

SOCIÉTÉ

TIMUR SI-QIN  
*Forgiving Change*  
Historisches Museum Basel,  
Haus zum Kirschgarten

**Art | Basel**  
**Parcours**





Installation view  
Historisches Museum Basel,  
Haus zum Kirschgarten





Timur Si-Qin  
*Forgiving Change*, 2018  
Cast aluminium and paint  
300 x 215 x 230 cm  
118 1/2 x 84 1/2 x 90 1/2 in

















Installation view  
The High Line, New York



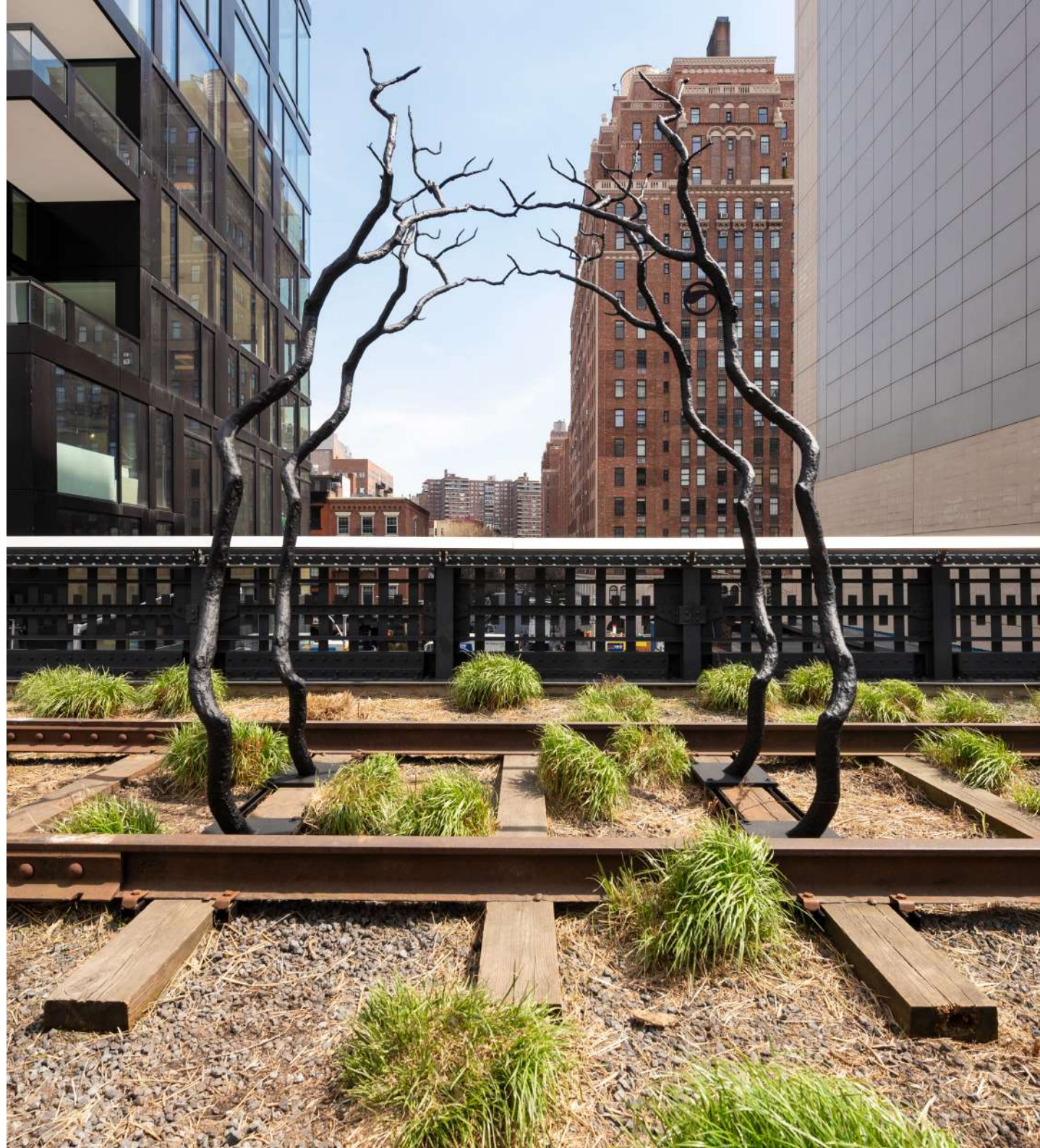






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FORGIVING CHANGE





Installation view  
Beaufort 2021  
Blankenberge





Start . Fundamentals . An interview with Timur Si-Qin by Anneleen van Kuyck

# An interview with Timur Si-Qin by Anneleen van Kuyck

DATE

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**Anneleen van Kuyck: You initially created this piece for the High Line in New York, a park created on a former railroad. Art takes the place of industry there, you could say. In Blankenberge, your work stands in front of a church. Religion plays a key role in New Peace, your long-term project in which this work also fits. Is this specific location of the work meant as a symbolic statement, as an alternative to the Christian narrative, which is losing its following in the Belgian context?**

Timur Si-Qin: The major religions, but especially Christianity in the West, had a monopoly on spirituality and religious emotions for a very long time. But now an evolutionary mismatch problem arises. Christianity grew organically in the context of agricultural societies and was later sedimented through canonization, but the scripture is not necessarily relevant anymore to the contemporary environment. Today we're faced with the global environmental crisis, and it has a lot to do with how we, in the West, view the planet in this dualist, agriculturalist frame of mind. We think about it in terms of extracting as many resources out of a given square meter of land as possible. I think we should recognize religions as meaning systems that guide adaptive behavior, specifically at the scale of the group, for current, local conditions. Today, facing the wholesale erasure of the environment, we need to turn to alternative frameworks for spirituality to reengineer our relationship with the planet.

**AvK: How would a framework adapted to the climate crisis be fundamentally different from the way of thinking that Christianity installed?**

TSQ: I think the Christian agricultural tradition became spiritually detached from the living aspect of nature. Nature was regarded as inherently sinful and deceptive. Later this gave rise to the metaphor of nature as a machine and the Cartesian dualism between mind and body. It set up a contemporary culture that approaches organisms only in terms of value and doesn't recognize them as actual living and related creatures.

The role of Christianity became an acute political issue, as in the United States, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, where right-wing Christian nationalism holds enormous power and presents the largest resistance to green politics. But it is also a factor in a more cultural or historical sense, having shaped the basic modes of perception and values of the Western European consciousness, including both the right as well as the left.

Instead, we need a culture that recognizes and values the innate, priceless, and living quality of the planet. Many such cultures, that hold nature at the center of their value system, exist. The Western anti-nature trait is in fact an aberrant minority among world cultures in this regard.

Today we need to popularize a spirituality of symbiosis that instills the values of nature and organisms into our culture. I suspect only a cultural movement with this type of spiritual dimension, would be able to catalyze such a deep shift in behavior, as it has in the past.

**AvK: You yourself grew up with many cultural influences.**



TSQ: Yes, I was born in Berlin to a German mother and an ethnic Mongolian Chinese father. When I was eight, my mom married a Native American man from the San Carlos Apache tribe. We moved to Arizona and I grew up there. During that time, my family traveled between different Indigenous communities in the Southwest and participated in Pow Wow ceremonies [social gatherings usually of many different tribes]. My religious upbringing was in a sense Lakota, one of the robustly surviving, pan-native American traditions after the civil rights movement. Growing up in that culture is a unique experience because it is also somehow invisible against the backdrop of the larger American society.

**AvK: How exactly did that Indigenous background, those ceremonies shape your idea of spirituality?**

TSQ: At some point I became very interested in New Materialism, which is a strain of philosophy that emerged in the nineties, with philosophers such as Manuel de Landa, Elizabeth Grosz or Donna Haraway. New Materialism largely shifts the anthropocentric focus and advocates a flat ontology that recognizes the equality of all organisms, human and non-human. In a way it represents Western thought breaking through to an understanding of the world that was always already understood by many Indigenous cultures.

A sweat lodge ceremony for example is a little hut in which one puts hot rocks and pour water over it to produce steam. It's like a sauna inside, but of course it's a ritual practice. There is singing and drumming, and a part of the ceremony involves praying to the rocks that you bring in. One isn't praying to a rock deity, in the sense that the rock functions as a symbol of a god or something, but to the rock itself, to those specific rocks that you recognize as your relatives. That's the fundamental philosophical concept of the Lakota religion, which is expressed in 'Mitakuye Oyasin'. It means 'all my relations' which expresses the very core of the Lakota religion: that we are all related. We're related to the animals, the plants, the rocks, the wind. That's an advanced philosophical concept that we're now approaching. In the West, this idea of a fundamental relation to other beings became partly available with the discovery of evolution by Darwin, but it is only now through contemporary discourses like New Materialism that we have the conceptual tools to integrate this view of reality.

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**AvK: In contrast, you often work with digital rendering and 3D-printing; Forgiven Change is cast from aluminum. These are materials and techniques that seem far removed from the organic idea we have of nature, or from what we consider to be an ecological, sustainable production process.**

TSQ: The rarified objects that are art, are insignificant compared to industrial processes or culture at large. And more importantly, it's misleading to pin yourself down to these symbols and tokens regarding what one thinks is green or ecological versus what's not. A part of the reason why I use these counterintuitive materials and processes is specifically to break this tendency for dualistic

signification. We often take an image or material as representing something else, as a word or symbol

associated with an ideology, for example. A lot of my work comes in the language of advertising and commercial aesthetics, and for people, especially in the West, it's often interpreted as a sign of capital.

**AvK: But that's not your intention?**

TSQ: No, I use marketing images because I'm interested in the cognitive dynamics of the human animal. It's a sort of investigation from an anthropological or even ethological perspective: how does the human animal, the homo sapiens, populate its world? What about objects and artefacts that humans make in their reality? I think that tells a lot of the way how our cognition functions and of our evolutionary history as animal organisms, that are prone to manipulation. This perspective encounters some resistance; when it comes to advertising, or also the surveillance culture we live in, we often think of manipulation in a negative way. But I think there's also an empathetic bridge to the vulnerability that we share with all other organisms as well. Just like any animal, humans are predicated on material conditions and manipulation.

**AvK: In Belgium, almost 60 000 citizens filed a lawsuit against the Belgian authorities. This so-called 'Climate Case' appeared in court last spring; in June, the judge condemned Belgium for its negligent climate policy. They had similar cases in the Netherlands and Germany. Furthermore, in more and more countries, nature in general or parks, rivers or mountains are declared as legal entities. Is this legal recognition important towards equality between humans and non-humans, or does it only perpetuate the domination of the human paradigm?**

TSQ: It's very necessary to engage at this level, I think. The landscape that we face, is partly a legal environment. These recognitions are vital to operating and moving forward. Through law we could approach the idea that a mountain for example is a living, spiritual entity in itself, but ultimately, we need a more profound cultural shift.



**AvK: What about climate change deniers, how can we bring them on board?**

TSQ: I don't think it's possible to change those people's minds so easily. Growing up in Arizona, you're exposed to a lot of right-wing Christian fundamentalists, the dominant culture there. They really wage war on nature; indiscriminate pollution, such as coal rolling [modifying a diesel engine in order to emit large amounts of black exhaust], is a part of the culture. The meaning systems they have, are very intractable, and I think this culture just needs a generational transition. When a culture is absorbed by younger generations that reflect on their parents' behavior, that may be a mechanism for change, together with education.

**AvK: A generational change takes time, which we no longer have?**

TSQ: No, we don't have much time left. In fact, psychedelic experiences may be interesting in speeding up that process. Empirical studies show psychedelics tend to green people's politics and catalyze a shift in the perception of nature. When you take psychedelics in nature, you see trees and other organisms in a different light. It may be the first time that you acknowledge them as actual beings that are fundamentally alive. There are already a lot of organizations in the United States that try to legalize psychedelic medicine, to treat PTSD for instance. And surprisingly, it became quite a bipartisan issue here: both conservatives and the left recognize it as necessary.

**AvK: The title of your work in Blankenberge leaves room for forgiveness. For what?**

TSQ: One of the roles of spiritual or religious traditions is in regulating forgiveness in a society, deciding who and how to forgive. The title Forgiving Change is a reference towards that. And it also refers to the big climate change itself, what we have to deal with emotionally at some level. At this point, even if we cut emissions tomorrow, a warming climate is baked in for at least the next three decades whether we like it or not. We have to foster forgiveness for this change.







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curated by  
Samuel Leuenberger