



(above) Wu Mingshi, *Coils* (2013)
Polyethylene, polypropylene, wire
Dimensions variable, installation view
Jingwang Homeland, Beijing, China, July 2013

(below) Installation view (detail)



Homeland Grunge

Daniel Stephen Miller

Wu Mingshi
Coils (2013)

Jingwang Homeland, Beijing, China
On display indefinitely

In many great cities—and also in many lesser ones—it's possible to find constellations of galleries that together signal their desire to be a destination for art-goers. At best, these districts resemble a Champs-Élysées of decorative things you could never afford even if you wanted them, and at worst they appear as trumped-up theme parks with more outlets unironically offering third-rate 'American coffee' and overpriced trinkets than artwork of genuine interest.

Beijing's 798 'Art Zone' is the current example of the latter *par excellence*. You will have no trouble finding a great pair of sunglasses, but if you're interested in interrogating the dialectic you'd be best advised to look elsewhere. Despite purchasing a new pair of rose-tinted vintage shades, on my most recent visit I got the distinct impression I should abandon my calling and do something useful with my life, like selling steak knives in rural Hunan.

Still, I persisted in my lonely mission to 'see some good art' in Beijing, and later that week made my way out to Caochangdi's 'Art Village', some three kilometres further north-west. I swear it's not just because I didn't bump into Ai Weiwei there—as a certain trusted friend promised I would—but Caochangdi also failed to excite me. Walking from one space to the next, I couldn't help but wonder: in all this sterile gallery art, where was the gleaming dirty chaos of Chinese urban life?

That's why it was such a giddy and unexpected pleasure one sunny morning in late July to chance upon Wu Mingshi's *Coils* (2013) sitting smack bang in the

middle of Jingwang Homeland, a brand new out-of-the-cereal-packet suburb also in the north-west corner of Chaoyang District.

It's common for Beijingers to explain where they live in relation to the city's ring roads, as in 'I'm near the South Second'. I would find it hard to suppress a giggle if someone told me in all seriousness that they lived 'outside the East Fifth'. Still, Jingwang Homeland's very name suggests the prosperity, or flourishing, of life in an outer urban oasis. The message is clear: *it's Beijing here, too.*

And why shouldn't its residents aspire to a place in the great cosmopolis? After all, they now have a public artwork of which they can be proud. Sitting earnestly at a major intersection, Wu's *Coils* remind this viewer of a pile of enormous milky turds, or—perhaps more charitably—a set of badly thrown quoits. Made of long stretches of white polyethylene pipe and held together with hand-torn bags and wire, the sculpture delicately negotiates the industrial and the everyday.

Indeed, compared to the largely decorative work on display in Chinese galleries, much of which could have been produced by upper-middle class dilettantes anywhere in the world, *Coils* feels both authentic and local. At the time of my encounter with the work, I was thrown by the lack of information at the site. It took me a few days of strategic enquiries to track down the artist responsible for this unique public installation.

I met Wu Mingshi at her studio in nearby Heiqiao (Black Bridge), a shambolic and mostly illegal village settlement which feels distinctly unlike the Beijing of its city planners' dreams. Over a couple of bottles of Yanjing, the pale and watery local beer, we discussed her background, her interest in public art and the surprising process that led to her commission in Jingwang Homeland.

Wu was born in December 1978, the same month that Deng Xiaoping announced the official launch of the 'Four Modernizations' that would transform China's economy in the following decades. 'My father came to Beijing from our home in Zhejiang Province in the mid-80s,' she explained. 'It wasn't easy for him. The economy

was growing strongly, but dad was in the toilet. I mean that quite literally: he was cleaning bathrooms.'

By the time Wu and her mother were able to join her father in Beijing a few years later, he had found a steady job installing plumbing and drainage for new apartment buildings. When she told me this, Wu preempted my obvious question. 'It's funny,' she said, 'this is the first time I've worked with the kind of materials my father uses in his work.' Has he seen the installation? 'Yes,' she told me, 'in fact he helped me source the materials. He doesn't understand what I'm doing, but he was happy to help.'

Following a long-held ambition, Wu gained entrance to Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1996 and studied in the School of Chinese Painting. After graduation in 2001, she quickly became disillusioned with the Chinese art market. 'So much was happening in society that was not reflected in the art being shown and sold,' she said. 'Despite my strict formal background, I was not interested in making decorative works for speculators and Party officials to buy.'

Working odd jobs—including a stint as a house painter—to get by, Wu tried a different tack. She started making small interventions on the streets of Beijing: improvised stacks of coal bricks, upturned apple carts, and awkward assemblages often involving street sweepers' brooms and cigarette packets. Documenting the works for a blog she called *Kongjian Shijian (Spatial Practice)*, she developed a small but loyal following.

'In 2009, I got the idea in my head that I could advertise for commissions,' she said. 'I thought people might pay me a small amount of money to put together a street sculpture—something that they were particularly interested in—and then send them a photograph.' Her advertising method was naive but ingenious: with black spray cans, she spent weeks scrawling the phrase 'public art', along with her phone number, everywhere she could. 'I didn't get many calls, but actually I was happy with the work—it ended up being a kind of joke about art in Beijing.'

So it came as a shock two years later when a local Communist Party official called, asking if she would be interested in a public art commission. 'I thought it was a prank!' she told me. 'Eventually, though, we met and I realised he was genuine.' The official, Zhang San, had read about New York City's Percent for Art law and decided it would be a good idea to commission a work for Jingwang Homeland. 'He only had a small budget, though, and I guess he called me because they couldn't afford Anish Kapoor,' she laughs.

Coils couldn't be further from a big-budget, low-concept public artwork. It's certainly no *Cloud Gate*. In a fresh new suburb, where construction has just been completed and many of the buildings are yet to be occupied, the work provides a deliberate interruption of the carefully planned streetscape. More astonishingly, on the corner at which it sits, the work completely prevents the movement of pedestrians on the footpath.

Is this a sly nod to the over-reliance of cars in Beijing's urban expansion, or simply a formal experiment? 'I know plenty of artists in the West who refuse to make public artworks because of the red tape,' Wu told me. 'One of the pleasures of working in China is that I don't have to bother with things like risk assessments. With this commission I had an extraordinary amount of freedom, including a license to mess with orthodox ideas about public installation.'

This is all the more remarkable since usually, left to bureaucrats and corporate administrators, public art commissions lead to the production of bland monoliths or cheap gags. In China the current fashion is for figurative works which serve as props for cheesy photo opportunities and magnets for paraphiles. Earlier this year a man was chastised in the Chinese media for repeatedly making out with a series of prominent life-size female sculptures in Chunxi Lu, Chengdu's main shopping precinct.

It's hard to imagine anyone posing for a photograph in front of *Coils*, let alone showing it physical

affection. But this is its great strength: rather than settling for cheap entertainment, it provides the new residents of Jingwang Homeland an opportunity to reflect on what on earth they're doing there, outside the East Fifth. It's trite to speak of China's 'growth without development', but if such development is to occur its citizens must have space for reflection on both the human and the aesthetic outcomes of rapid urbanisation.

Wu Minghsi is glad to expose her work to a local audience far different from those who visit Beijing's Art Zones and Art Villages. As a primary audience, you couldn't find a more fascinating or diverse one than the newly-minted members of the middle class who are working so hard to fulfil President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream'. How they react to *Coils*, and its grungy intervention in an otherwise ideal scene, is yet to be seen.

I asked Wu what she thought would happen to the work, and her response was strikingly casual. 'It wouldn't surprise me if a construction worker saw the pipes and decided they belonged in the ground,' she admitted. 'Wouldn't it be a shame to see it prematurely disappear? I'm not concerned. Nothing in China is permanent, and anyway, it's probably the outcome that would please my father the most.'