


Anonymous model photographed by Manel Ortega. In *MADALO*, July 2017, issue 02, Published by Manel Ortega, p. 52.


FREEDON echoes freedom but it has lost one line. The alteration of M into N in the moments of manufacture reveals the hollowness of the word, hobbling along, missing something. Taking delight in nonstandard English, FREEDON offers an ethics of error, valorising a ‘broken’ English for its ability to astutely and humorously comment upon a contemporary life that in many ways feels broken. In its half-hearted imitation of the English ‘freedom,’ FREEDON is at once a poor copy, where something seems to have gone awry, and a demonstration of joyous abandon: the FREEDON to circulate freely, don whatever, and disregard the rules.

The title of this article comes from a particularly poignant T-shirt found in Hong Kong last year. What appears to be a spelling mistake can be a conceptual opening. Rejection of the standard carves a path towards poetic insight unmoored from correctness. ‘Mistakes’ reveal a certain agency, the labour and gesture of the human hand. FREEDON is a moment of freedom from the imposition of ‘freedom.’ It is the refusal of an empty claim. FREEDON calls out freedom’s bluff.

In the Pearl River Delta, where an abundance of the world’s goods are made for export, alternate markets circulate items known as shanzhai. In English, we might say counterfeit, or bootleg, or fake. But in our findings these translations aren’t quite right.

In Chinese, shanzhai literally means mountain hamlet, suggesting an area where outlaws would stockpile stolen resources to redistribute among those on the margins. The word shanzhai retains this sense of subversive resistance and rejects the very notion of a single, original, rightful owner.

In shanzhai collaborations between seamstress and machine, the loom is a potential instrument of rebellion. In snatched moments on unsanctioned tools, the shanzhai shirt as stolen product protests a larger theft: theft of land, theft of resources, theft of time. The hybrid language that appears on shanzhai clothing — mostly made by women and an object of fascination and derision around the world — can also be read as ‘shanzhai lyrics,’ a feminist project of appropriation poetics, a form of écriture féminine written from and on the body.

A la Marzouk Mambrol’s description of écriture féminine conceptualized by Helene Cixous, shanzhai writing is also characterized by disruptions in the text such as gaps, silences, puns, new images... incomprehensible and inconsistent... it is attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice, which now speaks in a borrowed language.1 Wantonly rearranging a borrowed tongue, shanzhai writing as écriture féminine destabilizes hierarchy, and makes space for new insights at the site of non-normative language.

LIVING IN POVERTY DOESN’T MEAN STERILITY, IN THE FACE OF THE PESSIMISTIC THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE STATE OF THE EARTH.

THE RESULT OF MORE LIBERAL IDEAS KEEP CLOSE TO LIFE.

NOMADIC MINIMALIST COSTUMES ARE CREATED BASED ON SPATIAL DIMENSION ISSUES LIKE MEDITATION BLOWED AWAY BY MIST.

THE NEUTRAL AND CALM VAPIDITY ENLIGHTENED USTO EXPLORE WHAT WE NEED ON EARTH.

INESCAPABLE REALITY IS REFLECTED PERFECTLY THROUGH PLAIN AND SIMPLE TONES.

These T-shirts model what we might call shanzhai tactics, subverting hierarchy through exaggerated mimicry:

Financial anxiety deepens survival in doubt
profits down CAST Dow Inflation anortgage MONETARY macro disaster looming CAPITAL fear a revival
SHARES WORTH Crash! analysts sees stimulus package slow revival
assets social crisis
depends dollar weakeens
doubt Interest rates ECESION FORECAST revives analysts Downturn MONETARY slump

Global Trends BUST! disaster looming
announces trading loss
assets stimulus package

CAPITAL INVESTMENT Crash!
anxiety deepens rates

Revival Rates ION

FORECAST inancial crisis anortgage CAPITAL
capital weakeens MONETARY POLICY
Profits down Global Trends

Language is transformed into an unspooling pattern:

FREEDON (AND ON AND ON)

Logos become symbols that mock the hyperbole of branding:

jldjladjflaeijliajfdljladjlajdfladjf
Shanzhai lyricism expresses contemporary consumer affect in an incisive and humorous poetic mode that reshapes recognizable phrases to undercut a culture of numbing positivity and productivity:

**UNEMPLOYED**

Dear my boss,

I don’t want to was i for the weekens

I’m going to find my happiness

(Skateboard, Read a boot Surf, Travel, Dance Seep)

SO I WILL QUIT!!

Happiness Makes business sense

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The rampant interweaving of branded trademarks, plagiarized material, and unrecognizable content destabilizes clear distinctions between original and copy, undermining claims to intellectual property rights. And yet, the rich and powerful continue to determine the parameters of who gets fined or jailed for violating them. As the popularity of shanzhai grow, Western corporations have begun making their own shanzhai inspired lines – shanzhai shanzhai. In its Canal Street shanzhai-style pop-up shop, the brand Diesel sold DEISEL merchandise, capitalizing on the aesthetics of counterfeit and the appeal of a deliberate flaw. Despite this cheeky homage, who gets called (and sued for being) a bootlegger has to do with the continued delineation and protection of private property for a small elite. Corporate entities can afford to defend their plagiarism as innovation, the smaller operations of the secondary market cannot.

Perhaps the widespread appeal of shanzhai products in the West (as evidenced by the swell of articles, blogs, fashion lines, music and art projects both documenting and inspired by shanzhai) has to do with a sense that shanzhai writing rejects the logic of individual ownership and exploitation of the many by the few. Instead, it retains something of the shared resources and communal spirit of the commons, where communities sustained themselves on land that was not yet parcelled out by fences and hedges – and whose ownership and control by a single person would have seemed absurd.

Largely made from appropriated materials, shanzhai writing can be read as evidence of what Marxist feminist scholar Sylvia Federici, in her text *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, refers to as “everyday forms of resistance,” the pillaging, smuggling, poaching, and piracy that have long been the daily survival and subversion methods of the underclass to enact the redistribution of goods. A specifically feminist framing of shanzhai fashion production links the daily uncompensated labour of women that enabled the development of capitalism with contemporary issues of unequal access to the wealth generated by technological innovation.

Among the many tasks women did and do that are not considered ‘labour’ and thus remain undercompensated, spinning textile was traditionally a woman’s task. This exploitative gendered division of labour can still be seen today where, according to Emily Shultze,

“70% of garment workers in China are women, in Bangladesh 85%, and in Cambodia as high as 90%” and wages for garment work remain unfairly low. These contemporary conditions reflect Federici’s argument that primitive accumulation is not only a historically situated occurrence but is “re-launched in the face of every major capitalist crisis, serving to cheapen the cost of labour and to hide the exploitation of women and colonial subjects.”

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LOVE FOR SALAD
pick-me-up girls
Life is too short to waste any time on wondering what other people think about you
In the first place, if they had better things going on in their lives, they would have the time to sit around and talk about you
What’s important to me is not others’ opinions of me, but what’s important to me is my opinion of myself.

Today, the manual aspects of computing, the labour of inputting information, are still mostly done by female workers who perform the daily, thankless tasks upon which a male-dominated industry depends in order to demonstrate rapid growth and the smoothness of its apparently disembodied operations.

These underpaid and invisibilised workers are referred to as “mechanical turks,” a term that retains its orientalising origins from when it was coined to describe the amazing human-machine hybrid of a chess-playing robot dressed in Turkish clothing (in order to hide the real human inside the machine, moving the pieces with magnets and receiving no credit).

As Shenn Wen has shown, today the term is used to describe the workers, disproportionately women of colour, who carry out the gruelling tasks a human can do more accurately than a computer, such as transcribing subtitles.

Thus, the textual and textile “errors” visible in photos of Google books that catch the shadow of a scanning hand or in the typos of a shanzhai tee are sites of rupture that point to the lie of seamless production and reveal the presence of bodies upon which capitalist industry depends and which it conceals.


It’s Not Who You Are…
It’s Wha You Wear…
I Mean, Who Really Cares
Who You Are
Anyway

The secondary clothing market in China might be said to bridge the “women’s tasks” of both textile manufacture and computer programming to design and produce shanzhai garments available for purchase in markets and on e-commerce sites. The language that erupts from the speed of shifting global trends, filtered through the particular gendered economics and mechanics of garment design, production, sale, and purchase, is displayed atop the garments, a literal speaking the body.

Thus, while this area of women’s labour continues to be underpaid, under-protected, and under-recognized, the resultant shanzhai writing should nonetheless be appreciated as a site of creative agency and influence that communicates and comments upon the aesthetics and poetics of power and desire, rather than as an accidental by-product of faceless factory figures.

The advantages of being a woman artist

FEAR IS THE MOST ELEGANT WEAPON
YOUR HANDS ARE NOT MESSY
THREATENING BODILY HARM IS CRUDH WORK INSTEAD ON MINDS AND BELED
PLAY INSECURITIESLIKE A PIANO BE
CRATIVEIN APPROACH FORCS
ANXIETY TO EXCRUCIATING LVBELOUS GENTLY UNDERANNE THE PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE PANIC DRIVERS BLNDMAY
IYER CLIFFS ANLTBBRNATIVBIS
IRROR-INDUCED IMMOBLIZA
FERS ON FEAR PUT THIS EFFICIENT PROCESS
IN MOTION
FASEF CCN.TFSSFS

Shanzhai garments are so fetishized in the West precisely because they do not conceal the labour of production and the anxiety of surplus but instead articulate its contours in a hybrid machine-human language that speaks to the absurdities and inequalities of accumulation.

A major site of terrifying excess, the fashion industry encapsulates the cata

3 The contradictions of abundance; shanzhai writing is a costume of carnage within the carnivalesque performance of both violence and delight. We babble and exclaim. Freed, and on and on. FREEDON.
This text was developed in consultation with the Women's Art Library, Special Collections & Archive at Goldsmiths where Shanzhai Lyric’s growing collection of shirts was the inaugural ‘Archive in Residence’ through September 2019. The publishing of FREEDON (and on and on) corresponds to a cycle of work that seeks to put shanzhai lyrics in conversation with artist practices that occupy the ‘non-serious’ sites of gossip, fashion accessory, textile, glitch, and theft. Drawing on Marxist feminist discourses that examine the contemporary conditions sustaining the historical invisibilising of women’s labour (for instance, in fashion production or as data processors in IT industries), here shanzhai lyric is considered as an unauthorized collective creative process that refutes the logic of private ownership and fosters instead the active redistribution of property.