



At the Building Site

Becoming Who We Are

Mongolia is changing. Of course, Mongolia has been changing particularly rapidly over the past twenty years or so - but recently, the change has taken a new turn, described by the Guardian newspaper as being a country “on the brink of one of the most dramatic transformations in human history”¹ What it is all about is mining: opening up the once sacred surface of the Mongolian soil and divulging coal, copper, gold, uranium... The thriving economy brings a lift to most people’s standard of living; still many are hesitant to be overtly positive or negative about the whole process. It is not good or bad, it simply is. Change.²

I first came to Mongolia seven years ago as a part of a group of artists who wished to challenge our perceptions of the world by trying out how we would experience a place as radically different from our own European backgrounds as Mongolia.³ As much as we wished to see an alien culture, we wanted to experience ourselves as aliens. And we did – but this happened through the years in many different ways, as of course, during the process it was not only Mongolia that changed, we did also. For better or worse – who is to say one way or the other? Had we not lived the lives we have, we would not be who we are anyway. Nietzsche writes evocatively of the process of becoming oneself in *Ecce Homo*, stating that “one becomes what one is presupposes that one does not have the remotest idea what one is”. To be able to avoid “blunders of life, side-paths and wrong turnings” would definitely spoil the process. Maybe the greatest wisdom comes precisely from the misfortunes that befall us – “they are an expression of great sagacity”.⁴ Knowing oneself is a practice of reflection better to be directed backwards than forward. We should be immersed in the experience and only afterwards take our time to reflect.

This is what the art exhibition exchange project Bare house. Pori-Rotterdam-Ulaanbaatar has tried to do in its way. Exchanging people and places, cultural contexts, and with them, the practices of producing and displaying works of art, we have created a semi-ethnographic-artistic process of mingling our ‘becoming selves’, between Mongolia and Europe.

1 The Guardian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/nov/07/gobi-mega-mine-mongolia>

2 Parts of this essay have also been presented at IAA City and Nature Conference, Bologna, Italy in 2012 as Taina Rajanti & Annu Wilenius: *Travels in Time, Space and Intensity*.

3 This project was titled *Mongolia: Perception and Utopia* and resulted in exhibitions in Mongolia, Finland and Estonia as well as a publication Hacklin&Wilenius [ed:s]: *Mongolia: Perception and Utopia*, 2008.

4 Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo*, 1980, p. 64.

This current publication is meant both as a documentation and as a reflection of the exhibitions at Zanabazar museum in Ulaanbaatar in 2011.

Bare House on the Road

The first Bare house exhibition was held in Pori, Finland in 2010¹, and many of the works there were site-specifically produced to comment on Pori, its history and geography. All the participating artists and architects spent a time working at the Pori Artist-in-Residence program, and two of the Mongolian artists also had a residency in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. In making a new version of the project for Ulaanbaatar, several new artists joined and created new works in Mongolia, only some of the works remained the same as in Pori – and even those were re-worked with new edits and with Mongolian subtitles. Some of these versions showed in very intriguing ways how divergent it can be to show even (almost) the same work in a different context.

S. Ganzug, who had had to give up his idea for a performance – Museum for Goats – with fifty live goats in Finland, due to the lack of suitable animals, was very surprised that he could not have them in a Mongolian museum either. To obtain the goats was not the problem this time, but regulations about the museum space. It was kindly offered that he could exhibit them outside on the square. This would have missed the whole point of the work. Another work by S. Ganzug was a documentation of a performance bringing windmills in the form of folded-papers on sticks to his native village in the Western mountains of Mongolia. Coal and wood being the major sources of energy these apparently childish toys, surrounding the major electricity pole in the village, could be understood as a campaign for the idea that energy could be derived from a very plentiful local source, in a way that coal and wood are not. The performance in the mountains awoke quite some wonder and criticism. Displayed as documentation in the museum it was, however, mostly not understood either as personal or political provocation.

Another work bringing together European and Mongolian views on housing issues is Katrin Hornek's *If Architecture Could Talk*. A two-channel video installation paralleling Austrians - building gers to gain real freedom from housing regulations and dependence on society – with Mongolian building developers - ger district dwellers and pastoral nomads considering the probable freedoms of living in apartments. This work aroused a lot of interest in Mongolia as it mingles traditional and futuristic Mongolian values. Another piece that was reworked with

¹ Also published as Wilenius: *Bare house. Pori-Rotterdam-Ulaanbaatar*, 2011.

Mongolian translation was my own video installation from 2008 entitled *Of the House I Grew Up in...Helsinki-Ulaanbaatar*. I had photographed ger districts around Ulaanbaatar, and combined these with stories of my own childhood environment. This seemed to be of little interest for the local audience, possibly for being too ordinary and too alien at the same time.

The difficulty of transferring works of art between places and contexts became evident in the set of cultural (mis-) interpretations that took place as T. Enkhbold was invited to Manchester for the Asia Triennial. His performance there was part of the exhibition in Ulaanbaatar also as a simultaneous video documentation. In many Manchester based newspapers, his performance of erecting his hand-crafted ger and making a performance of ritualistic gestures was well received and marvelled at for its exoticism. One of the reviews questioned, however, the relation of Enkhbold's work and its 'roots'. Critic Phoebe Chambre writes: "Enkhbold's work is enfranchised by his nomadic community, yet if 'performed' in rural Mongolia, the piece surely wouldn't be art. Enkhbold (ironically enough) depends on changing, predominantly modernised urban places to enliven his work as 'art'."¹

It was a curious comment - as no pastoral nomad - nor any other Mongolian would recognize Enkhbold's practices as part of their daily routines - and what other reason would there be for this not to be 'art' out in the steppes? Lack of an audience? Lack of an understanding of 'art'? To contest this view on the nomads, it might have been interesting to display the restrictions the museum set for his 'nomadic' performance. These restrictions included advising against nudity, use of horse manure, burning of anything and the use of un-treated animal skins. Setting these two 'performances' side by side might have created a more dynamic cultural meeting than the performance of the 'museum nomad' - dressed in white pantaloons, making EU approved, child-safe gestures, with EU approved child-safe materials. What is missing in criticism of this work, in this hyper-conscious-of-absolutely-everything fashion of European art world, as Enkhbold playing the role of the ethnic nomad, exploited or willing, is that what is truly great about places like Mongolia is that they are still (partly) wild!

Another occasion for a certain amount of interesting cultural-context mismatching happened with Aletta de Jong's installation *Landscaping Modernism*. The work brings together various ideas of recycling and upcycling, being both reflective and critical of (Western) consumption; it uses Dutch photographs of mountains of waste metal combined with a still life of herbs and

¹ Phoebe Chambre: Enkhbold Togmidshirev's Gentle Message, *The Manunion* magazine, <http://www.student-direct.co.uk/2011/11/16/enkhbold-togmidshirevs-gentle-message/>, retrieved at July 21st 2012.

medicine gathered from nature and set up in re-used plastic bottles etc. Aletta, who has never visited Mongolia, had to cancel her trip there, so we gathered it together on site for her. Setting up this display of late urban European ideas in Mongolia, where being ingenious with whatever material you happen to have around is a centuries-old if not millennia-old art form, felt at least nothing like preaching to the converted. Rather, it felt as though there was a missing link here: that the always-new-throw-everything-away culture had not taken enough ground yet for this radical re-assessment to appeal. The work made a beautiful blend of two cultures and locations, although it may have had a stronger aesthetic than ethical allure to the locals. There is, of course, also that slight uneasiness about capturing 'degrowth' in a (still recently) developing country. The misconceptions and explanations that we exchanged while making the work made it very clear that for someone who had never been to Mongolia, it is very difficult to imagine it.

These incidents of creating and displaying art works, bringing together social and material circumstances, in different cultural contexts, express the potential of art to both create experience and to stimulate debate.

Winds of Change

I reflect here on my own experience of these exchanges. As mentioned, our initial idea to go to Mongolia in 2005 was to experience something radically different from our own lives and environments, and we certainly did. At first, everything was an adventure, and there was a tolerance for the most difficult things because of the sense of an adventure, at least when it doesn't last more than two to three months. I got used to a lot of things and felt quite comfortable becoming almost Mongolian (without Mongolian language, though).

Gradually, I started to work with the ger districts, walk around and listen to peoples childhood stories and sit about in gers sipping endless cups of milk tea and attend to garden parties with barbeques and beer – and I felt very strong recognition of my own childhood environment in the 1970s Helsinki, when my suburb was still half-designed and half-wild. Also in the Mongolian countryside I felt quite at home. I was not bothered too much about privacy (lack of) or hygiene (lack of, also) and many aspects of the nomadic households felt very homey to me. And as we stood on the Sukhbaatar Square for the 800th anniversary of the Mongol empire sipping vodka straight from (a plastic) bottle and listening to the Scorpions (live!) playing Winds of Change, I certainly had no complaints.¹

¹ Scorpions' Wind of Change is the iconic song of the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall. In Mongolia it coincided with the demonstrations of the democratic revolution on the Sukhbaatar Square 1989 – demonstrations that were followed three months later by the resignation of the world's second oldest Communist government. Friends with me in the audience said that sure some fifteen years ago it had been important to them, but now...well...





Then last year I came for the last, final, exhibition of the Bare house project. I stayed six months, during which time I was to organise, fund and curate two exhibitions in a museum that did not really cater to the concept that exhibitions are built. The usual way to make exhibitions is still based on string-hanging and pedestals, and this goes together with the idea that an exhibition is 'mounted' in a few hours. There were also many surprising moments dealing with the information, marketing and opening hours of the museum, just to mention a few issues. Of course, these are issues one should expect to be something different in a museum of Buddhist relics in Mongolia to what one would expect in a contemporary art museum anywhere. The ways in which art is framed or built to be perceived as art are very dependent on both geographical and temporal contexts. Be that as it may, these issues combined with the immensely physical fact of change in the city of Ulaanbaatar – especially traffic and queueing had become totally impossible – I became acquainted with very many parts of my European-Weberian mind that would just not budge an inch for any kind of assimilation at all. I felt myself, ultimately and absolutely, exactly what I had been legally labelled: a registered alien.

It is very easy to get – and to give – a chaotic impression of Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia. Partly I would say it is also true. There is a very different idea in this culture about, say, planning and information, for example. A common nomadic attitude could be paraphrased "Why worry about it now? All will be upside down tomorrow anyway".¹ But, I think, it is important and good to remember that although Mongolia is creating quite a chaos with market economy and motor traffic, just for example, it is far from fact that there would not be systems in the country that the people are very keenly and tightly tied to – and that these systems are not just theoretical but actually practiced. One of these systems is religion, which in Mongolia is a Lamaist mixture of shamanism and Buddhism – and practised by most Mongolians throughout their daily lives. There is a ritual for everything, from morning to night, and for anything special, such as cutting your child's hair or planting anything, it is best to consult a lama. Many of the hectically driving cars are decorated with solar-panel prayer-wheels. Then there are, of course, the very strong structures imposed by pastoral nomadism, which is very far from roaming the steppes aimlessly with your possessions in a haphazard bundle at your back. In a ger every item and every person has a place. And whenever the home is moved, it is moved for a purpose to a purposeful place. And above all there is the family, which is what Mongolia is all about. Urban or rural, you live the system of the family. So the chaos one experiences in current Mongolia is the chaos of very sudden change – possibly the most sudden in human history? No wonder one feels it.

1 i.e. Humphrey & Sneath: *End of Nomadism?: Society, State, and the Environment in Inner Asia*, 1999, p. 306.

City of Illusions

As I returned home and once more retold my experiences to my professor, Taina Rajanti (as the Bare house project is part of my doctoral studies¹), I was encouraged by her to read a science fiction story by Ursula K. Le Guin called *The City of Illusions*. She thought it would be good reading for me because it is a story of how you need to be the only, the singular, alien in order to be able to assimilate to a new culture. If you are two, you will form your own community and remain alien forever. As I read it, to my surprise and fascination, I found out that it was about much more than that.

The City of Illusions is a story of an alien – later to be named Falk – who is found in a forest on Earth some 2000 years from now. He has entirely lost his memory, and no one has any idea where he could have come from. The community takes him in and teaches him their language, culture, skills and beliefs. He becomes a full member of the community, but his origin still bothers him – vaguely as the only memory he seems to have is of a distant mountain landscape – and so finally he sets out to find out where he is from. The Earth is governed by a race called the Shing that are either alien or human pretending to be alien in order to stay in control. As Falk reaches the city of the Shing he encounters many layers of truths and in the actual city it is impossible to tell whether you are in an actual space or talking to an actual person or whether these are all just projections, illusions of different kinds – as are the ‘truths’ around.

In the city of the Shing, Falk finds out, however, that he comes from a distant other galaxy and that his memory has been erased. The Shing tell him that his old personality can be restored by an operation, but that this would utterly destroy his current personality. Of course Falk does not want this – so he goes through a self-suggestive meditation ritual that he hopes will enable him to reach his new identity even through the old one. And he succeeds. At first he goes nearly insane having these two entirely differing personalities inside his body simultaneously, but eventually he manages to balance them. And this remarkable endeavour, being two at once, enables him finally to escape from the Shing city and steal a spaceship and head towards his own planet.

What is essential here, I think, is that he can use both of the personalities and their very differing abilities and knowledge alternately and simultaneously. The old self is a space-

¹ For Aalto University, School of Art, Design and Architecture with the title *Nomadic Science Fiction: Experience of Diversity and Alterity through Urbanizing Mongolia*, addressing the question of art exhibition exchange as a form of research.

astronomer that can program the ship to travel the 140 light years through space back home, the new Earth person has learned enough brutality not to mind the violence needed in order to escape. Still the story does not end in a final, even hybrid truth, winning the day and the entire universe finding peace at that. Besides his own two experiences and selves, Falk-Ramarren, as he is called now, takes the stunned Shing captain and another young alien the Shing have schooled to be a propaganda tool, home with him– and concludes that now they will have at least three different versions (of truths) of Earth.

In other words, the City of Illusions is a story about how by accident and by will power – and a lot of technology – one mind can hold inside itself two entirely differing personalities and cultures. It is also a story about how this kind of merging (though still keeping aware of parts) is essential to manage superbly in the universe. Besides this it is ultimately a story of how both technologies and ideologies govern our being in the universe and different combinations give different results. Somehow I felt that this story expressed well the idea of rising above alternatives and somehow also the intense hope of a difference that I, along with many other artists and (urban) researchers, felt that the combination of Mongolian nomadic and Buddhist culture together with latest technology could possibly be.

Strangers to Ourselves

What I am trying to address through all my stories is the different experiences that a project like this can reveal about both others (persons, cultures, cities) and about ourselves. The things and places that we belong to and don't, and in which ways this appears in different phases. We mostly somehow imagine that we have solid, whole selves, but of course we don't. We are divided. We are processes. We change. Julia Kristeva for one has made a great point of the stranger inside ourselves, the unconscious, the part of ourselves that will never be known to us, that does not belong (to any house or culture).¹ She writes of an emerging paradoxical community of foreigners that acknowledge their own inner strangeness alongside the strangeness of others – and that through this combined knowledge of 'radical strangeness' we might shift somewhere else².

¹ Kristeva 1991, 192.

² Ibidem, 195.

And so we go in search of... positive nihilism?¹ Combinations of Western and Mongolian identities (selves and families), practices of art, ethnography, urban research etc. in order to see what is there, after being ripped off much, and then to think what can be changed. Stressing the importance of both diversity and disparity, Jane Rendell considers Kristeva's term diagonal axis as the core argument for interdisciplinarity – and at least in this case, internationality. What is essential is that, in choosing to give up what we already know and by setting out for unknown lands (and practices), the “transformational experience of interdisciplinary work produces a potentially destabilizing engagement with dominant power structures - allowing the emergence of new and often uncertain forms of knowledge.”² Rendell and Kristeva both emphasize that what is important here is not only to be intellectual and critical, but also to be emotional and political.³

To follow Nietzsche: it is oneself that one needs to challenge, oneself that one needs to find a new galaxy in – a new possibility of life, a new building site.

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Arabia, Helsinki July 13th 2012

English-Mongolian translation by Tsendpurev Tsegmid

1 Positive nihilism can be defined as removal of all non-inherent valuations (judgements, categories, social-logic etc.) so that immanent values can be perceived and reconstructed. Positive nihilism is not typical only to Nietzsche but also to many traditions of pagan, atheist, Buddhist and Hindu thought. (*The Unpopular Truth*, 2008 Online: <http://penetrate.blogspot.fi/2008/11/nihilism-in-search-of-working.html> accessed 6 Au 2012, David Storey 2011)

2 Jane Rendell: *Critical Spatial Practice: Curating, Editing, Writing*, in Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick [Ed:s]: *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Intellect, Bristol and Chicago, 2007, p.60

3 Ibidem.

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