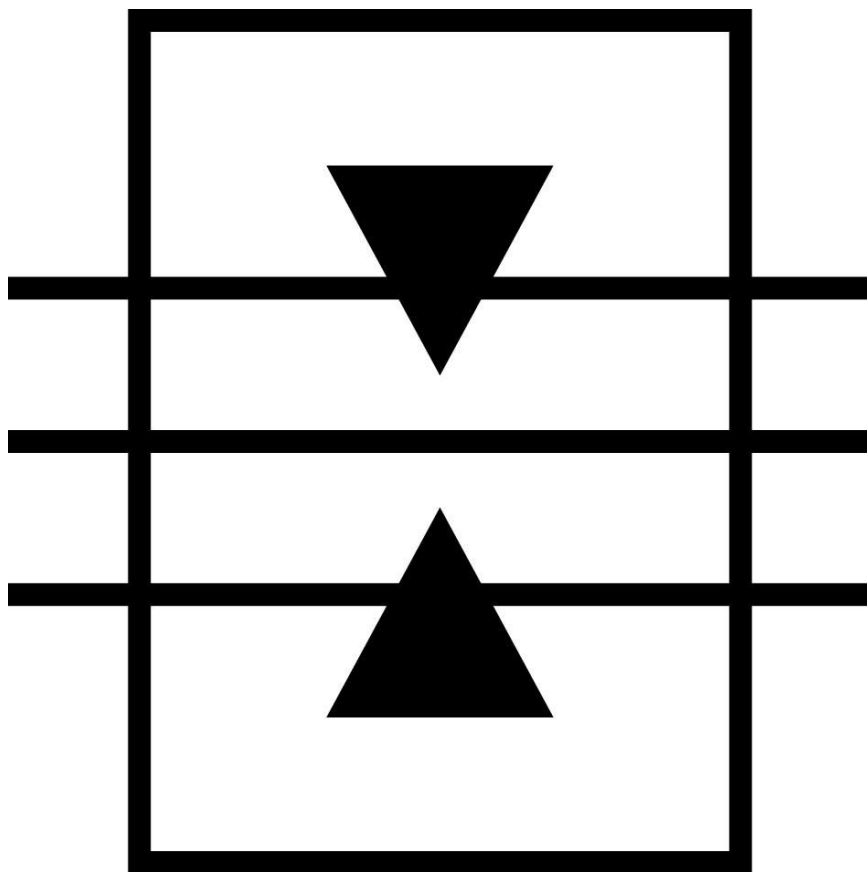


Entrevista

/ Anna Eschbach /

Co-fundadora de I: Project Space



I: Project Space logo

**Junzuan Ye
Martina Scherschener**

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Parte I. Sobre I: Project Space y Anna Eschbach



Anna Eschbach (izquierda) y Antonie Angerer (derecha) ¹

I: project es una plataforma abocada al diálogo e intercambio de arte internacional fundada en 2014 por las curadoras Antonie Angerer (alemana) y Anna-Viktoria Eschbach (húngara-alemana). Dedicada a construir estructuras de soporte para artistas y a ampliar las posibilidades establecer relaciones a largo plazo entre el ambiente artístico, el curatorial, el de investigación y otras formas de producción de conocimiento, el espacio I: project opera sin fines de lucro.

El espacio está ubicado en la antigua área de Hutong, en Beijing, y combina un espacio de exhibición con dos estudios de residencia para artistas visitantes de China y del exterior. Al encontrarse en el centro de Beijing pero por fuera de los distritos artísticos como premisa, I: project busca de manera comprometida acercar la interacción de las personas con el arte a la vida cotidiana.

¹ Fuente: <http://www.culture-vulture-with-residencies.info/i-project-space-beijing-china/>

Al colaborar con productores culturales locales e internacionales, I: project construye redes con espacios artísticos de distintos rincones del mundo de manera constante y con el fin de unir fuerzas con espacios de filosofías similares, compartiendo información y expandiendo el impacto del ambiente artístico independiente.

En el marco de I: project, las palabras *intercambio* y *diálogo* no se utilizan en vano, sino que se implementan directamente en la acción. La programación del espacio, que incluye también conferencias, charlas y talleres, genera el marco para las residencias y las exhibiciones en un constante diálogo sobre cuestiones actuales del arte contemporáneo.

Anna Eschbach, nacida en una familia mitad húngara y mitad alemana, vivió la mayor parte de su infancia en Japón debido al trabajo de sus padres. A su regreso a Europa, estudió su carrera en Historia del Arte con un postgrado en Estudios Curatoriales del Arte Contemporáneo, lo que inició su camino en el mundo cultural. Tras varias experiencias en el sector cultural y artístico en Europa, aterrizó en Beijing, China, el destino para su nuevo proyecto con Antonie Angerer, I: Project Space. Es un carácter inquieto, curioso y multicultural, y a través de su proyecto sigue aportando diversas ofertas artísticas, conectando el mundo internacional con una comunidad local.

Parte II. Transcripción de la entrevista

What is the area of your studies?

Antonie studied Chinese Studies and Art History, both Bachelor and Master degree. We actually met each other during our Bachelor degree, since I also studied Art History in my Bachelor degree. She continued her study in Zurich and Beijing, while I started doing Curatorial studies in Frankfurt, Germany.

I think what we do is like the connection of our two backgrounds. She has traditional Art History training and the Chinese Studies background, and I come from a more contemporary art perspective into the whole enterprise.

When and where did you get your diploma?

That is a very good question. I got my master degree 3 years ago in 2014, and Antonie 1 year before that. We both started in Tuebingen. She continued in Zurich and CAFA in Beijing, while I started in Tuebingen and finished my master in Frankfurt at the art academy.

Did you take any classes or seminars/professional training that helped you learn how to manage or carry out projects?

During my Masters, I had a lot of classes with the curators, and we always had the chances to discuss our own projects with them. Especially there was one class about the media training: how to write a press text, and how to structure a project. Besides that, I think there were mostly internships that helped, not so much university if I am being honest.

What kind of internships did you get?

Between my bachelor and my master degree, I almost worked a year at a social media platform for art collectors, and we were organizing all the visits to the art fairs. For the collectors, we also did the exhibitions. That was definitely helpful.

And I also worked for different museums, all over the Europe. One project I did was for the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, at which I helped to develop the residency program for

curators. Because the team was so small, it was basically me responsible for everything, which was a lot of pressure, but it also helped a lot to learn how to write project proposals, or how to talk to government officials. So I think that was crucial, and also why I started to do a residency program here in Beijing.

Did you start working in the arts right after you finished your studies? Did you work in other fields before?

Well, when I was a student, as a student I had different student jobs. I was also a translator for long time, working for Daimler Benz, the car company, translating Hungarian to German. I am half Hungarian and half German actually.

Did you work on similar projects in Germany, Hungary and other places before arriving in China?

Well, I think the Ludwig Museum was quite a similar experience. When it comes to the structure of the project, it is quite similar. I was also working for an art space in Frankfurt, Basis Frankfurt, which is also an independent art space, and they do exhibitions and artist studios. I was there for quite a while and I think that also helped a lot, when it comes to understanding all this kind of spaces and how the structure works.

When and for what reason did you come to Beijing? What was your first impression?

It is really hard to explain, but Antonie has been here on and off since 2007. We are friends, and we did projects together in Europe. 5 years ago, when she was here for an interview in Beijing, I came to visit her. That was my first time and my second time actually was when I moved here.

Antonie was so fascinated with the energy here, and it was so different from the image that the Western media was telling you about this country. And there was still this kind of anarchy, like you can do a lot of things. We were just meeting a lot of people. And out of the conversations, we kind of got the idea that something special was happening in China. And after that we also decided that we also wanted to be in Beijing, and witness everything first hand.

What did you find friendly for starting a new project in China?

Coming from Germany, where you have a lot of regulations and official papers to fill out, I had the feeling that China in that sense was more open. At that time you could also feel that as a curator you could start a lot of things. It was like trials: let's try it first, and see if it works. If fails, it fails. In Europe, things are working slowly because you overthink of a lot of factors.

How about the cultural perception? Did you find people friendly and welcoming in that sense?

From my experiences, people are actually extremely open to new objects and formats. When I first came to China, I was a little bit hesitated about going too far, because it was somewhat extreme that we are two German girls, who came to China to force people to view art and cultural events in the same way that we were used to them. So, for quite a while we have been trying to take time to understand how things work here, and what we can learn from this country.

Now, we still do this but many times we are just trying to see if a concept that we like from New York or London could also work out in Beijing, just like mixing everything a little bit up. But people are generally quite open.

What were the main challenges of working in the arts within a completely different cultural framework?

I think it is always like a very surprising thing, but you have to consider that you have to translate everything constantly, and also to take time to explain to people about your work compared to working in a familiar context. Here people are asking you for the explanations.

And for us, in the beginning, funding is also a challenge, like for everyone else in the cultural field. we could only get funding from outside of China, because we were new. And we also had to slowly find a way to get Chinese fundings, but that was only like building up trust I guess.

What was the motivation of starting IProject? Could you tell us the story behind?

During my first touristic trip in China, I discovered that there was very interesting art scene in China, but not a lot of things were happening outside the art market. For example, non-profit spaces where people can just try new things without necessarily selling them immediately. And then we wanted to create a space, where they could do exhibitions, artist talks and screenings, etc., to build a support structure for this generation of artists, and also exhibit art forms that are not easily presented in gallery spaces, like video art and performance.

We decided to hold the exhibitions, and meanwhile develop the residency programs, through which the artists could stay with us for 2 or 3 months, and work and research in Beijing.

The artists who participate in the residency programs usually come from other countries?

It's fifty-fifty. For the exhibitions, we try to work more with artists based in China, mostly Chinese artists. For the residency, we have more international artists, because it is easier to get fundings for international artists. But in the future, we would also have artists from Chongqing, Shenzhen staying in Beijing.

How did you start to develop your project? What were the first moves?

The first was to contact people who were already doing art projects here in Beijing. So we contacted several galleries, museums and curators that we knew, and through them we got to know other people. With the contact, we figured out how things worked out. The second step was to build a legal structure for the space, so we had to find a good solution. In our case, we had a company in China and luckily found a lawyer who was willing to help us more or less for free to open this company for us. The next step was to write a business plan and also start to talk with foundations that would be interested in supporting us.

How would you describe the situation of independent art spaces in Beijing? How do you define "independence"?

Unlike Berlin, London or New York, here doesn't exist a foundation that supports independent art spaces, which means people have to be more creative to deal with the situation, like AOTU Studio having a hair salon combined with an art space.

The line between “profit” and “non-profit” is not clear sometimes, which is not necessarily a problem I think. For me, the independence is not really from a money aspect, it more concerns how you approach the content. You can choose to follow a certain lines, or to say “No, I am independent” and decide what to do with my space.

We started a festival two years ago, the Independent Art Space Festival. In the first year, we tried to gather the managers to discuss the definition of independent spaces, but it didn't work. And during the second year, the festival focuses more on how independent art spaces create contents differently compared to the galleries and museums.

I think it is really about the whole direction: you can say “no” to things; you can be subjective and personal about your choices, and you are interested in supporting something very specific. It is how I see “independence”, but of course it is not that easy if you have to struggle all the time and besides the rent is very high in Beijing. And also, not everyone has enough money to support the space just as a hobby. So there are a couple of spaces that are not clear if they are outside the institution. In this case, it is really hard to come up with a definition for the spaces here I think.

By which means do you deal with financial balance of the space?

In the beginning, it was our savings for the space. Basically the first year, Antonie and I had part-time jobs in Beijing, and the money from the part-time jobs were kind of supporting the space. After roughly one and half years, we had enough foundations and sponsors that were supporting us. In this way, gradually we could leave our part-time jobs and work full-time for the space. Antonie was working for a photography gallery here while I was working for Microsoft.

From what foundations do you get financial support?

The very first was the German Cultural Institute, Goethe Institute. Now we are supported by Asian New Zealand Foundation, and have collaborations with other cultural institutes like the ones from Switzerland, Denmark and Austria. The embassies help when it comes to inviting artists to the country and the advertisement of the artists, but they can't really support them. And basically, the embassies and the cultural institutes are mainly supporting the artists from their own countries.

Do you have to save places for international artists who are collaborating with the projects?

For example, we have a residency program in collaboration with Goethe Institute. So in this sense, we have to reserve one place for them every year. But the deal we have with different cultural institutions is that we have the choice to choose the artists. We have the open calls together, but the last decision was taken by us. So it is not like the cultural institutes sending us the artists and we are totally disconnected and not interested in working with them. It is always like people that we want to support are helped by the cultural institutes.

And also actually for the cultural institutes it is also easier since they don't have to decide. About the decision, sometimes we also invite other people to help us with that to make it more interesting for everyone. Sometimes, we invite other curators or work with other programs for research programs. But the final decision stays with us.

What do you mean by “non commercial”? You never sell pieces, you just display them for them to be shown to people and then the trading is up to the artist? Or you sometimes create situations in which trading is generated?

I am always super happy for artists if they sell their work and I am also very happy for helping them with that, but in our space it's like absolutely the case that if someone is interested in buying work, which sometimes happens, 100% of the profit goes to the artist. We don't take any commission. The only thing is that we take the production costs back so if we produce the work with our money, and the artist sells, we get the production costs back but we don't make any profit. We sign a contract before about how much we are going to spend and then we simply get that money back from the artist. But it is just a lot easier for us not to operate as an art gallery.

Also, if you want to work with certain foundations, the arrangement is to not make any profit. If we were to do it, we would have to change the whole institution into something different, which might happen at a certain point, you never know, it would absolutely be in the future. It is actually something that we avoid and that we could definitely not do right now. We try to create an environment in which artists are not thinking constantly on which kind of work they have to do for future collectors. Here in China, there are plenty of spaces that you can use if

you want to sell your works. That is really not an issue. It is a lot harder to find a space that says like hey, do what you want to do. And in case of catastrophe or failure, you have at least tried it.

How do you manage to make a living whilst working in a non-profitable organization? You cannot make profit but you devote your time to the project. How do you manage to balance this?

The thing is we have a couple of projects happening at the same time, and that is generating enough so that we have a plus to support ourselves. We have like two residents at the same time, and it is normally two or three exhibition projects happening in one month. And we also sometimes are teaching, and we also go and deliver talks in other institutions, so there are enough things happening around the space and we can therefore afford everything.

So you would say that the main activity is non-profitable but then there are satellite activities, such as explaining the way you work, or giving workshops, of which you mostly get your income?

Yes, exactly. It is the combination of different things, and for example we have a project going on right now with the German government. We are managing the residency program for them. That is one example of the kind of project that makes it possible for us to also support our own space for a couple of weeks. Because of course, we are getting paid to do this. So, all in all, we are also working outside of our space to support our space, but most of the times they are projects of the same nature. We would not do something that completely contradicts what we do in our space in general. So yeah, it is basically doing different things at the same time.

It is amazing how you underwent a whole development process to realize a project that, at least at first, was not supposed to give you any return.

Yes. It sounds kind of crazy. To be honest, this space kind of only grew with time. At first, we really were only doing exhibitions, and now we have not only one but two residencies studios. And all these things kind of came on top of the project. So we could naturally grow into something. I think it is good that we slowly became who we wanted to become.

So you began without making any profit, just displaying the artists' work and helping them to become a little bit known, and this was perfectly satisfying, and then you got to a point at which all the activities around started giving you something else back.

Yes, but for example the Independent Art Festival does not give any profit, at all, it is a zero profit event. But then the production of the Festival led to a different set of conferences and publications, and other things, out of which we can take a little bit of profit into our space.

And tell us, do you feel different managing art projects as a foreigner in Beijing, compared to Germany or other European countries?

I think maybe not as a cultural producer or manager, but a regular person, you learn a lot about your own kind of background and your own kind of perceptions when you leave. You come from a familiar field and you see how you were formed by what you felt was super normal or standard, so being in Beijing you often have to question why you are doing things in the way you do, and why you don't do it in the way lots of Chinese institutions are doing it. So, you have to think about your practice a lot, and this creates a constant discussion with yourself. Why are you doing things this way?

The other thing is that, to be honest, we are a little bit weird. We are these two white girls in China, and sometimes people are so shocked that they do not know in which box to put us. This can be a true advantage, since they don't know what to expect. So they mostly let us do what we want to do, and this would not happen in Europe. We would have a lot more limits and a lot of higher expectations. So, sometimes it really helps. But on the other there are also times in which you realize you cannot do certain things because you are not Chinese and you are just not part of this specific group that they would like to have. So it is not always just freedom, there are limitations too.

So what are the difficulties and opportunities that you identify in Beijing's art scene?

I think here in China, they are re-creating a lot of definitions from the art world or the art market. For example, what a museum should do, or what galleries should do and how the artists and institutions should interact. So I think it is kind of fluent and free, which is a great opportunity to be part of the people that is doing things. But on the other hand, there are things that are changing really fast, quite dramatically actually. For example, AOTU just

closed, and the LAB 47 also. Plenty of spaces have closed and there will be new spaces, of course, but it is a pity. Also, there is not a lot of civility sometimes. And you constantly have re-build networks and structures. We haven't been here for a very long time, it's been a bit over two and a half years but since then, the scene has already changed at least a couple of times, and that is insane.

So, both of you speak Chinese?

Tonia does. I am still on the learning phase.

And does it affect you? Besides the professional side, does it affect you as a person to feel like you don't belong?

I probably shouldn't be giving a statement on this as a person that does not 100% speak the language, but as far as I understand, it doesn't matter if you speak Chinese or not, you will always be a non-Chinese person, so of course, it affects you. Society in general is kind of still open towards you, so you don't feel constantly horrible, but it is every day that you feel you are not from here. But that also, it helps sometimes.

And what is it that makes you feel different on a daily basis?

In my case, having grown up in Japan, I am used to this feeling. I went to Kindergarten in Japan because my parents worked there. They are currently there actually. So for me, these feeling of not belonging is not really a shock. It is familiar to me. It can make you feel excluded sometimes, but I think I feel more at home here than anywhere else.

Could you tell us about your life in Japan?

Sure. I have a very weird family. My mother teaches in Japanese, and for a long she taught in Tokyo, at the university. So, we lived there for a while and then moved back to Hungary and then we jumped between Germany and Hungary. My mother is now 50% of her time in Japan, but in Kyoto. And the rest of my family is kind of split over the whole world. My sister is back in Hungary and my father is in Germany.

Maybe having moved around and having family living far away from your family helps you build character to face changing lifestyles and adjust to new cultures.

Yes, probably. I've got the impression, since I moved to Beijing, that a lot of people with similar family stories end up living in China. More and more people have "third culture children". Those are kids that grow up in different countries and therefore do not have one or two cultures, but even three or four. There are more and more companies and professions for which you have to move a lot, and the kids of these families are used to being in different countries and the same time. I don't know why, China is attracting these people.

We are almost finishing. Just three questions left. The first one; what are the most valuable characters or skills you think that a cultural manager should possess?

First of all, you need to have really good people and communication skills. Otherwise, it could get really complicated. You should be able to work and communicate with different kinds of people, from different backgrounds and different levels. That is really crucial. And secondly, that you have some real life skills. That you are not only good in one thing but maybe a couple of things. You don't need to be amazing, just that you have input from different fields.

What do you mean by real life skills?

For example, I've met a lot of people that have never worked in a bar or some place like that. And sometimes, they don't know how to organize an opening or an event because they have no experience; they never had to think about how to plan something like that. It is fun, but also you learn how to deal with annoying people, or drunks, which is absolutely important.

Do you have a role model? Maybe a curator or a cultural manager that you admire. Or even an institution or project you specifically like or inspires you?

There are so many people and institutions that I actually admire. Let me think if I can come up with one that is outstanding... I think for us, one of the most inspiring space was Kunstwerke in Berlin. They started a very independent small place and they became more like a museum, but they are still today very punk-rock and badass. So, they are actually very important... Then, I really like this space called Portikus, which is a small place, but it also

kind of very inspiring for us. Also, I had a couple of very interesting professors in Frankfurt. One is now in Stockholm, Maria Lind. Then, I can think of a couple of curators that taught me. They really helped me to form ideas of how to do things. Charles Esche is one of them. And Katalin Timar was the curator for the Hungarian exhibition in Venice, during the Biennial. She was actually my mentor. She helped me a lot when I was just starting and is now working at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. She was really helpful to me in a personal level also.

What suggestions you would give to someone who is entering the field of arts or cultural management, especially in China?

I would say: take your time. Beijing, for example, is really pushing you to do things really, really fast, and I think that this is super inspiring, but sometimes you need to take time to figure everything out, what you really want to deliver a message. This happens to artists too. We are constantly having conversations with them in which we try to convince them not to produce so much and so fast. Just to kind of slow down sometimes, not allowing the institutions, the media, the market the system to pressure them. We always say: "I don't really care, I do what I want to do", and try to be as independent as possible, which is, of course, not easy. You should take it a bit slower sometimes in order to find your own path and your own speed. But also, if you want to do things really fast, then do them really fast. That is the amazing thing. Listen to yourself. How much do you want to do in this certain time?

This was a really nice conversation. Thank you very much for your time and we wish you great success with your project.

Parte III. Reflexión Personal

Proceso de realización de la entrevista

En cuanto al proceso de realización, tuvimos contacto con Anna Eschbach a través de WeChat, una aplicación popular de redes sociales en China. Le comunicamos sobre la idea de plantear una entrevista con ella y las motivaciones, y enseguida aceptó nuestra propuesta con placer. Realizamos la entrevista por Skype, que duró una hora y veinte en total. Hicimos la grabación de la misma entrevista, y la transcribimos y editamos.

Motivaciones y aprendizaje

En primer lugar, su perfil profesional es objetivamente llamativo. Más allá de haber estado en contacto con la cultura oriental en sus primeros años, Anna es una chica que combina ascendencia anglosajona y de Europa del Este, dos tradiciones bastante clásicas que nada tienen que ver con los modos y la historia de China. En la entrevista nos cuenta cómo fue el proceso de adaptación y los desafíos a los que se tuvo que enfrentar, lo que resulta sumamente interesante. Se trata de una joven que, con una historia laboral que incluye un puesto de alto rango en el Ludwig Museum en Budapest, centro cultural de suma importancia en Hungría, tomó la decisión de adentrarse en el mercado de arte contemporáneo de una ciudad, de un país, de un continente completamente distinto. Conociendo de cierta manera la historia del espacio y habiendo percibido su crecimiento a lo largo de su corta edad, podemos determinar a priori que es una gestora al menos interesante con la que charlar y cuya experiencia podía ser sumamente importante a la vez que alternativa. Esto tiene que ver también con la naturaleza de su proyecto; no es muy común encontrar emprendimientos con esta modalidad de “negocio” que no involucra comercio de obras sino que se reduce a la promoción y la puesta en común. I: project reúne en un sólo lugar artistas de todas partes del mundo sin dejar de lado el mercado local, generando contenidos continuamente y casi “por amor al arte”, literalmente.

En segundo lugar, y entendiendo que I: project se trata de un proyecto sin fines de lucro, las técnicas y metodologías a los que apelan los gestores jóvenes para sustentarse. Encontrar el punto de equilibrio entre insertarse de forma sustentable en un mercado sumamente competitivo en el que los modelos de negocio cambian todos los días y hacer lo que uno ama no es un desafío fácil para el gestor de la cultura. Además, el conseguir fondos de

instituciones o entidades públicas suele significar un obstáculo importante para la realización de cualquier tipo de emprendimiento; ni hablar uno con tales ideales y valores tan claros en cuanto a la selección de sus contenidos y la naturaleza de su negocio. I: project es una empresa autogestionada que ofrece oportunidades para los artistas sin dejar de contemplar a sus gestoras, y esto era algo de lo que queríamos saber.

Además, siendo aspirantes a gestores de la cultura y viniendo de países totalmente distintos, a ambos nos resultó interesante abarcar un ámbito artístico en un territorio del que casi no hemos hablado en lo que va del Máster. China es un mercado creciente, señalado por muchos como el futuro de los mercados. Se observa un despegue de los bienes y servicios que se produjeron históricamente en el país (productos manufacturados) y una inclinación hacia los productos más artesanales, hecho que sin duda tendrá consecuencias en un futuro no muy lejano. Dentro de China, Beijing se posiciona como una ciudad no tan comercial o cosmopolita, en comparación con Shanghai (la otra gran ciudad de China). Se podría decir que tiene un perfil un poco más rico en lo que refiere a cultura e historia, por lo que la escena nos resultó de interés particular.

En cuarto lugar, podemos decir que al ser ambos, Martina y Lorenzo, extranjeros viviendo en una ciudad en la que la cultura abunda y en la que parece que todo está inventado, como Barcelona, el escuchar la experiencia de una extranjera desarrollando su propio proyecto en un territorio ajeno pensamos podría servirnos para encontrarle la vuelta a los obstáculos que sugieren las temáticas burocráticas y legales.

Por último, mencionar que Lorenzo Ye conoció a Anna Eschbach a través de su trabajo en un espacio autogestionado en Beijing. La escena creativa en Beijing es un círculo pequeño, y entonces participaron unos eventos juntos, y co-organizaron unos proyectos, como el Independent Art Space Festival. Según su impresión de Anna, era una persona muy activa e interesante para entrevistar por su experiencia personal y profesional en el sector.

La entrevista nos aportó sobre todo una perspectiva positiva en torno a futuras decisiones. A priori imaginamos que obtendríamos respuestas complicadas sobre procedimientos lentos y obstáculos que pensamos habrían tenido que redefinir el proyecto varias veces. Sin embargo, Anna nos explicó de manera simple cómo llegó a cumplir su sueño, un sueño al menos complicado de realizar, que actualmente es ejemplo para varias instituciones. Entre risas y chistes, Anna le quitó los fantasmas a los procesos que la relacionan a ella y a su

compañera, dos jóvenes extranjeras con ideales ciertamente alternativos, con entidades públicas de la magnitud de China o fundaciones internacionales que parecen “inalcanzables”.

Además, fue una gran inspiración tanto su afán por el arte y cultura como su perseverancia en acertar lo que había aspirado y a la vez convertirlo en la realidad. Ella estudió una carrera artística en la universidad, la cual muchas veces en el mundo real se implica dificultades en el mercado laboral. Sin embargo, a pesar de haber encontrado una oferta laboral envidiable en Microsoft en Beijing, ella no dejó de perseguir las oportunidades profesionales en el mundo artístico, practicando su amor por el arte. No ha sido un proceso fácil ni rápido. Como dijo ella en la entrevista, “take your time, ..., sometimes you need to take time to figure everything out, what you really want to deliver as a message.” (“tómate tiempo, ..., a veces necesitas tiempo para averiguar las cosas, las que quieres transmitir como un mensaje.”)