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Making it work: Supporting contemporary artists in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Michael Curran
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Making it work: Supporting contemporary artists in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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Geography

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ABSTRACT

Following the country's political transition to democracy in the 1990s, a generation of Mongolian artists constructed an art movement rooted in the issues of the new society: transitional national identity, corrupt political and economic systems, and a growingly complex relationship with nature. The liberalization of the economy, however, hasn't nurtured sustainable creative resources or helped artists reach domestic or international markets, pressuring them to find alternative ways to create livelihoods out of their craft. This study considers how emerging multidisciplinary artists sustain themselves through both formal and informal means, and the motivations behind their creative lifestyles.

Central to the study are the following questions: How do emerging artists "make it work" in the transitional economy? How are contemporary artists received in Ulaanbaatar (the nation's capital)? What are the barriers keeping Mongolian artists from gaining greater public recognition? The study involves 21 participants, including 15 working artists and three curators working in Ulaanbaatar, and three artists who've left Mongolia for Europe. They participated in open-ended interviews surrounding their motivations, and perceived support and barriers on a number of dimensions ranging from the government's contributions to access to studio space to public perception of contemporary art. The artists work in mixed fields of contemporary art including painting, sculpture, video, and mixed media, and more conceptual forms including installation, performance, and land art.

The study's findings suggest that there are many intersections between the conditions of working artists in Ulaanbaatar and those in more emerged scenes in Europe and the United States given kindred conversations surrounding the demand for space, struggles to stay afloat financially, a lack of validation, and reliance on informal communities for sustenance. The struggle of working artists may be universal, but the conditions in Ulaanbaatar are very particular and require a nuanced look given the country's recent emergence from seven decades under strict socialist rule, and the tensions of Ulaanbaatar's shifting cultural and political landscape.

This study is critical for two reasons: (1) Because many emerging contemporary artists work at the vanguard of culture, we can better understand an alternative view of the rapidly-changing city by speaking with those on the margins; and (2) By including artists from the post-colonial world [or post-socialist, in this case] in the popular canon of art history, we can assemble a deeper understanding of art's historical narrative outside of established, Whitewashed art institutions.

Keywords: Contemporary art, artist support structures, working artist.

KEY TERMS

Contemporary art: Art made in the present day that responds to multifaceted global trends through an endless number of mediums. Contemporary art is more about engagement with the audience than aesthetic quality. Contemporary artists pull from an infinite amount of materials and styles to communicate, making it impossible to objectively define.

Curator: Traditionally, those who are employed by galleries to arrange exhibitions and interpret works. Recently, though, there's been a surge of freelance curators who arrange exhibitions in a variety of spaces and ways. Many artists must also be their own curators.

Emerging artist: An artist who has yet to achieve commercial success or large-scale recognition, and therefore has little access to markets or exposure. Emerging artists can often be considered those who are most experimental or conceptual in their field.

Residency: Programs that invite artists, curators, and a range of other creative people to create in a new environment away from their obligations by providing them with studio and exhibition space, and oftentimes other material and financial resources. The purpose is to provide the artist with time to reflect, produce, research, and present free of distraction.

Creative resources: Resources that allow working artists to put their art out in the public on their own terms, without struggling to make ends meet. These resources are broadly defined and include opportunities for funding, access to venues, a culture that does not discriminate, and strong networks of creators, funders, and publics.

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LITERATURE REVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art and contemporary artists

Contemporary art refers to work made by artists today. As defined by the non-profit ART21 (2016), it's generally globally influenced, diverse in material and concept, and responds to shifting cultural landscapes of values and identities. Rather than being structured around a major “-ism” — like realism or surrealism — or certain ideologies as many art movements have in the past, contemporary art is centered around the public's' engagement with the works. The public, then, can pull a variety of meanings from a single piece. This is one reason why context and creative resources are critical for understanding: meaning is constructed based on the context of both the public and the artist, and, if the public isn't actively engaged in the arts and there's no critical discourse surrounding the arts, then contemporary art will have a limited audience and miss its mark.

Artists come in many forms. In addition to their individual practices, artists are teachers and organizers; they work in community building, civic leadership, urban revitalization, economic development, youth development, and other important spheres of free societies. For the purpose of this paper, and informed by Rosario's et. al.'s (2006) definition, artists are defined as adults who (1) have received training in a certain artistic discipline, (2) identify themselves — at least part-time — professionally as artists, and (3) intend to derive at least part of their income from their practice. The focus in this current study is on artists working in the visual arts, including painting, sculpture, video, and mixed media, and with more conceptual forms including installation, performance, and land art. In this study, they may also be referred to as “arts workers”, to recognize the fact that artists *work*.

Research on artist support structures.

Most research related to contemporary arts has analyzed the funding of arts organizations and nonprofits (Americans for the Arts, 2003), contemporary art as a tool for urban revitalization (Frost-Kumpf, H., 1998; Stern, M., 1997), or macro trends in its markets and consumption (Prendergast, 2014; Velthuis, O., 2005). In these studies, understandings of organizations and trends are prioritized over individuals, and the artwork is treated as the final product, disconnected from the site of production: the artist.

One of the first significant understandings of the conditions of working artists came through the Urban Institute's study from Rosario et al (2006), titled *Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for U.S. Artists*. The study looked at creative resources

beyond well-known funding structures to provide a more nuanced understanding of the resources artists rely on. It gathered data via direct conversations with artists to “illuminate the multiple ways artists work, the range of places in which they operate, and the various supports — financial and otherwise — on which they depend” (Rosario et al, 2006, p. 4).

In their research, Rosario et al (2006) propose a framework of six interrelated dimensions that determine an artist’s support system, including: (1) validation and the ascription of value to arts work; (2) demand for art and healthy markets for financial compensation; (3) access to physical resources like grants, space, health insurance, and materials; (4) opportunities for training and professional development; (5) inward and outward connections with other artists, businesses, and communities; and (6) accessible data and information both about and for artists. The study laid out a set of next steps to improve artist support structures, focusing on fostering better understandings of artists’ realities. It used geography — or place — as the critical context where all of these elements interact, recognizing arts production as an inherent piece of the larger society.

One issue with the aforementioned studies is that they are all focused in the United States. But no matter where their practice is, it’s difficult to make a living as an artist. Menger (2006) finds that long-term employment in the arts has been gradually replaced with short-term hirings where financial risk is taken on by the artist themselves instead of the employers, forcing artists to diversify their portfolios, learn to navigate risk, seek multiple jobs, and possibly forego important benefits such as health insurance. Fewer creative resources and transition to piecemeal work have meant that artists must constantly adapt to working within the restraints of the economy. Thorsby and Zednik (2011) suggest that one of those adaptations is an artist’s ability to “exploit [employment opportunities] by applying their creative skills in industries far removed from the arts” (Thorsby and Zednik p. 10). That could look like filmmakers shooting commercials, painters working in graphic design, or sculptors teaching in universities.

Along with employment mobility, arts workers also have significant geographic mobility. Markusen (2006) writes that the creative class a distinctively mobile demographic, and that the number of arts workers in a city is, at least in part, dependent on the artist-support structures available in that city. The healthier the creative ecosystem, the more working artists.

Artists working in post-colonial or post-socialist countries face different barriers than their contemporaries in places like the United States and Western Europe — areas that have dominated a highly-Westernized canon of art history. There may be representations of ancient and indigenous art at elite institutions and museums, but there’s been little effort

to curate work that reflects subject matter of the developing world in a living, breathing way. This institutional rejection has been led by curators and critics alike, and is echoed by former Venice Biennale director Germano Celant, who Hassan and Oguibe (2001) criticized for regarding African artists without a place in narratives surrounding contemporary art, despite the global influence of their diaspora. According to Fisher (2009), in a 1989 retrospective on the African and Asian diaspora's effect on British art, critic Brian Sewell called the works "third-rate imitations of the white man's cliché," (Fisher, 2009, pg. 1). Artists deemed as "the other" according to popular art history must defy established institutions that regularly erase their work.

Mongolia's underinvestment in the arts is indicative of postcolonial or post-socialist nations that are strapped for funds (though of course it's not an attitude reserved exclusively for those geographies). In the case of Ulaanbaatar, it might be difficult to propose supporting emerging artists when residents in the city's ger district lack basic infrastructure. Basualdo (2003) discussed the idea that the World Bank might not actually allow the governing bodies of developing nations the necessary financial backing to support artistic initiatives.

In the development priorities of these nations, artists are often left out of the picture. This is a pressing concern considering artists' need for space. Rosario et al (2006) found that artists need multiple spaces to support their practices: affordable housing as well as an affordable and accessible area for work, and third places where they can both show their work and gather for critique and discussion are all necessary. Furthermore, Rosario et al (2006) note that there's often an information gap between artists' concerns and policy decisions, as "artists don't feature prominently, or at all, in most policy realms" (Rosario et al, 2006, 79).

Alongside underinvestment in the arts sector, post-colonial and post-socialist nations often have underdeveloped art markets. Prendergast (2014) builds a model of how markets for contemporary art function, and writes that the reputation of the gallery representing the artist may dictate the value. "Gallery brand names derive from a highly organized hierarchical system where their position in that hierarchy attracts collectors," (Prendergast, 2014, 1). However, in developing arts scenes, such a hierarchy is usually nonexistent.

Even within healthy creative economies and geographies that are generally supportive of the arts, resources aren't typically distributed equally. In the United States, as part of the *Minneapolis Creative Index*, artists were surveyed to understand what resources are necessary for arts workers to move their careers forward. Kayim et al (2015)

found dramatic differences around employment and income based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, showing that opportunities to access creative resources — even when they are in ready-supply — aren't created equally.

Contemporary art and creative resources in Mongolia.

Contemporary Mongolian artists have faced unique challenges because of their geographic isolation, cultural and political history, and developing economy. Most pertinent are the seventy years of strict socialist rule the country endured, where art's subject matter was reduced to officially sanctioned socialist realism, writes Munkhuu (2014).

Although artists working during Mongolia's seven decades of socialism faced limited artistic freedoms and heavy censorship, they did have significant resources relative to today. According to Munkhuu (2014), artists made up some of the strongest unions, art institutions and universities were established across the country, the government fully subsidized the gap between earned revenue and costs for arts organizations, and artist exchanges with other socialist nations — particularly Russia and the former Czechoslovakia — made up more than 60% of foreign relations by the 1980s.

In contrast to today, Smith (2016) found that some artists she spoke with in Ulaanbaatar have to ration their food budget just pay for paint. Munkhuu (2014) writes that there are no tax incentives for business or individuals to invest in the arts, philanthropic culture in Mongolia is scarce, and the government's strict control of budgets has left organizations with few options or the necessary cash flow to make investments on big projects. As of 2014, the state's monthly stipend for artists and staff of state run arts organizations ranged from 250,000 to 300,000 MNT, the equivalent of 200 to 300 USD (a high of 3,600 USD each year). That higher end hovers right around the 2013 GDP per capita of 4,050 USD.

The Mongolian government shows little indication that it will support Mongolia's emerging class of contemporary artists any time soon. Upon reviewing Ulaanbaatar's Master Plan for 2020, the city wants to build up the cultural sector by promoting the traditional fine arts that tourists are drawn towards. The plan measures creative capacity in terms of seats and square meters at fine art institutions like opera houses, museums, cinemas, and the cultural palace. There's no mention of small venues, galleries that lean towards the intellectual instead of the commercial, or methods to support the huge number of young folks who are actively creating in the city.

Arts workers in Ulaanbaatar are acutely aware of the demand for space that Rosario et al (2006) discuss. Half of the country now lives in the capital city. That figure is

only growing, and conflicts over space are happening concurrently. The supply of affordable, adequate studio space in Ulaanbaatar is quite fragile, forcing artists to work in a way marked by perpetual displacement.

On the international market, Smith (2016) finds similar attitudes towards Mongolian art that Fisher (2009) and Hassan and Oguibe (2001) discuss in their studies related to the other-ization of art made by diasporic artists and those working in post-colonial countries. Smith writes that Mongolian art that lacks a critical perspective and instead promotes a simple understanding of a historical, nomadic identity fares better in international and domestic markets than art with more critical perspectives. The consequence of this, she writes, is that Mongolian artists may revert to representations of themselves from the past, not from the future.

It's especially difficult for Mongolian artists working with new ideas or imported concepts to gain conventional forms of validation like media exposure, funding, and public engagement because of this "cultural branding," as Smith (2016) refers to it. Contemporary art produced in Ulaanbaatar, then, might be misinterpreted as folk art. This image may limit Mongolian artists despite the fact that most produce in the city. This could be one of the reasons for what Smith (2016) proposes is a lack of critical discourse surrounding contemporary art in Mongolia that has also prevented open critique, an important form of validation; Mongolian contemporary art isn't properly understood within the country or abroad.

The Present Study

Past studies on contemporary art have primarily focused on individual artwork and the impact of art in Western contexts. This research changes that emphasis, pulling back the lens to focus on the non-Western artist as the catalyst. Because nearly all research on artist support structures and the contemporary arts in general are set in North America, Europe, or Australia, scholarship in non-Western contexts must be expanded to understand the local challenges of artists in the post-colonial and post-socialist spheres.

At the center of this study is the idea of equity: when we listen to stories from places we are unfamiliar with, whose voices do we listen to? Because contemporary artists typically work on the margins of the economy, and create around the themes of globalization, changing identities, and shifting cultural and political landscapes, their work can be seen as alternatives to popular narratives around development.

Along similar lines, the equitable distribution of creative resources may seem like less of a problem in Mongolia than in the heterogenous United States, for example, as

81.9% of Mongolia's population are Khalkha Mongols. But disparities are perpetuated based on other conditions, including gender identity, established versus emerging status, and new media versus more traditional practices. While this paper won't comprehensively delve into disparity, these conditions are weaved into the study and will be exposed when relevant.

In doing so, the proposed study — like that of Rosario et al (2006) that came before it — uses the idea of place as its critical context. Ulaanbaatar has its own specific built environment, unique economic and social circumstances, and policies that affect how artists live and work. This study — both explicitly and implicitly — revolves around those conditions.

This paper also incorporates geography through its understanding of the diaspora of Mongolian artists. It considers the factors that lead contemporary Mongolian artists to take their practices to Berlin, Paris, New York, and beyond. Place and art production are intimately intertwined — this paper analyzes that relationship.

METHODS

Setting

17 of the 21 interviews (81 percent) were conducted in Ulaanbaatar, as the city hosts an emerging arts scene and the majority of working artists, curators, studios, exhibition spaces, and creative resources in the country. The remaining interviews were conducted via the phone or electronic mail with artists living in Berlin, Germany; Düsseldorf, Germany; Paris, France; and Seoul, South Korea.

Participants

21 individuals were interviewed in total. All participants were Mongolian, and currently live or have lived in Ulaanbaatar. 18 participants were artists who received training in a certain artistic discipline, self-identify professionally as artists, and derive at least part of their income from their practice. Additionally, three curators were interviewed to provide a vantage point geared more towards exhibitions, venues, histories, and resources on a larger scale. Two of the three curators also work for an arts organization as administrators, and one recently left his job at the Ministry of Culture. Individuals involved in the media or government, intellectuals and art historians, or current art students could have also been interviewed, but the study's aim is to understand resources from the creators' points of view.

Of the 21 interviews, 10 Of the 18 artists, 8 self-identified as women and 10 as men; two curators identified as women, and one as a man. Because all artists were cisgendered, they will be referred to as "male" or "female", though those are biological sexes and not gender orientations. The age range ran from 24 to 57, and the average age was around 35 years old. The intention with the big range of ages was to (1) ensure that artists at different stages of their careers could be heard from and put in conversation with one another, and (2) so that older artists could provide more historical context to the current movement.

Procedures

Initial conversations were held with artists and curators to determine the direction of the research in October, 2016. Formal interviews were conducted between November 10th and December 1st, 2016, two-thirds of which were held during weekdays in the early- to late-afternoon, and one-third on weekends around mid-day.

I used a snowball (or referral) sampling method, where existing participants would recommend future participants. This technique was used to reflect the connectedness of

the arts community in Ulaanbaatar. Proper consent — both verbal and written — was given at the beginning of all interviews.

The School for International Training's Local Review Board oversaw the current research. In accordance with confidentiality rules, all participants' names have been changed. Interviews were fully transcribed and coded, and kept on a password-protected application.

16 out of 21 interviews were conducted in-person, one interview was conducted over Skype, and four over electronic mail. The average oral interview lasted for about an hour and 15 minutes, and no follow-up interviews were scheduled.

17 out of 21 interviews were conducted with a translator. The other four were conducted in English. The artist was able to choose the language. They also chose the location of the interview — locations included artists' homes, studios, galleries, and local cafes.

RESULTS

To understand the nuanced realities of the working artist, conversations touched on a number of themes, from understanding their approaches and forms, to their financial realities, to the networks that can either lift them up or hold them down. Through the 21 interviews, eight major dynamics emerged, and are defined in the following ways:

- (1) **Defining contemporary Mongolian art:** Understandings of contemporary Mongolian art by the artists themselves;
- (2) **Making a living:** The tensions of making it work financially as an artist and approaches artists take to sustain their craft;
- (3) **Material supports:** Access to physical and financial resources, including the availability of space, access to exhibitions, grant opportunities, awards and residencies, and materials and equipment;
- (4) **Communities and networks:** The connections — both informal and formal, and inwards and outwards — that artists depend upon to access support and creative resources;
- (5) **Markets:** The mechanisms that determine arts' worth and artists' abilities to access these mechanisms;
- (6) **Education:** Artists' development of their conceptual practices and the state of Mongolian arts education;
- (7) **Validation:** The valuation of artists in society, both monetarily and intangibly; and
- (8) **Diaspora of Mongolian artists:** The flows of artists in and out of Ulaanbaatar, artists' relations to Western scenes, and reasons to remain practicing in Mongolia.

The results section is laid out in that order, one through eight. Before the breakdown of each dynamic is a figure that shows how many arts workers were concerned with that particular dynamic, followed by more in-depth narratives from the participants themselves. While the first four dynamics are those most closely related to the study's focus, the last four dynamics will also be discussed to round out the picture of artists' realities and to understand how we got here.

DEFINING CONTEMPORARY MONGOLIAN ART

Arts workers living in Ulaanbaatar have a distinctive, intimate perspective on contemporary art compared to the historians and critics that often try to define its

significance. This section intends to decentralize that conversation by privileging the artist's perspective, and is divided into three parts: (1) A history of Mongolian art and an understanding of where we are now; (2) The question of what exactly Mongolian art is, and how it speaks to national and global truths; (3) How creative resources have helped determine the style and material culture of Mongolian contemporary art.

A brief history of Mongolian contemporary art, as defined by the artist

Historically, artists have been some of the country's greatest intellectuals. That's true of contemporary artists, too. "Artists are democrats first — they initiate the terms of democracy," says Gerel, a 40-year old female curator. "[During the transition] they were helping democrats to have meetings in their studios and they had a big role in writing slogans and starting the strikes."

The post-transition movement of contemporary art — as with the rest of society — underwent serious growing pains in its initial years. "When the system changed in the 1990s, everything was chaotic and nobody had time to pay attention to art," says Bolormaa, a female artist and the oldest of the group at 57. "We didn't have food or anything in the shops. Back in the '90s, we would need money or the kids would go hungry. I would be in a real hurry to sell paintings, even if someone wanted to buy it for really cheap. Even for 10 USD — I would cry, but I would sell it."

Bat-Erdene, a 48-year old male artist who was active during the socialist period, says this sort of chaos was felt throughout society. "After the Soviet era ended, there was a big search for identity. People looked to many places to make sense of the world. A lot of people became shamans. My way to discover things was through art." Artists remain at the forefront of that continued re-articulation of national identity.

So what stage is Mongolian contemporary art at right now? Odtsetseg, the 34-year old female artist, thinks it's in transition. "Maybe 70 to 80 percent of working artists right now were educated during the socialist period. They're also the ones teaching," she says with some concern. "Until the next generation replaces that generation, contemporary art will face many challenges."

Because of these remnants of the old system, Naranbaatar, a 30-year old male artist, believes artists are "just scratching the surface," citing that artists as a whole haven't successfully communicated what the new Mongolia is. "Japan has shown what it's about — artists have shown their inner selves. When Western influences came to Japan, these creative people soaked it up and created a new awareness, showing the world what it means to be Japanese. I'm hoping Mongolia will have a similar process."

What is Mongolian contemporary art articulating if not its “inner self”? Narantsetseg, a 45-year old female curator, credits three major influences that ground Mongolia’s contemporary aesthetics. “One is the European classical school from Russia and the other is Mongolian zurag, which has same origins as Tibetan Thangka,” she says. “It’s more of an Asian influence. And also, we have some kind of primitive art from the past — more abstract paintings. These combine with contemporary approaches, using various materials and free expression.”

Gerel credits the continued appearance of these approaches as an unwillingness to change. “Not everyone has the goal of changing, unfortunately. I think that attitude is connected to the 70 years of socialism.” When artists became less insular is when change happened. “After 5 or 6 or 10 years of democracy — in ‘96, ‘97, ‘98 — artists started to develop new concepts applying the knowledge of what they gained from past exchange with Russia and Czechoslovakia, with the influence of tradition, traditional knowledge, freedom of expression, access to books — the ability to see the world has grown,” says Gerel.

And perhaps this is where we find the Mongolian style now — a combination of traditional elements, re-appropriated using technique learned abroad. Narantsetseg thinks that, in particular, the organic materials used in a lot of artists’ work — materials which she considers “shamanic” — blend with contemporary approaches to create something unique,

“Many artists who grew up in the countryside — and even those who live in the city — they are still connected to a Mongolian philosophy, not just visually but in terms of concept, their work is quite Mongolian. But the way how they express themselves often seems quite Western. It’s a big mix of everything. And this is quite unique, I would say. I think we have something to show off if people understand us.

As for where contemporary art is going? Naranbaatar thinks that less is more, and that a return to traditional material culture could help articulate that missing “inner-self.” “People are making a ton of contemporary art, and they need to take a step back and think about where they want contemporary art to go,” he says. “I’m thinking about a neo-contemporary-ism that involves introducing Mongolia’s history and origins in new ways.” Perhaps the future of Mongolian contemporary art lies in the re-articulation of its past.

But, is it Mongolian “enough”?

Unless someone’s well-versed in the extractive industries or nomadism, Mongolia is generally left off of peoples’ maps. This presents a serious challenge to Mongolian artists

trying to gain international exposure, as the Mongolian identity carries certain expectations. “Many people around the world just think of Mongolia as people riding horses and wouldn’t think there would be an environment of contemporary art,” notes Batbayar, a 32-year old male artist.

It’s true that many contemporary artists do want to incorporate horses in their work, but not in the essentialized ways people expect. Horses and other culturally- and religiously-significant symbols appear in the work of Enkhjargal, a 33-year old female painter. “The two topics that interest me most are the destruction of nature and the unraveling of culture,” she says. Similarly, popular icons and spiritual figures appear in the works of Naranbaatar, but not in the traditional way. “I address whatever frustrates me. Like Chinggis Khan’s image being overused and fake nationalist pride,” he says. Artists like Enkhjargal and Naranbaatar may be discussing the country’s nomadic identity and glorious history, but their work doesn’t singularly honor the past as traditional art has. Instead, they simultaneously challenge those norms.

But many contemporary Mongolian artists — especially those of the millennial generation who have studied or held residencies abroad — relate their work less to the country than to the world. Enkhtuya, a 28-year old female artist whose work considers inner space and inner voice states that, while “some artists are using the nomadic lifestyle and everyday objects to express something,” she doesn’t feel the same pressure to work with traditional materials and subject matter. “Because I’m expressing my inner self, I feel like a Mongolian identity is inherent.”

Otgonbayer, a 25-year old male artist who studied in New York City, feels a similar way about his work. “The way I work is almost universal,” he says. “I don’t try to be explicit. If I’m Mongolian, people might think, like, ‘Oh, I should have a Mongolian package.’ But it can be mental; it can be conceptual. If I’m thinking of making something out of felt, that doesn’t mean I’m trying to be Mongolian.” But Mongolian approaches are also central to Otgonbayer’s work, and he credits his multidisciplinary practice in part to the ingenuity inherent to the nomadic lifestyle. “My grandmother used to live in the countryside,” he says. “You learn to fix things, make things, create things. In terms of skills, working with different objects and materials — I think it comes from that.”

While Mongol zurag and Buddhist thangka are taught in schools, artists cited the work of Frida Kahlo and exhibitions from the Modern Museum of Art in Manhattan to contemporary galleries in Seoul as equally important to their development. Despite a lack of global recognition, Mongolian artists hold a global awareness.

Form follows function

The visual culture of Mongolian contemporary art is a product of the conditions artists create from. Otgonbayar discusses artists' approaches as part of a larger "third world mentality," saying,

"Even though there might be some limitations in terms of financial things, I see that not as problematic, and I think that's also the third world country mentality. The materials I'm working with can be found. But you've got to keep your mind in a creative way. It's constant thinking; being an artist, it's having a constant, active mind. Being ready to grab whatever the possible thought or material or solution or idea."

His work includes discarded industrial materials, including polyurethane foam, plastic tubing, scotch tape, the legs of discarded office chairs, and cardboard — a contrast to the organic materials used by other artists, but certainly a new aspect of the Mongolian material culture that's expanded since Ulaanbaatar's rapid urbanization and the resulting excess of discarded construction materials.

Beyond materials used, the availability of studio space has also informed the works produced. Ganbaatar is excited to experiment with larger artworks and sculptures because his new studio is far larger than his former home studio. And although Otgonbayar has devoted the main room in his apartment to production, he also depends on sharing space with fellow artists to make his larger sculptures.

You're also more likely to see acrylic paints than oil-based paints since the latter contains more toxic substances. For the number of artists who do work at home — particularly around their children — that's especially important. Khulan — a 49-year old female artist — said that she actually made the switch from oil painting to mixed media in part because her kitchen doubled as her studio, and she was raising her child in the space. On a similar note, Naranbaatar's studio is in the basement of an apartment building, and when he does use oil-based paints, he often gets complaints from the neighbors above — a precarious threat in a city with limited space allocated to artists.

Whereas form follows function, size follows form, and materials follow suitability, meaning that a limited number of diversely-sized studio spaces and spaces reserved exclusively for the arts means that there will be a limited number of diversely-sized artworks and a restricted material culture.

Though many studio spaces are limited in size, Mongolia — the least densely populated country in the world — certainly is not. "In Mongolia, I can be as free as I want. Even with experimentation with fire. You can go a little out of the city and experiment,"

says Otgonbayar. Given the abundant space and multiple ecosystems, the contexts of installations and supply of found materials are nearly limitless. That's clear when you consider the success of the Land Art Mongolia Biennial, a festival that aims to advance discourse on environmental and social sustainability through interventions, installations, and performances informed by the country's vast landscape — it's a festival with works that could only be set in Mongolia.

MAKING A LIVING

The myth of the starving artist has effectively made the artist seem like a person who operates outside of the economy. But their financial echo the society at large. Odtsetseg is balancing being a single mother, paying off her mortgage, teaching full-time at the School of Fine Arts, and making her art. Enkhtuya was working as an artist full-time until she experienced some medical issues and needed health insurance. She now organizes programming for an arts association during the week.

As the country's economy struggles to rebound, so do artists. And when these larger economic struggles are combined with a near non-existent domestic market for contemporary art, Ulaanbaatar-based artists often have to do conventional work to stay afloat and find other informal support, including loans, reliance on family members, and dependence on one another — to make it work with inconsistent incomes. Innovation is key to their creative lifestyles, and, as a group, they've shown the ability to overcome their circumstances. This section is laid out in two parts: (1) Arts workers' production of conventional works, which 10 participants discussed; and (2) The informal methods and strategies artists use to survive with inconsistent incomes, which 11 brought up.

Doing conventional work to stay afloat

While producing art sounds like a frivolous lifestyle to some, practicing art in Mongolia “means you have ten different jobs,” says Odtsetseg. Because of a lack of resources, “artists have to do everything themselves — they are their own curators, publicists, exhibitionists, managers,” notes Bolormaa. Many also hold unrelated second or even third jobs to survive. While Odonbold — a 38-year old male artist — worked at a plastic bag factory and gas station after graduation, and Ganbaatar — a 33-year old male artist — as a sous chef for a time, the majority of artists hold second jobs related to the arts. Because artists carry a wide range of skills, many have an easy time finding work that apply their skills. Naranbaatar derives income from designing stages. “In Mongolia, stage

design doesn't really exist, so they come to artists who say 'sure.' It's a way to make money, but with the stage design there are some elements that I consider artistic."

But these freelance gigs can consume an artist's contemporary practice. Since graduation, Odtsetseg has illustrated books and done basic animation out of "financial necessity," as she calls it. She's simultaneously working Monday through Friday as a professor at the State University of Arts and Culture. Because she needs to devote more time to learning the illustration trade, she's putting away her contemporary practice for a year.

Though Odtsetseg is temporarily transitioning to conventional work, it's a larger, more permanent trend she sees all around her. "Of the seven or so artists who were in my graduating class, only one or two became artists," she says. "The others are tattoo artists, sell crafts, or went back to school for something else." Because the society continues to resist accepting contemporary art, she observes more artists transitioning to forms that are "made for society." "Portraits are becoming popular, so there are many portrait artists now," Odtsetseg says. "They are even doing exhibitions of portraits. And calligraphy is becoming popular — they'll write names in calligraphy and have an exhibition on calligraphy. Or landscapes, mountains. So I'm also trying to do something that's profitable."

The participating contemporary artists can certainly relate. "One of the ways I make money is creating personal calligraphy for stamps," says Batbayar. His client list includes the country's president. Naranbaatar laughed about a commission he received from the wife of a wealthy, Mongolian agricultural magnate — a statue of a big-headed, smiling man on top of a tractor. He then points to another commission: a landscape painting of a religiously significant mountain. There's a certain amount of pride involved in Batbayar, Naranbaatar, and Odtsetseg's conventional works, but there's also a detachment. For many artists, there's a dichotomy between artists' "real work" and their conventional work — calligraphy stamps and landscapes, for instance. At the end of the day, all contemporary artists want to be making the art that speaks their truth — a truth that's detached from money. "It's almost like buying time," says Naranbaatar about his side gigs. "Making money to stay afloat and keep producing."

On a different note, day jobs can help the artist's practice by widening networks, building skill sets, and developing potential content. Enkhtuya's second job at an arts-related nonprofit also helps her with time management. "I feel like my connection to my artwork — my feeling and desire to do art — hasn't diminished at all, and maybe only increased [since I started working a second job]. Because when you have less opportunity [to create], you want it more." And Odonbold's infrequent gigs as a director of photography

in the film industry has helped sharpen skills for his conceptual video work — a form he started working with back in 2006. In Odonbold's freelance design work, most clients come without solid ideas, so he generally has the ability to really shape the project. Because he's been freelancing for so long, he's now developed a clientele that respects his style.

But Batjin — a 38-year old male artist who has also done freelance work throughout his career — notes how difficult it can be to build a clientele that respects your concepts. "It's something that takes time and a lot of investment," he says, and adds that financial necessities often interfere with that sort of perseverance. The anecdotes of Enkhtuya and Odonbold, then, shouldn't be seen as clear evidence of the benefits of second and third jobs, as many other narratives were marked with exhaustion.

Because the market for conceptual art is struggling along, conceptual artists may also be pressured to commodify their "real" works. Enkhtuya has noticed that her works are more popular when translated into more consumable fashion. "I had the idea to incorporate details from my paintings into the clothes. I realized people really liked that idea and were really interested, but it made me really disappointed because people weren't interested in art that much, but when it was clothes they paid so much more attention to it."

Some artists take the teaching route over the conventional art route, including Odtsetseg, Otgonbayar, and, formerly, Batjin. Though it's rewarding to influence the next generation of artists, they also all expressed frustration with working in the antiquated system. "Teachers need to do a lot of hand-holding still, and you always have to watch over the students," says Odtsetseg. Because of her commitment to her students, she only has time to work on her art at night. Otgonbayar has dealt with resistance from older faculty for promoting more interdisciplinary approaches, creating a lot of stress that's unrelated to his true practice.

Making it work

A feature of the emerging artist's financials is its inconsistency. According to Altansarnai — a 26-year old female artist now based in Paris — "monthly income varies from month to month." Put in other terms by Gerel, "Artists don't earn sustainable income to produce art. And then it's not necessarily good quality." Without a solid support system, artists are left to the variability and inconsistencies of the market, which can put pressure on their creative output.

When artists do make sales, though, their approaches change. A couple of years back, Batjin showed work at an international exhibition and sold two works. He stretched

that money for a year and half. In that period of financial security, he could cut down on freelance work and focused more on developing the works he's passionate about. But Batjin had next to no money for two or three months afterwards. That's becoming a harder reality as his children get older. He notes that such a feast or famine lifestyle becomes a lot more complicated with children in the picture, and pulls the working artist in yet another direction.

This sort of reliance on just a couple sales annually is common. "Sales are quite infrequent," says Sumiyabat, a 33-year old male artist. "I make one or two sales a year, but it works." Participants mentioned stories of an important sale here or there — typically from a gallery in Europe or East Asia — but rarely mentioned a more consistent stream of income from sales.

The previously-mentioned "third world mentality" can be seen again in artists' resourcefulness to make it work given irregular income. The 33-year old artist Ganbaatar, for instance, has adapted what he calls a "hippy style." That style, defined by both his reliance on found materials and the fact — which he proudly states — that he hasn't spent money on clothes in six years, is a necessity for many contemporary artists. He creates out of what he already has around him, and that approach results in the material culture we see throughout contemporary Mongolian art.

This resourcefulness also includes relying on informal sources of capital. "This kind of art, we try to make it using loans — getting help," says Ganzorig, a 37-year old male artist. "After a few months, one of the artworks would be sold at a good price, then we'll repay the loans. That's how we make it work." Relationships with family and spouses can also be leveraged to sustain artistic practice. "I made some money [selling art] in the Netherlands, so I used that money and we opened a little convenience food shop," says Bolormaa. "My husband operates it. So that takes care of living expenses for the family ... It's not hugely profitable, but it makes ends meet, so that gives me freedom to make my paintings."

MATERIAL SUPPORTS

Material supports can be defined as the physical resources that allow artists to do their work. The section is divided into the following five parts: (1) Devoted arts-space on both an individual studio and city-wide scale, which 16 identified as a significant limiting factor for their production; (2) Adequate exhibition space, which another 14 cite as a vital resource to promote work; (3) Grants opportunities (or the lack thereof), which only two

artists spoke of regularly applying for; (4) Awards and residencies, which a combined 15 artists spoke about; and (5) The availability and affordability of art materials, which four artists discussed.

Space Demands

(1) The micro-level: studio space

For Khulan and Bat-Erdene, their immense, flowing studio is a point of pride. “This studio is a result of our whole career in the arts,” says Khulan. Its floor-to-ceiling windows, high ceilings, vast storage space, and side kitchen are a far cry from the kitchen in the small apartment they worked in when they were just starting out.

Studios are vital to an artist’s practice. First off, it allows for another point of access for potential buyers. Gerel notes it’s becoming more common for collectors to swing by studios; Enkhjargal has two or three visitors a week come to her home studio to check out her work. Secondly, it allows for artists to get more inside themselves. “I used to have my own space but now I’m together with my teacher,” says Enkhtuya. “But it’s kind of difficult because I’m in someone else’s space so it’s hard to be myself.” Sumiyabat just moved to the studio he’s working in now. The best part about it? “It’s very peaceful,” he says. And what makes a good studio for Ganbaatar? “Solitude,” he says.

Though most artists in Mongolia rent their studios, Odonbold took out a mortgage for his place. “The main idea is that when you’re renting a place, you’re just giving money away to someone else. I see this as an investment in myself,” he says. “Now I have a place to work in for the future and maybe my children can have this place.” Such an investment is no small feat for an artist, as the majority of interviewees have been working at their current location for less than two years. Ganzorig calls those unstable connections to studio space the “nomadic style.” He’s worked at three different studios in three years; Enkhtuya has worked at two in the past year; Batjin built a ger for his family on their plot of land, and converted his former wooden house to his studio.

Artists have few protections in this nomadic way of working. Before his current place, Odonbold spent five years in the basement of an apartment building. That worked fine until it flooded and all of his works were destroyed. A dispute with the owners followed, but eventually he took his losses and left without any compensation along with the two other artists who shared the basement studios. Such are the dangers of renting, when artists have limited renting rights, and their livelihoods depend on what’s inside the studio.

If an artist does find studio space, it may be on the outskirts of the city. Art Mongolia sits way to the east in Khoroo 19; Naranbaatar’s studio stretches to the westernmost parts

of the city; Ganbaatar's and Sumiyabat's place is near the airport; and Khulan and Bat-Erdene's studio is in the southernmost districts. "The traffic is crazy," says Sumiyabat, shaking his head. Given the country's inefficient traffic management and unbearable backups in wintertime, artists with distant studios have to structure their days around the built environment: Bolormaa and Naranbaatar drive to their studios after the morning rush hour has subsided, and return home after the evening traffic has calmed.

An accessible location is an outcome of financial success. "In the city center it's expensive," says Sumiyabat, who notes that the further out you go, the cheaper it becomes. Because emerging artists don't make significant money, this usually means they're the ones at the margins — both figuratively and quite literally in the geographic sense — of the city, fragmented by traffic and urban sprawl.

"In general it's harder for younger artists to find studio space, said Sumiyabat. Such is the importance of Art Mongolia, which supports emerging artists with studios that are entirely free except for the cost of utilities. Batbayar describes the space's function, saying,

"What we envisioned is that there are so many graduates in Ulaanbaatar who want to make work, but don't have resources. Young artists can have a hard time making a living because they're living month to month and doing freelance work trying to make ends meet. They may not have time to create their own artwork, so we wanted to give them space to do that."

While nearly all artists have worked from home at one time or another, Batjijn, Enkhjargal, Ganbaatar, and Otgonbayar are all currently working out of their homes at least part-time. That's difficult for some, including Odonbold, who said, in reference to the three years he worked from home, "That was quite difficult, because your art gets mixed up with everything else." But for some, the comfort and convenience of home is a big positive. "I'm used to having a studio in the house," says Enkhjargal. "It saves time and is quite convenient." She'd like a bigger studio in the future, "but also together with a home." Ganbaatar agrees. "Working at home has its advantages because you're right there and you can be more focused on your work." This convenience is especially important for artists who are raising children, or who enjoy the ability to lock themselves in their studio for a week at a time, like Ganbaatar frequently does.

(2) The macro-level: arts districts

There's a lack of long-term vision when economic decisions are made in Ulaanbaatar. Batbayar voiced particular frustration over the transformation of the now-defunct Power Plant One. "It was completely abandoned," he says. "It could have been a

really nice place for a contemporary arts hub. But they thought, ‘What’s making money in Mongolia now?’ So they gave it to an alcohol business.”

As Batbayar and I drive to his studio, it’s clear just how many abandoned buildings there are in a radius of just a few kilometers — we point out each one. The construction boom in Ulaanbaatar has left behind abandoned, inactive spaces that with a little bit of love and investment could make for incredible studios and gallery spaces, comments Batbayar. Along those lines, he compares urban planning in Ulaanbaatar to Beijing. “The Chinese government has a long-term vision. In the beginning of the 2000s, they supported contemporary art galleries. In Beijing — in the 798 Art Zone — they gave space to art people for free. Of course they use it and make art there and bring in foreign artists for residencies and bring in some investment.”

The stress Ulaanbaatar faces as it works to accommodate its rapidly growing population — and figure out associated issues like water and electricity access and air pollution mitigation — make ideas like designated art zones and districts seem out of touch with the reality. But Batbayar isn’t the only one talking about growing the arts on a larger, city-wide scale. Mönkhbat believes that one of the biggest factors preventing contemporary art’s proliferation is the lack of facilities and organizations that have the ability to create space. Erdenechimeg — a 24-year old student and part-time artist in Düsseldorf — talks about the glaring differences between arts infrastructure in German cities and Ulaanbaatar, where she claims that the universities don’t even give adequate space to students. “In my opinion there needs to be a designated art street,” she says. “On one hand it will be a new tourist attraction and add an interesting area in the city. On the other hand, the artists will have a place to sell their artwork.”

When we talk about issues on this macro scale, Batjin — a resident of the ger district — is worried about resources’ equitable distribution, particularly in the ger district. Though home to a number of artists and an estimated 60% of the city’s total population, the district has next to no infrastructure compared to the city proper. Batjin’s dream? “I would like to see an arts space in the ger district — maybe developing an art village.”

When artists go abroad for residencies and exhibitions, they’re acutely aware of the differences between Ulaanbaatar’s creative infrastructure, and that of cities like New York, Shanghai, and Seoul. After a recent residency in Korea, Batbayar effused about the space allocated to artists, saying,

“The place I went to, it had huge land. There were about 10 buildings equal in size to the UMA studios. It had all kinds of apartments with the bathroom included, there were two-floor apartments for people who make large artworks, and small apartments, and there were studios for hundreds and

hundreds of artists, and separate space for domestic and international artists. It had everything included — just like a hotel room.”

Though that sort of reality sounds remote from Ulaanbaatar’s landscape for now, it doesn’t mean artists aren’t aiming to those heights.

Access to venues and exhibitions

The setup of the Contemporary Art Center of Mongolia — Blue Sun’s new space at the basement of the Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs — allows artists to experiment with the dreary, long-deactivated space and create a vibe that would be impossible to foster at a more conventional, linear space. The pieces are site-specific, in conversation with the unique, physical elements of the basement. Sumiyabat became a member of Blue Sun after graduation in 2006 partly because of such experimental exhibition spaces. “Other galleries had different requirements — you couldn’t drill into the ceiling. It was the mentality of the times. Blue Sun gave me that freedom.”

Narantsetseg is concerned that experimental artists like Sumiyabat are discouraged from approaching certain conventional gallery spaces for exhibitions. “Artists don’t really like the quality of galleries here or the quality of the exhibitions they have, and they just don’t want to mess themselves up with very commercial galleries,” she says. Naranbaatar feels limited by the little variety of architecture or layout in existing venues. “There’s not really one adequate gallery [in Mongolia]. Galleries are just small and there are just paintings on the walls. In exhibitions abroad, there are alternative spaces, like single rooms that are dedicated to a single work, and that space impacts the art’s meaning.” Linear spaces go hand-in-hand with a lack of curation experience, says Narantsetseg. “Most artists just have the experience of hanging paintings around the wall. There’s very little experience of good installation,” she says.

Another reason emerging artists have an issue approaching galleries is that — unless you’re affiliated with UMA’s gallery, Art Mongolia, or a similar space — it’s rarely free to exhibit work. Instead, artists “have to either barter their work or pay to rent the space,” says Enkhtuya. “There’s no support from the gallery side for the artist,” says Narantsetseg, which Batbayar notes is a big obstacle for artists who are already struggling financially.

In contrast to these frustrations, Enkhjargal feels good about the availability of gallery spaces in Ulaanbaatar. Compared to when she began her work a little over a decade ago, she says, “Now there are many galleries in Mongolia and you can have your own exhibition there whenever you want to. Sometimes there are exhibitions of multiple

artists [where you can submit work], and it has happened that sometimes your work isn't selected, but most of the time it goes through."

While joint exhibitions opportunities might be plentiful for some, solo exhibitions are harder to come by. Partially to blame are the unmanageable entry costs for solo artists. Otgonbayar's solo exhibition in Ulaanbaatar in 2015 was a big step forward in his career. In a solo exhibition, "I think you can be much more clear," he says. "The exhibition itself becomes your voice, and has this kind of collective, powerful meaning giving off. There's much more freedom." Solo exhibitions are an opportunity for artists to hone their installation practices and gain confidence in their voices.

At the same time, "There's a need for galleries to do more than just display work and provide space," says Bat-Erdene. "They need to actually help in artistic development." He commends 976 Art Gallery for the work they've done in not only curating art, but also advocating for artists and providing development opportunities. Through MCASA — the mother organization of 976 — 34 artists were able to receive small- to large-sized grants in four years.

Grant opportunities

The vast majority of grants that Mongolian artists apply to aren't from Mongolia aside from a few offered by ACM and other windows that open sporadically. Many artists seem to prefer more informal ways of funding their projects. Enkhjargal was one of the exceptions, as she was awarded 20,000 USD (48,960,000 MNT) in 2015 by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation — the first time a Mongolian artist was recognized by the foundation. That's the kind of money that's only been available abroad. It wasn't an easy application process, though. Because Enkhjargal doesn't speak English, she needed help from Narantsetseg — who speaks English fluently — to apply.

It's clear that with art history as well as grants, English is the privileged language, and its supremacy affects even the most basic tasks; Naranbaatar avoids the grantwriting process entirely. "I don't know foreign languages," he says. "Not knowing English limits me. When I want to write emails, I need to ask someone for help." That communication gets more complicated as the subject matter does. "Art terminology is very complicated," says Odonbold, who's worried about his ideas getting lost in translation when applying for opportunities abroad. Another notable barrier that Batbayar discusses is how cumbersome applications can be, distracting him from his work.

Awards and residencies

Just a year after graduation, Ganzorig won the “Best Work of Art By an Emerging Artist” award from UMA. “It was a big encouragement and inspiration. And also, it came with a certain amount of financial reward — I could use it for my artworks. It was an encouragement for me.” Batjin has also been surviving on the award money from a recent “Best Work” award he received from the government; Bolormaa has been recognized in Russia and subsequently has a painting at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg — a definite point of pride in her career. The awards system seems to be the Mongolian government’s preferred method of supporting artists to-date.

Save for a program here and there from ACM, all artists I spoke to did their residencies abroad. On the benefit of his residency in Shanghai, Otgonbayar says,

“It made me concentrate and go into myself. I tried to be intellectually active as possible. I think it also pushed me a little bit. I did some new series — some new ideas. I had constant conversations with other artists and we shared thoughts. Many people from other big galleries, museums, came to Shanghai and checked out the exhibition [at the residency’s conclusion]. I saw the director of MOMA at the Shanghai Arts Biennale.”

Other artists agree that residencies are invaluable for allowing artists to experiment with new subject matter in an unfamiliar context, and for broadening their networks. “It was a great experience to go to different museums,” says Ganzorig, who has held two residencies in Finland. Batbayar actually sees residencies as an expansion of an artist’s education. “Just because they finished art school doesn’t mean their education is complete. They should be sent abroad for programs or residencies. Their breadth of open-mindedness and mentality are very different from artists who’ve just stayed in Mongolia. It’s the least the government can do for its artists,” he says.

But residencies aren’t always entirely smooth. When artists do hold residencies abroad, the same language barriers for grants also apply. “I still send applications to residency programs, but language is a big barrier,” says Odonbold. “When I arrive, I’ll also need to express myself in the community.” With a lack of residencies domestically, applicants often self-select by their English proficiency.

To address a lack of domestic residency programs, Art Mongolia is working to convert one of their empty studios to a residency space for a foreign artist or two for six-month periods, but the center can’t provide direct financial resources. “The idea is that we’re going to provide information on cost, and then the artist should take that information and apply for grants and funding elsewhere,” says Batbayar.

Availability of materials

Naranbaatar handed me a catalog of German art supplies. It probably numbered two thousand pages and weighed three kilograms. He then pulled out two pages. “These are art supplies available in Mongolia,” he said, laughing. “Mongolia doesn’t have factories that make materials,” he continued. “Most get imported from China. When I’m going to exhibitions abroad, I see many materials I’d like to experiment with — particularly with sculpture. But those materials aren’t here in Mongolia.” When Naranbaatar travels abroad, he tries to stock up on materials. While in Mongolia, he usually buys from 976 Art Gallery, which is one of the only importers of high quality paints.

Sumiyabat brought up similar frustrations. “At least 40 percent of my income goes towards buying art materials,” he says. “But art supplies are inefficient and whatever is available is very expensive.” Like Naranbaatar, he often gets materials from friends who are travelling to China or elsewhere abroad. “But that’s also problematic because the materials can be seen as chemical substances at customs.” Odtsetseg also mentioned concerns over the country sourcing its arts materials almost entirely from China, citing the country’s spotty record of sustainable production. “You just don’t know what’s in it,” she says.

COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

Communities and networks can be thought of as the means of accessing validation, markets, and other resources. Artist networks can involve numerous stakeholders, including fellow artists, arts organizations, media and intellectual resources, and companies and individuals in the private sector. Artists in Ulaanbaatar participate in a number of networks and leverage these relationships to advance their practices.

This section is broken down into six parts: (1) Communities of artists, as all arts workers discussed their relationships with their peers in one way or another; (2) The opportunities and barriers set forth by arts-related organizations, which all participants also brought up; (3) Connections to the media and intellectual resources, which 11 out of 17 arts workers discussed; (4) Support from the government, which 14 artists discussed; (5) Partnerships with the private sector, which 9 brought up; and (6) Contributions of wealthy individuals, which 7 talked about.

Collaboration and resource sharing between artists

“Artists more or less have to do everything on their own. There’s very little media to promote, no administrative help, no publicity,” says Khulan. This struggle is collective, says Naranbaatar. “The income level is similar for all artists. If there are costs [for things like exhibitions], then we all pitch in.” In the absence of formal sources, artists depend on one another to advance their work and try out new ideas. Ganzorig commends the important conversations that constantly happen between artists. “Contemporary artists that have similar interests — they’re always meeting and talking about their artworks. They are great people, trying to help free of commercial interests.” Narantsetseg adds to that, saying, “They like to go to galleries and have discussions and sit and drink and talk about art. I think the only source which can be considered art criticism goes through such meetings.”

Artist collaborations are still developing in the city according to Batjin. In recent years he has found improvements in the way young artists work together, referencing the Human-Nature-Love-Freedom movement which consists of four artists that share studio space, conceptual ideas, and function “like a commune,” says Ganbaatar — a member of the group — proudly. “The collaborative spirit is recovering,” Batjin says, who began his practice two decades ago. “There’s always change. But the current situation is to work together to collectively push art forward.”

But Odonbold is aware that the closeness of the arts community can have a downside. “It’s such a small community that it’s easy to step on toes. As with any other sector in Mongolia, it’s hard to criticize objectively.” Put another way by Otgonbayar, “If something happens, the word spreads through more people.” The tight-knit community of artists can work both ways: when exhibitions happen, everyone comes out for support; when the community is exceedingly polite to one another, it can prevent good criticism that could influence artist’s creative output.

While Odtsetseg credits her two years under the mentorship of Khulan as the most influential time for her practice’s evolution and Bolormaa is genuinely excited by the progress of Art Mongolia, the main tensions between artists arise from ideological differences between the newer generations and older, more established artists. As Odonbold says, “We had a joint exhibition called ‘Smoke in the Brain’ which was mostly about air pollution,” he says. “The way we talked about older arts in our catalogue — it made certain artists feel slighted, and some said, ‘You kids have smoke in your brains.’” Odtsetseg has heard similar comments. “The attitudes from older artists is, ‘Oh, are you the kids who don’t like nature painters?’”

Narantsetseg partly blames the resource divide between established and emerging artists for these tensions. “There are some groups who are closer with the older generation, especially those who have studios at the Union of Mongolian Artists — those are big studios. So whoever has a room in that studio — they probably talk with older generation. But most don’t have studios there, and I feel they don’t really communicate with the older generation.”

Contemporary art institutions: organizations and galleries

When it comes to arts organizations, Arts Council Mongolia (ACM) and the Union of Mongolian Artists (UMA) stand out as the longest-running, most wide-reaching organizations. Some artists hold more positive views of these organizations than others. ACM helped fund Otgonbayar’s first solo exhibition at Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum. “They have this fund for young, emerging artists, and they sponsored everything. They’re the best —don’t just bring in visual artists, but also contemporary dance, film production, and share it with us.” ACM also hosts some of Mongolia’s only residencies. Batbayer travelled across Mongolia and into Korea as part of the “Feel the Wind” nomadic studio residency from ACM, making new works along the way. Others believe ACM is stretched too thin, and Ganzorig thinks they’re less concerned with visual art than other forms. “They focus more on performance or film, so in a given year, there would be about one or two programs or grants for contemporary artists.” Limited funds means that many of the artists that receive funding are those who are already well-established.

UMA is often referred to as the backbone of the arts in Mongolia. It’s the country’s oldest arts organization, has the most frequent exhibitions, and offers studio space well below market price. But Enkhtuya is concerned about who exactly UMA’s studio space — two buildings consisting of about 100 artists — serves. “It’s easier for older artists, more experienced artists, and those who have connections to get it. In general, it’s harder for younger artists to find studio space.” Even then, Bat-Erdene is concerned that UMA’s support stops at providing studio space. “UMA is important, but it can be negative, too. Their work regime comes from the old society, so they don’t have many lively events. They kind of just rent space,” he says.

The criticisms for ACM and UMA are the exact reasons why organizations like Art Mongolia and Blue Sun Contemporary Art Center that focus on creating vibrant, active spaces for the country’s emerging artists have become so important. Art Mongolia was founded in the summer of 2016. In addition to providing free studio space for its young artists, the building’s first floor has been converted to a vast space where emerging artists

can hold joint and solo exhibitions. Meanwhile, five of the participating artists actually credit Blue Sun for bringing contemporary art into the mainstream in the country. “When I joined Blue Sun, Mongolian art was limited to landscapes and traditional things,” says Naranbaatar. “People would call us ‘weirdos’ and wouldn’t understand us. But we would bring in foreign artists and have programs. It really built contemporary art in Mongolia.”

Gerel thinks that, overall, the relationships between institutions should improve if they’re to foster growth. “The Union for Mongolian Artists will never tell ACM what they’re going to do. They will just do it,” she says. This divide is palpable for artists as well. “Galleries and organizations don’t have good relationships with each other,” says Enkhjargal with a laugh.

Connections to the media, critics, and intellectual resources

Communication and intellectual resources build bridges between arts communities and the broader public and promote the visibility of artists. But there’s little of such infrastructure in Ulaanbaatar. Odonbold is worried about that. “We’re in a new age of contemporary art after 2010. There’s a need for media, historians, and critics to make sense of it.”

Ganbaatar is frustrated with the lack of professionalism in the media. “When I go talk to the media for interviews, the questions seem inadequate. They’re more concerned about entertainment or surface level things, or they’re always praising the artist.” Narantsetseg agrees, saying, “Only one or two journalists can write something good. They just have no idea about contemporary art.” An informal conversation with a former arts journalist revealed that arts’ publications have stopped printing because business couldn’t afford the cost of advertising because of the recent economic downturn.

Mönkhbat, a 38-year old male curator, is concerned that the burden of insufficient media and intellectual coverage disadvantages the artist by adding to their workload. “When you’re a contemporary artist, you have to be a researcher and theorist in addition to being an artist if you want it to work,” says Mönkhbat. “But when there’s a lack of texts [in Mongolian], conceptual education, and resources in your language, that can be very difficult.” That’s why he’s helping start the Red Hero Cultural Program. “[The program] was created to address a lack of archives, resource centers, historical books, and textbooks. It’s an attempt to bridge Mongolian artists with international artists and give international visibility to the arts in Mongolia.” The program would function more or less as a think tank for contemporary art — the first of its kind in the country.

Gerel agrees that developing intellectual resources and opportunities domestically is vital for the contemporary arts scene. “Because artists don’t have the capacity to go out and learn and see much, we want to bring it to Mongolia,” she says “Of course it is good for artists to travel and see the world, but that only benefits one or two artists. If we bring a good idea or big concept to this atmosphere, it will have more than 1,000 artists observing it.”

Government support: “It’s like living on the moon.”

Batbayar laughed when I asked him what the government does to either help or hinder its artists. He said that, fortunately, they don’t do anything to hinder the arts anymore. But, “It’s like living on the moon — there’s no support from the government,” he says. “The political sphere is more concerned with land and [natural] resources, not so much intellectual or artistic development,” says Ganzorig, the 37-year old male artist.

When the government does give support, “the sculptures they commission are of dead politicians wearing deels. And they’re incredibly expensive,” comments Naranbaatar. Promoting national pride still seems to be the government’s primary purpose with the arts. “Even the Ministry of Culture, they don’t give any material support,” says Ganzorig. “The extent of their support would be putting their logo on the program, and their attitude would be, ‘Well, you’re using the ministry’s name, so that should be an honor.’”

Mönkhbat — a 38-year old male curator and former Ministry of Culture employee — sat on the board that made acquisitions at the state-run National Modern Art Gallery. He puts it bluntly, saying that “The ministry doesn’t really know anything about contemporary art.” He faced frustrating opposition at board meetings, saying, “I was the one trying to push people to try and buy works from the young artists. At the meetings, it would go in directions of just trying to get conventional paintings and sculptures, which is bullshit. We have to focus on the works that are dealing with the real issues.”

Though contemporary arts’ development has stayed relatively stagnant on macro-levels in Mongolia, art markets and ecosystems across the Asian continent have taken off. “By 2010, the rank and value of Chinese artists has become really high in the world,” says Batbayar, who points to government policy as the primary reason for this rise. “The Chinese government has a long-term vision ... If a Chinese artist sells their work for a certain amount of money, that money will eventually go into the Chinese economy. But Mongolian policymakers don’t have that long-term vision.”

The National Modern Art Gallery in downtown Ulaanbaatar right off of Sukhbaatar Square has an annual budget of 220,000,000 MNT (about 90,500 USD). They’re also

housed in a central location with one of the largest gallery spaces in the city and a number of staff. Narantsetseg is convinced that an organization like Arts Council Mongolia (ACM) or the Mongolian Contemporary Art Support Association (MCASA) would be able to do a lot more with those funds if it was allocated to them because of their close relationship to artists and curation experience.

In the worst cases, government policies have led to displacement. The Red Ger Art Gallery rented space at Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum. According to Gerel who helped run the gallery, it was a great, symbiotic relationship — Red Ger got foot traffic from the popular museum, and the museum could offer a contemporary branch to its fine arts collection. “Then the government passed the Conflict of Interest Law,” says Gerel, “which said museums cannot run any business or rent a space for any other organization ... So we were kindly kicked out.” Another example of government interference comes by the way of customs. “Mongolia has big taxes for importing and exporting cultural goods. It takes a lot of money to ship works abroad for exhibitions,” says Bat-Erdene. The production of both Bat-Erdene and Khulan depends on moving works abroad, as the only foundries that can bronze their sculptures to their specificities are located in Bangkok.

In protest to the government’s neglect of artists, Batbayar responded the best way he knew how — through art. “There’s a law in Mongolia that bans cultural events a month before the election,” he says, citing the government’s fear of an overly-politicized public at an already tense time. “So I did an exhibition specifically for that period — no matter if they arrested me.” Despite the government’s interference, Batbayar notes that artists will just keep producing. “The contemporary artists working in Mongolia are capable to continue doing their art work no matter what party wins, no matter what’s going on in the economy — even if a war is going on — they will keep creating.”

Partnerships with the private sector

Where arts organizations are limited, the private sector often picks up the slack. Khaan Bank — under the leadership of the late U.S.-ian Peter Morrow — has done the most work for contemporary artists. “Khaan Bank had a project to raise money to buy Mongolian art work,” said Odonbold. “That gave me encouragement.” In addition to buying work from individual artists, they also provided the space for Red Ger Art Gallery — one of Ulaanbaatar’s only intellectual galleries that, since 2003, has aimed to support emerging artists and promote their work abroad, but is now without concrete space. “We’re now lacking space because Khaan Bank is building a new building,” says Gerel, who helped found the gallery. “We have a goal to move there, but we don’t know if the bank will give us

another chance to do that.” To Gerel, the bank’s decision means life or death for the gallery’s ambitions. “If we have that space, we will promote it as the first high technology-based modern art gallery. That’s our vision,” she continues. “If we do not get that space, our dream will just be shattered.”

As a group, however, the private sector matches the society’s lack of education surrounding contemporary art. Gerel, speaking on her work to connect artists with private businesses, notes that, “It’s a very slow process because bigger companies, bigger people understand how it’s important, but smaller businesses just buy souvenirs from the State Department Store for 50,000 MNT and they’re happy.” So while there’s a lot of new wealth in the city due to big investment in the mining sector, that hasn’t translated to greater investment in contemporary art.

Partnerships with wealthy — often foreign — individuals

Mönkhbat is concerned that given the lack of funding, “the arts scene may be beholden to people who have money, even though they might not be educated in the arts.” 2015 was the first year that Mongolia had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale — a significant achievement. But Mönkhbat questions how the roughly 140,000 USD that were spent on the exhibition was collected. “The Venice Biennale depended on getting a bunch of oligarchs to donate money,” he says. Narantsetseg, who helped find funding for the exhibition, confirmed that in friendlier terms, saying, “basically we just asked politicians to ask people to give money. That was our strategy.”

Artists themselves often rely directly on investments from the wealthy to fund their efforts. “There are some people who support individual contemporary artists and provide them with some space, and take some of their work as payment,” says Ganzorig. The landlord of the apartment Naranbaatar works in, for instance, lives in Germany and requires a couple works each year to cover rent. Blue Sun formerly held studio and exhibition space for its member artists at Xanadu Art Gallery. That space is now defunct. “A really rich guy’s daughter had the gallery, but she stopped doing it, so we lost our gallery.”

In general, the philanthropy sector is a newer concept in Mongolia compared to Western countries. “Mongolia is still a very poor country,” says Narantsetseg. “Someone who is rich, they have so many people asking for money — can be relatives, can be classmates or friends. So they got really tired of being asked for money. This is the matter that people don’t like to do charity work — they’ll attract more and more people.”

A short supply of domestic philanthropy means arts workers are depending on expats and other wealthy individuals living abroad. It was a French individual who acquired

the former auto body shop that Art Mongolia is now hosted in, says Batbayar, who's a friend of the Frenchman and co-founder of the space,

“That guy bought this land two years ago. It was abandoned for two years. That friend called me and said he had the space and asked, ‘How do you think it can be used?’ So we wanted it to be studios for those new art graduates with the gallery downstairs. And the owner of this place doesn't charge me any money for rent, so I don't charge anything to the artists either.”

That new, vital resource for young artists hinged on a wealthy, foreign individual. And now it may lead to more similar transactions. At the gallery's opening, says Batbayar, “Somebody saw this place and really liked it and said that they also have another land that's not being used. ‘Could you make it and use it for a place like this,’ they asked. That person is Mongolian.”

MARKETS

Markets are how artists actually make money through what they consider their “real work.” While not directly related to the study's original focus, an understanding of markets provides greater understanding of artists' livelihoods and underpins financial success. The section is divided into three parts: (1) How markets in Ulaanbaatar function, which all artists save for two spoke about; (2) Success of Mongolian artists in foreign markets — which all artists said they are involved in or affected by to some degree; and (3) The question of whether contemporary Mongolian art is detached from the marketplace, which is a hypothesis based on these conversations.

“It's jungle rule.”

While there's a certain hierarchy that determines value in places like New York or Paris, “there's not really one notable gallery in Mongolia,” remarks Naranbaatar. Or, as Mönkhbat says, “There's not a proper kind of representation system. In more established art scenes, individual artists are represented by galleries or curators. Because of a lack of representation, there's no catalogues, critics, or strong media.” He goes on to define these conditions as “jungle rule,” where artists have to dictate their own terms in a narrow market.

Prominent galleries — that determine value in many scenes — in Ulaanbaatar like the Contemporary Art Center of Mongolia, Red Ger Art Gallery, and 976 Art Gallery are primarily for intellectual purposes and aren't focused on sales. Gallery curators Gerel and

Narantsetseg both note how difficult it is to make it as a commercial gallery in Mongolia. “Selling experimental works is next to impossible,” says Narantsetseg.

And because that infrastructure isn’t established in Mongolia, artists may have to undersell their work to stay afloat. “They [potential buyers] see some works and ask, is it expensive?” says Ganbaatar. “And then sometimes I give it to them for really cheap. I say, ‘I have this work, and if you want to buy this work this month, I will sell it cheaper.’” Despite the concern that artists aren’t getting their fair share, many do feel that direct buys are a much easier route to making sales. Sumiyabat also sells his work directly, and is excited by the growth in collectors of contemporary Mongolian art — both domestically and internationally — that he’s observed.

That said, the market value of contemporary art varies a lot by its form. Odtsetseg wonders how performance artists survive. “At least I have a product,” she says, referencing her work on canvas. “But performance artists — they have a difficult time. Because they record their work but museums don’t want to buy the rights to the video.” While market opportunities are limited for contemporary artists across the board, it’s harder for some to sell their work than others.

Access to foreign markets

Bolormaa had her first major exhibition in France before Mongolia; Khulan and Bat-Erdene became prominent after an exhibition in Thailand; Naranbaatar had his first solo exhibition in Germany; Enkhtuya’s first solo exhibition was in Korea; Ganbaatar primarily sells his work to collectors in China, Europe, and the Philippines. Mongolian artists aren’t confined to a certain geography — many have relationships with galleries abroad, relying on their sales for income. Most said that they were more successful — commercially and intellectually — at international biennales and festivals than they were at galleries and exhibitions in Mongolia. Odtsetseg sold four works at the Fukuoka Triennale; Batjin’s conceptual work has improved since his participation in the Venice Biennale; Naranbaatar sees his involvement at NordArt in northern Germany as an introduction in a country he hopes to move to in a few years. Meanwhile, Otgonbayar and Erdenechimeg discuss how foreign audiences are ready to receive Mongolian artists now more than ever before.

Not for sale?

But then again, maybe it’s not wholly accurate to talk about contemporary art in dry, economic terms, and to compare it its predecessors, of which it has little in common. While many artists voiced frustrations with the lack of market interest in their works, a few others seemed unconcerned. “Contemporary artists don’t work like other traditional artists who

make works and sell them and live off of that income,” says Batbayar. “It’s not usually made for sale.” Every single artist interviewed talked about artistic fulfilment not in terms of monetary success or big audiences and fame, but in terms of evolution, progress, and the production of work that contributes to something bigger. Enkhtuya sums that attitude up best, saying,

“I used to think of success as something being material or externally-defined. But my mind has changed since then. I need to worry about security and life, but that’s not the priority. So in terms of success, it’s more about staying true to yourself, whatever happens. And also staying true to art — staying with the art and not giving up.”

EDUCATION

Because of the multitudes of positions an artist may hold throughout their career and the constant adaptation they must undergo, education and proper preparation are perhaps the greatest indicators of an artist’s success. This section is divided into two parts: (1) Remnants of the old system limiting teachings, which five artists spoke to at length, and the inadequacies in conceptualism in educational institutions, which 15 artists voiced serious concern over; (2) Learning from sources outside of the classroom, including exposure to movements and ideas abroad as a foundation of conceptual thought, which 16 artists gave credit to.

Remnants of the old system and closed conceptualism

Bat-Erdene, who grew up in Mongolia in the ‘70s and ‘80s, notes that, “Remnants of the closed socialist system are totally still in place [today] from elementary school to the universities.” A main component of the “closed socialist system” is that students belong to one teacher for the duration of their study. For instance, “If you’re in painting class, you’re stuck with one teacher for four years,” says Odtsetseg. Otgonbayar credits this in part to an “Asian mentality,” where there’s “over-respect for maestros,” who end up getting “put up on a pedestal” to the detriment of younger artists wanting to explore.

That means the fate of many artists’ careers may rely on an arbitrary designation of one teacher or another — what Sumiyabat calls “a rainbow mix.” Some artists like Enkhtuya were fortunate. “We had three different teachers in five years, and one was an artist who lived and worked in the Netherlands. So those two facts — that the teacher was educated elsewhere and the three teachers in five years — made us freer to create.” Putting her experience aside, Enkhtuya is disappointed that the system as a whole is

more concerned with developing technical skills and “painting realistically” than developing artists’ mentalities.

Frustration with the old system is especially acute for Otgonbayar, who studied art in New York City and now works as a part-time professor. Students at the School of Fine Arts have to choose a particular discipline and pursue that path narrowly — Odtsetseg chose monumentalism, Sumiyabat chose blacksmithing — which is entirely counterintuitive to the way Otgonbayar learned in New York. “American colleges try to build up your mind — to make you greater in terms of open-minded, creative thinking,” he says. Though sculpture was his concentration, “I took many courses, including graphics, printmaking, video, photography, and mixed media — it was really liberating for me.” He subsequently encourages all his students to take an interdisciplinary course load — a message that many older teachers feel slighted by.

A lack of conceptualism — when paired with the material constraints — affects the quality of the exhibitions, notes Narantsetseg, generalizing that, “Artists lack the knowledge of working deeply on ideas and developing it and turning the materials in different ways, and installing it and talking about it and writing their artist statements. This is just something that is never taught in schools.”

Learning outside of the classroom

While arts education lags behind the rest of the world, artists are actively seeking alternatives. “I just don’t feel confident in my Mongolian education,” says Enkhtuya. “Is it adequate? Am I learning everything I should be learning? I don’t want to waste time doing something that’s incomplete.” For that reason, she’s thinking of foregoing the nine credits she needs to finish her PhD on art history at the State University of Arts and Culture, and heading to Germany to wrap up her education instead.

Khulan and Bat-Erdene also felt unfulfilled by their Mongolian — and in the case of Khulan, Soviet — art education, and credit their travels to visit galleries and exhibitions in the United States and Europe as foundational to their practices. “Artists just go somewhere in different country and see completely different art,” says Narantsetseg. “I think they have very strong sense that something strong is going on, so they just try to figure out how to do that in their own way.”

A recent development is that artists who may not have the resources to travel often rely on the internet. It’s a particularly powerful tool for Khulan and Bat-Erdene who grew up during the closed-off socialist period, but who now interact with foreign curators

through their website. “The world has become so open, so we used the internet to find our own voices,” says Khulan.

VALIDATION

Put simply, validation is the ascription of value to what artists do. In conventional terms, it’s about monetary support. In a more intangible way, it’s about encouragement and the understanding of artists’ lifestyles and many contributions to society. This section regards validation from the public, as 13 arts workers noted frustration with a lack of public engagement domestically.

Public’s acceptance of contemporary art

Odonbold is concerned that conceptual artists are pulling their weight without equal effort to understand new ideas from the public. “It’s not fair for artists to prepare and then present to a public that’s not ready for it,” he says. “Art studies need to develop at the same time — we need to grow together.”

An example of that disconnect comes from the all-woman performance group Nomad Wave, which has made some of the most conceptual work in Mongolia to-date. And yet, the reception was good, says Enkhtuya — a former member of the group. “The public liked it because it contained essential cultural elements like the headdress and calligraphy. So they could easily connect with it because it was substances familiar to them.” Enkhtuya understands that the public only accepts works that incorporate the elements they’ve long seen in traditional art — a barrier for her independent work which is far removed from traditional practice. While she’s depending on the public’s knowledge growing, she’s not waiting around for them to get it. “Even though the public has difficulty receiving it, I can’t quit it. I feel like it needs to continue and after a certain amount of time — even if it’s just by a certain amount of people — it will be felt; society needs to feel it.”

Some artists — including Sumiyabat and Ganzorig — have been noticing improvements in recent years. But that hasn’t translated to investment or increased sales yet. “In terms of valuing the art works, it’s hard. Because who’s going to buy these artworks of me with paper hats versus, like, a nature picture,” says Ganzorig in regards to his more conceptual work. “So in terms of valuing, it’s kind of hard because there are only a certain group of people who have come to value contemporary art.” Sumiyabat, who works a lot with discarded materials, notes that when he was starting out in the mid-2000s, audiences viewed his materials as trash. “But now they see it as materials,”

he says. It's a simple but notable step forward. Ganzorig and Erdenechimeg have faith that, given the city's young, vibrant population, followers will grow.

But given the transnationality of contemporary art, it's important to consider Mongolian artists' publics outside of the country. Bolormaa credits her "amazing connections with gallery owners in the Netherlands and Germany" for her survival as an artist, and a French curator for bringing her abroad for the first time to an exhibition in Paris. While she was overwhelmed by the modernity of the city — "I took the lift in '92 and it was shocking" — she was encouraged by the reception of her exhibition and subsequently "tried harder and painted more." It was only after her exposure in Europe that she became well-regarded in Mongolia. "And then Mongolians started to think, 'Oh, well Europeans are paying attention, so she must be good,'" she remembers with a laugh.

Altansarnai has participated in about 20 exhibitions in Paris. "It's been very positive in general. I was left with great, encouraging words and inspiration after all the exhibitions I participated in," she writes. On a similar note, Panidjugnii — a 35-year old male artist now based in Berlin — wrote how audiences have not only received him positively, but have also pushed him forward. "I believe I can work harder and accomplish even more."

This encouragement is essential as artists require time and practice to articulate their own styles and build followings. "It's been 11 years since I graduated, and I feel like before I would just drop paint without having a direction," says Enkhjargal. "But I feel like, in the past 5 years, I found my path ... The first five years when I was younger, people wouldn't know my work that well or buy that much. But the past five years have been better as people got to know my work." This encouragement also needs to be sustained throughout an artist's career. "The art used to come a lot easier because I was young and more energetic and carefree," says Naranbaatar. "But now I've got more responsibility. It's about taking it to the next level at this point. I'm always trying to progress."

For women artists, the struggles to gain validation can be exacerbated. Bolormaa knows of many talented women artists who were unable to devote the necessary time and effort to their work because they were expected to lead the household. Meanwhile, Odtsetseg pushes her female students in particular. "I try to tell women not to stay at home," she says. "Mongolia is a comparatively conservative society and the mindset is stuck in the past. Men expect women to have kids — so many female artists run into that problem because they try to oppose that idea."

DIASPORA OF MONGOLIAN ARTISTS

Mobility has always been a part of many contemporary artist's lives: the first wave involved those who came from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar. Bolormaa remembers dreaming of art materials she'd hope to find under the rugs of her family's ger before graduating from the School of Fine Arts in 1981; Batjin moved from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar in 1988 to attend the university; Naranbaatar came from Bayankhongor Province to the city to pursue his work. The mobile spirit has stayed the same, but the location has changed, with artists now looking to more fertile creative ground in the United States, Western Europe, and more mature Asian scenes like China and Korea. This section pays particular attention to the three artists who are currently working and studying abroad, including Altansarnai, Erdenechimeg, and Panidjugnii.

This section is divided into two parts: (1) The reasons for moving abroad; and (2) The challenges Mongolian artists may face abroad and reasons most have settled in Ulaanbaatar. Within this conversation is the broader question of how Ulaanbaatar's arts scene compares to more mature scenes.

Opportunities abroad

Enkhtuya wants to relocate to Germany to understand the origins of various conceptual movements and be challenged in the well-established scene. That's the main reason Panidjugnii came to Berlin. "I came to Germany wishing to challenge myself and show myself on the world stage," he says. "It is not easy to succeed in this art world with great history and culture, but I am working really hard." The challenge also drew Altansarnai to Paris. "I came to learn a high standard from the beginning, develop myself, and compete." The result? "I think I learned to think more freely, and my curiosity and creativity to try and create in all forms of art have been kindled," she says. Erdenechimeg came because she wanted her work to have more of an international scope.

Altansarnai credits the huge number of gallery spaces in Paris for her 20 exhibitions. Another big difference is how galleries conduct these exhibitions. "When participating in or having an exhibition at a gallery, the gallery usually takes care of all the costs like transportation cost, cost of transporting my artwork, etc.," she writes — a far cry from bartering works for exhibition space. Where she does pay more is with studio space — studios range from 150 to 1,500 Euros depending on location — but she notes that it's more common in Paris for artists to have joint studios, which cuts down on costs.

In a similar vein, Erdenechimeg writes that a lack of arts management in Mongolia is holding the scene back. “I think there’s still a lack of curators and art critics. It seemed like galleries in Mongolia don’t have any other function than renting the physical space,” she says. Whereas in Germany, artists and galleries often form mutual relationships. “Here, if you connect with a gallery then they take care of art management and promoting the artist and their career, and this in turn helps the gallery to advance its reputation and scope,” Erdenechimeg says.

Panidjugnii’s move to Germany came down to simple economics — his schooling was tuition free. In Germany, when you have a degree from an arts school, you’re deemed a professional artist and receive financial assistance from the state and material supports like health insurance that are unheard of in Mongolia. “Ulaanbaatar should pay more attention to its cultural policy,” he writes. “Ulaanbaatar could learn a lot from Berlin’s example.”

Partly because of his work ethic and partly because of Germany’s robust social and economic support system for artists, Panidjugnii was able to establish an art gallery in 2010 — the first Mongolian to open a gallery outside of Mongolia. “The idea of a Mongolian establishing a gallery abroad seemed impossible because there weren’t even many people who had opened private galleries in Mongolia then,” he writes. Given Mongolia’s recent emergence in the contemporary arts, artists like Panidjugnii have the ability to form lasting cross-cultural exchanges in fresh ways.

Challenges abroad

It’s still challenging to make it as a contemporary visual artist abroad, but in different ways than it is in Mongolia. First off, there’s a much higher cost of living. Ganbaatar — who lived in Sweden for four years and in Germany for seven — is able to live as a full-time artist in Mongolia, but was unable to do so in Europe. When Ganbaatar lived in Sweden, he worked in kitchens as a pasta chef, and as a street artist in Germany, throwing knives and working with bows and arrows. “It was difficult — I spent a lot of time working different jobs,” he says. And despite her 20 exhibitions — a mark that would likely make you a full-time artist in Ulaanbaatar — Altansarnai holds down two other jobs, as both a model and artistic director.

Cost of living is comparatively cheap in Ulaanbaatar, and is a big reason why Otgonbayar returned after studying in New York. “It’s not cheap to live in New York,” he says. And price is just one of the reasons he doesn’t quite feel at home in New York. “All these rules [in New York] are kind of strange for me,” he says. “Like, you can’t work in your

apartment. You would have to have a certain studio space that you can't stay overnight in. In Mongolia, I can be as free as I want. It's the place I grew up. I know people. I can ask for help and make things manageable."

This familiarity of Ulaanbaatar and the countryside's landscape grounds Sumiyabat's work. "The opportunities here — it's everything. Nature, the landscape, climate. It's my homeland. My art expresses the spirit of ancestors as opposed to myself. When I drive in the countryside, it feels like nothing else," he says. When an artist moves abroad, they may risk losing the connection to the context at the foundation of their work. "I am worried that if I move to the United States, then I will make American art," he says half-jokingly.

Another challenge abroad that artists don't generally face in Ulaanbaatar is competition between artists. That's one reason Enkhjargal has remained in her hometown. "The competition is very tough, and unless you're really really special, it's hard to stand out abroad. Whereas in Mongolia, if you're just a little better than other artists you can stand out," she says. Altansarnai says that even the requirements to consider applying to a gallery are incredibly high in Paris. "Competition is very high," she says.

DISCUSSION

THE EIGHT DYNAMICS

General observations

The conditions of Mongolian working artists are not unlike those in the United States. One of the conclusions of Rosario et al (2006) is that it's imperative to encourage better public understanding of the arts and "to support a more expansive interpretation of art making that is consistent with artist's realities," (Rosario et al, 2006, pg. 82). They write that all other priorities of advancing the arts depend on this point. The same could be said in Mongolia. Odonbold certainly understood this when he noted that it's unfair to demand so much output from artists when the public simply isn't ready to receive conceptual work.

That's far from the only parallel that can be drawn between Mongolian artists and their foreign contemporaries. Each of the dynamics Roasrio et al (2006) discuss are reflected in Mongolia: (1) the public and the government ascribe limited value to contemporary artists, (2) markets are limited for conceptual workers, (3) there are many barriers both financial and social for accessing physical resources, (4) opportunities for artistic development from galleries and universities are limited, (5) artists rely on communities both formal and informal to access resources, and (6) there's little formal information about or for artists.

That said, the conditions of Mongolian artists are a unique product of the particular setting of Ulaanbaatar. Of course, Mongolia's recent history is far different than other nations that have big communities of contemporary artists. The seven decades of strict socialism which restricted art to realism has its leftovers in cultural institutions, the education system, and government policy. Meanwhile, the rapid development of Ulaanbaatar and its strained resources, along with a continued re-articulation of the new Mongolian identity, have brought up realities exclusive to those working in the city. That history makes it difficult to compare arts in Ulaanbaatar to Berlin or Beijing straight-on and requires a very individual understanding of Mongolian artists.

Defining Contemporary Mongolian Art

When artists were asked how this research could be useful to them, the majority said that simply spreading the word about the contemporary arts in Mongolia would do some good. The 21 artists and curators interviewed here are constructing a new idea of Mongolia that originates in the studios and apartments of Ulaanbaatar. To understand the

working artist is to get a glimpse at the realities of a city that's hyper-aware of the rest of the world, but has been largely ignored from global conversations.

The first step of promoting contemporary art in Mongolia, then, is understanding what exactly it is. What may be unexpected is how it speaks to both national and global truths. There are certain Mongolian approaches: the use of found, organic material and discarded industrial components; the resourcefulness and dexterity of artists that reflect the resourcefulness and dexterity inherent in the nomadic identity; new works that incorporate elements of Mongol *zurag* to discuss rampant capitalism, and traditional wear used in performance art. But artists are looking outwards more than ever before. They're participating in biennales and international festivals across the continent, they're studying in Berlin and New York, and they're holding residencies in Scandinavia. Erdenechimeg identifies as an international artist, while Naranbaatar hopes Mongolian artists will reign it in and really start to define what "Mongolian" now means; there's tension in these two thoughts, and that tension has translated into new aesthetics.

Of course it's also important to think about how art is limited by its surrounding resources. Found materials are prevalent because paints are unaffordable or simply not available; works are more linear in shape and size because there are few diverse, experimental venues to exhibit at; the majority of paintings I've seen are made on lightweight canvas that can be easily removed from the frame and shipped abroad for exhibitions. The conversation surrounding contemporary Mongolian aesthetics, design, and style, then, is inseparable from a conversation on creative resources and geographical context. To understand Mongolian contemporary art, we must first understand the conditions it develops under.

Making a living

Financial struggle is perhaps the most distinctive mark of the emerging, working artist. The realities in Mongolia are similar to the ones Menger (2006) discuss, what with inconsistent income and significant financial risk involved in the creative lifestyle. Mongolian artists — as with contemporary artists in the West — are pulling on informal support systems and depending on piecemeal work like freelancing and stage design to make it work in an economy with insufficient formal support structures.

Their other jobs — modeling, filmmaking, teaching, arts administration, and graphic design to name a few — reflect the diverse portfolios of artists that Thorsby and Zenik (2011) suggest. While their resourcefulness should be applauded, these second and third jobs are usually seen as entirely separate from their "real work." Artists' output of the work

they're passion about — that they make in order to challenge, shift, and discover — can slow or come to a complete stop, preventing their contributions to discourse that's already underdeveloped.

Perhaps now we can forever lay to rest the myth of the starving artist: the creator who operates outside of the bounds of finance. Economic issues in Mongolia end up being artist issues; artists have to constantly be active and plugged-in to informal solutions in an environment without sustainable financial support; with the international spread of their work, they're increasingly affected by trends and investments outside of the country. While these attributes belong to most contemporary artists globally, those working in developing economies like Mongolia feel them more acutely.

Material resources

Whereas Minneapolis' Creative Index distinguishes the difference in resource accessibility depending on racial identity and sexual representation, there are similar obstacles in Ulaanbaatar, albeit based on different structures. Conventional, older artists — primarily men — have had the most success in the city. In comparison, younger artists who make more conceptual and experimental works are likely to face many more barriers, including working in the “nomadic style” of studio space, which is a romantic term for what looks like perpetual displacement in reality. Female artists — as explained by both Bolormaa and Odtsetseg who are separated by a generation — have also had to deal with the societal norms encourage women to stay at home.

Young artists have no safety after graduation — save for the few involved at Art Mongolia and those who are supported by wealthy backers — and, because of this, may be prematurely pressured to turn to conventional practices like craft-making or return to school for something entirely unrelated to the arts. Meanwhile, experimental artists often have to sacrifice their vision to exhibit at more conventional venues. So while finding studio or exhibition space isn't typically a problem, finding an affordable, appropriate venue for younger or experimental artists can be an issue. To put it plainly, artists' adaptability shouldn't be taken for granted.

Beyond these concerns over equity is the idea that a notable portion of material resources — namely grants, residencies, exhibition opportunities, donations of space, materials — are coming from galleries and individuals abroad. The Mongolian government still bases their support of artists off of an archaic award system that emphasises temporary support and is also a remnant of the Socialist era. Foreign advocates are often more in tune with the realities of working artists, again emphasizing that “a more expansive

interpretation of art making that is consistent with artist's realities” (Rosario et al, 2006, pg. 82) is needed within Mongolia.

Communities and networks

Despite the barriers, some artists are able to find their niches in communities both within and outside of the arts sector — pairing with the private sector for studio space, sharing costs with fellow peers, and gaining the attention of the few media sources operating in the city. But these communities and networks each have their ceilings: philanthropists are stretched thin, the media is intellectually insufficient, arts organizations are underfunded, and relationships with the private sector are highly dependent on the economy’s volatility. The biggest frustration in regards to networks was the either unwillingness or inability for the government to support the arts, including the complete detachment between government policy and artistic needs. Without proper sustainable creative resources, the future of contemporary art is relegated to informal networks and active microcosms.

Though Rosario et al (2006) discuss the importance of diverse stakeholders at a national, regional, and local level, they leave out international networks, which many Mongolian artists have been able to leverage to show and sell work, and gain inspiration. While such an approach may not be necessary in the United States, dependence on transnational communities are vital to many working artists.

Markets

There’s no structure that sets value for conceptual work in the country — no hierarchy of brand names or gallery prestige that you find in more established scenes. While souvenirs, crafts, and conventional works all have clear buyers and sellers — it’s true what Smith (2016) says about conventional works with simpler understandings faring better in markets — galleries in Mongolia are mostly intellectual, not commercial. While many artists relied on direct sales, a notable exception in the conversation was that no artist received business or marketing education. That means many artists rely on informal routes to sell their work without prior experience, resulting in some artists today echoing the sort of desperation to make a sale that Bolormaa talked about enduring more than two decades ago during the country’s painful transition.

Education

Returning to the bigoted comments of art critics like Sewell in response to contemporary artists from the post-colonial and post-socialist worlds, it's possible to see how his criticism originated. There was a culture of copying European artists in Mongolian art after the transition. But of course there was — conceptualism was never developed because of the restrictions the Soviet Union implemented. There was never time for artists in Mongolia to authentically exchange with those who influenced important contemporary movements. Instead, the borders were opened after contemporary art had achieved relative commercial and intellectual success in countries that could develop free of outside control. After a couple decades of advancement, it's up to similar critics to understand art from these geographies on their own merit.

But for now, the older generations who grew up during the Socialist period remain in power to the chagrin of artist/teachers like Otgonbayar and Odtsetseg, and hold the power to determine what's taught and what's valued in Ulaanbaatar's art scene. The Mongolian State University of Arts and Culture — the country's only significant arts university — and its School of Fine Arts are potential centers of training, criticism, and dialogue. Unfortunately, the university misses its mark more often than not, forcing artists to find alternative, informal ways to educate themselves and build their conceptual practices.

Validation

Smith's (2016) hypothesis that it's difficult for contemporary artists to gain validation for their work holds true according to these 21 interviews. Contemporary art's success hinges on the public's understanding and their respect for the artistic process in general. But the current Mongolian economy demands immediate outcomes, while publics that are detached from the site of production as they are in Mongolia have the expectation that works are simply finished, not made. Yet no artists work in this way.

These differences highlight how artists are not only economically and often politically isolated, but also socially isolated from society. Given the city's young population and recent growth in gallery space and major art events, there's hope that these trends will change in future years. But for now, artists' are still commonly seen as the "weirdos" and recluses that Naranbaatar says Blue Sun was considered a couple decades ago.

Diaspora of Mongolian Artists

The mobility of Mongolian artists aligns with Markusen's (2006) definition of artists as a uniquely mobile class of workers that flock to resources and opportunity. Artists are

concentrated in Ulaanbaatar because the most resources and fellow artists are located there. In a similar way, Mongolian arts workers who left the country in the past few years arrived in New York, Berlin, Paris, San Francisco, Shanghai, and many other metropolises — all cities that have greater creative resources than Ulaanbaatar. These unequal resources across geographies makes some artists worried about braindrain unless the country begins taking contemporary art more seriously.

Countering that narrative, however, are the artists that stay in Mongolia not for its creative resources, but for its comfort and irreplaceability. Mongolians are traditionally very rooted to the land; while many artists look abroad for inspiration and opportunity, they still feel this connection with Mongolia in one way or another — it seems to be a quality that can't really be quantified.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Limitations

The biggest shortfall of this study is that it just took place over a one month period. The issues related to creative resources are a product of development policy and direction, post-socialist attitudes, economic and political situations — to put it simply, there's a lot to digest over a short period of time. It's for that reason that this study is meant to act as a precursor to future initiatives — a primer from which to dig deeper.

There are also limitations with the methods used. The first is that all conversation was filtered through a translator or was spoken as the participant's second, third, or fourth language. The second is that the referral sampling technique may leave out certain groups of people. There's a multitude of arts communities in the city, and while this research intended to reflect those differing perspectives, certain voices could have been left out.

Strengths

One strength of this study is how it differs from the studies that have come before. As mentioned in the introduction, it's different because of its focus on the artist instead of their work, it uses geography as its critical context, and it provides greater insight into contemporary art in a non-Western context — where many of the world's most exciting art movements are happening at this moment.

The greatest strength of this research, though, is that 21 Mongolian contemporary artists have never been assembled for study before. These findings, then, are an introduction to a group long excluded from arts studies and conversations surrounding contemporary art. While this paper is in no-way the end-all, be-all of a contemporary

artist's reality, it does survey a diverse group of mixed ages and genders, who work with a number of mediums.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of future directions for research that could use this study as a building block. Some directions are academic, others are not. A priority is to quantify the sector's contribution to society. One way to do that is to conduct a study in the style of the Minneapolis' Creative Index. This would measure the economic health of the industry in regards to employment, transactions, and community participation, and also measure who exactly the creative workers are: who are the painters and photographers, how many performance artists are out there? Those figures would allow comparison of the value of Ulaanbaatar's contemporary arts scene to other cities, instead of seeing it in isolation. One concern over such a study, though, is that it's based in economics. So that approach would be better off supplemented with an analysis of contemporary arts' non-commercial value, including contributions to well-being, identity expression, and community cohesion.

Another direction would be to gauge how the public feels about the art, to round out the picture of why artists are valued the way they are. Why do they choose to engage or not engage with it?; What is the societal value of contemporary art according to the average gallery patron — what about to the average bus driver? Both quantifying and qualifying these attitudes could help artists connect to broader audiences.

When I asked artists how the current study would be helpful to them and their practices, many noted that it's important to get the word out — both domestically and internationally — that these creators are here; that Mongolia's art isn't just confined to history, and that it's living, breathing, and growing every day. With that idea in mind, it may be more important to pursue non-academic paths and spend energy helping artists construct formal pathways for connection — a database, for instance, that anyone in the world can access, and scroll through the multitude of artists that are working in the city, with links to their work for sale and to short biographies. Or shooting short videos that can be widely distributed with artists talking about their practice, in order to help people relate to these communities that are usually secluded, making contemporary art more approachable and its artists more accessible. Artists should be consulted to determine the shape and scope of those projects.

CONCLUSIONS

RELEVANCE AND MEANING

The larger priorities of this study are reiterated as follows: (1) Because many emerging contemporary artists work at the vanguard of culture, we can better understand an alternative view of the rapidly-changing city by speaking with those on the margins; and (2) By including artists from the post-colonial world [or post-socialist, in this case] in the popular canon of art history, we can assemble a deeper understanding of art's historical narrative outside of established, Whitewashed art institutions.

This paper must work together with similar research and efforts outside of academia to reach these deeper understandings. In order to accomplish those lofty objectives within Mongolia, there's a huge need for realistic information, and to move away from talking about economics and traditional art to something bigger that's happening in the country. By focusing on working artists, we're able to shift the conversation to something active — something that's very much alive, and get a deeper understanding of a city that's unfamiliar to many. The issues of artists are the urban issues of Ulaanbaatar — a lack of space, little connection between publics, and the inability to recognize innovation on a large scale. The specific realities of artists shed light on these issues in a very particular way.

To identify solutions requires changes in perception, including a fundamental shift in attitude towards artists and understandings of how they work. It requires bringing in a number of stakeholders to make change happen and match the transformations that contemporary artists are already undergoing by themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

While the study's findings are in no way conclusive, they provide a baseline for the needs of contemporary Mongolian artists. Based off initial findings, the following ten action steps for arts organizations, the national and city government, and other stakeholders are recommended. To be clear, these initiatives won't completely improve the realities for working artists, but they are important steps towards harmonizing policies, planning, and practices with artists' realities. Though it would be impossible to introduce them all tomorrow given the country's current economic conditions, they should be treated as a working list that can be amended after discussions with arts workers.

- **Consider open studio days, art walks, and other initiatives that make the work of artists more visible:** Artists are relegated to the periphery of the city in more ways than one, making the common Ulaanbaatar residents unaware of their doings. Introduce efforts that connect the public to artists more readily to break down these barriers.
- **Create a formal, online structure for the public to find out about artists:** There are no formal online structures for publics to connect with artists outside of social media, which itself is highly limited. Create a formal website that hosts information on artists, their portfolios, and sales page.
- **Incorporate artists into city planning and policy decisions:** As space conflicts continue, ensure that there is space devoted to the arts — not just fine or traditional arts, but studio, exhibition, and third spaces for contemporary artists.
- **Ease the process of acquiring mortgages for studios:** Artists have limited rights and guarantees when they rent, meaning they often bounce from studio to studio, paying a lot of rent in the process. To prevent against displacement and secure rights, banks should provide incentives for artists to mortgage their studios.
- **Ensure that grants, awards, and other funding opportunities are available for a diverse group of artists:** Funding sources currently favor artists who (1) speak English (in regards to international funds), (2) are somewhat established, and (3) have more conventional approaches. These opportunities should be reviewed to ensure a number of different types of artists can access these resources.
- **Replace the government's award system with a more sustainable funding mechanism:** The system is rooted in the socialist era and generally favors more established artists. Instead, invest those funds into a pool that awards multiple small to medium-sized grants to emerging artists each year.
- **Develop services to help artists apply to residencies and grants abroad:** Language barriers and cumbersome paperwork are big obstructions for Mongolian artists and many rely on friends or family to help apply. Creating a more formal structure to help with the process would encourage more artists to apply, and apply confidently.
- **Guarantee health insurance and other securities for all working artists:** Many artists take conventional jobs for health or economic security. Guaranteeing these securities for artists will allow them to focus on their “real” practices.

- **Make cultural exchange easier and improve foreign policy:** Consider free, expedited Visa applications for international artists, and make it easier at customs for artists to transport their works and move paints and other materials in and out of the country.
- **Make an effort to hire teachers with a wide range of conceptual approaches:** The School of Fine Arts is dominated by professors from older school of thoughts. Hiring of faculty from a range of conceptual backgrounds and ages is important to diversify teachings and influence the development of the next generation.

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