

Contemporary Mongolian artists' relations to the nomadic life.

This article offers a few examples on how contemporary artists in Mongolia perceive their upbringing and growth in nomadic families and their art in a contemporary art scene. The article also describes the artists' view on Landart and their participation in the annual seminar 'ArtCamp 2010'.



Art Studios in Ulaanbaatar, headquarters for Blue Sun artist organization.

This article is based on five interviews during a 30 day long stay, including participation in Art Camp 2010, exhibit in Ulaanbataar, (gallery Xanadur), visits to nomadic families and travels within the country.

Interviews:

Dahlka Ohir Yondonjunai. Organiser for Art Camp 2010 and Blue Sun organisation.

Flower-Flower Tsetsegbadam: Art historian student, about the art scene in Ulaanbataar and Mongolia.

Artists: Batzorig Dugarsuren (Bazo), Enkbold Togmidshiirev (Bolto) and Sedbazar Ganzug (Zuge).

Author: Marie Gayatri Kristoffersson, part taking artist at ArtCamp 2010 living in Sweden.

Background : About the author

Since 1994 I have, as an active artist in Landart, on numerous occasions been inspired by thoughts of how a nomadic life might shape humans' connection with nature ¹. For instance, the idea of how nomads relocate between different pastures has, on a personal level, occasionally served as an example for how humans might best relate to nature.

To work with art in nature, after all, also means constant moving between locations where the area's conditions play a large role in how the piece of art develops. On a figurative level one can find symbolic similarities between a nomadic life-style and the form of art with which I work. And on the large, contemporary, international art scene it is not uncommon to see Western artists, living with nomads for a time, only to channel inspiration from this into their art ². But how does the opposite reality look like? Opposite in the perspective of activities and art making that starts at a grass roots level and in the native culture with an intention to be adopted in the western cultural world? Are there artists who work with Landart and who, with personal experience of a nomadic life-style, work with this in their art? If there are, what do they think of Landart and what is it that employs them in the meeting of art and their experiences of a nomadic life? I travelled to Mongolia to find out if such a activity could exist there.



Marie Gayatri, South Chorea 2008

Mongolia

Mongolia is a country in central Asia, north from China and south of Russia. The total area is 1,564,116 km, over six times the land area of the UK. It is the fifth largest country in Asia according to size but with a population of 2.6 million. ³ Ulaanbaatar is the head capital with a population of 1,2 with unofficially numbers of inhabitants up to 1,5 million. ⁴ To understand this variation of inhabitants in Ulaanbaatar you have to know some more about the Mongolian historical background, the social and political situation today. On a short term of last 100 years history Mongolia was the second Communist state allied with Russia, from 1921- 1990. The country developed into a democracy, and since 1992 there have been free elections. For the moment the nation is run by a political party called Mongolian National Democratic party, MNDP. Most Mongolians I talked to describes the party as "a party with red sympathizes". Mongolia is a country with a large number of nomadic population, but today it is difficult to know exactly how many. The number of nomads actually living from their herds varies in numbers from 50-70 %. Mongolia is changing a lot at



Nadam (yearly national festival) outside UlaanBaatar

the moment and even though many people in general terms today are quickly adapting to a modern western lifestyle, such as living in houses, getting higher education, working in cities, using internet etc., they are in some other perspectives living with social habits developed by a nomadic culture. And the variation in people living in Ulaanbaatar is just one example.

The phenomenon can be described like this; In a nomadic lifestyle you move along with your herds and normally you move 4 times a year, shifting from one area to another chosen by season and growth of grass etc., feeding the herds you have. This is how you are brought up, how your ancestors have been giving you knowledge about surviving and living, which means that ancestors play a crucial part in a nomads life, since you have learned everything from them. For instance a nomads relation or perception to the cultural conception of "home" is simply different from the way a person with a resident culture thinks and acts upon the concept "home". It might be considered as "natural" for resident persons to take actions in moving your home from one place to another, by making announcements of some kind, to post-offices, social departments etc. But for a person with a nomadic background this might not be a natural thing to do. And when you move in to a city, you might not even think of it as you actually are leaving one "home" behind -to create a new one. You simply move as you are used to live, and one day you might move again. In some ways this is how Ulaanbaatar expands, people move in and out in periods of times - sometimes returning to the countryside, also for a period of time. Some come to the cities and live with relatives already resident in flats or houses, some put up their ger's ⁵ in suburbs and start adapting to the city life in this way. When this way of living by moving combines with a resident city lifestyle and social resident structure it results in some problems. Criminality, alcoholism and unemployment is a huge problem in Ulaanbaatar today, as in many other large cities in the world. However city life is not really what you normally expect to focus on as a visitor in Mongolia. The countryside is literally around the corner, and travelling through vast spaces is very much a way to experience a country like Mongolia. And by doing so you sleep with nomads in their gers, or if you have your own tent, you sleep in your own tent somewhere. You might spend the evenings around the fire-place cooking and eating after a day on the move, by vehicle, horse or foot. It is a huge country with so many different landscapes; in east enormous plains, south the desert region Gobi, west mountains and in the north pine forests stretching to the Russian Taiga.

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The art scene in Ulaan Baatar

In Ulaanbaatar there are around five private art galleries and some private investments in art are taking place, mainly



Gallery Xanadu, Art Camp exhibits 2010

from state employers, but now and then from abroad, from countries such as China, Malaysia etc. ⁶ This considers mainly paintings, sculpture and calligraphy. The most important institution is the National Art Council. And then there are some national organisations and networks in various disciplines. Blue Sun is one of them. Blue Sun started as an organisation called Green Horse Society around 20 years ago. At that time the initiative came from a number of artists, such as Baatarchuluun W., one of Mongolia's most famous calligraphers. ⁷ In the beginning of the ninety's, they had their first international exchange with a group of artists in Holland. 1994 they also had their first project on Landart. After a contact with Swedish artists in 2004, Blue Sun again focused on Landart as a workshop platform for inspiration in Mongolia and organized the reoccurring event Art Camp. A seminar/workshop in wilderness where exchange between foreign artists and Blue Sun members can be held ⁸.

Blue Sun is well known for being experimental and encouraging new concepts to the art scene. Today they are mainly focused on contemporary art and established artist in the group also accept students on a private financial basis. The break through of contemporary art began roughly seven years ago and there are a hand full of museums and galleries that every so often exhibit contemporary art. We are as yet not to see any form of investment or compensation from institutes to contemporary artists. And to live as a contemporary artist in Mongolia can be seen as a large economic risk. Despite this, there are a number of active artists within performance, video, mixed media, and so on. Most of them have experience in one or more arts-in-residence programs in other countries and of past exhibits, both in their own country and abroad. Others are active on the Asian art scene; China, Malaysia, South Korea and more. Books, websites and catalogues are available for their projects, exhibits and so on.

I had the honour of meeting some of these artists, cooperating with them and finally choosing some for an interview. I chose these three artists because all of them were actively engaged in contemporary art, according to the criteria I described above. They were recommended by older artists within Blue Sun and together, they could represent a spectrum of opportunities and differences. A variety which in turn, hopefully, would be able to reflect something of the contemporary Mongolian art scene.

Interview

How would you describe a traditional Mongolian life style to me, and what does it mean to you as a contemporary artist in Ulanbataar?

The traditional Mongolian life style is about the nomadic life and the cultural implications it has developed for thousands of years. The nomadic life is also about being able to read and understand nature, so that one can survive together with one's livestock. It is about movement, about moving from one place to another. We are all brought up in nomadic families and moved to the cities to study in our teens, or later because of career choices. The traditional Mongolian life style means different things to us. Baso, for example, thinks it's important to preserve traditions so that they are not lost in an ever changing society where more and more Mongolians choose to move to the cit-

The nomadic life is also about being able to read and understand nature, so that one can survive together with one's livestock.

ies and become resident. But he underlines that art must be free and must be allowed to move freely between traditional expressions and modern ideas. To Bolto, contemporary art is a possible arena where, through his art, he is able to re-establish a kind of lost connection with things that feel significant to him, now and in his past. And to Zuge, the nomadic life is still very present in his life, and he almost describes it as some sort of constant yearning back to home; a nostalgia that sometimes is expressed in the art he creates.



Bolto performing at Art Camp 2010

Do you think that your social background as a nomad can inform a contemporary art perspective? Or are they two incompatible worlds? How do you reflect on this, do you see possibilities or obstacles along the way?

Neither Bolto, Baso or Zuge see any obstacles. They approach the question from different angles. Zuge and Baso prefer to work with their art so that it awakes questions, concerning conflicting fields in society. It can be about mankind's fear for the future, social and political questions and so on. Further, they use a visual language which often has a direct connection to the nomadic life and their own experiences of it. The format of display for intention, idea and content may have a contemporary shape as, for instance, film, performance, interactive art events and so on. Bolto, on the other hand, does not combine contemporary questions with his art, but perceives himself as a sort of voice of the past. He describes it as if he conveys different messages from his ancestors and childhood through the objects he uses in his art.

How would you describe your art?

The three artists describe their art as an activity where one learns from others, where one draws impressions from others. They tell of how their artistic expressions were shaped to contemporary art when they began to work with Blue Sun. Bolto also considers art as a positive force, an interaction between action and experience, where man develops art and art develops man. Zuge describes his time of residence and the meeting with the European culture as an important learning and ingredient to his present works. Baso looks upon his art as an activity in the beginning of a far greater and wider project.

What does Landart mean to you and your art?

To Zuge, landart is directly connected to various memories of his childhood and nomadic life. He feels at home and closely related to working with nature as a form of art tool. Bolto's interest for Landart has to do with how the art form brings understanding of space, sur-



View over site for Art Camp 2010, Trull River, central Mongolia

roundings, nature, state and consciousness. He experiences it as a form of recognition from the north; perhaps from earlier memories or a more collective memory. He doesn't quite know, but he feels that landart stirs memories within him, something he thinks we all carry. Baso's interest in Landart lies in the contact with and exploration of natural materials. But he wants to continue developing his ideas, and above all else, he wants to attempt to use Landart in projects that interact more actively with people and an audience. Baso also says he likes Landart; that it is a new place for him and that he enjoys moving toward new places.

Why did you choose to participate in Art Camp 2010?

The three artists agree that Art Camp is a good way to exchange experience and a platform upon which one can test new ideas. Some of them wanted to engross earlier ideas in a context where the out door environment and nature got to align with an explored art form. Bolto regards Art Camp as something of a tradition in Blue Sun and is pleased to get away from the city where he sometimes feel like he's having trouble breathing.

Conclusion

Today's Mongolia is changing towards a modern way of approaching both art and life, and those questions being asked in above interview was searching for a dialogue that could bring forth an idea of how young artist are dealing with new conceptual art ideas and values. And how this may interact with their experiences as nomads, which on one hand could be representing a kind of old or primitive lifestyle, meeting very different and new values. Since my personal meeting with these artists mainly took place at events which were Landart based it was also interesting to find out why these Mongolian artists chose to work with an art expression, such as landart as part of their practice.



Boltos ger and ongoing art project

A conclusion on the dialogue/ interview that took place, could be described as follows; On the art scene in Mongolia there are a number of artists, choosing to work with their art in contemporary art concepts, fusing traditional nomadic traditions and aesthetics in to media's such as performances etc. This also seems to be an acceptable and successful way to work (- for instance in this very writing moment Zuge has a solo exhibition at the National Museum in Ulaanbataar). I would now like to make a few proposals on what could be considered as "nomadic aesthetics" within contemporary art. I would like to do so, by explaining and looking closer at this artists artworks.

Enkbold Togmidshirev (Bolto) has constructed his own ger, small enough to check in as luggage without extra costs at an airport, he told me with laughter. This is one of his art projects. In Europe, he erects his ger at different locations and lives in it as his project. Sometimes, he lifts off the layer of cloth, covering the constructions and creates various performances in it. In his performances, he uses horse dung, fire, ankle bells, animal hides and so on. Boltos family has been raising and breeding horses for generations.

In Mongolia a horse is both a respected and sacred animal and Boltos relation to horses is a strong link to his nomadic heritage. For him the horse is present in his performances by covering the ger floor and himself with horse dung, by the rope made of horse hair hanging from the center of the ger, and by burning horse dung. He describes that this physical remains from a horse in a space he himself creates, acts as a tool for him to alter a kind of transcendent state in his mind during the performances he creates. He also explained to me that what he actually examines in his performances is the space in the very centre of the ger. In a ger the centre is a place where ancestors communicate with their living relatives. By approaching this central point in his artwork, he makes spiritual connections with his ancestors or early memories from his childhood. In Boltos case it is most obvious how he uses traditional props as an artistic expression but also gives them an aesthetic implication with his ger serving as a framework for an act to take place. What I see as an aesthetic dimension is contained in Boltos ability to walk on a border line between a very personal experience and art concepts based on performing in the context of the art world. By do-



Zuges project at Art Camp 2010

ing so, he gives his varied events, happenings, performances and exhibitions a sense of mysterious feeling, yet with invitational gestures that make it possible to confront issues involving past and present.

Sedbazar Ganzug (Zuge): In this piece which was made during Art Camp 2010, and then later exhibited in Ulanbaatar,⁹ Zuge uses a special knot technique by tying branches together with a string. All branches are tied together in both ends and by doing so, Zuge creates a repeating shape. He explained to me that the zig-zag pattern he used, also is a re-occurring pattern he has been working with in previous projects. To him, it is the mountain tops from his home region in western Mongolia. This piece was 140 meters long and wound through slopes, groves, sandbanks, up through trees and down on the ground again. The knot technique being used is the same one used in tying together the wood construction in traditional nomad gers. In this artwork created at Art Camp, I would like to suggest that the nomadic tradition was very central for this particular artwork. In Zuges choices of using a knot technique he symbolically bring forth an idea of tying objects together connected to a nomad tradition. There is a sense of making things visible in his art pieces! For instance, aesthetic perfection doesn't seem to be an important ingredient in this piece, knots were tied together in a way that at a first sight looked random and chaotic, but by walking his 140 m long art piece crossing river banks, water, forest and then a river again, I was thrilled to realize that what he was examining in his artwork was pointing toward something else tells perfection! This sense of making things visible in his artworks lies in his ability to bring forth his own personality and emotional involvement in the process of making art. The process is left as traces in his final pieces and acts as a mirror, giving you a strong feeling of recognition, as a human being with many various feelings.



Bazos performance at Art Camp 2010



Bazo exhibiting at Xanadu

Batzorig Dugarsuren(Bazo): In Bazo's case it might not always be so obvious to describe a visual link between a nomadic tradition and his art. The link between nomadic tradition and his contemporary art pieces is sometimes more evident in his exploration of social activities and art, than in a

visual artistic outcome. Like in this performance which was made during Art Camp, Baso planted wooden poles symbolizing living trees outside the participants tents. He ended his performance by watering all poles. Baso explained that this was a symbolic act which underlines the nomads' situation, but also the environment, where many faulty decisions are made that do not work in favour of the ordinary person. This was why he was watering wooden poles, that obviously never would grow! In showing his performance during the exhibition he used a hand made wooden wheel created for this situation. The monitor was placed inside the wheel, constantly showing his performance over and over again. It was an interesting mixture between a solid wooden sculpture and an audio visual experience. A situation where you had to put together a mixture of materials and media to a complete art piece. The fact that you also had to follow a narrative documentary motion to get it all together really created a sense of surprise and provocation in a funny way, yet with an underlying seriousness. The wheel is also an ancient nomadic symbol being used in traditional art and hand craft.

By looking closer at the chosen artworks, we do get a wider view on what an artist might express in a very different life situation, not only by referring and knowing a lot about art, but also in finding ways for our self to understand how lifestyles may pay a very important part in art itself. I happened to be at a specific event in Mongolia at a time when a kind of creative activity, an experimental willingness and a great deal of determination to survive as an artist seemed to fuse art and lifestyle with traditional habits and values – to produce results that work in many successful ways! This was brought in to daylight in most sincere ways and maybe the reason why this is taking place, is part of an even larger social or historical contexts I was not able to see or examine. After all, I was in Mongolia to make an art project myself, participating on a program organized by Blue Sun and my intention in writing this article, was to work my way from a point of view, where artists meets artists. To capture this opportunity in confidentiality being created, and take the chance to bring forth a dialogue, based on questions that could help a foreigner (like me) to understand how art may come to light in a cultural surrounding like Mongolia.



Another view of Zuges project at Art Camp 2010

Notes and references

1 A beautiful thought, but an utopian idea of mankind's future, since we today, are far too many human beings for this even to be possible. For example the Norwegian philosopher Arne Neas speaks about this ideas in one of his books; Life philosophy (2000).

2 Marina Abramovic,
www.artinfo.com/news/story/33882/when-marina-abramovic-dies

3 Blunden, Jane (2008). Mongolia, Brandt Travel Guide

4 www.alacrastore.com/country-snapshot/Mongolia Figures like 1,5 million I was told by Mongolians, living in Ulaanbataar.

5 A ger is a nomads traditional home, - a tent. A ger is normally around 8 meters in diameter and houses an entire family. Most gers are white and coved with felt, made of sheep wool.

6 Information from interview with Flower-Flower

7 Newspaper article in; Mongolia Todag 2006.

8 The seminar began as an exchange between Swedish and Mongolian artists, but during the last few years, the event has continued, organised by the members of Blue Sun. At Art Camp 2010, 14 artists participated, 12 Mongolians and two foreign artists (Belgium, Sweden). Out of the 12 Mongolian artists, roughly half of them were active artists and half of them were students in the organization Blue Sun. An art camp means that artists collectively venture into the wild for seven to ten days where they create art, exchange experiences and finally brings it to a close with an exhibit at a gallery in Ulaanbataar. The practical conditions are very simple; everyone lives in tents, cook together, share chores, expenses etc. The last day concludes with a tour where everyone shares their works.

9 Gallery Xanadu; Ulaanbataar

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