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**Zane Mellupe and "the invented person"**  
Jana Kukaine, Art Critic

Is "Zane Mellupe" a fiction or an art project? This is the question I can't help but ask after a conversation during which the artist spoke enthusiastically about her pseudonyms, her imaginary identities and mental journeys. Of course, I believe everything she says, like a reader who believes in a story well-told.

Zane Mellupe, as I managed to find out during her visit early this year, was born in 1981 in Riga, and has lived in China since 1999. As a Sinology student at the University of Latvia, Mellupe went to Shanghai on a scholarship from the People's Republic of China, and decided to postpone her return home due to the rational reason that Sinology is best studied in China. From 2004 onward Mellupe also studied in London, where she obtained a Master's degree in photojournalism and documentary photography; then her path led her back to China. Now she is a photographer, artist and curator who, circulating freely in the global bloodstream of contemporary art, practices multi-faceted and dynamic art, where "a delicate and sensitive soul" goes hand in hand with "a sharp and agile mind".

Mellupe works both individually and also in a group of multimedia artists *Liu Dao*, and over the last three years has been acting as creative director and residential programme manager at the Shanghai art centre Island6, founded by Thomas Charvériat in a former industrial neighbourhood. Their most recent joint art project was an exhibition Fakir. Taking part at the opening were not only artists but also masseurs, Taoist fortune-tellers, illusionists, magicians and street vendors of fried noodles, with their shabby wooden carts – people representing a stratum of society not commonly met at an art gallery, unless at least labelled with *performance by*.

**Zane Mellupe:** In an art space, we normally don't expect having to take our shoes off and having our toenails cut and being given a foot massage, do we? This process can be regarded as a work of art. In creating this exhibition we wanted to find out what exactly is a modern day fakir. Traditionally they are hermits or anchorites, monks living an ascetic lifestyle, but in the West are frequently associated with magic, or at least people with supernatural abilities. This exhibition is also about the superhuman, in a direct and a sarcastic sense. Fakirs are everywhere, especially in China, which is a land of so many contrasts. Take, for instance, people who do plastic surgery – large breasts, small breasts, thick lips, thin lips... One storey houses crumble, high-rise buildings grow; a park today, a car park tomorrow, plenty of money today, no money at all the next day. So many illusions.



Zane Mellupe. Father. From the series 'Found Family'. 2008. Publicity photo

**Jana Kukaine:** Do you see any parallels between a fakir and an artist of today?

**Z.M.:** Can an artist afford to live the life of a hermit? No, not if he wants to live off his art. At the moment, a great deal of time has to be spent working on one's PR, if you wish to raise your commercial value and there isn't a gallery to do it for you. Yet the rigorous self denial worthy of a fakir is evident in another aspect. For me, art is a mind trip. The artist Tino Sehgal once offered gallery visitors to draw a slip of

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paper out of the bag. It bore, for example, an inscription "the elephant". That's all. This "elephant" belongs to you. That's the way I like to think of conceptual art – as about not striving to physically possess something.

**J.K.: Sounds like the "dematerialisation of a work of art".**

**Z.M.:** Yes, it is the idea that matters in art. Whatever I may do, I must know why I am doing it. Having seen several art galleries in Riga, I came to the conclusion that here, like in China, the dominating tendency is for "pure", unsubstantiated visually. Alright, that could be something like "this is the way I feel, and I don't try to understand what I'm trying to tell you". That could also be a way of communicating, if there were to be a clear basis for why things are exactly the way they are. It could be that the artist may not want to communicate at all. Fine by me, but I would like to know why they chose to do that. At least I always demand an explanation from myself.

The choice of medium by itself does not decide anything. I like experimenting, and in this respect China is wonderful, as it offers end-less opportunities. Because of this, a great many foreign artists go to work there. In China one may safely play around with materials, raw materials, models. It will probably sound presumptuous, but I'd say that nothing is impossible in China.

If there are people out there who can do things better than me, for instance a sculptor, then I'll go to him with my drawing and he'll make a bronze sculpture for me. But it is acutely important to mention this sculptor's name! This is the question of how true we can be in our fiction. For me it is unacceptable that a photographer takes a snapshot of a ballet dancer and leaves me in the dark about who the dancer is. This is a monstrous cult of the ego, and it is not playing fair. In art, there exists a code of ethics – written, by the way, in France and undersigned by the French artists' trade union...

**J.K.: Who wrote it?**

**Z.M.:** That's not relevant, because the rules are derived from common experience. There are several statutes for the practice of art in the world. The one I referred to was designed by a committee of French gallerists together with artists. One of the most notable gallerists in the world, Michel Dauberville, drew my attention to this document. I do hope that, given the specific conditions in China, there will also be people in Shanghai willing to put it into practice.

**J.K.: It seems that the tradition of writing only the artist's name under a piece of art might be due to the myth of the artist as a creative genius. Which run-of-the-mill sculptor or ballet dancer could rival that!**

**Z.M.:** Sometimes it is not at all that important. Everything depends on the level of communication taking place between people representing the different fields at the time when a piece of art is created. Why shouldn't we be consistent and draw attention to the brush producers? The brush stroke is so important. Previously the paints also were mixed by the painters themselves. At the *island6* centre we work together with engineers, sound technicians, architects, designers, composers, mechanics, glass workers, taxidermists...and their presence in the making of works of art is crucial. In this respect, movie credit titles naming every professional who has contributed in any way to the making of the film is a perfect solution.

**J.K.: Your contacts with Latvia, how close are they?**

**Z. M.:** This trip was an excellent opportunity to find out what's going on in Latvia with galleries and art. I am trying to assess cooperation opportunities for presenting an exhibition of Latvian video art. I found out many good things: what's happening in the Academy of Arts, at the gallery KIM. In this country, there are many clever, gifted, educated people. But Latvia's artists don't talk about themselves much, although they should. They should talk, and even make up beautiful stories! They should promote themselves – document, note down and communicate to the media, electronic media in particular, as they have now become more important than printed media due to their public accessibility. No communication platform is so bad that it can be ignored. Any advertising is better than no advertising at all.

As regards galleries, I got the feeling that the *Rigas galerija* is the most active internationally. It would be wonderful if the representation of Latvia's artists at major art events were to become more noticeable, but that goes hand in hand with the development of an art market. It is vital to stimulate an independent art market, raising the commercial value of art works on the world market. I consider it unacceptable that the work of galleries should be propped up with public money.

**J.K.: And what is it like in China?**

**Z.M.:** Somewhat different. The Chinese are blessed with very keen business acumen: a person who is able to earn a lot of money is considered smart. The "Artist" is not allowed to fall behind. Even a young unknown artist may try to sell his works for US\$80,000 only because "his paints similarly to his friend" whose work was once sold for 80 thousand. Everyone strives as they know how, conscious that at the moment Chinese art is in fashion, but this will change. Another joke about the Chinese art market: there is a very famous artist Zhang Xiaogang, a German art collector comes to China, and, hearing about an artist named Zhang Xiao Ku, buys his work only because his name sounds like that of Zhang Xiaogang.

Chinese art is extremely multi-cultural, and it is much more difficult to understand what the right criteria are. It is galleries that decide about the bon ton and the rationale. They also engender confidence in a particular artist: we may be sure that we are investing in a promising "project". Because a customer is not just buying art, but also a story and a piece of an artist. Take, for instance, a photograph of a house and a field. The story that comes with the image is a brutal one: the house is an orphanage for AIDS patients, and the field where they grow maize is the place where their parents who've died of AIDS are buried. Then you will look at it differently, won't you?

Personally, I like it when works open up slowly. It seems to me that for a viewer, more often as not, art is just a pastime and they even don't make an effort to go into depth: "Oh, something's been made there!" Each takes as much as they are capable of taking.

**J.K.: Still, the verbal aspect is not at all a self-evident and in-dispensable part of an artwork, because as a visual phenomenon it must be able to show "what you mean to say". Lengthy explanatory texts are sometimes so tiresome that I cannot but ask why the artist wants to wear me out.**

**Z. M.:** Of course, all learning is tiring! I agree with you. But I wanted to say something else: it's not about lengthy texts but about "key words". If a person writes to me a long love letter, I read no more than four lines, because I do not have time! I'll tell him that straight to his face. There's a million different ways for you to communicate. If you are not happy with a written text, you can try sound or vibration. Or, the Yves Klein classic, of making exhibition audiences after the opening urinate blue. Today an event like that would mean court proceedings. The same is true about how the works are displayed in an exhibition, whether it can entice the viewer to keep going further.

**J.K.: When speaking about Latvia you use the "we" form. Is there some special way of being a "Latvian in China"?**

**Z. M.:** Well, I'd hate to keep on saying "I", "me", "mine"... (*laughing*). I suppose, yes, I see myself as belonging to Latvia. Latvians (actually, I mean all residents of Latvia,) have a certain critical attitude and sceptical thinking. Perhaps because people were force-fed Communist ideology? China, too, has had enormous exposure to Communist ideology, and the fact that I am from Latvia helps me to understand China better.

Strictly speaking, it makes hardly any difference if I tell the Chinese that I am from Latvia, or from Ruararaland. In fact, I'd be happier if I came from Ruararaland, because then I could say anything that came into my mind. In Latvia's case, more often one must speak about Latvia as "not a Catholic country, not a country with Russian as an official language, not a country where all women are trapped in a web of prostitution, not a country where people are starving to death en masse."

For quite some time now, I have been absorbed by an idea. In the art centre, we conceived of an idea that we could create our own country and a pavilion at the *World Expo*. It appears that there is quite a number of such tiny self-created states in the world already! Our country would be named "The Republic of the Six", and all things in the world that can be measured in sixes would be the property of our country. Six spoons, six chairs, the sixth day... It is endlessly interesting to research into the preconditions for setting up a state: there is history to be invented, a flag to be designed, population to be selected, a penal code to be laid down, national features to be characterised, recognition by neighbouring states to be achieved. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, by setting up three neighbouring states at once. At present, we have even engaged lawyers in this work, and they have been carried away by the idea.

**J.K.: The usual mind trip. And what about your Chinese pseudonyms?**

**Z. M.:** Yes, I once had an art project where I invented various people, their biographies, the genres they were working in... but I'm not going to tell you anything about them now! The issue of nationality, unfortunately or luckily – it depends – is of importance within the context of the commerce of art. Of course, there are "formulas", which, if followed, ensure that works of art can be sold quite well. You have a rough idea of what customers like, and you know that your piece of work has to be a little "more or less Chinese" for it to be sold. At our centre we have works we call cash cows – they pay the rent, and then there are works created for ourselves, ones that allow us to develop new ways of communication.



Zane Mellupe. Mother. From the series 'Found Family'. 2008. Publicity photo

**J.K.: So what are these "cash cow formulas"?**

**Z. M.:** On a daily basis, an average of a hundred people visit our gallery and after some not too complex observations, you can tell with a good deal of accuracy what exactly they like and what those specific groups of people would be ready to buy. For instance, the "housewife" category prefers things "somewhat Chinese but not too much", "pop", or "interpretations of the Cultural Revolution". Of course, the space itself is important – selling off some walls is easier than off others. Similar factors are the lighting and the location of works, the way we enter a gallery or make an exit.

The Chinese art market is very chaotic and of course dynamic. People from all over the world flock to

China in the quest of art. It's all the rage! For example, in Shenzhen, there is a place called Dafen which employs a thousand or so craftsmen, as they call themselves. All they do is to paint Mona Lisas and other examples of Western art. Well, they are making copies, in other words. Paintings to be sold by weight. I must admit that the majority of Chinese are rather reserved and cautious towards the new media. Traditional oil painting, calligraphy and ink drawings still rate highly.

Once, as part of the art centre's residency programme, we had an artist who wanted his sculpture to be perforated, shot through by a person who had killed somebody. I took on the challenge and found a man – he was a shooting instructor. I play-acted, saying that I represented a company testing the durability of a particular material. The man agreed, unaware that he was taking part in the creation of an art work...

**J.K.: You like fictions, don't you?**

Z. M.: Yes, yes. It's the mind travel that attracts me.

**J.K.: Any authors that influence you?**

Z.M.: I am a little afraid of other artists because I don't want to be influenced... The ones I could feel affinity with might be war photographer James Nachtwey, and Dianne Arbus – her works are so truthful; also Ai Weiwei, and, of course, Sophie Calle – she has the most unique concepts!

**J.K.: In our conversation you have noted more than once the conceptual nature of art. In your opinion, these tools that artists came to use by way of conceptual art of the 1960s, are they different today? Do you see any continuity?**

Z.M.: Continuity? I'm not interested. To be more exact, I am interested, but there's no time to research. What is important to me is my own discovery, which possibly stems from ignorance. Inventing new things is much better than reading instructions. And what is conceptual art after all? My Mum told me that during wartime children in Latvia were taught to call pigs rabbits – so that at school nobody would blab about having pigs at home, and the pigs would not be requisitioned. That's conceptual art for you! And let other people's evaluations remain for themselves. If people say that this is not art, then I tell them that they don't know what they are talking about – because not only are they unable to see things, but they don't even want to try.

/Translator into English: Sarmīte Lietuviete/

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