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## Looping in Time and Drifting in China

*An email conversation with Kristiina Koskentola about her works and her experience of working in China*

By Carol Yinghua Lu

**Lu:** Please tell me a bit about yourself.

**Koskentola:** I am a Finnish artist based in Amsterdam. I was also trained in the Netherlands and I have been living here for the past 15 years. Am I Dutch or Finnish? I would say I am Finnish but Amsterdam is home. I work with a range of media: installation, interventions in public space, video-performance and photography.

**Lu:** Generally speaking, what are you concerned about in your work?

**Koskentola:** About the content of my work: I am interested in the way the human body is seen in the life sciences and its relation to personal experiences, mental, physical and social structures. I see the body as 'a space in between'. My themes circle around the integration and disintegration of object, subject, time and space. I research different conditions related to *psychosocial pariahs*, them being physical or metaphorical, personal or communal, biological, cultural, social or spiritual. I'm interested in these 'conditions' in between. In my work these conditions merge into one another. This relates to the transformation and alchemy of meaning, time, space and material. The 'space in-between' describes something between perception and interpretation; it is not simply a subject-object relationship, nor is it static but rather means a movement or process that defines its own structure.

**Lu:** Whom exactly do you mean with 'psychosocial pariahs'? What do you mean with 'conditions in between'? Do you mean the conditions of psychosocial pariahs?

**Koskentola:** With 'pariahs' I do not actually refer directly to people or persons but more to a context, a set of systems defining people, and its interpretation. This is also why I refer to as a 'condition in between'.

**Lu:** It's interesting that you refer to pariahs as 'a condition in between' rather than as 'a condition on the periphery or outside'. I would also think that a 'condition in between' isn't a normal condition, 'in between' meaning 'falling between others'; a space that's there yet demands little attention. Do you have a personal relationship to pariahs beside your interest from an artistic point of view?

**Koskentola:** I surely relate from a personal point to more general views or claims. I refer to these conditions because I am interested in the aspects that have created the socially despised or rejected. These are actually very normal conditions yet when they appear together this causes the fall.

**Lu:** What brought you to work in China in the first place?

**Koskentola:** Geographically, China is placed at the one end of the ex-Soviet Union, whereas Finland is located on the other end. Both countries also have a common history with regards to their practice of shamanism. I am interested in how this common earth-related background influences the way people think of and look at the body today despite the cultural differences and geographical distances. I wanted to contextualise my work in a new way. I am interested in how to be universal while remaining isolated. In Asia there is a way of making body-related art and using organic materials that appeals to me. I see some connections in my work and thinking to the artistic approach of Chinese artists to the physical, and I wanted to research this.

**Lu:** What are the results of this research? What have you discovered that you didn't know before, or that you knew the opposite of?

**Koskentola:** I think this research brought me closer to my subject matter: the questions have generated new questions. My research is going in new directions that are questioning the ambiguity, identity and the constitution of the subject, as well as the cultural constitution of perception within a subject-object relationship.

**Lu:** Did you view shamanism as a 'condition in between', too?

**Koskentola:** Wow!

**Lu:** According to your discoveries, is there any difference between how people define and relate to the 'condition in between' in these two countries? Have you discovered anything else that possibly links up

these two countries apart from their geographical relationship and their common history of shamanism? What has disappointed you?

**Koskentola:** Every culture has its own social systems and set of 'rules'. This creates ambiguity, something I am very interested in, and that's more challenging to think about. In linking Finland and China I made some quite amazing discoveries: for instance that certain traditional Chinese medicine treatments are also practiced in Finland like 'cupping', or that people in Beijing go ice-swimming, just as people do in Finland. And, while speaking English with a Chinese person, it was familiar to me that the Chinese language – just like Finnish – does not have the genders 'she' or 'he'. So I found people in China and Finland making the same mistakes: addressing their mother or girlfriend with 'he', or father or son with 'she'. This (what I call 'transsexual English') always made me smile and feel at home.

What I found disappointing? Well, the pollution made me very sad, naturally, as did the huge amount of Christmas decorations. Even if in the latter case, I appreciate the irony.

**Lu:** When were you working in China?

**Koskentola:** I stayed in Beijing for three months, between December 2007 and March 2008. Next to that I have visited Beijing before, on my way to Mongolia. And I am returning again in two months.

**Lu:** Has working in China changed your way of making art? The reason I ask this is that I have experienced the dramatic or even fundamental change that has occurred to a young Chinese artist who spent two years in Holland through a residency program. It completely changed his way of thinking about and working with art. He developed a much more inward way of thinking about issues in relation to art rather than focusing purely on socially inspired, narrative aspects of artworks rooted in socialist-realist education at art academies in China. I wonder whether there is a reverse effect or something on a more metaphorical level that was transferred to your actual way of making art?

**Koskentola:** What happened is that I became more 'outward'. I think staying in a completely different culture inspired me to open my work up to a more social-cultural dialogue. The anthropological aspect got stronger. My stay in China has surely deepened my research and influenced my thinking.

**Lu:** How so?

**Koskentola:** Methodology sounds so academic. I naturally do a lot of artistic research in order to contextualise and get inspired within my subject matter. The things that influenced me most of all are in fact from everyday life. From a dinner table to little talks and, naturally, the huge city of Beijing with its historical buildings next to the rapid urban development and all the suburban areas, and people living their lives adapting to each of the (new) surroundings. Sometimes I had the feeling that I was looping in time.

**Lu:** *Ludra* was one of the works you created while you were in China. How did you make the objects with newspaper? Do the shapes of the objects mean something? What is the meaning of the title? Where was *Ludra* shown?

**Koskentola:** *Ludra* was shown in *Intrude: Art & Life* at the Shanghai Zendai MoMa (2008), the *Critical Mass* exhibition curated by the Artist:Network:New York in Beijing Huang Yan Contemporary Art Space (2008), and in the *Search and Research* exhibition at my studio in the Imagine Gallery (2008).

The title *Ludra* has no meaning. *Ludra* consists of three large objects (170 x 65 x 30 cm) hanging from the ceiling and a shelf with newspapers, the material the objects are made of. The size of the objects refers to the human body. This can be seen as a metaphor for the influence of information and of the constitution of (cultural) identity. I built the objects on a 'skeleton' made by a chicken-coop and many layers of newspaper on this frame. The newspapers create a 'skin', a pattern that I have perforated by sticking my fingers through it, thus manipulating the pattern. The installation is about the ambiguity of information and language and their relation to the identity of individuals and nations. The objects are made with newspapers in different languages. As it is difficult to get foreign newspapers in China, I collected the newspapers from several embassies, or they were sent and brought to China by friends from all over the world. *Ludra* is a critical comment on the global function of information and all the misinterpretations and one-sided views this implies.

**Lu:** Is there any particular reason why you made this work in China? What kind of response did it generate?

**Koskentola:** *Ludra* was inspired by a failure of understanding. In China I was cut off from the language: I can neither read nor write Chinese. Every communication was via a translation or a foreign language. I was also cut off from the Internet for two weeks when my computer crashed. At that time, I sometimes felt like I was really drifting! For me Chinese characters are like beautiful drawings: they are abstract information, and I was free to interpret them. They are autonomous to me. They are very much like a code message.

As I said: it is a critical comment on the global function of information and all the misinterpretations and one-sided views this implies. In China, I was naturally confronted with a one-sided, misleading image the media creates of the country (as one could be when travelling to any other country). 'Made in China' naturally also deals with censorship, and the dysfunctions of censorship in general. Yet it works in both directions.

It got very positive reactions. I think people mostly appreciated the work's physical quality and its approach from two directions.

**Lu:** What was the most difficult condition about working in China?

**Koskentola:** Communication. Not very many people speak English and one therefore often needs a translator. Next to the language problem there is also the cultural difference that makes interpretation and understanding sometimes complicated. However, at the same time this is one of the most interesting aspects of my stay!

**Lu:** Did you have a lot of interaction with the local community while you were working in China? What is your perception of how people work here?

**Koskentola:** I had a lot of exchange with Chinese artists and the local community.

I made one project together with Chinese artist Nan Hao, and I worked with Chinese filmmaker Sheng Sheng and a Chinese doctor. I made a lot of new Chinese friends. I think I was very lucky. What you often see in international art institutes and residencies (not only in China) is that the foreign artists mainly connect with each other. This is pitiful, as one of the most important points of working in another country is precisely the country's culture and the interaction with local communities.

For instance, compared with studios in Europe Chinese artists' studios are huge! There is also a very large commercial circuit (2007-2008). From my point of view / artistic working practice – this strikes me as shocking. Yet I would like to stress that there is a very high level of interesting experimental artists who make contemporary Chinese art extremely interesting to me.

**Lu:** I have worked with international artists in my exhibition projects in China and one of the major challenges is to get people interested and to give the audience here sufficient contextual information about the artists for them to appreciate and better understand the works. It's impossible to invite a foreign artist, or import a work of art to China and solicit the same kind of attention and interest as it would have claimed from an audience that is more tuned into what is happening, globally, in arts and is more sophisticated in terms of understanding Western art history. Chinese contemporary art history has a very short existence and still it's developing its own logic and structure. Our understanding of Western art history is rather fragmented. Sometimes we could even seem a bit arrogant because of this ignorance. What is your impression?

**Koskentola:** Well, naturally the exchange with some Chinese artists is quite basic because of this. On the other hand I am ignorant in many aspects of considering China and its culture.

**Lu:** Can you talk a bit about the work you made with Nan Hao? How did you decide to work together and what are the results of this collaboration?

**Koskentola:** The co-project *Traverse Condition* is an on-going research/installation that at the moment consists of two parts. Part one is realised in Beijing and the second part in the Groningen polder in the Netherlands. The results of the project are visual arts (photography, installation, video, performative research), architecture and (semi-) science.

I first met Hao Nan in the Netherlands at an exhibition opening and contacted him in Beijing. We started to meet each other on a regular basis and had long talks (and walks) about art, and discovered that we had many common interests and shared views. We both work with interventions and architecture, and the collaboration was a natural follow-up of all the discussions, as was the work a reaction to urbanisa-

tion and environment to the walks. This transnational collaboration is extremely interesting and it surely added a lot onto my work in China.

*Traverse Condition* circles around issues of urban construction, condition and paranoia by referencing the ancient model of acupuncture. The two fundamental energies of Yin and Yang exist everywhere around the world, for example, including the human universe as well as the universe of buildings. The way the needles are positioned and are stuck into the human body can, metaphorically speaking, be regarded as architectural discourse between the needles as constructing and supporting elements, and the human body as the platform receiving and generating energies. In the building context, the actual architectural dialogue is formed when the question between effectiveness and non-effectiveness, the pure symbolic value of these acts, appears. On the other hand they create a mental state and form a reaction on the loss of traditional values due to rapid urbanisation, and the loss of original Chinese culture in general, or environmental issues stressed in the Netherlands.

**Lu:** How has China inspired you?

**Koskentola:** China is a country of huge extremes, which has a rich and long history and cultural tradition. Living and working in a foreign country, and certainly a country that is culturally so different from your own, forces you to rethink and reformulate your ideas. China has been, and still is, a huge enrichment for my research and work.

**Lu:** Your work analyses humanity, identity, human nature and issues that are not specific to a cultural background but can be identified by people from all over. In *About Food / Loathing*, the way you see food as a metaphor for self-perception seems to be an occurring theme in your work. Also in *Gobi and Rite* you seem to be searching for everyday scenarios, or to create scenarios on which you can project your view of life and human conditions. This is rather a comment than a question, but would you agree with such a summary?

**Koskentola:** Yes, one can describe it like this. Yet these conditions are rather anonymous, reflecting on an individual as well as on a communal level. These mentioned works are critical, and can be seen as comments, but they also question resp. analyse certain social and cultural aspects, and their (ambiguous) interpretation. These works also work in two directions: they are exposure as well as (self) enclosure.

**Lu:** Can you talk a bit about *Autocannibal*?

**Koskentola:** In this seven-minute video piece I repeatedly put my right hand into my mouth and pull it out again. Just as if I were repeatedly eating myself up.

*Autocannibal* is about the confusion of the condition humaine and the phenomenon of war. What do we need all that hate for?

*Autocannibal* is a reaction on everything we see in the media: misunderstandings and powerlessness.

Hate and violence disgust and despair me. *Autocannibal* is about what it means to eat your self. Because that is what happens in a war: killing and torturing one's kind is a bizarre form of cannibalism.

**Lu:** How does China meet, or fail to meet, your expectations prior to your visit and stay?

**Koskentola:** To be completely honest I had no idea what to expect! It is different to read about the country and culture than to live there as a stranger and start working in a totally new environment. In any case China absolutely did not 'fail'. China with its rich culture and extremes is very inspiring to me. And I really like the people in Beijing, who are very open and expressive, helpful and kind.

\* *Cupping*, a form of traditional medicine, involves placing glass, plastic, or bamboo cups on the skin. They create a vacuum that pulls up on the skin, and stimulates an acupuncture effect. In early days animal horns were used for cupping; the Finnish variation includes absorbing blood by means of the 'cups'.