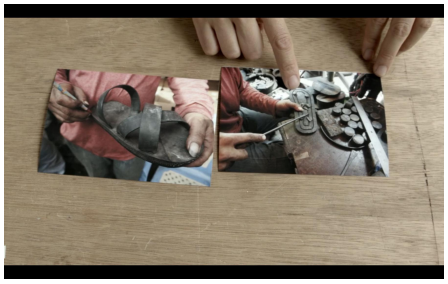
The Discreet Charm of Chance

by Jari Niesner

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Xin Cheng telling stories of rubber reuse, encountered in Cambodia, Japan, Taiwan, Korea. Jesús Pulpón, Federico Calvo Gutierrez, Xin Cheng, *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019). Two-channel video installation with mattress borrowed from Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort before it is exported overseas.



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Heidi Salaverría, Xin Cheng, *Elastic Dialogues* (2019). Works on paper, artist's book, walking & talking. Photo: Federico Calvo Gutierrez.



Special opening night event: *On the other side of the reflection* by Jozefina Frljić, Natalia Golubtsova, Sigrid Bohlens (choreography), Tam Thi Pham & Goran Lazarević (music). Photo: Pedrothe.Communist.

Local writer Jari Niesner walks us through the recent Hamburg exhibition Following the Rubber Trails *at Frappant Galerie by New Zealand artist Xin Cheng, based in Germany since 2016.*

For the most part, life is a string of chance events. Where, when and whom we meet lies beyond our limited control. So, it can only be happenstance that a New Zealander of Asian descent runs into a German neophyte barely arrived back from Canada. Hamburg, the gateway to the world, is Germany's famous port city on the shores of the river Elbe with many a green place popping up between beautiful buildings from the neo-renaissance, expressionist or modernist periods, and a few post-war sprawls of living blocks. It is an architecturally-diverse city, still undisturbed by the megalomania of skyscrapers. Many, especially the young generation, are drawn to the thriving culture of the metropolis

with its vivid nightlife, bars and cafés, and its ethnic diversity and openness.

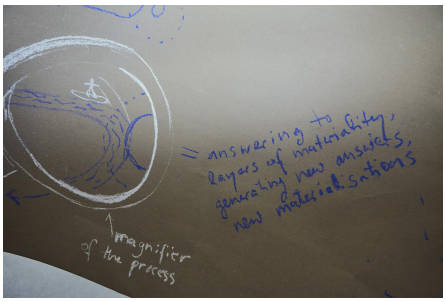
Hence, it comes as no surprise that housing prices are high and there's a constant struggle of the small against the big players. This is, in a way, the original story of the Frappant Galerie – an association (est. 2005) which advocates for contemporary art outside of state-governed institutions. After a long and bitter fight with IKEA, Frappant had to leave their former home behind, but were consequently able to buy the empty barracks in Altona, a western part of Hamburg. They set up there in early 2010 and have been enriching the art scene with a number of gallery and club spaces ever since.



It is in this artist-run space that Xin Cheng from Auckland presented her collaborative project *Following the Rubber Trails*, which involved installations, drawings, performances, videos and philosophy. The exhibition, a journey through several of the manifold implications and environments of rubber filled with air (hoses, tyres, etc.), uncovers the material's porosity and elasticity, continually (r)evolving stories, lifeworlds and atmospheres. Xin's work often blurs the boundaries between art and the practical demands of everyday life. She makes the case that only an adaptive

and playful approach leads us to a future where we are still alive. The collective nature of this exhibition, which includes works from a range of other artists and from different fields, expands this approach.

Xin Cheng and I met in 2017 when she joined a group of performers at the Summer Festival at Kampnagel, one of the great venues of off-theatre in Hamburg. At that time, Juan Dominguez and Arantxa Martínez, two Berlin-based artists from Spain, were collaborating with the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst (where Xin was pursuing a Master's degree in design) to create the garden of the International Summer Festival Hamburg. I was part of the organising team which enabled the living sculptures, of which Xin would eventually become an essential part. After the festival, Xin and I continued our sporadic email exchange and then moved on from there to walking and talking throughout the city, but mostly alongside the Alster, another Hamburg river. A practice Xin later revived and developed with the philosopher Heidi Salaverría, who joined her for a special event at the opening of *Following the Rubber Trails* as conversational partner.



Heidi Salaverría, Xin Cheng, *Elastic Dialogues* (2019). Works on paper, artist's book, walking & talking. Photo: Federico Calvo Gutierrez.



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Shortly before the opening at Frappant Galerie on the evening of Friday 19 July 2019, I'm chatting with a few other attendees around a convivial beer. We are soon invited into the first of three gallery spaces: a large Möbius strip, inconspicuously made from a roll of Manila paper, occupies almost the entire room. It is suspended from the ceiling by strips of elastic cut out from bicycles' inner-tubes and on it there are quotes and drawings –

some of them upside down, others bent and stretched over a wide area. It is quite a challenge for the audience to fit in the room, some people even slip under the strip and take a look from the centre. I watch people twist their heads in order to read what is written on the strip. It almost feels as though the audience itself is unknowingly tested in its flexibility.

A moment later, the second gallery space down the corridor opens and the crowd disperses. In the second room there is a two-channel video installation, one video projected and the other playing on a monitor, with a small relaxing area in the middle – two mattresses to lie on with a book at the head side and a little lamp for reading. The area invites us to rest – but with the crowd shuffling around, it also creates a tension of doubt. Should I lie down? How will I cope under the gaze of the others? Again, it's almost as if the audience's flexibility is under scrutiny. How elastic can our thoughts be made?

Near the entrance, the projected video of the installation *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019) gives insight into the craftsmanship of a Phnom Penh worker, who makes sandals from old rubber tyres. "They are good for gardening, and last for ages," he tells Xin, who travelled to this part of Cambodia in 2014 and, with the help of a friend, found this man who made a living recycling rubber. Xin has long been interested in resourcefulness of all kinds, and has been looking for ways to work with rubber as a material with a variety of possibilities. Watching this craftsman closely, it becomes clear that there's no need for a special saw for cutting the material, simply a sharp knife and a bowl of oil to lubricate the blade. To fit the straps into the slits in the sole, a strip of hard plastic is folded in half, sandwiching the rubber strap, which is then pulled into place.

Making rubber sandals looks peaceful, but there's a dark history behind it. Soldiers, townspeople – frankly everyone in Cambodia – were forced to wear sandals during the period that went down in the annals as the most gruesome past of the country. Namely, the story of the Khmer Rouge, a far-left revolutionary group who took over Cambodia after the United States left the region at the end of the Vietnam conflict. Under the leadership of dictator Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge tried to establish an agrarian socialist society in a government of sameness, where any kind of individualism was punished with death. While they might have intended to build a

perfect society and to banish human inequality, they in fact ended up with genocide. One of the many lessons that Xin brings back to us from a now recovered Cambodia is that it matters greatly how new forms of living and notions of resourcefulness are implemented within our societies. The *how* is as important as the *w hat* when it comes to public and people-to-people relations, and economics has to be understood as a tool to support resilient livelihoods.



Jesús Pulpón, Federico Calvo Gutierrez, Xin Cheng, *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019). Two-channel video installation with mattress borrowed from Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort before it is exported overseas. Photo: Federico Calvo Gutierrez.



Historian Jürgen Ellermeyer telling stories of rubber invention, import from the tropics and production at Museum der Arbeit, Hamburg, which used to house the New-York Hamburg Rubberware Company. Jesús Pulpón, Federico Calvo Gutierrez, Xin Cheng, *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019). Two-channel video installation with mattress borrowed from Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort before it is exported overseas.



A craftsman in Phnom Pehn, Cambodia, making sandals from old tyres, in the same style as those used during the Khmer Rouge. Jesús Pulpón, Federico Calvo Gutierrez, Xin Cheng, *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019). Two-channel video installation with mattress borrowed from Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort before it is exported overseas.



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One example of this important distinction is provided in a segment of the second video playing in the room, which shows people who regularly meet near the Hamburg market Alte Rindermarkthalle

St. Pauli in order to help each other repair their bikes. This self-help, skill-sharing concept is popular among alternative communities in Hamburg and around the globe. On the monitor, we also learn about the self-taught American chemist, Charles Goodyear (1800-1860) – one of the many fathers of vulcanised rubber. The story goes that his wife Clarissa was tired of his effectless experiments with natural rubber (caoutchouc), so he had to hide them from her. When she unexpectedly came back early one day, Charles went to quickly throw away a rubber mass he'd been working on; however, he accidentally spilled it onto the stove and when he took it off again, he noticed that it had become a new material. This story is recounted by Jürgen Ellermeyer, former historian at the Museum der Arbeit (Museum of Work), located in the buildings of the New-York Hamburger Gummi-Waaren Compagnie, which, founded in 1871, imported virgin rubber and turned it into other items (combs, mouthpieces for clarinets) up until the '80s. Xin accompanies Ellermeyer's historical insights with her own photo-stories of rubber transformations in Tokyo, Taipei and Seoul, where she discovered multiple ways to be creative with this material – from a playground for children with monsters and climbing frames, to waste bins made from old tyres.

After giving the audience some time to watch the video material and have a close look at the tortuous Möbius strip, Xin and collaborator Heidi Salaverría gather us around the strip and begin their talk on the philosophy of rubber. As a material, rubber does not only reflect the central element of chance apparent in the artist's practice, but it also connects with improvisation as a crucial human ability. The philosopher and the artist give us a glimpse at how their relationship has developed after they met at another art space in Hamburg, the FRISE Künstlerhaus. They move along the Möbius strip symbolising an infinite warp of events. Salaverría explains her concept of 'the beauty of doubting', stating that discovery is often based on doubt and that "elastic systems are more resilient".

Blue lines, found all over the rubber strip, are also printed throughout the accompanying booklet. They could be clouds or the wide sea. Parts of Xin and Salaverría's dialogue is printed in this booklet, discussing "elasticity, doubting, the vague, improvisation, generating worlds, layers of answerability, scales and dragons..." It

begins with a quote by Xin: “The surface, where things meet, is where most of the action is”. Unlike the notion that the brain is first and foremost occupied with its inner workings, this statement aims at the encounter of each other. The discourse shifts to the dual system of form and matter (white/black, male/female, mind/body), the dichotomy of interdependence and autonomy, which the two speakers expose as artificial binaries. There is a sense of scepticism in the room staggering between acceptance and revolt. In uncertain times like ours, isn't more certainty the way to go, rather than the abundance of doubt? After all, one cannot doubt everything. Here again, we are reassured that “the how of doubting plays an important role”. What we need is an acknowledgement of constant change, the difference between living practice and static claims, an acknowledgement of “the third” in-between. One of the quotes (by Marilyn Frye from the *Politics of Reality*) on the Möbius strip points at this “flirtation with meaninglessness – […] trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist”. Another given example of the artificiality of binaries are moiré patterns, which are produced by overlaying at least two similarly ruled patterns with transparent gaps. The term originates back to a French type of textile, traditionally made of silk and with a watery appearance.



Opening night performance: *Resonanz* by Jozefina Frljić, Natalia Golubtsova, Sigrid Bohlens (choreography), Tam Thi Pham & Goran Lazarević (music). Photo: Federico Calvo Gutierrez.



Xin Cheng, *Elastic Space* (2019). Used bike inner tubes, hooks. Photo: Xin Cheng.

The ramifications of improvising with rubber are demonstrated in the third and last space, situated between the two other rooms. As the doors open, we find a large installation with rubber tubes hanging from the ceiling. Plastic water bottles dangle, too. While the audience floods in, lured by the sound of an accordion and the Vietnamese instrument dàn bau, two performers begin to move about the room, obstructed by the elastic bands. They are accompanied by the instruments for dramatic effect and their dance is serious, swift or slow. Bouncing, playing with the rubber, becoming enmeshed in it. Getting caught up and freeing themselves again. But the web of rubber serves not only as a physical obstruction for their performance – it also becomes an *ide a* or *reflection* of the movements of their bodies. The performers move like rubber itself. At one point, a tube snaps and, suddenly, collective self-awareness is palpable: even the most flexible material can break sometimes.

The dance performance is followed by another mystic sound performance by Tam Pham, a musician who produces sound through sensors underneath her gloves. This part takes me by surprise and I don't know how to connect it to the trail of rubber

which leaves me thinking that perhaps it was a suggestion by Tam Pham herself and thus constitutes a final element of chance.

After the applause subsides, I take a closer look at the three-part booklet – *Rubber Trails/Elastic Dialogues/Porous-Elasticity* – which is complete with a hidden pocket in the middle. Through a couple of randomly-placed holes, the reader can spot another drawing and a few artistic responses inserted in the booklet.

I also find two of my own poems in the book – Xin had asked me for a poetic response to the concepts of elasticity/porosity. They are opposites as well as complements and relate to Xin's reflections on emptiness and spaciousness and the capacity for expanding space. In a time when the world seems stuffed and full of apparently unneeded things, Xin's exhibition reminds me that on the fringes there's plenty of room. Creativity can work with and on any material. This can be highlighted with another quotation from the booklet, this time from the Chinese philosopher Laozi, whom Xin has drawn on on a constant basis:

> "Thirty spokes unite in one nave and on that which is non-existent on the hole in the nave depends the wheel's utility. Clay is moulded into a vessel and on that which is non-existent on its hollowness depends the vessel's utility. By cutting out doors and windows we build a house and on that which is non-existent on the empty space within depends the house's utility. Therefore, existence renders actual but non-existence renders useful."



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Used tyres in Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort, Hamburg, waiting to be exported overseas. Jesús Pulpón, Federico Calvo Gutierrez, Xin Cheng, *Rubber Trails* (2014-2019). Two-channel video installation with mattress borrowed from Chef Kemal's trading yard in Rothenburgsort before it is exported overseas.



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Xin Cheng, *Elastic Space* (2019). Used bike inner tubes, hooks. Photo: Xin Cheng.

One might add that only in an empty space is there room for things to come in. The virtue of rooms are their possibility to serve as meeting places. In this, Xin's work not only harks back to Chinese philosophy of spaciousness, which is essentially grounded in the belief that all things are connected, but also to the practice of upcycling and readymades in contemporary Western art, similar perhaps to that of Joseph Beuys' work, an artist who placed himself in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and sought to reuse his *objets trouvés* in surprising new ways. In fact, Xin merges those sources of inspiration into something quite her own. At the centre of her artistic practice is the concept of *change*. Most of the water running away from the city into drains contains rubber. These grindings from tyres, construction materials or footwear, in tiny portions, find their way into other systems, even into our own bodies. If we want to be resourceful, resilient and respectful, first we need to confront ourselves with the manifold implications of change. We have to make room for others. Xin proves that you can

make something from the discreet charm of chance that we come across, as with ubiquitous rubber.

Biographies



Xin Cheng likes to walk, and do stuff around making by hand, ecology, conviviality. While living in Hamburg from 2016 to 2019 she hosted performative talks and workshops on everyday resourcefulness in Berlin, Sheffield, Mexico City; befriended dancers, film-makers, philosophers, junk traders; wrote stories for hainamana.com; made books with Materialverlag and organised a multidisciplinary show on rubber trails. Returning to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland before a virus changed the world, she is happy to continue her making-do(ing) with old and new friends. Her works have been shown in public galleries throughout Aotearoa and at International Biennial of Graphic Design Brno (Czech Republic), Sprint Milano (Italy), Frappant Galerie (Hamburg). She has done residencies in Norway, Taiwan, Cambodia, Switzerland, Korea, and Japan. She was previously a co-director of the artist-run-space RM, Auckland and holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (Germany), and studied ecology, psychology and fine arts at the University of Auckland. xin-cheng.info, small-workshop.info



Jari Niesner is a writer and director based in Hamburg, Germany. During and after the completion of his studies in philosophy, English literature, and dramaturgy, he's been involved in numerous theatre productions at home and abroad. His own works include the chamber opera *Die Toten-Farce by Niklas Anczykowski* (2017) and the performance installation *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot (2018).

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