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The Atlantic

When the Forgery Is the Art

At the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism Architecture, curators are considering the creativity required to create counterfeit goods.



Oil painters at work in Dafen Village's "Louvre" building in 2006

[Stephen R Woolverton / Wikimedia Commons](#)

MEGAN GARBER | **JAN 12, 2016** | **CULTURE**

[At the BBC today](#), Jennifer Pak has a fascinating report on the [Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism Architecture](#), taking place this month in

Shenzhen (it starts 17 minutes in). The city, home to Foxconn and often referred to as “China’s Silicon Valley,” is also, Pak notes, sometimes called the “counterfeit capital of China.”

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Knockoff Appeal: Counterfeits Can Boost Sales of the Real Thing

Some of the many fascinating objects on display—within an abandoned flour mill converted for the purpose—were curated by London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, which is establishing a design museum in Shenzhen in partnership with the Chinese Merchants Group. And they hint at an extremely contemporary iteration of Walter Benjamin’s

[century-old anxieties](#): What is art in an age of digital reproduction? What is creativity in the era of the network? What does it mean, really, to “invent” something during a time when technological improvements mean that good designs, and good ideas, can be copied in an instant?

Innovation, David Li of Shenzhen’s Open Innovation Lab tells Pak, is no longer “limited by my access to technology, or my access to design, or my access to manufactures.” That means on the one hand that manufacturing has been freed from the traditional constraints of corporate marketing. The V&A’s [Brendan Cormier](#), demonstrating one of the cheap, mobile phones on exhibit at the biennale—a copy of a big-brand model, modified with large, well-marked buttons and heightened sound quality that make it perfect for use by seniors—[notes](#) that the people who might get use of such a gadget had previously formed “a market that was completely ignored by the larger phone companies.”

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In that sense, the V&A suggests, the distinction between “real” and “knockoff” is, from the consumer perspective, a largely semantic one. Sometimes the counterfeit can be, as a practical device, better than the original. “It’s not that we’re trying to promote counterfeit goods,” Cormier [says](#). “What we’re trying to say is that the ecosystem—because it really is an ecosystem which allows [shanzhai](#) [counterfeits] to exist—it’s allowing for many small-scale innovations within the mobile industry.”

But it’s not just commercial goods that are being changed by the industry quickly evolving to produce—and, yes, design—counterfeit goods. According to [Luisa Mengoni](#), who is overseeing the V&A’s contribution to the Shenzhen Design Museum, art—and innovation as a broader cultural and commercial goal—will be affected, too.

Take [Dafen Village](#), a Shenzhen suburb known for its replications of famous paintings. (As *The Atlantic*’s James Fallows [described it](#): “In one sprawling area are many hundreds of individual art factories, in which teams of artists crank out hand-painted replicas of any sort of picture you can imagine. European old masters. Andy Warhol. Gustav Klimt. Classic Chinese landscapes. Manet. Audubon. Botero. The super-hot and faddish contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun, whose paintings and sculptures all feature people wearing [enormous grins](#). Thomas Kinkade, the ‘[Painter of Light](#).’ Walter Keane, the ‘Painter of Mawkish Big-Eyed Kids.’”)

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Another of the V&A's biennale exhibits is a series of four paintings, three of them oils-on-canvas produced in Dafen, and a fourth a digital print on canvas. To the casual observer, they look the same. And they make, as such, a provocative juxtaposition. While few would argue that a Dafen artisan is an artist in quite the same way Klimt—or even Kinkade—was, the exhibit suggests the myriad levels of artistry and creativity and craftsmanship that contribute to a good forgery. It suggests the many ways that technological improvements have blurred the line between “original” and “copy.”

And it makes a corollary to the commercial finding that [counterfeits can actually boost sales of the items they knock off](#): Counterfeits, the curators are arguing, can actually offer their own contribution to innovation. Copies suggest not [the death of the author](#) so much as a new form of networked, industrialized authorship.

“When we first started this project, we wanted to understand: ‘How can we understand Shenzhen as a design city?’” Cormier tells Pak. “And to do so, you have to go through a personal kind of exercise of changing, or altering, a lot of your biases or assumptions about design. So: assumptions about design being driven by a singular author, that

painting is all about individual creativity. That has to be shifted to an idea that painting is about craft and technique.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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