

## THE UNSKILLED MIGRANT

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*"Well, a frame is just...just a permanently pointed forefinger."*

—Samuel R. Delany, *Dark Reflections* (2006)

Marcel Duchamp's last painting, *Tu m'*, features a hand painted by a commercial sign painter named 'A. Klang,' whom Duchamp had hired to execute the illusionistic detail. By paying another painter to paint a hand whose forefinger points at the vanishing point of a canvas—upon which the shadows of earlier readymades are cast, *Tu m'* summons together a gamut of artistic skills, labour, and materials, and recirculates them within a painted history of Duchamp's own oeuvre. As the art historian John Roberts has observed, '...at no point in looking at the picture is handcraft ever identified with the maker of the picture, but neither is the hand ever absent from the picture's making.'<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the 'hand' which signifies 'handcraft' is not Duchamp's, though it is procured by him.

*Tu m'* is a commissioned painting made to measure for the bookshelf of patron Katherine Dreier, and hence by its dimensions alone we are reminded of the ineluctable commodification of modern art. The payment for Duchamp's artistic skill, subcontracted to and supplemented by Klang's painting skill, provides the frame wherein Klang can be figured as a premodern artisan and a postmodernist pun: a 'sign' painter who signs his signature, not Duchamp's, on the canvas. Klang's signature, found on the hand's white shirt cuff, is in pencil, ready for erasure.

The signed hand of *Tu m'*, then, points at a modernist labyrinth: it is a painting within a painting about painting that is, at the same time, a commodity within a commodity about commodities. Is this a puzzle that can be unravelled through a history of Drier, Duchamp, and Klang's interactions, stories of the intricate relations between patron, producer, painter—'artists' all? Or would such facts serve only to recapture in fetishistic detail *Tu m'*'s production, and re-commodify the readymade *qua* product?

Duchamp eluded this paradox by asking yet another question: 'Can we make a work of art that is not a work of art?'<sup>2</sup> As such, it is a mistake to reduce the Duchampian readymade to an instance of 'found art,' or to a failed attempt at de-commodification. The refusal of aesthetic finality in Duchamp's practice apports what is, instead, an ambiguous space between de-commodification and the non-art object, and it is this



Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, oil on canvas, with bottle brush, three safety pins, and one bolt, 27 1/2 x 119 5/16 in. (1918). Yale University Gallery, New Haven, Gift from the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953.6.4. ©2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp.

space that provides fertile ground for contemporary artists interested in probing the ever-changing processes by which art is made, readymade and commodified.

Contemporary Dafen village, with its official 8000 registered painters and 600 registered art dealers, offers an accessible and affordable source of skilled painting labor. A 'giant readymade' prepped for interrogation, a handful of conceptual artists from the metropolises have travelled to Dafen village to hire. Their projects, and the reactions of Dafen painters who have interacted with them, offer a particular 21st-century riposte to the 20th-century problems initiated by the Duchampian query into skill and commodification.

*At the moment, the core competitive advantage of Dafen paintings is price. There is a joke running in the village: a government official went to Europe for a vacation and brought back a painting worth 600 US dollars, but he discovers that it was a painting from Dafen: retail price, a mere 80 yuan. The space between 600 US dollars and 80 yuan is the margin of survival for Dafen's oil painting industry. Yet, as it is increasingly copied by others, the Dafen model, built on an advantage of price, will prove to be nothing but a castle built on quicksand.<sup>3</sup>*

Dafen village is located in its own modern labyrinth. Once a rural village left outside the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Dafen village is situated a kilometer from the Buji checkpoint at the secondary line, an internal municipal boundary that separates the Special Economic Zone from the rest of the city. Dafen village's entry into the hand-painted art product industry began in 1989 when a trade painter from Hong Kong named Huang Jiang arrived with his apprentices and workers seeking low-cost space, labor, and proximity to Hong Kong exporters. Huang Jiang and his associates initially operated workspaces inside the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and in Guangzhou before discovering Dafen village's optimal location. Soon, aspiring painters, skilled and unskilled, began migrating to Dafen village from all over China, where they could live and work without the permissions then necessary to enter the Special Economic Zone.

In those early days, nearly everyone trained and worked in Huang Jiang's company, filling orders from Hong Kong that often originated in Britain, Europe and the United States. Within a flexible system of bespoke piecework, painters were paid per painting,

from which the cost of dormitories and supplies were deducted. An average painter could complete thirty to forty paintings in a day, earning enough for a basic livelihood and remittances to their families in their home villages. By the mid-1990s, wholesalers and distributors based around the world were sending agents to Dafen village to place orders, while painting firms small and large began opening galleries to receive their own clients.

As Shenzhen-based anthropologist Mary Ann O'Donnell has argued, regulatory borders encourage the migration of illegal labour from rural China to Shenzhen while easing the transnational flow of capital and goods.<sup>4</sup> There is a cultural irony to this geographic calculus: although the modern avant-garde artist is a romanticized figure of unfettered movement and marginality, Dafen village's painters are illicit migrants of a wholly different order. Their mobility is a product of transnational markets and capital, but it is circumscribed by the regulatory boundaries that enable the very flow of their income and their products.

Price—or, more accurately, access to markets—is as much the measure of the Dafen painter's *immobility* as it is the core advantage of the Dafen business model. Dafen village's painters and dealers are well aware that they are producing paintings that will be sold at a much higher price elsewhere, but the ratio between the Dafen painting *in situ* and the Dafen painting overseas is made incontestable by the geo-economic forces that render Dafen painters transnationally immobile and reliant upon foreign agents who are not. Recognizing their precarious position, Dafen's painters have recently begun striving for 'creativity' and 'originality.' This is one way to overcome their subsistence as low-priced labourers: in comparison to commercial paintings, at Dafen village, original paintings appear to have an unlimited price.

*Positioning is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect...changes made in the name, the price, and the package are really not changes in the product at all. They're basically cosmetic changes done for the purpose of securing a worthwhile position in the prospect's mind.<sup>5</sup>*

In 2007, German-born, Berlin- and New York-based conceptual artist Christian Jankowski travelled to Dafen Village after reading about it in a Hong Kong newspaper. Learning of the new Dafen Museum of Art then under construction, Jankowski toured the construction site and took photographs of its unfinished interior. Then, aided by Shenzhen interpreter Lisa Liu, and later by Hong Kong curator Christina Li, he conducted a broad survey of the galleries at Dafen village. They conversed with painters and dealers, trying to ascertain their self-perception as artists, and asked each an ultimate question: If you had the power to choose, what work of art would you most like to see exhibited in the new Dafen Museum of Art? Based on their answers, Jankowski would ask the painters to compose paintings that placed their answers to the question within the photographs of the museum interiors taken by Jankowski. The paintings thus appear to depict Dafen paintings hanging inside the walls of the museum while it was under construction. Seventeen paintings were ordered for Jankowski's *Super*

*Classical* solo exhibition at New York's Maccarone gallery. Though each painting is signed on the back by the Dafen painter, each is also issued with a certificate authenticating it as a Jankowski work.

Jankowski's *China Painters* broaches the question of authorship by the numerous framing devices that allow each of the multiple authors within the series to appear in nested form. First, there is the frame of the referenced image, the source painting reproduced by the Dafen painter. Second, there is the painted frame of the museum-under-construction which gives breathing space to the ongoing local redefinition of 'art' spurred by the construction of the new museum. Third, there is the framework of the New York installation, in which Jankowski is the author of a series of paintings. As assisted readymades, each painting is securely fastened within a triple frame of seriality, the museum institution, and the cosmopolitan gallery system, holding in check the fading localism of a singular expression.

Li Tianning, a retired high school art teacher and theatre set painter from Jiangxi province, executed one painting for Jankowski in 2007. He found Jankowski's order extremely 'unacceptable' at first. As Li remembers, Jankowski had challenged him to envision what traditional Chinese painting would look like in five hundred years. Jankowski, for his part, had decided to commission a painting from Li because Li had said that he would paint something that would represent the 'inner landscape of the museum director'—who has yet to be appointed for the Dafen Museum of Art.<sup>6</sup>

Li stayed up all night thinking through the commission and planning a sketch for Jankowski. Finally, he decided upon a landscape overflowing with modern transportation and communication technology. In his painting, Li placed an electric tower with receding power lines at the centre of the pictorial space as a direct appropriation of the linear perspectival picture plane. Li thought this would be fitting because he understood that Jankowski was trying to effect a certain kind of 'east-west dialogue' with his project. For his part, Jankowski thought that the power lines symbolized 'communication' and was confused, since they were not telephone lines, but, in good humour, went with it. Reflecting upon the interaction one year later, Li Tianning stressed how pleased he was with the final work, on which he had 'toiled for three days and nights.' When asked whether he considered the final painting his or Jankowski's, Li Tianning smilingly said, 'One should say that he issued the exam question, and I wrote the paper.'<sup>7</sup>

Painting, inherited by the modern *as art*, is often seen to have been debased by Dafen painters' ready-for-hire, made-to-order existence. Their practice is represented, by journalists and critics alike, in the condition provoked by the Duchampian readymade: as a profession 'emptied of all *métier*.'<sup>8</sup> 'Dumb as a painter,' goes another Duchamp aphorism. But like Duchamp's *Tu m'*, Jankowski's *China Painters* does more than re-contextualize the skill-turned-commodity back into a rarefied aesthetic space. Rather, the skilled work of the hired hand is conspicuously framed by the unskilled, un-painting, labour of Jankowski, and the painter's automatism is recouped as creative work through the intervening authorship of the conceptual artist.

In 2008, a version of Jankowski's *China Painters* was exhibited at the Third

Guangzhou Triennial, thereby erecting a fourth frame around its many authorial voices. The Guangzhou exhibition of *China Painters* represented the overseas return of these exported artworks to the famed Qing-era port of the China Trade, the modern origin of Chinese trade painting itself. By the time of their arrival in Guangzhou, the paintings had travelled from nearby Dafen village through the cosmopolitan centres of Hong Kong, New York, London and Berlin, and acquired the imprimatur of an internationally-acclaimed exhibition history. Repositioned back in South China, the permanently pointed forefinger that said, 'This is art,' now declared, 'This is global art.'

*I'm concentrated on what we call in the industry, the baggage train niche. Basically that means I specialize in products for overseas use. And being that the United States uses 110 volts where most other countries in the world use 220 volts....they require different products. I have that niche.'*<sup>9</sup>

In a Jankowski video work of 2002, Michele Maccarone, owner of Maccarone gallery which represents Jankowski in New York, appears speaking the words of her gallery's neighbour: he is a veteran retailer of American appliances that are compatible with overseas voltage and electrical outlets. The portability of the refitted appliance, remade for local electricity, is an apt analogy for the globalist artworks of Jankowski's practice.

An agent of readymades and a readymade agent, Jankowski carries a cosmopolitan discourse with which he can remake the value of a Dafen painting by great orders of magnitude. There is hence a new price for a new type of Dafen-made painting. This price is far greater than what the hypothetical officiate-tourist has paid in a generic Europe, and it is the price one would pay for a Jankowski-authored Dafen painting (available: Galerie Klosterfelde, Berlin; Maccarone Gallery, New York; and Lisson Gallery, London). And yet, though the new price for this Dafen-made painting is many times higher than that of a tourist souvenir, it is still far from an unlimited price. The transformation of the readymade's exchange value is therefore not arbitrary, but rather, enabled by the transnational positioning and re-positioning of the painting within a painting about paintings—or, if you like, a commodity within a commodity about commodities.

Yet it is not only the global conceptualist who spins tales to increase the market value of his original works. Nor is the global conceptualist the only type of artist for whom the depiction of distant places is a hallmark of his creativity. Another Dafen painter with whom Jankowski worked in 2007 was Peng Bide, a retired painter and former cadre of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, the semi-military Party authority set up in 1954 to develop the northwestern Xinjiang frontier. Peng's frame of reference for his own artistic career is not at all an artisanal one. Rather, he claims to be a painter whose artistic objective is to depict the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party in original and inspiring works of art. To Peng, the value of his work far exceeds any price anyone has ever been willing to pay, hence he has only ever sold copies of his own work, repainted by his own hand. Indeed, Peng regarded the painting made for Jankowski as merely a copy of his original work. Peng Bide has priced that original painting—from which the Jankowski-Peng assisted



readymade is derived—far above even what Maccarone Gallery has priced the Jankowski-authored work.

The encounter between Jankowski and Peng Bide was enabled by China's globalizing economy and by the global turn in contemporary art. Supported by biennial culture and international art markets, Jankowski's practice is in step with the expansion of contemporary art into authentically localized, but transnationally-readable, situations. Supported by the state's investment in originality at Dafen village, Peng Bide's post-retirement career as a painter is in step with the expansion of the Chinese creative industry, represented by Dafen village. Unbeknownst to Peng, one of his many 2007 clients was a global conceptualist painter who saw him as an artisan.

In that sense, *China Painters* further complicates the hierarchal frames introduced in *Tu m'* by juxtaposing the transnational mobility of Jankowski against the regulated mobility of the Dafen painter. Artists, all, sharing a single global imaginary, but each living within a different geographical and aesthetic order. The practice of the global conceptualist operating within the authentic texture of localized situations is one in which such paradoxes of arrivals and departures raise deep questions about our incomplete knowledge of the places, practices, and persons by which the value of works of art are created. The permanent frames and pointed forefingers by which we can unravel *Tu m'*'s rich maze of relationships between painting-as-skill and painting-as-commodity are, in Jankowski's *China Painters*, stretched across the globe. Ready-to-



Christian Jankowski, *Three Leaders*, painting by Peng Bide, from *China Painters*, installation view, Maccarone Inc., New York, March 2007. Image courtesy of the artist and Maccarone Gallery.

travel, made-to-be-unmade, the unskilled migrant masters each of these incomplete frames and positions.

### The Old Communist

In 1961, when he was only 16, the Old Communist joined the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and went to the frontier regions to develop the hinterland. In the Corps factory where he worked, a group of young artists newly trained in the socialist realist tradition had set up a painting studio. From them, the Old Communist learned to paint. He went out with them into the Xinjiang countryside to sketch and paint from life, critically observing and recording the glorious work of the Corps, and giving expression to the sincerity and warmth of the Xinjiang people.

After the reform and opening of China, though no longer young, the Old Communist was able to enrol in the Xinjiang Normal University and formally study painting in the Art Department. For his graduation in 1985, he composed a painting of a female youth from the Corps working in the wheat fields of Xinjiang. The painting won him acclaim from his teachers and was published in four Party newspapers. The Old Communist took up the position of Art Editor of two magazines in Xinjiang. One day in 2000, he learned of Dafen village on a business trip to the southern city of Guangzhou, when he went to stroll down Wende Road, the famous street of art galleries. In 2002, after retirement, the Old Communist and his wife moved to Dafen village, far from their Xinjiang home. They opened up a gallery to exhibit and sell his paintings, most brought over from Xinjiang from his decades of work as an artist.

One day, a gallerist in Shenzhen offered him 380,000 yuan (56,000 U.S. dollars) for his painting of the female youth in the wheat fields. Although this gallerist never bought the painting, the Old Communist was heartened to know how much it was worth. Another day, a businessman in Beijing called him after seeing this painting in a Party newspaper, asking for its price. The Old Communist told him that someone had already offered 380,000 yuan, so the businessman responded, 'Indeed, I thought it would be about 400,000 yuan.' The Old Communist was glad to once again have the painting's value confirmed, even if neither of these individuals would ultimately buy the painting. The Old Communist has in fact never sold any of his beloved paintings.

Once, a German man with Cantonese and Mandarin translators came to the Old Communist's gallery to see his work. This German man was attracted by a painting he had done entitled the *Three Leaders*. The German man asked him why he made this painting. The Old Communist explained to the German man the importance of the three leaders depicted in the painting: Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and Jiang Zeming. Through these three leaders, China was modernized and great improvement was brought to the lives of the Chinese people. The German man asked for the price of the painting, and the Old Communist told him it was 380,000 yuan. This was too much for the German man, but nevertheless he came back with his translators another six times to see this painting.

One time, the Old Communist got very upset when the German man asked if the Old Communist could make a copy of his *Three Leaders* for just a few thousand



yuan. Evidently, this German man did not understand the value of his work. He sent the German away. Only when his wife saw him later and told he could come back to visit, did he return.

Finally, one day, the German man told him through the translator that he had already taken a photograph of his *Three Leaders* painting. He told the Old Communist that if would not make him a copy for a lower price, then he would find someone else in Dafen village to paint it for just 4000 yuan. The Old Communist was furious. He warned the German, that if he dared to have someone else copy his work, he would go to the government to file a complaint. After all, this was an original work of art, and the Old Communist held the copyright to it. This scared the German man. But in the end, since he had no other choice, the Old Communist painted a copy for the German for about 60,000 yuan (8,000 US dollars). The German man said that the painting would be exhibited in the United States. Really, only because he said it would be exhibited did the Old Communist finally agree to paint a copy for him.

The copy he made for the German was not very good, primarily because he was given only twenty days to do it. The Old Communist felt that it was very difficult to copy one's own painting, getting it exactly the same as an original. Now the Old Communist is engaged in painting a copy of one of his other original works: a painting of Premier Hu Jintao visiting the village next to Dafen village. The Old Communist is making the copy for an official who plans to give it to Hu Jintao as a gift. He is forced to make a copy because he himself had been planning on giving the original to the local leaders as a gift. But otherwise, the Old Communist rarely copies his own paintings.

Once, the Dafen Party Branch Committee Secretary even suggested to the Old Communist that they should mass-produce his *Three Leaders* painting at Dafen village. The Old Communist refused. If his painting was copied by many hands, it would no longer be his own original work. It would just be a collective work.

As for the copy he made for the German man, it is true that there were additions made to it, all requested by the German. He had said that it ought to be painted as though it were hanging in the construction site of the Dafen Museum of Art. But this has no meaning for the Old Communist. All that painting is, for him, is a poor copy of his original work. And this original painting is always getting better. In fact, he is constantly correcting it.



Peng Bide, with *Three Leaders*, oil on canvas, 2007. Photo by Winnie Wong, 2009.

- 1 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 76.
- 2 "Peut-on faire des œuvres qui ne soient pas 'd'art'?" (1913), in S. Stauffer, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Die Schriften*, (Zürich: Regenbogen-Verlag, 1981), 125.
- 3 Zhou Min, 'How Can China's Model Oil Painting Village Ascend?' *Yangcheng Evening News* (Guangzhou: November 22, 2004).
- 4 Mary Ann O'Donnell, 'Becoming Hong Kong, Razing Bao'an, Preserving Xin'an: An Ethnographic Account of Urbanization in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone,' *Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3-4 (2001): 418-43.
- 5 Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for your Mind. How to be Seen and Heard in the Overcrowded Marketplace* (1972).
- 6 Li Tianning, interviews with author, 4 and 22 FEB 2008; Christian Jankowski, interview with author, 25 FEB 2008.
- 7 Li Tianning, interview with author, 4 FEB 2008.
- 8 Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 290.
- 9 'Michele Maccarone' in Christian Jankowski, *Point of Sale*, 3-channel video installation (2002).