Portraits of the Land: Environmentalism and Contemporary Art in Mongolia

Sarah Morgan
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, Environmental Health and Protection Commons, Growth and Development Commons, and the Natural Resources and Conservation Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1139

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
Portraits of the Land: Environmentalism and Contemporary Art in Mongolia

Sarah Morgan

Academic Director Ulziijargal Sanjaasuren

SIT Study Abroad Mongolia

Fall 2011
Abstract

Environmental concerns are globally relevant, but in Mongolia they hold special importance. Not only does Mongolia contain an unusual amount of pristine wilderness, but Mongolian history and culture are also deeply rooted in a close bond with the land. Now, increased development and globalization are placing new pressures on environmental systems. In response to these pressures, Mongolians artists are joining a national (and global) conversation about the interactions between art, environment, cultural heritage, and activism.

This study explores the sources of inspiration and motivation for these artists. Through this research, I hope to bring to light the role of the arts in improving Mongolians’ relationship with the environment. At the same time, studying in a country that is facing rapid change due to globalization, I hope also to consider more deeply the delicate balances involved in international work towards sustainability and improved quality of life for all people.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 4

Introduction: The Importance of Mongolian Contemporary Art ................................. 5

Methodology: Context and Scale .................................................................................. 6

Historical Roots: Traditional Mongolian Culture and Change ................................. 9

The Contemporary Art Scene of Ulaanbaatar ............................................................. 10

Art, Humans, and Nature: Roles and Relationships ................................................. 12

Art and Change: The Future of Art in Mongolia ...................................................... 25

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 30

Glossary ......................................................................................................................... 32

Appendices .................................................................................................................... 33

Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 42
Acknowledgements

In the course of my research, I have encountered so many people who have shared with me their time, their wisdom, their boor tog and their stories.

Thank you to my advisor, Bayaraa, for your guidance through my interviews and for your interest in the Big Questions.

Thank you to the staff of SIT, to Ulzii Bagsch and Ulzii Akh—you helped me find a perfect balance of adventure and safety. Thanks to Tungaa and Baigal for taking on a herculean translation task. Without you, my paper would be wordless.

To the artists I interviewed: thank you for listening and thank you for speaking. You have left me with so many more questions. If I come back to Mongolia, it will be to follow trains of thought you have inspired.

Thank you to my host families and to the Other Nine. The places I have lived here have been homes because of you.

Finally, thank you to the people scattered across the world these three months who remind me what I have to look forward to when I return. The world is wide, and I love you.
Introduction: The Importance of Mongolian Contemporary Art

Mongolian contemporary art lies on the peripheries of international art consciousness; it is understudied. Increasingly, though, the art world is turning its attention towards these nascent movements. There is value in examining how Mongolian art is growing in the midst of rapid social, political, and environmental change.

Mongolian culture lies in a unique position in the world, where tradition meets modern life. After seventy years of strict adherence to Soviet socialist forms, artists are adjusting to the advent of democracy, and have the freedom to explore new uses of abstraction, multimedia, performance art, and installation. From the year 1990 to 2000, Mongolian art blossomed in a multitude of directions in an explosion of creativity and innovation. Now, as artists begin to settle into the styles and communities they have developed, it is easier to witness the results of post-1990 freedom.

One of the most fascinating characteristics of contemporary art in Mongolia is a relationship with tradition and with nomadic culture, re-invigorated and reframed in contemporary contexts. Filled with complexity, these relationships between human beings and nature, between artist and ancestor, between Mongolia and the rest of the world merit a close look.

Contemporary art history in Mongolia is now at a tipping point. Mongolian artists are stepping onto a global stage, and with them they bring a rich history and unique perspective on art and modern life. Especially relevant on a
global scale is the perspectives Mongolian artists can offer on the relationship between humans and nature.

The degree to which humans depend upon the health of the land demands a multifaceted approach to environmentalism. The Deep Ecology movement, founded by Norwegian environmentalist Arne Naess, promotes the development of a healthier relationship between humans and nature through spiritual and artistic initiatives. Beyond allowing people to understand on a scientific and rational level the importance of conservation, Deep Ecology recognizes the value of people’s emotional relationship with the natural world. Deep ecology also stresses that successful environmental initiatives must take into consideration social and cultural values. The arts in Mongolia are able to play a role in environmentalism because they bridge science and culture, and can inspire sustainable solutions to complex problems.

**Methodology: Context, and Scale**

In order to best ascertain how Mongolian contemporary artists link humans and the natural world in their work, I found it most helpful to listen closely and deeply to the experiences of several prominent figures in the Mongolian art scene. These artists explained their philosophies, inspirations, and perceptions through a series of interviews. In each case, I attempted to leave each question broad enough so that the artists could respond within their own value systems. I wanted to determine which questions most intrigued them, how they
contextualized themselves within the art world, and how nature, humans, and art could interact in their episteme.

The artists I interviewed were chosen based upon their prominence in Mongolian Contemporary art, as determined by my advisor, their involvement in environmentally themed artistic initiatives, and their availability during my research period. I interviewed six artists in a two-week period, visiting their studios and digitally recording their answers. Although rough translation from my advisor helped to direct the interviews, the responses were translated and transcribed more precisely at the end of the two weeks. In reviewing the answers to my questions, I was able to determine how the artists perceived their relationship with the natural world, and the role that they felt art should have in addressing environmental issues in modern Mongolia.

In addition to the six artists interviewed, I also spoke with a young woman named Mangalam Natsagsuren. In 2010, the Arts Council of Mongolia selected Natsagsuren to participate in a young leadership program for future artists and arts promoters. Natsagsuren’s experiences in art promotion helped me to contextualize my perception of the direction of contemporary art in Mongolia, and offer a sampling of a more economically focused view of the arts community.

Throughout the research period, philosopher Jacques Derrida inspired a close examination of context in each of the interviews. Derrida writes of the origin of meaning; when considering a written mark, a piece of artwork, a musical composition, it is necessary to consider all conditions surrounding the experience (Derrida 5). Communication involves the intentions of the artist and the reaction
of the viewer, not just the form, style, and content of the artwork itself. For this reason, I feel that it is necessary to pay close attention to artists’ explanations of their work. Working in a cross-cultural context, I especially need to avoid imposing my own assumptions and definitions upon the artwork. The information that the artists wished to share, rather than my own interpretations are given stronger consideration.

Naturally, there are barriers that limit the scope and depth of this study. Language limitations dictate that the artists’ exact words cannot be included. Translation is a type of transformation that is both intricate and subtle. More of an art than a science, translation demands careful consideration and deep understanding of two distinct cultures. The translator must then synthesize this cross-cultural knowledge into a finished product. The final translation must honor the intentions and choices of the original author while simultaneously providing the new reader with some degree of cross-cultural understanding. Although I believe the words of the artists have been skillfully translated, it is important to keep in mind that meaning is always slightly shifted and sometimes dropped in the translation process.

Time was also a limiting factor for this study. Because this research occurred only over the course of one month, only several artists’ voices could be included. Because this study is relatively small, it is intended to give a small introduction to the state of environmentalism in Mongolian contemporary art. This is a first look into the diversity of ways that artists are approaching environmentalism, and what environmentalism means to them. By beginning to
understand the types of power and influence this art can have, both the Mongolian contemporary art community and the international art community may benefit.

**Historical Roots: Traditional Mongolian Culture and Change**

Keeping in mind Derrida’s advocacy of context, it is important to recognize the cultural and artistic roots of contemporary art in Mongolia. Cradled between China and Russia, Mongolia is distinguished by a long history of nomadism. Herders of sheep, goats, horses, camels, yaks and cows move seasonally to find pastureland for their herds. In order to sustain this highly mobile lifestyle, Mongolian herders usually live in easily portable round felt homes called **gers**, and carry with them few material items. The lives of the herders are dependent upon the cycles of the land: the rich bounty of dairy products in the fall, the ferocity of the winter months and the regrowth of the grass in time for summer. The changes in the land easily become changes in the lives of the people, determining the pace of their days and the health of their livestock.

Today in Mongolia, about half of the population lives in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Beginning in 1921, Soviet political, cultural, and economic influence lead to the development of industry and sedentary, urban life in Mongolia. In the wake of Soviet socialism, Mongolia is left with two distinct worlds: the world of the city, where fences mark property lines even in the organically sprawling **ger** districts, and the world of the country, where homes appear as white specks amidst dramatic expanses of untouched land. The division is growing hazier,
though, as more nomadic families relocate to the city in hope of finding prosperity. With the increase in urbanization has come a dramatic rise in pollution levels in the city. Sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide, all contributors to acid rain, are on the rise in Ulaanbaatar. Such high levels of these chemicals are unhealthy for residents of the city, and also can be destructive to trees and the rest of the plants and animals living in the surrounding area. At the same time, foreign mining companies are just beginning to explore the wealth of mineral resources buried beneath Mongolian soil. (Jackson 30).

Amidst all of this change, nomadism and urban life are in constant interaction. While there are tensions between residents of the city and the countryside related to urbanization, rural Mongolians are still considered the “guardians” of traditional Mongolian culture because they live so closely with the land, and still live as nomads. For this reason, rural life is a prominent feature of modern Mongolian art; it is a way to preserve tradition as life changes in the city (Natsagsumuren, personal interview).

The Contemporary Art Scene of Ulaanbaatar

Contemporary art in Mongolia began as a tentative exploration of political boundaries. In 1968, the Mongolian government shut down an exhibition featuring abstract paintings by Ochiryn Tsevegjav, Gombyn Soosai and Puntsagnamjiliin Baldandorj because they claimed it displayed capitalist tendencies (Jargalan 2011). Gradually, the art community began to experiment more with abstraction and contemporary styles, finally forming into organized
schools beginning in the 1980s. Batbayaryn Gansukh, Yondonjunain Dalh-Ochir, Sambuugin Mashbat and Galsandorjiin Erdenebileg formed the Green Horse Group in 1989, which went on to dominate the contemporary art scene in Mongolia for the next ten years (Jargalan 2011).

The Green Horse Group adopted free exploration of style and content as their primary goal, declaring in their manifesto, “art should not be governed by any one theory” (Jargalan 2011). From 1989 until 1999, the Green Horse Group fostered a generation of artists unafraid of experimentation, controversy, or the melding of tradition and innovation.

Untrammeled by government pressure, post-1990 contemporary Mongolian art was most limited by funding and gallery space. Though financial support for artists remains scant (Natsagsuren, personal interview), the opening of dozens of galleries in Ulaanbaatar has helped to provide more exposure for Mongolian artists. Among these galleries are Blue Sun Gallery, host of avant-garde, politically active contemporary art exhibits, Xanadu Art Gallery, which supports 10 annual artists in residence with studio and exhibition space, and the Red Ger Gallery, which operates under the management of the Art Council of Mongolia. In addition to these newer galleries, the Union of Mongolian Artists (which has been in existence since 1942) provides 60 select members with low-cost studio space. Each year the UMA is also host to dozens of solo exhibitions in their downtown gallery, providing exposure to emerging talent and established artists alike (Natsagsuren, personal interview).
In 1990, Mongolia began the difficult transformation from socialism to democracy. At the same time, the artistic community began on a long path to developing new styles and ideas. Mart Batzorig, who is both a prominent artist and art historian, described the transformations:

The changes in 1990 represent a very significant development of artists’ creativity and philosophy. I have observed that for 10 years from 1990 to 2000, there were very few artists but the directions or tendency of their drawings were greatly isolated from each other. Each of the artists was entirely independent. From 2000 to the present, the art community has less diversification of direction than in the 1990s. Artists are very similar to each other. Some directions that were being explored no longer even exist. New directions in artwork are becoming more rare. (Batzorig, personal interview).

As the rate of change and growth slows a bit, art historians find a more appropriate climate in which to analyze trends and patterns. One of these most relevant trends to examine in the past twenty years is the way Mongolian artists are expressing environmentalism through their work. As artists communicate with each other more and focus on more unified messages in their artwork, they are beginning to produce a distinct brand of Mongolian environmental art.

Art, Humans, and Nature: Roles and Relationships

By comparing responses from six of Mongolia’s most well-known young contemporary artists, I was able to recognize the diversity of ways that these
artists conceptualize the relationships between humans, nature, and art. While artists seemed to have similar feelings about the bond between humans and the natural world, their philosophies differed greatly about the role art plays in this web. Some artists saw their art as a way to simply express the beauty of nature—a way to calm the viewer and tap into deeply buried emotional wells. Other artists hoped their work could convey messages about social and environmental problems, and could invite the viewer to inspect their own lives and actions. Still other artists considered the performative act of art itself as a way to mend broken relationships with the environment.

Many artists in Mongolia take inspiration from the natural beauty and diversity of the Mongolian landscape, which ranges from the sand dunes of the Southern Gobi to snow-capped peaks and pristine blue lakes in Hovsgol province. Artists in Mongolia see the value of this landscape-style work in its impact upon the viewer. As contemporary artist Monkhor Erdenebayar explains, “I believe the value lies not in what one sees, but rather how one perceives it” (Imagination to Creation 47). Erdenebayar’s work centers on the power that imagery can have to relate to an audience; his paintings all depict cubic, abstracted horses, inspiring in the viewer a sense of pride in nomadic heritage (Figure 1). Each horse, Erdenebayar says, is an expression of majesty, peacefulness, and power, communicated through distinctly Mongolian imagery.

Similarly, collage artist Budzagd Nandin-Erdene seeks to express the loveliness of nature in her work. She hopes that her work makes a distinction between the artificial and the natural, and that viewers eventually realize the
superiority of organic, spontaneous beauty. Once people developed this appreciation for nature, she says, “it also allows human beings to connect to God” (Nandin-Erdene, personal interview). At its core, this view of nature, beauty, and appreciation shares the values of the Deep Ecology movement. It is characterized by a belief in the wealth and complexity of the natural world. As Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess summarizes, “One square meter of a meadow is so fantastically rich that there should be enough to discover for the rest of our lives” (Jickling 57). Nandin-Erdene’s work is an exploration of that richness.

Others stress the immediacy of artwork as a way for humans to respond to the beauty of nature and tradition. Enkhbat Tsolmonbat, who incorporates many traditional elements of Mongolian art and culture into his paintings, explains the drive to portray natural beauty in this way:

My teacher told me that drawing is the most natural action for human beings…Something great can come out of something very simple. We convert our emotions to artwork. We must convert simple things into great things. Appreciation of nature and cultural heritage must be transferred by our work so that it can be passed on to future generations. (Tsolmonbat, personal interview).

Tsolmonbat represents the attitude of a group of artists, including Nandin-Erdene and Buyantogtoh Badral, that art has a duty to work for social change. While some artists feel that art should challenge the audience through innovative technique and subject, Tsolmonbat feels that incorporating traditional elements is
the most important duty of contemporary art in Mongolia (Kish “Mongolian Contemporary Art” 12). For him, the most important viewers are the young ones who have yet to solidify their values and understand their cultural roots. These people are most receptive to the emotion that he pours into his artwork, and have the most power to enact these values in the future.

Contemporary artist Togmidshiir Enkhbold explains the way that meaning can be transmitted through beauty and tradition in artwork:

Art shows changes in the community, so in turn, people understand and enact changes in the community. In the case of my artwork, some people are not very familiar with all of the meanings of the ger, but any artwork related to the ger makes people remember what they have forgotten…. The ger has such different meanings for people living in ger districts and for people living in ger in the countryside. In urban areas, they see the ger as a just a shelter for sleep. But in the countryside, the ger is related to everything. The original meaning of ger seems to be disappearing, but I think art makes people remember. (Enkhbold, personal interview).

Tsolmonbat’s work takes advantage of the strong ties between image and memory, and the role that emotion can play in shaping peoples’ consciousness. Halfway between a nostalgic longing for the wisdom of the past and a recognition of the realities of modern life in urban Mongolia, his art honors tradition by recontextualizing it.
Other artists use their artwork to express destructive cycles of human interaction with nature. They tend to target specific environmental concerns in a more direct manner through powerfully emotional imagery. A 2010 group exhibition entitled “Smoke in the Brain” is a prime example of Mongolian artists seeking to target specific environmental problems in their artwork. This show, which ran in the Art Council of Mongolia’s Red Ger Gallery, brought together ten contemporary artists to send a strong anti-pollution statement. It was the first group exhibition in Mongolia to unite artists so strongly on a single issue, and was focused on activism rather than commercial value. Curator Mart Batzorig explained that the inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar are “already aware of the situation with the pollution, so I hope our exhibition is the first step in waking them up and encouraging them to do something. I also hope it will serve as inspiration for other artists to touch on those kinds of issues in their future work” (Kish, “Smoke in the Brain” 12).

“Smoke in the Brain” was not simply designed to educate the public about air pollution in Ulaanbaatar; the artists sought to use emotional power in their artwork to inspire real change in society. Once again, this is an example of Deep Ecology principles. Artist Buyantogtöh Badral, when discussing contemporary Mongolian art, stated that although art does not have the power to cause immediate social or political change, “it can be used as a tool to show people all these problems…art is a bridge to a human’s soul” (Kish, “Mongolian Contemporary Art” 12). Because art can reach the audience on an emotional level, it can inspire the viewer to reexamine their relationship with the problem. Badral
Morgan 17

compares apathy to illness; “our society needs medical treatment,” he says, “and I hope that this exhibition might serve as medicine for society” (Kish, “Mongolian Contemporary Art” 12).

“Smoke in the Brain” approaches the problem of urban pollution from many directions, but as a whole, it sends a strongly unified statement against smog in Ulaanbaatar. While artist Munkhtsetseg Jalkhaajav creates soft sculptures of mothers and fetuses breathing through gas masks, Uuriintuya Dagvasambuu paints elaborate scenes of pale human figures drowning in a sea of billowy gray smoke. Though the styles differ—Munkhtsetseg’s fabric works personify nature and humans as mother and child while Uuriintuya plays on common special arrangements in Buddhist art—the message is clear. The air that gives life can also be poison, a poison of human creation.

Odgerel Tsulbaatar’s “Gate of Life” installation piece is another example of art that sends a clear environmental warning (Figure 2). In this piece, Odgerel explored the relationship between living trees and other forms of wood. He hung doors from the limbs of trees in order to represent the threshold between living as a part of nature and living in conflict with nature by submitting to avarice. He also creates a miniature display that contrasts petrified wood, a living tree, and a drawer full of woodchips. “All these,” he says, “are the past, the present, and the future. If we continue to destroy our Mother Nature, carelessly abusing it, she will avenge us…” (Kim 191). Odgerel’s sharp contrast between the vivaciousness of the tree and the fragmented, dry woodchips is an almost violent representation of human destructiveness.
Not all artists use their work to address environmental problems so directly. For some, these issues serve as more of an underlying concern in their lives that they feel unprepared to address. Tsolmonbat, who paints the beauty of nature, has considered creating artwork that directly relates to environmental destruction.

Last year I went to UmnuGobi province and saw lots of mining companies there. In the end, I think, we will just be left with an enormous black hole. After 10 years, I see the whole UmnuGobi becoming a huge hole. I have an idea about that—I want to create art about this issue. This would be a bigger work to make people understand the immensity of the situation. But I can’t start it yet—I don’t know how. It would require a huge amount of research… Now I am just describing about beautiful nature. But I will never forget about this. (Tsolmonbat, personal interview).

For some artists like Tsolmonbat, taking on the immensity of environmental destruction in Mongolia seems like too formidable a task. On an individual level, reaching and moving an audience to action is a huge burden for the artist. Artists, though, can use their artwork in a third way to address environmental concerns. This third method transforms art into ritual, and allows artists to actively engage with the “broken relationships” between humans and the environment.

For multimedia artist Tserenpil Ariuntugs, the action of his artwork, his creative process, is just as important as the final result. In one of his recent works
entitled “Track,” he took a series of photographs documenting his interactions with tree stumps (Figure 3). In each photograph, his hand casts a shadow upon the round cross-section of the stump. The photographs display a noticeable disconnect between human and tree; the stump is dead, the handprint is ephemeral, painted only in light, and the photograph is a medium that especially captures the fleeting nature of the interaction. However, the instant is nevertheless an instant of reaching out, of seeking connection. Although the tree and human have not achieved real contact, there is some sense of balance and reconciliation.

Ariuntugs explains the ritual he is enacting through his artwork: “In my work, I try to create a positive balance between the tree stumps that have been butchered by people and myself. I want to remind people that if we do not restore the balance between humans and nature very soon, then one day nature will punish us without mercy” (Ariuntugs, quoted in Batzorig, “From Imagination to Creation” 19).

Ariuntugs sees his work as a deviation from the ways most people interact with nature. For him, the artwork is the interaction, and it represents a healthier mindset about the place human beings have in the natural world. “Most people use mechanic way of contact with nature,” he says. “For example they cut trees to fulfill their material needs. They never think about the result. But artists feel hurt about that. Artists connect with nature with their minds, with our spirituality, and we convert our feelings to art” (Ariuntugs, personal interview).

In her performance work, “Melody of the Three Beauties,” Ganbat Enkhjargal also creates a ritual that reconciles past human crimes against nature
(Figure 4). In her performance, she used shamanistic techniques—the use of a unique ritual costume, song, and meditation—to channel the spirit of the Three Beauties Mountain. Throughout her meditation, she concentrated upon asking “forgiveness and mercy for the misdeeds of mankind” (Kim 82). In this ritual performance, Enkhjargal embodied nature itself, allowing the viewer to recognize the human qualities of the environment. The artist explained, “With this work, I wanted to tell people that nature can be hurt, it can forgive, and it needs to be loved just like us, human beings” (Kim 85).

Whether they are displaying the beauty and bounty of nature in their artwork, exposing environmental challenges, or enacting change through the artistic process itself, Mongolian contemporary artists approach inspiration, realization, and communication in a variety of ways. Each of these artists perceives different relationships between the art and the audience, and also between the artist and the natural world.

Just as the artists conceptualize the role of art in different ways, so do they display a range of definitions of environmentalism. The attitudes of the artists seem to indicate that they value a much more symbiotic relationship with the natural world, paired with a concern for social, cultural, and political issues. The artists and the artwork displayed attitudes about the proper balance of humans with nature that differ slightly from American conceptualizations of ecology and conservation.

“Environment” poses an interesting problem of translation; in the United States this word is used to speak of nature separate from human beings, cities, and
technology. The environment is a series of natural resources and forces that have the power to impact human lives, but stand outside of the realm of human existence.

In contrast, Mongolian artists’ definitions of “Environment” tend to take into consideration all tangible and intangible surroundings of an individual. Furthermore, Mongolian artists speak of the environment and human beings as inseparable; as artist and art historian Batzorig states, “human being and nature and art are the corners of one thing, just existing in three different forms” (Batzorig, personal interview).

This inseparability is demonstrated in Bayart-Od Byambarenchin’s instillation sculpture “Empty Universe” (Figure 5). Bayart-Od used string, stone, wood, and air-filled balloons to visually depict the web of life on the planet, to show the unity of all life forms. Bayart-Od says of his work, “We must understand that while living in this world, we all breathe the same air, feed from one source as we are one whole” (Kim 172). “Empty Universe” looks at first like a tangle of raw material that does not follow any laws of order or reason. However, upon closer inspection, the implicit geometry of the work begins to emerge. The artist’s strings of connection are intricate, yet purposeful. Each supports the balance and stability of the sculpture as a whole, much as a healthy ecosystem depends upon a host of nearly invisible biotic relationships. Bayart-Od’s “Empty Universe” depicts a system that is not in fact empty, but brimming with correlations, tensions, and equilibriums. For him, environment is the whole universe, and everything that binds it together.
Udmaa Uranchimeg brings spirituality into the definition of environment in her work entitled “Living Stone” (Figure 6). In this piece, Udmaa created a stone pathway leading to a ger. A painted Buddha eye gazes up at the viewer from each stone of the path, a reminder of the living spirit in all parts of nature. Stones also dangle from the ropes of the ger, strung with metal wire. This, Udmaa writes, represents the way that nature and tradition are intertwined. She believes that tradition (represented by the ger) informs how Mongolians should practice environmentalism. At the same time, the metal wires represent technological developments that have lead to improper relationships with nature. Only by revisiting tradition and recognizing the “eyes in the stones” can Mongolia regain its unique brand of spiritually infused environmentalism (Kim 134-135).

For these reasons, the environmentalism that Mongolian contemporary artists reflect, expose, and enact may best be compared to the Deep Ecology Movement. This Norwegian initiative began following the philosophical-ecological writing of Arne Naess in 1973. Naess constructed a strategy for environmental protection that depends upon societal value systems. In his essay, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement,” he explains seven characteristics of Deep Ecology that set it apart from traditional ecology. While pollution and resource deprivation are primary concerns in conventional ecology, Deep Ecology is focused upon using an intrinsic and cultivated appreciation of nature to address these problems. He also advocates environmental protection that keeps in mind the needs and values of the underprivileged, and encourages artists and religious leaders to become involved in conservation efforts (Naess 95-100).
In Mongolia, Deep Ecology serves as an excellent lens through which to consider the contemporary art community. This community is engaging with the emotions of the audience, and ultimately seeking to rekindle or inspire Mongolian people’s culturally influenced environmentalism. Naess writes that “ethics of duty may intimately be based on the ethics of fondness, empathy…” (Naess 52). Mongolian artists are using tradition and spirituality to encourage these types of emotions in the public.

Medium deserves special attention when considering contemporary environmental art in Mongolia. One of the Mongolian artists who best represents careful use of materials in his artwork is Togmidshiirev Enkhbold, who works primarily in performance and installation art. For one of his performances, “Mother-Child,” Enkhbold constructed a miniature ger-like frame and sat at the center (Figure 7). Enkhbold describes this work as an analogous comparison between nature and human being, and mother and child. Harbored in his constructed womb-like space, the artist began to visualize the space of the ger as a miniature world, “from the fire hearth, the central point of the ger structure, up to the roof, upper part of the ger as the core point of the world, and the ger as an entire micro world” (Kim 78). For Enkhbold, the ger is a medium through which to access valuable traditional relationships with nature. His art melds contemporary concepts of artistic performance and ritual with ancient symbolism and material culture.

Although he used to work with oil paint, he says that this type of material could never really express his true cultural and artistic identity; it was too far
removed from his nomadic roots and too distant from the natural world where he finds his ancestry and inspiration. Ultimately, he found that material, not subject, was most important in expressing his ideas properly. “Image is insignificant,” he says. “The important thing is context, like the combination of different materials. The natural character of the material should be considered more deeply” (Enkhbold, personal interview). Now, Enkhbold prefers to incorporate livestock materials into his artwork, such as boxes of horse dung. Only once he uses this type of media, which connect him with his ancestor and with the land, does he feel that his artwork can faithfully depict his emotions for the land (Enkhbold, personal interview).

Symbolism, systems of visual language in artwork, is also of vital importance. Symbolism can work on both a cultural level as well as a powerful individual level. Mongolian artists draw upon both of these “languages” to communicate with their audiences. In this way, they can place themselves within an overarching cultural context while simultaneously developing their own systems of expression that speak to the individuality of their own experiences and emotions.

Enkhbold’s “Mother-Child” performance is also deeply symbolic. Because nomadic culture limits material possessions, each object in the ger holds special symbolic importance. Enkhbold views not only life in a ger as meaningful, but also the physical structure and the relationship with the land as symbolically significant. “The everyday work and activity in a ger, forgotten things can be
restored in the modern time, and can become new for people living in the present” (Enkhbold, personal interview).

Batzorig Mart’s symbolism is drawn directly from nature. In order to represent memory in his artwork, he incorporates butterfly forms into his paintings and collages. “Nature itself is like art,” he explains. “The butterfly is the closest thing to art for a human. It’s shape and pattern, and the diversity of all kinds of butterflies seem like art—like abstraction, light, or color—to me….Every butterfly looks like art to me” (Batzorig, personal interview). Although many of Batzorig’s paintings depict urban landscapes full of manufactured road signs, walls, and newspapers, he ultimately returns to nature to represent his memory, his identity, and his origin (Figure 8).

Art and Change: The Future of Art in Mongolia

In considering the role of art in society, it is important to consider not only the intentions of the artist and the significance within the art world, but also the impacts upon the larger community. As Mongolian art becomes more widely accessible to the public, more diverse in style and content, it has an increased importance in all realms of Mongolian life.

In reaction to environmental imbalances, artists are both hoping to portray and enact change through their artwork. In this way, contemporary art is both a way to express real political, social, and environmental issues, and to develop solutions to these problems. Batzorig Mart explains that social or political change in society and change in the artistic community may happen simultaneously, but
move at different paces. “When society is changing gradually,” he says, “art changes sharply and deeply” (Batzorig, personal interview). This deep response to change, this sensitivity to the forces that shape modern society in Mongolia is what makes contemporary art so valuable. Above all, artist Nandin-Erdene says, “the very important thing is people’s reaction or feeling towards the artwork. If they didn’t have any reaction, that would be bad” (Nandin-Erdene, personal interview). In the search for strong reactions, artists are producing art that engages the audience both emotionally and intellectually.

The future of art in Mongolia remains unclear, still to be determined by the creative community that is constantly shifting and resettling. Although the sharpest, most sudden changes in Mongolia took place in 1990 with the transformation to democracy, all six interviewed artists indicated that art is still in a process of transformation. Most indicate positive trends; as collage artist and painter Nandin-Erdene explains, “The capacity of artists is definitely improving. It’s natural that they’re progressing and tackling different issues while employing different techniques” (Kish, “Mongolian Contemporary Art 12).

Many artists feel that currently the artistic community in Mongolia lacks self-reflection or criticism. As new styles, methods, and themes are explored, some artists see a need for communication amongst artists, critics, art historians, and the public. Ariuntugs feels that Mongolian artists exploring contemporary art “are working too individually. [Contemporary art] is developing in Mongolia. But the problem is the artists don’t have some who can evaluate, give suggestion or give critiques” (Ariuntugs, personal interview). NGOs in Mongolia are
supporting the arts financially in Ulaanbaatar, but efforts to increase communication and critique amongst artists are still in their early stages.

One such fledgling initiative is the Time and Space Nomadic Residency Program, which for the past four years has brought together Mongolian and Korean artists to create work inspired by the land. Visual artists, performance artists, poets, and curators travel together through rural Mongolia. During the program, each artist creates a piece inspired by their surroundings, by their position in time and space (Kish “Artistic Adventures” 12). This program unites the artists throughout their creative process, allowing them to give and receive meaningful feedback. “Melody of the Three Beauties,” “Empty Universe,” “Living Stone,” and “Mother-Child” were all created through the Time and Space Nomadic Residency program. These works all display environmental themes with deeply embedded symbolism and close attention to culture (Figures 2,4,5,6,7). Dialogue with a small artistic community allowed the artists to fully develop these ideas, and to create an exhibition that painted a multi-faceted portrait of the land, and of human beings’ relationship with the land.

Unavoidably, the future of Mongolian contemporary art will be increasingly entwined with the processes and effects of globalism. The Time and Space Nomadic Residency engaged artists in a discussion across cultures; similarly, Mongolia 360° Land Art Biennial brings together an even more diverse group of artists to explore land use issue in Mongolia.

Mongolia 360° seeks to address the issues of desertification, depletion of natural sites and wildlife, industrialization, and non-sustainable development in
Morgan 28

Mongolia through international artistic dialogue and collaboration. In what chief curator Rajath Suri describes as Mongolia’s climate of “cultural confidence and renewal,” the artists draw from Mongolia’s nomadic past to create land art that is relevant today (Suri 4). Organized for the first time in 2010, the exhibition will take place again in 2012 with a new group of international artists.

Mongolian artist Batzorig Dugarsuren drew his inspiration from the globally diverse group. In his piece “Man and Nature – Nature and Bazo” (Figure 9) Batzorig asked three primary questions: “What does man consist of? What does nature consist of? What is the relationship between man and nature?” (Suri 20). Batzorig asserts that Mongolia, and Mongolian art in particular, can help the world to answer these questions. In his work, he symbolically digs a hole from Mongolia to the “other side of the globe,” the southern Atlantic Ocean. His instillation piece is constructed of ger framework pieces and doors, as well as mass-produced items. Once more, this is an example of tradition meeting and shaping modernity. As Batzorig explains, “In the past Mongolian rulers conquered half the world. Now it is time that the world to recognize Mongolian art. The aim of my work is too make people familiar with Mongolian customs and culture on a global scale” (Suri 20). Amidst a group of international artists, Batzorig’s “Man and Nature” emphasizes the increased role that Mongolian art can play in an international discussion of art and environmentalism.

As the Mongolian art scene continues to evolve, it may perhaps find a greater role in political and social change. Each change and new direction that artists explore is a risk, an experiment, but ultimately artists in Ulaanbaatar have
confidence that strong and creative artistic ventures will thrive. Batzorig compares contemporary art in Mongolia to “a baby, born and walking. Babies fall and stand while they are trying to walk. Some people think of art as a business…. but I think, if Mongolians are truly passionate about something, they do it very well” (Batzorig, personal interview). Every artist interviewed indicated that the arts community is full of hope for the future. As the political climate becomes ever freer and the international community begins to recognize the unique contributions of Mongolian artists, they feel that the value and quality of Mongolian contemporary art will continue to rise.

As environmentalists look more and more to Deep Ecology for answers to natural imbalances, the value of Mongolian contemporary art will develop as well. By accessing the emotional wells of the public, art has the power to unveil hidden truths about human beings and nature. Science and art balance each other in this regard; as Batzorig writes, “science discovers the constant and fine art discovers the unexpectedness, perhaps the nature of the constant…” (Batzorig, *Joint Exhibition* 18). It is this unexpectedness, this sense of wonder and curiosity that sparks change in society.

Arne Naess recognized the powerful relationship between science and culture 3700 miles from Ulaanbaatar, amidst the mountains and glaciers of Norway. However, his principles are globally relevant. Naess writes of “spontaneous experiences” that are the building blocks of human existence. Each moment is inseparable from individual history, from past experience and association, from deeply instilled cultural expectations and values. For this
reason, how an individual responds and acts toward nature is indescribable through the tools that science alone has to offer. Although the arts and philosophy offer imprecise, unquantifiable information, they are just as vital to helping humans understand their position in the universe and determining how to respond to their experiences. “Spontaneous experiences, experiences that you are confronted with every moment,” writes Naess, “have as near a relation to reality as you can have in mathematical physics” (quoted in Jickling 53).

Conclusion

Environmental writer Jesse Wolf Hardin writes, “One never really manufactures either adventure or art. We are confronted by it, consumed by it... and remade within it. It always has a purpose, one beyond the range of the artist's intentions, and it is willingly given away” (Hardin 3). Contemporary art in Mongolia is a communication of emotion, a call to action, and a way to access past traditions and wisdom. It is a product of the artist’s intentions, and a product of the viewer’s perceptions. As artist Enkhbold summarizes: “man develops art, and art develops man” (Kristoffersson). As Mongolia shifts and adapts through global interaction and increased political freedom, art is shifting as well. Artwork reflects changes in society, but it also seeks to cause them.

Science and art are working jointly to search for new ways to relate to nature and to determine humanity’s position within nature. Mongolian art may be a small part of this endeavor, but it is a tradition born of nomadism, and has unique perspectives to offer to the world. Mongolian poet L. Khasar writes, “In
this chaotic life/ Only the butterfly could find/ ordered pattern” (Batzorig *Joint Exhibition* 17). Memory and innovation, science and art, are uniting in contemporary Mongolian art, creating order in the midst of rapid change. Even as the grass on the steppes grows shorter and the air in the city thickens with smog, art is bringing hope to a young generation of Mongolians. Environmental art is helping Mongolia to remember the value of the land, and to ignite passion for a sustainable future.
Glossary

**Contemporary Art**  In Mongolia, art produced in the post-1990 environment of free expression and creativity.

**Context**  As defined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, all circumstances surrounding the creation of a “mark”—of literature, visual art, or other forms of communication.

**Deep Ecology**  An environmental movement concerned with the social and cultural implications of the relationship between humans and the environment.

**Environmental Art**  Art that expresses the artist’s relationship with the natural world, whether defined by the artist or perceived by the viewer.

**Ger**  A round, felt-covered home used primarily by nomadic herders in Mongolia.
Appendix

Figure 1.
Monkhor Erdenebajar
*Life Book on the Dead Tree*
Figure 2.
Odgerel Tsulbaatar
*Gate of Life*
Figure 3.
Ariuntugs Tserenpil
Track
Contemporary Art: From Imagination to Creation, ed. Batzorig Mart.
Figure 4.
Ganbat Enkhjargal
*Melody of the Three Beauties*
Figure 5.
Bayart-Od Byambarenchi
Empty Universe
Figure 6.
Udmaa Uranchimeg
Living Stone
Figure 7.
Togmidshiirev Enkhbold
*Mother-Child*
Figure 8.
Batzorig Mart
*Chaos and Butterfly*
*Joint Exhibition*, ed. Batzorig Mart, Ulaanbaatar: Union of Mongolian Artists
Figure 9.
Batzorig Dugarsuren
*Man and Nature – Nature and Bazo*
Works Cited

Ariuntugs, Tserenpil. Personal Interview. 8 November, 2011.


Batzorig, Mart. Personal Interview. 6 November, 2011.

Batzorig, Mart. Tarkhin Dakh Utaa. Exhibition catalog, Tarkhin Dakh Utaa.


Enkhbold, Togmidshiirev. Personal Interview. 5 November, 2011.


Nandin-Erdene, Budzagd. Personal interview. 7 November, 2011.

Natsagasuren, Mangalam. Personal interview. 18 November, 2011.


Soyolmaa, Davaakhuu. Personal interview. 6 November, 2011.


Tsolomonbat, Enkhbat. Personal interview. 6 November, 2011.

