems from human choices and should not be regarded as natural. The seven photos ranged in color from dirty yellow to dull grey and luminous pink, and Song invited netizens to vote online for their preferred choice. The main purpose of this work was "to give contemporary China a memory, a description of what happened, namely that smog in this generation influenced every aspect of life." (Interview 17). Although this statement contains some optimism that one day smog will be consigned to history, it also suggests that the scale of the air pollution problem is such as to render it historically significant and something that should not be forgotten. In another display of black humor, Song also aims to have *Zhongguo maise* recognized internationally as an official color that artists and designers can use as they would any other color. In his words, *Zhongguo maise* would be China's contribution to global civilization.

The artist Liu Bolin 刘勃麟 is famous for using paint to camouflage himself and his models so that they are eaten up by the background, capturing ordinary people's feelings of invisibility amidst a rapidly evolving society (Piao, 2015).[2] He started this in 2005 when he camouflaged himself against the backdrop of his forcibly demolished art studio as an act of protest. This image formed part of his performance photographic series *Hiding in the City* 城市迷彩, for which Liu has camouflaged himself against numerous backdrops, including supermarket aisles, magazine stands, and walls covered in CCP slogans. By rendering himself invisible against these backdrops, Liu illuminates the environments that have deeply affected the lives of citizens in contemporary China (Wang, 2015). His work is an effort to reassert agency within a context that can often alienate the individual. In Liu's words, "Instead of passively disappearing, I'd rather actively make people disappear to express my attitude. [. . .] I'm using this active disappearance to voice my protest" (Piao, 2015).

In 2010 Liu turned his attention to the topic of air pollution, camouflaging himself against a pile of coal (Wang, 2015). In 2014 he painted a group of models so that they blended into the background: a heavily polluted Tiananmen Square (see Figure 5). Liu created this artwork in response to Beijing's issuance of a red alert, indicating severe air pollution, in order to express the helplessness that ordinary people felt (Piao, 2015). Tiananmen Square was chosen because it represented the center of China, with the implication that only the central government could take action to resolve the smog issue. Liu also painted a series of models in grey hues dancing in front of a forest on a smoggy day for a piece of art entitled *Winter Solstice* 冬至. Liu stated that the piece was an expression of protest against poor air quality, explaining that "these are the movements people instinctively make when

Figure 5. Liu Bolin artwork in which he renders people "invisible" in smoggy Tiananmen Square.
Source. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/25/world/asia/liu-bolin-air-pollution-beijing-winter-solstice.html.

their lives are suppressed" (Piao, 2015). Meiqin Wang's (2015: 180) comment that "the invisibility of the figures urges viewers to think about factors that have brought up such a result and to become aware of how the dominant power and ideology have rendered individual existence precarious and marginalized," made in relation to another of Liu's works, also applies to his treatment of air pollution. In addition, the act of camouflaging can be interpreted as an attempt to protect Liu and his models from further harm, in much the same way that an animal or insect might (Wang, 2015). Liu also attracted attention for a performance in December 2016 in which he donned a Guy Fawkes mask, strapped twenty-four smartphones to his body, and wandered around Beijing's streets during a severe smog episode to "livestream the smog." Liu's work is not alone in linking air pollution to broader societal problems in China caused by, among other things, excessive greed and focus on material things (Wang, 2017).

Photographer Wu Di's work addresses a variety of societal problems including the sexual exploitation of vulnerable young women. His interest in air pollution was triggered in 2008 when he saw media reports of United States athletes wearing face masks upon their arrival in Beijing for the

Figure 6. 445 Face Masks 445 个口罩.
Source. https://www.chinadialogue.net/culture/6769-A-prayer-for-clear-air/ch.

upcoming Olympic Games. This stimulated him to begin researching air pollution. In 2008, Wu began work on a series of images called *Floating in the Dust* 尘浮于世 for which he photographed models, including a heavily pregnant woman, wearing gas masks in various poses. Cultural critic Zhu Dake commented that Wu's slightly disturbing images "hinted at a kind of citizens' fear over survival that is difficult to articulate through words" (Li, 2017). Poor air quality also inspired Wu's "445 Face Masks" 445个口罩 photograph (Figure 6). It features a young girl standing in front of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests wearing 445 face masks that protrude from her face like an elephant's trunk. Wu calculated that she would need to wear 445 face masks up until 2030, the year by which the Beijing's air quality will meet national standards according to the municipal government's 2012 air pollution control workplan. Criticizing government inaction, Wu said that "children shouldn't have to wait that long for good air" (Zaixian Yingzhan, 2017).

Wu has also worked with Greenpeace, an international environmental organization that has campaigned to raise awareness and concern about air pollution in China, producing photos for them to dramatize the smog. One day in January 2013, when $PM_{2.5}$ levels in Beijing approached 1000 $\mu g/m^3$, Greenpeace asked Wu to produce some images. Wu continued his strategy of using vulnerable subjects to highlight the public health costs of pollution by photographing a five-year-old girl in front of several Beijing landmarks. She

posed with plastic tubes connecting her nose to two colored balloons, which metaphorically contained the last remaining breathable air in the city. These images echoed themes explored in Liang Kegang's work about the value of clean air. Wu titled this work *Smog's Harm* 霾之祸. The images were widely circulated, being reproduced in over eighty Chinese publications and appearing in Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* (Li, 2017). Because Wu is relatively well-known and has many followers on social media, he can connect with a much bigger audience in China compared with Greenpeace (Interview 3).

Although we have focused on Beijing, artistic expression in relation to air pollution has also been documented in other cities. For example, in 2013, twenty-three students in Xi'an dramatized the health impact of air pollution. Their performance included covering themselves in cellophane and fixing pictures of blackened lungs to their chests (Xibuwang, 2013). In 2014 several artists in Changsha held a mock funeral for the last person to die from smog in the city. Local public security officials reportedly questioned some of the participants out of concern that the performance was related to the June 4, 1989 protests, something that the artists denied (Boxun, 2014). In the same year, a group of citizens gathered at Yangren Street 洋人街 in Chongqing to express opposition to smog. Participants wore face masks and costumes, including a couple in the process of getting married while wearing gas masks connected to each other by a tube. According to state media, this was a piece of performance art designed to promote the message of "block smog, save energy, and protect the environment" (Zhongguo Xinwen Wang, 2014). And in 2016 in downtown Chengdu, as authorities clamped down on a planned demonstration against smog, a small group of local artists defied the government by donning anti-pollution masks and staging a small-scale gathering there. Eight of them were arrested before subsequently being released (BBC News, 2016). It is of course possible that people in many other locations have also used art to express opposition to air pollution.

Art as Activism: Awareness-Raising, Ambiguity, and Limitations

One of the main ways through which artists seek to achieve societal impact is awareness-raising. The Internet and media play a vital role in amplifying representations of smog and providing a crucial platform for public discussion about air pollution. Aforementioned works by artists such as Kong Ning, Nut Brother, Liu Bolin, and Liang Kegang are visually striking and have generated significant online and media attention, reflecting growing public concern about the issue. Zhang Chao, whose photographs of magnified air particles generated much online and media attention, pondered,

> Why did I become famous from taking pictures of smog? [. . .] I have taken numerous pictures of beautiful nature in my spare time but received less than ten interview requests per year. Now, I have to answer dozens of phone calls from the media every day. (Wang, 2014)

For some artists, achieving societal change through awareness-raising is their primary goal and overrides aesthetic considerations. As one curator said, "Whether or not it is 'art' is not important. What is important is whether or not it can solve or improve the environmental protection problem. [. . .] Effective [artwork] is useful, ineffective [artwork] is useless" (Interview 1). Another curator named Ariel said that, although she admired Nut Brother's *Dust Plan* performance, she felt that the piece was relatively immature from an artistic perspective. Noting that she herself had first encountered the work through media reports, Ariel said that "the main significance [of *Dust Plan*] was its societal impact" (Phoenix Online, 2016). Artists involved in the *Praying for Blue Skies* performance also acknowledged its lack of sophistication but believed that generating public discussion around the topic offset this drawback. A curator who participated in the performance commented,

> Wearing a face mask and lying down is a very simple and direct action. [. . .] Some people might think that this means of expression is overly direct, not profound or clever. But only those who were there in person and participated can understand the pressure they had to confront and the complicated factors they had to consider. [. . .] To carry out the performance and have the media report on it [. . .] in the current climate, [all this] is hugely difficult. (Du, 2015)

As one Greenpeace activist commented, artistic images like these can exert much wider impact than standard images of air pollution because the latter are commonplace and no longer have the power to shock people (Interview 8). One artist stated that "my goal is to let people understand the kind of air quality they are experiencing. Then, after public opinion is established, to change government policy. [. . .] The scariest thing is public ignorance" (Interview 3). In order to be seen as credible in advocating policy change, Wu Di makes conducting careful research a crucial part of the artistic process. This invokes other actors documented in the literature who have taken pains to emphasize their own "rationality" when contesting pollution in China (Johnson, 2013; Hansen and Liu, 2018). Wu commented that

> every piece of work I do is based on a real situation. Although my method is an artistic one, my works must stand up to scrutiny. No matter if it's a deep investigation or based on specialist data analysis, I want to present a solid 扎实 depiction of it. (Li, 2017)

In this way, Wu portrays himself as a credible and responsible interlocutor whose main aim is to provoke policy change.

However, some artists whose work engages with air pollution are much less explicitly oriented towards policy-advocacy and awareness-raising. For example, Yao Lu 姚璐, an artist and teacher at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, has subverted the classical Chinese landscape 山水 genre. At first glance, his works depict idyllic scenes of mountains, water, and floating clouds. Upon closer inspection, it emerges that his pictures are collages of photographs comprising mountainous piles of rubble from building sites covered in green netting, dirty water, and polluted air. His message is a commentary on contemporary society: while things may look good from afar, it is important to consider their actual content (Interview 4). Yet for Yao, aesthetics are the most important feature of any artwork. Rather than disseminate his works via the media and online channels, Yao's pictures are primarily intended for display in art galleries (Interview 4). There can be a tension, therefore, between art as activism and staying faithful to one's artistic beliefs, something that is reflected in the wider literature (Desai, 2017; Bishop, 2005). As Boris Groys (2014) has noted, "Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists." We also spoke to a sculptor who had painted a smoggy scene to let out his negative emotions on a particularly polluted day. Once his painting—which we found leaning against a wall in a corner of his small studio—was finished, he felt better and moved on to other work (Interview 5). Whereas culture can be a form of resistance or advocacy, it can also be "an escape from politics and a way to release discontent that might otherwise be expressed through political activity" (Duncombe, 2002: 6). At the other end of the spectrum, we also encountered an artist who was explicitly critical of China's one-party system, blaming it for a range of problems, including air pollution. Although some of his artwork had engaged with air pollution, he did not believe it would have any impact because nothing short of a revolution would resolve China's environmental problems (Interview 16).

It is of course possible that some artists produce smog art for commercial gain, either directly through selling artwork or indirectly through achieving fame—although, perhaps unsurprisingly, none of our interviewees expressed this sentiment. Chinese artists' depictions of air pollution have generated a large amount of attention from the Western media, helping to raise artists' profiles overseas as well as domestically. Kong Ning took her smog bride to Art Basel in Hong Kong, and when the first author visited Liu Bolin in his studio, he was preparing to ship a smog-related exhibit to an exhibition in France.[3] Many of the artworks we discussed above (including photographs

of performance art) are commercially available. At the same time, some depictions of air pollution are bleak and are not expected to be commercially successful. As one curator stated, "Nobody wants to buy artworks that make them feel uncomfortable" (Interview 1).

The relationship between art and environmental activism is therefore not straightforward and can be difficult to pin down. Du Xiyun eloquently captured the dual functions of art as advocacy and art as a coping mechanism for releasing pent-up frustration. Expressing a certain degree of optimism about art's ability to encourage change, he wrote:

> Here we can see the relationship between art and environmental problems: the ideal situation is to directly resolve environmental problems. But if a person feels helpless in doing so, yet at the same time is not willing to completely give up, they can use an indirect 迂回 approach (or, we could say a "clever" 巧妙 approach), of which art is one example. Obviously, art cannot directly resolve environmental problems. But at the same time it isn't completely useless. Art can attract people's attention, touch their hearts, and in doing so pushes forward the further fermentation of these problems in people's minds. To put it differently, regardless of whether someone is an artist or a spectator, art can help them vent their emotions. (Du, 2015)

The act of awareness-raising is not necessarily seen as a means of challenging the authorities. Some of our interviewees emphasized their role in supporting the government to resolve the smog problem. One curator who organized an exhibition featuring work depicting air pollution said, "I hoped to use this kind of artistic activity to push the government to control air pollution" (Interview 9). However, although she considered her exhibition to have been successful because it generated media coverage, she acknowledged that it had no discernible impact on air quality. The exhibition's main benefit was to raise public awareness—in this way, she claimed, art could play a supporting role to the government's work. Another interviewee who organized an exhibition at Soho in Beijing featuring approximately three hundred works depicting air pollution by Chinese designers also stated that his role was to raise awareness in support of government policies. In his words, when it comes to air pollution, "the government does the big work, we do the small work" (Interview 18). And Kong Ning stated that she used the medium of performance art because she wanted to bring her work out of the studio and into the real world where it could better "connect with reality" (Caixin, 2014). In a media interview, she claimed that her performances were an attempt to encourage more people to pay attention to environmental protection and to their own personal safety. Kong also admitted that she hoped her work would encourage the government to pay more attention to people's

health. One of our interviewees was keen to stress the absence of any contradiction between her work and that of the government because they both want the same thing—blue skies (Interview 13).

Presenting one's work in this way may be an expedient way of avoiding official censure. However, it may also reflect support for the government and the recognition that addressing complex social problems in China invariably requires governmental support. Studies of environmental NGOs, for example, have also shown how many organizations actively cultivate close relationships with government officials in order to maximize their own influence (Ho, 2007; Fürst, 2016). The goal of awareness-raising is consistent with official state rhetoric, which envisages a role for the public in its battle against air pollution, albeit one focused on individual as opposed to collective actions. This is encapsulated through the slogan "start taking action from oneself" 从我做起. From the state's perspective, awareness-raising can better equip citizens to take individualized measures to protect themselves from pollution and encourage them to behave in an environmentally responsible manner (Johnson et al., 2017).

At the same time, some artists are critical of the status quo even if they do not directly blame the authorities. Public expression can attract censure particularly when it generates a large amount of attention as *Under the Dome* demonstrated. In this sense, the green public sphere is "a manipulated virtual space [in which] open discussions and investigative exposures of environmental problems remain political and controversial" (Cui, 2017: 44). Artists must navigate a difficult context in which the boundaries that separate acceptable commentary from that which the state cannot tolerate are invisible and constantly shifting (Stern and O'Brien, 2012).

Unlike environmental protests, which tend to be rooted in specificity and clearly apportioned blame, visual representations of smog depend on ambiguity (Interview 13). This ambiguity allows for a range of interpretations. This was highlighted in the *Praying for Blue Skies* performance. On the one hand, this performance could be viewed as an expression of exasperation at the government's failure to tackle air pollution, hence the artists' asking help from the gods. On the other, the artists did not explicitly apportion any blame for smog, and when participants sent photos of the performance to media outlets, they purposefully refrained from including any textual explanation, allowing the audience complete freedom to interpret the performance however it saw fit. This ambiguity is viewed as necessary to avoid antagonizing the government. One artist said that "in China, I can't directly bump into [the government], I need to be less direct" (Interview 2)—a view that was expressed by several other interviewees. As one commented, "These artistic methods enable the problem of smog, which is difficult to discuss directly, to be indirectly inserted into the public debate platform" (Interview 1).

Several interviewees expressed the belief that artists have a certain leeway to express themselves in ways that ordinary citizens cannot. One artist was stopped by police when performing on the streets of Beijing. However, one policeman recognized her and said, "Ah, it's only that environmental artist" before allowing her to continue on her way on the provision that she avoid potentially sensitive locations such as Chang'an Road (Interview 13).[4] Nut Brother also commented that the only time he met slight difficulty performing *Dust Plan* was in the Embassy area and near Tiananmen Square, although on both occasions he was allowed to continue (Jiemian Xinwen, 2015). Another interviewee stated that, compared with ordinary citizens, artists have "an extra layer of protection." He said,

> [We use] performance art as a form of expression first and foremost because expressing oneself through the medium of art is relatively safe. It provides the guarantee of a safety layer. [. . .] If we hadn't said that we were artists [when performing *Praying for Blue Skies*], then it would have been difficult. [. . .] Artists can make issues contained within the smog problem more abstract (Interview 1).

Another interviewee explained the function that "public interest artists" 公益艺术家 such as he himself could perform. Contrasting his own artistic work with other forms of environmental expression, he explained that while ordinary people might resort to public protest, artists rely on a "visual sensation method" 视觉的方式 that can invoke deeper thought about air pollution. Because of this, if artwork is too simple, it will have only limited impact. He went on to claim that artists can use their unique social position to speak for ordinary citizens who may lack the opportunity to speak out. He said,

> Everyone suffers from this problem [of air pollution], but ordinary people don't have the opportunity or ability to speak out about it, or if they do, then their words won't reach other people. In fact, artists can adopt the role of 'spokespeople' 代言人. When they speak out, it can be broadcast. They can express lots of people's worries. (Interview 2)

In this sense, some artists have a feeling of responsibility to do something. Artists can help fill a gap by drawing attention to issues that mainstream media finds difficult to cover. One artist stated that "it is difficult for the state media to report on air pollution; therefore I think that we need 'the power of ordinary people' 民间的力量 to influence government policies" (Interview 3).

Yet it bears repeating that artists operate in a highly restrictive political environment that subjects them to repression should they go too far (Zhang, 2014). Sometimes the authorities censor artists' work. For example, when

an independent curator invited artists through social media to contribute pieces for an exhibition in Beijing's 798 Art District entitled *Suffocation! Much More than Smog* 窒息! 不止于霾, which was later displayed in the nearby cities of Tianjin and Shijiazhuang, some of the artworks could not be shown due to perceived political sensitivity. This form of censorship can seem arbitrary and difficult to understand. This curator commented, "In fact, [the authorities] don't understand what the artworks mean, nor do the [censors] who come to inspect them" (Interview 9).[5] Ironically, other artworks that she deemed less sensitive were censored. Most of the time, however, artists resort to self-censorship. For example, one artist stated that "if you cross the line, [the authorities] will cause trouble for you" (Interview 2). Liang Kegang planned to extend his previous project by finding some Chinese children to collect several hundred jars of air in China's polluted cities and then send them to France. Each jar would have a photo of the child's family. However, he has not yet done so, and he admitted that he was reluctant to go through with the idea because it might be "dangerous" 危险. Another artist was also clear that he did not want to antagonize the government. But he also admitted that "in reality, [my work] does contain some dissatisfaction [with the government] within it" (Interview 17). Most of our interviewees openly discussed their recourse to self-censorship. As one artist stated, "The goal of [making art] is not to get yourself arrested. I [therefore] choose a milder form of [artistic] expression, one that approaches the line [of what the state will tolerate]" (Interview 2).

Artists, then, are unsurprisingly subject to similar constraints that other socially engaged actors, including journalists, NGOs, and lawyers, face (Stern and O'Brien, 2012). This also influences how they interact with each other and the public. In examples such as *Praying for Blue Skies*, the Changsha funeral, and exhibitions such as *Suffocation! Much More than Smog*, artists worked together collectively. In the first example, this was a conscious strategy in order to avoid identifying a "leader" and achieving safety in numbers (Interview 1). But we also noted during interviews that many artists claimed to be largely unaware of other prominent examples of art addressing the air pollution topic. Although we group together several examples of this work in this article, we do not intend to suggest that artists are consciously working together to raise awareness about smog.

Some artists complained that they sometimes struggled to convey their message to the general public. One artist criticized China's education system for making people "art illiterate" 美盲 (Interview 4). Nut Brother revealed that some bystanders believed he was a street cleaner or vacuum salesperson

(Buckley and Wu, 2015), and other interviewees similarly complained that their work had been misunderstood (Interviews 13 and 14). To a large extent, this lack of public engagement, which restricts the extent to which artists can engage in a meaningful two-way dialogue with the public, is related to political restrictions designed to prevent artists from forming close links with social forces that might result in the undermining of the political regime (Zhang, 2014). As a result, the artists examined in this article focus on awareness-raising rather than deep public engagement.

Conclusion

Air pollution has generated considerable societal debate and concern in China and is no longer treated as a taboo subject. However, although there is a sizeable literature on environmental activism in China, relatively little attention has been paid to public engagement with smog. This article has shown how artists in Beijing have represented air pollution through a wide range of mediums, from performance art to photography and painting. By highlighting the inherent absurdity of smog, often through humor and satire, artists contribute to public debate about one of contemporary China's most pressing social problems.

An issue like smog does not lend itself to the type of "rightful resistance" identified by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li (2006) because its scope transcends local politics. Whereas rightful resistance is focused around highly *specific* claims based on laws and regulations, artists rely on *ambiguity* and focus on transforming public opinion and awareness in a way that largely bypasses the state. Instead of focusing on injustices at the hands of malfeasant local officials, art can achieve impact through interrupting deeply embedded modes of thinking about air pollution (Brunner, 2018) and subtly questioning the structures that produce and sustain it. The traditional media and the internet have provided important platforms that have enabled artists' work to reach a wider audience and generate debate within China's green public sphere. As DeLuca (2009) noted, the power of modern communications technology renders organizational strength less important and brings activist agency into greater focus. Chinese journalists have long been viewed as crucial actors in promoting environmental consciousness (Geall, 2013), and some sections of the domestic media criticized government inaction over smog in 2014 (Reuters, 2014). Although this criticism was quickly deleted, it suggests that some journalists have been receptive to actors such as artists who engage with social issues such as smog while stopping short of directly challenging the authorities.

At the same time, and consistent with the experiences of other environmental activists profiled in the literature, most artists avoid antagonizing the authorities lest the latter respond with repression. As this article has shown, artists are intensely aware of the limited space for artistic expression. This inhibits the extent to which artists connect with other activists and with ordinary citizens in a meaningful two-way dialogue in which artists listen as well as speak (Desai and Chalmers, 2007). As this article has discussed, art can often be seen as an expression of futility, frustration, and resignation about individuals' powerlessness to improve air quality. Furthermore, Party Secretary Xi Jinping's tightening control over Chinese society (Economy, 2018), including significantly enhanced censorship, further reduces the political space for activists to work in, including socially engaged artists and the journalists who have promoted their artworks. In 2018 the photographer Lu Guang 卢广, whose work has documented the human costs of industrial pollution in China, was arrested in Kashgar. While it is difficult to discern the cause of his arrest (he was granted a "bail-like" release in 2019), this case serves as a reminder of the potential dangers of environmental activism (Yu, 2019).

Despite the limitations associated with socially engaged art in a one-party state, the types of visual representations of smog explored in this article matter because they help generate public concern and debate, which in turn can pressure officials to address large-scale pollution. In recent years, the Chinese government has been more open in acknowledging the problem of smog, and studies suggest that air quality in cities such as Beijing has significantly improved (Zheng et al., 2017). Several of the artists we interviewed noted these developments, which explained why they had moved on to new topics (Interviews 2 and 3). For example, in 2018 Nut Brother filled nine thousand empty Nongfu Spring plastic water bottles with brown polluted water from the village of Xiaohaotu in Shaanxi province in order to pressure officials to tackle water pollution (Ryan and Mou, 2018). The CCP's brand of "responsive authoritarianism" (Weller, 2012) depends in part on closely monitoring and responding to public opinion, and the authorities are acutely concerned that air pollution could result in unrest. In several speeches, Xi Jinping himself has noted the "strong public reaction" to smog (Party Literature Research Center of the CCP Central Committee, 2017). If we accept the claim that "the main drivers of governmental action against air pollution" are "anticipation of protest as well as general awareness that environmental problems can have a considerable effect on public health and China's economic performance" (Ahlers and Shen, 2018: 304), then socially engaged artists have an important role to play.

Appendix

List of Interviews Conducted

1. July 10, 2016 — Curator, Beijing
2. July 3, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
3. July 3, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
4. July 3, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
5. July 4, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
6. July 6, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
7. July 6, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
8. July 6, 2017 — NGO staff member, Beijing
9. July 7, 2017 — Curator, Beijing
10. July 7, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
11. July 8, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
12. July 9, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
13. July 11, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
14. July 13, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
15. July 14, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
16. July 14, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
17. July 19, 2017 — Artist, Beijing
18. July 22, 2017 — Curator, Zhengzhou
19. July 22, 2017 — Designer, Zhengzhou

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Notes

1. Although a variety of terms have been used to refer to China's air pollution, including "haze" 雾霾, throughout this article we follow Xiaoyue Li and Bryan Tilt (2018) in using the commonplace term "smog."
2. At first glance, Liu's intention appears to be to blend himself into the background. However, he explained that "I do not melt into the environment; on the contrary, I believe that I am encroached [upon] by the environment" (Wang, 2015: 166).
3. The exhibit comprised a series of used air filters that Liu had arranged into a picture of a human face.

4. Chang'an Road is one of Beijing's major arteries and passes in between the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square.
5. One artist bemoaned this phenomenon, stating that "we want [the authorities] to understand!" (Interview 15).

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