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The Artist as Image Decoder

Ni Haifeng's Agency between Europe and China

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One of the aims of the session 'Parallel Conversions: Asian Art Histories in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries' was to discuss modes by which conveyance takes place, and how this conversion generated new contexts or art discourses. In this contribution I address a particular mode of such conveyance by presenting and discussing several artworks by the Amsterdam-based artist Ni Haifeng. Ni was born in 1964 in Zhoushan, China, and moved to Amsterdam in 1994. He now travels back and forth between China and the Netherlands, exploring life and art between two cultures. Ni introduced his art to the Netherlands several years before the start of the hype of contemporary Chinese art at the 1999 Venice Biennale. If he focuses on de-exoticising China in his work, he also engages explicitly with the centuries-old trade-ties between the two countries, questioning what these contacts mean or meant and capitalising on their various cultural, or, rather, intercultural, dimensions. I have been working together closely with Ni Haifeng for over one year and a half in 'Laboratory on the Move', an art project on the role and position of contemporary art in a globalising world. The underlying art historical issue involved is whether or in what ways contemporary art can open up perspectives for pursuing art history from an integrated worldwide angle.¹

In *Self-Portrait as Part of the Porcelain Export History* (1999–2001) Ni Haifeng has woven a multifaceted fabric of references. He has done so by inscribing the history of the porcelain trade onto his body, as symbolised in the well-known Chinese floral motifs and patterns in blue as well as reflected in instructions for *Chine de Commande* pieces and excerpts taken from Western standard books on Chinese porcelain (see figure 1). This *Self-Portrait* does not only assume the history of the porcelain trade between China and the Netherlands, the history of the Dutch East India Company, the blue and white and polychrome tableware bearing Western images commissioned



Figure 1 Ni Haifeng
Self-Portrait as Part of the Porcelain Export History, 1999–2001
165 × 127 cm (each)
series of 7 type C photographs
© 2008 Ni Haifeng

by Dutch customers, and the subsequent patterns of bilateral exchanges, but it also comments on the contemporary history of his own migration to the Netherlands, the alleged multiculturalism of his position, and the particularity of this art form. Taking as a point of reference Alfred Gell's theory of art as agency, this paper aims to elucidate the way in which Ni Haifeng's work destabilises rooted meaning production by introducing unexpected modes of transference.

Self-Portrait can be seen as the answer to a frequently put question to Ni Haifeng: what does it mean to be a Chinese artist in the West? According to Ni, this question follows from the assumption that societies have stable and invariable structures, while in his view there is no fixed or unchangeable



Figure 2 Ni Haifeng
Kunst als gift (Art as Gift), 2005 and ongoing
 12.5 × 18.0 × 4.5 cm
 installation of porcelain object and grey 'passport'
 © 2008 Ni Haifeng

difference between 'them' and 'us'. In his experience, living in the Netherlands involves an endless process of 'translation', a term he prefers over 'negotiation' because of the latter's association with business. For him, to translate really means creating something new; reinventing things. As an artist he continually tries to challenge ideologies or fixed beliefs, considering this to be a form of subversive art that creates a particular moment of awareness, that destabilises, and aims at finding new meaning, or 'what has not been habitually referred to before'.² This applies to the artist, who seeks to destabilise the common production of meaning, as well as to the viewers of art who on their part try to find and generate meanings. Ni pursues permanent destabilisation, without ever creating a stable state of meaning, the artwork thereby being the agent.

The Art Object as Social Agent *The Spread of the Potato*

In his posthumously published *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell defines objects in performative terms as systems of action, intended to change the world. Artworks do so *a fortiori* because they are part of a system of action, intended to change the world rather than to encode symbolic propositions about it.³ Gell makes a clear stand against the idea of art as an autonomous aesthetic entity detached from the social processes encoding an object with this system of values. Artworks act as agents upon the viewer; they motivate responses, inferences and interpretation. In the theoretical definition Gell formulates, the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded. His anthropological theory of art considers art objects as 'persons'. As strange as this

assumption may appear at first glance, from the outset anthropology—so Gell argues—has been preoccupied with the peculiar relations between persons and 'things', which somehow 'appear' or serve as persons.⁴ Central to his argument is not the art object per se but the dynamics of social interaction it entices. Although this may be conditioned by 'culture', Gell claims it should be viewed as a real process, or dialectic, unfolding in time. The objective of his thesis is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context.⁵

It is this operational property that particularly applies to Ni Haifeng's work. Two specific agents used by Ni are a potato and a passport, which he has connected in two of his art projects: *Art as Gift* (ongoing) and *Gift* (2006–07).

Art as Gift (see figure 2) was commissioned by the Amsterdam Art Fund and the city of Amsterdam in order to enhance the naturalisation process of immigrants and to celebrate Naturalisation Day, the day on which they formally receive Dutch citizenship. Ni transformed his own work into gifts for the newly naturalised residents of Amsterdam: he built an installation in the form of the city plan of Amsterdam using typical Dutch materials: wood, brick and potatoes. Next, he broke up this work into hundreds of bits and pieces and had them shipped to China. There they were reproduced en masse in white porcelain, decorated with the well-known traditional blue flower motifs and shipped back. On Naturalisation Day, these items were distributed as gifts to the new Dutch citizens. Since the start of this project in 2006, over 4000 items have been handed out to a quite diverse group of individuals. Although they may come from a variety of countries and have very different cultural backgrounds, at the same time they are mutually connected through their migration.

While in the dissemination process the original art installation has fully disintegrated in a physical sense, it has taken on an integrative function in terms of its multiple social-relational effects. The potato, itself an immigrant and disguised as Chinese porcelain (also imported), is the connecting agent, whether it is valued as a token of integration or rootedness in the Netherlands, or disclaimed, as in the case of an Amsterdam shopkeeper who passed it on to someone else who in fact did cherish it as a meaningful object. The potato challenges people's imagination and therefore invariably gives rise to stories: where it comes from, what it means, how it was passed on. One of my colleagues who owns one of these artistic potatoes recently told me that 'it always serves him well when it comes to telling a good story to his guests'. In this respect, the object



has a life of its own. It also has a special tactile quality: people like holding it because it feels good, it is smooth and it has a nice touch to it. I have seen people selecting a potato by testing them in their hand.

A question Gell raises in his book is which 'alternative means' ('alternative' in the sense of not just based on aesthetic criteria) can be proposed to distinguish art-like relations between persons and things from relations which are not art-like. He suggests that these can be distinguished as situations in which the material 'index' (the visible, physical 'thing') permits a particular cognitive operation, a particular mode of inference, that is a system of signification 'rules' that allow the sign to acquire meaning.⁶ The porcelain potato serves here as an index that permits this mode of operation; it elicits a specific kind of social agency from both maker and user/receiver. As much as these migrants, Ni, himself a migrant, is conscious of the difficulties of settling down in a foreign environment, be it by choice as in his case, or out of necessity as in the case of many asylum-seekers. In a newspaper interview he acknowledges the difficult, ongoing and multilayered process of naturalisation. He sees it as a natural, inevitable process—and as one that cannot be regulated or imposed by law or from above, despite the fact that the Dutch Government conceives of it as one that can be imposed from above. The *Art as Gift* project with the porcelain potato as social agent signifies the process of naturalisation, thus linking up import with export,

Figure 3 Ni Haifeng
Gift (pp. 22–3), 2007
booklet
© 2008 Ni Haifeng

immigration with emigration, past with present, and politics with social groups. However, not all Amsterdam city-council members were happy with the project as part of the Naturalisation ceremony; some claimed it to be an embarrassing affair, merely aimed at rewarding good behaviour.⁷

This remark brings to mind the problem of gift-giving. After all, gifts are seldom selfless or merely altruistic; in every culture there are a host of—often unwritten—rules about gift exchange, how one is supposed to behave, and what one is supposed to give in return. Getting your residence permit or passport makes a person a citizen of the Dutch state, and that brings along a set of codes of behaviour. This problematic aspect of gift-giving/receiving has been one of the themes that Ni Haifeng and myself elaborated upon in our collaborative project 'Laboratory on the Move', in which we have been working together as a team on the subject of art in a globalising world for over a year.⁸

Participatory Practices

Within the context of the *Art as Gift* project, the porcelain objects come with their own grey, poetic passports that welcome the receivers as new citizens of Amsterdam, and that echo the

'real' passport issued by the Dutch Government (see figure 2). This project was also the starting point for our collaboration. Discussions about underlying notions of the naturalisation process, acquiring a new national identity, giving/receiving and so on, led to a new, more critical version of the grey passport in which texts, layered over the photographs, reflect critically on issues of citizenship, ownership and identity (see figure 3). The booklet *Gift* is an exact copy of the state-issued passport, but instead of confirming the holder's identity, it questions it. It challenges this document's alleged unifying principles, for we all know that having a Dutch passport does not necessarily mean that the bearer is accepted as being Dutch. Only recently debates flared up in Dutch politics about several members of Parliament (of non-European origin) who have a Dutch passport and one of another country. Xenophobic arguments on the issue of full loyalty to the Dutch state of those who have a passport of another (read: non-Western) country fuelled discussions in politics and the media. Instead of being proud of having delegates with a mixed cultural background who are willing to represent the people, their loyalty is put in doubt. When handing out the *Gift*-booklet accompanied by a porcelain potato on the occasion of the official start of the collaborative cooperation project in December 2006, many Dutch Dutch who were present claimed to appreciate getting their *second* passport, as well as the artistic potato. Today, the positions on this issue are hardening in the Netherlands, and by handing out the fake grey passport together with the little porcelain sculpture to 'native' Dutch citizens, they become connected to the 'new' Dutch citizens in a contingent, relational nexus.

In this respect, Ni's work can well be characterised as a participatory art practice which aims at generating relationships. Nicolas Bourriaud formulated this kind of art practice as a social interstice 'taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social contexts rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space'.⁹ These installation works are not so much a contemporary space to visit or to walk through; rather, they create a (social) space that develops in time. The process of connectivity is contingent and always unfolding. In the end, Ni's porcelain potatoes may be passed on time and again, thus potentially changing the interrelated story, while the items themselves may even end up in museums or private collections, where they will acquire a different value, as has been true of the former 'Chine de Commande' pieces that were ordered from China for use and splendour, and

that are now valued as unique and costly museum artefacts. No matter how this process will evolve, intersubjectivity—or in Gell's words, 'the agency of person and thing'—constitutes its substrate. The power of linkage is quintessential; it is the agent that summons to exchange and dialogue with it. According to Bourriaud, contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.¹⁰ The form he refers to is that of behaviour, and in its turn this is what Gell denotes as *agency*: material objects motivate responses and inferences. In that way, subjectivity is not a given or static quality, but a production.

This kind of artwork/art project seems to be able to generate a positive response to society's globalisation by opening up a changing intellectual space. Consequently, the public, rather than being a given entity, is an emergent system produced by the artwork. Also, and this is a subject that crops up repeatedly in debates on art and its societal position, these participatory art projects allude to a genuinely felt sense of urgency of art that is capable of getting deeply embedded in society.¹¹ *Art as Gift* and *Gift* are not focused on adding yet another art object to the world, but they seek to open up people's imagination because the object comes with a story, and the story refers to individual experiences of migration, and it connects them to other people.

Ni Haifeng is both insider and outsider: he is an artist who (voluntarily) migrated to the Netherlands, not because he was repressed as an artist in China. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe he is referred to as a *Chinese* artist, but last year his work was exhibited in China as *Dutch art*, so Ni remarks: 'In China I am considered Dutch'.¹²

Xeno-Writings

In other words, Ni is viewed as 'foreign' in both places; he is *ξένος* in old Greek, the rather neutral word for someone from abroad, a foreigner, a guest even, but in contemporary usage it has acquired the very negative connotation of 'xenophobe', the fear (read: hatred) of foreigners, strangers, aliens. An ongoing theme in his oeuvre is what Ni designates as 'xeno-writings', a form of self-invented 'calligraphy' covering walls or entire spaces, such as in the recent exhibition 'Drawing Typologies' in Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam of thirty artists of different generations who all currently live in the Netherlands and who employ drawing as a medium in a wide variety of ways.¹³ These 'xeno-writings' are composed of numbers, figures, signs, symbols, marks, letters of different languages, computer

codes, characters and so on, all decipherable but not legible; individually they are all recognisable icons, but as a whole they do not make any sense, no matter what language you speak.¹⁴ Language is meant to communicate, but even when speaking the same tongue we do not always understand each other. The 'xeno-writings' oscillate between identification and understanding—destabilising fixed meanings, and hence knowledge production. Albeit written in English and in Dutch, the texts on his body in the aforementioned *Self-Portrait* are foreign, referring to past practices and trade-related connections. Yet they are also inscribed onto his body, thus making these connections part of himself and, conversely, making export trade part of him. Transferring this mutual interdependence to the discipline of art history implies acknowledging the worldwide interrelationships of artistic practices and exchanges as both local and global, inward and outward, and context-bound.

NOTES

- 1 Kitty Zijlmans, Rob Zwijnenberg & Krien Clevis (eds), *CO-OPs. Interterritoriale verkenningen in kunst en wetenschap (Exploring New Territories in Art and Science)*, De Buitenkant, Amsterdam, 2007.
- 2 Marianne Brouwer, 'A Zero Degree of Writing and Other Subversive Moments: An Interview with Ni Haifeng', in Roel Arkesteijn & Ni Haifeng (eds), *Ni Haifeng No-Man's-Land*, Artimo, Amsterdam, GEM, Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague, Gate Foundation, Amsterdam, 2003, p. 50.
- 3 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 6.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 9. Here Gell also refers to Marcel Mauss's exchange theory from 1923 (*Essai sur le Don*). His elaborated subject matter and the examples Gell uses to support his argument are taken mostly from the Melanesian Islands, but also from artists working in Western traditions, most notably Marcel Duchamp.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 13. For this kind of inference, Gell introduces here the term 'abduction', taken from logic and semiotics. For example, Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Macmillan, London, 1984.
- 7 Hannah Aukes, 'Aardappel burgerde ook in' ('The Potato Became Rooted Too'), *Het Parool*, 28 December 2006, p. 18.
- 8 The cooperative project 'Laboratory on the Move' of Ni Haifeng and Kitty Zijlmans is part of the large, national research program 'Transformations in Art and Culture: Technologisation, Commercialisation, Globalisation', subsidised by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research/Humanities Department. One of the subprograms is the experimental 'CO-OPs: Exploring New Territories in Art and Science' (that is, the Natural and Social Sciences, and the Humanities). In seven dual projects, an artist and a scientist/scholar work together for a year on a theme of their mutual interest. Ni and Zijlmans are interested in the relationships between art/art history and globalisation. 'CO-OPs' is dedicated to the question of whether (and if so, how) academic practice can benefit from the knowledge/understanding that pre-eminently belongs within the artistic domain. See n. 1; see also Ni Haifeng & Kitty Zijlmans, *Gift*, self-published, Amsterdam, 2006; Ni Haifeng & Kitty Zijlmans, *Forms of Exchange*, Museum Het Domein, Sittard, 2008; Ni Haifeng & Kitty Zijlmans, *The Return of the Shreds*, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, 2008.
- 9 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002, p. 14. See also Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, co-published with Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2006.
- 10 Bourriaud, p. 17.
- 11 For the Netherlands, see, for example, the discussions and publications of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht: Maria Hlavajova & Jill Winder (eds), *Concerning War: A Critical Reader*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2006.
- 12 Aukes.
- 13 'Drawing Typologies. Proposal for Municipal Art Acquisitions', brochure exhibition, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 29 June – 16 September 2007. Guest curator Roel Arkesteijn.
- 14 For his work Ni Haifeng was awarded the first Fritschy Prize in 2004 for his contribution to the debate on intercultural issues. The theme was chosen in tribute to Gerard Fritschy, who was the head of the translation department of the former Dutch State Mines. The prize is funded from a bequest by the late Gerard Fritschy. See Claudine Hellweg, 'The Paradox of the Foreigner', in Ni Haifeng & Claudine Hellweg (eds), *Ni Haifeng-Xeno-Writings*, catalogue published on the occasion of the Fritschy Prize 2004 to mark the exhibition (15 May – 4 July 2004), Museum Het Domein, Sittard, 2004.