

## Mama Huhu

*(Eng. Lit. Horse Horse Tiger Tiger Eng. Tran. So, So...)*

Artists Ni Haifeng and Kristiina Koskentola are both based in Amsterdam. They both work frequently in Beijing. In this conversation they are reflecting on their traversing artistic practices and on migrations of objects and ideas.

**KK:** China is a country of huge extremes, which has a rich and long history and cultural traditions. When you go to China, you go home. For me, however, it is a different reality.

**NH:** 'When you go to China, you go home', well, not exactly. Home is not a fixed place, rather an idea, an image, a memory, a state of familiarity. After 16 years of living in Europe, China is, for me, both familiar and foreign. It always takes me a while to 'recontextualize' myself into a very different reality whenever I travel to China. This repositioning creates a kind of rupture in both my everyday life and artistic thinking. Holland, on the other hand is my adopted home, providing me a familiar everyday reality, yet there is always something foreign in my relation to the place. This creates a nomadic mode of living, or the post-colonial mode of in-between. How about you, what is your experience as a Finnish living in the Netherlands but extensively traveling to China? Does the trajectory of your movement articulate a certain aspiration for the unfamiliar? How do cultural differences play out in your artistic practice? What is your experience in China?

**KK:** Living and working in a foreign country, forces you to rethink and reformulate your ideas. In a certain way, meeting the unfamiliar opens up a larger and more intimate dialogue. You come closer to yourself

and your subject matter. The 'otherness' is working both ways, as it should. What you describe about your relationship with China applies also for my relationship with Finland, however the changes there are slow and subtle. Amsterdam is my home base, my 'family' is there. But, China opens up a different situation. Though my everyday surroundings in Beijing are, by now, familiar - the studio and the village, friends, colleagues and neighbors (often I just relate to the 'otherness' of the people) - yet, it is still unfamiliar, foreign, and challenging. Beijing, and China, in general is very interesting for my practice with historical heritage right next to rapid urban development and suburbs, and the people living their lives adapting to each new surrounding, continuously connecting the past, present and future.

Naturally, in China, I have a communication problem: I do not speak or read Mandarin. Few people speak English, and also the cultural difference makes interpretation and understanding sometimes complicated. On many levels, everyday situations create a state of body language, a non-verbal communication - posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, etc. - things that I usually interpret subconsciously, things that only act as an addition to the spoken information, I become conscious of these things and they become the most important form of communication. For me this 'return to the body' or 'return to physicality', these interactions, specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting, open new understandings and approaches to my work and research. It is like a fluid body, connecting various forces and conditions, global and local, of different perceptions of space and condition and the physical interaction with them.

As a native Chinese you are in a different position. You also worked a lot with writing and linguistic philosophy. Can you talk a bit about this? And maybe reflect on your position as an artist in China and / or in Europe?

**NH:** Yes, my very earliest works were very much inspired by linguistic philosophy, especially Wittgenstein, from whom I learnt that language as a system effectively determines the world we know. The boundary of the language is the border of the world that is knowable. Language is not just an instrument with which we utter our thoughts. More importantly, it is a structure that shapes our thinking. I see cultures as something quite similar to language in this respect. It is very pertinent

in today's context, in understanding the proximity of different cultures and cultural differences, that each culture as a system determines the world we comprehend. I think that by moving between different cultural spaces, one is provided with a possibility of defying the cultural grammar, and thus, a good dose of 'relativism'. My experience, or position in China is double-sided, like I described earlier, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. I work a lot with my Chinese colleagues on exhibitions and collaborative projects. Some of them I worked with long before I left China and we understand each other very well. But once a while I would find myself not fitting in very well, not so much because of the individual differences, but rather a kind of temporary cultural difference. The same is true to my experience in Europe, despite the fact that it is my home and my main artistic venue. Often, momentarily, I would be reminded as being a guest.

**KK:** Yes, the politics of identity function as a certain kind of straitjacket. By moving around, the very aspect that creates the dialogue also creates this position of ending up being a 'guest' everywhere.

Even though I do have a lot of interaction with the local community and local institutions, and I work a lot with local artists, yet, there is always a distinction between Western artists and Chinese artists, or foreign artists and native Dutch artists living in Holland, or Finnish artists living abroad (so called 'outside-Finns'), etc. The list goes on.

I am not so much interested in these polarizations. Things are always working both directions, in continuous movement. Every culture has its own set of systems and 'rules'. This creates ambiguity, something, that I am very interested in, and find very challenging to think about. Identity is a very complex notion. It is not a fixed thing, not just a set of narratives that are constituted by certain environments or genetics. It is not static, but always in development, changing, re-formulating. Like nomadic artistic practices, it is always in relation and reaction to everything that happens around it, to its context.

For me the important thing is to reflect and research these movements, the in-between, translations, interpretations, and the human condition.

In the installation *Dialogue with the Flows* (See Artists Notes) I question the geographical and ideological movements and metaphorical possi-

bilities of the ancient practice of cupping and the translation that happens through the process. Cupping is used as well in the East as in the West, but the philosophy behind these healing practices is different.

**NH:** I've always thought that over-emphasizing cultural identity is a sign of a deep uncertainty of who we are. Cultural identity has always taken the form of identity crisis and this is, in my opinion, always under-construction. We both agree on this and our experiences, though very different, illustrate very well the complexity of identity in trans-cultural environments. It is also very interesting to discuss with artists from Northern Europe, the topic of cultural identity, which comes from the 'privileges' that are only associated with those from the areas that were considered 'periphery' in relation to the West.

I stated in an interview, quite some time ago that living elsewhere was a constant process of translation. It is interesting to see you also mentioned 'translation'. Apparently it is not in the narrow sense of the word (language translation), but more broadly, the transportation and transformation of meanings, ideas, memories and so forth.

In *Dialogue with the Flows*, you are dealing with two fundamentally different notions of human body, or two different systems of knowledge about the human body. I am interested to know how, in your work or your thinking, they reconcile with each other. Are they diametrically opposed, or can they possibly be translated into each other?

**KK:** 'Periphery' always exists in relation to the 'center'. Within European terms, Finland is periphery. There are relatively fewer people up north, it is geographically further away, it also uses a language that is very different from dominant European languages. Actually, geographically speaking, if we forget the former Soviet Union, China and Finland are neighbors. And, yes, it is time to reconsider the use of this term, and the position of the West in the cultural discourse.

All human societies have medical beliefs that provide explanations for birth, death, and disease. These are observations of how nature, cosmos, and the human body interact.

The cross itself is one of the most ancient human symbols. It incorporates religious, philosophical, and spiritual beliefs of various cultures

that have existed throughout the course of human history.

As we all know, in the West, during the Medieval times, a tension developed between the church and ancient medical practices. Ancient medicine originated from sources that were not compatible with the Christian faith, and hence, much of it was seen as magical, or mystical. Today, globalization or 'westernization' is changing the position of these practices in China.

*Dialogue with the Flows* is open for multiple interpretations. It is open-ended. The 'translation' of this piece depends on the viewer's cultural background and/or how he/she 'navigates' through notions of time, space, object and subject. I use the word translation here in the broadest sense possible, much like you've mentioned above.

**NH:** So you consider yourself the 'other' within the West? It reminds me of what can be called 'voluntary marginalization' or 'active marginalization', that is, one consciously positioning oneself on the periphery of the dominant culture either as a means of keeping a critical distance or forming a resistance to the dominant discourse and institutions. Would you characterize your position in such a context? Is it also part of the reasons that drive you to extensively work outside of Europe?

Yes, geography, ethnicity and culture may not always coincide with each other, though people continue to differentiate cultures on the basis of large geographical areas and ethnic groups. The reason I asked you about the 'translation' in relation to *Dialogue with the Flows* is that, I always thought cultural differences should not be viewed as fixed, mutually exclusive and unbridgeable. Cultures are far from homogenous. How is your view on this? What is your experience in traversing between different cultures in this particular context? I mean, is Chinese culture homogeneous or exclusive to you? Do you speak the language? Is there any aspect of the culture in China that particularly interested you?

**KK:** Well, maybe I like this distance, and more importantly, the movement in order to be critical about my practice and myself. I am not that interested in hierarchy, 'marginalization' or 'othering' in this context: more in the globalized state of culture in artistic practices.

The first time I went to China, I saw connections in my work and thinking and the approaches of Asian artists on the topic of the physical, and I wanted to do research on this.

And, yes, cultures are not homogenous. Take China for example, there are more than 50 ethnic minorities and almost three hundred languages. The cultural difference is never fixed, nor is there one fixed cultural perception, not only in China, but it is like that everywhere. There are always interconnections. And, at the same time, things are always ambiguous. There is no such thing as a neutral consciousness or perception. One cannot be conscious or perceptive without the outside world, seeing one is like seeing nothing.

When somebody asks me (in Mandarin) if I speak the language I describe my very, very limited knowledge of the language with my favorite expression 'mama huhu' (Eng. Lit. Horse Horse Tiger Tiger Eng. Tran. So, So...).

**NH:** Is this the reason you chose the phrase as the title of this conversation? 'Mama huhu' has a slightly negative connotation in Chinese, of being not precise, not perfect or not thorough. But it is rather interesting once it is extracted from the semantic contents and is treated as an image. It is then something at once resembling a horse and a tiger, perhaps a hybrid, which is quite relevant in this trans-cultural context.

**KK:** Yes, it is very poetic and even political. And, in a way it also relates to nomadic artistic practices and the transformations of ideas, objects, language, history and contexts. Traversing and bonding in interpretations and perceptions, in word and image, time and space.