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# Cultural Sharing: Socially Engaged Art Between Cities

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Li Yang

## Abstract

Public art seeks the effectiveness of communication. In past artistic creations, the artist remained the main creator, placing their work in exhibition spaces to achieve the sharing of art, while the public, as the audience, was merely a viewer. In today's cities, artistic creations in public spaces have become increasingly diverse, yet some marginalized groups between urban and rural areas still lack effective access to art. Some artists adopt socially engaged approaches, inviting the public to actively participate in the creation of art. In this process, the artist relinquishes exclusive authorship, transforming the original act of sharing the artwork and space into a collective social practice and shared creation. This shift removes the artwork's role as a mere medium of art's dissemination in public spaces and directly returns the art to the public and turning socially engaged art into a bidirectional artistic practice.

## Key Words

Contemporary art, public art, socially engaged art, cities, rural areas

The city was the original locus of modern art. Early art sharing primarily referred to museums, galleries, and iconic sculptures or artistic architecture located in central urban areas or commemorative spaces. These works symbolized the cultural and orderly image of a city as a whole, disseminating art and culture to urban citizens collectively. However, urban citizens are not a homogeneous entity. They are stratified into different social classes within the urban structure. The elite class that holds discursive power constructs a more authoritative voice in the development of art. Their cultural background presumes them to be more qualified to make decisions about and appreciate art, and they also represent the foundation of urban order. Yet, within the layered spaces of the city, the broader populace and marginalized groups at the lower strata constitute an implicit urban order. Their spatial order exists in markets, urban villages, and old neighborhoods—everyday life spaces where, historically, art has often been absent.

As artists increasingly focus on society, they have begun adopting more flexible approaches to engage in

interventionist art creation within everyday life spaces. This brings greater vibrancy and artistic value to the public living spaces of the general populace and marginalized groups, transforming the hidden survival spaces beneath the urban brilliance into a warmer and more humane urban cultural ecology. The artists' interventions break the silenced and marginalized order, acting as catalysts for societal and cultural transformation. They inspire the public to use art to change their living environment and even their way of life, enabling the public to shape an alternative form of shared contemporary cultural art through active participation.

## 1. The Gaps in Urban Order

The city is one of the most common living spaces in modern human society. It is predicated on a dense population and is composed of factors such as buildings, transportation, sanitation systems, public utilities, and communication systems. Beneath this, it also represents

a series of conventional orders. Order is a necessary component of society; it is not only implicit in the understanding, ideas, daily public opinion, and habits between individuals, but also manifest in the systems, commerce, and law enforcement practices within society. However, within this complex assemblage, order largely stems from the integration of experience. It is fundamentally different from the knowledge we find in scientific texts, philosophical theories, or religious forgiveness. Therefore, social order constantly undergoes discovery and self-correction through experience, which is evident in the ongoing revisions and supplements to laws. Similarly, due to its vast collection of factors, it inevitably exhibits delays and negligence, such as unbroken regional social movements and local wars. Negligence and correction often emerge together, as order rarely possesses foresight.

Art does not possess powerful social correction abilities, but it has never been absent in social development. This is due to the inherent sensitivity of the artist. As a form of cultural documentation or healing, art intertwines with all aspects of history and society. As the sociologist of art Arnold Hauser once said, “The more advanced the society in which the art we study exists, the more complex its network of relationships becomes, and the more blurred the social context of these relationships is.”<sup>1</sup> At times, art serves as a mirror of historical development and social transformation, while at other times, art functions as a means of repairing the defects in society’s original order. Art as a mirror is often seen in the sociological approach to the history of painting, while art as a social harmonizing factor is more commonly found in art with social functional demands, such as architecture, public sculptures, art education, and theatrical drama. Today, art increasingly emphasizes attention to society and the public, and its participation and intervention in society have become important reference points in art historical research.

Art’s intervention in society typically arises from issues that often exist in the areas of disordered social norms within communal societies. These issues are not blind spots in regulations, but rather a collection of incongruous phenomena that occur between people at inappropriate times. As Michel Foucault put it, “The basic codes of a culture—those codes that govern its language, perceptual frameworks, communication, skills, values, and hierarchical practices—define from the very beginning a series of experiential orders for each individual, orders that they must navigate and within which they find themselves.”<sup>2</sup> The individual possesses their own natural experiences and moral awareness,



Figure 1. GRAV. *A Day on the Street*. April 19, 1966. Participants walked on placed wooden blocks in the Montparnasse district.

which are shaped by their specific environment and state of being. Society, on the other hand, is governed by a more complex set of norms, with gaps in order between individuals and between the individual and the larger society. These gaps exist within the blurred space between practices, systems, and ethics, where freedom and culture unfold. A loose gap leads to the issue of unregulated rules, while a narrow gap creates the busy groups that traverse the city, who are too occupied to attend to freedom and culture. They continually expand their norms and demands, resulting in a state of existential anxiety beneath the silent order, exemplified by an increasing pursuit of non-essential material goods and the growing pressure of diverse living expenses. In this context, freedom, culture, and art become luxuries, “useless objects” in their own right.

Thus, social order is manifested as the coordination between the individual and the collective. However, at times, it can implicitly reflect a compromise between the weak and the strong, primarily manifested in the unequal distribution of resources and power imbalances between individuals. For example, the “Community Arts Movement” and the “Artist Placement Group,” which flourished in the 1960s in the United Kingdom, focused on marginalized groups. In contrast to the British Arts Association, which was controlled by the aristocracy and upper-middle classes at the time, the working-class public in Britain did not have a voice in art. The public sought to gain a voice by engaging in participatory art practices and challenging elite culture. The characteris-



Figure 2. Collection · Postage Large Floral Fabric sold in a store in Wuhan, September to December 1992. Image courtesy of Ren Jian.

tics of the Community Arts Movement are primarily manifested as follows: “It aims to challenge the class structure of the international art world and its success criteria based on quality, technique, and method, as these criteria often hide class interests behind them; it supports the participation and shared authorship of artworks; and it seeks to allow the creativity of various social groups to take shape, especially for people living in socially, culturally, and financially deprived areas.”<sup>3</sup> The GRAV also sought to establish a relationship with the public through their creations. For example, on April 19, 1966, they organized the event *A Day on the Street* (figure 1), arranging various interactive activities with the public in locations such as Parisian streets, subway stations, and along the Seine River. However, their creations were more focused on interacting with the public than on the art itself.

In comparison, the public’s participation and intervention in art within the city often emerge from the city’s interstitial spaces, especially in rapidly evolving cities like those in China, where socially engaged art cases frequently arise in marketplaces, bazaars, or urban

villages. Art’s intervention in the city does not solely aim at transforming space but rather attempts to shape the relationship between the artist and participants, the active and the passive, real life and art, within the space. This process seeks to inspire the public’s awareness of freedom and cultural concepts and to repair the disturbances within the social order.

## 2. The Evolution of Art Among the Town

Socially engaged art between cities does not share common implementation techniques or characteristics, nor does it, like social revolutions, have a concrete, idealized goal that must be achieved. For artists, participatory intervention in society is more about the unfolding of an attitude. They aim to make the public they engage with begin to recognize their circumstances and untapped creativity. By simply introducing a space providing some necessary tools or equipment, and offering a few simple, incidental guides, the public can express their talents. This process serves to enlighten,



Figure 3. New History Group. 1993 · *New History Big Rock*. Wuhan, September 30, 1993. Image courtesy of Ren Jian.

broaden, and deepen their sensitivities in daily life and work environments—sensitivities they often overlook—and enrich their lives. Unlike traditional art and avant-garde elite art, the artist is not focused on skill development or the quality of the works produced by the public. These low-cost activities do not aspire to create extraordinary masterpieces; in these contexts, art is simply a medium. What the artist values more is the participation process itself, emphasizing the real experiences and meanings that both the artist and the public share during this process.

Although socially engaged art originated in Europe, its universal relevance to social issues quickly led to its global development. In China, however, due to the delayed development of the market economy, urbanization, and avant-garde art movements, signs of such art only began to emerge in the 1990s. For example, from the perspective of Pop Art, the New History Group (新歷史小組), represented by Ren Jian (任戩), initiated the “Basic Pattern Production Implementation Series Project (基礎圖案投產實施系列工程)” (1991–1993), which was a socially engaged art project. The early phase of the project was mainly focused on individual

artistic creations, but the final sales and exhibition phase became highly interactive with society. The *New History · 1993 Big Consumption* event included social activities such as rock music, exhibitions, sales, and fashion shows. This case was, in form, a carefully planned avant-garde art activity and was the final project of the “Basic Pattern Production Implementation Series Project” initiated by Ren Jian in January 1991. The project consisted of three stages: the first stage, from January 1991 to August 1992, involved creating 187 oil paintings called *Collection · Postage* (集·郵), using national flag elements and transforming the national symbol into everyday postage stamp patterns; the second stage, from September to December 1992, focused on printing the *Collection · Postage* artworks as basic patterns onto fabric, which was then sold in shopping malls in several cities; the third stage, from April to June 1993, involved the *New History · 1993 Big Consumption* event in Beijing and Wuhan, carried out with the members of the New History Group (including participants such as Zhou Xiping (周細平), Liang Xiaochuan (梁小川), Ye Shuangui (葉雙貴), and others. In the *Big Consumption* event, the New History



Figure 4. Handshake 302 Art Center, 2016. Image courtesy of Wu Dan.

Group combined the decentralization of the art market with the mass appeal of Pop Art, choosing the first McDonald's restaurant opened by a foreign fast-food corporation in China as the event's base. Ren Jian showcased his factory-made works, *Collection · Postage Large Floral Fabric* (集郵·大花布面料) (figure 2) and *Collection · Ren Jian Denim Series* (集郵·任戩牛仔系列), at a new product launch at McDonald's in Wangfujing. Both the artists and staff wore the "Collection·Ren Jian Denim" outfits. After the launch, the artists performed the collective song *1993 · New History Big Rock* (figure 3). However, during the exhibition setup at the McDonald's in Wangfujing and the Zhongcui Fashion Boutique, the event was shut down by authorities in the middle of the night. From June to September, the series of activities were carried out successively in Wuhan. The New History Group described its creative intentions in the project brief: "1. To completely decentralize Pop Art and turn it into an art product available for daily consumption. Through the reciprocal flow of creation = production, artwork = product, exhibition = sales, collection = circulation, and appreciation = consumption, to achieve the reciprocal

flow of art = life. To fundamentally alter the aristocratic existence of art, artists, artworks, and appreciators; 2. To construct a comprehensive, everyday, life-oriented, and mass-oriented artistic language that offers new possibilities for artistic expression and artistic intervention in contemporary life; 3. To have artists, theorists, and entrepreneurs collaborate in a multidimensional way, altering how art becomes socially effective."<sup>4</sup> From the industrial production of clothing to product launches and exhibition sales, this series of oil paintings—originally awarded at the "Guangzhou: First 1990s Art Biennale"—was thoroughly recontextualized as a set of commercially oriented products, ultimately transformed into everyday apparel worn by people on the streets of the city.

Social intervention through art in cities often does not take place in high-end and developed spaces, which already have mature urban planning, numerous public artworks, and abundant art education resources. Instead, interventionist art tends to grow in the cracks—within marketplaces, urban villages, and other urban enclaves surrounded by capital and order. These artistic "vacuum areas" provide space for artists. Taking art intervention



Figure 5. Photo of the “Handshake 302” team members (from left to right): Wu Dan, Zhang Kaiqin, Mary Ann O’Donnell, Lei Sheng, Liu He, 2015. Image courtesy of Wu Dan.

in urban villages as an example, “Handshake 302” (figure 4) is a public art project that was established in September 2013 in Baishizhou, the largest urban village in Shenzhen. It developed from the “Urban Village Special Task Force,” created in 2012 by Mary Ann O’Donnell, Zhang Kaiqin (張凱琴), Lei Sheng (雷勝), Liu He (劉赫), and Wu Dan (吳丹) (figure 5). The group consists of cultural practitioners from fields such as anthropology, architecture, design, and art. The “Handshake 302” originated from the room number they rented in Baishizhou, Building 49, Baishizhou Second Alley, which was Room 302 (with an area of 12.5 square meters) in 2013. “Handshake” refers to the building they lived in, and it also represents their desire for artistic intervention in society. Starting in 2013, “Handshake 302” organized over a hundred events on various themes such as “Object Love in Baishizhou (物戀白石洲)”, “Paper Cranes in Flight (紙鶴在飛)”, “Hidden in the

City (隱於城)”, and “The New Immigrant Genealogy (新移民家譜)”. These events included workshops, dance, drama, academic exchanges, exhibitions, parent-child learning, games, and other forms. All events were publicly open for online recruitment. They organized activities for residents of urban villages, migrant workers, and other lower-middle-class groups, using art and cultural events to engage in discussions and reflections on topics such as the history and culture of Shenzhen, the environment of urban villages, and modern life. They also provided high-quality art education and other public welfare activities for children and teenagers. “Handshake 302” used art as a medium to inspire public thinking, expression, and communication. They did not have a clear objective; rather, they practiced whatever activities seemed possible. In August 2019, due to the launch of the “urban renewal” project in Baishizhou, “Handshake 302” relocated out

of Baishizhou. After three years of spatial suspension, it moved into the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of No. 29 Chun Jing Street in Nantou Ancient Town in 2024.

Marginalized groups and everyday living spaces are often the most overlooked blind spots in urban settings. The goal of urban renewal is to provide citizens with a more livable environment, with public art works primarily serve as embellishments within this process. However, well-maintained and artistically enriched urban spaces are rarely accessible to marginalized groups. They often live within the interstices of urban folds, laboring day and night to provide the city with its most basic supplies and services. Yet, they are frequently ignored and, burdened by the struggles of survival, have little opportunity to engage with the development of culture and art. He Zhisen's (何志森) "Mapping Workshop" is an art organization focused on marginalized groups. One widely known example is their 2018 project, *Landscapes of Creation: The Wet Market Art Museum*, implemented at the Nonglin Wet Market in Dongshankou, Guangzhou. When leading students in this art intervention at the market, He Zhisen emphasized: "First, the role of the initiator is that of a curator advocating for 'non-object creation'. Second, the main creators of the art museum are not architects or artists, but rather the 'public'."<sup>5</sup> He organized students to photograph the hands of 44 vendors and held a photography exhibition in the wet market. He also invited artist Song Dong (宋冬) to create *The Boundaryless Wall* (無界的牆) at the market. After the market was demolished, He Zhisen, at the invitation of Feng Boyi, initiated a crowdfunding campaign to "rebuild the wet market" and hosted the *Market in the Museum* exhibition at the Chongqing Yue Lai Art Museum. The project was imbued with warmth and human connection from start to finish. Even though the activity did not bring tangible economic benefits to the market, the relationship between the organizers and participants evolved from initial friction and skepticism to trust and heartfelt appreciation.

The project by the New History Group influenced social spaces by transforming artworks into commodities. However, in this project, the artists remained the creators and leaders of the works. While the public moved beyond being mere spectators to becoming consumers and experiencers of commodified art, they were still not participants in the creative process. Handshake 302, on the other hand, used a rented 12.5 square meters room in an urban village as its medium. From this tiny space, the group connected with nearby residents through online promotion, offering a variety of public art activities. The "Market Museum"

project, in a certain sense, provided the market community with an opportunity for artistic experience. Comparing the three cases—from the popularization of artists' works to the opening up of private spaces, and the artistic transformation of public living spaces—artists have provided diverse artistic possibilities for the city. Along the way, the level of public participation has progressively increased.

### 3. The Sharing of Creative Exclusivity

Good art or a good creator does not adhere to a fixed standard, but art can still be distinguished by its quality. Once art enters the public domain, it inevitably faces public judgment. Public art that fails to resonate often ends up as crude public scenery, typically characterized by its "untimeliness" in a specific context. When creating public art, the fundamental questions are: for whom is it created, and why? As Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello critically ask: "Are today's artists, and even today's intellectuals or researchers, akin to networked beings seeking producers for their projects, dependent on costly, heterogeneous, and complex frameworks, as well as the ability to communicate with distant actors holding divergent perspectives? And ultimately, who is the audience they aim to engage, persuade, or win over?"<sup>6</sup> In Chinese cities, many public art projects consume significant resources and involve complex efforts, yet they do not necessarily provide genuine artistic inspiration to the public. Public art is often permanently installed in specific public spaces, where avant-garde pieces rejected by the public may face removal amid controversy. Meanwhile, perfunctory, formulaic works fail to produce any meaningful social impact.

In the intricate urban landscape, public art, as a marker of urban civilization, inevitably carries significant social value. However, the general public—the primary intended audience of public art—often has limited direct access to it and experiences a notable disconnect. Despite being placed in public spaces, artworks still maintain a certain degree of distance from their viewers.

Artists, increasingly intrigued by public engagement, strive to achieve deeper artistic interaction with the public. With this vision, artists relinquish the exclusivity of their creative autonomy, sharing the rights of creation with the public to fulfill the goal of public art. This shift moves art from the initial sharing of works and spaces toward shared authorship of creation, thereby achieving a deeper level of cultural and humanistic sharing. In some



Figure 6. Setouchi Triennale 2025 poster.

forms of socially engaged art that emphasize shared creation, every participant becomes a creator. For instance, in the series of public welfare activities organized by “Handshake 302,” each individual gained hands-on experience. Similarly, in the “Market Museum” project, every vendor had the opportunity to create something uniquely their own. The process of public participation in art creation is fundamentally different from the subcontracted division of labor seen in some artistic projects. For example, in the production of large sculptures, the artist may only design a small clay model or sketch, leaving workers to handle scaling, casting, assembling, polishing, transporting, and installing the piece. Although workers are involved in physical production, their contribution is pure labor—they lack an understanding of the work’s meaning. The core of socially engaged art lies in helping the public comprehend the creative process; understanding their role is fundamental to genuine participation. Some artists

relinquish the exclusive right to create, inviting untrained members of the public to join in the creative process. Even though the resulting works may lack professional polish, the participants’ experience holds far more tangible value than mere spectatorship. Their involvement is regarded as a social and cultural transformation brought about through artistic engagement.

The development of socially engaged art today is increasingly shifting from the past model of small-scale activities spontaneously organized by individual artists or groups to more extensive regional cultural industry projects developed by governments or cultural enterprises. These projects are characterized by larger scales, more diverse artist collectives, greater financial investments, and more complex public issues to address. The main challenges in this shift include:

1. Conflicts between artists and the public: The fundamental issue lies in whether the artist’s goal is to



Figure 7. An old residential building in Zouping City, Shandong Province. November 2019. Photo by Li Yang.

complete an artwork or to foster harmonious progress in collaboration with the public.

2. The involvement of capital: With greater capital investment, the distribution and return of funds become critical considerations in artistic creation. Does the investor prioritize enhancing public satisfaction with their living environment and lifestyle, or are they more focused on producing avant-garde works that can be promoted? Often, it is difficult to balance these two objectives.

3. Approach to solving public issues through art: Should social transformation align with the majority's preferences, or should it focus on mediating the relationship between individuals and the collective majority?

These questions highlight the complexities and tensions inherent in the evolving nature of socially engaged art.

We can use the Setouchi Triennale (figure 6) in Japan

as an example to address the above issues. Originally, the residents of the many islands in the Seto Inland Sea were greatly affected by natural conditions, transportation, and various other cultural factors. This led to a significant population decline and severe aging of the population. This not only caused the regression of various industries but also resulted in the closure of elementary and middle schools due to the absence of newborns and newlywed couples over the years. As a result, a large number of abandoned residential houses appeared. Since 1998, after Benesse Corporation collaborated with local governments to initiate art development and planning on several islands, places like Naoshima have gained international recognition as art islands. Key contributions include Tadao Ando's Chichu Art Museum and Lee Ufan Museum, as well as Yayoi Kusama's iconic Yellow Pumpkin sculpture. These efforts have transformed many islands in the Seto Inland Sea into destinations attracting visitors from around the

world. Since 2010, the Setouchi International Art Festival, held every three years, has further cemented this transformation. The festival spans 100 days across the islands, starting with 92 works created by nearly 100 artists and growing to over 200 works in subsequent editions. Each festival now draws over a million visitors and generates tourism revenues exceeding 10 billion yen. Beyond economic growth and tourism development, these artistic initiatives have also positively impacted local communities. Island populations have gradually increased, schools have reopened, and, most importantly, through the collaboration and interaction between artists and residents, the islands have tackled their decline in a culturally progressive manner.

Throughout this process, various conflicts and challenges were transformed into positive factors driving development. It can be said that when uncertain social issues are approached through positivist sociology, they often lead to dead ends. However, when treated as ongoing practices, those structurally ambiguous reflections and explorations can consistently evolve into meaningful directions for humanistic development.

#### 4. Conclusion

Art must always respond to its environment because it

promises a better world. In today's societal shift, art's openness to metaphysical purity has embraced more concrete goals and orientations. More importantly, art's engagement with society allows it to realize its value more practically, enabling artists to recognize that the transformation of their environment is often more tangible and significant than their personal artistic experiences. Thus, socially engaged art not only shares work and spaces but also relinquishes the exclusivity of creation traditionally held by artists. However, certain participatory projects still grapple with value dilemmas, the most fundamental being artists' lack of genuine social experience, which leads to an overemphasis on their perspectives. At times, they fail to anchor their work in authentic social practice and instead tend to compete with the plans of other artists, prioritizing artistic rivalry over meaningful societal impact. Sometimes, when artists initiate a socially engaged project, they should be more inclined to address the public's issues. On the contrary, if they focus more on completing a piece of work, the significance of that work will inevitably be diluted. This is because the value of socially engaged art lies in the public, not in the individual achievements of the artist. The quality of the collaborative model provided by the artist is not judged by the public involved, but rather by critics, artists, and cultural groups, as well as government agencies. This



Figure 8. Graffiti and installations inside an abandoned unfinished building in Songzhuang Town, Beijing, May 2022. Photo by Li Yang.

results in the inability of the shared nature of engaged art to effectively respond to its true subject—the public participants.

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Editor: Yao Xiao

*Art Frontier Journal*

## ENDNOTES

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## 人文共享：城市之間的社會介入性藝術

李洋

**摘要：**公共藝術所訴求的是傳播的有效性，在過去的藝術創作中，藝術家依然是創作主體，他們將其作品置於展示空間以實現藝術的共用，公眾作為受眾群體是觀看者。在今天的城市中，公共空間的藝術創作已經越來越豐富，但依然有一些城市與鄉村之間的邊緣群體缺乏有效的藝術分享。有一部分藝術家採用社會介入的方式，讓公眾參與到藝術的創作當中。在這一過程中，藝術家取消了其創作的專屬權，將原本的作品共用與空間共用擴大為社會實踐與創作共用，以此取消了藝術作品在公共空間中的傳播介質屬性，而將藝術直接還與大眾，使社會介入性的藝術成為一類雙向性的藝術實踐。

**關鍵詞：**當代藝術；公共藝術；社會介入性藝術；城市；鄉村