



From Moscow to Beijing
Joram ten Brink & Elly Clarke



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Moscow to Beijing

Michael Mazière

Elly Clarke and Joram ten Brink present interpretations of their journey on the Trans-Siberian train as the basis of the exhibition *The Journey – Moscow to Beijing* at London Gallery West. Travelling together as part of the ‘Capturing the Moving Mind’¹ conference taking place on the train, the exhibition reveals two distinct yet related interpretations of the same event.

Using a range of formal strategies from documentary to art photography, Clarke’s project is investigative and interactive in nature: it consists of large-scale hand-printed colour photographs, snapshots, interviews with passengers, a 3-screen video projection, postcards and local ephemera. This diversity of materials and approaches mirrors the fragmented nature of her enquiry, which aims to transcend the barriers of language, nationality and geography. Clarke’s project creates an intimate space in which the subjectivities of the passengers she encounters on the train can be gleaned. In her work the artist is a cipher, attempting to produce images from a position of trust in which the subjects are active, if sometimes resistant, participants.

ten Brink’s 16mm film *The Journey* is a poetic essay that weaves together images taken on and off the train with stills of modern and ancient Russia and China. As the film unfolds, fragmented images of the journey are blended with a soundtrack layering music, dialogue, atmospheric effects and station announcements to recreate the disembodied experience of travel. Drawing equally from the traditions of documentary, personal cinema and diary films, *The Journey* constantly shifts its parameters, forcing the viewer to reassess the origin and meaning of the exotic content of the film.

The criss-crossing of these audio-visual trains of thought produces a work with no clear narrative or point of view, and a constantly shifting meaning. Projected in the gallery space the film offers multiple interpretations on repeated viewing.

Clarke and ten Brink offer here a series of interpretations of the Trans-Siberian train journey – not a cohesive ‘Great Train Journey’ of the traditional television documentary, but a truly contemporary take on the fragmented experience of travel in a globalised and image saturated world, where images and experiences can no longer be just what they seem.

1. ‘Capturing the Moving Mind: Management and Movement in the Era of Permanently Temporary War’ held on the Trans-Siberian train (11–20 September 2005). Organised by a group surrounding the online journal Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization (<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/index.htm>)

Travelling Without Moving

Sarah Carrington

The Trans-Siberian is one of the world's longest train journeys. Along over nine thousand kilometres of track it crosses eight time zones and at its longest point, is non-stop for five days. It is a vital life line bringing goods and people across vast distances as well as providing a romanticised pilgrimage for travellers. The journey departs in Moscow, a city struggling to reconcile itself as a modern capital and arrives in Beijing ten days later, a place that is determinedly 21st century.

In September 2005, a unique conference took place along the route. *Capturing the Moving Mind* was an event that countered the restless urge to move and keep moving. In an age of cheap air travel and advanced technologies it is possible to be in many places at once. This conference refuted that possibility by putting people in the confines of old fashioned carriages with limited electricity whilst moving across a vast land mass at a relatively sedate pace.

The conference created an altered sense of time and place. On the journey participants were confronted with fellow travellers and the passing landscape in a way that is impossible in the air. The train serves as both vessel and destination. Days are structured around a strict schedule of arrivals and departures, meals and sleep. It becomes its own universe, a strange linear world where it might be possible to talk to people in a new way.

Travelling by train offers a welcome respite from the frenetic and relentless experience of day-to-day life. I often relish the prospect of hours of time to catch up on reading or sleep whilst on the rails. The pace and constant horizon provide a moment of passivity and space

for reflection. The notion of an active, discursive and stimulating exchange of ideas seems to contradict the quietness of this special space. What would it be like to 'do' in a realm normally associated with 'being'?

Elly Clarke and Joram ten Brink were invited to participate in the conference and to make work in response. Their projects brought together these two states of mind and reflected on the universal questions of travelling. What do we get from being away? How do we tell people about what we've seen or translate what has happened to us? What do we take back home? How can the places we travel to become our places? Their projects reflect on the duality of being in a place but always being somehow outside it.

*'A foreigner is, in essence, a translator'*¹

Both works deal with what is lost and what is left behind in the process of translation and navigate a way through the process of representing place whilst avoiding the temptation to fall back on preconceptions.

Clarke and ten Brink boarded the train in Moscow armed with various cameras and film equipment. Clarke knew she had obligations to fulfil in the form of photos that had already been purchased². ten Brink travelled with a 16mm camera and stills camera and planned to take 'notes', like snap shots in motion, as he had done on previous journeys around the world.

Their cameras provided Clarke and ten Brink with an excuse to start talking to people. ten Brink's camera is a bulky and unwieldy appendage, lending theatricality to his presence on the train. Like Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera*³, his tool becomes an extension of his body and offers a starting point for conversation and engagement.

Clarke's practice is based on her desire to communicate with people. She sees photography as a conversation and the pursuit of shared

representation is at the heart of her project. During the trip, she journeyed through the carriages of the train seeking participants to interview. In her interviews footage is framed by the intimate space of the train compartment with participants gathered around the window. We are (as in ten Brink's film) always aware of the motion and of places passing by.

Clarke is often accompanied by a fellow conference delegate who assists with basic translation. Each participant is asked the same set of questions about where they are from, why they are travelling and why this mode of travel. The final question is if they have anything



Video stills from *Conversations* showing objects by participants in response to the question "Have you got anything interesting to show me?".
Clockwise from top left: Holiday photographs, a russian icon, a yodeling swiss souvenir, traditional Ukrainian costume.

to show her or sell her. This exchange offers an interesting reflection on the process of being away. It is as though she is asking, 'please show me something or sell me something that will remind me of this moment and will convey you to me', almost seeking a souvenir of the encounter.

In addition to the interviews, Clarke also asked people if they would take a disposable camera to use and send photographs to her in London. The process of giving cameras without knowing what will come back serves to break down the power relation implied between photographer and subject and counters the idea that representation is a one way street.

*'Photography not as a way of observing the world but as a way of participating in it... a way of being in the world and with the world.'*⁴

Clarke's project allows her to encounter the train in a new way. She forces herself to get to know people and to gain a richer understanding of the extraordinary trip. *Moscow-Beijing* therefore maps multiple experiences of the journey: Clarke's photographs taken twice daily, then the content of the interviews with passengers (and the views passing by through the windows) and finally the translators' interpretations of the interviews. Clarke is attempting to diminish her role by sharing the process of representation and thereby confusing expectations of authorship.

For ten Brink, his 'notes' captured throughout the trip provide source material for *The Journey*, an essay film that explores his relationship with the representation of the other whilst maintaining a distance from direct comment on the context. In so doing, *The Journey* becomes about the act of travel more broadly and the physical experience of continual motion.

We naturally first seek a narrative when confronted with the pattern of shots and stills that make up *The Journey*. We study the characters

that appear and try to discover what might link them. A figure continually reappears throughout the film; is this his journey? Is he the filmmaker? Is he a ghost? At times he is seen squeezing himself into bunks or wedging his body into corners of the train. It seems that the duration of the journey is forcing his body to adapt itself to the architecture of the train. Clarke when describing the trip recalled this sense that the train begins to govern you as you surrender yourself to its rhythm. His eyes meet ours at one point, as if to force a question on who has defined or characterised what we've seen, to remind us of the layers of interpretation that constantly guide our reading of images.

Interspersed with footage taken on the journey are still shots capturing places and moments in time on the trip and elsewhere. ten Brink conjures up expected and unanticipated reference points for places. Dr Zhivago, an American production of a Russian novel featuring English and Egyptian lead actors, appears on a monitor dubbed into Russian and seemingly watched in a London suburban home. This works to conjure up clichéd ideas of Russian history whilst also referring to the ways in which our knowledge of places is constructed by other places.

Moscow-Beijing sets up a photographic process that is open to the input and ideas of others. Clarke was determined to be clear in how she presents the project and her motives to her participants, reflecting her desire to be responsible to the people and places that are documented. Participants were given release forms to sign and then handed a sheet of questions in their native tongue. This emphasis on equity made some participants suspicious however. The paperwork that Clarke hoped would reassure them was perceived by some as a threat. This demonstrates the way in which the nature of practice is altered or misunderstood in a new context and it is evident in the variety of responses to the interviews. The Russian family eagerly present icons to the camera whereas the Chinese duo participate but are unwilling to look at the camera and answer each question as briefly as possible.

*'Outside you have vast landscape to broaden your horizons. Inside there is space to walk around.'*⁵

Clarke is therefore always sharing the space of the train with her participants but is outside of their journeys. The conversations give her an introduction to participant's experiences but she can only get as close as they allow. This status reflects Clarke and ten Brink's experience of the trip overall. They are inside the train but on the periphery of the conference. In *The Journey*, we are taken from the intimate and protected spaces of the carriage to people and places outside. We see traders setting up stalls on platforms,



Alan Schacher in *The Journey* by Joram ten Brink

revealing the communities that live by the train's schedule. Both works reflect the internal space of the train and their constant interest and need to observe and connect to the worlds and realities passing by outside.

Clarke's conversations with fellow passengers were only understood in fragments on the journey. On returning home, she wanted to find a way to gain a deeper understanding of what people had told her. Clarke sought out friends and neighbours who spoke the languages of her interviewees and filmed each translator working their way through the conversation

As they begin the translation, subtitles with snippets of their biography appear on screen, conveying what she knows about them, so that their story becomes part of the story of the project. In the final presentation of the interviews, the translator's words are placed on screen as they are translating so that their presence is made visible. This serves to highlight that translation is never a neutral role, their own confusion or intrigue or reflections on place become part of the interpretation.

On his return from Beijing, ten Brink considered how to bring together the fragments and pieces he had gathered. He wanted to resist the temptation to create a narrative or sense of resolution to the journey. He based the structure on a loop, counteracting the constant forward linear motion of the train. Images, people, places are returned to throughout, like phrases in music, and each one can then be reinterpreted in its alternate position.

One of the recurrent visual phrases is a bleary Thames and silent suburban street which evoke a sense of home. But we're still not home, there is the window again and we're back rolling along the seemingly permanent horizon line that is only interrupted by electricity cables and pylons that break up the motion like frames in film.

Clarke similarly wants to continue her connections to the people and places she met on the Trans-Siberian journey express. By giving fellow passengers disposable cameras to take photos and send to her, Clarke is eliciting their trust, hoping that they will fulfil her request and use the money she gave them for postage to complete the loop of participation. She is also leaving a residue of the exchange with people hoping it will live on for them as it has for her.

There is no destination to this journey; both works propose that place is with us wherever we are. We take the places we visit home and they come with us wherever we go.

Sarah Carrington is an independent curator based in London. Between 2000 and 2006, Sarah was co-director of B+B, a curatorial partnership with Sophie Hope

1. Julia Kristeva, 'The other language or translating sensitivity', in *Imported: a Reading Seminar*, Ed Rainer Ganahl, Semiotext(e), New York, 1998, p.194.
2. Elly Clarke sold photographs via e-bay.co.uk in order to fund her participation in the conference. Photographs were taken twice a day at 10am and 4pm of wherever she happened to be at that time.
3. Dziga Vertov, 'Man with a Movie Camera' portrayed a day in the life of Moscow and other Soviet cities. The characters in the film are the filmmaker himself and the subject of the daily life and activities of Russian people.
4. Sinisa Mitrovic, in *I only Want you to Love me*, Phil Collins, Photoworks, 2003.
5. Quote from interview with passenger on the Trans-Siberian express by Elly Clarke.



The Journey
 Joram ten Brink with Alan Schacher
 16mm colour, film transfered to DVD, 19 minutes

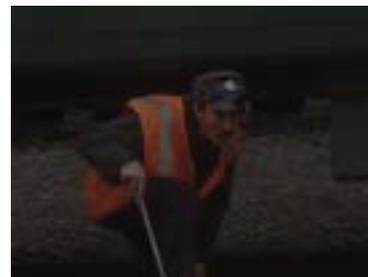
The Answer Phone
 Hello
 Hello, how are you?
 Alrighty... we have just got a new... eh... answer phone
 Neat machine, eh?





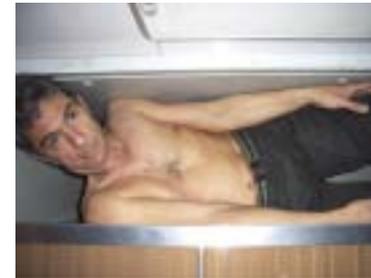
Yeah, yes, we were just testing it and then we decided...
and then we heard it was you so we picked it up. How are you?
Good, pretty good, yeah
Good... hold on one second... one minute, pump um pump um... ok.
I just thought about you yesterday

I have been moving around quite a bit for few months, but I have
settled down again
Are you?? What happened with the apartment I...
That one I left couple of months ago
Wow...



I moved to live with my girl-friend
Yeah
And... then we got this apartment
The two of you?? You moved in today?
I got married today, I mean...

WHAT? You got married??
Yeah...
You got MARRIED?
Eh, yes
Congratulations! Do your father and mother know?



On the train

Under the circumstances... I went with John
 Without him... Without anything
 A year ago... a long time ago
 It started to rain towards night

She passed by... a little of everything

One of these days
 Sixty miles an hour
 During the afternoon, he walked along the streets
 As a result... for that reason... on account of... at last...



around here in order to go there... I am in favour of going there
 pardon me, excuse me – what is the name of this town
 it is ten miles from here... it is twenty miles from here
 follow this road... take route seven
 can you tell me how do I get to this place?

at what station do I get on
 where do I get on
 where is the railway station



A window on the world

Brett Neilson

To move without cause, to organise without ends, to flee the war against intellect: these were the imperatives that animated the conference ‘Capturing the Moving Mind: Management and Movement in the Era of Permanently Temporary War’ held on the Trans-Siberian train (11–20 September 2005). Organised by a group surrounding the online journal *Ephemerata: Theory and Politics in Organization* (<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/index.htm>) and affiliated with *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* and the new Italian journal *Confitti globali*, the conference brought together activists, artists, mobile communication experts, filmmakers, musicians, and researchers of all stamps. In reality, this moving event was something more than a conference. The rhythm of the train, the changing landscapes, the interactions with strangers, the border controls and currency exchanges: all imposed contingencies that demanded constant interrogation and shifts of perspective. At the same time, the train functioned as a kind of protective shell, like the set of a reality TV show, removing the participants (their discussions and creations) from the world that flitted by outside. Yet, in this isolated space, there was time for rumination, intimacy, withdrawal, and debate – an ongoing group dynamic, fight or flight, contained by neither the many nor the one.

It is not difficult to criticise an undertaking like this: a pack of intellectuals, activists, and artists, predominantly white and English-speaking, speeding past impoverished towns, disputing the finer points of immaterial labour while aestheticising the crumbled factories on the way. To be sure, the paradoxes of this situation were sharpened as the train continued on its arrogant line, like Benjamin’s angel, but with its face unturned, oblivious to the

storm behind. The outside world, as it were, reacted back on the group, sparking internal dissension, stunts of devil’s advocacy, and, in the case of one participant whose passport was stolen, delicate negotiations at the German consulate in Novosibirsk. It is tempting, following the formulation of another participant, to characterise the event in temporal-historical terms: a bunch of people from the twentieth century, hurtling past nineteenth century villages on their way (like the business leaders of our times) to find the twenty-first century in Beijing. But a mere stroll around Beijing, let alone Moscow, reveals the limits of this elegant summation.

In these former second world cities, the first world implodes upon the third. All the global divisions can be found in a single locale. The petrodollars that swell the pockets of the Russian oligarchy do not trickle down. The houtons of Beijing, rapidly being cleared for the 2008 Olympic Games, border on corporate skyscrapers and department stores. As the local participants in both Moscow (Michael Chernyl) and Beijing (Zhiyuan Cui and Wang Hui) insisted, the concept of capitalism is too wide to explain what is happening in these urban laboratories. If, as Deng Xiaoping once said, ‘we do not know what socialism is,’ perhaps today we need to add, ‘we also do not know what capitalism is.’ For it is the very precariousness of capital, its constitutive exposure to venture and risk that makes it impossible to isolate as an empirical object. As that most abstract of abstractions, capital produces an –ism to which nothing (but almost anything) can attach. Doubtless, this is why it propagates so incessantly. And perhaps this is also why the power that it breeds is so mad, indeterminate and arbitrary, no more so than at a time of seemingly permanent war.

It was the emergence of the new forms of global control (which find their principal mode of being in war) that occupied the conference’s critical core. Beyond the state of exception, beyond the borders and fences, beyond the humanitarian tragedies and suicide bombings, there operates a new and seemingly pure power that functions without institutional legitimation and seems to change day by day.

The control of the mind, of collaboration between minds, of feelings, affects and the generic human capacity to relate is the borne of this power. Under its sway, politics melds with productivity and the primary struggle becomes a fight for the free use of human minds. It is no longer a matter of this or that issue, this or that injustice. When power becomes detached from any single logic or rationale, all that remains is to stay on the move, to meet its madness with a delirious rigour that shifts, twists and compulsively derails. With such movement, there emerges a variety of experience that motivates itself and, in so doing, acquires the quality of an experiment – a kind of pure theoretical practice that attempts to create something new. This, in essence, was the gambit of the conference, locking away forty brains and bodies in a train and leaving them to sense as well as cogitate. Can there, could there emerge from such an experiment a new form of politics, another way of being, within and despite the frenzy of global control?

The Trans-Siberian journey was kind of learning without pedagogy, an exercise in improvisation as much as organisation, a passionate encounter where relations by hand, touch, and intuition (although not necessarily physical) outweighed those that occurred on the cusp of understanding. Beyond the lands of the Roman alphabet, with only one Russian and one Mandarin speaker, the signs become illegible and the entire symbolic realm of language begins to fall away – imposing itself as a kind of barrier, sure, but also opening new vistas of intimacy that are neither communicative nor symbiotic. To buy food on the platform, one was left only with the hands – pointing, counting the fingers, expressing gratitude by joining the palms. Some used digital cameras to display the items they wanted to purchase. But this gestural economy, importantly motivated by commodity exchange, could not go unnoticed by the group. Obsessed with the movement of the economy from the limited sphere of rationality to the in-born and adaptive human faculties, the discussion constantly veered back to these chance encounters. Perhaps because this accidental ethnography – more than the internal group dynamic – registered how the purity of experience is always contaminated by contingency and context.

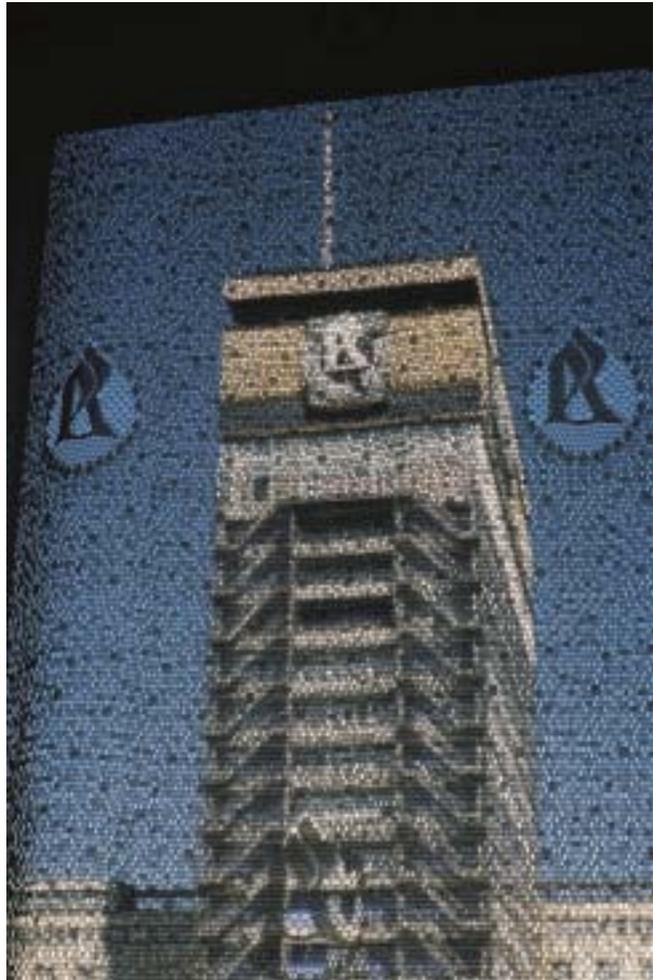
The memory traces of this event were already under construction before it began. Part of the process involved the use of newly invented ‘mobicasting’ software to feed images and sounds via mobile phone from the train to a website and display in the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki. An exercise in the assemblage of an open archive as much as an act of intellectual tourism, the conference sought to build common resources for creative political expression. Nor has this generativity ceased with the dispersal of the participants, each of whom came and left with his own baggage. As the object of journal issues and art exhibitions, the process goes on. Disposable cameras distributed to non-conference travellers on the train were sent to a studio in London, film rushes shot on the journey were stitched together with others, digital video of an action carried out at the Russian-Mongolian border provided source material for media art, a manifesto about a network of networks was written down. But these material products should not be considered ends in themselves. The point of the conference was to institute, through the sheer experience of movement, a mode of being that reveals itself phenomenologically – a way of living without opportunism or fear, paralysis or submission. Such a strike against boredom, or activism for the sake of activism, has no outcome. It exists only in the present, somewhere between departure and arrival, in the thick of the night, when the movement seems to slow and the rhythm of the train at once wakes you and lulls you back to sleep. In this time and space, there is neither dream nor calculation, transport nor retreat, but only the incessant clang of metal on metal.

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Brett Neilson, a fellow participant at the conference on the Trans Siberian train, is Associate Professor of Cultural and Social Analysis at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, where he is also a member of the Centre for Cultural Research.



Curtain (Moscow to Novosibirsk), 2005
Hand-printed photographs by Elly Clarke: 30 × 40 ins, edition of 5



Curtain (Hotel Rossia, Moscow), 2005



Buffet car (China), 2005



Buffet car (Russia), 2005

Alternative Funding Strategy, 2005–6

Having been refused money from the Arts Council and the British Council, Elly Clarke sold *Unique Elly Clarke Photos Not Yet Taken onboard the Trans Siberian Train* through ebay.co.uk. She pledged to take two photographs a day for the 10-day duration of the trip: one at 10am, the other at 4pm. Clarke raised £570 towards her trip. After sending buyers their prints, the series was developed into a limited edition set of 21 postcards.



130705AM
 ebay.co.uk
 raised £570



110905AM
 Hotel Rossia, Room 7292
 sold for £20



110905PM
 Hotel Rossia, View from Conference Room
 sold for £20



120905AM
 Hotel Rossia, View from Room 6043
 sold for £15



120905PM
 Moscow Train Station
 sold for £15



130905AM
 View from Train at Balesino
 sold for £50



130905PM
 Between Perm & Swerdlowsk Pass
 sold for £50



140905AM
 Between Tatarskaja & Barabinsk
 sold for £15



140905PM
 Roundabout in Novosibirsk
 sold for £15



150905AM
 Akademgorodok
 sold for £45



150905PM
 Novosibirsk (Lenin)
 sold for £50



160905AM
 Near Krasnojarsk Pass (Factory)
 sold for £15



160905PM
 Carriage 9, Conductor's Cabin
 sold for £15



170905AM
 Near Lake Baikal
 sold for £40



170905PM
 Untitled (Factory)
 sold for £40



180905AM
 2 hours from Ulaan Baatar
 sold for £15



180905PM
 Sajin-Sanda, Mongolia
 sold for £15



190905AM
 First glimpse of China
 given as a present



190905PM
 To Hotel from Beijing Train Station
 sold for £17



200905AM
 Unisplendour Hotel, View from Room 701
 sold for £26



200905PM
 Tsinghua University & Bike 701
 sold for £27



Conductor 119



photo 14

Trans Siberian Photo Project, 2005

Portraits of three participants and one of their photographs

After interviewing passengers about their journey, Elly Clarke presented them with a disposable camera. She asked the participants to take photographs, from the day they met until they reached their final destinations. Of ten cameras given out, Clarke received four sets of photographs back. Each shows a very different version of the same journey.

The camera from Tuwshin, sent from Mongolia, was accompanied by two photographs (see opposite page, bottom right) as well as a letter. Written in Russian in a child's handwriting, it explains how Tuwshin had travelled on the train seventeen times since meeting Clarke two months earlier.



Two gentlemen from Mongolia



photo 24



Tuwshin



photo sent with camera from Mongolia

Moscow – Beijing, 2005–6
3-screen video installation, DVD colour with sound

With the help of questions pre-written in Russian and Chinese, Elly Clarke conducted interviews with passengers she met on the train. *Conversations* is a record of these interactions. *Translations* shows their subsequent interpretations by Russian and Chinese speakers Clarke met in London and Los Angeles. *Trans Siberia* shows the changing landscape of the journey, from Moscow to Beijing. The interpretations provided by the translators formed the subtitles for *Conversations*.



Conversations, 40:15 mins



Trans Siberia, 2005–6, 34:42 mins



Translations, 54:06 mins

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Joram ten Brink is a filmmaker and a
Reader in Film at the University of
Westminster. He works as a writer/director
of documentary and experimental films
in the UK and Holland. His films have been
broadcasted and theatrically released in
the UK, USA, Holland, Israel, France,
Germany and Spain. His work has been
screened at the Berlin and Rotterdam film
festivals and at MOMA in New York. His
edited volume *Building Bridges – the Cinema
of Jean Rouch* is published this year by
Wallflower Press. He is the director of the
AHRC Arts on Film Archive.

<http://users.wmin.ac.uk/~tenbrij>

Thanks to
Alan Schacher
Barbed

Elly Clarke is an artist based in London.
She has a Masters in Fine Art from
Central Saint Martins and an
undergraduate degree in History of
Art from Leeds. Her work has been shown
in the UK and abroad, including at Globe
Hub in Newcastle, the Banff Centre in
Alberta, Canada, the Kiasma Museum
in Helsinki and Seven Seven in London.
Since 2003, Clarke has participated in
and contributed to conferences and
publications produced through Centre
for Mobility Research at Lancaster
University. In London, more recently,
she contributed to the latest Control
Magazine.

<http://www.axisweb.org/artist/ellyclarke>

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Asja & Lilra
Tuwshin & his friend
Brigita & Tania
The Mongolian gentlemen
The Ukrainian family & their friend
Oonla & The Ice Skating Team of
Mongolia
Conductor 119 from Carriage number 9
Prestige Engineering from Ulaan Baatar

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candidates to interview on the train:*

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