

# Tich Interviews: Artist Kim Engelen

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For his latest interview, Tich has a change of pace by interviewing an international artist: Kim Engelen. Kim recently completed her book titled “The Little Bridge”.

- 1. Qn: It’s 1994, you are a freshman at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in The Netherlands. Did you always envision yourself taking this route or did it “just happen”?**

Tammy Rae Carland one of my teachers at CCA in San Francisco told us that an artist’s career has many winding roads. I think I agree with her on this. And maybe that is also a good thing – art is not completely predictable and so it opens up for new things to develop.

- 2. Qn: You describe yourself as a contemporary artist, please explain what that is for the layman.**

Contemporary Art is said to be an art expression or art form which takes place in the present time – Art from today. It works with images, situations, questions showing the possible tension and contradictions rooted in everyday life.

Contemporary artists can make use of a multitude of media, such as video, performance, photography, technology, drawing and painting. Contemporary Art can be any material, method, concept, and subject. According to Wikipedia to which I concur: “Contemporary art is part of a cultural dialogue that concerns larger contextual frameworks such as personal and cultural identity, family, community, and nationality”.

The cool thing to me about Contemporary Art is that it can't be really pinned down which makes it fluid and thus continuously interesting.

In my own art practice, Contemporary Art means a very personal but on the same hand conceptual and perhaps a more technical approach. For example in 2003 I did a performance called “The Life of Jogger” This I organized as if a regular sport event. I created a vast website (where people could find all sorts of information, read my joggers diary and signup for the 10k run and such). The run was announced on the radio. I had interviews about it, I had made an art video and all the joggers who had signed up received via post a cobalt blue T-shirts with in white text I SPORT on it. On the day itself the joggers jogged together 10 kilometers – as a blue breathing and living organism through the streets of Rotterdam. From the photographs made of the performance I created a photo-book with the name: The Face of Jogger.

**3. Qn: Fine art in China and in Europe. What are the similarities and differences you have observed?**

It has only been months since I came to China so that might be too short to say anything really. But I think fine arts in China and fine arts in the West have a very different timeline. Chinese fine art comes from such a vast and deep artistic culture of which I hardly know anything about. Western art has gone through many developments and changes and styles and movements and periods. Chinese art probably also went through a lot of transformations but my western eye is not trained to see these nuances. In general, Chinese fine art to me feels possibly more rooted and traditional. Maybe a little bit like what I said about Contemporary Art. To me, painting is a more traditional medium, so is let's say for example calligraphy. Additionally, I would maybe nevertheless also like to add that the art market can be perhaps a little bit homogenous. What works are selected and where are they shown, so in that regard are Chinese Fine Arts and European or Western Fine art really that different? Yes. Of course. But then again in what way? Or in what topics? Thinking of material, method, concept, and subject. Under the huge umbrella of Fine Arts also falls Contemporary Art. Among my longtime favorite Performance artists are, the Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh. In his "One Year Performance 1980-1981", he punched a card in a time clock on the hour for twenty-four hours a day. Freedom can also mean the freedom to suffer and endure at one's own beckoning. In an extreme fashion he blended art and life. As a true genius he made the thinking about art an artwork in itself. Another impressive artist to me is Zhang Huan. In his work "12 Square Meters" (1994) he sits in a public toilet smeared in oil and honey and endures flies all over on his body. He sits with shaven head in a meditative kind of pose. With his masochistic performance he seems to show how strong the mind can be and makes it look appalling and sexy at the same time. He managed his body as more than an aesthetic object. He used his own body as if

to express individual autonomy and agency. Another great work by him is "To raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond" (1997) in which you see several people waist high standing in a pond. This is documented by photographer Rong Rong and raises the question of authorship. Is the performance the artwork or are the images of the performance the art work? Are the photographs taken of the performance artist or of the photographer? Which makes me think also about the complexity of collaborations.

#### **4. Qn: Still Photography versus Video. Which do you think allows for more artistic expression?**

Since I graduated in 1999 up to maybe 2012 I considered myself a video-artist. During these 13 years, I would have probably answered video. I would have said video adds time to the mix, expression over time, and additional layers such as music and or sound. But now I think there is not one best solution which fits all circumstances. Since it depends on what you want to express. Sometimes photography might be more suitable, at other times video. And I think that it also matters what medium you are comfortable with. My custom is still video since I feel so relaxed with it. I love the medium: How it looks. How it works. How my body gets involved in the making. The possible interaction with the person in front of the camera. And how you are able with video to demand somehow from the viewer the time to experience your video. Since time is often a necessary element in video. The viewer has to look longer in order to be able to see more (or to possibly understand the artwork). In video time is an additional material that can affect the self-awareness state of mind of the viewer. On top of this I like how you can transform video into an installation and envelope the visitor in it.

**5. Qn: As a visual artist, how much does the saying “A picture says a thousand words” influence your artistic process?**

Although I am a visual artist I actually don't totally agree. Maybe I would if the word “can” had been added. I'm thinking of a short poem by Ernest Hemingway. Which consists of only 6 words: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Yes perhaps it takes more time to think. But what I want to say is that words can be incredibly powerful. Also, I love text: I love to make art-books. I love to write about my work. With words, you can be deliciously precise. But I am not a trained writer and English is not my mother language. Therefore as a medium to work with, it takes me much more time and effort. My specialty lies in social oriented performances, video and iPhone photography. But my topics of interest rotate around communication and self-development. So I am happy that, as an artist I am free to use whatever medium I see fit. In short: No, that particular saying doesn't influence my artistic process.

**6. Qn: You have an ongoing art project called “Sun-penetrations”. How do you think the casual observer relates to the concept behind this project?**

People (or the absence of them) play the central role in my art. I work and play with the individual as work in progress, with the focus on the intrinsic thinking world and the inner strength of the individual. In the (absence of) meeting with another through conscious reflection, development (or deterioration) can take place. More positively speaking or ideally, my works are about self-development, critical thinking and humanity.

I know sex and violence draw attention. But this work penetrates to a deeper level. It's a different sort of violence: loneliness. And the visual beauty that lies in the respect for this raw emotion. In my ongoing series "Sun-Penetrations" I show photographs and 1-minute videos. Most works are half dark, calm and quasi abstract images. The focus is or seems to be on the bright sunbeam and mostly no humans are visible (besides occasionally maybe legs or a hand). And yet it's so much about the body. The only deep penetrating that is taking place is from the sun piercing from outside inwards.

In "Sun-Penetrations" the (female) body is inside the home, the private space when experiencing the sun's passage in time. "Sun-Penetrations" move around the perceiving (self) domesticated body and its interpretation of the penetrating sun. These artworks come into existence by my own body traveling and thus living and staying in hotels, motels, residencies, and new homes.

When I was living in Berlin I had a solo exhibition at *Burnrate*. The art space was divided into 3 rooms (which I called experience rooms). And in the 3rd room in the back, I had the space filled with ticking clocks from the '80s. Making it acutely perceptible that time is and has been passing. My 1-minute videos showed beams of the sun, penetrating through windows, curtains, doors, burned glass and holes, into the inner space. When sitting in that space people said they felt they were coming under some sort of spell, or trance and said they felt calm and comforted.

**7. Qn: Your first solo exhibition: How nerve-racking was it? What was the inspiration behind its title: "In Between Cars"?**

The exhibition itself was not nerve-racking to me, I was just too busy with my schoolwork and side jobs to get everything organized and ready.

But the social implications of having a solo show whilst still being a student at art school was a disturbing experience. Without my knowledge, a fellow student out of spite or jealousy, had created a (fake?) political campaign between herself and me and had the (fake?) results up on posters with our names and faces, throughout the school. I also had to hear that some art teachers supposedly had said that they didn't believe I had organized it all by myself. But I had, and the exhibition was a success: It was opened by the minister of culture. The show was well visited. With the exhibition came a black paged catalog of my artworks. I had sold a work and the exhibition made the newspapers.

The title of the exhibition had a double connotation. On one hand, it pointed out literally: (Art) in between cars. On the other hand, I wanted to imply some sort of intimacy. I think in my art there is always some sort of intimacy involved or making the private, public. Since it is real and personal: It deals with inner thoughts, the body, and social interactions. It can be exposing and thus vulnerable. So I created a sort of space within a public space. And the exhibition name "in between cars" has the same sort of particular private / public feeling to it. Also, I strongly felt and feel that art is about life and should be accessible to everybody, back then I didn't like the idea of the artificial white art cube (which is created for the sole purpose of showing art). So doing an exhibition in a car showroom was for me very fitting.

**8. Qn: Having lived in 6 different countries, which would you say has been a greatest source of artistic inspiration the most?**

I think all countries have had their effect on me and thus my art.

The Netherlands is where I originally come from and where I had my initial training at the art academy as an artist. Spain is where I did my first artist in residence abroad and where I felt the first love for the earth, the people and the language and where I experienced women actually supporting each other. Then in 2010 I studied at CCA in San Francisco where I was surrounded by so many different people of race, creed and social background. I was surrounded by super intelligent and open-minded

characters by which I felt mentally stimulated, I felt I could grow. Here my theoretical side as an artist got nourished. It is also here where I started to write weekly tumblr posts. Which I still do

([kimengelen.tumblr.com](http://kimengelen.tumblr.com)).

Sweden is where I completed my masters in Critical and Pedagogical Studies and where I fully emerged in my studies and where my work broke free from only using video as a medium. Berlin, the city of Sodom and Gomorrah, is where I lived for 4 years and had personal experiments which shaped me even further, into who I am today. Here I took a curating degree

and also had my Private-Mini-Exhibitions. And now here in China although feeling quite exposed as the foreigner and yet, strangely enough, feeling totally safe. As an artist I feel free to be personal and poetic without feeling it to be downgraded. People, here I feel support personal growth. As instead of the western feeling I have in Western cultures, of being only acknowledged when being critical, academic and serious. Although I come here as me. I think I am a bit of both, very serious in my work and also very personal. I think this is where I have to be with my art. For me being in China is nurturing and I think it does my art good.

9. **Qn: Have you exhibited in China yet? How was the experience? If not, why?**

Yes. It was a mixed group-exhibition in Hangzhou called "Unstruct". It was held in the exhibition space of Chen Haiping and his wife JunJun. From them I felt generosity, freedom, tenderness and warmth. In this group exhibition I became very aware of my own extreme diligence and drive to have my work look perfect in every single aspect. I presented a large-scale light-box with in it a video still frame from my bridge-performance called "Empathetic Walking Panel" on the *Broken Bridge*. The performance was captured using a drone video camera and shows *The Broken Bridge* from above.

The "Bridge-Performances" are one of my ongoing art projects. I coined these temporary encounters of co-creating the "Bridge-Performances". To me the bridge is a wonderful tool to work with, it stands as a metaphor symbolizing connection, process and transition. And during the bridge-performance "Empathetic Walking Panel" I asked three thought-provoking questions about the expat community living in Hangzhou. The transcript of this conversation is presented in the first art-book I made in China called "Empathetic Walking Panel" and was placed on a pedestal next to the lightbox.

10. **Qn: What is the next step for you as an artist?**

At the moment I have several books lined up. The art-book "The Little Bridge" from my last artist in residence in Jiaying is into print. I lived and worked for six days at the Meihuazhou Scenic Spot in Jiaying. Every day I made one new artwork and exhibited the new work the same day while continuing to make new works of art. The exhibition space was presented as an artist studio where people could walk in to see

the artworks in progress.

Furthermore, I want to complete my art-book “Private-Mini-Exhibitions”. While living in Berlin I inaugurated six mini-exhibitions at my home. By opening up my private space to the public I continued to initiate a setting for a temporary intimacy, similar to the “Bridge-Performances” themselves. This art book is now being translated into German and I’m thinking whether or not I want to make it trilingual and also have it translated into Chinese.

Then I have another book in the pipeline which is something completely different from what I would normally do – namely an art-book for kids. In here are art lesson-scripts with images from actual student works. The art classes are oriented around Western modern art.

Moreover, I want to do many exhibitions. I have a group-exhibition in December coming up. Gallery Ram and Bin Art Center told me that they want to exhibit my work. Then next year I will have an art show in Shanghai near the Bund.

Also, I was thinking that for more than 20 years I have operated as a freelance artist. Now I want to see if I can have gallery representation here in China in order to enjoy the push and support of professionals. My intention is to be to be a high-ranking artist and, in that sense, my next step is always to make great art and show it.

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Questions: Ticahona, Hangzhou Writers Association

Answers: Kim Engelen, December 5, 2018

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