

## ULAN UDE

**25-03-2020.** Today we have a grueling 24 hour travel ahead of us that will take us over Moscow and Irkutsk. We take the Trans-Siberian express for another 10 hour train ride to Ulan Ude, a city in the Buratyian Republic of Siberia, on the boarder of Mongolia. From Moscow on I see an enormous amount of nothingness. No life underneath the wing of the 737 that glides through the Russian sky, no cars, towns or cities alight. Just a sea of black tar boiling underneath the engines of the plane.



We uploaded Love, Disorderly and Entertainment. Three tracks with their videos will be released the upcoming weeks. I feel excited about Laurent's film. I feel it captures the world as it is, in this very moment. I feel the desire to pull it off Spotify and Youtube, and only show it in an empty space. With Ayoto's film this first release feels more complete. I feel confident and proud that our friendship turned into this piece of work. The album is coming together. I collected around 12 songs that I will narrow down to 8-10. I want this album to feel cohesive. Unlike Stray it has to come together. I might have to ruthlessly sacrifice songs in the track listing for that. I want Ellen to go over it.

After spending the past months in the studio I'm glad to see the guys again but I'm aware of what I'm asking them to do. The trip is long and exhausting with less than an hour of stagetime and most of the circumstances are unknown. I hope for something extraordinary.



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I look at my passport. What a strange document. Somehow I suddenly feel the worthlessness of these papers. I have a strong feeling this belongs to the past. We will fight over these borders and after a while, once it will turn to wasteland, no one will care anymore.

Moscow -1C

During lunch at the airport I observe a family scene. She's very controlling towards her family, a husband and a grown up son. The son is extremely irritated at his mother and tries to argue. The husband sits in silence. I can feel resentment and words are spoken full of anger. The men try not to give in to the psychological control by arguing like children with their mother. I am well aware of the small snapshot I am seeing, probably projecting myself, but I find family dynamics fascinating even though it's hard not to judge.

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We drive past a huge ice skating stadium and the volunteer of the festival informs us that we will be playing here. The organization around this show was a challenge due to the language barrier so we had no idea how big the actual venue would be. Showtime is around 6pm which we hear is the best time because it will get too cold later on. I'm asking what the capacity of the venue is or how much tickets are sold but nobody really knows. Stray dogs pass us while we make our way inside...

Maybe they didn't understand the question, it happens.





The dynamic of the group isn't always an easy one for me. I find it hard not to feel responsible. On travels like these everyone gets hungry, tired, grumpy and easily argue about food and space. There is a certain survival mode when fatigue sets in and I still haven't found a good way to deal with it. I'm aware of the toll a trip like this takes on everyone. It's not like I can pay my team for 4 days of work. I can only pay them for the show and discuss with them individually if trips like these are worth it. I feel some people of my group are not empathic when they are hungry and tired. There is a lack of a bigger understanding and mentality. Everything is a hassle, from getting food to sleeping to getting coffee to asking for towels. Food is a problem when we are in Siberia, there is mostly meat and due to the language barrier, obtaining vegetables is complicated. Sometimes the crew acts as if they haven't had any food for days and that's where the hogging starts. A fear of not eating enough so when the food arrives everyone hogs as much as possible on their plates and eats as fast and much as he can. A survival mentality when everyone is a bit on edge and hungry.



Sacha turns out to be a kind but troubled young man who is eager to help but everything he does turns into one big misunderstanding. During the day I find out he has been living in China for 9 years doing all sorts of jobs. Now he lives with his mother and grandfather in a communal flat. He shows me the outside, it looks gray. He looks skinny, pale with long unkept hair and big eyes. He carries a small plastic bottle with him filled with vodka and through the day he gets drunk. Sometimes he goes into periods of silence only to wake up with a few sips of vodka. Occasionally he turns really enthusiastic and after several minutes he goes back to a nostalgic stare into the distance. He gets more intense for me as we approach the show. Constantly trying to engage, I can't always make sense of his stories.

The dynamic of the group isn't always an easy one. I find it hard not to feel responsible. Trips like these get you hungry, tired, grumpy and you easily argue about food and space. A certain survival mode sets in with the fatigue and I still haven't found a great way around it. We try to be gentle towards each other as we are all aware of the toll a trip like this takes on everyone.

The setup and soundcheck runs smoothly always thanks to Ferran. What to do without him. A show like this would be impossible and that scares me too. Ten minutes before showtime the place isn't packed and we decide to push showtime. I make peace with the possibility of playing a venue that's only half full but miraculously out of nowhere the place fills up fully with thousands of ecstatic Siberian youngsters. We start. The show is echoey, the hall is huge and my ears are blurry. It feels a bit like a day dream and time travel at the same time. I'm performing but find it difficult to find the release. The impressions and travel keep me away from it but we keep on pushing and by the end of the show I feel more emerged. It's hectic backstage, people walk in and out and we want to pack our things and double check if we have everything. When we arrive at the hotel

i'm nearly falling asleep but force myself to get up from and go for a drink with the crew. By the end of the night the vodka is also getting to me and I decide to call it a night.



As an artist, surviving these days is a challenge and these shows make no sense financially. I can only pay my friends for the show itself, which means that all the travel days go unpaid. I discuss with them individually if trips like these are worth it. Food is a problem when we are in Siberia and sometimes the crew acts as if they haven't had any food for days . When food arrives everyone hogs as much as possible on their plates and eats as fast and much as they can.



Driving 85km out of Ulan Ude through white fields towards a remote rural area we find the Ivolginsky Datsan, one of the only monasteries that was unharmed during the soviet period.

As we approach the temple, horns, cymbals and prayer intensify. It's busy and there are two rings of monks chanting through out the day. I feel privileged to be here and witness their 'new years' routine. The outer ring consists out of younger monks and musicians with long horns and cymbals. I love the constant cluster chord I hear, the atonal voicing droning through the hall. Multiple throat like noises in random intervals. Their chanting is followed by an occasional cacophonous answer of horns and drums.

We hear because it's buddhist 'New Year' we are allowed to visit the legendary Lama, who died mid-meditation in 1938 and has been sitting in his lotus position ever since. The monks say he is still alive. His corps is not mummified, his organs are inside and his brain activity has recently been measured by 'russian scientists'. He also has been gaining weight, so we hear. I enter the temple and see a small man meditating behind glass with his skin still intact. I look at him from different angles. From the side his skin is translucent and you can see his skull. From the front you can see his skin, his eyes closed. Is he breathing? I offer him a silk blue scarf and a (living) monk takes it from me and gives it back with a knot. Over all I feel calm.







We fly back to Moscow, direct this time. The travel is hardcore. To switch airport in Moscow, it takes us over the ring 2 hours to get from one airport to the other. I feel I have slept 2 out of 5 days and I'm running on fumes. My back hurts from the endless sitting and my whole body is stiff. A 7 hour wait on the other Moscow airport. I sleep an hour in a sleeping pod. It smells bad. Finally we board the last Aeroflot flight to Amsterdam and by this time we've been traveling for another 22 hours.

Ulan-Ude is our last show together. Soon after our trip I fall sick with Covid-19 and I realize we are heading for uncertain times.