

ARTS CATALYST

ARTS CATALYST Journal, Autumn 2018
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An Archaeology of the Future

Introduction

Arts Catalyst's 2018 Autumn season involved a series of artists' residencies and takeovers of our centre. Inspired by Ursula Le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home*, a part-story part-text book that imagines a distant post-cataclysmic future society, Arts Catalyst's season offered fragments that, like archaeological remains, built up an affirming sense of how we might live in a more meaningful way.

Mongolian artist Tuguldur Yondonjamts opened the season with a residency and exhibition *An Artificial Nest Captures a King and Investigations into the Darkest Dark*. Confronted by Mongolia's rapidly changing society, Yondonjamts creates fantastical stories that enfold myths, objects and practices from across deep time, Mongolian history, and our modern globally-connected culture. His exhibition at Arts Catalyst centred on his film *An Artificial Nest Captures a King*, which references the unlikely discovery by scientists of an ancient alligator fossil in the frozen Altai Mountains bordering Mongolia, alongside an evolving installation of his research. During his residency, part-supported by UCL's Anthropology Department, the artist undertook research towards a new project, which involved a new journey to the highlands of Scotland to deposit a new fossil. We organised a parallel programme of events with curator Hermione Spriggs and UCL Anthropology, addressing themes arising in Yondonjamts's work.

Artist Tom James' month-long residency, *Kings Cross Gas Workshop*, speculated and focused on sustainable DIY systems for a post-Brexit society and the future pressures of climate change which may alter the way we live.

In a mini-residency, artist Grace Ndiritu explored her experiences of living in rural, alternative and spiritual communities outside cities.

How it started: visiting Mongolia

In March 2017, I met anthropologist Lauren Bonilla at a workshop that I'd organised at Arts Catalyst titled 'Conflict Minerals and Artistic Practice', which explored the different ways in which artistic and cultural practices contribute to our understanding of the relationship between geological natural resources - their extraction and

distribution - and conflict. After this, I met with Lauren and curator Hermione Spriggs to discuss an art and anthropology project they had conceived, pairing artists with five anthropologists carrying out fieldwork in Mongolia on its volatile economy and vast mineral reserves.

These conversations inspired me to take up an opportunity to visit Mongolia that year - my first trip to a country whose name is so often used as a synonym for remoteness and obscurity. In my imagination, Mongolia was a place of remote plains, mountains, and deserts, populated by nomadic people with harsh if romantic lifestyles: hunting with eagles, herding wild horses and reindeer. The reality, of course, was a mix of these impressions (not entirely wrong) with a very different actuality - that of a society in rapid transition...

Ten years ago, Mongolia's mining boom was set to make the country into the world's fastest growing economies. This beautiful landlocked country, one of the least densely populated on earth and home to one of the few truly nomadic cultures left in the world, sits on vast reserves of gold, copper, silver, tin, coal, fluorspar, uranium, tungsten and the 'rare earth minerals' used in today's modern advanced technology. Still emerging from former communist control, and as increasingly drought-stricken summers and exceptionally cold winters drove more nomads to the cities, particularly the capital Ulaanbaatar, the country felt that it needed to exploit its resources. Multinational mining corporations poured into the country, while China, to the South, helped Mongolia's economy to grow rapidly through its demand for coal and copper.

By 2016, however, things had gone badly wrong. Global prices for coal and copper plummeted, and the government mishandled the money - having gone on a spending spree to build infrastructure, with a lot of money poorly spent. Mongolia's debt rose to nearly 80 percent of its GDP. The IMF stepped in with a massive bailout of \$440 million, as part of a loan package totalling \$5 billion. Although wealth had been created, it was not - it never is - evenly distributed. In addition, mining was having a huge impact on Mongolia's slender water resources and fragile pastures, with associated consequences for traditional nomadic herding culture.

I spent most of my time in Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar, known as the coldest capital city in the world and one of the most polluted, a place that resonates with history and the visible collision of old world and new - numerous gers, the traditional round dwellings of nomads, sitting next to modern tower blocks and highways. I made a weekend trip out of the city to see more of the country and to visit Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol Empire between 1235 and 1260, whose ruins lie in Övörkhongai Province and the nearby Erdene Zuu Monastery, some of whose temples survived the 1939 communist purge of monasteries and still house some truly spectacular Buddhist sculptures and paintings.

The tradition of nomadism and herding and the relationship to the land runs deep in Mongolian society. The ger is a symbol of pride. Many houses in Ulaanbaatar have a ger alongside them, to which families may retreat in the winter when houses get too cold. One thing that was said to me a few times in Mongolia was that, despite the threats to nomadic life, this connection to the land and to self-sufficiency is so strong that – should the economy stall again, as it has in the past – Mongolians will survive by turning back to traditional lifestyles. How true that is I have no idea (also given that the nomads I met had trucks, motorbikes and satellite TV), but it's interesting that many Mongolians feel only a step away from a nomadic life.

I met artist Tuguldur Yondonjamts on a snowy morning in Sükhbaatar Square (previously known as Chinggis Square). I had been strongly drawn to the images and films I had seen of Tuguldur's artwork and was intrigued to meet the artist. Tuguldur's visually astonishing works draw on Mongolia's shamanistic practices that still linger in the 21st century, which honour the spiritual forces of nature and a sacred landscape, as well as his training in traditional Mongolian painting, combining these with a contemporary research-based practice and his use of film and installation, creating journeys that connect different times, places and traditions. I invited Tuguldur to come to Arts Catalyst in London for a research-based residency the following year, and to create an exhibition.

An Interview with Tuguldur Yondonjamts

Yondonjamts' 25-minute film *An Artificial Nest Captures a King*, opens with an aerial view of an immobile alligator sleeping - and snoring loudly - on frozen glaciers in the mountains. The alligator, it transpires, is crafted from fabric and doubles as a sleeping bag as we see the artist unzip its mouth and slide into its cavernous body to join it in sleep. Imagined as a journey of discovery, sounds from a 1980s Russian utility vehicle used by the scientists during their research, as well as music from shamanistic rituals, trace the conjunction between real and imagined worlds. In the vehicle, which is filled with noise-making Mongolian percussion instruments and shamanistic talismen, the artist undertakes what appears to be a journey across the snow-covered landscape, but is revealed to be merely endlessly circling around a sleeping alligator. Alongside the exhibition, the artist undertook research towards a new work.

NT: Tell me about your inspiration for your work

I'm motivated by myths and legends, fossils and objects. I try to put them together and make a system for understanding the shape or the meaning or the material, or the origin of the material, so I keep connecting them. Most of them relate to my culture but also I like to travel to different places. In my recent works, I make suits which have crocodile shape or the shape of a large serpent and they all relate to the sites where I shoot the videos. They are designed to be a sleeping bag and I try to sleep in them at the sites, and some of them generate good visual dreams.

NT: Describe your process

TY: I'm interested in observing different layers in the stories that happen, particularly in Mongolia. And I'm interested in translation - different kinds of translation. Translation is integral to my practice. I see things that inspire me in traces so it's hard to articulate my practice. I draw, I write, I translate, and I analyse different types of translation. I make sculptures that have quite a logical structure.

NT: As part of your residency at Arts Catalyst, you're translating a poem into binary language. Tell me about that and how it connects with your other research.

TY: Translating is a part of my practice. Translating seems to relate to what I've experienced in Mongolia and since I started to travel. I was born in communist Mongolia and then I've seen Mongolia change into a democracy since 1990. As a child, I went to a Russian school and at the same time I'm playing with Mongolian kids, so all the time I was translating between these two different systems, although I didn't realise it. When I started to travel, I went to Germany and I had to learn German, which I did for five years. (In fact, I worked as a translator for German border security, which was a very weird job.) In general, this idea of translating ideas is interesting. So, binary language. I'm translating an ancient Mongolian poem into binary language. The poem is called *Khan Kharangui*, which you can translate as 'darkest dark'. It is part of a traditional singing ritual from west Mongolia that is performed at night to bring prosperity. It is a strange story about love, competition, travel and magical events. So, I am translating this poem and if someone takes the time to decode it, then that person will start to write ancient Mongolian, although ancient Mongolian is written vertically, while binary language is written right to left. Binary language is a scientific language. It has been used to try to communicate with extra-terrestrials. I was very interested in this triangle of artist, scientist and extra-terrestrial all connected through binary language.

NT: You're talking about your inspiration for this research - the Aricebo crop circle that was supposed to be a reply to the 'Arecibo message'. You've met with some of the artists who were involved in designing and creating crop circles in the 1990s in Wiltshire (although not the Aricebo reply itself).

TY: Yes. It is interesting these artists, crop circle makers, creating a language together in a way. It was very interesting to meet Rod, who designed circles, and Mark, who told us about how they made them and showed us some of the places where they made them, near to ancient Neolithic sites. This is a very interesting way to develop a story. In some places, they say travellers used to talk to birds and were said to understand bird language. I try to work with the elements ... Shamanism is a fragile issue for me. I like shamans and their ideas. People have said that I am a shaman, but I am not.

Tom James | King's Cross Gas Workshop

What will the people of King's Cross do once the future starts to unravel? How will they live once the sea levels rise, the economy collapses and Russia turns off the gas? Where will they work? How will they heat their beans?

During November 2018, artist Tom James was in residence at the Arts Catalyst Centre in King's Cross, building an anaerobic digester in the gallery and turning the centre into a temporary, low-tech, off-grid gas works. Tom ran a public workshop to teach people to build their own digester, and was available throughout the residency introducing people to the digester, explaining the technology, and talking through people's fears of the future.

Anaerobic digesters are simple machines designed to turn food waste into methane gas, which can then be used to cook or heat water. They can be made from everyday materials found in DIY shops, salvaged from skips outside houses, or reclaimed from landfill. Crucially, they also work better at scale – running one with your street or community works better than doing it alone.

The residency aimed to explore narratives of a past, present and future King's Cross, encompassing on one hand its industrial history as a site of gas production, marked by its iconic gas holders (now luxury flats), and on the other, a possible future for collective, bottom-up energy production, in the context of the environmental and economic collapse that seems to be just around the corner.

The residency is part of Tom's ongoing research project *A Future Manual* – a self-published, DIY guide to surviving and thriving in the uncertain world that awaits us.

You can buy the first two issues of *The Future Manual* (*How to build a fire*, and *How to catch a rabbit*) here: <http://www.a-future-manual.org/>

Grace Ndiritu | A History of Resistance

In 2012, artist Grace Ndiritu took the radical decision only to spend time in the city when necessary, and to otherwise live in rural, alternative and often spiritual communities. This has taken her to Thai and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, permaculture communities in New Zealand, forest tree dwellers in Argentina, neo-tribal festivals such as the 'Burning Man' in Nevada, a Hare Krishna ashram and the 'Findhorn' New Age community in Scotland. Her research into community life has resulted in the founding of The Ark: Center For Interdisciplinary Experimentation - an artistic model for creating an off-grid community within an urban setting.

In her mini-residency at Arts Catalyst in October 2018, Ndiritu gave a talk on this research and led a session exploring the intersections of hippie counterculture and

radical leftist activism, which began with a discussion of Simon Sadler's text "Mandalas or Raised Fists? Hippie Holism, Panther Totality, and Another Modernism" (PDF link below) which unpacks California's Bay Area 60s activist scene and the overlaps and distinctions between the Black Panthers and the activism that emerged around the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a hippie almanac published by Stewart Brand between 1968 and 1972. The discussion was punctuated by short silent meditation breaks led by the artist.

https://www.academia.edu/25846853/Mandalas_or_Raised_Fists_Hippie_Holism_Panther_Totality_and_Another_Modernism