

performingborders | LIVE 2019 (LADA)

Burong's Conversation with Miao Jiaxin

Location and date: Brooklyn (USA), May 11th to 29th, 2019



Next Performance (Belgrade, 2016) Credit: Tina Maric

Miao Jiaxin (<http://miaojiaxin.com/>)

Beginning in Shanghai, where his photography works expressed the universal theme of urban angst, Miao then immigrated to New York, expanding his view of urban streets towards a more conceptual public stage. Miao's works often express the ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic tension that always exists between the individual and governing or cultural authorities, questioning assumptions about power in relation to identity politics. He posits the artist's nature as one who transgresses boundaries, challenges consensus, and stays distance from authorities.

Miao Jiaxin met Marta in NYC during his project *Jail's Seeking Prisoners* in which Marta stayed in his cage/prison for one night with her little dog Untitled. After Marta moved back to Belgrade in 2015, Miao came to visit Marta in Belgrade and worked with PerformanceHUB students in 2016 and 2017. He is the first tutor of PerformanceHUB.

Q 1. *What is your personal trajectory of becoming a performance artist?*

A 1. I was born and raised up in China in a working class family. No one had told me that art could be life and career. Going through the major educations in the 1990s when China initiated fast growing economy, like the majority of my generation I chose to study popular majors, like Advertisement for monetary opportunities. In school, I met my mentors and I learnt photography, loved the way how cameras record moments.

We are the generation got brainwashed in similar but different way than our parents. With the luxury of time and rebellious energy, I found photography poetic, abstract in concept as opposed to the practical and ideologized knowledge that leads you to be a standard person.

I was intrigued to take large amount of photos and soon found out the action of taking mundane photos was more powerful and political than the photo results. I started to realize that I am an artist who at the time only produced photographs. But they are emotional photos - the aggressive flash and extremely contrast black and white images constantly remind you the existence of the artist or an individual. I at the time had already strong desire to step out from behind of the camera to be in the front.

Opportunities brought me to New York City after practicing life and art in China. I worked in Chinatown for 3 years, struggled and enjoyed the drifting of life, learned and observed the inequality in all different aspects of our social structure. It became abnormal to be part of the norm and being numb.

Performance art allows artists to be more expressive in voice and in body, brings awareness of the alternative existences, and itself is essentially an art form that resists the institutionalized art

and art in the capitalism market.

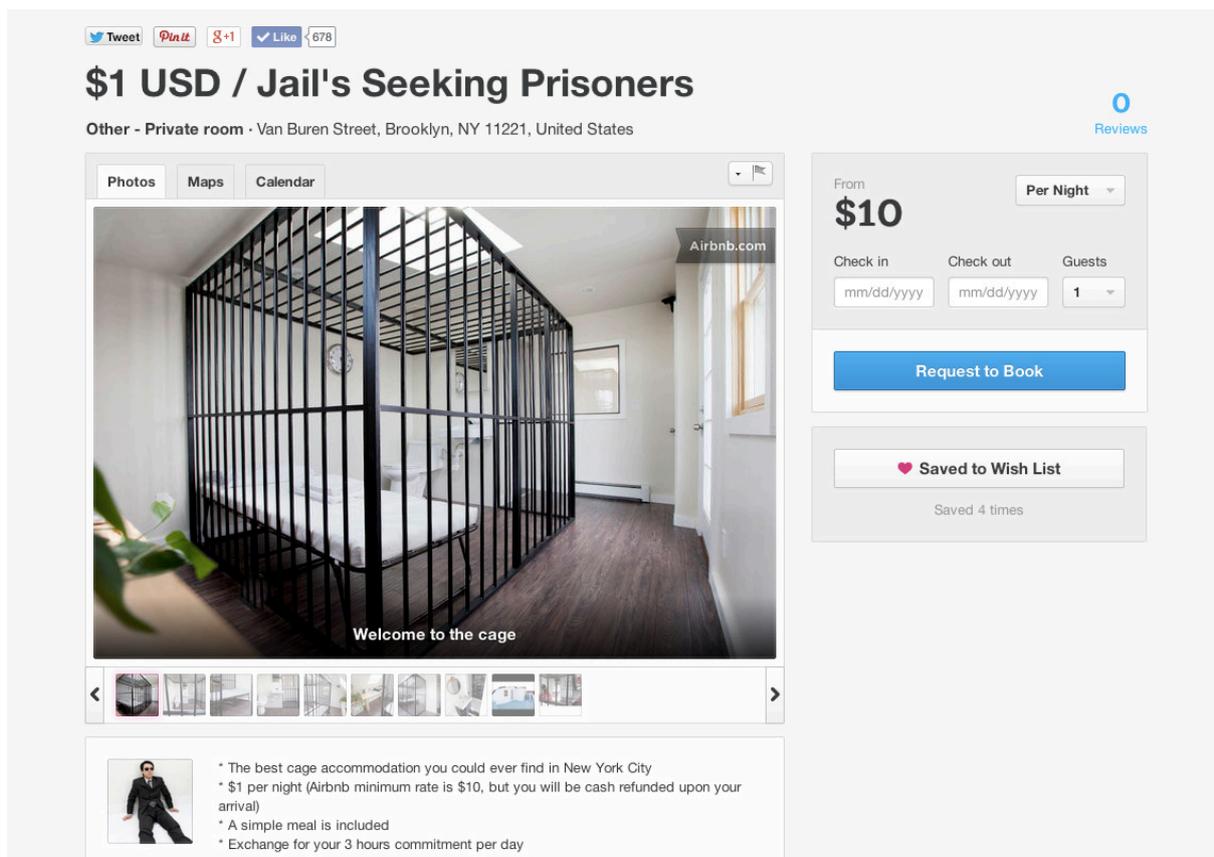
I joined the performance art community a few years later in Brooklyn New York, meeting all different spirit and performative energy. Showing works is more like a self introduction. Years later, people often recognized me somewhere. They couldn't remember my name but one of my performances. I really like this. And I also like that the person sooner or later would completely forget the performance. But I know he was inspired at the moment, and pleased when he could again be able to remember it. And he must already have passed the energy he got from the performance to the people surrounding him. That's what we could do at least as an artist.

I see my art making is more influenced by conceptualism, less activism. But today art is political. I do pay lots of attention to feminism, black lives matter, queer and LGBT. These are not different topics. They are all about one theme of human equality.

To be an artist, we question ourselves, we care or we do not care. Further more, the question becomes, to be or not to be an artist.

My mentor Barbara DeGenevieve simply told me once upon a time, being an artist today is political. I guess that's the influence I had for the art making. We are equipped with the idea to liberate and to be liberated, and we push boundaries as far as high as we could, so we generate the inspirations for others.

Q 2. As an artist from China and from different cultural background, how did you come across Marta and her art practice? What is your impression?



Screenshot of *Jail's Seeking Prisoners* (NYC, 2014) on Airbnb Courtesy: Miao Jiaxin

A 2. I met Marta in 2014 through a mutual friend who was also very active in performance art scene in NYC. She brought her lovely dog Untitled to my studio which at the time was turned into a Jail cell.

Marta was very relaxed and calm from my first impression. She could also get excited when she introduced her new works and talked about her personal life. I felt I could always click with people who are frank and not pretentious. We were both living in NYC, but Marta was definitely from a whole different world to me. It's not because that she's Serbian and I am Chinese. This is more because I lived in Bushwick, Brooklyn, hanging out with all the struggling young artists and most of them are financially broke and emotionally unstable, as opposed to Marta.

I appreciate her sincerity, her strong belief and her fearlessness in not only practicing art but also

practicing life. She was new and she was completely a stranger to me, but I knew that I knew this person in heart.

Marta and Untiled stayed in my Jail cage for that night, as participation for this art project, called *Jail's Seeking Prisoners*, where participants would stay in this \$1 Airbnb accommodation with live streaming camera broadcasting 24/7. We became friends ever since then. That led to the later stories. I visited her gallery and got to know more of her art, and more conversations, and later I was introduced to PerformanceHUB in Serbia.

After the studio visit, the 2nd time meeting Marta took place during her weeks long solo performance, *Clairvoyant*, where she invited participants for coffee in a setup living room, part of the gallery in Chelsea. She would start a casual conversation, get into your life while you respond and finish the cup of coffee.

As part of the Serbian or Balkan tradition as well as daily ritual, Marta became a predictor while looked at your leftover coffee marks on the cup, telling you the upcoming happenings and giving you life advices.

While being fully aware it's a life alike performance, we drove the conversation semi playful with laughs and truth. Marta seemed well trained in this game. She handled the conversation freely while observing and carefully probing into your sensitivity.

She predicted that I would meet a very important female friend in the near future, and amazingly it happened. Can't you believe it? I even doubted that she believed it! All the cups with the coffee mark were photo documented, and the stories came with the live performance were the memorable moments to be continued.

Marta relates her performance art to cultural rituals. The metaphor of coffee reading in predicting life events in culture and history was presented in an art gallery, talking to an unpredictable art world in a piece of performance. I personally find it's intriguing.



Q 3. *What is your experience living in this city and working with PerformanceHUB students?*

A 3. Marta moved back from NYC to Belgrade in 2015. We kept in touch and later talked about visiting Belgrade and PerformanceHUB for an artist talk and workshop. I of course was quite interested in seeing this city, their traditions, the trace of the recent history and the modernity, as well as young generation people, along with their practice in contemporary arts.

Chinese people from my parents' generation probably all know the name of Belgrade and former Yugoslavia. It was their comrade country. Almost everyone saw Yugoslavian propaganda movies and they cheered for their national teams in Olympic games.

I have seen China's fast change and development, and I was naturally fascinated to see what's going on in the former comrade country, which once upon a time had so much similarities in the appearance of urban development, as well as people with alike minds.

The trip to Belgrade was for learning and sharing, meeting talented people and feeling great energy in the art world in Belgrade. PerformanceHUB functions as an institution which recruits performative people in the practice of contemporary art, and builds up a tight community for art practice and communication. It would later travel and represent Serbian performance art to the world.

Visiting Belgrade is one of the most impressive trips so far. Seeing all the new and old, transitions and gaps, yet still with grey and pain after all the wars and unrest, someone should predict that it's just great timing for the birth of great art.

Visual references:

1. *Next Performance*

<http://miaojiaxin.com/next-performance-2016/>

2. *Massage*

<http://www.g12hub.com/en/content/miao-jiaxin-studio-massage-parlor-belgrade>

3. *Jail's Seeking Prisoners*

<http://www.miaojiaxin.com/MENU%20and%20TEXTS/Jail's%20seeking%20prisoners.html>