

Touch The Blue Sky



The story of Land Art Mongolia began when a large festival, planned for Ulaanbaatar, central square but his backers suggested that he should realize it anyway. The rest is artistic imagination in a complete with monitors and controls. Running between August from around the world. Here everyone had the chance to relax, clear their heads, and recent third edition of Land Art Mongolia where you can touch the blue sky and walk

*was canceled. Marc Schmitz had received funding for a monumental public work on the history. Today biennials are a normal experience: integrated transnational nomadism, 3 and 14, 2014, the third Land Art Mongolia featured the works of the 24 participants create with the help of peers. Here **Brian Holmes** takes us on a personal tour of the the green earth of a natural museum.*

The soil of the steppe is a light ochre yellow, soft, friable, almost powdery in your hand. Although this is the rainy season still the ground is parched, without any trace of what I could perceive as moisture. The prairie grasses have woven the tiny alluvial particles into a dense mat, like earthen felt, interlaced with fine invisible roots to a depth of around four inches, perhaps more in some places. The tip of the iron crowbar that I found in the marketplace cuts through this grassy carpet like a dull knife, requiring several blows. I work the bar back and forth, pulling up clumps of soil that burst free of the roots and spill in ochre rivulets on the green carpet. Then I hurl the bar once again into that small hole: it strikes the rock with a loud clang.

My companion, Claire Pentecost, and I came here to the Orkhon Valley as part of *Land Art Mongolia 360°*. Claire's idea was to dig a hole, around three and half feet deep, such that a person sitting in it would see a horizon bifurcated into the conventional landscape, above, and the structure of the soil, below. You would see the nutritive part of the land, the rhizosphere, the deep roots of aboveground existence. But what became obvious as we ventured out of our *ger* is that on the valley floor, such soil as has gained a foothold is draped lightly over a tremendous lava flow. What

we encountered were not deep alluvions accumulated over centuries, but immense basaltic bones of the earth. Not the rich humus of a primeval prairie, but a rock of ages barely covered by the pastures of nomadic herds. Endless green vistas open up all around us: the plains roll away into distant hills and far-off peaks. Everywhere in our immediate environment the grassy carpet is stippled with dark black boulders, half covered in gray-white lichen. We won't be digging here. Or maybe not in the way we expected.

We walk along the edge of the cliff, through delicate biomes composed of grasses, succulent plants, and olive-green shrubs close to the ground, plus occasional taller weeds whose urticating hairs will sting you with a vengeance. In a pool of bright green pasturage we come across a few white puffballs, testimony to recent rain. The traces of livestock are everywhere. Marmot-like rodents run through the jumbled stones. A small tree with dark green foliage grows directly from a rocky face: its trunk climbs upward at 90 degrees; its leaves are spangled with crimson berries. At its base, in a pile of small stones, were a number of 10 *tögrög* [Mongolian currency] notes offering to the spirit of the place. I thought, slipping another note between the stones. [The artists' own ideas of the spirit of the place were diverse]. Zigor wants to paint a horse blue. Hermione has a map

to find a nomad family. Andra is wearing a bone in her hair. Chris is at work on some elaborate equine performance, with poles, pails, and a traditional violin. They're mostly young artists, with wild dreams. Last night when the bus got a flat, just before our arrival, I walked through chill wind to a point where nothing man-made could be seen: open land hundreds of miles. Now, after the morning on the green carpet with the clanging rocks, Claire and I feel that distance opening up in ourselves: a ray of sunlight on a blade of grass is an invitation to experiment.

This morning we hiked beyond the tree line. From the valley floor, the rivulets that drain the hillsides look like zigzags etched faintly into green. We strike out from the camp across the road, watching a solitary man on horseback ford the river. High above, on the right-hand side of the mountain slope, one can glimpse a brown, white, and black jumble of grazing goats and sheep. The grass is uniformly clipped at a height of about two inches. There's an extraordinary smoothness to such a space, both for the eye and the human hoof. As you move closer, those rivulets turn out to be steep canyons lined with tumbling stones. We climb higher to avoid the deep ravine; and suddenly the flock is just above us. And now here are foot-high clumps of wiry grass, along with aromatic plants, flowers on the stem, butterflies and blue-ball thistles.

Claire and I have hit on an attitude: the Naturalist Without a Book (and even better, without the Internet.) We will look at the life around us, touch it, smell it, and try to get to know it without the reassurance of a genus, a family, or a species. Cameras might replace pencils; but for once, they won't replace perception. Life everywhere: a giant beetle, rusty-orange lichen favors flat rocks exposed like solar panels, facing due west; mottled yellow and green grasshoppers but with red underbellies. The grasses have now changed entirely: thick, diverse, overflowing and crowned with seeds. No animals grazing here, these must be the winter pastures. Now the ravine we've been skirting is a shallow crease on the hillside, deep wet green, without pools. We cross, reveling in bright fronds.

It is hot; the flies buzz at our ears. We rest on roots, looking down into the Orkhon Valley where the glittering river disappears, then emerges once again from the dark basaltic lava flows. Small clusters of white *ger*—nomads' homes—are dispersed at five or ten-mile intervals, always where the grass grows brighter along the banks. The nomad lives within felt walls, eats milk products, slaughters meat and wild game, drinks *airak* (fermented mare's milk), rides horses, and listens when sing. Mounted and armed with a powerful bow, he moves fluidly through a sustaining sea of grass, using coded gestures to communicate far beyond the reach of voices lost on the wind. Genghis Khan's powers sprang from the steppe. He transformed his people, effecting basic changes in society's traditional patterns.

Nomads always run the risk of becoming sedentary; as any visit to Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, proves.



Batkholboo Dugarsuren, Past, Present Future, 2014, on-site installation, furniture, ger material, engine.

Nomadism looks great; but we are closer to the ancient Mongol empire than we think. I place one foot after another, remembering [the freedom of childhood] days in the 1960s. Now we're on the high ridge: the land that no one owns stretches out before us. You see the wooded valleys where nomads, within felt walls cinched tight against the cold, winter with their herds. Hours have passed: now we head back to our own *ger* camp on the black lava flows.

The works of *Land Art Mongolia* emerge slowly: colors, forms, feelings, and gestures, in the landscape. Over the next few days a whole parade of dreams will be fulfilled. Zigor Barayazarra, for example, has painted eight horses blue

on green, each tethered in a line, otherworldly. I am fascinated by Batkholboo Dugarsuren's pieces, laid out on a circular patch left behind by a vanished *ger*. It's the raw materials of inhabitation, in the shape of a monumental horse: bed, felt, poles, canvas, rugs, stools, cupboards, saddle—plus the disassembled parts of a two-cylinder motorcycle engine, arrayed on a brightly painted table. Here the nomad's mobility is at a standstill. Further down the river is Dulguun Baatarsukh's spiral of white bones circles around a sharp basalt rock; a line of small stones connects the spiral to a standing slab, on which a double tunic is hung, sleeves outstretched: half is shredded blue fabric; the other is simple unadorned burlap. Life is like the clothes we wear, Dulguun tells me, bright orange fingernails flashing in the sun: death is the change of one garment for another.

But what can be done with a biennial? *Land Art Mongolia* is young, not fully defined, and a bit wild. The story began when a large festival, planned for Ulaanbaatar, was canceled. Marc Schmitz had received funding for a monumental public work on the central square, and his backers suggested that he should realize it anyway. What has emerged from the visions of Marc and his wife, Dolgor Ser-Od, is a "walking museum" taking artists to remote sites in the Gobi Desert, for the first two editions, and now to the Orkhon Valley. Performances and cultural exchanges are mixed with earthworks, pictorial experiments, and contextual installations. The aim is to renew the classic forms of Land Art, launched with monumental gestures by Americans in the 1960s. Yet there is something more than this explicit aim. Between the lines, you can read a strong desire to push beyond



Above: Chris Bierl, W.T. (12 Tied Horses), 2014, 12 horses, 12 poles, 12 buckets, water, rope, horsehead fiddle, musicians. **Previous pages: Kinez Riza, Anthroposcenes, 2014**, on-site installation, prints, wood, video (approx. 5 minutes).



Marc Schmitz, Shelter Café "Ulziit Nuur", 2014, membranes, wood, black salt from Ulziit Nuur. Dedicated to Friedrich Nietzsche's hugging the horse.



Dulguun Baatarsukh, *Infinity*, 2014, on-site installation, animal skull and bones, textiles, stones, grass.

the limits of what Friedrich Schiller long ago called “the aesthetic state.” Today biennials are a normal experience: integrated transnational nomadism, artistic imagination in a complete with monitors and controls.

With this *Land Art Mongolia* I feel a different style. You bus over unpaved roads, sleep in a *ger*, and share mare’s milk and vodka with the local people. It’s not about being a survivalist or going native: there are no A-list art stars; no special budgets or hidden hierarchies, no contract, waiver or disclaimer, and no insurance. There’s no audience, not while you’re out on the steppe. What you have is a chance to relax, to clear your head, and to create something with the help of peers. Long friendships can spring from these short meetings.

This year’s [2014] experiment is about humans and animals, in a country where the latter are more numerous than the former. How to move between instinctive sensibility and conscious reflection? What do nomads without property understand about the myriad creatures of the earth, whom city-dwellers have almost completely forgotten? The fourth edition, in two years, will really take the plunge: artists and shamans: how to translate the healing magic that flows right out of human fingertips? We are barely able to ask such questions, yet they are exactly what is needed. My mind drifts back to Dulguun’s two fabrics, flowing into the cosmic spiral of white bones. How do we change the garments we were born with?

Classic Land Art works were monumental, like the enormous horseman traced in white stones on the mountain by



Badam Dashdondog, *Ail Ger Boli Toglokh (Playing House)*, 2014, on-site installation, stones, acrylic paint.

the nomad community—or like Ganzug Sedbazar’s audacious bid to string canvas covers of *gers* in a giant curtain across the deep basalt canyon of the Orkhon River. Such works offer an experience of immediate transcendence, when an ordinary object expands beyond ordinary human measure. Today, the infrastructure projects of late capitalism challenge our imaginations with further ruptures of scale. We are faced with what Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects,” whose complex immensity inevitably eludes you, even as it presses in on your most intimate existence. China, for instance, is now setting up a global transportation network, or “New Silk Road,” in its bid to become the economic pivot of the 21st century. The construction of a high-speed link to Tibet foreshadowed a more significant

economic project: the railroad from Xi’an, running across the steppe of Kazakhstan to Germany and Belgium. China’s railway ministry has announced its intent to collaborate with Russia on a high-speed link running through Ulaanbaatar and Moscow, then across the Bering Strait to North America. The global infrastructure projects championed by the sinister American Marxist Lyndon LaRouche now stand a chance of being built by the inheritors of really existing Communism, whose industrial logic has proven far more unstoppable than socialist ideology.

These kinds of infrastructure projects represent not just a continuation, but an *amplification* of the trends that constitute the Anthropocene—that is, the era when human technology reshapes the earth, releasing countless tons of carbon and endless joules of heat in the process. The hyperobjects press inward, toward the cellular level of existence. That was already clear in the late 1960s, after Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, when the environmental movements first took hold. The idea that the most crucial of all battles could be fought with unequal arms—dispersal against concentration—began emerging then.

Land Art is compelling. We had not quite seen everything that first day. As luck would have it a few thousand years of surging river floods had brought an accumulation of silts to that magical spot with the crimson-berried tree. Claire chose a place on the slope where the grassy bank fell off for about a foot, along a curve that already made it look like a natural amphitheater. Gazing upward you could see the nearest mountain peak, with the monumental horseman drawn on its flank in white stones.



Ganzug Sedbazar, *Water Flows, Wind Blows*, 2014, on-site installation, rope and ger textiles.

We dug a half circle, swinging the pick, working the spade, then installed a cushion of soil in an elongated bag used for the construction of earthen dwellings. Sit down, it says: an invitation to a change of perspective. When you descend into the hole, you are enclosed within a circle of roots. On your horizon line is the green, grass carpet, ascending through the field of boulders to the distant mountain peak. Each blade of grass is a gateway to the universe. Laughing and sweating, we cut turf for the floor, where the goats would come to sniff and to dig. The animistic spot itself had shown this pathway.

In the evenings, I spent some time talking with the artist Francesco Bertelé about his permaculture garden in a village in the mountains above Lake Cuomo. He is experimenting with the use of artificial ponds that rebalance the solar heat (cooler in the daytime, warmer at night.) The insect pests are attracted to the water, where tiny fish eat them. He mainly works with seed bombs in the spring, to germinate plants that complement each other and crowd out the weeds. The neighbors see the results and complain about the mess—it's something they don't understand, an unknown world. But when they tasted the tomatoes, they were interested, starting a little



Claire Pentecost, **New Horizon**, 2014, soil, grass, Cal-Earth bag.

movement in the village. These kinds of changes are much bigger than we can imagine, Francesco maintains. Artists and would-be-nomadic warriors, take note, and please, don't get too delirious.

I look out at the river, at the horses on the banks, at the clouds striding over the mountains. I listen to the insects and the birds; feel the sun and the wind on my skin. I remember the interior of a tra-

ditional *ger*; and the voice of a nomad singing. These are the worst and the best of times to be alive, for sure. Δ

Brian Holmes is an art and cultural critic living in Chicago after many years in Paris. His books include Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering and Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society.



Francesco Bertelé, **Badarchin (The Hermit)**, 2014, performance (felt, thread, rope).