

What is the Socially Engaged Art Museum? Lessons from the Yangdeng Art Collective in China

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【Abstract】

Socially engaged art since the 1990s has become a global trend. The practices of socially engaged arts, while creating new kinds of arts and opening up the entire institutional domain of the art world, are inseparable from the practices of museums that undertake significant changes. In this essay, I theorize the concept of “socially engaged art museum” - a practice that unveils art as an aesthetic force for rendering everyday life performative or playful - to examine both socially engaged arts and museums under what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls “aesthetic regime of art” (2009). Comparing with the current scholarship that mostly examines European and American examples, I examine cases from Chinese contemporary art. Specifically, I discuss artistic practices of the Yangdeng Art Collective in Southwestern China. My argument is that a socially engaged art museum - qualitatively different from a conventional art museum that engages social life through its curated collections and exhibitions - is both a context-specific artwork of aesthetic experience and a technology of the individualized self in contemporary risk society. Not only does this study question the common scholarly view of socially engaged arts as “post-autonomous” or “anti-aesthetic,” but it also advances a notion of sociality that accounts for the complexity of everyday life.

【key words】

socially engaged art, aesthetic experience, technology of the self,
contemporary art, art museum

Introduction

In December 2011, a group of artists from the City of Chongqing founded an art collective at Yangdeng, a small township in rural Guizhou. Under the name of “*Yangdeng yishu hezuoshe*” (literarily “Yangdeng Art Cooperative”), the art collective has carried out a series of art projects at Yangdeng township and its surrounding areas since 2012. By working with local residents and villagers, the artists have conducted interactive art projects during market days, painted colorful graffiti on residential buildings, developed site-specific “art museums” (*meishuguan*), created and exhibited artworks in these museums, on school campuses, in the fields on mountain tops, and on broken bridge foundations. As a whole, these projects use artistic labor, knowledge, and skills - that is, artistic productive force - in the production of “the playful” in the daily lives of Yangdeng residents.

The playful here is neither a tangible product of economic development or moral advancement nor an intangible form that may be easily converted into an existing intellectual property. The playful is an art experience of local residents in the practice of everyday life. It is an aesthetic technology that makes local residents and/or artists inseparable parts of the art experience in encountering objects normally inaccessible or invisible. To speak of the playful for the art projects is to speak of Yangdeng’s aesthetic transformation (rather than its socio-economic-cultural development or modernization). The playful is a name under which various artworks and projects come to form a space in which artistic labor and subjectivity become contemporary with everyday life at Yangdeng.

In the last decade, as in other places around the globe, many Chinese artists have worked outside their studios, art academies, and art museums to engage social, economic, political, and environmental issues (see Wang 2019). I use the term “socially engaged art” to characterize these art practices and projects. Across China, the Yangdeng art collective (2011-present) is only one of the many socially engaged art projects. Other well-known projects include the *Bishan Project* (2011-2016) by Ou Ning and Zuo Jing in Anhui; the *Xucun Art Commune* (2010-present) by Qu Yan in Shanxi; the *Water System Project* (2012-present) by Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao in Chengdu (Ren 2020); the *Qiuzhuang Project* (2012-2013) by Li Mu in Jiangsu; the *Fly Together - Shijiezi Village Art Practice Project* (2015-2016) initiated by artists Qin Ga, Jing Le and Zong Ning in Tianshui, Gansu; and the *Fairyale Project* (2007) by Ai Weiwei. Most of these artistic practices have

operated under the name of “project” (*xiangmu*) and given the public the impression of disconnecting to the existing art museum system. While not a homogenous relationship to the museum system in China, they are related to museums in varied and different ways. Ou Ning’s work, for example, is inseparable from supports of NGOs (including art organizations and institutions); Xucun itself operates as part of an international art world; some aspects of the work of Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao had been supported by the A4 Art Museum (formally, the A4 Arts Center, a private art gallery in the City of Chengdu) and the Pompidou Center in Paris; the Yangdeng art collective has been tied to the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute; Li Mu’s project was explicitly supported by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands (Gu and Li 2015); Ai Weiwei’s “Fairytale” was a work for Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany (2012); and the “Fly Together” is a work of the Sijiezi Museum, which is loosely tied to the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

These socially engaged art projects have complicated relations to the contemporary art world, particularly art institutions like museums. Since the late 1980s, the mainstream Chinese contemporary art has been gradually incorporated into the *dispositif* of the creative economy, a mode of the economy that focuses on technological innovations and cultivates creativity as an intangible resource for economic development (Ren 2018). In the historical context, socially engaged art projects as a whole have developed an alternative mode to the mainstream world of contemporary art. Despite the fact that these art projects happen at the community level, this alternative mode of contemporary art is characterized less by its engagement with a community or a group of individuals in various ways (social, economic, political, and/or environmental), and more by its innovative way of using aesthetics outside the formal art institution. Instead of the classic notion of aesthetics associated with the regime of the fine arts, they use an updated notion of aesthetics, what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls “aisthesis,” a mode of experience according to which we perceive things, both sensibly and intellectually, as belonging to art (2013). It is in this sense of aesthetics that these socially engaged art projects radically affect the relationship between contemporary art and the museum system. Compared with a conventional art museum that incorporates everyday life into the functions of the art institution, as I discuss below, a socially engaged art museum not merely rejects the functions of the art institution but also reveals art as an aesthetic force for rendering everyday life performative or playful. I use the Yangdeng art collective to illustrate the concept of socially engaged art museum.

A Brief History of Socially Engaged Art in the Chinese Contemporary Art World

Since the end of the 1980s, contemporary art's relationship to the museum system has changed significantly. On the one hand, as scholars such as Terry Smith (2009), Hung Wu (2010), and Xiaobing Tang (2015) argue, contemporary art, especially works beyond the old masters in the West, has been systematically incorporated into the global art market. While Chinese contemporary art has been developed along with the international art market, it has also become part of the creative economy in China (especially since the 2000s). On the other hand, Chinese contemporary art has witnessed a qualitatively new development known as socially engaged art. Socially engaged art - different from socialist realist art that blurred the boundaries between art and daily life in the 1950s and 1960s (Tang 2015) - contributes both to the opening up of the representational regime of fine arts and to the development of the aesthetic regime of art (Ren 2015). Thus, a historical discussion of Chinese contemporary art is necessary to the understanding of these changes.

Although the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition at the National Art Museum in Beijing in 1989 was an important event in the history of contemporary art, it did not use the term "contemporary art" (*dangdai yishu*). The institutionalization of Chinese "contemporary art" (*dangdai yishu*), which took place in the 1990s, was characterized by a neoliberal development of the art world: the expansion of the market logic into the world of art creation, new forms of labor organization in art production, and transnational development of the Chinese art market (Wu 2010)¹. Since 2000, contemporary art, in the broader shift of the Chinese economy from the made-in-China to the created-in-China model, has become an important part of the creative economy in urban China. The state itself becomes active in transforming the (market-based) Chinese transnational art world into a global art world. The Third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, for example, engineered by a state-run institution, aimed at becoming "an established activity of international scale and academically addressed to the issues of globalization, postcolonialism and regionalism" (cited in Wu 2010, 396). Following the Third Shanghai Biennale, Chinese contemporary art embraced a global discourse of the art world. A host of large-scale biennials and triennials emerged in major Chinese cities. They anchored a normalized relationship between contemporary art and the "creative

city” model of urban development in China by connecting art experience to urban experience. In Chengdu, for example, the 2011 Biennale *Changing Vistas: Creative Duration* was sponsored by the Chengdu Municipal Government for the purpose of branding Chengdu as a world garden city based on the creative economy (Hu and Lü 2011).

Not only does the rising number of contemporary art exhibitions in a major city incorporate contemporary art into the established art museum system, but it also shows the development of new art museums. The Shanghai Art Museum, Guangdong Museum of Art, and He Xiangning Art Museum (in Shenzhen), for example, spearheaded the trend of making contemporary art an important aspect of their institutions. In the meantime, wealthy individuals and private companies began to fund the establishment of new museums and exhibition spaces in major cities. Examples include Beijing’s Today Art Museum, Shanghai’s Zendai Museum of Modern Art, and Nanjing’s Square Gallery of Contemporary Art. In Chengdu, contemporary art is now a mundane aspect of urban living. The Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art is officially developed by the municipal government as part of the Chengdu High-Tech Zone. Other institutions of contemporary art include the Blue Roof Museum of Chengdu (private) and A4 Art Museum (private).

The institutional development of contemporary art - through establishing art museums and staging art biennials - is part of the broader trends of engaging with the global art market and creating art spaces in major cities. Chinese contemporary art has become the single fastest-growing segment of the global art market (Belting, Duddensieg, and Weibel 2013, 134-135). Almost every major New York gallery had signed one or more Chinese artists by 2008. Parallel to the growth of the real estate sector in China is the astonishing and spectacular appreciation of art prices. The rapid development of art market has witnessed an explosion of commercial galleries in major cities. In Chengdu, for example, for profit galleries include K. Gallery (private) and XLY Museum of Modern Art (private). Moreover, a new type of urban art space has been emerging. Unlike previous “artist villages” that were located in cheap, semirural areas, the new type of art space is geographically and culturally connected to expanding city centers and integrating art into leisure consumption, and entertainment spaces. For example, Beijing’s 798, a Bauhaus-style former munitions complex, is redeveloped as a major art district (Pang 2012; Wong 2014).

The historical development of Chinese contemporary art shows that the notion of contemporary art has been developed and evolved in a close relationship

with social, political, and economic changes both in China and in the rest of the world. These changes focus on the neoliberal expansion of the market logic into the sphere of art creation, art profession, and art institutionalization. The shift of the Chinese economy from the made-in-China to the created-in-China in recent years has further incorporated contemporary art into the Chinese creative economy as contemporary art helps to promote such norms as creativity and innovation. For contemporary art from the 1980s to the 1990s, its boundaries from the official versions of Chinese arts were relatively clear. In the creative economy since the 2000s, however, the boundaries between contemporary art, the economy, and the state become blurred. Thus, contemporary art has become a *dispositif* of the creative economy in urban China. Similar trends have taken place in many other countries such as Britain, the Netherland, Germany, Australia, and the United States (Lash and Lury 2007; Bishop 2012; Finkelpearl 2013; Hewson 2014).

As contemporary art becomes a *dispositif* of the creative economy, scholars - whether those focusing on global contemporary art (Smith) or those on Chinese contemporary art (Wu; Tang) - agree that contemporary art appears to have become a category of globalized art market. While agreeing with these scholars that contemporary art is inseparable from the well-developed art market system, this paper also argues that scholars need to recognize the multiplicity of contemporary art. One major development in contemporary art since the 1990s, I argue, has been socially engaged art (or participatory art, social practice, etc.). As a new mode of contemporary art, socially engaged art grows out of critiquing specific practices of the art world (or field) that supports the art market system, and this critique itself is a critical element that makes contemporary art possible in the first place. The *Long March Project* (2002), curated by Lu Jie and the artist Qiu Zhijie, is a good example. The project involved a series of exhibition-based activities (including performances) along the route of the Long March held by the Red Army in the mid-1930s. This project itself was tied to the curatorial expertise of Lu Jie — who has the knowledge of traditional art museums and but decides to work outside the conventional art museum system as an independent curator — and Qiu's experimental art practices. In spite of not focusing on social engagement, this art project experimented curatorial practices by negotiating with the established museum system.

Socially engaged art marks a significant change in art's relations to society (and its politics). If a regime of art refers to a network of relationships that

informs the way in which an object, an act, or a practice is understood as art (Davis 2010, 134), we can identify three major regimes of arts historically: the ethical regime of images, the representational regime of the arts, and the aesthetic regime of art (Rancière 2009; Ren 2015). From a Foucauldian perspective, “regime” is defined as the way in which art’s definition, artistic practices and thoughts are connected to the administration of a society both as individuals and as a whole. In Plato’s Greece, the image, produced by poetic work or theatrical performance can affect the “ethos” of individuals and the community. For this reason, the image raises ethical questions in such practices as dance as therapy, poetry as education, and theatre as (civic) festival. Under the ethical regime, art neither exists nor is recognized as an autonomous domain. For this reason, this regime is characterized by images instead of art. Second, under the representational regime of the arts, art becomes separate from life in such a way that art imitates life. The artist’s know-how (*savoir-faire*) is distinguished both from the artisan’s know-how and from the entertainer’s know-how. It is this distinction that regulates fine arts according to a presumed agreement between a *poiesis* (a way of doing) and an *aisthesis* (a way of sensible being that is affected by *poiesis*). Finally, the aesthetic regime of art abolishes the hierarchical rules of representational regime. It promotes the equality of subjects, the dissolution of genres, the indifference of style in relationship to content. In today’s creative economy, it has become a dominant trend that artists engage in society in some forms by considering social and economic impacts of art. The distinctive boundaries between art things and ordinary things (in everyday life) are often blurred. In aesthetic engagement, however, the negotiation between art as life and art for art’s sake becomes an ongoing process. This means that art creation shifts its emphasis from *poiesis* to *aisthesis*.

It is in the broad context of the aesthetic regime of art that socially engaged art both critiques the classic notion of aesthetics - closely linked to the representational regime of fine arts - and develops a new kind of aesthetics that aims at maintaining art’s potentiality in social transformation. The sociality characterized by socially engaged art is multi-dimensional, reflecting complicated social relations. Merely recognizing the creative economy as a condition of socially engaged art is insufficient for the understanding of the many qualities of socially engaged art, for example, convivial (Bourriaud 1998), antagonistic (Bishop 2004), and/or communicative (Kester 2011). Furthermore, the multi-dimensional sociality is inseparable from socially engaged art’s contemporaneity: the co-presence of different temporalities that

may be economically driven, socially convivial, politically antagonistic, and/or interpersonally communicative. Contemporaneity is not an additional quality that socially engaged art might or might not have; rather, it is essential to socially engaged art's very conception: Every meaningful socially engaged art is contemporary because it has meaning for the present. In light of this relationship between sociality and contemporaneity, I thus argue that socially engaged art marks a radical expansion of contemporary art, or an alternative to the mainstream world of contemporary art.

Due to the fact that many Chinese socially engaged art projects has occurred in rural areas in recent years, this alternative contemporary art takes rural China seriously; and these artists regard rural residents (including farmers) as their contemporaries. Socially engaged art as contemporary art is significantly different from previous artistic practices in rural China. In modern Chinese history, for example, Y. C. James Yen's educational experiment in rural Hebei in the end of the 1920s to the 1930s was one of the most systematic efforts that included art as part of the education programs in rural China. While nearly one hundred highly educated Chinese intellectuals participated in Yen's project, they never treated rural residents as their contemporaries; instead, they regarded the farmers as "ignorant," "poor," "weak," and "selfish." The primary purpose of their educational experiments was developmental and governmental, transforming farmers into civilized subjects. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, artists joined in official workgroups to create artworks in the countryside. For example, Wang Shikuo's creation of *The Bloodstained Shirt* (*xueyi*, 1959) was based on his experience of participating in land reforms (Tang 2015, chapter 2). The socialist realistic work was intended to serve for the purpose of class struggle. During the Cultural Revolution period, educated young people went to the countryside to learn from the peasants while transmitting their knowledge to rural residents. Art was hardly considered an important work of the educated youth. Compared with these practices, treating rural residents as equals (contemporaries) is an important characteristic of socially engaged art projects like the Yangdeng art collective.

The Yangdeng Art Collective

The members of the Yangdeng art collective include several types. A group of artists (faculty members and students) primarily affiliated with the Department of

Sculpture at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (hereafter SCFAI) in Chongqing constitute the main body. Another group of the collective includes Yangdeng residents such as art teachers, folk artists, carpenters, and anyone who is interested in art. The third group of the collective consists of temporary members such as visiting artists who may participate in creative activities and events. All of the members are treated as equals through various forms of coproduction, co-operations, negotiations, and discussions. For this reason, the art collective uses the name “cooperative” (*hezuoshe*) as a way to characterize its location (that is, a rural area rather than an urban place), its voluntary and flexible form of organization, and its principle of equality in operations.

The Yangdeng art collective does not aim at creating a tangible product of economic development or an intangible form easily converted into an intellectual property. Due to the fact that most of the artists are closely affiliated with the SCFAI, a major art academy in China, they are very conscious of what art can and cannot do in rural development. Thus, according to the artist Jiao Xingtao who cofounded the collective, the artists maintain a critical attitude in their work by avoiding five common ways of engaging a rural society through art: “collecting folk songs and music in the field” (*tianye caifeng*), “learning through personal experience” (*tiyan shenghuo*), “developing a rural area through culture” (*wenhua xiangjian*), “art charity and philanthropy” (*yishu cishan*), and “predetermining goals and plans” (*yushe mubiao he jihua*).

I argue that the art creation and production process is inseparable from the general production in everyday life, that is, the utilization of artistic labor, knowledge, and skills to realize art’s potentiality in social transformation. Since 2012, the art collective has maintained active and ongoing programs that have produced a wide spectrum of artistic and creative activities, and artworks. For example, sculptures are permanently located in schools and fields; interacted exhibits and performances are staged during market days; paintings representing local scenes are on display in a space donated by a local resident and an inspired artist; local stories are collected as an archival history of the place; and photographs and videos are shared through social media like WeChat. The majority of these works are co-created, co-produced, or collaborative. They become embedded in the daily lives of Yangdeng, whether mundane or extraordinary. One activity started by artists may appear to be accidental in the beginning, but it becomes eventful as it becomes tied to a particular practice or incident for residents. And then, this

creative activity may trigger another activity, one initiated by residents, whether in the form of a voluntary engagement with the playful or that of a request for an assisted art experiment. The two “art museums” (*meishuguan*) discussed below are part of this network of creative activities that made the playful an art experience of local residents in the practice of everyday life.

The Fengdoughua Art Museum

The name “art museum” is commonly viewed as a formal institution of the art world, but here, it refers to the process of transforming an everyday space into an art space by means of sculpture-making skills. The Fengdoughua Art Museum located at the center of Yangdeng’s main street, discussed here, was developed based on the transformation of a “soybean jelly” (*douhua*) restaurant called Fengdoughua. When I first visited Yangdeng in May 2016, I had an opportunity of visiting this place. The Feng family (Feng Rujin, his wife, and their young children) owns a building space divided into two sections. The front functions as a restaurant. A big wok and stove occupy half of its entrance. The space - small, narrow, and very little natural light inside (Fig.1) - can only accommodate four tables. Behind the restaurant is a living space for the family to watch television when they are not busy.



Figure 1. The Interior Space the Fengdoughua Restaurant, Yangdeng, Guizhou

How does the artistic transformation of the space address the fact that it is operated as small family restaurant on the daily basis? What kinds of artworks can be created as integral part of the space? To address these two questions, Feng Rujin (the owner and a well-known carpenter) and the artists from the SCFAI

(Lou Jin, originally from Yangdeng, and Jiao Xingtao, Wang Bi, Zhang Jie, Li Zhu, and Wang Ziyuan) agreed that the spatial transformation had to be qualitatively different. Physical changes included repainting the inside space and decorating it with pictures. At the conceptual level, the artists decided to name the new space the “Fengdouhua Art Museum.” The naming was intended to mark its distinguished character both from the meaning of a conventional museum and from that of an ordinary restaurant.

This art museum is in fact a social sculpture that negotiates between art and everyday life to make art an aesthetic experience in the practice of everyday life. The artists used the four tables as raw materials for creating artworks. They first created a total of four small wooden sculptures - a pack of Guiyan cigarette, a pair of chopsticks, a small sauce plate, and a set of motorcycle keys - to realistically represent daily objects commonly used by local residents (Fig. 2). Then, they inserted each of them into the flat top of a dining table, making it literally a new table.

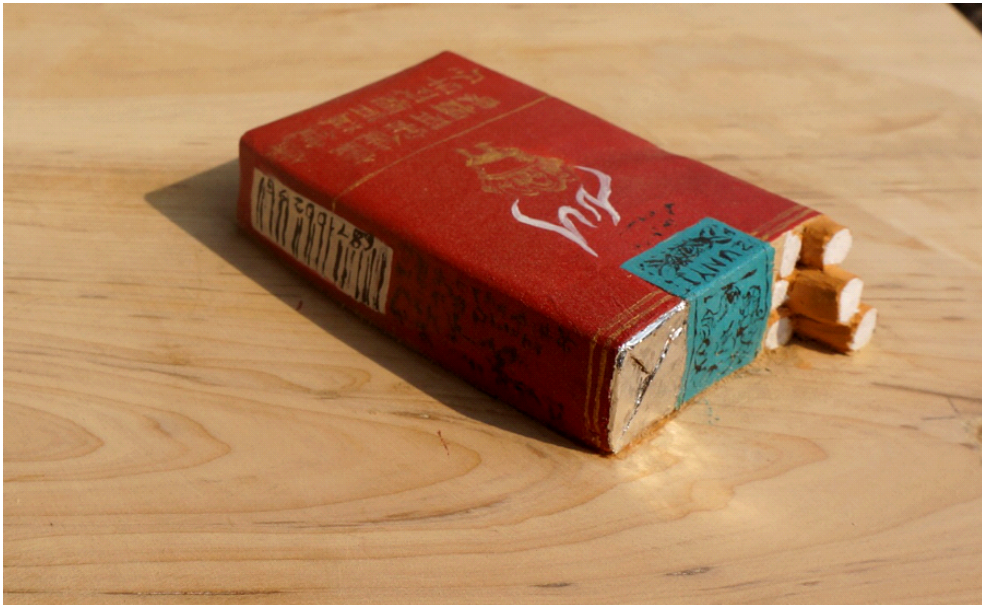


Figure 2. The Guiyan Wooden Sculpture, the Fengdouhua Museum, Yangdeng, Guizhou



Figure 3. Customers on the Opening Day of the Fengdohua Art Museum, Yangdeng, Guizhou

It is only when these new tables are used by residents that they begin to perform their aesthetic meanings as artworks. On the opening day (January 25, 2014), many people from Yangdeng and surrounding villages came to visit the new art restaurant (Fig. 3). Besides the new name, everything else appeared to be the same. When visitors at each table began to eat, some tried to interact with the objects on the table, whether by picking up the chopsticks, taking a cigarette, or sampling the hot sauce plate. However, they immediately realized that none of these objects were movable and could be used directly. For visitors, viewing the name of art museum made them curious about the new environment, interacting with the objects on the tables gave them opportunities to encounter something beyond the restaurant as an everyday space. Thus, under the name of the art museum, the artists enabled the mundane activity of eating in a restaurant an aesthetic experience. Similar to Alice's experience in wonderland where she realizes that the only way of making a sense there is the logic of the nonsensible (rather than the conventional logic of the sensible) (Deleuze 1990), the aesthetic experience inside this art restaurant/museum is a performance of a play in which objects of boredom as a conventional experience of inaction in everyday life become animated in such a way that they direct a user's attention to the qualities of art objects

that are normally withdrawn or unavailable to human's everyday experience (or what the philosopher Graham Harman calls "real qualities," see Harman 2019).

The Western Cake Art Museum

The success of Fengdouhua as an art museum became so affective that other Yangdeng residents also wanted to use art museum as a model for reinventing their businesses. A few months after the opening of the Fengdouhua Art Museum, Liang Daqiang, the owner of a cake shop requested the art collective to create a cake art museum. Like Fengdouhua, the cake shop had existed for years. Located on the main street of Yangdeng, it was a small family style business. Liang, a classmate of Lou Jin (member of the art collective) in the Yangdeng Elementary School, spent a year in Shenzhen where he learned cake-making. After returning home, he worked at the Yangdeng Mining Company (a major local business) while operating a cake shop named "*Guoweixiang xibingwu*" (Fruit-Flavored Western Cake Shop). In the first five years, this shop was very popular among young people. Compared with other restaurants and businesses that sold Chinese foods such as steamed buns and dumplings, this was the only one selling European style cakes, which were viewed by local residents as "symbols of an outside culture" (*wailai wenhua de xiangzheng*). The gradual decline of the local mining industry led to economic recession in the small town. Young people had to leave for cities to find employment opportunities. Affected by the recession, Liang had been considering to stop selling cakes and lease the space to other people until he witnessed the success of the Fengdouhua Art Museum.

For the art collective, the artists would be glad to assist local residents in any possible way. While agreeing to help, they were mainly concerned with artistic and aesthetic aspects of the transformation of the cake shop. After consultations with Liang, the artists eventually focused on the European theme associated with the cakes sold at the shop. They painted one wall with sweet pink color and used it as a backdrop for staging a series of participatory activities that were carried out in a three-month period (July 28-October 27, 2014). Artists compiled an album of twenty European landscape paintings, representing famous places and cities in Europe (for example, Amsterdam, Moscow, and Rome). A customer who purchased a birthday cake received a framed photography for free. The photograph could be the customer himself or herself, or the customer's entire family. After being

photographed, the customer chose a painting from the album as the background image and explained the reason behind his or her selection. The art collective then used Photoshop to merge the two images together to create a final image of a customer standing in front of the landscape painting. Two copies of the image were produced. One was given to the customer, and the other was on display at the cake museum.

The art collective named these artistic activities as “Purchasing a Cake, Touring Europe” (*mai dan’gao, ouzhou you*). Local residents, especially kids, were eager to participate. They were excited to eat a delicious cake and receive a photograph of themselves standing in front of a beautiful landscape or scenic site. A five-year old girl, who selected the Dutch windmill landscape as the background of her photo, received a birthday cake from her parents and a framed photo of herself. She became a poster child of the Western Cake Art Museum (Fig. 4). The final photo resembles a photo that a Chinese tourist often takes during her trip to the Netherlands.

In recent years, more and more Chinese people have toured Europe. In the ordinary context of international tourism, travelers can make their trip memorable in many ways. Besides eating local cuisines and purchasing souvenirs, they often



Figure 4. A Five-Year Old Child in a Photoshop-Composed Dutch Landscape

take photos of themselves in front of a monument or at a scenery site. Chinese artists have also taken on the theme of touring Europe. In his *Fairytale Project* (2007), for example, Ai Weiwei took 1,000 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany to create mass encounters with local residents (2012). Li Mu's *Qiuzhuang Project* (2012-2013) is another example. Li recreated selected works from the collections of the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands and displayed them at Qiuzhuang, the village where he grew up (Gu and Li 2015). Similar to these projects, the Western Cake Art Museum also created a zone of encounter between Chinese and European cultures. Ai Weiwei's project facilitated face-to-face communications between Chinese citizens and Europeans; and Li Mu's documented the receptions of contemporary arts originally created by White European and American artists. In the case of the Western Cake Art Museum, European paintings were readymades. The Europe at Yangdeng came from representations by European artists, but it was disembedded from the representational regime of fine arts and re-embedded into the aesthetic regime of art. As a socially engaged artwork, both consuming a cake and taking a photography formed the art experience of taking an imaginary European tour.

Socially Engaged Art Museums: Lessons from Yangdeng

The two examples of “art museums” at Yangdeng shed lights on the ways in which socially engaged art challenges us to rethink of the categories of sculpture and art museum. The Yangdeng case demonstrates both sculpture as an aesthetic experience (rather than merely art experience, which is closely tied to the urban experience of a creative city) in the practice of everyday life, and art museum as a technology (rather than merely an institution) in public life.

The Aesthetics of Socially Engaged Art

In what sense are the two art museums at Yangdeng - which were created by artists who engaged local residents and daily lives - artworks? Since the late 1990s, scholars such as Bourriaud (1998), Bishop (2004), and Garcia Canclini (2014) have observed a global trend of socially engaged art as “post-autonomous,” not only rejecting classic notion of aesthetics but also embracing social accountability, moral judgment, and economic measurement. In her critique of relational art in

the Western context, for example, Bishop points out: “[T]oday, political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago. This is partly because postmodernism has attacked the very notion of aesthetic judgment, and partly because contemporary art solicits the viewer’s literal interaction in ever more elaborate ways” (2004, 77). In contrast to the situation described by Bishop, Yangdeng’s socially engaged projects emphasize aesthetic experiences. To clarify this point, I compare Yangdeng’s artwork to the work of the New York-based artist Rikrit Tiravanija, “one of the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit” whose “work has been crucial to both the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory, and to the curatorial desire for ‘open-ended,’ ‘laboratory’ exhibitions” (Bishop 2004, 58). Tiravanija’s influential art projects - for example, his 1992 *Untitled* at the 303 Gallery in New York and 1996 *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany - transformed the traditional gallery space (reserved for functions such as showcasing collections and artworks) into a living place (kitchen or apartment). His works were intended *both* to erase the distinction between an institutional space and a social space, and between the artist and the viewer, *and* to enable the viewer to experience art’s capacity within the broader social arena. His turn to the social nevertheless participated in realizing neoliberal norms. By focusing on creating situations where the audience could produce its own work, Tiravanija promoted the do-it-yourself way of living as a norm, which arguably reproduced the dominant economic model of globalization (Bishop 2004, 57-58). Thus, the model of relational art represented by such artists as Tiravanija and Superflex is a model of substituting aesthetic judgment with neoliberal judgement.

The Yangdeng art collective shares Tiravanija’s concern of erasing the hierarchical distinction between the art museum as an institutional space and that as a social space. A key difference, however, is that the Yangdeng art collective does not base its practices on the substitution of the aesthetic judgment with the dominant neoliberal economic logic. The notion of socially engaged art at the Fengdohua Art Museum, for example, is an artwork of the aesthetic experience of negotiating the boundaries between art as life and life as art. Not only are the four objects specifically connected to the practice of everyday life at the restaurant, but they are also artworks for encountering what is behind the realm of the everyday. At the Western Cake Art Museum, the notion of socially engaged art entails a co-authorship between the artists and the participant. Its production

involves artistic knowledge and skills that both appropriate readymade European paintings of famous places in Europe and create photographs of participants (buyers of birthday cakes). Moreover, this art production is also a general production of memorable experiences associated with a process in which consumption produces memories of life passages (like birthdays). The co-productive process - both art production and life extension - entails contemporaneity as an aesthetic dimension of socially engaged artwork. That is, a socially engaged artwork is based on negotiating the copresence of two productive forces: one from the formalized art world (represented by professionally trained artists, scholars, and institutions such as art academies and museums) and another from the production of everyday life (represented by amateur artists, enthusiasts, residents, and socioeconomic institutions)². The artwork of the Fengdouhua Art Museum materializes an aesthetic engagement with the practice of everyday life by negotiating the boundaries between artworks as metaphors and objects as humanized tools. Meanwhile, the artwork of the Western Cake Art Museum highlights contemporaneity as an aesthetic dimension of socially engaged art.

What is the Socially Engaged Art Museum?

As socially engaged artworks, the two art museums at Yangdeng enable us to reflect on the conventional art museum in the context of socially engaged art. A conventional art museum that engages everyday life is not a socially engaged art museum. In her study of three conventional art museums in Europe, Bishop argues that these museums have used their collections to create a sense of contemporaneity, the presence of multiple temporalities within one historical object (2013). Her analysis shows that certain works of art with certain kinds of temporalities tend to occupy the timelines of a historical narrative in a given historical object. The way in which each of these museums frames art times is part of the process in which the museum enshrines art through the production of an exhibition as a discourse of contemporary art. Even if a museum like the Van Abbemuseum (one of the museums discussed by Bishop) actually places collections within an everyday context, the museum may not be able to claim its contemporaneity with a society, as shown by the work of Li Mu who placed reproduced works from the Van Abbemuseum's collections within the everyday life of Jiuzhuang, a village in rural China (Gu and Li 2015).

Compared with a conventional art museum as an institution of the art world, a socially engaged art museum is not an art institution but an aesthetic practice that reveals art as a force that renders everyday life performative or playful. This kind of art museum is thus a *technology* that brings forth what is concealed or withdrawn in the same way as Heidegger speaks of technics as standing reserve (1977, 20). In a socially engaged art museum like the Fengdouhua Art Museum, socially engaged artworks neither occupy a gallery space nor seek to transform it in the sense of what Tiravanija does with the exhibition space of a conventional museum. The artworks are constitutional to the art space due to the fact that they are contemporary to the space in which everyday life does not merely happen, but also happen as an aesthetic experience. The four woodworks on the dining tables at Fengdouhua are not simply markers of the restaurant's transformation into a socially engaged art space, they are also contemporary to the spatial practice of everyday life.

Being inseparable from everyday life, a socially engaged art museum can only exist in everyday practices, which cover a whole range of activities such as work, consumption, and family. At Yangdeng, the two art museums are small, family businesses. On the surface, the name of "art museum" implies a sense of emulation, a gentrification of poverty, or even a desire for high culture. In practice, however, these art museums are not so much different from other restaurants that focus on making a living on the daily basis. A socially engaged art museum is not a model of creativity in the creative economy; rather, it is merely a technology of the self in a double-fold sense. One is the Heideggerian sense of technology that reveals art's capacity for rendering everyday life playful; and another is the Foucauldian sense of technology of an individualized self in Chinese risk society in which the do-it-yourself way of living becomes a norm of social conduct within context of addressing all kinds of risks in everyday life (Ren 2013). The double-fold sense of technology is achieved through the cooperative and coproductive work between the artists and the residents.

This kind of art museum helps us further understand the relationship between contemporary art and precarity, a critical issue in contemporary globalization that has been affected by neoliberal policies around the world (Ren 2010; 2013). Bourriaud, one of the prominent theorists in the "post-autonomous" artistic practices, has refined his argument about relational art and its aesthetics from a micro-utopian view of conviviality (1998) to a perspective of "precarious aesthetics" (2009; 2016). For him, the precarious is defined in such terms as nomadism, flickering, and blurring

(2009, 33-35). An art project within a conventional art museum may use this notion of precarity as a way of engaging contemporary society: “constantly affirming the *transitory* and *circumstantial* nature of the institutions that structure social life, the rules governing individual and collective behaviour” (Bourriaud 2016, 43). To extend his argument, I argue that we need to ground precarity within the practice of everyday life. In a socially engaged art museum, an art practice cannot simply take his notion of precarity without confronting everyday contingencies, including the precarity of living that is often socially embedded and structurally determined. Thus, in a risk society, the do-it-yourself way of living is fundamentally a precarious way of living. A socially engaged art museum is meaningful in the social context of risk society precisely because it makes possible for art to show the precarious nature of life (in addition to showing the “transitory and circumstantial nature of the institutions that structure social life”). The Western Cake Art Museum, for example, is an artwork that mediates the way in which a participant encounters and interacts with a place in Europe. For a participant/consumer/coproducer, appearing in an urban scene in Europe is merely an effect of participation/ consumption/ coproduction. The fact that the production of a photograph creates an imaginary trip to Europe is paradoxically linked to the reality that rural residents at Yangdeng are rarely able to visit Europe, in contrast to common media scenes of Chinese tourists in many European cities.

In sum, a socially engaged art museum, as shown by the works of the Yangdeng art collective, is both a social sculpture and a technology of the self. As a social sculpture, it becomes embedded in a specific context of everyday life (e.g., at Yangdeng). This context-specific artwork is a contemporary art in the sense that its production as an artwork of aesthetic experience is contemporary to its production as a humanized, sensuous daily object (e.g., a restaurant or shop). Thus, this artwork includes both real and sensuous qualities (Harman 2018). Meanwhile, a socially engaged art museum - qualitatively different from a conventional art museum that engages a society through discursive means - functions as a technology of the individualized self in a risk-driven society. This kind of museum enables artworks and artistic practices to render everyday life playful (“play drive” in Schiller’s term), fulfilling art’s potentiality in maintaining the sanity of the humanities in a world dominated by rationalisms of all kinds (political, scientific and economic) (Sommer 2014). Not only does a socially engaged art museum affirm the precariousness (that is, the transitory and circumstantial nature) of the institutions that govern social life, but it also highlights the precariousness of contemporary life in a neoliberal, risk society.

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Notes

1. Conceptually, the neoliberal economy has a broader meaning than the market economy. As I have shown elsewhere (Ren 2010), neoliberalism is a constructivist project of the state that deploys economic rationality to regulate and regularize every domain of human life. The development of the market logic (or the market-based reasoning) as a norm in the Chinese art world is an example of neoliberalization in the cultural realm (Ren 2013).

2. In the American historical context of art museums, Paul J. DiMaggio identifies two models of art museums: a collection-based, elite-controlled classic model and an education-oriented, professional-controlled department store model (1991: 269-272). These two are variables of European-American art world. By comparison, the two productive forces associated with socially engaged art are tied to the historical present of contemporary art as global, rather than merely European or Western (Smith 2009).

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