

**Interview with Varvara Shavrova – UNTOUCHED**  
**by Carla Nayton**

Varvara Shavrova was born in Moscow, Russia and attended art college there. At the age of 20, she moved to London to undertake a three-year studio fellowship with the Freeform Arts Trust to ‘experience the western way of dealing with contemporary culture.’ London became her home for the next 15 years and it was during this time that she established her career as an artist.

Varvara has supported the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center by generously volunteering to help with our research of the Beijing hutongs. She served as a volunteer during our first phase of ‘Friends of Old Beijing’, and performed monthly surveys of hutong neighborhoods from October 2006 until Cultural Heritage Day on June 9, 2007. On that day, the research carried out by Varvara and the other volunteers was displayed.

Varvara has just exhibited her ‘Untouched’ multi-media art project at the Beijing Art Gallery of Imperial City, for which she received the 2008 Culture Ireland Award. Her exhibition is a result of two years of painstaking work in two countries. She has created a visual and auditory record of a hutong neighborhood in Beijing juxtaposed against the very different backdrop of the small Irish town of Ballycastle. Through her work, Varvava captures the shared nature of the human condition, despite the surface differences between these two cultures. She highlights similarities between these two local environments facing imminent change, and incites in the viewer an appreciation of the value of the unique cultural heritage of each place.

Varvara’s work is important and timely, as it draws attention to the destruction of the hutong culture in Old Beijing. Through her art work, she shows how valuable the intangible culture is of Beijing’s hutong communities. I interviewed Varvara about the creative process behind her ‘Untouched’ collection, and discovered how the cultural heritage of Old Beijing is preserved and promoted through her work.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me what first inspired you to create your ‘Untouched’ collection of work?

**Varvara:** It was my first experience of Tiananmen area in 2004. It was very lively and densely populated; messy, but also a very interesting part of Beijing, just south of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. I was really interested in this part of Beijing; it was so full of energy. I went to take a picture, and I just left my camera video recorder running instead, you couldn't capture this kind of scene with a photo, it was too full of life. There was a very famous duck restaurant in this area, the Li Qun Duck restaurant. The duck restaurant was a hive of activity, I used to love taking people there; it was a real cultural experience. I went back there a year later to show my sister who was visiting Beijing and we discovered the whole area had been completely demolished. It looked like a bomb had been dropped on the whole neighborhood. I was really shocked by the whole thing and decided I wanted to do something about it. I don't know if you've seen, but when they demolish the houses, they leave one wall standing, it looks really strange. I took pictures of these walls. There were all these leftover objects in the rubble from people's homes – chairs, DVD players, even spoons. I wrapped these in demolition tape, and these objects from the demolition site became the inspiration for a collection I exhibited at 798. It was this exhibition that led to my 'Untouched' project. I did one project based in Tiananmen, but then also because I was coming and going to Ireland, and the experience was really very different, I decided I needed to connect the two through my work.

**Interviewer:** You draw many parallels in the experiences of both cultures. Your short film in particular celebrates the cultural identity of each place through the rituals of food, music, and way of life. What did you see as being the main similarities and differences between Chinese and Irish culture?

**Varvara:** I think it's interesting, when I was making the film actually I wasn't actually aware of many parallels: the similarities gradually emerged in the process of editing the film. I just filmed what I saw as interesting and I filmed the characters that were interesting - strong characters - but I wasn't intentionally making those visual and almost rather abstract parallels, it was later that they became apparent. When I came to edit more than 30 hours of film both in China and Ireland, I

suddenly realized there were these really amazing, unnerving similarities, and of course they are based on people's cultures, people's food culture, people's family culture, and also their relationship with space around them.

**Interviewer:** There is a lovely organic quality to your work, and an almost romanticism to your subjects, who speak in past tense about the way life was. Did you feel you were capturing something on the brink of extinction?

**Varvara:** Maybe, but I think the romantic aspect comes from the fact I am a painter by training, and paintings as a medium tend to be romanticized: you paint because its old fashioned or because it's something of an odd activity to paint paintings, and so that is why I decided to use new media for this project as well but of course as an artist I retain the same eye and the same view. Even though I photograph the walls I don't paint the walls. I'm interested in the same aspects as though I were painting them; the textures, the composition, the contrasts; so that's one aspect. And yes, it is important to document something on the brink of extinction but there is also a sense for me that it's not about nostalgia, it's about the experience here and now, because it is here and now. A lot of people don't know about it, a lot of people live in Beijing's completely secluded community. Even the Irish that came to the opening of the exhibition, they really loved this aspect of Beijing in the film. Of course the Irish recognized the familiarity of Ballycastle and they laughed about their own habits, but when they saw the parallels with China, they thought 'well, this is amazing, I've been living here maybe for 10 years, but I never knew that this area existed, or I never knew these people were so similar to us!'

**Interviewer:** You highlight in your work the impact redevelopment is having on cultural heritage. Why did you feel it was important to draw attention to this issue?

**Varvara:** I think because in China, there is this continuous program of redevelopment, and replacing the 'real old' with 'fake old'. On one level there is an understanding of the importance of Chinese culture - how this is a 5000 civilization and how this really is the most ancient culture in the world; on the other hand there is the destruction of the

real artifacts, the real things from this culture, which are rebuilt anew, so they look quite old, but they are not really old. I think this is in Chinese culture, because it has been done before, even in Beijing's history the city has been demolished and rebuilt by a number of historical leaders, so it is a practice that we might see as abhorrent, but here it is normal. Ultimately, I think that buildings are not the most important issue (particularly in Beijing), but it's the people's culture that matters most. For Chinese people, the culture of the family and the culture of the community are extremely important. And when these old communities get dispersed, that is what disappears; it's the relationship between people, their ability to socialize as they all live together. But one shouldn't forget that yes, this is nice, but people also live in terrible conditions. Quite often there will be twenty people living in one yard, it will be all built upon, so the old structure hasn't been maintained, so it's in very poor condition, they don't have a toilet, they don't have running water. The problem is hutong preservation projects cannot be sponsored by the government, and people don't have the money or incentive to restore those buildings themselves, so it's something of a dead end. In addition to this, the people that live in the Hutongs usually don't have the ownership of the buildings, so they don't know if they put money in to restore it or even maintain it, that tomorrow a big developer might come in and buy the whole land and they will have to leave. It's a very complicated issue, and in a way it does feel like there is no way out of it, unless some major foreign fund like UNESCO decides that a certain area of Beijing needs protection, and then they put a protection order on it and pump huge amounts of money into it. It's not as though the Chinese government doesn't have this as a priority, but there are all sorts of other priorities, such the Olympic Games, so it's complicated. I think there is a better solution than demolishing and rebuilding again, but it's not happening.

**Interviewer:** As a final note, what do you hope your audience takes away with them after viewing your 'Untouched' exhibition?

**Varvara:** It would be nice if they took away the positive aspect to the work, which actually comes across much stronger through the people rather than the buildings. The positive aspect is this; that people are always people, there is an amazing similarity between a European community and a community in Old Beijing. Things are tragic but they are also

funny, those funny aspects and the very humanistic aspects about how people eat, how people drink and how they socialize. In a way, communities also change, but then my impression of particularly the young people's interviews, particularly in Ballycastle and also in Beijing, is that they do value their culture and their family roots. Even if those buildings don't exist anymore or they cannot find the exact place their father was born or where their grandfather had a farm, they still retain the importance of the place itself, and they also plan to return, so perhaps they will leave, but will return in years to come. Maybe they will be the ones who really value the culture, even though they may not be able to find the real objects, they will be able to re-instate their cultural heritage by their very presence there. And culture is in people, it's not necessarily in buildings. In London, if you look back 20 years, very little has changed. But if you look at other more dramatic periods in British history, such as during the war, huge chunks of London were bombed and have been replaced with really ugly artifacts. So every nation goes through its motions. Europe now is extremely privileged because of its wealth and because of its cultural awareness - you can't move a stone without applying to a planning commission - whereas in China everything is driven by money so they have to grow to understand what the values were.

Artists have long captured the places and spaces around them. At the same time that Varvara objectively captures the 'real' Beijing in her 'Untouched' works, she simultaneously leads her audience to contemplate why these old crumbled hutong walls and people that live among them are chosen as to be the subject matter of her art. Art has an incredible ability to transcend social and political boundaries and reach a diverse audience. It is because of this wide-reaching ability that art is an incredibly powerful medium for drawing people's attention to current issues. Varvara's 'Untouched' collection promotes the preservation of Old Beijing in a contemporary and relevant manner. Through her art, Varvara places value on hutongs as a viable form of cultural heritage that China ought to be investing in for the future – not destroying.