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ENGINEERS OF THE SOUL
Инженеры человеческих душ
人类灵魂的工程师

Hostage by Wang Jianwei

Mathieu Borysevich, Artforum October 2008

Wang Jianwei: Zendai Museum of Modern Art

Hostage

The second floor of the museum “Hostage” presentation was dominated by the film installation Hostage/Money, 2008. Using an image from China's 1965 renminbi banknote as a point of departure, the artist produced an intense thirty-two-minute, high-definition work that reconstructs the daily life of a Cultural Revolution-era commune. On a spartan sound stage flanked by leafless trees and a surrounding wall of red brick, up to sixty actors at a time perform their daily activities without speaking. They exercise, read, get dressed, work with machinery, conduct meetings, and so on. The action is choreographed so that what is happening, what has just happened, and what will happen are experienced simultaneously, without sequence or spatial division. Occasionally the actors freeze, allowing the camera to pan around a significant action. But it is the ominous outer wall that provides the symbolic foundation of Hostage/Money. According to the artist, the wall represents not only the two antithetical sides of the banknote--on the one side an illustration of joyous, united people, on the flip side a reminder of the oppressive authoritarian state--it also represents the logic that shapes China's global outlook even today: We are in (nei) while everyone else is out (wai). Moreover, the wall figures the boundary between what has changed and what remains the same. At the end of the film, a strong outside force brings the wall tumbling down. Watching soldiers remove bodies from the rubble, one could not help but think of earth-quakes past, like the Tangshan earthquake at the end of China's Cultural Revolution, and those to come (the Sichuan earthquake of May 2008 happened a week before this exhibition closed)

