

Transkript Interview Timur Si-Qin

Gekürzte und bereinigte Transkription vom mündlichen Interview mit Timur Si-Qin am 16. April 2020, per Skype.

Marlene: Maybe I can give you a little sketch of what I am working on and why I want to talk to you. In my PhD I am researching the display situation of postdigital art. I chose three case studies, one is *New Eelam* by Christopher Kulendran Thomas, your *New Peace* or *Peace* and the third one is going to be Debora Delmar's MINT. The common denominator is obviously BB9 and what I am interested in is basically how this affirmative structure of the work to economic strategies is developed and how brands are developed in the display. I am going to look at special interior situations that are referenced in some of the works. In your chapter I am going to talk about the Brandscape. I am going to research how you develop a brand through the display. The last chapter with Débora is going to be on the marketplace that is generated and the products that come out of these artworks and what their status is. This is the framework of my thesis, and I am now working on the second chapter which is your case study of the *New Peace* brand and I had some general questions on the displays itself and some questions that go a little further. So, first of all, I am going to start with the really hands-on questions. For me it was not quite clear when you used the stock images that already existed and when did you do the images yourself?

Timur: I guess, a lot of the early works was stock photos and then at some point I went back and forth a little bit. I can just tell you in each case. For the *Premier Machinic Funerary* display, these images were commissioned. That was maybe more or less the turning point. I think I made some smaller stuff still with some stock photos afterwards but yeah not so much.

Marlene: Does it make a difference if you use photos that already exist or if you stage them yourself or is it more or less the same? Like does it have the same function? Or does it make a huge difference?

Timur: Well, I think conceptually it was more or less the same thing, coming from the same place. But then in terms of quality I think it is just more fun of course, it's a nicer thing usually. I think it also was important to do the stock photo stuff at the beginning as well. And actually, just now, you know there is the stock photo series of this woman that is this cosmetic ad?

Marlene: Is it the one that has been in Art Basel now?

Timur: Yeah, it was just in Art Basel and my gallerist asked me like the day before like «Hey do you want to put this online?», cause he was like not going to do the whole thing, but then the day before he was like, ok fine, I'll just do it.

Marlene: I looked at it, like this kind of digital version they did of the fair. And I thought it was very strange...like they just basically did a rendering of a little bench and a wall and then they just put in any image on this wall, to do a mock-up of the right dimension of the artwork

Timur: Was it in 3D? or was it in 2D?

Marlene: 2D, like the situation that they have in artsy, it was just really random, I don't know. Yeah, but I know this work, ok cool.

Timur: It's really interesting because, I never figured out a way of showing that backstory of it, because for that photo for a while, and you still can, you see it everywhere, you see that series

everywhere, like all over the world, in advertisements in China, here and in Germany, like I even saw it once like in a news article from this bombed out scene in Crimea during this war, there was a cosmetics beauty salon, and this woman was hanging there in the window and there was a bombed out car.

Marlene: You should track down the Model of this photo.

Timur: I found the photographer, it's a Russian, I don't remember if I tried to get in touch with him or something, but I never made a connection.

Marlene: And for the corporate image, do you do everything yourself? Like the whole *New Peace* branding? Or do you work with other professional marketing studios, or is it done by you?

Timur: It's mostly me, sometimes I work with graphic designers, typographers, I am working on that right now with some typographers to do the next iteration, but it's mostly me.

Marlene: Do you have a training?

Timur: I don't really have a training, the only training that maybe applies is for a year I worked as an advertisement designer in my university newspaper, that was very rudimentary stuff.

Marlene: Could you explain some things to me, that were not clear? I looked into this development of the brand, and maybe you can tell me if I got this right: So in the beginning, how it started was with the ancestral worship situation, the first time that *PEACE* made an entrance in your work, and then you brought in the Abercrombie aesthetics for like the third, or was it the second iteration of the *Machinic Funerary* and from there on it started to be this assembly of different elements that don't really fit together right? You had this kind of diffusion, and one cannot really pin down what the brand actually is or, as I understood it, your focus was that you even played on this that you wanted to make visible how the brand functions on the surface, as a tool of itself, not by putting in some meaning. How I saw the development or what I called in my research the diorama series, when you started using the landscapes or dioramas, for Team gallery, and for the Berlin Biennial and then for the Statements shows, so there came this element of the landscape, which was really strong, which you also elaborated on, but still one couldn't really focus what the brand was really dealing with, and then only in the last iteration of the *New Protocol* there came the spiritual component, which was kind of the meaning, or what it was all about, would you agree to this development?

Timur: Yeah, I would agree to that.

Marlene: Would you say that it's a natural development, because one could think that it's a contradiction, if in the first place the brand is just like this empty vessel, but then you put in something really strong in the other iteration of it, like a new religion, how does it work together?

Timur: What do you mean? How does the emptiness work with the substance?

Marlene: Yeah, or how is this logic in your thinking that now it's this really strong...

Timur: Let me back track a bit, so I think, where all of the work was coming from, is challenging an anthropocentric perspective of human culture. That is the reason that I was really interested in stock photos for example, and branding was never like a commentary on branding, but actually, or I should say that the framework from which I was looking at branding was from the anthropological framework. I wasn't making a comment on economic systems of humans, I was

making a comment on the objects and the images of homo sapiens and really trying to take this zoomed out perspective. And from the point of view of art discourse, that's a very difficult perspective to get out to. When people see branding or commercial images, they immediately think that it's a comment on capitalism, or something like that and it fits into that discourse. But what I was trying to say was if we step outside of these discourses that we are so stuck in, then we can recognize, that these are the actual images that humans are populating their cultures with, their societies with and thinking about why is it, that this is happening. What drives the pattern and the ubiquity of certain kinds of images that we see over and over again. From within the standard discourse, there is no way of really explaining that. In terms of discourse of power and desire, these are the standards of discourses on how capital works and stuff, which is coming from psychoanalysis and it's using the tools of psychoanalysis but ultimately what I'm trying to do is challenge that and say that it is ultimately an anthropocentric framework. What I think is most beneficial is that we need to step outside of this culture anthropocentric sphere and really think what drives humans to behave the way they do. I recognized over the years that the real problem that I am trying to deal with is climate change actually, and that it is really necessary to make this shift in perspective in order to address climate change. And then the spiritual of course came in with that as well, but it was also almost a little bit in there as well. For example, the Abercrombie, the *Premier Machinic Funerary II*, I was making these sort of anti-funerals for these hominids and also those fossils in particular, they were these transition fossils, they were not homo sapiens, they were like a different...

Marlene: So, the morphogenesis theme comes up already there?

Timur: Yeah, and specifically also these grey areas like a human and a non-human, or human and an animal, and that's already pointing at we have to consider this outside, this external to human thing.

Marlene: I read a lot of your texts and Interviews and this point about not being about critical theory, not being about this dualistic system of like being outside or inside, or being critical, or what it even means to be critical artwork, that you kind of try to reframe this whole situation.

Timur: Right.

Marlene: But would you then say that what you do cannot even be described by critiquing, or what is your mode then? If you use the affirmatives...

Timur: I would say that it is even more critical, actually.

Marlene: So, you still think that being critical is important, but not in this traditional sense of the critical theory, but in a new sense?

Timur: Yeah, I think so. I mean it depends on what you really mean by criticality. I think being even more investigative, trying to be even more clear headed. I think, the thing that I feel is the biggest counter to it is actually the Christian foundations of European culture. I think that that kind of sets up the whole conversation in a lot of ways and especially how capital and commercial images respond.

Marlene: What about the website? For me it was not really clear how *Mirrorscape* is connected to *New Peace* or what kind of extension or relation it has to the main thing.

Timur: I think I'm not quite sure either. I was also experimenting with other little sub brands and module brands, for example there was this *Truth by Peace*...

Marlene: Ah yeah, the one you did in Beijing?

Timur: Yeah exactly, and that was more like fashion, you know? But *Mirrorscape* was...I just kind of thought of it as trying to describe an early sense of spiritual destination and a state of mind but I don't know it didn't really lead anywhere, so I have moved on a bit, maybe it will come back at some point.

Marlene: Ok, let me quickly go back to my questions. Maybe we go back to the content of the *New Protocol* work, can you explain to me how you interpret or how you use the term Morphogenesis, because it seemed to me that there are other words or concepts that come up but this seemed to be a very strong and very central concept that you use and I tried to see what it really means but it would be interesting for me to hear why you used this specific concept as your main frame for the spiritual concept.

Timur: So, think that the books that really inspired me and set me on this path were these (shows the books) The first book I read when I was twenty and my mom gave this to me for Christmas or something and it's kind of a well-known popular science book about Chaos theory and complexity theory. It's really fascinating, I don't know if you ever read any of the stuff in that direction but basically, it's about how systems have all these properties that are very interesting, self-organizing properties for example and that all of reality is very finely structured and patterned. This is very obvious when we go out into the nature and it's also very specifically about the mass of fractal patterns, scale and variance. Big things are replicated smaller things and what that showed me, is that there is this innate beauty that is just in everything, like mathematically, we can't even escape it if we try to. It's non computational, you can't predict ahead of time unless you go through all the steps to get there, maybe one example is a fractal pattern like the Mandelbrot, so if you zoom in, you can't just skip a bunch of zooms, you have to process each way down and that applies to so many different systems in reality actually and there is this small threshold, the chaotic threshold for a system, so that once it passes it then it becomes inherently non-computational and so that really flies against the idea of a clockwork deterministic universe and at the same time it is really beautiful.

And then there is this book: *How the leopard changed its spots* by Brian Goodwin. He says that genes don't really do all of the work of building bodies, it actually has to do with this sort of self-organizing behavior of materials and bodies themselves, for example plants grow just in few different ways, there is the one's that grow their leaves staggered and then there is the spiraling ones and what he says in the book is that genes don't determine those things at all, the only thing that genes determine is the rates of the growth of the leaves and if you tweak the ray of growth beyond a certain threshold then it automatically has a phase transition and it changes into the spiraling leaf growth for any plant. This way of thinking about phase transitions is really important, and critical thresholds and this goes actually to the book that really inspired me, which is Manuel de Landa, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* and he basically says that, he puts Deleuze into a mathematical framework, the dynamical systems framework. He describes how everything that is happening is subject to these very interesting dynamics. It comes down to the idea of a phase. You can graph any system in this multidimensional sort of space and then there is specific points in the space that attracts things, that's the attractors. Surrounding each attracter is a basin, the basin of attraction, so imagine if you have a marble and there are three different dips and then it lands on one ridge and it will go onto one attractor and if it lands on the other one, it will go into the other one. You can imagine that all reality and systems sort of behaving in this way, and you can even think of the transition of liquid to solid to gas, or solid to liquid to gas as the same thing. You can think of the phases of water. So, there is three different attractors basically, there is the solid attractor, there is the liquid attractor and there is the gas attractor and so with the temperature it will push it towards different attractors

and there are these very sudden transitions, which are called the critical transitions. De Landa applies that to history, and he applies that to economics and to culture in general. This early work that I was doing with stock photos was thinking in that framework, thinking like there are these very specific attractors in our visual language as humans and that we have a tendency to see those as solutions over and over again and it doesn't really even matter what specific dynamics those are you know, because there is all kind of stuff involved.

Marlene: Would you say one could explain Morphogenesis as some kind of construction plan?

Timur: It is not a plan. It is not a blueprint for the whole body. Rather it is the actual process of the embryo genesis, that determines the structure of the body. DNA plays a little role in that, but it is not this one-to-one download like this is the plan, follow every step, but it's really dependent on the cells migrating here and there is a certain temperature that changes them to this.

Marlene: So, there are also external factors that can change the development?

Timur: Exactly. Morphogenesis is just this, what strikes me is there are these incredibly complex things in reality, like our bodies for example. We don't plan them at all, like a baby is not planning its own body as it is growing. It is just doing its thing and it just grows into its form. I think when I learned about it first, already automatically it had some sort of spiritual connection to me. Over the years, I kept thinking about it and thinking about how there must be these larger scale structures in how our lives go, in how everything goes, we can't really even perceive, but we are definitely a part of them, a part of this embryogenesis at a larger scale.

Marlene: Ok, this is the level of the content and now you choose to put this in the display and in the way that for example the language you choose in the VR or also in the texts, this is also really affirmative to, I would say branding language or language that we know from other areas.

Timur: Right.

Marlene: Would you say this has to do with this basin of attraction, that we know this kind of language and that is why we would understand it, more or better?

Timur: It is coming from recognizing that the human is an animal. You know the author Yuval Harari? He is saying that we have to come to terms with the fact that we are hackable animals, and his discourse is about how that applies to democracy. I feel like that we have to engage in this language and in these tools, partly out of a responsibility to just explore them and to see how they actually function and B also just as an acknowledgment of our animal reality.

Marlene: That this is kind of the point where we have come to in evolution and this is the language, the up-to-date way of communication?

Timur: Yeah, and that's not to say only biological but also cultural evolution. You can't separate that, also very random fashion trends and all of that stuff is mixed in with it, but just to recognize that there are specific images and experiences that humans react to in specific ways. I think it is our responsibility to explore that. One example I talk about sometimes is Jeff Koons sculptures, the discourse around a Jeff Koons sculptures like desire, and the embodiment of desire and when you look at this shiny thing, that's how far as it goes when talking about what it means and what it's representing. What is interesting is the dynamics that go into why humans are actually attracted to shiny and reflective things. There are studies that have been done where they took two groups of people, and they gave them salty dry crackers to eat. Then they gave water to one of them afterwards and the others not, and they have them look at a series of images. What they

found is that the people that didn't get the water rated the images of shiny and reflective things much higher and so what it establishes is that there is this very innate link of reflection to water. It really shows us that we are still animals and I think that then the trick is to point out that this is also our kind of a beautiful vulnerability as well, the vulnerability that we share with other animals. It's only the western perspective where that change in perspective is difficult because we don't want to think of ourselves as animals.

Marlene: And where it comes back to letting go of this and moving on to post-anthropocentric viewpoints.

Timur: Exactly.

Marlene: What would you say if, I am just saying that because in a lot of art criticism around for example the BB9 in Berlin and also post-internet art in general, they always bring up this kind of »Oh it has been there already«, like affirmative art, or art that works with branding has been there since the 1970s, 1980s and these people never mention it, they should mention as a predecessor, how do you react to this kind of accusation?

Timur: Ah, I mean it is difficult because I think that other artists who are working with this stuff, for example *New Eelam*, and even Débora Delmar, I don't think they are approaching it in the same way, I don't even think that they are being aware of it. But of course, artists are also very intuitive, they respond to things, images and culture and so it is just a very natural thing to work in this way. I don't know, you mean that they are saying that we should have more historical references, Andy Warhol or something?

Marlene: Yes, I don't know, Barbara Kruger, just people who generally worked with branding and very explicit branding imagery and that has been there in the 1990s excessively, but then was in this framework of institutional critique, and really kind of an anti-capitalistic reading of the art, stuff like this.

Timur: Right, and that was the critique from the masses? You turn up the dials on capitalism and you reveal its inner contradictions, and Koons was in that framework as well. I'm not interested in that because A it's already been done and B I think it is just too stuck in this polar western framework where you have to choose a side and somehow images represent a specific side and I think that that's just really silly actually.

Marlene: But would you agree that if we only see your work in the museum, maybe not really engaging about what we just talked about, would you see that there is, on the visual or on the aesthetic level that there are links or would you also deny that?

Timur: Oh yeah, I mean, links to historical work?

Marlene: Yeah to branding and ok he's an artist that made a brand, but that has been there...

Timur: I mean, of course I think it's impossible not to make links ultimately. Maybe my really early work is also more coming from that tradition as well, I think that the *Axe* works for example still had this sort of stirring capitalism thing and trying to be culture jamming. But then as I progressed, I wasn't as interested in that anymore probably because so many had done it as well. We get it, so and then what really drew me more was the materialism, new materialism and what that means for climate change.

Marlene: Could you elaborate on that? Because at one point you were talking about treating this brand that you build as a material, and I saw what you meant but also, I was not so sure what you meant. Maybe you could elaborate on that?

Timur: You can think of any system as a material. This goes back to a specific essay I wrote, the *Aesthetics of Contingency*. Basically, what makes a material a material is its properties, its tendencies and its capacities. Like how it tends to behave and how it is capable of behaving. A brand is also that kind of object that has specific tendencies and capacities, our cognition processes it in a specific way. For the standard cultural practitioner, a brand symbolizes contemporary capitalism. But really, it divorces the operation in the phenomenon of the symbol from its larger context which is symbology. The reason really that branding works is not because everybody has been sold or forced to buy the concept of the brand, rather that there is a cognitive operation that just has to do with how our memory functions, we see the same image over and over again and then we associate specific associations with that memories and it is just easy for our brains.

Marlene: It is like priming...

Timur: And that didn't start with branding either, we have logos and symbols going back as far as language goes back. I am trying to break through this divorce, that we have between what we think of as modern and human, which is totally divorced from what came before and the animal arose from, and I think that this is ultimately dangerous.

Marlene: It should come together?

Timur: And you know what I mean about the materiality then? This is for example a function of its materiality of the brand. It lives in a certain ecology as well, it has a specific environment that it is adapted for and a current environment is printed objects, or screens.

Marlene: My last question: what is your relation to the museum space? Is it important that your works are in the museum, or could they exist outside of it? Or has it maybe become even more important to be in the museum space, as an artwork?

Timur: You mean as opposed to galleries?

Marlene: No, I'm talking about this, because the work looks like it's very close to ordinary things or brands...could it be just a brand that you recognize or that you just see outside of a museum and not necessarily recognize as art there?

Timur: Right, I mean have you seen the merchandise?

Marlene: Yeah, I bought a cap!

Timur: I think, it's all legitimate and whatever works, I'm ok with, I'm interested in exploring.

Marlene: But you wouldn't say that it is even more important to go back to the museum space after there has been this narrative of going outside of the museum, and the museum is dead?

Timur: I don't know, that never really interested me, the whole discourse of whether or not. To me they never represented more than what they actually are, which is just, you know...

Marlene: A place to see the art?

Timur: Right, exactly. I think that the artworld thinks of itself as much more important and bigger than it actually is. Its incessant self-critique is often not leading anywhere. I think it's silly for people on the left to call other people on the left fascist, while there are real fascists actually in power. I am writing a new text that is about this. On the left we like to blame markets and capitalism, which if you read enough de Landa, you recognize is a very shifty target anyway. It is hard to discern what we are talking about there, but then at the same time, there's these real literal Christian cults that are in power in America, that are determining the policy of the republican party which determines climate policy of the entire world basically. And Christianity I think is a political blind spot for the left, like A we come from a largely Christian culture so it's hard to even see it, because it's just coming from our own tradition and then B I think that because of the antirealist or pluralistic term that postmodernism took, we have a really hard time saying that a truth claim by for example Christians is less valid than science you know.

Marlene: Yes, I think I understand where you are going.

Timur: I feel that art should pay more attention to that.