Chinese gallery puts people to sleep at Frieze

LONDON. Every morning of Frieze, shortly before the fair opens, a young woman will take homeopathic sleeping medicine and turn into an art piece. Dozing on a bed in the open area of Vitamin Creative Space's booth (F32) at the northern end of the tent, the somnolent woman will be visible to all passersby. After she awakes, she will go home and leave only an empty bed in the booth.

Each day's piece is named after the sleeper—today's is "Kate". "In this work, I use medicine as a way to change [a person's] natural state, just as a sculpture is always trying to reshape the earth and stone in order to make these materials as a piece of artwork," explains the artist, Chu Yun, in his somewhat obscure statement about the work. "In the piece, medicine is a method and purpose to construct and reshape, to reach a standard state—Beauty."

Britain's art world has a history of public sleeping, of course. When Cornelia Parker had actress Tilda Swinton sleep inside a glass casket eight hours a day at the Serpentine, more than 21,000 people streamed through over the course of a week. But Vitamin's sleeping beauties will have a tougher time of it, given that Frieze's Resonance 104.4 station lies only feet from the bed. Thus, the women, paid £50 ($93) to participate, will have to stay up all of the previous night and sleep wearing earplugs and a face mask.

The project is being produced by Vitamin Space of Guangzhou, China, a conceptually oriented gallery started in 2002 by writer and curator Zhang Wei, novelist Hu Fang and artist Zheng Guogu. "We didn't have a clear idea then, except that we wanted to work outside normal art categories," explains Zhang. "For us, selling works of art is not the goal, just a way to keep supporting new projects." While both its geographic location and artistic focus have distanced Vitamin from the Chinese contemporary art-market hype raging in Shanghai and Beijing, the sleeper piece is for sale as a unique conceptual work, at $12,000 for the right to reproduce the project.

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