Socially engaged art in China and their entanglements with art institutions

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Abstract

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This thesis focuses on a specific area in the life-cycle of socially engaged art in mainland China — the point at which socially engaged art that takes place outside of art institution enters into the institutional arena.

While many socially engaged art practices in China started out of a critique towards the art system, the relationship between socially engaged art and art space cannot be defined as an antagonistic one. Many artists have used institution resources to facilitate their work and/or artistic career, and identify the revision of art institutions as part and parcel of their practices. At the same time, curators do not take a 'neutral' position or step back at all times; instead, they often actively take part in researching, conceptualising implementing, intervening in and exhibiting artists' projects, the strategies of which depend on various factors, including but not limited to personal interest, artistic judgement and institutional agenda.

The author argues that scrutinising the relationship between socially engaged art and art institutions can reveal, critique and develop an understanding of the process and efficacy of socially engaged art and the curation of such practices. Furthermore, it encourages the acknowledgement of the complexities involved in presenting and curating socially engaged art and asks the question: When art institutional professionals are not the initiators of artists' projects, what responsibilities should they take in exhibition-making activities and beyond? Through case studies, in particular the author's observation and participation in artists' collaborations with art institutions, this research identifies and contextualises the diverse modes of and the complexities in socially engaged art and the curation of it, and promotes reflexive thinking among various practitioners, such as artists, curators, and researchers.

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Chapter 1 Contextualising socially engaged art in China: research rationale

Introduction

In one area of the exhibition 'Self-awareness and Reconstruction: From Yan'an Woodcuts to the Practices of The No Name' (25 October 2015 – 13 November 2015, Xi'an Art Museum, Xi'an, China),[1] the homepage of the website of the 'Eastlake Project' was projected onto a wall. In Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in central China, donghu (East Lake) is the biggest lake in the city, occupying an area of 33 square kilometres. In recent years, an increasing area of the lake was filled by real estate developers. In 2010, a deal between the government and a real estate company was made public: a complex of shopping malls, theme park, hotels and luxurious apartments would be built at East Lake's northern area, which involved filling about 0.3 square kilometres of the lake area. Many 'experts' stood out and defended this decision both in terms of environment protection and economic benefit. At the same time, voices against the plan were muted; any discussions in relation to 'East Lake' were monitored and erased in public media. 'Eastlake Project' began in 2010, with local artists Li Juchuan and Li Yu making an on-line call for artistic responses as a way of expressing dissatisfaction towards and protesting the complicity of government and real estate agencies in the commercial development of Donghu, or East Lake, in Wuhan, without due process or a concern for the environment. Anyone who is concerned about the construction project was encouraged to make a piece of 'artwork' at the lakeside as a protest, which could be anything—even just taking a picture of oneself standing by the Lake, and send back relevant

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[1] The exhibition was initiated by Man Yu, one of the curators of Xi'an Art Museum at the time. Man aimed to stress the social engagement role woodcut played in the first half of the 20th century in China, and to highlight contemporary artistic practices with a similar ambition, such as the 'Eastlake Project'. Interview with Man Yu, 15 April 2017, Shenzhen. For Further details on the exhibition, see Xi'an Art Museum (2015). For further details on the agency of woodcut in addressing political issues and addressing social change in China in the first half of the 20th century, see Chang (2016).

information and pictures, including the exact location of where the work was done, to the project website. The project was carried out at three-time periods, from June 25, 20s10 to August 25, 2010, from April 29, 2012 to May 29, 2012, and from July 10, 2014 to September 30, 2014. All the places where someone has done a work were marked on Google Maps. The 'Eastlake Project' has grown into a network of artists, architects, scholars and activists in the past years, focusing issues such as land use, property laws and space politics.[2]

On one side of the exhibition space computers were prominently displayed for visitors to access the project's website, where they could find out more about past events and join future initiatives. As the website was blacklisted within China, the museum purchased a virtual private network (VPN), which provided access to blocked websites through encrypted connection. An image of the project website's homepage was projected on the gallery wall. On the other side of the room, postcards printed with pictures of the project's activities were exhibited, which visitors could take away. Before the 'Self-awareness and Reconstruction' exhibition, the 'Eastlake Project' had also been exhibited in other exhibitions, and members of the project had talked about their work in several museum forums and lectures.[3]

Recent years, especially from the first decade of the 21st century, have witnessed an increasing number of artistic projects in China, including 'Eastlake Project,' that use art-making as a medium to facilitate conversations about or conduct interventions into social realities. While social engagement and critique have long been a central motif of art, recent practices present a highly evident feature that emphasises an open,

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[2] For more information, please see the 'Eastlake Project' website (http://donghu2010.org, accessed 16 July 2015).

[3] See, for example, 'Hinterland Project' (27 September – 15 November 2015, the Times Museum, Guangzhou). Please see further details on the Times Museum website (http://en.timesmuseum.org/exhibitions/detail/id-612/, accessed 10 December 2015); and the forum 'Projects on Social Art Practice by Artists in Asia', organised by Ni Kun (2015) at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai in 2013.

collaborative process, usually drawing the participation of the public, rather than treating making art objects as the ultimate goal or the core activity. They range from community projects aimed at enabling sustainable civic participation, through science-art collaboration in treating brain-damaged patients, to individual or networked endeavours that address issues of social justice.[4]

From the Western perspective, terms in relation to these practices include but are not limted to: socially engaged art (Helguera 2011; Thompson 2012), dialogical aesthetics (Kester 2005), new-genre public art (Lacy 1991), social cooperation (Finkelpearl 2013), relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998), community art, activism, participatory practices (Bishop 2006), and social sculpture. Despite the different evaluative frameworks different theoretical perspectives propose, which I will discuss later, a shared concern is that they approach art as social practice, a move away from the authorial object-centred mode of artworks. As artist and educator Pablo Helguera (2011: 9) states,

> While bearing '[M]ost artists who produce socially engaged works are interested in creating a kind of collective art that affects the public sphere in a deep and meaningful way, not in creating a representation—like a theatrical play—of a social issue.

These theoretical developments of these terms and theoretical discussions have influenced practices in China in one way or another, including the discourses used to critique them and the formats some practices employ. For instance, my interviews with socially engaged artists in the mainland of

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[4] For a glimpse of some of the projects, please see Ni (2015) and 'Socially engaged art in contemporary china' (seachina.net, accessed 5 March 2017), a growing database organised by researcher and artist Zheng Bo. It should be noted that there are also many projects that choose to be less visible for various reasons. Some practitioners hold different ideas with curators or researchers thus they reject being included in exhibitions or documentations. Some are immersed in work at hand and do not think exposure is necessary.

China often refer to traces of influences from works of other areas in Greater China, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, where theories of socially engaged art have been widely introduced and art as activism is widely practiced. For example, Taiwanese artist Wu Mali has been actively introducing western theories, including concepts from Suzanne Lacy's Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art and ideas garnered from Grant Kester's Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art, as well as identifying local practices (Wu 2007; Lu 2012).

However, compared to the influence of the introduction of contemporary art from the West after China ended the Cultural Revolution and opened its door in the late 1970s (Gao 2008a), theories and practices in relation to socially engaged art in the West do not play a leading role or shaping force in China. While the Chinese terms used to describe such practices are similar to the literal translations of some of those English terms, [5] and English terms have been used by many critics, curators and scholars to refer to practices taking place in China (SEAChina: On-line Database of Socially engaged art in China 2017; Wang 2017; Sun 2011; Wang 2010), the discussions of practices in China have different trajectories of developments and meanings. In this thesis, I have chosen to use socially engaged art (hereinafter referred to as SEA) to refer to the artistic practices that are the focus of this research. This decision is partly based on the consideration that it corresponds to shehui jierushi yishu (社会介入式艺术), a widely used term in China that covers a wide variety of media, methods, and genres.[6] Using SEA as a placeholder is a provisional strategy for this thesis. Identifying relevant Chinese literature and referring to literature in the West, the following sections will delineate key areas associated with practices in China. It is not the aim of the thesis to create an East-West dichotomy; rather, it aims to contribute to this contested

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[5] See, for example '介入 *jieru* (intervention/engagement in English)' by Wang (2010), Sun (2011) and Ou (2016), '参与式艺术 *canyushi yishu* (participatory art in English)' by Zheng (2014).
[6] See, for example, Sun (2011); A Wall (seachina.net); Wang (2010); and Wang (2016).

area of study by creating a conversation based around shared concerns and crucial differences of the field of socially engaged art in different contexts.

This chapter aims to contextualise SEA in China and to formulate a rationale for this research project's focus on the relationship between SEA and art institutions. First, it identifies key discourses in this field, both in China and in Anglophone contexts. It points out different emphases in critique, including evaluative criteria in examining the efficacy of SEA. Second, this chapter provides a picture of multiple motivations associated with socially engaged art, such as artists' social responsibility and artistic pursuit. I point out two problems in criticisms: (1) overgeneralised critiques and a lack of in-depth case studies; (2) insufficient access to a diversity of projects and effective discussions brought about by the problem of visibility. The chapter then introduces the main line of inquiry of this project: the interactions between socially engaged art and art institutions in China. It also introduces theoretical thinking that frames this research, and the lack of research in this area regarding their mutual impact. I will then identify the contributions of this research. Finally, I explore and unpack terms used in this thesis.

Contextualising theoretical perspectives

Depending on the perspective that one takes, SEA can mean different things and refer to a large spectrum of practices. Critiques of SEA can be centred on the work's efficacy in addressing social issues, the quality of participation, aesthetic qualities of the work or the possibilities that a process-based and networked manner of working can bring to artistic practices. As Shannon Jackson points out,

> Even when social practices address political issues, their stance and their forms differ explicitly in their themes and implicitly in their assumptions about the role of aesthetics in social inquiry. While some

social art practice seeks to innovate around the concept of collaboration, others seek to ironize it. While some social art practice seeks to forge social bonds, many others define their artistic radicality by the degree to which they disrupt the social. (2011: 14)

Helguera (2011: 2) once defines SEA as 'a meaningful interaction or social engagement, characterised by a dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence'. If we use this definition for practices in China, examining how 'meaningful' has been defined can reveal more than focusing on the element of 'social intercourse'. Different emphases in critiques and different ways terms are contemplated, including evaluative criteria in examining the efficacy of SEA, suggest the contexts of the ground practices are rooted in. How artists align themselves with certain terms and stress differences say much about how they establish their identities and position their practices.

Community art has a strong focus on collaborative forms of making art and people's engagement with art (Dickson 1995), but it also has a strong political dimension, and its implications change over time. Community arts movement in the UK after 1968 emphasised process over the end result. In the early 1970s, it focused on social justice, and in the 1980s it had also embodied the notion of social responsibility, as a result of UK government's policy (Bishop 2006a:38). Today, the political implications of community art is still being interrogated by artists and community art organisations practitioners (Bas 2016).

Participatory art is another important discourse in relation to SEA with a democratisation and process-focused motif, which emphasises the audience's inclusivity in completing a work (Kwon 2002; Kravagna 2008). Helguera (2011: 14-17) puts forward differing levels of participation where audiences engage with artworks, using these distinctions to evaluate the

works. Discourses around participation focus on the role of participants and at their core is an interrogation of the political potential of participation in artistic projects, rather than merely physical interactivity (Bishop 2006a).

For art historian and critic Grant Kester, SEA is 'less concerned with producing objects or outputs per se than with a process of collaboration that is understood to produce certain pedagogical effects in and on the community' (Kester 1995: 5), and reciprocal exchanges are essential to realise political potentials. For Kester (2004), the essence of SEA lies in the process of having dialogues, which enacts a changing of conventional perceptions and generates new knowledge. Thus, the role of the artist is a collaborator of the dialogue, who needs to respond to the changing context all the time and cannot work in a theoretical manner. The artwork produced in SEA is an ensemble of the dialogical process, which should not be looked at without considering the whole process.

While championing the idea of art for and made by nonexperts,[7] the term shequ yishu (社区艺术, community art) in China does not have the political implication of the community art movement in the UK in the 1960s that identified social and policy change as its goals. Similarly, the connection between participation/canyu (参与) and art/yishu (艺术) recalls, for Chinese, the managed participation by the state, to achieve order and harmony rather than chaos or social unrest. It implies an element of social obligation, something always connected with 'the collective' (jiti, 集体) that one has to be part of, as in 'participate in the collective activity' (canyu jiti huodong, 参与集体活动). As the following chapters demonstrate, art museums prefer this term, as it demonstrates their relevance to the public, while many artists are

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[7] See, for example, Zhu, Jiangang and Zhang Xiaojing (2017).

cautious of the vagueness of the above terms. Consequently, theoretical interrogations into participation are rare to see.

In fact, scholars in the West have also pointed out participation in art cannot lead to fundamental structural changes and the public has also been fetishized and become artists' currency (Kester 2004; Bishop 2006b; Beech 2008; Rancière 2011). Bishop (2006b) argues that being collaborative alone does not guarantee the significance of an artwork. At the same time, as all collaborations strengthen social bonds in some way, all collaborations are morally right. Also, the ameliorative outcomes of collaborations are easily instrumentalised by the state to avert attention from real social problems. Bishop argues that the aesthetic has been overlooked in some works in their pursuing of social change, and the best collaboration practices should not be thought of in terms of their ameliorative assumptions but from the original and distinctive voice of the artist. Bishop places artistic outcomes at the centre of discussion, warning against the danger of instrumentalization if the emphasis is on how ethical a collaboration is. For Bishop, antagonism is more effective than conviviality and reciprocity are in terms of evoking political awareness and challenging the status quo (2006b; 2012). In other words, Bishop urges for closer examinations on particiation (2012: 41),

> It is tempting to make an equation (and many have done so) between the value of a work of art and the degree of participation it involves, turning the Ladder of Participation into a gauge for measuring the efficacy of artistic practice. But while the Ladder provides us with helpful and nuanced difference between forms of civic participation, it falls short of corresponding to the complexity of artistic gestures. The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society.

Art historian, critic and curator Christian Kravagna (1999) stresses the ambiguities in the evaluation of usefulness of a project,

> In the end, it seems that it is possible to assess the value or success of participatory practices neither by evaluating the scope for action that they offer the participants, nor by trying to measure any 'concrete change'. Scepticism seems advisable in particular with regards to the recurrent issues of usefulness... it seems justified to ask whether changes that 'only' take place at the symbolic, rather than the 'concrete', level—as proposed by certain models of participatory practice—must be re-evaluated. In many cases, these are the practices that retain at least the ideal of potential political action. This is not least because they dwell, first, on the political consciousness and foundations of participation, without immediately committing themselves to the pragmatism of problem solving.

Beech (2008) proposes a specific approach in examining participation

> It is vital to the critique of participation, therefore, that we locate it within – rather than beyond – the differential field of culture's social relations, as a particular form or style of cultural engagement with its own constraints, problems and subjectivities. We can begin by noting that the participant typically is not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project. To participate in an art event, whether it is organised by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller, Santiago Sierra or Johanna Billing, is to enter into a pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role.

Discussions that see ethics and aesthetics as inseparable (Downey 2009; Jackson 2011; Thompson 2012; Marstine 2017) receive less attention. Also

overlooked is that the aim of Bishop's work is to urge for more diverse ways of looking at art, rather than relying solely on the relational and participatory aspects of works, as they do not necessarily guarantee democracy. This research project shares the position of the above scholars and argues for a closer examination of the complexities in the process. It dismisses the 'artworks' and 'process' binary and attempts to identify critical moments where the artistic medium takes effect as the central epistemological concern. I would like to quote Kester's (2013: 7-8) understanding of the approach to analysing efficacy,

> It is a commonplace to criticize social art practices for sacrificing an authentically aesthetic (albeit hazily defined) experience to a reductive concept of political efficacy. But all are associated with an intellectual or creative resistance to capitalism. The operative question is, how, and at what scale, this efficacy is enacted... when does it begin and end? An unfolding process rather than, or in addition to, a discrete image, object, or event defined by set limits of space (the walls of a gallery) or time (the duration of a performance or commission).

The next section will be devoted to specific discussions in China in relation to SEA. These discussions identify crucial moments of discourse that define SEA as a field. They serve the purposes of literature review, and I also aim to highlight the conditions and impacts of these discourses.

Art into society: A central motif

Intervention/engagement has been a central motif around the practices and discourses of art in China since the 20th century. The Woodcut Movement in the 1930s, initiated by artists and Leftist writers, played an important role in both education and in communicating Anti-Japanese War ideas (Chang 2016). Mao Zedong made it an official policy that art should serve politics in

his talk in Yan'an in 1942, during the time of the Anti-Japanese War. In the early decades of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), arts participation in society mainly served ideological needs and for exerting social control, such as in socialist realism and propaganda art in the Cultural Revolution.[8] After the Cultural Revolution, at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, with the influx of new ideas, 'contemporary art' was embraced by artists, as a tool for making new approaches into art-making, and also as a tool in social liberation and reform, along with other pursuits of intellectuals. The 1990s witnessed the gradual embracement of contemporary art by the state and market, making the discussion of art's engagement with society a complicated issue (Gao 2008a; Gladston and Hill 2012; DeBevoise 2014), as examplified by the analysis of the above section.

While there are uses of activism art/jijin yishu (激进艺术), or 'critical art'/ pipanxing yishu (批判性艺术) (Wang 2011) to term such practices, these terms are less frequently encountered compared to SEA. In addition to the sensitivity of the term, there are two major reasons for the less popularity of this term. Firstly, the idea of Zhengzhi yishu 政治艺术/political art, can suggest artworks that cater to governmental political needs, such as model dramas (Yang Ban Xi) in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and oil paintings depicting historical scenes of party leaders' inspection tours of grassroots-level governments. For most artists interviewed in this research study, this term implies top-down forces rather than critical civil initiatives. Secondly, while many SEA practitioners have political ambitions, the process and impacts of projects are usually subtle and it depends on how a project develops, including stimulating others to find relevance and thus different projects can grow together. They would not deny that they are political art, but they would not label themselves as such. Although, overall, cultural policies promulgated by the government have been giving more and more

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[8] For example, for the period of the early founding years of the PRC, the impact of socialist realism on artists and society can be found among the numerous articles in *Meishu*, or *Fine Arts* magazine, two key publications from 1954-1966.

support to contemporary art, with the intention of establishing China's leading position globally in arts and culture (Berghuis 2012: 227; Welland 2018), such terms easily attract attention.

An analytical approach that examines the social relevance of contemporary art in China, and the roles curators and critics can play in formulating the critical discourses of art, has developed since the early 2000s. Among many efforts, the 2nd Forum of Young Critics, held by Shenzhen Art Museum in 2005 and titled 'The Sociological Turn of Contemporary Art in China,' called for a social turn in art curating and criticism (Sun and Lu 2005). According to the Chairman, art critic and curator Sun Zhenhua (2003: 125), 'many artworks have direct relations with urban culture, consumerism, and materialism in China now. Traditional methods, such as personal expression or formal analysis, are not enough to interpret them. We need to learn from sociology.' The significance of this Forum is that it draws attention to the role critics and curators can play in identifying artworks with social concerns and in addressing social issues through criticism. This approach sees artists as public intellectuals (Wang 2006) who address social issues in the public sphere.

In the winter of 2009, without engaging in any form of consultation process, more than one thousand artists with studios located outside the Fifth Ring Road in Chaoyang District, Beijing, were asked to leave their studios to make way for the city's urban-rural integration plans, despite the fact that most of the artists had long-term contracts with the developers. As the artists refused to move out without a compensation plan, heating, water and electricity were shut off. To prevent studios from being razed, artists had to keep an eye on the demolition teams' movements and take turns guarding the studios on site. At the same time, they made reports to governments at all levels. However, there was hardly any feedback. Having no other choice, artists began to use art as a strategy. They wrote slogans, and organised a series of

events, including exhibitions, discussion forums and sports meets, and a brief but influential march, where they discussed the problematic use of lands, the legal methods they can use, and demonstrated their determination for self-protection. These actions, together with media pressure, prompted local authorities to take up compensation issues more seriously, though it was not possible to stop the demolition and further discussions and pressure on public policies were not continued (Sun 2011; Wang 2010). Because of this event, the winter of 2009 was given the name 'Warm Winter.'

When artists of the 'Warm Winter' stood on the broken tiles of their studios, they probably thought that their actions would be written into art history, but might not have thought about how the event as a whole would be described as an art practice. Scholar and curator Wang Chunchen started his writing with a description of this event in his book, *yishu jieru shehui— yizhong xinde yishu guanxi/Art Intervenes in Society: A New Artistic Relationship* (2010), a book focusing on the entanglement between art and society since 1979. Situating his theory in the rapid changing realities of China today and the development of art in China in the past decades since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1978, Wang Chunchen raised the urgency of artists' jieru (介入), and defines jieru as 'not simply corresponding to the society, or making illustrations or descriptions of the society, but applying artistic freedom and thinking to social phenomena, the social environment, social issues and the social system' (2011). In addition to the 'Warm Winter,' Wang Chunchen's examples in his book also include Ai Weiwei's Documenta 12 project in 2007, in which he took 1,001 Chinese to the exhibition, many of whom were abroad the first time. Ai and participants talked about issues concerning identity, country, cultural exchange, and so on; the 'Long March Project,' various art activities along the route of the Communist Party's Long March in 1934 and 1935, and so on. Rather than offering a classification, Wang puts forward the idea that the attitudes and actions of artists can be seen as artwork, which includes conversations and social events.

Wang's analysis is in line with several strands of discussion using the analytical approach that examines art through its relevance to Chinese society. As Gladston (2017: 2) points out, with restrictive regulations that ban politically sensitive contents, art is hardly regarded as a means of critique in China. In contrast, in the West, art critique has been institutionalised and funded by states. As a result, to examine the criticality of contemporary art in China, one needs approaches other than the one assuming art's critical distance from society. In this situation, how to decide the 'criticality,' 'publicness' and 'political' quality of art, has been the pursuit of many researchers, and SEA seems to be the recent embodiment of the central theses revolved around these theoretical strands that focus on examining whether an artwork touches social relations or is 'socially functional' (Gao 2013: 218). Rather than totally negating a project by its structure, critics have begun to focus on the specific moments when art engages with the social and look at their conditions (Li 2012, Wang 2011 and Sun 2010; Zheng 2012). In addition to the social turn in art curating and criticism (Sun and Lu 2005), other important discourses of contemporary art in China that are relevant to SEA include self-organization (Bao 2014), the epistemological and interpretative challenges raised by conceptual art in China (Wang 2014; Qiu 2003), criticality (Gladston 2017; Parke 2015; Berghuis 2012; Wang 2011). For researcher and curator Robin Peckham, for artworks to have 'a critical quality,' they need to 'engage with the specific bodies of power and sources of injustices' (2012: 252). For scholar, artist and curator Qiu Zhijie, instead of merely presenting a critique or an artist's own intentions and concepts, artworks need to have a direct impact (Qiu 2003). Scholar Elizabeth Parke (2015), referring to the representation of migrant workers in the arts, differentiates interventions that are 'insightful modes of critique' and those 'exploitive' and 'problematic.' Parke takes into consideration how the artists position their works about personal fame and financial income. These discussions, which align with crucial discussions on SEA, have not been fully taken up by recent debates on SEA. The lack of

continuity in the discussion limits our understanding of the diverse forms SEA can take and the inheritance and development of these theoretical thinking. For example, the idea of public art in China has been continuously contested and developed, moving from sculptures displayed in public spaces, whose main function is to commemorate historical moments, to artworks in general engaging local issues. The essence of 'public art,' or 'publicness' (Berghuis 2013: 147; Zha 2005) lies in enabling citizens to have their say on what is considered public.

At the same time, the idea that art should intervene in society, or should be analysed in this way, is not agreed by all. For example, art critic and curator Lu Mingjun (2010: 108) contends, 'sociological turn has some positive impact. However, with the absence of a consensus on basic values, its critical power will be reduced, if not lead to revolutionary (or post-revolutionary) nihilism.' Similar positions are also held by critics who are skeptical about the political potential of SEA, leading to a preference for aesthetics and artistic outcome in SEA, another important strand of SEA discussion, in addition to thinking associated with the issue of relevance and efficacy in art. Embedded in the belief in artistic forms is a tacit acknowledgment that SEA cannot lead to practical steps to solve social issues in China, and they can only be legitimate art if they have some sort of aesthetic value, under which standard the processual and relational aspects of SEA are NGO-type practices. A related phenomenon is that Bishop's emphasis on the distinctive aesthetic value of art and her warning against the instrumentalisation of art attracted many followers in China.[9] Critics have also pointed out that discourses around contemporary art in China have been 'pan-politicised'.[10]

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[9] Bishop's 2012 publication, Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship, started to be translated into Chinese by mainland China scholars chapter by chapter soon after it was out.
[10] Contemporary art since its first inception in China has often been interpreted as in ideological confrontation with state ideology. Recently this understanding has been challenged, see for example Gao (2012) and Peckham (2012).

Another equally prominent perspective is the impact of the changing social and economic conditions of art-making which render SEA an attractive choice for artists lacking resources, especially after the market of contemporary art in China gradually cooled down after 2008. At the same time, social support for emerging artists was and remains lacking; artists are compared to migrant workers, often the victims of unexpected demolition acts.[11] As curator and art critic Bao Dong (2016) articulates, while contemporary artists identify themselves first and foremost as public intellectuals who cannot be easily categorised into any social class. In today's China, class differences among artists are evident. There are immense differences between artists' education, opportunities and 'taste,' among others. SEA, with its focus away from making objects, means less financial input.

The above discussions lay a foundation for understanding the external conditions of SEA and provide a few approaches to understand it. More work is to be done in the following areas. The processual and networked nature of many SEA projects decide that their efficacy can be examined in more ways than relying upon the stated claims artists start with, and it requires efforts of multiple disciplines. At the same time, it is not clear how a project develops and changes during its trajectory, and what this means for our understanding of a project, including artists' and other actors' decision-making process. Materials of this kind, as shown in my fieldwork, can be tracked through private settings, such as in meetings or at meal tables. It should also be noted that facing this newly coined practice, many have a reserved attitude and are careful not to express their ideas. As the research went on, critical voices became more and more diverse, especially with the inclusion of more and more artists' voices. I will further illustrate the

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[11] For instance, a recent large-scale demolition act, in the name of urban construction and controlling the number of population, took place in Heqiao at the beginning of 2017. Heiqiao is located in northeast Beijing, covering an area of approximately 2 square kilometres. It is a low-cost living area near to 798, a cluster famous for galleries and museums in Beijing, thus attracting a great number of artists. There were more than 1000 artists living in this area at the end of 2016. The demolition forced artists to move their studios and self-organised art spaces, without receiving reasonable compensation.

changes in the final chapter. The next two sections illustrate these issues through identifying how the discourse of SEA interacts with the interpretation of two types of work.

Changing artistic practices: socially engaged art as a lens

Arrow Factory is a small storefront art space in a Beijing hutong, a type of old neighbourhood where traditional styles of housing are located in Beijing. Projects that the space has completed include collaboration with local police, where they placed a TV in the space to broadcast an 'Anti-cheating guide.' In another project, artist Wang Gongxin copied the design of the bakery next door.[12]

The main phenomenon that Arrow Factory interrogated when it was established in 2008 was the art system and it aimed to provide a space for experimentation. According to artists Rania Ho, Wang Wei and Pauline Yao (2011: 16), the founders of Arrow Factory,

> Arrow Factory came into being during the frenzied lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It was a moment in China utterly consumed by scale and spectacle and soaked in the rhetoric of grandeur and success. The contemporary art world's infatuation with overblown proportions, style-conscious aesthetics and commerce-friendly 'creative industry' enclaves drove us to conjure up another scenario: the presentation of works by contemporary artists in an ultra-small space situated far away from the so-called art districts.

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[12] Arrow Factory was established by artists Rania Ho, Wang Wei and Pauline Yao. For more information, see http://www.arrowfactory.org.cn/

Artists' resistance towards the commercialisation and industrialisation of contemporary art was central to many artists' practices at that time, leading to spaces that responded to artists' need for experimentation and opportunities outside traditional institutions. It also provided a ground for experimental curatorial practices that were hardly possible in established institutions. They also brought attention to artistic activities outside Beijing, Shanghai, and other central art cities, asking what other localities could offer to art and what artists could offer to the local. Many critics' and curators' have identified different strategies (e.g. the idea of being small and staying away from the market championed by the Arrow Factory; artist collectives that emphasise a collaborative way of working, in contrast to the artist-star model favoured by the market), as an important stream of contemporary art practices, where one could find vigour (Bao 2014).

These concerns of artists in the first decade of the 21st century included their reflections on the art system and the Westernised art historical narrative, and efforts to establish a local art narrative and identity. While the discourses around the 2010s positioned artists' initiatives according to their relationship with an abstract art system, they nevertheless started the discussion of artists' self-organised activities, from which emerged many of what we understand as SEA today. If we use SEA as a tool to examine the Arrow Factory, a project that does not often appear in the discussions of SEA, we find that it constantly considers its relationship with the local environment and communities. For instance, Rania Ho and Wang Wei place the public as an important measure when reviewing their work, conducting interviews with residents about their views on the space (Ho and Wang 2017).

Anther example is experiments in art education. To bring art 'down to the earth,' or 'reconnect art and society,' educators have stressed the importance of understanding the real world first. The teaching methodologies they adopt

thus take on a 'socially engaged' dimension. For example, artist and educator Qiu Zhijie started to teach in the Total Art Studio in the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou in 2003 and emphasised the 'site' as the place where art takes place, as cultural studies and social investigations. Before talking about art's function, Qiu took his students to various villages, aiming to let students see what villages were — not what was presented in media and policy terms. This 'return to the village' also included a re-examination of the individuals' relationship with his or her hometown. Qiu admitted that he did not know what the 'correct' way to reposition the artist in society was, but to 'return home' was the first step (Qiu 2012).

Chen Xiaoyang, an artist and Associate Professor in the Sculpture Department of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (GAFA), designed a course in which students made inquiries into public issues in the local village of Nanting, and importantly, exhibited works within the village and interacted with local villagers. The course aimed to cultivate students' ability to use art-making as a method to conduct social inquiries and to generate discussions and actions around common issues for villagers. For Chen, it is important to 'go out of the studio and into the society'.[13] Zheng Bo, now Associate Professor of the City University of Hong Kong, used to teach art and social engagement in the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Zheng took students to explore the vegetation surrounding the Academy and to identify their migration history, aiming to initiate further investigations into histories and policies through triggering physical experiences.[14]

After many years of experiments, educational projects like the above began to be interpreted as field research, or SEA. For instance, in 'Harmonious Differences: the Second Experimental Art Exhibition' (9 April 2011 – 2 May 2011, Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Beijing), Chen Xiaoyang's

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[13] Chen Xiaoyang, interview with the author, 12 January 2015.
[14] Interview with the author, 13 April 2015.

project and Qiu Zhijie's projects were put in a section 'Experimental Classroom in Academies'. The exhibition statement in the catalogue said: that 'The exhibition will showcase China's fine art institutes' achievements in innovative art teaching, research, and creation. It will demonstrate how China's fine art education today is now opening to more diverse academic ways of thinking' (Central Academy of Fine Arts Art Museum 2011). In the catalogue (ibid: 196), Chen's project was introduced through 'Teaching Aim,' 'Theoretical Approach,' 'Coursework,' and 'Reading List.' It was described as 'students walked out from the narrow circle of the academy and of art to get in touch with the reality of social life, adjusting the strange relationship between art and the public...'. In 2015, the project was presented in 'Civil Power', the opening exhibition of Beijing Minsheng Art Museum (25 June 2015 – 10 October 2015), interpreted as 'presenting works that are rooted in the social reality and among the people; that reflect current thinking and emotions of the society; and that demonstrate a concern and responsibility for the society'.[15] According to the changing needs of different curatorial occasions, projects are interpreted differently.

From outside to inside: creations and negotiations between SEA and art institutions

This thesis uses the term 'art institutions' to refer to public and private art museums, as well as art spaces that do not have collections, but are dedicated to promoting experimental forms of artistic expressions. The entire landscape of interaction between SEA and art institutions is beyond the capacity of this research project. The project is informed by a case study approach, with the 'case' being artists' trajectory of working with art institutions. The majority of the institutions discussed in the thesis are private art museums. I further explain my approach in Chapter 2. The term

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[15] See the exhibition introduction at
http://www.minshengartcompetition.cn/AboutExhibition.aspx?model=work (accessed 17 December 2016).

institutional grounds is defined as 'in the context of the institution – physically and ideologically within the institution.'

As the following discussions will demonstrate, in mainland China, many SEA projects are initiated by artists outside of institutional frameworks. Artists sustain the projects through other paid work, friendship, barter and support from various organizations including art institutions. Such projects evolve and modify their goals and terms of operation over time, and thus their relationships with individuals and organizations can vary at different times. As a result, their meanings are not definite and cannot be considered without the element of time. The artists' relationships with these projects change too. Sometimes a project needs to fit into an artist's schedule and be conducted with whatever resources there are to hand; at other times, the same project might require concentrated input and more structured planning. In a context where it is rare to see a project addressing specific social issues openly and directly, this inclusion of the changing goals and relationships over time and how they affect each other can provide additional languages to unpack the issue of quality. All the above issues lead to further confusion of our knowledge of SEA, such as their evaluative criteria, thus came my motivation to locate discussions in specific cases and situations. In the next section, I will explain how I identify art institutions as a valuable place for researching SEA in China.

I acknowledge that caution with regard to the art system and its emphasis on aesthetics affects artists' strategies for their SEA. For instance, for Li Juchuan, the artist and architect who initiated the 'Eastlake Project,' there is an association between the ineffectiveness of art in addressing social issues and the way the art system works, 'exhibiting in museums faces the danger of being aestheticised and the issues we are concerned with become an art issue' (qtd. in He and Shen 2013). However, I would argue against the idea that a structuralist position, which holds that remoteness from institutions is

a strategy for SEA artists to distinguish themselves from the middle-class tastes for beautiful works. Why did Li Juchuan choose to work with curator Man Yu in the 'Self-awareness and Reconstruction: From Yan'an Woodcuts to the Practices of The No Name' exhibition introduced at the beginning of this chapter? What efficacy did he expect in participating in this exhibition?

In mainland China, art institutions are largely positioned as places where art is exhibited. There are relatively few institution-led SEA initiatives; however, it does not mean they are not a main component of SEA. Art institutions have been the foreground of new research, which rapidly responds to SEA, serving as a gateway to the public, and making socially engaged art more visible. Features of SEA projects – for example, prioritizing process, engagement with social issues, a focus on place, collaborative work or artists' reflexivity – are emphasized and historicized in claim-making curatorial statements of exhibitions.[16] A presence in art institutions puts SEA in the spotlight and opens up opportunities for discussion and collaboration, especially for projects that, at the outset, had not aimed to present their work in an institutional context. Not only does institutional support such as commission fees and exhibition participation fees provide an important source of funding for artists, but it also opens up a channel for SEA to gain wider critical approval in and outside of the art circle, through which their social networks are expanded and projects are developed. Together these provide an arena for debate, where the complexities of socially engaged projects are brought to a wider public, connecting practitioners with interested audiences, researchers and social organisations. My initial contacts with SEA projects were through exhibitions and public events in art institutions.

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[16] Examples of exhibitions that engage with SEA outside institutions outside mainland China: The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now (8 November 2008 -8 February 2009, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art); Living as Form (24 September – 18 October 2011, Historic Essex Street Market, New York); Disobedient Objects (26 July 2014 - 1 February 2015, Victoria and Albert Museum, London). ALTERing NATIVism: SOUND CULTURES IN POST-WAR TAIWAN (7 June 2014 – 14 September 2014, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan)

The following section first examines the interaction between SEA and art institutions in the West, and then introduces a specific area of engagement of SEA in mainland China and its implications for the process and efficacy of SEAs – the point at which SEA that takes place outside of art institution enters into the institutional arena.

Educational turn

> 'Contemporary curating is marked by a turn to education. Educational formats, methods, programmes, models, terms, processes and procedures have become pervasive in the praxis of both curating and the production of contemporary art and in their attendant critical frameworks… curating and art production more broadly, have produced, undergone or otherwise manifested an educational turn'. (O'Neill and Wilson 2010: 12)

O'Neil and Wilson's writing captures an important arena of SEA in the Anglophone context, i.e. museums and galleries where artists uses workshops, action research and other forms of education to shape creative process, to share knowledge and to address contemporary issues. This turn has its roots in the efforts of seeking alternative ways of learning, the expansion of performative art forms, and art institutions' revision towards discursive space influenced by new institutionalism and institutional critique. Many experiments set up specific spaces, which allows relationships between the space and its different users — gallery staff, artists, members of the public and so on, as well as relationships among its users, to grow over time and through various projects. In addition to its impacts on curatorial activities and educational models, this educational turn has also facilitated integrated ways of programming that draws upon the forces of different

segments of the gallery, such as the exhibition team and the education/learning team, in a collaborative manner, thus diminishing the boundaries between different segments and facilitating curators' work with artists across different departments of an institution. It also generates curator producer roles that focus on the pedagogical potential of curation (Doherty 2006; Möntmann 2007; O'Neill and Wilson 2010; Mörsch 2011; Allen 2011; Steedman 2012; Wilson 2013).

In general, the educational turn puts visitors' learning at the centre of an institution's work.[17] At the same time, as Kester (1995: 9) points out, it also provides many opportunities for galleries and artists to learn:

> Collaboration would be characterized by a more equitable process of exchange and mutual education, with the artist learning from the community and having his or her own presuppositions (about the community and specific social, cultural, and political issues) challenged and expanded.

A central question is, what is the actual potentialities of such collaborations for participants and under what conditions emancipation is taking place? One important factor at play is the role of art institutions in carrying out social agenda put forward by government policies in the Anglophone context (Brenson 2004; Tallant 2010; Pethick 2011; de Bruyne and Gielen 2013). In the UK, discussions on socially engaged art in institutions have been epitomised by the increasing concern over social equality and the societal, economic and cultural value of the arts over a number of years. Cultural agendas have focused on the creative production and active engagement with

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[17] For instance, Tate has set up a specific research strand that places pedagogy at the core of its work, with an aim to to generate exploratory and liberating experiences among visitors, through disruptive strategies, collective learning, and co-creating activities. See Tate Research Centre: Curatorial Practice And Museology (https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-curatorial-practice-museology, accessed 12 June 2018).

arts alongside a focus on 'widening participation' to encourage artistic expression, especially for excluded social groups. Art is expected, among many other goals, to promote social inclusion, empower the disenfranchised, and strengthen communities. Under New Labour's and the Conservatives' privatisation of public institutions, arts organisations are expected to be service providers, acting as agents of social change and facilitating civic engagement (Matarasso 1997; Lynch 2001; Fleming 2002; Crook 2010; Steedman 2012). Writer, curator and educator Irit Rogoff (2009) is cautious about the limited self-articulation in padegogical programming with set rules. Kester (1999/2000), MacPherson (2001) and Mirza (2006) also suggest that what looks like emancipatory practices might actually reinforce social issues and negative stereotypes, validate the status quo and divert people's attention from the real causes of social problems. As a result, community members are not empowered, rather, they are instrumentalised and still excluded from galleries. Pedagogical programmes are accused of being used as a tool by museums and galleries to secure funding, create new audiences and realise the value of potential audiences. Participants are reduced to mere objects, with pro forma consultation and collaboration.

At the same time, the autonomy of the artists may be undermined by the institution, as the political awareness of the artists will be appropriated by the institutions who claim to advocate critical tendencies, through sanctions or requesting artists to provide concrete solutions to social problems (Steedman 2012). In addition, since public programmes are often deemed more social than artistic, aesthetic considerations are not regarded as a major concern, and the artworks produced are usually minor rather than major displays in museums and galleries (Weil 1990).

Despite all these controversies, curatorial projects of the educational term at institutions are an important component of the ecology and they take place at a steady state. Consequently, their ethics, legitimacy and efficacy have

been a key theme of reflections. For instance, in the UK art educator network Engage's 2011 conference, gallery practitioners took part in exchanges that explored approaches in avoiding labour abuse both for artists and participants in forced collaboration, and how to embed activist artists' work into gallery's work. Through individual experience, different positions were substantiated by details, contexts, and concerns of practitioners' work. For instance, regarding the issue whether artists need to do proper research and be immersed in an environment for a certain amount of time before starting a project, some practitioners consider this is a necessity to ensure ethical practices. In the meantime, some practitioners valued the fresh energy artists bring in when a quick exchange takes place.[18] Artists and institutional practitioners' reflections and practices, along with academic work that examines projects from a different perspective, especially focusing on the participants' points of view and roles (Plumb 2017), constantly interrogate the claimed equitable relationships in art institutions, the creative and unique role of artists that distinguish them from service provider for the participants, and the non-elitist position of gallery.

While there is no theoretical formation like 'educational turn' put forward in curatorial discourses in China, curatorial creation demonstrates similar discursive forms, and projects with open process and invitations of audience participation are more and more visible in art institutions. Institutional practitioners such as curators and education officers have increasingly supported or worked with artists in developing site-specific projects. For instance, the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, also the organiser of the Shanghai Biennial, a public institution sitting in a position between the local and the international, invited Chen Yun, organisor of Dinghaiqiao Mutual Aid Society, an artist-initiated community organisation in a local rundown neighbourhood, to initiate a public project specifically for the Biennale. Drawing on the organisation's experience in engaging communities and

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[18] For more information, please see artist and educator Alicia Bruce's documentation of the conference (http://axis-engage11-aliciab.tumblr.com/page/2, accessed 20 February 2017).

initiating projects with art, Chen Yun initiated a special programme called 51 Personae, where 51 common citizens shared stories and led activities across Shanghai that are relevant to their life and skills during the time of the Biennale (Chen 2017). In my interview with Chen Yun, Chen Yun stated that the programming was developed by Dinghaiqiao members. The Biennale committee mainly supported the project in marketing and prepared a modest budget for artists' fee and logistics.[19] In another case, the artists were never reimbursed by the art institution they worked with for the agreed project costs, as the processual nature of their work made the reimbursement process not as straight forward as making a one-off payment and in the end the artists gave up. There are also cases where curators actively participate in the shaping of a project, and institutions have also set up regular space and programme to make such projects develop and sustainable. For instance, the Times Museum in Guangzhou dedicates its street-front space to its Banyan Commune Artist Residency Project as exhibition and workshop space, as an approach to explore the local community and generate more conversations.[20] As the case studies of the following Chapters show, these initiatives often demonstrate a self-revision process of art institutions to identify research directions, to diversify curatorial programmes, to enhance an institution's educational capacity, to strengthen public engagement and to gain access to a diversified source of funds.

To investigate the institutional role is a driving force for this research. While many interesting experiments have taken place, led by artists, curators or both, it is not clear, from the outcome of many projects, how much institutions were involved and how the curatorial hand played a part in the shaping of a project and what are influencing factors, as most projects are discussed within their significance for expanding art forms and their impact

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[19] Chen Yun, interview with the author, 15 April 2017, Shanghai.
[20] For more information, please see 'Open Call: Banyan Commune Artist Residency Project 2018-2019' (http://www.randian-online.com/np_announcement/open-call-banyan-commune-artist-residency-project-2018-2019/, accessed 14 May 2018).

of opening up curatorial opportunities, especially for young curators, rather than their potential for institutional engagement and learning, or how participants are understood or worked with. As a result, we do not see many discussions on ethics, authorship, equity and other issues that are in heated debates here in the UK, in relation to frameworks of gallery commissions where projects are held accountable to commissioning institutions.

At the same time, when SEA taking place outside institutions enters the institutional arena, in addition to translating field experiences of projects in exhibitions, art institutions and artists often add collaborative element to the projects' instutional presentation, which proposes a different set of questions, such as the relationship between different manifestations of the same project, the various considerations of art institutions and artists in developing site-specific projects, and the role of project participants in the institutional space.

Research rationale

Through literature research and my contacts with curators and artists, I identified curatorial issues that warranted further investigation and brought the following questions to mind:

First of all, art institutions and curatorial explorations are an important factor framing what we understand as SEA today. If we pull the timeline back a little, we can see such entanglements from very early on. In 1997, artist Song Dong and Guo Shirui, then the director of the Contemporary Art Centre under the National News and Publication Bureau, initiated 'yesheng (野生)', or 'Wild', an 'exhibition' that adopted a guerrilla style, where artists were requested to carry out art projects in public space, with a high emphasis on 'process' and a connection to local situations. There were a few organisers all over China; those who wanted to participate needed to submit a detailed

plan with sketches of their intended projects and explained how their projects were responsive to their contexts (Wu, H. 2016: 166). Dai Guangyu, one participating artist based in Chengdu, connected the event with the motivation to make contemporary art happen, 'In Beijing and Shanghai, at least there are many circles of contemporary artists. In Chengdu, we do not even have circles. We are in desperate need of things to happen (ibid: 167).'

The lack of space and opportunities drive artists and curators such as Song Dong and Guo Shirui to think about alternative approaches to make contemporary art happen, from which the idea of emphasising process and being responsive to local contexts was generated. While back then no one was using 'socially engaged art' to describe this project and the message the project intended to convey, through its open calls and publications, was much on artistic forms rather than on a concern for particular issues of the local, it could be seen a ground where we can see many excellent SEA and its key ideas were central to SEA today. For instance, for Song Dong, 'only during a process can art become related to space and time' (ibid: 144). The idea of using nonexhibition space, and an emphasis on process and being responsive to local contexts, were evident in this project.

Secondly, how are the exhibition narratives decided? What are the influencing factors? Curatorial narratives, like other forms of narratives, are constructed by individuals to achieve certain aims and targeting certain audiences (Holstein and Gubrium 2012). Individuals have 'intentions for and anticipations of the future' when they construct narratives of themselves (Ritivoi 2004: 231). Curating is a collective process with at least two perspectives: the curator(s)'s and the artist(s)'s. Actors may have different aims within a curatorial framework. How do they interact with curators' historicising practice (Cook 2013)? How do artists make decisions about whether to participate in an exhibition or not? How will this contribute to our knowledge of SEA as well as curatorial practices? Even silence, including

not creating a narrative, inadvertently also implies a certain perspective and position.

Thirdly, I identified initiatives on institutional grounds that explored the curatorial frameworks to the extent that they became new projects that engaged local social issues and communities. There was a lack of critical approaches that examine the organisation of such projects, the various labour practices, efficacy and the challenges they raised. For example, in 'Positive Space' (29 March – 4 May 2014, the Times Museum, Guangdong), an exhibition that explored 'the different points of departure, focuses, structures and methodologies' of self-initiated art organisations in China, the curator, Bao Dong, made the exhibition into a market fair and let organisations decide for themselves how to present their work. Commentaries and the curatorial voices of this exhibition stressed the significance of the theme of the exhibition in identifying an important trend, but little was done to analyse individual artist's endeavours and considerations of their working methods.[21] While we can access artists' reflections on their self-publicised platforms on the Internet,[22] it is difficult to know how projects were shaped and the communicative process between the artists and local organisations and communities.

Fourthly, it became evident in my research that there were overlapping concerns of SEA and institutional practices, but it was unclear how they impacted upon each other. Curatorial changes, including an emphasis on the site-specificity of exhibitions, can provide openness, time and budget to SEA artists to think of using institutional spaces in many different ways. At the same time, they also pose challenges to institutional work, as the process-based nature of SEA requires resources and renovated ways of working

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[21] For more information, see http://www.timesmuseum.org/exhibitions/detail/id-283/ (accessed 4 May 2016)
[22] See, for example, https://www.douban.com/people/ArtPraxis/ (accessed 4 May 2016)

(Jackson 2011). What are the motivations, opportunities, and challenges for art institutions in engaging with SEA?

These issues are particularly prominent considering the many changes taking place in art institutions at this particular historic moment. On the one hand, there is a growing concern to widen cultural participation, which will be further explained in Chapter 3. On the other hand, scholars and institutional practitioners have been making attempts to connect contemporary artworks with society, such as identifying artworks with social concerns, forming critical discourses around artworks and cultivating political awareness. While in China it is hard to use theory to guide institutional practices or highlight museums' critical role and social responsibilities in the public sphere, an important strand of museological theory in the West (Sandell 2005; Mouffe 2010; Barrett 2011; Marstine 2017),[23] like other public intellectuals, curators can tacitly intervene in society and contribute to improving its inadequate infrastructures, refuting the idea that there is a fixed prerequisite for curators and museums to be politically effective and highlight a space for negotiation (Li 2011; Li 2010; He 2014; Zhou 2005). I found few empirical studies on artistic and curatorial practices that address and enrich these theoretical issues, which makes it difficult to identify constructive discussions or impacts on practices.

Research questions

In summary, on the one hand, many SEA artists were very cautious in working with art institutions and my inquiry started with a motivation to investigate concerns from both points of view, exploring negotiations in the institutional context. On the other hand, I aimed to investigate the

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[23] Market drivers, precarious political situations and a lack of a supportive infrastructure for art in China all pose immense difficulties for curators and art institutions seeking to take an activist role. As art historian Li Gongming asserts, it depends on the wisdom and courage of museum directors and curators to decide what their positions are in regard to social issues (Li 2010).

opportunities and challenges curating SEA could bring to both artists and art institutions. The research project started with the following questions:

- How do SEA artists position art institutions in their overall practices?

- How do artists navigate in the social and economic contexts of art institutions to produce political works or discourses of political works?

- What forces or negotiations are involved in the interaction between artists and art institutions?

- In what scope do museums facilitate the research and agendas of SEA? What is created?

- What new demands do curating SEA raise for curatorial practices?

- What impacts does curating SEA have on curatorial and museum practices?

- How will the converging space SEA and art institutions form position art and art institutions in contemporary Chinese society?

Illuminated by a grounded theory approach, which will be introduced in Chapter 2, the thesis presents the findings of the research around its core categories and their key concepts. The first category ruminates on the process and multifaceted understanding of SEA. It presents SEA projects with a combination of artists' philosophy, community participants' opinions, and practices of curators and other key individuals that play a key role in enacting and transforming the projects, including NGO staff, other researchers, other artists and so on. I structured the chapter by the

conceptual categories I developed through the field work and identified those critical moments where important decisions were made. In contrast to typical criticism on SEA which focuses on one particular aspect of a project — usually the critical social issues the project attempts to address — my writing focuses on individual choices and trajectories that shape the project in a particular way. For example, one of the key concepts I developed is timing: what makes practitioners start a project? When and what are the factors that made artists decide their research is ready? When does a project end? When did the art institution choose to participate in a SEA project? How did they schedule their curatorial work? What do these decisions mean in terms of the institution strategy? Another concept, personal, looks at the various motivations and strategies of individuals in engaging with SEA. It is in an aggregation of multiple motivations we see a project closer. For example, sometimes, artists act out of their research interest in interrogating veiled social realities. While community participation is prioritised and enacted to its full potential, it is often built in a framework that fits artists' research rationale without being able to enact participants' engagement with the research topic.

Introduction of case for ethnography

The case I chose for the ethnography research was a collaboration between Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun[24] who were based in Chengdu, Sichuan,[25] and the local A4 Contemporary Arts Centre (now LUKELAKES·A4 Art Museum, hereinafter referred to as A4). The artists had been engaged in SEA for five years (since 2010) when I started my fieldwork (early 2015). Their projects were usually long-term and involving multiple partners. Their presences at institutions were dynamic, which include exhibitions,

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[24] Chen was born in 1981 in Henan Province, and Cao was born in 1982 in Jilin Province. They are partners. They graduated with a Fine Art Undergraduate degree with Jilin College of the Arts in 2006 and 2005 respectively.
[25] Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan province. It is the political, economic and cultural centre, and transportation hub, of not only Sichuan province, but also Southwest China. Chengdu Urban Planning 2011-2020; Chengdu Cultural Industry Development Planning (2008-2012) made 'the top city of China's cultural industry' the goal of Chengdu.

workshops and lectures. I identified a strong motivation of experimentation from their work. At the same time, A4 was in the same city with the artists and the two had collaborated a few times on different occasions. This was rare as back then the form of collaboration between SEA and art institutions was usually one-off exhibitions. When I was preparing for case studies, I got to know that A4 would support the artists in the year of 2015. It was not clear in what form the institution would support the artists, but it looked like a flexible, negotiable plan which placed the institution as not only an exhibition place but also a research space. This provided for a rare opportunity for me to examine the mutual influence of artists and institutions.

I will introduce more about A4 in the next chapter, locating it in the general context of art institutions in China. Here I will briefly introduce the two artists' trajectory of work.

Cao and Chen did not start their exploration in 2010 with a goal to make 'socially engaged art', nor did they identify themselves as 'socially engaged artists'. They went out of their studio, together with a few other artists they worked with back then in the group 'Art Praxis'.[26] It was a reflective and self-learning process, where the artists immersed their living experiences and knowledge of the countryside in a specific site, to nuance their understanding of social relations and multiple narratives. They did not have any expectation on what they would find and if there would be any 'arts' made. The artists devoted a large amount of time to talking with local people and investigating the impact of policy change in this area. In this process, it became clear to the artists that a focus on the local voice would be at the centre of their practice (Art Praxis and Ni 2012: 10):

> We entered into the field with the conventional 'treating disease' attitude, looking at everything with preconceptions. It did not take us

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[26] Members of Art Praxis in 2010 included Cao Minghao, Chen Jianjun, Chen Zhou, and Shi Surao.

very long to realise that our thinking and aesthetic awareness were invalid in this complicated reality. We realised that the only solution is to go back and listen to the local, to search and rewrite the invisible…

The self-funded nature of many projects decide artists cannot just travel wherever to carry out projects. While investing as much energy as they can, artists need to have other 'more proper jobs' to earn a living. Cao and Chen are lecturers in a local university, which offers them time for their own artistic practices without shouldering too many administrative duties. They also give private art lessons to children on weekends.

Since 2010, Cao and Chen have started to investigate the land use, economic situation, and changing lifestyles influenced by the policy 'Building a New Socialist Countryside', which was promulgated in 2006 to optimise rural resources and management and led to a large scale reconstruction process in rural areas (Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Anon 2010). Spending two years in the Kunshan field and talking to village families, the artists focused on microhistory, immersing themselves in local life and the difficulties brought about by the changes of reforms in land use, economic situation, and lifestyles. Theirs was a reflective and self-learning process, where the artists immersed their living experiences and knowledge of the countryside in a specific site, to extend their understanding of social relations and multiple narratives.[27] The artists' practices have increasingly emphasised collaborators' own initiatives, rather than making individually-authored object-based artworks. Much effort is devoted to communication and organising work, and the artworks are often embedded in the places of collaboration.

In the few artworks the artists made during this period, the artists often adopted a documentary style and minimised their presence in the works. For

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[27] Cao and Chen work collectively with other artists at different times in their work in Kunshan, such as Chen Zhou and Shi Surao.

example, in the video installation *Confessions of a Private Residence*, Chen documented the process of Mr. Xia washing his residence, a wooden-structure house that his family has had for hundreds of years. Xia hand washed the house regularly to keep it functional and to restore its original appearance. Under the then new policy, Mr. Xia, and many local families who lived in independent courtyard houses, would be moved to a residential compound composed of apartment buildings of two or more stories. The washing act is both an act to resist oblivion and an act to symbolically upholding a life style.
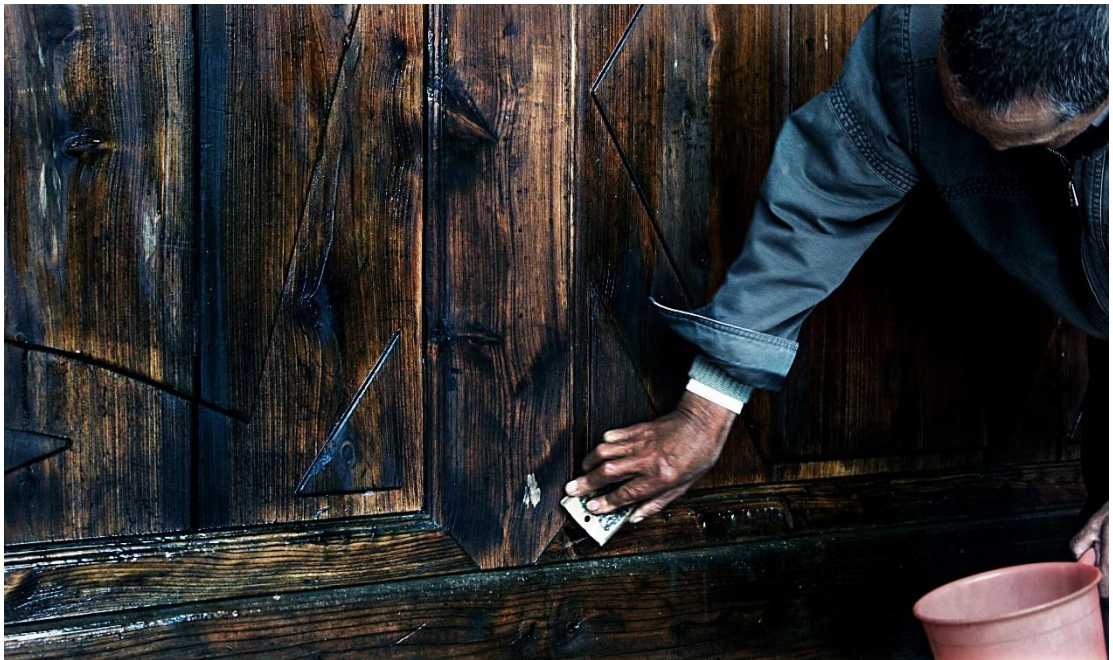
Figure 2.1 Washer, Chen Jianjun, photography, 2011, 80x47 cm. Photograph provided by Chen Jianjun.

Figure 2.2 Confessions of a Private Residence (still), Chen Jianjun, 2011, 4-screen video installation, 8'6". Photograph provided by Chen Jianjun.

In *An Individual's Geographic Annals*, Cao filmed a working morning of a family living off cultivating mushrooms. As there are always ups and downs in the price of mushroom as a result of policy changes, this family had to constantly move to different places since the early 1990s, and several of the family members have migrated to cities to earn better wages.
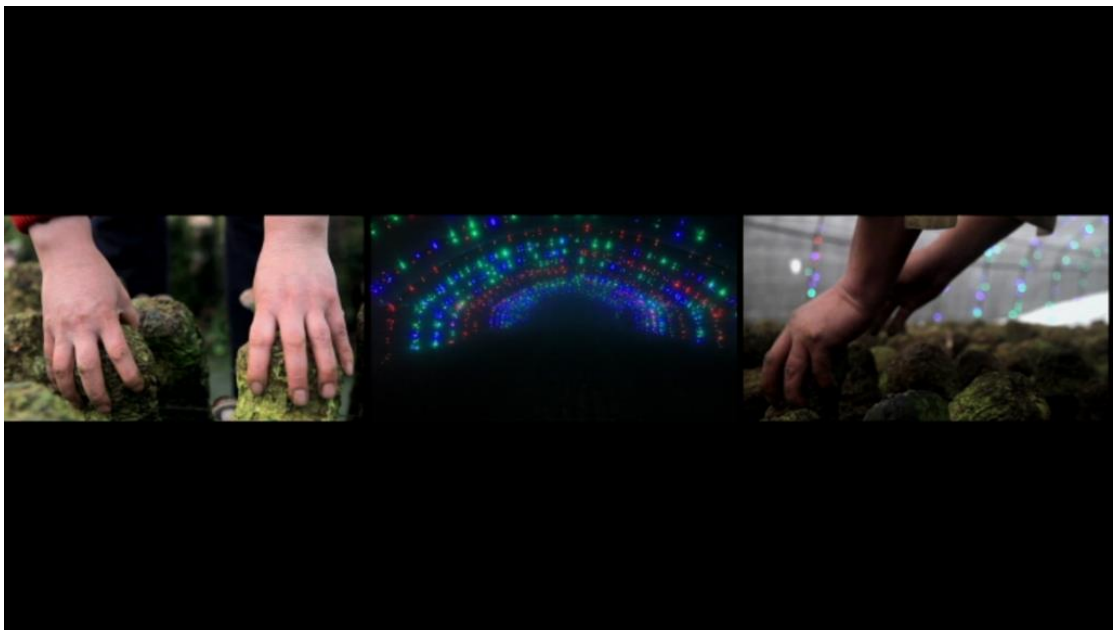
Figure 2.3 An Individual's Geographic Annals (still), Cao Minghao, 2012, 3-screen video installation, colour, silent, 3'43". Photograph provided by Cao Minghao.

Figure 2.4 An Individual's Geographic Annals (still), Cao Minghao, 2012, 3-screen video installation, colour, silent, 3'43". Photograph provided by Cao Minghao.

The artists aimed to facilitate reflections and discussions on the impact of the policies on people's life styles and the subsequent psychological and practical issues, which were often overshadowed in the development discourse of this area. The artists' role lies in their consideration of collaborators' narratives and how to set up a scene to enable them to naturally perform or talk about daily activities and past experiences. In this process, the artists identified dialogues with collaborators a key research tool.

Cao and Chen deliberately kept a distance from art institutions when they started the 'Kunshan Project' in 2010. They had gone out of their studio and located their art-making in the social sphere for a long time before the Kunshan Project; talking and working with people in real life had been a central strategy for the artists' research and art-making. Cao explained their motivations in an interview,

There were few artists doing similar work. We did not know what and where our work would head into, let alone thinking about that institutions would be interested in our work. The only thing in our head was that we could not continue the way we had been working, i.e. making works in the studio and exhibiting them in art institutions.[28]

In Chapter 4, I will introduce the artists' motivations and strategies in working with art institutions.

An explanation of terminology

Artist

While categorisation and a fixation of identity are against the will of many artists[29] and terms such as 'practitioner (shijianzhe 实践者)' and 'artivist (yixingzhe 艺行者)' are widely used (Wu, Q. 2016), 'artist' is the primary identity for SEA practitioners, thus my use of the term in this thesis. This is not only because the art ground is the still primary ground where much of the SEA discourse is circulated, but also because for many artists, it is important to stress and to affirm the agency of art and their role as artists in their practices.

Curator and curating

Cezhanren 策展人 is a combination of cezhan 策展 and ren 人. The literal meaning of cezhan is 'to plan/organise exhibitions,' and ren means person. The Chinese term was first coined by Taiwanese curator Victoria Yung-Chih Lu in the early 1980s, as a Chinese parallel to the English term curator. The term was adopted widely since then in the Chinese speaking world, to

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[28] Interview with Cao and Chen. 25 March, 2015. Chengdu.
[29] Artists often identify themselves as curators, researchers, organisers, and artists at the same time. Many understand their practices as integrating research, art and curating.

describe the brain behind an exhibition in the contemporary art field. It replaces the term organisor/zuzhizhe 组织者 organisor, art moderator/yishu zhuchiren 艺术主持人 and other terms used in the 1980s. The term arose with the birth of discourse on contemporary art and its fight for living space and was closely associated with an authority of criticism and power (Jiang 2008; Jia 2013).

While there are attempts by curators, especially those who are familiar with international discourses about curating, to expand the notion of curating in China by using terms, such as 'para curatorial' and 'the curatorial'[30], to frame the discursive activities they organise,[31] the connotations of cezhan in China did not have a changing trajectory unlike its Western counterpart and the same term cezhan is mainly used to refer to the exhibition-making activities. Some curators consciously use other terms, such as organiser (cehuaren 策划人) and convener (zhaojiren 召集人), to stress their efforts to enact a more democratic working relationship (or at least a willingness to do so) and to share the power of decision-making in exhibition-making.

In this thesis, the terms curating or curatorial practices represent the acts of various players who shape an institutional project. They are not limited to curators' acts, but also artists' and other individuals' who play a major role in the shaping of a project. While using these terms, I am not suggesting all curatorial work consciously embeds the concerns of the curatorial discourse

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[30] The notion of the curatorial put forward by Paul O'Neill (2012) gives discursive curatorial work parity with exhibition-making. There is no primary or secondary curatorial activities. 'Curatorial'. See an explication of the curatorial at: http://tranzit.org/curatorialdictionary/index.php/dictionary/curatorial/
('Curatorial work no longer concerns solely the display of artworks and the task of exhibition-making; it is now also understood as a practice centred on longer-term, less object-orientated, discursive-educational projects that involve various people as instigators and actors. Subsequently, curatorial work—which may also be read as a reaction to authorial and consolidated forms of exhibition production—has become more conceptual, increasingly concerned with process- knowledge- and research-based endeavours', accessed 5 August 2017).
[31] For example, Nikita Choi, curator at The Times Museum, Guangzhou, initiated an annual programme 'para-curatorial' in 2012, the Chinese translations of which is *fancezhan* 泛策展, extending curatorial work beyond exhibition-making and promoting interdisciplinary exchanges. For further details, see http://www.timesmuseum.org/programmes/detail/id-753/ (accessed 5 August 2017).

from the 1990s, such as achieving educational aims, questioning the status quo or being responsive to social relations. I use them as umbrella terms that can cover a wide range of practices. Whenever necessary, I will specify what I exactly mean when I use these terms.

Chapter 2 Research methodology

Introduction

My first-hand experiences with SEA, and my research on museums and social issues, especially the social change potential artists and museum collaborations could bring to the public sphere, made me believe that SEA is a social force and the curatorial could be a parallel action platform for SEA artists in addition to their original sites of practices. Consequently, in the initial stage of my research, I was driven by practice-related questions such as 'what are the key issues facing the curatorial of SEA?' and 'what are some of the best practices/techniques in addressing the agendas of SEA in the curatorial'? My theoretical framework was fundamentally inductive, aiming to examine the role of SEA and curatorial practices in attracting public participation, opening up discussions and acting on pressing social issues through case studies, a qualitative research method that develops 'a nuanced view of reality' through its closeness to 'real-life situations' and 'its multiple wealth of details' (Flyvbjerg 2004). When I neared the finish of my first year of the Ph.D. in the middle of 2014, I decided that my research would focus on the trajectory of the two or three most active SEA and curators, to investigate their interactions with art institutions including alternative spaces.

This, while leading me to explore artists' and curators' innovative practices in China, which forms an important part of this thesis, also created a bias in my research design, case selection and data analyses. To be specific, my initial choice of cases presented a strong focus on artists and curators who had a strong intention to renovate curatorial practices. As my research went on, especially after the initial field research at the end of 2014, I found three problems with this strategy.

Firstly, I found out that the motivations for doing exhibitions and other curatorial projects were diverse for both curators and artists; that 'ideal' cases where curators and/or artists worked together on techniques of developing and demonstrating potentials of the curatorial for SEA were rare.

As a result, my preferred analytical framework was not sufficient to interpret the dynamic picture of both SEA and their curatorial settings.

Secondly, while SEA-related theories, such as those found in discussions on curatorial responsibilities and the quality of participation, provided useful insights for my research, basing the analysis on these parameters was not very helpful. For example, in some cases, community engagement in initiating projects that responded to their needs went very deep, but the curatorial hand was not necessarily there.

Thirdly, I realised that interview as a research method has many limitations. In my initial research, I obtained very specific answers regarding curators' and artists' attitudes and practices towards SEA. However, most of the respondents spoke from their own positions and integrated practices into their own trajectories of work; it was difficult for me to interrogate the complexities involved in the curatorial process, especially the details about community participants' voices. I needed to see the relation between what they said and what they did so I could understand better the implications of their words.

In summary, understanding SEA and curating SEA under the rubrics my theoretical training had provided me were not sufficient. Coming back from the initial research, I began to re-examine a range of methodologies and revise my research design (from November 2014 to February 2015). Eventually, I enriched my research design by drawing on grounded theory method and adding ethnographic approaches to one setting of an SEA project. My initial concerns in relation to the impacts of curating SEA on art institutions in terms of engaging social issues, knowledge creation and capacity building in other areas, and how such interactions would support and provide resources for SEA, were still useful. Instead of treating them as concrete questions, I began to see them as relevant concepts to guide my research. Rather than using existing theories as guiding theories, I use them as sensitising concepts and analytical tools. I identified the explorative

approach and context-specific analysis championed by grounded theory method as a suitable approach to provide useful tools for interpreting these phenomena.

Many of my 'how' questions were turned into 'what' questions, such as 'what does SEA/curating SEA mean for different individuals?' and 'what kind of artist-curator relationships are there?' To avoid predetermining the research lens, I attempted to 'remain at a descriptive level...rather than to offer an explanatory account that requires testing against reality' (Willig 2013: 72).

A grounded theory approach — ontology and epistemology

First put forward in 1967 by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, grounded theory is rooted in a symbolic interactionist perspective, which regards the researched world as a 'product of human participation and negotiation', 'contributing to the unfolding of social process' (Willig 2013: 80). It is a method/theory package: as a method, it identifies and integrates categories and theories from data; and as a theory, it is the product of the data/theory generating process. Here I use grounded theory method (GTM) to refer to grounded theory as method. While it is difficult to give a single definition of the many interpretations of GTM, a core shared principle is that the social process is the unit of analysis and the empirical truth of reality is obtained by analysing their actual meanings in the real setting (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994). New theories are developed from empirical research and connected 'to evidence through engagement with data rather than deduction' (Dey 2004: 82).

The positivist position held by early GTM theorists, which establishes the veracity of research through treating data as being in an external reality, free from being influenced by researchers' actions, has been widely critiqued by constructivist and postmodern positions that recognise the experiences and perspectives of the researcher, the researched and other social actors (Glaser

and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994; Dey 2004; Clarke 2005; Charmaz 2006; Bryant and Charmaz 2007). A repositioned GTM assumes 'the existence of multiple realities, the mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants, and aims to provide interpretive understanding of the studied world' (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001: 160).

While the goal of GTM is to facilitate the generation of new insights on the investigated matter and to synthesise the social process, it is problematic to regard GTM as holding an inductive epistemology. I follow researchers such as Bryant and Charmaz (2007) and Dey (2004) who treat GTM as an abductive approach, which examines the accountability of theories in individual cases in terms of their relevance, power and influences. In the words of Dey (2004: 91),

> What is generated is not so much new facts as new ways of connecting them… The relevance of a particular frame of reference is not determined only by its consistency with observations; it also depends on its capacity to generate insights, which taken together can produce a new account of the subject under investigation.

Mechanics and techniques

Diverse theorists agree that, in GTM, data-collection and analysis are simultaneous. As data collection begins, open coding begins, which is 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data' (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 61). Categories explain the shared characteristics of instances, and the same data can be assigned to different categories as the research evolves and when different coding paradigms are employed. The researcher aims at 'generating as many categories as possible in the light of these various possibilities, without

prejudging which will prove most valuable at this stage in the analysis' (Dey 2004: 85).

Further data collection is not driven by the need for statistical representation; rather, it asks the researcher to choose cases which demonstrate characteristics that interest the researcher the most and are most relevant for the phenomena. Corbin and Strauss (1990: 176) term this process 'theoretical sampling', i.e. 'sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory'. Through constant comparison among data, and comparison between data and emerging theories, researchers move 'backwards and forwards between ideas and data' (Dey 2004: 84), until new data can no longer throw new insight and theoretical saturation is reached. In these processes, theories are being constantly refined (Charmaz 2006; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

I initially started my sampling unit around key SEA projects, relevant exhibitions and crucial curators and critics when I developed case studies. These projects and individuals had long-term experience in SEA and are particularly interested in (at least from the way they talked about this issue) making changes to the working approaches of institutions with SEA. An exploration of their practices would provide rich and theoretically interesting accounts about the dynamics of SEA, and lead me to key informants which I might otherwise have not thought of. Snowball sampling was later used to reach community participants, NGO staff, museum staff (including assistant curators, directors and curators who did not normally appear in the literature but played a key role in organising SEA curatorial programmes), anthropologists, researchers, architects and other key actors associated with those SEA projects, including those artists who worked with SEA practitioners but have different ideas to them in curatorial approaches. Later I began purposeful sampling and theoretical sampling, where I continued to identify projects and individuals, including curators and practitioners who curated SEA but had not been typically associated with it or who did not use

the language of SEA, such as government museums working with SEA to attract young audiences. I also paid special attention to practitioners who held a 'low-key' profile and were not actively engaged in working with art institutions, to investigate their self-definition and self-positioning in relation to art institutions. They facilitated my understanding of SEA in the different registers it operates in and helped me to approach the issue of SEA and curating SEA from a wider perspective, identifying their traces, instead of taking them as a passing trend.

This study used a variety of data collection methods, including literature research, ethnographic methods for one SEA project, participant observation for three projects, and 36 interviews with key informants involved in eight other SEA projects or curatorial projects. My field research started at the end of 2014 with projects that had existed for a couple of years by the time I contacted them, for the artists had more contact with various art institutions and there was more literature available on these longer-term projects than on new ones. This led me to projects that are mostly community-based with no clear finishing date (though it turned out later that these projects were very diverse and 'community project' might not be the best term to describe them). Later my theoretical sampling led me to projects that I was not aware of, some with shorter project time and very different strategies, based on which I was able to seek clarification and amplification of emerging ideas. According to Gobo (2004: 405), the sampling process exists 'in dialogue with field incidents, contingencies and discoveries.' I withdrew from field research at the end of 2015, a point when I had generated two or three core categories and thought it was time to start writing, considering the scope of the Ph.D. research. Facing the changing dynamics in the relationship between SEA practitioners and art institutions taking place after my field research at the end of 2015, I continued to follow recent cases after the fieldwork and made additional interviews in January and February 2016, and in April 2017.

My research basically followed a strategy that responded to the living process of SEA. Usually I would first conduct desk research to identify key issues of a

project. In my first visit/Email to a certain respondent, I used these key issues as sensitising concepts to direct the research, and conducted semi-structured interviews. Most of the researched projects were ongoing and the artists were active during the time of my research. As a result, I paid multiple visits as much as my research schedule allowed to follow their work and to track evolving ideas of participants. These processes also connected me with key informants and ideas of other projects, providing a source for theoretical sampling.

For instance, for Nanting Research, a socially engaged art education project developed in a village in Guangdong, I got in touch with the project leader at the end of 2014. Nanting Research was in its third year in 2014. In the process of our communication project members were invited to participate in an exhibition entitled 'Civil Power' held at the Beijing Minsheng Art Museum from 25 June to 10 October 2015. In the curatorial process, I was copied into the emails coming back and forth between the project leader and the curatorial team. I was also in an on-line messaging group of the project planning team composed of participating artists of the Nanting Research and advisors of the project. These provided me with a channel to follow the exhibition planning process and the negotiations with the Museum. I visited the project site in April and had conversations with local participants. I was a participant observant at the Beijing exhibition site for the whole installation process, having conversations with members of Nanting Project as well as of other exhibited projects; I made follow-up interviews with key informants, such as the chief curator of the exhibition and other participating artists in the exhibited SEA projects, who I did not have the chances to talk to during the duration of the exhibition. I kept the conversation going with the project team after the exhibition, and continued to follow their progress and collaborations with various institutions, incorporating this data into my field notes and theory building.

Concise Research Timeline of the Nanting Research	Research stage	1st stage	2nd stage	3rd stage	4th stage	5th stage
	Time	10 October 2014-17 April 2015	17 April 2015 – 23 April 2015	30 April 2015– 30 June 2015	1 July 2015 – 1 November 2015	1 November 2015 – 30December 2015
	activities	Literature research on the project; Initial Email and WeChat interview and communications with Chen Xiaoyang; Interviews with curators who had worked with the project team	Guangzhou site visit with Chen Xiaoyang and community members. We discussed about the project and the upcoming exhibition	Intense Email and WeChat communications with project team and curatorial team; participant observation at the exhibition	Email and WeChat communication with project team on exhibition reflection; literature research on exhibition reviews and contextual information	Email and WeChat communication with project team on the development of the project; literature research

Table 2.1 Example of case research methods in this research project

Ethnography in grounded theory methods

...ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or
covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time,
watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking
questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting
documents and artefacts — in fact, gathering whatever data are
available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of
inquiry' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3).

Ethnography, with its first appearance as 'an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organisation and culture' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 1) in Western anthropology of the 19th century, has been evolving and used differently in different social research settings. It proposes to 'construct an account of the culture under investigation that both understands it from within and captures it as external to, and independent of, the researcher: in other words, as a natural phenomenon' (ibid: 9). Operating in qualitative research settings and in various disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, it is used to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those in the context. Epistemologically, the researcher who uses ethnography believes that knowledge is created through social processes and can be gained through observation, participation, and experiences. While there are different terms in the literature synonymous to the concept of ethnography, such as participant observation and fieldwork, I follow Delamount (2004) and use ethnography as the term of the methodology and use participant observation as a description of techniques that include observation and interviewing.

Ethnography is one of the major approaches GTM adopts, able to capture the 'complexities of postmodern life', and 'can prevent grounded theory studies from dissolving into quick and dirty qualitative research' (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001: 160; Clarke 2005: xxxii-xxxiii). Similar to GTM, ethnography does not rely on deductive approach or existing categories to enhance the understanding of a phenomenon. Theoretical propositions are developed during and after the field work (Bamkin, Maynard and Goulding 2016; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Emerson 2004). It aids GTM by creating multiple channels of data collection and facilitating integral interpretation. As Seale et al. (2004: 203) explicates,

> While interviews often take place somewhere in the respondent's daily world, such as in the home, they rarely extend into the household's

nooks and crannies, or accompany the respondent from one location in this world to another. Field research, in contrast, can engage participants in these ways. The fieldworker not only sits down at the respondent's kitchen table, say, turns on the tape recorder, and interviews him or her, but commonly continues the research conversation well after the tape recorder has been turned off.

My research benefits from ethnography not only because it suits the GTM approach, which is fundamental to this study, but also because it addresses some of the difficulties in research presented by the dialogical and process-based nature of SEA. At the same time, ethnography also produces theories as grounded theory does, and also a narration about the researched lives and phenomenon.

Ethnography as a tool to study the dialogical and process-based nature of SEA

Artists working in the ethnographic modality normally seek social interaction, but scholarly analysis hardly considers the actual exchange taking place during the art project, and both its social and aesthetic implications (Siegenthaler 2013: 737).

Conventional methods of contemporary art criticism focus on the 'end products' and often take place in the exhibition space. This approach, while for most of the time can capture the characteristics of most artistic forms,[32] may fail to capture the actual artworks of SEA, i.e. the social encounters and multiple actors of SEA, which mostly take place beyond the confines of art institutions. What is accessed within the galleries are their documents and other residuums (Kester 2013; Siegenthaler 2013; Jackson 2011).

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[32] According to Kester (2013: 4), 'In writing about object-based practices the critic need simply be present before the work of art for a limited period of time (a few hours, a day) in order to acquire at least a basic understanding of it. At the very least, one can easily enough find a high-resolution reproduction of a given painting or sculpture that captures something of the nature of the actual work. Complex, long-term projects like the IMI require a different, and more extensive, form of research if they are to be engaged with any clarity'.

Fundamentally, SEA is about human interaction and usually involves long-term project time. This, first and foremost, decides that not all labour is materialised in the end in the form of artworks or its accompanying texts. Sometimes, it is a sentence that a participant says that inspires artists and triggers the next stage of actions; sometimes, it is a particular decision that an artist makes that earns the trust of community members and motivates them to participate in a project. These details and moments are difficult to document, thus the missed opportunity to study the 'actual and factual aesthetic qualities' of these 'artistic qua social practices' (Siegenthaler: 739).

Siegenthaler (2013: 744-745) refers to Alfredo Jaar's The Cloud (2000) and discussed the necessity of researchers to leave the gallery and learn from ethnographic work to study process-based art, using 'participation, observation, long-term cohabitation, interviews and informal conversations' (ibid: 749). Jaar brought together bereaved families of dead immigrant workers who attempted to cross the border between Mexico and the United States, to both sides of the fence, to share experiences, build solidarity and enact future interactions. Siegenthaler argues:

> While the artwork had an immediate social and aesthetic impact on place, what remains in its documentation is mainly its symbolic gesture. There is no information on the factual effects of this event, firstly on the lives of the people involved and secondly on local social and cultural practice. Have people decided to continue with such meetings, independent of the presence of the artist? Has the event initiated a more public discourse about border victims? Has the artist sourced from or fed into local practices of mourning? Or is it possible that this event barely played a sustainable role locally, while its documentation is strongly received in the global art world? Such questions that lead beyond the mere symbolic meaning of the act can only be asked and answered through research on place; during and after the event.

Kester further discusses the fact that audiences' actual experiences of artworks are often neglected by art critics (2013: 6-7), thus their potential in transforming the works over time is missed. Kester argues for a 'field-based approach' (8), in which 'the critic inhabits the site of practice for an extended period of time, paying special attention to the discursive, haptic, and social conditions of space, and the temporal rhythms of the processes that unfold there'. Actually, not only for SEA, a field-based approach also provides new insights for the arts generally. For example, in terms of object-based artworks, which make inquiries into other cultures, anthropologist Arne (1993: 8) suggests investigating the reception of the concerned communities. These all point to a closer study of the art-making and exhibiting processes. Geertz (2000[1983]) reminded us to focus on the connection between the energies of artistic creation itself and the dynamic of human experience, putting externalised conception under scrutiny. Sarah Thornton, a journalist who frequently uses ethnography and participant-observation in writings about contemporary art, gives credit to ethnography for giving her an 'open mind' (2008: 256) to understand the milieus of the art world and unveil its multivocal quality.

Another methodological concern with conventional art criticism approaches lies in their analytical framework, that they are inadequate in addressing questions of production, such as the boundaries of a project, i.e. its entry into and departure from a site, and critical moments of a project, such as 'the changes that occurred in the social organisation of the project over time', 'the moments of creative insight and stasis', and how various participants 'accommodated' or 'challenged' the authority of public agencies and artists' (Kester 2013: 3-4).

While getting closer to project sites, as in other research cases in ethnographic work, does not guarantee robust research or reconstruct a given project in its totality,[33] an immersive experience makes researchers

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[33] E. C. Feiss (2014: 2) interrogated Kester's undefined use of 'fieldwork', as well as his neglect of 'the hierarchical foundations… of any gathering of people for change or exchange are purified from the critical

more sensitive to the different manifestations of notions and facilitates the conceptualisation of insightful questions. As Siegenthaler states (2013: 739):

> In turn, the study of artwork and documentation in a museum context would not become obsolete. Instead, it would be enriched by the fact that the researcher/critic is no longer limited to merely analysing the visual and textual documentation, and the material residues of art practices taking place elsewhere.

Perhaps because of the resources demanded by ethnographic research, especially time resources (Bishop 2012), much of field accounts come from artists themselves, who are the closest to their own practices. Even rarer is ethnographic research on the interaction between practitioners and art institutions, although there has been a growing literature contemplating on the themes and works of exhibitions in relation to SEA work,[34] and some artists have voiced their reflections.[35] Among the few research projects that use ethnography is one by Keith (2012) who studied the negotiation between curators and educators on exhibition narratives and audience engagement through an 18-month process of participant observation of a partnership between the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Black Cultural Archives in London. Embedded in the institutional environment as a researcher and volunteer, she was able to identify critical decision-making moments in exhibit selection and narrative-making, and point out opportunities for organisational change. Finkelpearl (2013), while not 'officially' taking an ethnographic approach in writing what we made, based on his long-term interest and experience in commissioning SEA, brewed critical questions for SEA practitioners, community participants, museum educators and so on, on art medium and cooperation with various communities.

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undertaking' in preference of focusing on moments of agency.
[34] For example, see Lu (2012), Wu (2014), and Judah (2014).
[35] For example, see Wu and Xia (2015).

I am not suggesting that ethnography is the best or the only way to study SEA.[36] However, ethnography is the most appropriate approach for my research. It not only can capture those key decision-making moments and changes in strategies which are not necessarily manifested in the final artistic or exhibitionary 'products', but also can illuminate the various manifestations of the involvement of art institutions in SEA, which take place in formal meetings as well as in casual daily conversations.

Reflexivity

For Glaser (1992), in order to generate new theories and to avoid the contamination of existing theories, the presence of the researcher should be eliminated in GTM and literature of the researched area can only be read at a late stage of research study to avoid the contamination of theory. Revised versions of GTM, especially constructivist GTM (Charmaz 2014; 2006), have pointed out the research process is interactional and situated, where the role of the researcher is a key element that constructs data interpretation, rather than a pure conduit of knowledge that is generated from 'natural' data. As a result, acknowledging the position of the researcher, including any theory the researcher brings in that has an impact on the research project in one way or another, is helpful for one to understand the researched field critically and produce robust and careful interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Charmaz 1990).

Similarly, with roots in naturalism, ethnographic approaches once treated the influence of the researchers as distortions to objectivity. This initial assumption has been challenged and revised as a result of a recognition of the impact of the theoretical background and participation of researchers in the co-construction and analysis of data. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 16) propose to 'exploit' the effects of the researcher, instead of eliminating them,

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[36] For example, Feiss argues analysis must start with how the project articulates its own demands (2014: 2).

to say that our findings, and even our data, are constructed does not automatically imply that they do not or cannot represent social phenomena... how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations.

In this section, I will first introduce how theories are used at different stages of this research project, and then I will examine my considerations on my self-positioning in this research.

The position of theories in this research project

The aims of an engagement with literature are to define the significance of relevant research, to identify limitations in research, and to provide a focus (Ramalho et al. 2015; Charmaz 2006; Clarke 2005; Strauss & Corbin 1990). The use of theories, as Clarke (2005: 77) states, should contribute to an epistemological framework without throwing assumptions or disrupting the emerging process of theories,

> The question becomes: how, then, can one initially frame and focus the research, drawing on extant literatures and situating the proposed research within those literatures without doing premature theoretical closure?

To ensure this groundedness, theories need to be engaged with at all stages of the research, constantly reflected upon and compared with memos and emerging theories (Ramalho et al. 2015: 6). Identifying theories in relation to this research project is a constant motif for my work and literature review has been conducted all through the study.

Firstly, theories provided sensitising concepts to guide the research. As Blumer defines it (1969: 147-148), while definitive concepts 'provide

prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.' Although I changed my research methodology after the initial stage of research, the literature review I conducted in my first year of research was still useful in terms of forming sensitising concepts as research tools. For instance, the understanding of process as work in SEA drove me to pay attention to how artists and curators consider the beginning and ending points of their projects and the issue of documenting their work. In addition, I also paid attention to areas of concern that reveal new insights about this sensitising concept, so the research was not 'merely an extension of the researcher's expectations' (Goulding 1999: 8). This brought out other dimensions of this issue, such as questions of the relationship between documentation and identity, as there were artists purposefully rejecting documenting practices for they did not want to be presented as just another art project and they did not think documentation was capable of showing a whole picture of their projects.

Secondly, an awareness of the debates surrounding SEA, especially those in China, facilitated my conversation with my respondents as it enabled me to be sensitive to the different concerns of various individuals and to have informed exchanges. For instance, I was careful in using the term 'collaboration', as the spectrum of collaboration is wide and, in many situations, it can be very exploitative (Finkelpearl 2013). In the research, I paid special attention to how different individuals defined it and positioned it in their practices.

'Efficacy' is another example. The Ph.D. research extends my previous study during the Master's degree on SEA in the UK gallery context, to SEA in the broader public sphere, including situations in Eastern Europe and South America, where artists initiate self-publishing, decentred organisations and other approaches that are familiar to those of Chinese SEA practitioners to conduct activism both in the art worlds and on broader social concerns. This area of literature reminded me to pay attention to how the 'efficacy' of SEA is differently defined, contested and received, as well as their impact on the

discussions of curator-artist collaboration. In other words, literature does not serve as a background or a context in this research, but is a parallel approach to gather data and analysis (Goulding 1999). Existing theories provide both theoretical and lexical references for my analysis.

Fourthly, a review of SEA-related research provided useful practical and reflective tools for my research activities. For example, in terms of research on SEA exhibitions, Bridges (2009) examined two SEA exhibitions in terms of their interactivity with their urban environment, curatorial methodology prior to and over the course, and the relationship between artists and audiences they attempted to engage. For one of the exhibitions, Bridges was able to participate in art projects in person and interview artists and curators. For the other one, he relied on second-hand materials, such as the catalogue, exhibition reviews, and published interviews with artists and curators. Bridges would concede that greater intimacy with the artworks could have been more helpful in generating revelatory experiences. I chose to use ethnography as a research method to create conditions for such intimacy, which I will explain more in detail later. Looking back, ethnographic work endowed me with a confidence in the social process of SEA, as I had bodily experiences of the 'artistic hands' in initiating conversations, long-term exchange and facilitating mutual understandings in various communities. While I have doubts in some strategies artists or curators adopted, I can comfortably explain to anyone my personal experiences and understandings of SEA, including how it might be different from the work of anthropologists or social workers.

Last but not least, theories put forward challenges but also facilitate my efforts to build a conversation between researches in different contexts. As curating SEA has not yet become a prominent discourse in China, finding answers to my research questions was a constant process of identifying and linking different fields, to weave a reasonable thread to connect different dots and to differentiate how ideas are used differently in different contexts. This issue became more prominent when artists and institutional

practitioners used similar concepts to describe their practices, such as constructing community.

My role

"'[P]articipant" does not mean doing what those being observed do, but interacting with them while they do it. The researcher may do the same things, but that is not a requirement' (Delmont 2004: 206).

My ethnographic research with Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun in Chengdu lasted for eight months. This amount of time was calculated based on the artists' schedule and A4's project planning. I arrived in the field in late March 2015 (communication with the artists began as early as in late 2014), when the artists started to work with participants in the Shuijingfang neighbourhood after the Chinese New Year, and their partnership with A4 officially came into being. I left the field in the middle of November, after the opening of the Water System Museum Workshop. While I did not stay in the field for as long as 12 months, the typical length of fieldwork in ethnography to ensure the capture of a complete life circle of the researched, I did witness a complete 'circle' of a project, i.e. from the beginning of a SEA project to its representation in the museum. I continue to follow the consequent effects of the workshop, as well as the artists' and the institution's work, remotely.

During my time in the field, I was both a researcher and a collaborator in most project activities, including work in the community which the artists carried out alone or together with NGOs, scholars and other collaborators; A4's planning meetings; meetings between artists and institution staff; and the organisation of workshops. In particular, I shaped the structure of and contributed to the content of the Water System Museum workshops, which included an exhibition and four sharing sessions with various practitioners.

Stating this position is necessary and relevant, as my position would inevitably influence how my respondents received me and thus had an impact on the data I obtained, despite the open and explorative GTM structure that directed the research. At the same time, while I tried not to be influenced by this thought during the research process, how I approached the material was inevitably influenced by it. As a result, reflecting on my own position is a constant reflexive process employed throughout the research.

Researching through doing things together with SEA, museum staff and communities helped me in particular to recognise individual differences among what looked like monolithic groups, such as an artists' collective and a museum. It enabled more dynamic data collection. Some of the most surprising observations and arguments of this research came out of such a context. I employed photography as a documentation method of SEA, facilitating both the artists' and my research process, as well as an approach to being part of the project. Last but not least, having the camera at hand provided a comfortable position for me to be part of 'the artists' team' to observe their work without having to give opinions all the time, as I preferred to see how the project was carried out without my active interference. I later realised that these photographs are filled with my personal interpretation and manipulation, so I became more cautious in using them, adding more notes.

Interview is another method used in the research activities. 'Interviews are, by their nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts' (Rapley 2004: 16). Interviews were firstly used as information sources and I conducted content analysis to answer the questions I set. At the same time, interviews presented research topics that facilitated the GTM research process, such as how curators and artists constructed their subjectivities, the messages they wanted to convey, and how and when they did so. As Rapley (2004: 16) suggests, 'you should analyse what actually happened — how your interaction produced that

trajectory of talk, how specific versions of reality are co-constructed, how specific identities, discourses and narratives are produced.' I conducted some interviews on-line, some over the phone, but mostly in person. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 120 minutes. In the conversations, whenever I found relevant, I offered my opinions for comparison. I seconded what Rapley (2004) championed as engaged and collaborative forms of interviewing, which argues that interviews should be focusing on interaction. Engaged interviewing facilitated the research process by helping me establishing long-term relationships with respondents, as well as by providing opportunities to clarity and test ideas with respondents.

In doing interview, in addition to analysing the conditions of interviews and their verbal and non-verbal contents, the researcher is also advised to constantly review interview questions and structures, which provides a foundation for further analysis of the researcher's presumptions, disciplinary biases and expectations.

Other approaches of participant observation applied in this study include having formal exchanges with my respondents. Firstly, as a researcher from a museum studies background, I was often seen as a colleague by my respondents, especially in the ethnographic field work. A constant concern of Cao and Chen from their experiences in working with institutions is how they can use institutions more effectively in addressing issues emerging from their site-specific SEA projects, instead of merely presenting their practices. This corresponded to my pursuit of the possibilities of institutional work, which they identified immediately in my first Email to them. As a result, while I was a researcher and observer in their project, I was seen as a critical friend and colleague from the very beginning in their SEA practices, especially in their endeavour to tap the potential of institutional collaboration. I inevitably would be approached to offer my opinions while observing and discussing SEA and museum practices. Secondly, I collaborated with artists and curators on forums and workshops to test ideas,

create opportunities for curating SEA activities to get rich data on issues my research concerns, such as how artists transform their practices in various curatorial occasions and the consideration of curators. For example, I began to have email conversations with Nikita Choi Yingqian at the Times Museum, Guangzhou, since May 2015 about the organisation and themes of a forum she would hold on artistic research in September 2015. I conducted interviews with the artists I was working with and tried to understand their perception of the forum. In this process, I became more aware of Nikita's strategies in engaging with SEA, and how artists positioned themselves in this context, which enriched my theories.

For most of the projects and institutions I researched in this study, I managed to establish continual communication throughout the research process. For example, I was in various WeChat groups where artists, participants and curators discussed their work. These conversations were particularly useful in the ethnographic research; I was able to follow the projects through on-line communications and phone calls. At the same time, curators and artists of many projects would copy me in to their Email discussions on the project or forward E-mails to me.

Long-term engagement with projects and multiple interviews on the same project have brought to the surface different dynamics of a project. The use of ethnography further strengthened my capacity to examine the multiple dimensions of SEA and curatorial practices. It created more space to see what was not articulated in words and not realised in the final artworks. In addition, long-term observation, as well as working together with artists, community participants and curators, offered more opportunities to clarify and test ideas.

In the field
Constrained by space I will not tell a detailed ethnographic story. However, I feel it necessary to draw a sketch of it to delineate the field relations and the process of knowledge production and further address the issue of reflexivity.

The first days were hectic, filled with many fresh faces, traces of solidarity as well as intense debates, delicate gallery buildings and derelict countryside houses, high-rise buildings in the city centre and shanty dwellings behind them. I was astonished by the diverse networks surrounding the artists' work — not only museum practitioners, architects, anthropologists, but also government officials — and the devotion the artists had to their work. Most importantly, I had a direct experience of the way they interacted with different communities, which was much stronger than the impression I had got from pictures, exhibition documentation and other media. When I arrived in Chengdu in late March 2015, the artists had been working in the Shuijingfang neighbourhood in the city centre of Chengdu for half a year and a few residents had already expressed interest in working with the artists to develop their projects. We met Ms. Gong, a key figure throughout the project, for the first time, on the second day after I arrived. Within twenty days we had met her a few times at Ms. Gong's home, at the artists' studio, and in the neighbourhood where she used to live.

The impressions I developed in the first days lay the groundwork for analysing some crucial aspects in understanding the artists' work — the artists usually first connected their project theme with individual endeavours, and then work with participating individuals to develop strategies that address personal concerns as well as engage a broader public. The artists were not easily influenced by emotions and they were able to separate project goals and emotional responses clearly.

I then began my eight-month journey with the artists in Shuijingfang and several other sites, as well as in their studio, and had hour long discussions nearly every day on current practices as well as practices in the past. Constant discussions not only brought back memories of the past and shed new light on them, but also enhanced my understanding of the features of the artists' work, especially the connection between their personal stories and the differences in their strategies, for which I always felt grateful as such

conversations could not be planned beforehand. In addition, I obtained more knowledge about how the artist duo negotiated with each other and made agreements or different decisions. These negotiations emerged through emotional outbursts and heated debates over drinks and in late-night taxis. As Fontana and Frey (1994: 373-4) suggest, 'as we treat the other as human being, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about the other.'

There were also anxieties. Firstly, as the artists had been working in the field for a long time, they had a good command of sociological and anthropological knowledge on the topics that interested them. While I had prepared myself for their research before the fieldwork, I still did not always feel well equipped to give immediate responses in many conversations. Secondly, sometimes when artists had moved on to think about the next step of work, I was still lingering on remarks made by certain community collaborators, and there were times when I found it difficult to identify with the artists' strategies. I knew I was not able to give a logical explanation to my responses and come up with an immediate analytical framework right away, so I would take notes and write down my thoughts immediately for further analysis.

For A4, my research in SEA and museum studies helped greatly in establishing a trusting relationship. Over eight years' work, the institution came to identify a strategy that emphasised the relevance of their work to Chengdu, as well as to the changes taking place in the contemporary art scene in China generally. They had worked with several SEA artists and had a thirst for new ideas, new resources, and new connections. As a result, they were willing to share their ideas with me. I was introduced to the chief curator Li Jie in a gallery activity that he and the two artists both attended. Then I paid formal visits to the Director Sun Li and Li Jie in the following weeks. I refined my questions for them as I gained more and more local knowledge through interacting with various curators and local artists after I

arrived in Chengdu. I was given permission to visit the institution and the staff at any time as long as my visit would not interrupt their work. I usually made appointments with one of the staff members before my visits, sometimes having formal interviews or just sitting in some of the meetings. In addition, I was granted access to internal archives, including meeting minutes, yearbooks, activity pamphlets and communications between the institution and its funding company. I also attended exhibition talks, forums and other activities A4 organised to map the institution's directions and the messages they wanted to convey to the public.

The quality of communication improved overtime, which concerns the intensity of conversation and how able I was to make connections to map out relations and positions and ask meaningful questions. For example, as I worked more and more frequently with artists and curators, I saw more individual differences among its staff and how they negotiated their positions. In addition, just as I need to spend some time to understand the particular languages and lexicons the respondents used, they also needed time to understand my position.

Ethnographic methods also facilitated my research on those who were not champions of SEA or who did not identify with opinions held by practitioners I initially approached. Long-term relationships with various individuals enabled me to understand their concerns more in depth and connect them with local art ecology and social relations. Mutual understanding fostered deep-level exchanges other than official responses. The multiple chances of conversations offered by ethnography added depth to interviews. For example, in one conversation the curator would focus on how his personal life trajectory bred his interest in a certain type of artworks; in another he would focus on the specific perspectives and strategies he used to do research of such artworks. Ethnography also enabled me to observe, digest and then ask more specific questions as the research moved along.

In addition to studying then ongoing projects, I also took chances to study the projects the artists and art institutions worked on before, through having conversations with various individuals, including participating artists, community participants, NGO staff, curators, researchers and so on.

I used video and audio recording to record the interaction and interviews, and made notes for future reference. When it was not possible to take notes immediately, I tried to take notes of the conversations from memory afterwards. I also referred to documentations from other sources, including ethnographers working in the same field, NGO staff, and journalists – anyone who had been part of the artists' projects briefly or for a certain period of time. For instance, during the preparation of the workshop, I encouraged community participants and IYouShe staff to keep a diary of the exhibition preparation process. They provided details that otherwise went unnoticed by me, especially in terms of the observation on community participants and project audiences, and also offered a lens to see the notetakers' concerns.

In addition, I also made notes about what kind of reactions I had towards data and what I relied on to make these judgments. I was aware that my efforts in articulating the strategies might largely be a result of my own theoretical training, which would hinder me from seeing what was really happening. Still, making notes when the memory was fresh provided further opportunities of re-examination.

Every evening, I reflected on a day's work, transcribed my recordings and added them into the field notes for analysis. I made an initial coding of the notes and transcripts. This had two aims: one was to 'provoke new insights into relations among the elements that need memoing promptly' (84), and the other was to pay attention to new things requiring attention, which helped analysis and facilitated further research decision-making, such as new areas to look at and additional data to collect. Within the scope of the ethnography, observation and theory work together, 'modifying original

theoretical statements to fit observations, and seeking observations relevant to the emerging theory' (Emerson 2004: 428). Ethnographic findings were also integrated to the general research framework to achieve systematic data comparison, which directs research activities outside the immediate ethnographic setting (Pettigrew 2000; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001)

Later analysing process

There are various routes to an iterative process of developing emergent categories into paradigms to be analysed. Glaser (1992) considers data as the source of theories and argues that theories should only respond to the immediate field of study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) introduce axial coding, the process of focusing on one coding family and integrating categories around it, which requires researchers to map out the context of categories, as well as the relationships between respondents and the categories, and, in addition, their impact. Situational analysis developed by Clarke (2005) aims at analysing the relations of all human and non-human elements in the situation of concern and articulating various positions and cartographies of actions. According to Clarke (2005: xxxii), '…in addition to studying action [a situation centred approach] also explicitly includes the analysis of the full situation, including discourses—narrative, visual, and historical.'

In the latter stage of my research, I followed Corbin and Strauss' approaches. I developed data collection and analysis based on a particular coding paradigm, i.e. the mutual construction of SEA and art institutions. I made the decision based on the initial research findings and a consideration of obtaining an in-depth research. I developed several analytical categories through my initial research, such as the formation of the concept of SEA in China and key players in the formation of SEA. It turned out that the artists' interactions with art institutions are an important property of these research categories. This was partly because of my sensitivity towards the dynamics between artists and art institutions. There were other crucial areas emerging from my empirical research in relation to this category, such as the

collaborative ground developed by SEA practitioners and NGOs in community art and participatory art. However, delving into these areas would require extra resources and strategies to produce valuable insights, which probably was not realistic during the limited time of the Ph.D. research. While I kept being open to emerging data and themes in various fields, such as the interactions between the NGO and the artists, and conducted observations and interviews when I felt necessary, I needed to focus on the most relevant areas of research, i.e. the intersection of SEA and art institutions.

This study includes sharing analysis as part of its method. Since ending the fieldwork, I have been keen to carry some of the conversations with me. Presenting my research in this way would in itself be research. In seminars, conferences and exhibition conversations with artists, curators, museum professionals and scholars, I have tested my ideas with those who are also concerned with this topic. In addition to identifying the relevance of the research, they also pointed out directions to deepen the research. At the same time, what they communicated through these platforms became an invaluable aspect of the research data. These all help me to ground my arguments and connect them to the problems museums are facing and the directions they are pursuing. Most importantly, they facilitate my understanding of my research interest and develop it in many meaningful ways.

Ethics

Interviews for this research were conducted with the principle of fully informed consent. Individuals were provided with an information sheet before the interview and were informed they were free to withdraw from any stage of the research process. All informants have a copy of my contact details in the event that they wish to withdraw. As most of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, I translated the information sheets and consent forms from English to Chinese, and made sure the informants understand

their meaning. Prior to interviews I asked research informants if they were happy with their voices being recorded.

The research involved discussions of political sensitive topics. I took special care to check with informants to ensure that I did not misinterpret the words of the practitioners and they felt at ease with my research. Confidentiality issue was explained. All data with interviewees who asked to remain anonymous, including notes and digitally recorded material, has been kept on a password protected computer.

Many materials used in this research were collected in the ethnography, including video and audio recordings, notes, photography, memory of conversations and scenes, amongst others. When I was not sure about if my collected materials or memories were correct, I double checked with my informants.

Limitations

Choice of cases

There are practitioners who choose to remain remote from art institutions. There are also projects that identify art institutions as the final destination. For artists who set out on their work with a mind to come back to the gallery space and schedule the projects within a fixed amount of time, gallery space is one of the very important, if not the most important destinations, of their projects. In such case, the exhibitions follow a 'conventional' exhibition logic, where the display and the interpretation of artists' conceptual thinking behind their artworks are the main activities. While fully acknowledging the significance of such work and the actual changes they have achieved, I do not focus my discussions on them considering the scope of the thesis.

The voice of community

One important dimension of this research is practitioners' field relations with community participants, and limited by the scope the research I was not

able to conduct research on participants' voices fully. For example, for my research with the Artists in Transit project in Ciman Village, Yunnan, although I familiarised myself with this project beforehand and was fully immersed in the environment and I was able to observe villagers' attitudes while I was there, the time I spent there was very short (four days). I was not able to have trusted conversations with local villagers and thus missed opportunities to nuance the understanding of community participants' perceptions of exhibition-making. The lens I used to examine artist-participant relationships was largely determined by the project artists. This research, as stated at the very beginning of the thesis, focuses much on artists' and curators' endeavours.

Translation as techniques and analysis

Another limitation of this research concerns translation. My research setting is in People's Republic of China. I used Chinese mostly in daily conversations and interviews, and I used Chinese to transcribe recordings, make notes, analyse data and generate theories. As the research results are presented in English for the Ph.D. degree, when I began writing up, I needed to not only translate transcriptions but also some concepts and categories I developed in the process. There are a couple of particular challenges in this process. First of all, when I do the translations, it is highly likely I import existing theories and their lexicons from English. Secondly, words having similar meanings in different languages may have different nuances and cultural connotations (Schopenhauer 1992 [1800]) that I might not be aware of. Thirdly, the Chinese language can be vague/metaphoric but also convey concrete meanings for Chinese based on the settings the conversations are in. What shall I do when I translate these nuances? Shall I do verbatim translation or shall I translate what is not evident at first glance?

I experimented with the following strategies, which intertwine translation and conceptual analysis and require 'analytical efforts that take place before, in parallel to, or independent of the technical textual translation' (Shklarov

2009). Firstly, my efforts to find working concepts in English were continuous. I always referred to the original Chinese texts when I was writing and revising the thesis, to check if the English conveyed the Chinese accurately at its best. I paid particular attention when I revised my analytical angle, as the way a concept was translated could be totally different as a result of that change.

Secondly, I provided as much as I could of the original Chinese text, the literal English translation of that text and the English expression I think best conveys the Chinese meaning. In addition, I provided a comparison of the different uses of languages if they have a bearing on the topic or on readers' understanding. Actually, as Shklarov (2009) demonstrates, 'revealing differences between linguistic meanings or language structures' facilitates 'the emergence of concepts and theoretical categories.' This is because,

> 'Often it is impossible to express a complex concept in different languages with precise equivalency, and the translator has to settle for the most effective compromise. The settling for a compromise involves elements of theorizing.'

Thirdly, I aimed at conceptual equivalency rather than descriptive accuracy. For instance, in an interview setting when verbatim translations were not enough to demonstrate the implicit meanings which were obvious to me and my respondents in Chinese, I provided extra explanations in my voice.

Theoretical saturation that cannot be achieved

Last but not least, while the aim of GTM is not being representative, the research would have been enriched if I could have incorporated practices from more diverse geographic areas. For example, two emerging themes from the research is the diversity of approaches SEA artists establish with local institutions to combine art with multiple needs. These institutions have different missions and collaborators. While it is not difficult to obtain

information about their activities, I did not have a chance to further investigate the role they play locally, especially in the geographically remote area, where art facilities are less advanced. Grounded theory is always provisional and there are always emergent findings to develop the theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 40). I hope my research can stimulate future research in this area.

Chapter 3 From outside to inside: institution as process of socially engaged art

Introduction

This chapter addresses an ontological concern of SEA and defines institution ground as a constitutive element of SEA. Curating SEA generates many interesting experiments that cannot be easily pinned down. There are new 'artworks' per se being made on the institutional ground, such as conceptual works that reflect artists' thinking of their projects; arrangements of documents, videos, and other materials are also given much attention; at the same time, new initiations and curatorial strategies that use the institutional ground to facilitate projects are emerging, which this project pays particular attention to. How artists consider the exhibition ground is associated with their strategies in the sites where their projects operate, including ethical considerations. At the same time, the objectives of socially engaged art projects may vary at different stages, and artists may position themselves differently about diverse exhibitions, including considering questions of whether to work with art institutions at all.

I argue that curatorial practice is a constitutive element of SEA and an irreplaceable source for understanding SEA; researching SEA exhibitions provides insight on curators' and artists' motivations and institutional conditions and can illuminate the distinct agendas and effects on audiences that these projects generate. I expound this idea through three dimensions.

The first dimension interrogates ambitions generated specifically on the institutional ground — to achieve institutional change and to develop a critical voice for contemporary art in China, which are often shared by art institutions and SEA artists, establishing an open ground for the two sides to interact.

The second dimension investigates new creations on the institutional ground that add to the original projects outside institutions. On the one hand, interactions between SEA and art institutions have an impact on projects outside institutions and cause changes in those projects. On the other hand, institutions become a place of initiating new projects that are associated with projects in the original sites. What artists try to achieve, is a redistribution of time, to maximise the time of action and minimise the time of representation.

The third dimension examines artists' considerations on the relationship between what takes place on the institutional ground and the projects outside. I argue that such considerations are inseparable from artists' understanding of what is effective for their projects.

Because of the discursive and dialogical nature of SEA, understanding SEA is something that cannot be realised easily. Examining them via curatorial work is perhaps a useful way forward.

Dimension 1: motivations of turning to socially engaged art — changing institutional motivations and individual endeavours

While most contemporary art exhibitions still occur within the realm of private art museums, the cultural influence and economic benefits contemporary art can bring have made it more and more visible in public institutions. On the one hand, public institutions interact with contemporary art in various forms, such as holding lectures and organising events. Shanghai Biennale in the Shanghai Art Museum in 2000 is a representative case, which marked the beginning of the official support for contemporary

art. At the same time, there are also publicly funded, or state enterprise-funded art museums, such as the Power Station of Art in Shanghai established in 2012. In addition to the efforts of independent curators and advocates of experimental art within state organisations, on the policy level, with the promulgation of *Regulation on Museums* (Chinalawinfo 2015) in March 2015 and the *Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law of the People's Republic of China* (Chinalawinfo 2017) in March 2017, state museums have been placing more value on their cultural services, in addition to collection care. There is also an increasing pressure of state-funded museums to diversify their funding sources and reduce their dependency on state support. For example, *Regulation on Museums* put forward by the State Council (2015) in 2015 proposes that foundations and other channels should support the development of museums; museums should enhance their capacity and sustainability by working with culture industry, tourism industry and other relevant industries to develop innovative products; and relying on government funding alone is not sufficient to fully make use of the collections.

SEA, with the possibilities of sociability it brings and as a useful route to communicate ideas of contemporary art, is a welcome idea. For instance, the community-focused image of SEA can make up for the lack of presence of art institutions in communities, especially in the physical space outside museums. At the same time, working with SEA artists can diversify museums' programmes and help museums attract audiences, especially young audiences. The multidisciplinary nature of SEA and the wide network in which their work not only connects museums with the social sectors that they normally would not be in touch with, but also provides museums with new perspectives, especially in education, pushing these institutions to engage with society at a deeper level. For example, Zhejiang Art Museum invited scholar and artist Wu Mali to conduct a public art project where participants discussed their views on marriage. A documentary was made on

this.[37] It can be said nowadays the environment for contemporary art is friendly, although there are priorities in the 'type' of art public institutions engage with (Xiong 2016; Welland 2018).[38]

Among private institutions, a turn to SEA also includes an increased focus on audiences, at least in terms of curatorial discourses[39] and the growing inclusion of audiences in the exhibition space, through interactive exhibitions, time-based curating where the participation of audiences constitutes and facilitates a project, and an increasing emphasis on education (Liu 2013; Hong 2014). This is a response to the changing funding situations and national policies and to changes brought by diversified artistic approaches.

Wu (2001) stated nearly two decades ago that there was no precedent to non-profit private institutions in Chinese history, nor were institutions in China based on any specific Western art museums funded by private foundations and donations. As China did not have a philanthropic tradition of funding public art, and no sophisticated tax law was available to help attract private donations to support art, to operate a non-commercial gallery requires originality and dedication. Contemporary art institutions in mainland China, from its inception, have had commercial companies as the major supporters, among which the real estate companies and financial companies are the leading force. The earliest private art institutions appeared in the late 1990s. Without an independent legal status or external founding sources, they depended entirely on the founding companies' input. When the companies' business went down, the support institutions got

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[37] Interview with Li Wen from the education department, 16 June 2015, Hangzhou.
[38] While there is no uniform cultural policy in place in order to facilitate local strengths in different areas in China, and while creative workers seem to have much room for experimentation, the central government remains its control on cultural policy (Keane 2013; White and Xu 2012), through restricting sensitive contents, emphasising economic values and strengthening central administration of art organisations.
[39] For instance, the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai and the Shanghai Project, Shanghai Himalayas Museum co-organised 'People's Forum' to discuss issues associated with audience engagement. See more at http://www.rockbundartmuseum.org/en/event/overview/25bcoxm, accessed 9 June 2017.

become limited. For this reason, even though many institutions were named as museums, they needed to rely on renting out spaces or selling exhibited works to gain revenue. When companies become more cautious in recent years in terms of their input, institutional practitioners face the need to diversify their sources of funding, such as through establishing foundations, gaining non-for-profit status to receive tax relief and familiarising themselves of funding schemes and sponsorships home and abroad (Luo and Fu 2018).

Policy support, such as the recent implementation of the Charity Law (National People's Congress 2016) which provides guidance for non-for-profit organisation to fund raising, is slowly taking shape. The first contemporary art institution that registered with the Bureau of Civil Affairs and gained the non-for-profit status is the Today Art Museum[40] in Beijing in 2006. Before that, private museums were all registered as museum companies. As the registration rules for different cities/regions are different and are not always publicly available, art institutions often need to find out by themselves how to gain a non-for-profit status and what conditions and terms it means. It is still difficult for private museums to get donations, as the tax exemption a donor can get is limited. Besides support from the founding company, sponsorship and gradually ticket sales are important sources of income (Zhang 2018).

In terms of government support, while private museums are not directly administered by state organisations, such as the Ministry of Culture and Provincial Departments of Culture, are involved in the work of many private institutions through funding projects, giving awards, and project

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[40] The Today Art Museum was established in 2002 and at its first five years, it was only Zhang Baoquan, the founder of the museum and the Jindian Group, the real estate company behind the museum, supporting the museum financially. It has experimented on various ways of generating revenues, including establishing foundations, finding sponsors, renting out space for exhibitions and commercial activities, conducting publishing services and running a bookshop.

collaboration. As a result, criteria listed in national evaluation guidelines for art museums, such as social impact, public education and public cultural service[41] are useful for private institutions as these criteria are directly linked to the support the museums can receive from the government, in terms of exchange, training, and funding. A few spots also are reserved for projects of private institutions in the annual Support Programme for Art Museum Projects organised by the Ministry of Culture. For example, in 2011, nine out of a total of 28 exhibition projects supported by the programme were directly associated with contemporary art. Among them were projects developed by the private institutions Beijing Today Art Museum, Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum, OCAT Shenzhen, and Guangdong Times Museum. At the same time, education programmes in contemporary art institutions, such as the 'Mobile Art Museum: Contemporary Art in Communities' in the Shanghai Himalaya Museum, were also recognised by official awards. With the decline of industries such as real estate, one of the main investors of contemporary art institutions, and fewer resources feeding into art institutions, private museums also crave public recognition to diversify their funding sources in a precarious funding climate.[42] While it is far from the reality that art institutions have been transformed to audience-centred spaces, audiences and their needs have become a discourse that is increasingly valued by institutions.

These approaches to gain wider recognition not only draw more funding for art institutions, but also put them at a position where they have to be more and more open to public scrutinisation. By competing with projects put forward by state institutions, private art institutions need to answer more questions of accountability other than addressing the usual circle of contemporary art audiences. For instance, in 2017, Today Art Museum

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[41] See, for example, *Evaluation Criteria and Measures of National Key Art Museums* put forward by the Ministry of Culture in 2014 (http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2015/content_2818472.htm, accessed 26 September 2017).
[42] For instance, some local bureaus of the Ministry of Culture, such as Beijing Cultural Bureau, support private museums by awarding excellent exhibitions and public programmes (http://zhengce.beijing.gov.cn/library/192/33/50/438650/98941/index.html, accessed 7 August 2017).

applied funding from the China National Arts Fund and Beijing Culture and Arts Fund. The former is regulated under the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance, and the later by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Municipal Finance Bureau of Beijing. The final round of selection involved an oral exam where the director, the curators and the financial officers all needed to attend to present the cases and to answer questions from the jury, including the academic value, practical operation and potentials of education of the projects (Zhang 2018).

Also embedded in this strong motivation of contemporary art institutions in establishing a sustainable development model is a pursuit of finding a voice in contemporary art in China. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the key question for art practitioners in China was how to establish a mechanism to support the exhibiting of experimental art and to negotiate with official channels (Wu 2001; Jia 2013). After space was no longer the major issue, art institutions needed to address the evaluation of quality and to take into account more elements than successfully opening an exhibition, including asking the question of what directions to take. 'How to establish a critical academic direction' and 'how to find a path when a professional mechanism has not yet established' have been a common topic many institutions needed to address. The act of naming and historicising SEA is closely related to the institution-making process, demonstrating the ambitions of institutions in proposing meaningful topics. The attributes of SEA, i.e. its interrogation of the significance and possibilities of art in the present day, its social concern and so on, are of academic interest to many institutions nowadays.

Institutions also work with freelance curators whose research focuses on SEA. One crucial role, if not the most prominent role, of curators, is making criticisms and defining critical historical moments, and freelance curators are an important source of making propositions in relation to SEA in exhibitions. For instance, Bao Dong, the curator of both exhibitions 'Positive

Space' (29 March – 4 May 2014, the Times Museum, Guangdong)[43] and 'ON|OFF: China's Young Artists in Concept & Practice' (13 January – 14 April 2013, the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing),[44] spent much of his time with artists and were updated with many SEA artists' thinking, which enabled him to quickly identify changes in art-making and point out their significance in relation to art history and to society. 'Positive Space' was based on his research on self-organised artists' organisations that emerged after 2008. 'ON|OFF', including projects by 50 artists, or artist collectives, came from his knowledge of artists of the post-70s and post-80s generation. When opportunities arose where he could work with art institutions, he could transform his research in exhibitions. [45] Not defined nor burdened by an institutional identity, freelance curators can connect SEA with prominent issues in art institutions, such as the issues of dialogues between artists, publics, and the exhibition spaces. In the Young Curator Project of Power Station of Art in Shanghai, curator Zhang Hanlu (2016), talked about her proposal for the project

> We do not want to do a 'passive' exhibition whose only mission is to be "looked at". We want an active exhibition like a game…A question we always talk about is how to do an exhibition which won't die after its opening. Most exhibitions are very lively at their openings, but their life end after the openings. The strategy we think of was to do a weekly reading club. It is not necessarily books; it can be a social incident, a work sharing session… During the exhibition we invited an artist every week, except for the Spring Festival.'

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[43] For more information, please see http://en.timesmuseum.org/exhibitions/detail/id-327/, accessed 2 April 2016.

[44] For more information, please see http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/chinas-young-artists-concept-practice/, accessed 2 April 2016.

[45] Email interview with Bao Dong. 12 February 2016.

The freshness and energy of SEA and the many active individuals involved in them not only provide academic value to large institutions with a strong background, for emerging institutions of a smaller scale, they also provide an opportunity for institutions to find their voice in curatorial experiments. An overview of exhibitions of new art institutions in recent year reveals an increasing interest in SEA. In their search for development strategies, art institutions, especially experimental spaces where curators have a close relationship with local artists, are not satisfied with merely presenting works or creating exchange platforms for artists, but aim to play a more active role in working along with artists and the shaping of art projects. The evolving and collaborative nature of SEA enables multiple conversations between curators and artists to take place. For instance, Ni Kun, curator of Organhaus Art Space, an independent art organisation in Chongqing dedicated to experimental art,[46] explains his motivation in working with SEA artists in recent years as a means to increase the institution's curatorial role:

> Back in 2010, our space had already achieved the goal we set when we were first became established in 2001, i.e. to showcase experimental works and to establish a channel between local artists and international artists. So we began to think, what else shall we do? In a place where there is nothing going on, anything you do will be valued, but we need to be critical of ourselves. We began to think about the role we can play. In addition to being a platform for showing good practices, we also wanted to initiate projects and make projects.[47]

At the same time, institutional strategies could conflict with the principles held by SEA projects. This is evident in a collaboration between Art Praxis and Ni Kun from Organhaus. During the artist collective's Kunshan Project in 2011, the curator suggested a collaboration and brought a few local artists

[46] See http://www.organhaus.com/, accessed 6 May 2014.
[47] Interview with Ni Kun. 2 June 2015, Chongqing.

from Chongqing whom he thought were suitable to work with Art Praxis on this project. The new artists stayed in Kunshan Village for ten days, culminating in a day-long artist-led workshop with local villagers, including sports activities and a barter market (Art Praxis 2011: 67-87).[48]

While recognising Organhaus' facilitation of their work in terms of experimenting with collaborative approaches of working, Cao and Chen were uncomfortable with the workshop, especially the little time it allowed for the new artists, who 'parachuted' into Kunshan Village, to familiarise themselves with the village. The short period was meant to allow quick, fresh exchange of views and artistic production; however, for the artists, it caused misunderstandings with the villagers and affected the relationship Art Praxis had slowly developed over a long time with the villagers,

> Of course, looking back, you can always justify in what respect such workshops helped push forward our practice. But the situation of the village on that day was not pleasant at all. For example, villagers did not understand why artists would waste grains to make artworks... Many left when some of us threw a noisy party and began to tell dirty jokes... You immediately know you do not want similar things to happen again.[49]

This conflict was not something that could be foreseen. In the beginning, both sides had the good intention to further their practices in the process. It is not easy to bring to light the debate, for various reasons, as the artists also

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[48] According to Ni Kun: 'I think this is the way art practice is supposed to be. When a practice develops into a certain stage, new people should come in, and the way you work needs to be different each time.' Interview with Ni Kun. 2 June 2015, Chongqing.
[49] Interview with Cao and Chen. 22 May 2015, Chengdu.

faced the pressures of professionalism and they might still identify the workshop as 'the second stage' of their project.[50]

As the above case demonstrates, institutional practitioners not only regard SEA as a study object, but also actively work with artists to shape a project. The level of the participation of institutional practitioners vary; how specific individuals in institutions identify key issues for their work and navigate among institutional and local complexities, decides the level of experimentation, and what project to work with and how. Towards the more active end of the spectrum, institutional practitioners use SEA as an approach to change institutional practices. When a curator identifies with the agenda of an SEA artist and finds a path to integrate the artists' agenda into his or her pursuits, the purpose of action can be very evident. For instance, Man Yu, the former curator at Xi'an Art Museum, was the core member of Floor #2 Press, a non-profit publishing group and the organiser of 'Six Rings are One More than Five' ('5+1'). '5+1' is a project inviting artists to carry out research in administrative villages between the 5th Ring Road and the 6th Ring Road in Beijing, an area largely occupied by migrant workers in addition to local residents. The project aims to present the complexities of the issues in these areas, such as the lack of infrastructure, and provide information for further investigation.[51] When Man took up the role of the Deputy Director and Curator of Xi'An Art Museum in December 2014, he decided to take up curatorial strategies which make the Museum respond to local issues. His main approach is initiating experimental projects and events where artists are mobilised to engage with local issues and produce visual forms of 'report' in exhibitions. As someone who is an SEA practitioner himself, Man is prepared to engage with the experiments and flexibility SEA projects require. In July 2015, artist Liu Weiwei made a documentary in Xi'an about local taxi drivers' struggles in protecting their

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[50] The official English name proposed by Ni Kun is 'Village Politics Being Watched'. The Chinese name is '昆山在造', the literal translation of which is 'Kunshan under-construction'. Here I use the latter one as it is more frequently used in the Chinese context.

[51] For further information, see http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1432240, accessed 16 May 2016.

labour rights and their self-organised company. Working with Man Yu, the artist held a public screening of the documentary at the Xi'an Art Museum, inviting the drivers and other members of the public to discuss the issue. For an institution known for Chinese painting and calligraphy, this is something quite unusual.

Three key factors facilitated the curation of this social issue-centred exhibition in a traditional institution: one is that Man Yu was a new member of staff in this museum, and the more traditional-minded crew did not immediately realise the activist idea in Man's initiation of the project and did not realise so many people would attend. Secondly, Man used tactics of ambiguity in the language of the planning of the project to his fellow colleagues and to announce project events through public platforms; thirdly, when the screening and discussion were interrupted by the arrival of two police cars, Man persuaded the director of the museum not to drive audiences out.[52]

Man Yu worked with Liu Weiwei not because he was particularly interested in the issue of taxi drivers, but because he considered that Liu's approach to addressing local issues also addresses his concern in making the Xi'an Art Museum more relevant to the local community, which is the core motivation for Man to take risks.[53] For Man, the Museum was only a container of beautiful forms of works but was not interacting with the spirits of artists who were creating these works. For instance, woodcut was a tool used by artists in the early 20th century to fight against imperialism and government corruption; for Man, only exhibiting woodcut works and demonstrating their techniques, without thinking art's relevance in today's society and the museum' position, is a superficial way to interpret works. By working with

[52] Interview with Man Yu, 15 April 2017, Shenzhen.
[53] Man resigned after the exhibition. The museum reaffirmed its stance in traditional arts and rejected the idea of reform.

artists such as Liu Weiwei, Man hoped to build the connection between art and society.[54]

This rare case of artist-curator collaboration demonstrates the important role curators' endeavours can play in formulating and sustaining an SEA project in an institutional arena, and how SEA in turn can help shape an institution's goal and move it forward. In cases studied in this project that are at the lesser active end of the institution-artist collaboration spectrum, the interaction between curators and artists focused mainly on design, logistics and other practicalities; if artists wanted to enact site-specific work, they often needed to take the initiative and address problems brought about by the limited support institutions can offer. It should be noted that sometimes, the absence of an institutional role can provide much flexibility and room for creativity, as the following case analysis will demonstrate. This is not only for exhibitions that are oriented towards making new works, but also for exhibitions that are retrospective, which summarise and analyse past practices.

It is difficult to evaluate different approaches of working. While in public institutions, messages of SEA might tend to less obvious[55], exposure in a context outside the usual critical art sphere can bring diverse perspectives and drives practitioners to see their practice from different viewpoints. While private spaces might give more freedom to artistic experiments, sometimes institutional practitioners' ideas can be so strong that they are in opposition

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[54] Interview with Man. April 2017.Shenzhen.

[55] For instance, an examination of the texts in relation to state institution presentations reveal that, the language used is milder. In contemporary art institutions, the languages often focus on larger political agenda, such as anti-neoliberalism. For instance, World Factory by Shanghai-based theatre collective Grass Stage, a 2014 play about Chinese workers and global capitalism, has been invited by many art institutions. In state art museums, the description contents are often brief and do not go to details about how the play drew inspirations from struggles within China. While in private museums, texts directly speak to the power relations and the political agency of the play. A look at the texts of its presentation in two museums reveal this difference. In OCAT Shenzhen, the title is 'Social Factory – theatre as social research and social practice' (http://www.ocat.org.cn/index.php/Exhibition/?aid=351, accessed 3 April 2017); In Zhejiang Art Museum, it was presented as a theatre progamme titled 'Play: Social Factory' with very brief introduction (https://www.zjam.org.cn/Site/news/2016/002/001252.shtml, accessed 3 April 2017).

to what an SEA project is for. For artists examined in this research, the major idea is how to use different space strategically, and what issues of their projects and the institutions will be addressed through this process. These will be further explored in Chapter 4. It should also be noted that institutional goals change over time, and the agendas of institutions' engagement with SEA also change, which will have an impact on what is achieved. I will use the example of A4 Contemporary Arts Centre (now A4 Art Museum), a key case in this project, to illustrate this point.

When A4 was established in 2008, it was named A4 Gallery. The Chinese suggests commercial activities, though the institution has focused on non-profit activities since its inception and has never represented artists to sell artworks. It positions itself as an exhibition and research space, a non-collection institution. It changed its name to A4 Contemporary Arts Centre in 2010 and then A4 Art Museum in 2016 following the institution'sexpansion, with an ambition to further professionalise their curatorial and educational work.[56] A4 was initiated and funded by Chengdu Wanhua Investment Group Co., Ltd., a local real estate enterprise. Both A4 Art Museum and its predecessor, A4 Contemporary Arts Centre, sit on the south side of the city, 22.5 km away from the city centre of Chengdu, in a high-end residential community developed by Chengdu Wanhua Investment Group Co., Ltd, with 1823 m² of and 3500 m² respectively. Like many other private art institutions in China, A4 was established without clear directions and has been modifying its strategies through constant experiments and reflection. Slowly, they identified two key aims for organising exhibitions and other events — establishing a connection between the institution and the city, and bringing excellent practices to Chengdu.[57] The curators develop

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[56] Curator Li Jie talked about the museum's plans in an recent interview, 'In the next five years, we hope to build A4 into one of China's leading contemporary art museums with an international vision and community reach, coupled with a strong professional research and public education capacity. It will certainly follow the direction of international collaboration. At the same time, we will establish a new and improved academic and educational program structure. Finally, we will launch the research and production of art projects in public spaces, outside of the art gallery context' (Tang and Wang 2015).

[57] Talking about A4's position in Chengdu and China generally, Director Sun Li once commented, 'We are in Chengdu, but Chengdu is not the only place we are responding to… A4 plays a specific role in connecting

artist case studies, international residency programmes, and programmes dedicated to local young artists' experiments appropriate to these aims. Education has been given paramount importance, seen by the institution as a useful approach to connect itself to the city's residents.

The motivations of A4 for interacting with SEA are rooted in these ideas. Firstly, a focus on local artists' developments and transformations drove the curators to pay attention to SEA that emerged in recent years. Secondly, SEA provides additional dimensions to the institution's existing education and engagement programmes, which usually takes a 'teaching style' through lectures, and focuses primarily on children, represented by its annual Children's Art Festival,[58] and university students. SEA provides a more interactive approach, valuing individual input and creating unexpected results. This attention on SEA is consolidated by the institution's mission to respond to the issue of a lack of communication between institutions and publics manifested in the development history of contemporary art institutions in China. Director Sun Li commented on the potential of A4's support on SEA in facilitating the institution's connection with the public:

> We have always been paying attention to the collaboration between our institution and other actors in the society, an important aspect of which is to build up, in the gallery space, the close relationship artists and publics often have in the social sites.[59]

A4 also grounds its attention on SEA in the history of Chengdu art's intervention into the society and identifies one of its missions is to respond to local artistic practices. For example, in 1995, Betsy Damon, an American

Chengdu with outside art scenes. In addition, we convey a message to local artists: we are not having and cannot just have dialogues among ourselves; we are working together with artists in Shanghai and Beijing in the same environment' (http://www.chinaluxus.com/20121228/255746.html, accessed 28 July 2016).
[58] See http://www.a4am.cn/website/activity_info/id/56/nid/913, accessed 28 July 2016.
[59] Interview with Sun Li. 24 April 2015, Chengdu.

artist, initiated 'Keepers of the Waters' public art project in Chengdu, with the local and national Chinese artists and American artists, to invite discussion of the protection of the local Fuhe River and Nanhe River and contribute to the local government's river renovation project.[60] At the same time, Chengdu's art scene makes a strong point of practices not taking place in the exhibition halls, with groups of artists labelled as street artists and shengtai yishujia/ecological artist, who conduct works in streets based on social issues.[61] Performance art, which at different times have been suppressed by official guidance, has a strong hold in Chengdu. The Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts is a pioneer in integrating the teaching of performance art in its courses in 2012. Many key figures of performance artists work in this city, and there are exhibitions, festivals and media attention dedicated to such work, which is rare to see in other cities. Performance art's stress on art's interaction with audiences at common places, with a concern for public issues, is not an unfamiliar topic for many Chengdu citizens. What relevance does this history have for today? What changes have taken place in artists' practices and why?'[62] For these reasons, A4 makes SEA one of the institution's research focus, expecting the changes it could bring to contemporary art practices and institutional practice, as Curator Li Jie explains,

> I think they [Cao and Chen] still need to do a lot to get to the core of such practice. However, what they have done offers a valuable lens for us to examine contemporary Chinese artists' change, from working within the confinement of the mega art historical narrative to exploring their own working methodology. Many SEA artists and projects work in groups, which provides an opportunity to leverage the current personal

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[60] Three years later, Damon worked with the local government on designing and constructing a Living Water Garden in Chengdu, the first inner city water-themed ecological garden. For more information, see http://www.keepersofthewaters.org/Proj06ArtP2012.cfm; http://www.keepersofthewaters.org/Proj05LWG2012.cfm; http://www.awallproject.net/index.php, accessed 28 July 2016.
[61] For example, see Zha (1998), Gao (2008b) and Chen (2014).
[62] Interview with Li Jie. 22 May 2015, Chengdu.

worship model of the contemporary art market in China. In addition, I pay attention to them not because they are socially engaged artists, but because they are experiencing such changes. As an art institution, our working methodology with such artists needs to be changed too. For example, we have developed a regular program '7-day Workshop', where artists form temporary collectives to address new issues based on common interests, the results of which is often a surprise. These working methodologies come from working with artists like Cao and Chen.[63]

Assistant Curator Cai Liyuan adds that the institution's continual support of SEA reflect that the institution has a focused research direction, which is closely related to the institution identity,

If you work with an artist not only today, but also tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, then people start to appreciate the development of depth in the research. It would be different from doing everything a bit. It shows that the institution's research is developing and long-term… To have a clear direction is very difficult, as an institution needs to respond to different needs, but I think it is necessary. It is extremely important for an art institution in China today to know what you want, your characteristics, and your research area, especially when you have a wealth of resources.[64]

They have held several public forums with various practitioners and worked with a few SEA artists in delivering public engagement activities.[65] The institution also takes its expansion in 2016 as strategic, making SEA one of the institution's direction and planning to develop programming on Asia's

[63] Interview with Li Jie. 28 April 2015, Chengdu.
[64] Interview with Cai Liyuan. 25 May 2015, Chengdu.
[65] For example, in 2013, A4 invited Cao and Chen to give a talk in 2013 on their progress on WSP; in 2014, artists Wu Chao and Xia Weilun worked with A4 in delivering a workshop on emotions; and the first forum after the institution expanded its space in early 2016 was on SEA.

SEA projects.[66] Similar with A4, SEA is one of the directions many institutions hold onto in their professionalisation process.

Dimension 2: beyond representation — the impulse of actions and undefined creations

Figure 3.4 Conversations between Na Yingyu and Li Mu, performance 'Cast Accounts (Qiuzhuang Project)' at am art space, Shanghai, 28/12/2013. Photograph provided by Li Mu.

[66] Interview with Li Jie. 1 September 2015, Chengdu.

Figure 3.5 Conversations between Na Yingyu and Li Mu, performance 'Cast Accounts (Qiuzhuang Project)' at am art space, Shanghai, 28/12/2013. Photograph provided by Li Mu.

Figure 3.6 Conversations between Na Yingyu and Li Mu, in a poplar forest north of Qiuzhuang Village, 05/07/2013. Photograph provided by Li Mu.

For an hour in the evening of 28 December 2013, at am art space,[67] Li Mu and Na Yingyu sat opposite each other, with some beers on the table between them, and had a conversation on the budget of Qiuzhuang Project, a long-term art project by Li Mu in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands.[68] In his hometown, Qiuzhuang Village, Jiangsu Province, Li and the villagers copied artworks by Western artists like Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Richard Long, Andy Warhol, and John Kormeling from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum and displayed them in the houses and streets of Qiuzhuang. The project was still going on when the performance took place at am space. In the performance, Li and Na went through the recent budget items of the project one by one. Next to them was a screen showing pictures from the project. At the same time, Yu Ji, curator of am space, transcribed the accounts of the Qiuzhuang project expenditure with colour chalks on the wall.

Several months before the performance, on 5 July 2013, in a poplar forest north of Qiuzhuang Village, Li and Na were talking about the progress of the Qiuzhuang Project, how it is or it is not a 'spectacle' for villagers, and villagers' understanding of the project. Actually, conversations like this often took place between Li and his friends during the more than one year length of the project (2013-2014).[69]

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[67] Am Art Space is an artist-run space in Shanghai that focuses on experimental art and residency programmes (http://www.amspacesh.com/, accessed 5 June 2017).

[68] Qiuzhuang Project is an art project in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, the Netherlands. The art-making process, including setting up a village library, took over 13 months and finished in February, 2014. These works gradually disappeared for various reasons. For example, wooden replica of Richard Long's work was used as firewood by villagers; village officials asked villagers to take down replica of Andy Warhol's *Mao* otherwise they would be punished; and installations of Dan Flavin's light works were dismantled in the demolition work that took place in the village in May, 2016.

[69] Li Mu's blog documents the transcripts of conversations he has with his friends (http://www.iamlimu.org/blogview.asp?logID=260, accessed 5 June 2017). Different from Cao and Chen, who were dedicated to community-based SEA and labelled themselves as such, Li does not regard himself as a SEA specific artist, carrying out a variety of art projects and working with different art institutions.

This case is a demonstration of using curation to facilitate an ongoing project, by actually doing part of the accounting work of the Qiuzhuang Project in the gallery space. The action is 'accidental' rather than planned. When Li Mu got the invitation, they had an impulse to do something about the Qiuzhuang project, as they were devoted to the project at that time. However, they thought at the beginning that the predetermined form of the work, i.e. a performance, is not suitable to 'present' the project. Another concern for the artists is that by then the Qiuzhuang Project had not finished; it is problematic to show something which is not finished. If 'representation of the project' could not be achieved, what else could be done? What seemed a difficult situation triggered the artists' idea of using the space as a reflective conversation space. This newness is a strategy to address the limitations in space, as well as the artists' consideration of enacting the exhibition space, as the artist states,

> When I move a project into a museum space, I hope the two can have some chemical reaction and something new can be created, instead of replicating what has been done. Moving what is on the project site, such as Sol LeWitt's 'ladder', to the art museum, is meaningless. This drives me to make something new in exhibitions.[70]

[70] Interview with Li Mu, 14 October 2015.Suzhou.

Figure 3.7 Replica of Sol LeWitt's work, which was used as a ladder by the villagers, Qiuzhuang, Jiangsu. 02/09/2013. Photograph provided by Li Mu.

Figure 3.8 Prints of Andy Warhol's Mao in a villager's house, Qiuzhuang, Jiangsu. 02/09/2013. Photograph provided by Li Mu.

'Action' is a core strategy of many site-specific SEA in art institutions. Rather than using art institutions as merely an exhibiting space, artists have a strong tendency to activate the exhibition space. In Li Mu's case, the artists used the gallery space as just another space for carrying out project planning and reflection. In the case of the 'East Lake' project introduced in chapter 1, artists solicit public participation on the institutional ground. Sometimes artists raised donations through exhibitions.[71] There is also an increasing number of practitioners initiating new projects with local communities to address their concerns, such as Liu Weiwei's practice with taxi drivers introduced earlier in this chapter.

Some SEA actions are less visible than others as they take place behind representational forms, rather than addressing social issues directly or using time-based strategy such as performances as a means. A constant worry for many artists and curators is that in a representational exhibition, no matter what stories they tell, their projects will become a spectacle, lose their criticality and be interpreted as an art object. As a result, how to enact actions through exhibitions becomes a central motif for artists and curators.

Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun were invited by the curator Bao Dong to attend the group exhibition 'Positive Space' at the Times Museum, Guangzhou (29 March 2014 – 04 May 2014). The artists' concern was to enact new actions rather than presenting old works. In addition to addressing local concerns, as suggested by the Curator Bao Dong, for the artists a central issue was to find connections between the local context and their ongoing project in the Kunshan Project in Chengdu. On the one hand,

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[71] For instance, in 'Trepidation and Will' (5 November - 11 December, 2016) at Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing, Qin Ga, initiator of 'Fly Together', a project based in Shijiezi Village, Gansu, which investigates what art can do for this village. The organisors announced a road maintenance project for the village at the opening of the exhibition, and called on visitors to donate money to support the project (http://www.msam.cn/cn/media/details/219, accessed 10 June 2017).

in this way they could integrated work at the Guangzhou site into their work at the Chengdu site, to enrich their understanding of issues of common concern. On the other hand, they could use their experience at the Chengdu site to facilitate the Guangzhou project. After three months' research prior to going to Guangzhou, the artists established a connection between the experiences of migrant workers who worked in clothes-making assembly lines in the urban villages in Guangzhou and farmers in Kunshan who also migrated across China to make a living. The artists contacted NGOs and researchers in Guangzhou after arrival, and gained access to eight migrant workers' families through NGOs. The artists and the families spent one month together getting to know each other, during which time they developed a collaborative clothes design and clothes making project based on the families' interests and skills.[72]

Figure 3.9. Collaborative clothes-making among migrant workers, Kangle Urban Village in Guangzhou, 24 March 2014, Photograph provided by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun.

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[72] Interviews with Cao Minghao. 3 April 2015; and 28 April 2015.Chengdu.

Figure 3.10. Collaborative clothes-making among migrant workers, Kangle Urban Village in Guangzhou, 26 March 2014, Photograph provided by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun.

In this project, artists' efforts to redistribute the time distributed to actions and representation in exhibitions is palpable. The core of the artists' work was contemplating relationships with local families and negotiating a conversation that values each other's experience. The establishment of substantive relationships and trust, the discovery of common interests, and the building of experiences working together took time. For example, while the initial access to local families was not difficult and facilitated by local NGOs, as all the families were very busy working, it was not easy to find an appropriate time to visit them and enact exchanges. The artists spent every day in the urban village, talking to family members in their lunch breaks in order not to interrupt the workers' everyday lives. They spent a lot of time with children of these families, as they had more free time. The artists taught the children art, which created much communication opportunities and contributed to the conceptualisation of a collaborative clothes-making project. It was also through observing the busy working schedules of workers

that the artists found an urgency in facilitating communication between the workers.[73]

As a result, the artists spent the majority of the exhibition preparation time (one month) in working with local families. In the final week, they developed the idea raised by young people in the families who designed clothes based on their dreams of their futures, and the artists, the workers, and the young people worked together to make the clothes come to life. In addition to presenting the clothes, the artists also organised a discussion with major participants from the collaborative NGO and migrant families, local art practitioners working with the public, and researchers and critics interested in art's role in the society. A recording of this discussion could be accessed in the exhibition. The exhibition is one component that serves the purpose of the project.

Dimension 3: Interrogating the outside and the inside — understanding SEA through artist' consideration on ethics and efficacy of exhibiting

This section will look into a case of a refusal to explain the artists' thinking about relating to their working sites and the exhibition mechanism.

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[73] Interviews with Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun in March and April 2015, Chengdu; Interviews with Feng Simin, officer of the local NGO Xiao Yanzi, April 2015, Guangzhou; and interviews with Meihua, participant of the artists' projects, April 2015, Guangzhou.

Figure 3.11. Mu Yunbai's drawings of villagers in the Ciman Village, Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan. 29/08/2015. Photographed by the author.

The figures in these drawings (figure 3.11) are villagers of the Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunan Province. They were drawn by Mu Yunbai, an artist who lives and works in the Fengle Village, Lijiang, not far from the Ciman Village. In early 2015, Mu collaborated with the local Association for Seniors to take pictures of the elderly in Ciman Village and worked for several months producing 100 drawings. The drawings were given to villagers for free after the exhibition in the Association.

These drawings were Mu's contribution to 'Artists in Transit' in 2015, an art project organised by He Wenzhao, an art critic and curator in Beijing who grew up in Ciman Village. He witnessed the rapid changes taking place in the village in recent years brought about by urbanisation and tourism development, and felt the need to do something to address the anxiety he and other villagers had encountered. In 2012, he initiated 'Artists in Transit'

(AiT) and invited artists to take up residencies in the village for a period of time each year. Artists decided their own approaches to art-making, with the interests and the knowledge they learn in the village, and during which He assisted them with access to information and people if there was a need. A variety of projects were conducted, including investigations into the village's daily aesthetics, such as villagers' use of tablecloth and curtains, the music of the local ethnic group of Naxi, a local pear that is famous nationwide, and so on. Through this project, He hoped to examine the village's tradition, history, and current situations and possibly reimagine its future together with the villagers. The collaboration with Mu was based on their shared personal emotional attachment to Lijiang. Mu has a successful career as a professional artist, but he also regards himself as a 'people's artist', a villager in Lijiang first and foremost, and often makes drawings for villagers for free. He proposed to Mu to join his project and make drawings for the Ciman villagers.

During the past five years, artworks made in AiT have not been presented in a collective way in any institutional exhibition.[74] For He and the participating artists, there needs to be a project exhibition in the village first before exhibitions in other venues take place. There are two reasons. One is that the project considers the villagers, instead of art world audiences, as the primary audience for the project:

> The artworks should be placed in the playground, kindergartens, shops, Qinglong River, Association for Seniors, and other public spaces, or even villagers' homes if they would like this. If you go without this and exhibit this project somewhere outside this village, actually you are circumventing many issues in art and ethics. I am not saying without a local exhibition the whole thing does not look

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[74] Individual artists in the project has presented their works in various places, but the project as a whole has not been exhibited.

complete or ethical to outsiders; I am saying, we should not view the locals as audiences in the first place. The artworks are something the artists and the villagers create together for specific stakes in this village. This village is entitled to an opportunity of seeing how it has been seen by others. I think the participating artists also look forward to hearing what the villagers will say about their work.[75]

The second reason, which is closely related to the first one, is that throughout the project, the exhibition has been regularly used as a tool in soliciting villagers' participation and responses. Instead of giving the drawings to the villagers directly, Mu and He carefully framed these drawings and made an exhibition of them. The exhibition was moving even for a casual visitor; however, its real audience was the villagers. He hoped through the exhibition villagers could look at themselves and look at each other in a new light and increase respect for themselves, a major concern of AiT. As He states:

> Mu Yunbai invests in affections when he draws for villagers and he hopes to create something like a bond. It is a pity for him when he saw the villagers fail to see the dignity in themselves and handle the drawings in a careless way or even lose them. So I said let's do it nicely, frame the drawings and make an exhibition, to demonstrate great respect so the villagers know that this is very serious. They never thought they were good-looking, but for me, they are the most beautiful people. I can't say this to them as they won't agree with me if I do. However, when you put up those framed drawings, they can see it. In addition, this project is also helpful for 'Artist in Transit' as a whole. Three years have passed, the villagers are expecting something

[75] Interview with He Wenzhao. 29 August 2015.The Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunan.

to happen. This time, they see something beyond their expectation, which facilitates our mutual understanding.[76]

He and the participating artists expect that this agency of exhibition in healing and reimagining the village is realised through this future collective exhibition too, and making an exhibition first and foremost in the village is indispensable to achieve that. During the past five years, artworks made in AiT have not been presented collectively in any institutional exhibition.[77] For He and the participating artists, there needs to be a project exhibition in the village first before exhibitions in other venues take place. When invited to participate in Chengdu Biennial in 2013,[78] He suggested setting Ciman Village as a parallel exhibition space, instead of presenting project documents and artworks in the exhibition space in Chengdu, making the Ciman villagers the first viewers and integrating the biennial into the project process. In He's words, 'this is a report for them, an opportunity for them to look at themselves... Why do biennials have to be in big cities? Can't they be more ambitious, doing something instead of just talking about it, and breaking the boundaries between the local and the remote?'[79] Seeing the difficulties in relying on outside exhibiting mechanism to achieve the project's aim, He decided to draw resources to realise the exhibition in the village himself.

Not participating in the biennial for AiT was an ethical decision for He at the time. Another question was, should the artist ask the villagers about whether to participate in the biennial or not? Maybe the villagers have an interest? It is a pity that I do not have the time and resources to design dedicated research to the attitudes of villagers in this project, a research direction I

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[76] Interview with He Wenzhao. 29 August 2015. Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan.
[77] Individual artists in the project has presented their works in various places, but the project as a whole has not been exhibited.
[78] Chengdu of Sichuan province is about 900 km away from Lijiang of Yunnan province. Yunnan and Sichuan are bordering provinces.
[79] Interview with He Wenzhao. 29 August 2015. Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan.

would like to develop in the future. Nonetheless, from my understanding of this project, I would argue that while asking villagers' opinion about participating in an exhibition looks like a legitimate approach, according to the principles of consent, it could simplify the situations and represent negligence of responsibilities of guardianship on He's part.

A further examination of the relationship between the project and the villagers may be helpful in understanding this issue. The artists and villagers are not bound by any form of formal contract. The initiator, He Wenzhao, who firstly funded the project on his own and then gained some support from friends, adopts a 'passive' approach, centring the dialogical aspect of the project on connecting its overall themes with villagers rather than deliberately involving villagers in art-making. For He, not disturbing villagers' lives is the first ethical consideration when someone initiates something in this village, regardless of whether it is art or anything else. 'Farmers are very busy; there is no need to deliberately initiate something for them to join.'[80] The project, which unfolds over time (2012 – ongoing), is more like living with the villagers instead of making an art project together. Artists with various interests come to this project with their own trajectory of work; their projects in this village may or may not involve the participation of the local villagers. If, according to He's knowledge, any villager might be of help to an artist's work, such as providing certain information, He would introduce the artist to the villager, just as if introducing two individuals on a daily social occasion. It would then depend on the villagers' interest as to whether they would work with the artists or not.

He is modest about what AiT can achieve. Before AiT, He had been organising oral history collection in the village (since 2008), which can also be framed as an SEA as the core of the project is to work with villagers to create a space for looking at the village differently. Through AiT, He hopes to

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80 Interview with He Wenzhao. 27 August 2015. Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan.

continue and stimulate the conversation with the presence of artists'
practices in the village. A single act may or may not trigger responses, but He
believes the long-term presence of the project will have an impact that
cannot be expected.

While the artists in this project build relationships more in daily life
situations than in art projects, intentionally not involving community
members in the making of art, the operation of the project is based on the
consideration of communities, such as demonstrated by the founding non-
bothering strategy. First of all, the selection of artists is based on He's
knowledge of the artists' works and his judgment of artists' possible
relationships with villagers. Only those who will respect local contexts and
whose work will be benefited in one way or another by working in the village
are invited to join the project.

Secondly, as artists are situated in this village environment, they are
inevitably involved in a conversation with the local villagers, and the
responses of villagers are rulers of their work. Sometimes, responses can
only be obtained after the research stage, when artists' works make a
presence in the village. In the summer of 2015, several artists proposed to
paint the figures of some villagers on a wall at a busy crossroad in the village.
The proposal was welcomed by many villagers, who asked the artists to use
them as models and made suggestions to artists while they were painting.
While the wall paintings attracted great attention and many villagers
expressed their appreciation, one morning, HE and some artists found the
wall was painted over. For He, this reminds him to be more thoughtful in
communicating with villagers:

> While I had always been cautious not to disturb the villagers, and
> make sure artists' proposals are recognised by villagers, harm cannot

be avoided, and I have to be responsible for it. I was petrified and my heart broke when I saw the old lady painting over the figures. I know she felt hurt too. But at the same time, this incident opened a conversation, and I know I can make some remedies in future work. It reminds me to ask myself: have you considered everything? Are you deliberately neglecting something?[81]

Figure 3.12 The wall where artists' drawings of villagers were painted over, Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan. 29/08/2015. Photographed by the author.

[81] Interview with He Wenzhao. 29 August 2015. Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunnan.

Thirdly, the realisation of companionship that avoids disturbance to people's everyday life but influences villagers' relationship with the village in small ways, relies on constant conversations between He, artists and villagers. This is especially evident examined through the lens of time. One artist's work, Village Portrait, can be an example. One participating artist in 2012 decided that he would take a group photo of villagers in the Ciman Village every time 'Artist in Transit' takes place. In the first year, it was mostly senior people taking part. In the second year, many young people joined. The third time, which took place in 2015, witnessed the biggest gathering ever. Many villagers took leaves from work to join the group photo-taking.

Figure 3.13 He Chongyue, *Village Portrait*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3.14 He Chongyue, *Village Portrait*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3.15 He Chongyue, *Village Portrait*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist

When introducing the photo-taking event to villagers, He and He Chongyue, the artist, used no language of 'art project', but explained that it was part of the village history project. Every time the photo was taken, the artists would print them and send them to every villager's house. Similar to villagers' drawings introduced at the beginning of this section, this long-terms act creates some ripples in the village, as He reflects on this project,

> More and more villagers are participating in the photo-taking events, after seeing the pictures themselves. 200 households were willing to spend time in taking the picture. It is through this that you find something spiritual can be ignited through art. If I had mobilised the villagers through village officials, or if I had given some gifts or money to villagers in return for their participation, maybe I could get the whole village to participate even in the first time. But that would be pointless. That is something I'm against at, a scam, where people join you not out of their need but some kind of outside force. Now we have been doing it for a long term, and every

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time we will send pictures to those who participate. When they talk about the picture, put it somewhere in the house, it begins to work and attracts more and more people. They know I just want to take pictures of the village and may begin to look at themselves differently.[82]

Now let us come back to the discussion of the Chengdu Biennial's invitation to participate. Without an invitation to the exhibition, AiT co-exists with the village and artists contemplate ethical issues according to the everyday interactions and changes taking place in this village. AiT does not have to present itself as an art project or take on a framework of a project. Upon being invited to the Biennial, however, AiT would need to turn from an everyday practice into an 'art project.' He rejected the invitation because, for him, AiT cannot be formulated into an exhibited project if the villagers are not able to review and interact with the exhibition, which is not possible in an off-site project. Seeking ideas from villagers about whether to take part in a biennial might be a way forward to further develop relationship between AiT and the villagers – at least it can bring some publicity to this village – but turning AiT into a Biennial project without villagers' recognition renders the exhibition an activity that is not relevant to villagers, a quality at the core of AiT.

Conclusion

Despite practitioners' positioning of themselves and their projects in relation to art institutions, when thinking about the issue of collaborating with art institutions,[83] they do not have a natural hostile attitude towards art

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[82] Interview with He Wenzhao. 27 August 2015.The Ciman Village, Lijiang, Yunan.
[83] For example, there can be an element of pragmatism, for institution is still a primary place where SEA can be publicised and supported. Collaborations can take place as a natural response to the art world, especially for artists who conduct long-term projects outside institutions but also operate within the art system and thus naturally have closer ties with the institutions.

institutions, and the idea of making the curatorial a constitutive element of a project is shared among most projects.

This means for practitioners an exhibition is not an event that can be done any time, and it needs to have different functions at different stages of the projects. Leaving the work totally within the control of institutions is difficult for artists who refuse to fix the meaning of their work. For them, projects continue to develop, individual artists' practices develop, and their understanding of their projects also changes. Exhibiting is identity-making and an invitation for colleagues to join in and criticisms. To understand the thinking behind a particular decision, including the refusal to participate, worries or discontents, helps us to understand the considerations of projects and the extended idea of exhibitions, such as their relationship with communities, ethical considerations, priorities and aims.

While the propositions I put here cannot be generalised to all SEA, it offers new dimensions of the interaction between SEA and art institutions and revises our understanding of what SEA is. At the same time, cases like the various interactions between art institutions and the Kunshan project by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun offer an individual history of interactions between artists and art institutions.

In my opinion, it is difficult, but important to find a language to discuss creation under such conditions. Most research attention goes to curatorial themes and particular works in an exhibition, not creations outside the parameters set by the curatorial ideas. This leads to lost opportunities for learning for multiple stakeholders or the potential to enlighten discussions on other artistic practice (such as 'performance' in Li Mu's case demonstrates) and education, leading us to the creativity in the dynamics of artist-institution interaction.

There is one shared feature in the case of Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun's work at the Times Museum and the case of Li Mu and Na Yingyu's performance at the AM Space — curating took place without the curator's active participations. Li Mu was invited because of Yu Jie's trust and friendship; Li had the freedom to decide what to do. Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun's one month's research and project development took place without the exhibition curator's involvement. For many cases examined in this research, the curators simply did not have enough time and resources to give much support to SEA artists. In others, curators were not sure about what they could expect from SEA, so they chose to take a less active role by providing practical rather than intellectual support. I am not applauding such a laissez-faire approach, as curatorial negligence can cause problems including, but not limited to, a lack of support and ambiguous or even conflicting messages within one exhibition. I want to point out, however, that it is in such 'unsupervised' contexts that some of the most interesting projects took place, where artists thought hard about facilitating their practices through art institutions and explored the potentials of the institutional grounds. The next chapter will explore collaborations where both artists and curators were highly involved.

Chapter 4 Beyond 'process' in exhibition-making: dilemmas, and the many faces of action

Introduction

For most cases examined in this research project, the institution is not the initiator of an SEA project. The programmes they belong to are exhibition/education programmes and are treated as artists' projects by art institutions, rather than collaborative projects with art institutions. When curators and institutions are not the initiators of projects, what curatorial responsibilities do institutions need to follow? In Li Mu's case introduced in Chapter 3, while AM Space curator Yu Ji did not participate in the conception of the performance idea, the trust and support he gave to the artists, and his open attitude towards new practices were the foundation of the performance idea. Liu Weiwei and Man Yu's case analysed in Chapter 3 demonstrates the importance of curators' mediator role in negotiating the relationship between artists and institutions, and the relationship between institutions and the larger social sphere. Man Yu's pursuit of institutional change facilitated his collaboration with Liu Weiwei. One does not have to be an SEA practitioner, like Man Yu, to be a curator of SEA outside institutions. Nonetheless, curating SEA does require skill sets that are different from curating object-based works.

The literature on curating SEA largely revolves around SEA projects initiated by commissioning agencies and gallery programmes, with a focus on curators' role in nurturing practices, including recognising collective authorship, enabling multiple voices to be heard, amongst others. For example, for Nato Thompson (2007: 99), former Director of New York-based

socially engaged art commissioning organisation Creative Time, 'Most of the magic occurs in the level of care, commitment, and time.'[84]

Regarding exhibition-making of SEA, the major difficulties lie in an equivalency of experiences. A common strategy is to provide as much social contexts and documentations as possible in exhibitions. There is also an understanding that it is not fair to judge an SEA project based on its exhibition (Siegenthaler 2013). This chapter focuses on exhibition-making and explores the complexities involved in the collaboration between SEA and art institutions through a case study. It will analyse the differences between exhibition narrative and the project in its original site. It is not only a technical issue but a result of a combination of reasons, including artists' understanding of the efficacy of art institutions in facilitating their work; and art institution's agenda at that particular moment, amongst others.

Through proposing and expounding on problematics in exhibition-making of SEA, this chapter aims to provide researchers, artists and curators with reflective tools for evaluating the efficacy of exhibitions. While there is often a gap between the intention of an exhibition and its realization, it is a collective responsibility to be honest, transparent and progressive.

Case overview

The collaboration I explore here was between A4 in Chengdu and the artists and Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun in their 2015 project Water System Project. An introduction to the artists' previous project in the Kunshan Village, the Kunshan Project, can be found in chapter 2. After a few years'

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development and the participation of new collaborators, in 2013, the artists extended their enquiry from the Kunshan Village to a longer historic period and a larger geographical area, covering six areas of action along the Dujiangyan Irrigation system[85] and its downstream in Sichuan, including the Shuijingfang neighbourhood, one neighbourhood in the Chengdu city centre.[86] The artists named this stage of the project shui xi ji hua, or the Water System Project (hereinafter referred to as WSP).

The artists continued their usual working approaching, started WSP by having conversations with individuals in various sites to share their concerns on the history writing of the urban and rural areas. By the end of 2014, the artists had finished their first stage of research and planned to initiate projects with residents in five sites. The artists' activities were mostly self-funded, except for the Shuijingfang neighbourhood, which was funded by IYouShe, a local non-profit organisation, which I will introduce later.

At the end of 2014, A4 proposed to financially support the artists' work in 2015, including research fees, such as transportation to various project sites. They would like the artists to name A4 as a partner for their project and hold an exhibition or workshop at the end of the year at the institution with a fixed budget. There were no other requirements, and the artists could make decisions as to how to use the money and carry out their work. Cao and Chen welcomed the support and, based on their previous experience working with art institutions, they were confident they could develop a collaborative relationship with art institutions not only as a representational space but also as a contributor to their project as colleagues, as I will explain below. As the following analysis will demonstrate, such collaboration without strict

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[85] The Dujiangyan is an ancient irrigation system in Dujiangyan City, Sichuan, China. It was constructed around 256 BC as an irrigation and flood control project and is still in use today.
[86] The projects sites include the city centre neighbourhood Shuijingfang, four villages in rural areas of Chengdu, i.e. Kunshan, Anlong, Xinjin and Liujiahao, and the Dujiangyan Scenic Spot.

framework accommodated the growing nature of SEA in which lots of changes are expected. At the same time, unclear positions and responsibilities also led to problems. The final workshop which began in November 2015 included an exhibition and four lectures.

My decision to use WSP as the key case is based on my observation and participation in the collaborative process. As introduced in Chapter 2, I began my ethnographic research with the artists at the end of March 2015, and left the field in the middle of November 2015, rightly after the opening of the artists' workshop at A4. I was asked by Li Jie and Sun Li to contribute to the workshop in July. I took a 'passive' approach by using my ethnographic materials as workshop exhibition materials. At the same time, accompanying curators and artists in this process enabled me to have many in-depth conversations with them on emerging issues. Again, I am not claiming that ethnography is the only legitimate tool. As discussed in chapter 2 there will also be blind spots in ethnography, and it depends on the research needs to decide whether it is necessary for the researcher to be present. For this research, ethnography provided a channel for me to follow artists' work and their interactions with curators as much as I can, so I was able to identify key moments where problems arose and the logic behind them, as well as to raise important questions about curatorial responsibility in curating SEA, which are often outside parameters of existing theoretical frameworks.

Before going into specifics of the collaboration, it will be helpful to examine the positions of the artists in working with art institutions, A4's position in working with SEA, and my position in working with the artists and A4. These issues have been touched upon in previous chapters, but here I will focus on issues directly relevant to the situations at the end of 2014 and through 2015, so we will have a clearer picture of the motivations, conditions, and expectations of various actors in this collaboration.

Expectations at the point of collaboration

'How to return to the gallery' had been a constant concern for Cao and Chen. Before the WSP exhibition at A4, they had used exhibition opportunities to initiate new research and community projects that were relevant to their ongoing concern (such as in the 'Positive Space' exhibition, Chapter 3). They had also explored the potential of art space in expanding communication with a wider public. In 'SEE/SAW: Collective Practice in China Now', UCCA, Beijing, 20 November 2012-30 December 2012), a group exhibition where the Kunshan project was included,[87] the artists put aside their artworks and documents of the project. Instead, they tried to connect audiences' experience to Kunshan villagers' migration experiences by holding conversations at the exhibition site with audiences about their own experiences of moving around China:

> The most important thing in the exhibition space is not our works; the visitors do not have to know what happened in this specific village in Chengdu. We aimed to create a new relationship with the visitors through conversations. Everyone has the experience of having to move around for life and work.[88]

This action-centred strategy was emphasised in their consideration for the collaboration with A4 at the very beginning, and they insisted on using workshop rather than an exhibition to describe the expected outcome. One day in project sites, Cao described that the workshop would not be a project report. Rather, the workshop would be just the same as other project sites, to achieve what could not be achieved at other project sites.[89]

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[87] For more information, please see http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/chinas-young-artists-concept-practice/, accessed 10 November 2016.
[88] Interview with Cao and Chen. 22 May 2015.Chengdu.
[89] Cao Minghao, conversation with the author, 17 May 2015. Chengdu.

One key concern for the artists was to avoid being fetishized by the 'clean' gallery space. In 2012, Li Jie, Curator of A4, invited Art Praxis, the artist collective Cao and Chen were part of back then, to participate in their Young Artist Experimental Season (YAES)[90] and extend their work in the Kunshan Village to the area A4 was located in. The area of A4 used to be a village called Liangshan before the development of this area. The proposition of Li Jie was based on his consideration that moving away from the place the artists normally work in would benefit artists' thinking and nuance artists' working methods.[91] Li Jie reassured the artists that they could use the exhibition space in any way that they liked, and there was no need to make 'beautiful' works. The artists spent several months in researching and doing field visits to this area, with Li Jie joining the artists' discussion from time to time and helping with logistical issues.[92] For Cao and Chan, although the final exhibition ('A New Way to Explore Liangshan Village', 1 May 2012 – 18 June 2012, A4 Contemporary Arts Centre, Chengdu, China) managed to reveal the hidden history of Liangshan Village and promote discussions on diverse narratives, it failed to enact a thorough reading of the complicated social reality of Liangshan,

> Although we had much freedom in how to do the exhibition, we unconsciously decided to transform what we learnt in the field to an 'artwork' format to be put up in the exhibition space. Of course, A4, as a gallery, welcomed this approach. In the end, what was presented in the gallery space was very clean. Although the reality of the sites is very complicated, bringing the works into the museum has the

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[90] YAES was a regular group exhibition programme of A4, to promote experimental practices underrepresented in Chengdu.

[91] 'It is great to focus on a specific area. However, it also stops you from recognising how you do things in a certain way. You allow yourself to do experiments and you invest yourself in every problem you encounter. We want to push the artists to walk out of their ordinary working area, so they need to crystallise their working methods in a relatively short time.' Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu.

[92] Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu; and Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, conversation with the author, 2 April 2015 Chengdu.

danger of rendering the places and people as spectacles. The problem lies in our approach.[93]

The artists' another concern came from their previous experience in using documents to provide information for their work, which they described as being 'too messy.'[94] These experiences influenced the artists greatly, shaping their ideas of what would not work in the exhibitions space.

A4's strategies in working with the artists had experienced several stages. When Cao and Chen were carrying out the 'Kunshan Project' in 2012, A4's attitude towards the project was open but cautious. On the one hand, as an institution with a mission to identify and cultivate local artists' new thinking, its director Sun Li and curator Li Jie had an interest in artists' new endeavours. On the other hand, they were not eager in being involved in the 'socially engaged art,' 'art intervention' and other trends of the time back then,[95] out of caution towards the danger of proposing a new trend too easily. Balancing its attention to different artistic practices in the local ecology had always been a theme of A4's work. As a result, in their early interactions, the framework the institution worked with the artist was 'Young Artists' Experiments', a regular programme of A4, without specifying the practices as a representative of a new genre of practice.

Between 2012 and 2015, while the two sides did not hold many public events, Sun Li and Li Jie had been following the artists' work and invited them to organise discussion sessions in A4 to share their progress.[96] Li Jie was particularly interested in the artists' long-term engagement with various individuals in their fieldwork and the way the artists used their experiences

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93 Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, conversation with the author, 3 May 2015, Chengdu.
94 Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, conversation with the author, 5 September 2015, Chengdu.
95 Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu.
96 Such as 'Interactive Art Project 2013: Dialogue on Water System Environmental Art Program', unpublished discussion transcript, 11th October 2013, A4 Contemporary Arts Centre, Chengdu.

to respond to others' experience naturally, without rushing to make artworks.[97] During these years, Li Jie and Sun Li also established a clear institutional development strategy where a connection to the locality, broadly defined, was a key area of their work (see Chapter 3). The WSP workshop collaboration came after the artists had worked in this field for several years, and after they had some presences in various art institutions.

In my emails to the artists before I went to Chengdu, I introduced my research interest in SEA artists' initiatives in art institutions and institution's role in facilitating discussions on critical issues. My emails and my identity as a Museum Studies researcher influenced the artists and institutional practitioners in the way that they were looking forward to some forms of experiments in their collaboration, which was evident in my first meetings with the artists and the institutional practitioners.

In summary, for the artists, using the structure and the language of 'workshop' meant actions and experiments. For A4, 'workshop' meant a journey with the artists and a participatory element, which not only fulfilled their academic interest and institutional building interest but also demonstrated that the institution supported the artists' growth. These motivations set the tone of the collaboration when it began. As I will analyse below, during the process of WSP, the artists and the art institution needed to address other concerns, such as expectations from the local community, which had an impact on their curatorial strategies, especially in exhibition-making.

Institution management and conditions of collaboration
The way A4 was managed left much room for its staff to work with SEA. A4 was privately funded and did not need to report to local governments to hold

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[97] Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu.

activities.[98] While the institutional practitioners needed to report to their funding company and follow the company's procedure regulation and human resource administration, it had independence in deciding academic directions and managed to create conditions for flexible use of resources to address the unexpected demands for funding from art projects.[99] This prepared A4 to allow changes and uncertainties in their collaboration with Cao and Chen.[100] For example, at the beginning of the collaboration, Sun Li left much room for negotiation when making plans with Cao and Chen regarding deciding what the artists would be doing in each site, as both sides knew the project was still developing. They also decided that the workshop should be devised at a later stage to respond to the urgencies then.[101]

In terms of political sensitivity, Sun Li and Li Jie judged that while the funding company no doubt had a concern on whether A4's programming would lead to any trouble,[102] their engagement with Jianjun and Minghao would not cause trouble to the institution or the funding company, nor would it put the artists at a position that they would have to make compromises in their work,

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[98] When international loans were involved in the institution's activities, the staff needed to report to the local government to obtain Customs Entry/Exit permit. This regulation on international loans applied to all venues in China. A4 registered with the local Civil Affairs Bureau in the Tianfu New Area in July 2016 and obtained a non-profit status, which means the institution needs to work with the government procedures more closely and make reports in the future.

[99] For example, the team would leave room when making budget, to be prepared for events that could not be planned beforehand. At the same time, Li Jie acknowledged that the company's administration facilitated professional and efficient planning work. A worry was that there was only one source of funding; once the company stopped supporting A4, A4 would be at a precarious situation. Li jie, conversations with the author, 1 September 2015, Chengdu.

[100] For instance, for the additional cost of the flight tickets and accommodation of three invited speakers for the Workshop, Li Jie managed to draw funding from three other projects.

[101] Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, conversations with the author, 4 April 2015, Chengdu.

[102] According to Sun Li, 'The company certainly has a concern on whether our programming will lead to any trouble. If there is a potential issue, they would remind us not to get into trouble, and we might need to think about how to do things differently. It also depends on the type of activities. One-off events, such as discussions and forums, are generally OK, but if it is long-term exhibitions, which have larger impact and more audiences, we need to be more cautious in how we deal with them and we are expected to adopt some measures to avoid trouble. So far, our programming has never been rejected.' Sun Li, interview with the author, 24 April 2015, Chengdu.

Their [Cao's and Chen's] working methods are different from that of artists who do field work with an aim to create works with a strongly critical attitude towards the politics. They are more subtle and gentler, good at locating things that are directly related to their feelings. Such things can generate strong reactions in viewers and drive viewers to reflect, rather than blow viewers straight away.[103]

A more prominent management issue was a constant need for A4's staff to find a language to describe the relevance of their work to their funding company. Li Jie included public relation as an important aspect of their work,

In the company, we are still in a marginalised role. They can't understand why we can't plan budget as they do, as a normal company does. We are often questioned about the value of our work. I have to develop a strong public relation skill and use different languages to talk to different colleagues, so they can see why what we are doing is meaningful. Whenever we open an exhibition or hold an event, I will first invite the company staff; even if they are not interested, they can at least feel our presence.[104]

This need for finding relevance was connected with A4's efforts in expanding international communication and public education, which corresponded to the company's brand image and needs for community engagement. As the following analysis will show, while it requires language skills to translate the often radical language artists use to define a project into the more subtle phrasing necessary to realise it, these efforts were not necessarily in conflicts

[103] Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu. The then Assistant Curator Cai Liyuan expressed similar ideas, 'There is a kind of ambiguity in their works. They are not straight-forward radical criticism.' Cai Liyuan, interview with the author, 25 May 2015, Chengdu.
[104] Li jie, conversations with the author, 1 September 2015, Chengdu.

with artists' critical pursuits. However, it did require closer collaboration between the artists and the institutional staff to achieve their respective expectations.

Project development over the collaboration and curatorial strategies

For Li Jie, there were three discernible stages in artists' work, the fieldwork research stage, idea refining stage and intense action stage. In the fieldwork stage, artists could have many ideas of actions. After a series of trial and error and feedback collection, they would narrow their choices of strategies. Li Jie chose to focus on the second stage and the third stage, where artists began to make choices of plans and develop actions. This strategy was out of three considerations. Firstly, the limited time and resources Li could use made knowing all the details impossible. Secondly, Li was respectful of artists' ideas and were cautious about giving opinions too early. Thirdly, Li found that too much spotlight would form pressure on participants, making them feel disturbed and rendering intimate conversations impossible.[105] I will return to Li Jie's strategy later.

For me, it is important to see how artists overthrow an idea, as it reflects considerations in many areas, including how artists consider the issue of efficacy. As a result, I had been with the artists ever since the beginning of project initiation in WSP in March 2015 and followed their work in different sites till November. Due to space limitations, this chapter will focus its discussion on the artists' work in one site of WSP — No.67 Courtyard in the Shuijingfang neighbourhood in the city centre of Chengdu — and its presentation in the WSP Workshop in November 2015.

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[105] Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu.

Collaboration between the artists and IYouShe

The choice of Shuijingfang grew out of a collaboration with a local Chengdu NGO IYouShe Community Culture Development Centre (hereinafter referred to as IYouShe). IYouShe focuses on community development, whose services the government also purchases. Their major approaches include community film-making and self-organised theatre groups, a mutual aid charity warehouse, and a charity bazaar, which raises funds for the impoverished and needy through selling second-hand goods. Artistic approaches have been used by the organisation as a useful means to facilitate personal expression and community participation, something the residents can organise on their own.[106] Liu Fei, one of the directors of IYouShe, worked with the artists previously in a community art festival and was impressed by their approach in using art to initiate conversations with community members and solicit stories, finding it consistent with the NGO's pursuit of moving beyond 'documentation' to empower residents' own questions and awareness.[107] As the artists held a Later in 2014, Liu came to Cao and Chen and invited them to work in the Shuijingfang residential area in central Chengdu where IYouShe is based, to learn from the artists' approaches in working with various communities.[108]

The two parties agreed on a loose framework to guarantee that: the artists' ideas would be prioritised; IYouShe would financially support the artists'

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[106] IYouShe was established in 2009 and registered with the Civil Affairs Bureau of Jinjiang District in Chengdu. IYouShe identifies collaboratively constructing communities with stronger senses of happiness as its mission. The organisation started as a video-making team with professional resources and specialised personnel working on welfare projects (Liu 2015).

[107] Interview with Liu Fei, 4 April 2015, Chengdu. Hu Yue, who leads the documentary team in IYouShe, once commented, 'I feel the themes of documentaries we made are too broad… It is like presenting all the information we have, without digging deeper…A great number of staff are focusing on doing events, and are doing an event for the event's sake. I think this is not the value we are putting forward…In comparison, the artists spend a great amount of time in talking to people.' Staff diary. 3 November 2015.

[108] Liu Fei, interview with the author, 11 May 2015, Chengdu.

work in the neighbourhood; the artists would have the freedom to decide whom to work with, what approach they would use and the forms of the artworks; and IYouShe staff would help the artists' research in the community if there were a need.

For the artists, IYouShe provided a platform to further their work with communities. Cao and Chen had doubts in their initial contact with IYouShe in 2013, worrying that IYouShe first and foremost served the government ideology which made the NGO part of it. 'When we talked about a possible collaboration for the first time, IYouShe asked us to paint murals in the community… I know we want different things from the collaboration.'[109] The two sides spent two years in understanding each other's work. Cao and Chen introduced the idea of socially engaged art, community art and so on to IYouShe staff by organising sharing sessions. They had a 'pilot project' in IYouShe's community festival event, where the artists set up a tent and played video works about the land use issue in Kunshan and invited locals into a conversation. Through these events, IYouShe got to know more about the artists' approach. Cao and Chen found that, although IYouShe adopts a harmonious approach in their cultural events and uses the language of the government, they were open to learning new ideas and repositioning their strategies accordingly. The artists believed that there would be much room for negotiation and it would be possible to steer IYouShe's work in a more critical direction.

For IYouShe, the motivation was to explore more diverse approaches to interacting with community residents. Liu Fei from IYouShe recognised the different positions IYouShe, and the artists had, but had faith in mutual learning,

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[109] Cao Minghao, interview with the author, 28 March 2015, Chengdu.

We do not start from a critical position, as frequently I can see the reasons why the government does certain things. You cannot just criticise the government without thinking about the context. We cannot talk about history, culture, and community protection in a vacuum…. For the project, I have my ideas about how it should work, but I keep them to myself, so I do not interrupt the flow of thinking. However, I will assist artists to realise their ideas through every means possible.[110]

In addition to introducing flexibility into the budget to accommodate the changing needs stimulated by the evolving nature of the project[111] and supporting the artists in terms of logistics and human resources, IYouShe assisted the artists in reaching community residents and making sure the artists' work was not interrupted by local officials. IYouShe played a key role in communicating with the local neighbourhood committee of the Shuijing Fang sub-district, the government agency which is responsible for administrating the neighbourhood's economy, civil affairs, and public security, to make sure the rooftop could be used as a garden. Recognition from these officials was not only reassurance of the feasibility of the project but also stood for approval from the government (though the officials may not be fully aware of what exactly was going on).

No.67 Courtyard and the Shuijingfang neighbourhood

Among all the household clusters IYouShe works within the Shuijingfang sub-district, the artists chose No.67 East Jiaochangba Street (hereinafter referred to as No.67 Courtyard).[112] Firstly, the special spatial arrangement

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[110] Liu Fei, interview with the author, 11 May 2015, Chengdu.
[111] 'I totally understand how you work. However, we need to make reports to our funder, as well as the Civil Affairs Bureau and the audit department. You might need to compromise a bit… We do not need very detailed information, but maybe make estimation? For example, 8000 yuan (about 914 pounds) for props.'
[112] Shuijing Fang sub-district is located within a financial area of the city, rightly east to the city's commercial centre. It covers an area of 1.06 square kilometres, with six residential clusters, i.e. Shuijing Fang, which the sub-district is named after, Jinguanyi, Jiaozi, Dianjiangtai, Jiaochangba, where No.67 is located, and Guangming

attracted the artists immediately: the rooftop of a bicycle garage located at the centre of the cluster looked like an 'open-air theatre' to the artists; audiences, or residents living in the buildings surrounding the garage, can see the stage through their balconies and windows. Different areas of the rooftop had been used as places for family farming, Ping-Pong, chat, or even drying quilts. The artists saw potential in this place for engaging residents in a dynamic manner, such as doing a theatre collectively.

Figure 4.1 No.67 Courtyard and the rooftop of its garage. Photographed by Chen Jianjun in 2014.

Secondly, No.67 was described by IYouShe as 'the most difficult' cluster, with many tensions and conflicts within the residents in cluster management, and

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Lu. By the end of 2014, the sub-district had 13,192 households and a resident population of 40,829. No.67 was built in 1997, with an area of 60,000 square meters and 730 households (Chengdu Jinjiang District Local History Committee Office 2015).

the artists saw much room for change and creation in these issues. The staff of IYouShe had been finding it challenging to work here. For instance, the conflicts between apartment owners and temporary tenants were intense in terms of public space use.[113] An impression the artists got from their visits to the neighbourhood was that projects introduced by IYouShe, which were intended to contribute to community building and self-governance, resulted instead in boundaries and segmentation. The participants of an urban farming project[114] on the rooftop of the garage, most of whom were retirees, locked the entrance to the rooftop of the garage at night. They wanted to keep the place away from children, temporary tenants, couples who want to spend time together on the rooftop, and so on, who in their eyes were either suspected vegetable thieves or litterers who messed up the environment on the rooftop.[115]

Thirdly, the artists found that the larger social and cultural issues reflected in this area were in line with their ongoing research interest. They found it difficult to find discussions on complexities of urbanisation, such as a loss of collective memories, and the changing definitions of urban and rural landscapes in this area. The artists thought their work could add to the attention the area had got from its possible demolition.[116]

Artists' and participants' initiatives

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[113] Liu Fei, interview with the author, 11 May 2015, Chengdu.

[114] The 'Urban Farming' project was initiated and funded by Hong Kong's Partnerships for Community Development (PCD), and executed and managed by IYouShe in several household clusters in Shuijing Fang sub-district, Jinjiang District, Chengdu. The project came to No.67 in March 2014.

[115] Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, interview with the author, 24 March 2015, Chengdu.

[116] With the urban renewal work speeding up in Chengdu in recent years, the landscape and organisation of Shuijing Fang have changed greatly. When part of the Shuijingfang residential cluster was identified as one of the Four Historic Cultural Streets in Chengdu, a large-scale demolition and renovation project took place. Rumours had spread among the residents for two decades in the area No.67 was in about its potential demolition.

While from March to November 2015 the artists were developing projects with different individuals at the same time, a central figure is Ms. Gong Suqing. Ms. Gong used to live in the Shuijingfang neighbourhood when she was a child in the 1950s and later moved because of urban planning. Ms. Gong was obsessed with drawing her version of the neighbourhood in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to relying on her memories — when she was a child, little Gong often went out to the streets to pick up the cinders to support her family, so she had grown a strong memory of the whole area — Ms. Gong also referresd to documents and visited old neighbours to talk about old streets and all kinds of local businesses, to make the drawings as accurate as possible. In her opinion,

The documentary books and old photographs are all about high-rises in the prosperous business streets, such as Chunxi Road and Yanshikou. Nobody cared about our poor neighbourhood. I'd rather draw by myself what it looked like. I enjoy drawing houses so much; When drawing houses, I feel like I am in the picture, walking in and out of those houses.[117]

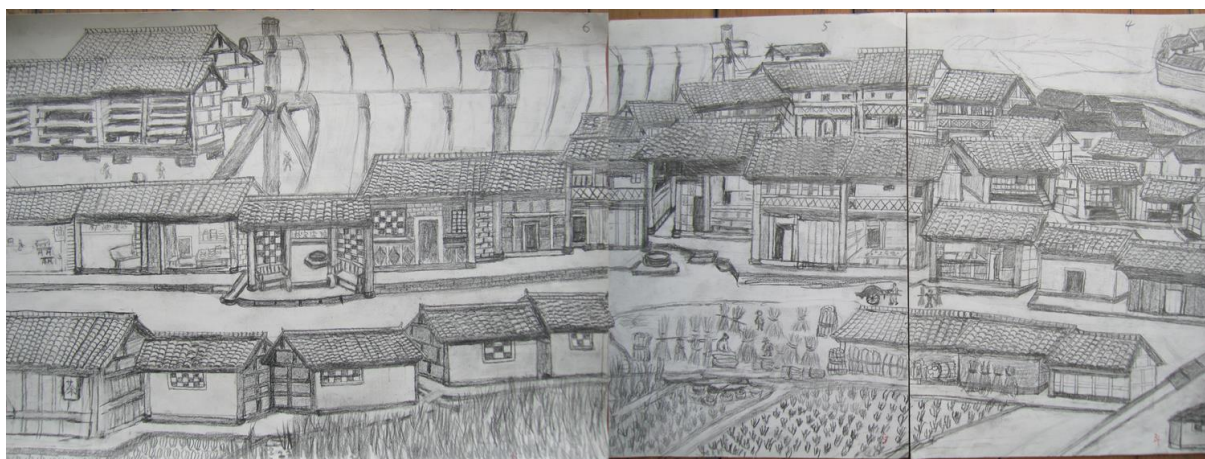
Figure 4.2 A photograph of two drawings of the Shuijingfang neighbourhood in the 1960s by Ms. Gong. Photographed by the author in 2015.

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[117] Gong Suqing, initial meeting between the artists, the author and Ms. Gong, 28 March 2015, Chengdu.

For the artists, Ms. Gong's strong motivation in drawing her version of history was powerful enough to involve more participants to reflect on the history of the neighbourhood and imagine alternative futures. 'When Gong talks about her walking in and out of those houses, it is like she is moving around different histories... She is taking actions to have another interpretation of history,' commented Cao.[118] The artists thus conducted work in two main areas. The first was sharing their understanding and perception of the city with Gong. The four of us took many walks together in the Shuijing Fang area to facilitate their mapping of the city. The artists and Ms. Gong often visited each other to share progress and make further plans.

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[118] Cao Minghao, conversation with the author, 12 April 2015, Chengdu.

Figure 4.3 Ms. Gong was telling stories about the local area. Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun were recording her talk and taking notes. Photographed by the author on 10 April 2015.

Figure 4.4 Ms. Gong was telling stories about the local area. Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun were recording her talk and taking notes. Photographed by the author on 10 April 2015.

Figure 4.5. We came across Ms. Gong's old neighbours in our walk, with whom Gong identified the locations of some shops for her drawing. Chen Jianjun was recording their conversations. Photographed by the author on 10 April 2015.

The second area of work the artists took was encouraging Ms. Gong to excavate her feelings and develop her personal style. At the beginning of their collaboration, Ms. Gong was worried about her lack of professional drawing skills, 'I think only with real techniques that viewers can recognise my efforts.'[119] On the one hand, the artists shared with Ms. Gong a variety of 'outsider artists' who were self-taught and had diverse styles, to demonstrate to Ms. Gong that she could develop her unique style based on her understanding of things with confidence and power. On the other hand, the artists shared with Ms. Gong their experience in art-making; how they reflected on the use of different media and their struggles with choices.

Within three months, Gong had finished two scrolls made of dozens of pieces of sketching paper (7.8 m and 4.5 m in length respectively), with more than 100 houses and all kinds of figures and activities.

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[119] Gong Suqing, initial meeting between the artists, the author and Ms. Gong, 28 March 2015, Chengdu.

Figure 4.6 Ms. Gong and her scroll drawings. Photographed by the author on 3 July 2015.

Along with working together with Ms. Gong, the artists further investigated issues in the neighbourhood and contemplated opportunities and methods to collaborate. For instance, the artists aimed to build a sustainable working method in the neighbourhood, so after the artists left, new imaginations and actions could still be possible. After a long-term discussion with IYouShe, they came up with the idea of doing a No.67 'story house,' the content of which would be contributed by residents. This was based on their

interactions with Shi Shi, a long-time local participant of the artists' events. Shi Shi grew up in No.67 and had lived there for nearly 30 years. She ran a small light meal café in the cluster and had always been thinking of contributing to community building. To connect the old, the young and children, Shi Shi had organised meal sharing events and after-school classes, but had experienced difficulties in making long-term plans,

> It is impossible to do free meals all the time, plus the residents are not very enthusiastic about it, so I had doubts about what I was doing. The work of IYouShe and the artists drives me to think about more about my work, and I think they can help me achieve what I want.[120]

For two years' time, IYouShe would support Shi Shi in finance and resource. Shi Shi would be responsible for working with residents in developing the story house, both in its content and its finance.

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[120] Shi Shi, conversation with the author, 6 April 2015, Chengdu.

Figure 4.7 Outside Shi Shi's light lunch café in the No.67 Courtyard. Photographed by the author on 26 July 2015.

From July to September 2015, the artists held six sharing and discussion sessions with residents in the central square of the courtyard and on the rooftop of its garage. Using Ms.Gong's drawings as a focus, the conversations involved discussions about histories of the Shuijingfang neighbourhood, and residents' memories and imaginations of public space in the area. Other tools, such as questionnaires and individual home visits, were also used.

Figure 4.8 Public exhibition and discussion in the central square of the No.67 Courtyard. July 2015. Courtesy of Chen Jianjun.

Figure 4.9 Public exhibition and discussion in the central square of the courtyard. Photographed by the author on 10 July 2015.

No.67 project in the WSP exhibition

Figure 4.10 Exhibition view of No. 67 Courtyard Project. Photographed by Li Jie in November 2015.
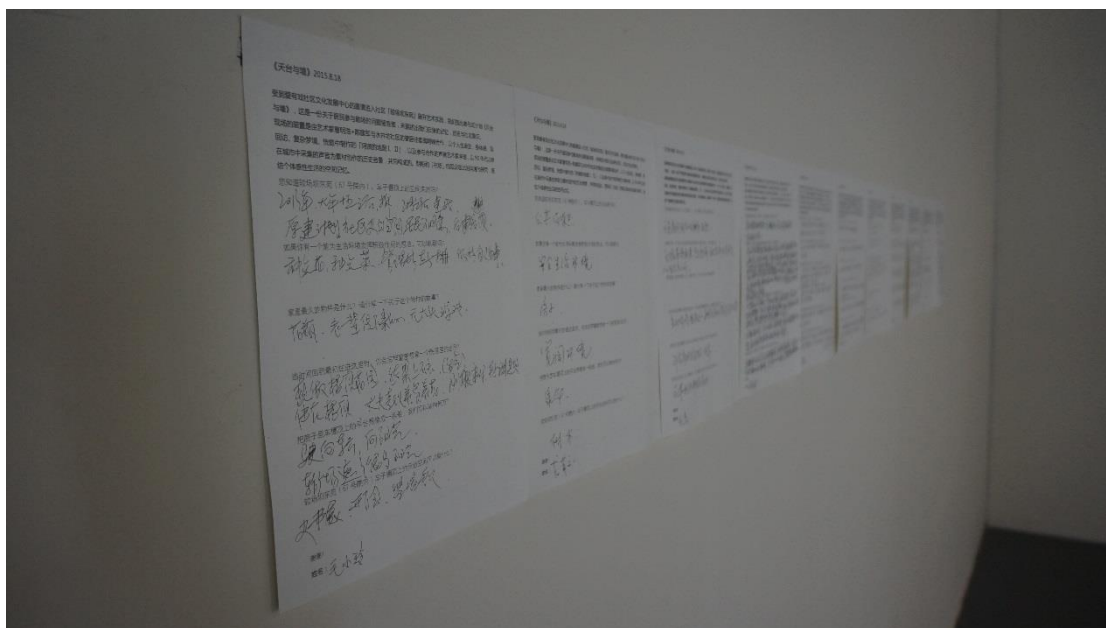
Figure 4.11 Exhibition view of No. 67 Courtyard Project – questionnaires used to solicit ideas from residents about the use of space in the courtyard. Photographed by Li Jie in November 2015.
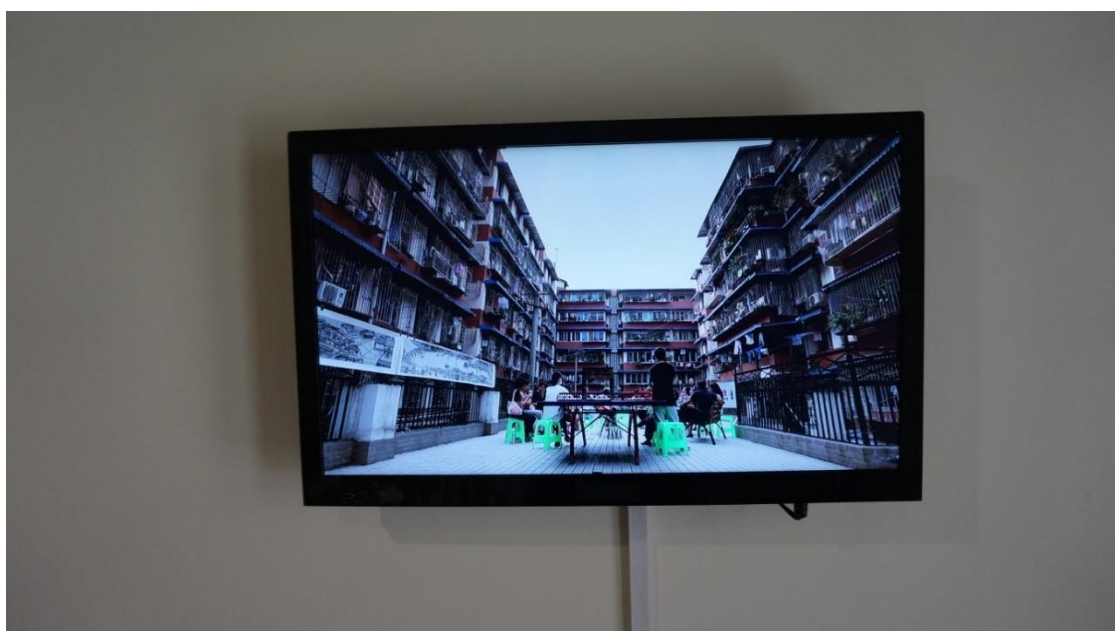
Figure 4.12 Exhibition view of No. 67 Courtyard Project – a documentary made by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun based on the recordings of public discussions in the courtyard. Photographed by Li Jie in November 2015.

Figure 4.13 Exhibition view of No. 67 Courtyard Project – a video installation made by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, which focused on details of Ms. Gong's drawings. Photographed by Li Jie in November 2015.

Figure 4.14 Exhibition view of No. 67 Courtyard Project – text installation made by the author, which focused on presenting key decision-making moments/conversations in the project. Photographed by Li Jie in November 2015.

Li Jie made a few visits to the Shuijingfang area and joined some discussions between artists and residents. Li had been careful to express his views on artists' views, out of respect for artists, but he managed to spot some appropriate timings to express his ideas. For example, when artists finished several rounds of discussions with residents in Shuijingfang about their opinion of the public space and the community's history, Li suggested that 'you can also try to hold discussions within each family so that you can have a more comprehensive perspective.'[121] He did not insist when the artists did not proceed with his ideas.

Other subtle approaches Li Jie used was creating opportunities for artists to exchange ideas with colleagues. For example, after Li Jie and Sun Li went with the artists to their working sites in July 2015, Sun Li made the following comments, 'Their ability to transform the fieldwork is not enough. The actual scenes are so brutal.'[122] Not long after that, A4 recommended the artists to a public art committee, which provided an opportunity for Cao and Chen to work with several international artists in the forest area of Dujiangyan. Li Jie explained he intended to push the artists to make decisions in art-making and expose the artists to new thinking,

> They have heavy research at hand. In such activities, you need to make a choice, instead of doing an academic report. In addition, after they finish their work for the festival, there are another two intense weeks where they can exchange their investigations of this particular place with other artists, which will definitely bring new energy and thinking into their practices.[123]

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[121] Li Jie, conversations with the artists, 9 September 2015, Chengdu.
[122] Sun Li, conversations with the author, 11 July 2015, Chengdu.
[123] Li Jie, Email with the author, 16 September 2015, Chengdu.

For Cao and Chen, the making and communicating processes of this project proved to be helpful; the works produced for this public art event were later used in the workshop exhibition.

The artists, curator Li Jie, A4 director Sun Li and I had a few meetings together in early September. The installation of the exhibition was from late October to early November. The curatorial process of the workshop exhibition was primarily artist-led, with suggestions and contributions from Li Jie and me.

During the exhibition-making process, the artists worked with IYouShe staff and volunteers developed some residents' idea about making the garage rooftop a garden, by flower donation events so whoever wanted to donate flowers could do so.

Figure 4.15 A growing garden made of flower pots donated by residents on the rooftop of the courtyard garage. 2015. Courtesy: Cao Minghao.

The artists made a three-screen video showing the details of Ms. Gong's scrolls, a small 'garden' made of the flowers donated by No.67 residents, a documentary of the project's public exhibitions and discussions, and an installation of some of the questionnaires the artists collected from the residents.

I contributed to the exhibition of the workshop by making a text installation using my ethnographic materials, including photographs and notes, and selected documents that I deemed important to reveal the process of artists' work and decision-making. For example, in the section for Ms. Gong's work, I put several official local history books from which Ms. Gong drew inspiration, along with Cao's written reflection on her role in working with Ms. Gong: 'Maybe in the future, I will teach Ms. Gong drawing skills, as a friend. However, for this project, I hope it is not only for Gong as an individual; I hope it can draw many people in and engage with them.' Another example is one collaborator's doubts about the artists' approach: 'I am not very well educated, and I think we need more time for discussion. I just think that before I talk to other people about what I do, I need to understand it first.'

The one and the many: exhibition narrative and multifaceted 'community'

> .... the essential defining factor of a community is the sense of belonging that comes to those who are part of it and that, through association with communities, individuals conceptualise identity. Such

identities are relational and depend on a sense not only of self but also others. Thus a community is essentially self-determined.

— Sheila Watson (2007: 3)

If we follow Watson's definition, the Shuijingfang neighbourhood was a community defined by geography rather than the sense of belonging. While the neighbourhood was a residential complex under the same administration body, its residents did not share the same values or even have the same understanding of the neighbourhood. They are not what Kester terms 'politically coherent' communities either (1999:7). Residents had different understandings of the neighbourhood, and they did not all agree that there was a need for collective action in changing the use of the public space at No. 67. Young people, with a good education background and a good income, were active participants, as well as middle-aged women who regularly took part in the administration work of neighbourhood issues. Temporary tenants and the elderly were less passionate about artists' visits.

In their conversations with No.67 residents and when they were thinking about strategies to work with the residents, the artists honoured the differences among different residents. The artists and I identified several different thinking in the community in field visits: house owners who were looking forward to the demolition of this area so they could make a fortune out of the compensation money; temporary tenants in the old derelict housing, many of whom were underprivileged migrant workers, who were worried that they might have to find another cheap place to live; a shrewd restaurant owner who had his own view about culture and heritage and had already done a few art projects in his place; and Shi Shi, a café owner who grew up in the neighbourhood and had organised many community events to contribute to community building. From March to September, the artists visited different individuals regularly, with an aim to find commonalities and

to develop collective action plans, without relying on one thinking. The public discussions also aimed to bring out different perspectives.

Residents' diverse motivations and forms of participation were demonstrated by the exhibited questionnaires, video documentation of various workshops and the artworks produced as part of the project process. However, looked as a whole, what the exhibition presented tended to be taken as a singular narrative. The main exhibition space had minimal interpretation, with the titles of works and the makers' names (e.g. Ms. Gong) shown along exhibits. The artists chose this strategy deliberately to break from the inaccessible text-rich panels with which audiences of SEA exhibitions are often presented. Ironically, this lack of interpretive context added ambiguities to the complex relationship between the multiple narratives in the project and the overarching narrative that the artists chose to present. While the discussions recorded in the documentary presented various perspectives, these perspectives were constructed around the artists' own understanding of the collaborative experience. This tendency to collapse multiple narratives into a single narrative that is controlled by the filmmaker is, of course, something that the medium of documentary is often charged with (Plantinga 2005; Downey 2009; Schneider and Wright 2013).

Granted all of these issues, more fundamentally, it was the action-centred thinking of the multiple actors involved – artists, me as a researcher, institutional practitioners – that underpinned the overall exhibition strategy, which emphasized some aspects of No.67 without clarifying their relationships with the project as a whole. The fact that participants were not directly involved in deciding on a strategy for presenting their multiple narratives also contributed towards these ambiguities and tensions in the exhibition narratives.

Another issue concerned flower donating activities taking place at the same time of the exhibition-making process. Making the rooftop a garden by donated flowers was decided by the artists on 1 November 2015 from many suggestions offered by the residents. Hu Yue, from IYouShe, agreed with the artists' ideas and thought it would be a good way for residents to participate in the community building process. The artists set a preliminary goal and expected that there would be at least 50 residents who would participate in the following days.[124] The call for donations started on 3 November 2015. It was mainly Hu Yue, Shi Shi, and three volunteers who were responsible for communicating with residents. They set up a desk at the central square of the No.67 cluster. Hu Yue also used a more proactive strategy by walking around to talk to people and called familiar residents to help with recruiting, explaining the artists' ideas and the exhibition plan.

The artists and Hu Yue expected this process to be an opportunity for reconciliation and to build a collaborative mechanism whereby the process of residents donating their flower pots enhanced mutual communication and trust among community members. However, the residents participated in the flower donating not necessarily because they understood the changes the mechanism hoped to achieve. Their motivation might have been that they could somehow be 'present' in the exhibition by having their flower pots exhibited there, something they rarely had the chance to do before. At the same time, many participants were members of an urban farming group organised by IYouShe. As IYouShe staff were the facilitators of the exchange, members of the group might have participated not because of a recognition of the artists' concepts, but instead to show support for IYouShe's work or to curry favour with IYouShe for ongoing support of the work in the farming project. As a result, the participants' role was set by the artist, and the artists became the conceptual director (Helguera 2011: 51).

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[124] As I was not able to be present at the No.67 then, I mainly used email communications with Hu Yue to get to know the flower donating process. I met the volunteers several times too.

It is hard to say that the project had led to actual changes in human relationships or the management of public space in the neighbourhood. It might even have led to more misunderstandings and troubles among community members. While I took it as an iterative process, and the artists were continuing their engagement with community members and experimenting with other approaches, the exhibition did not provide sufficient on-site interpretation tools to expound on the 'installation' of flowerpots, and its associated problems and future goals.

Reflection

<u>Social aspirations over multiple narratives</u>

Why was the inequivalence between artists' actions in the neighbourhood and exhibitions? How did the diverse individuals in the neighbouhood become a discreet entity? In addition to the deficiencies of gallery space in exhibiting process-based works, as introduced in the beginning of this chapter, in this case, an important factor was that artists tacitly regarded interrogating the larger social and political issues the neighbourhood reflected as their primary concern. The artists identified with Ms. Gong's dedication in having a personal account of the history and expressed many times that the key challenge was to communicate Gong's strong awareness of being reflexive and writing her own narratives, rather than conveying a message of nostalgia or simply reproducing the city landscape in the past. When the artists were in the neighbourhood and conducting the project, they were careful in negotiating differences. However, when doing exhibitions, they seemed to prefer a clearer activism message.

For the artists, facilitating such conversations was no doubt an 'action' on the institutional ground, which would expand the political discussion to a wider

public. However, with a 'clean' space and a clear statement, where individuals' participation was reduced to supportive materials of this statement, the dynamics artists had worked hard to achieve in the project sites was lost. As a result, it may be difficult to affect the public.

Cultural concerns

As discussed earlier, based on their past exhibition experience, the artists set a specific goal to work on the visual to enable a narrative, without the use of text,

> In our previous exhibiting experiences, there was always too much information to contextualise what we were doing, which was difficult for audiences to read and follow. This time, we want to work on making the artworks demonstrate our working process, using as few texts as possible.[125]

As a result, the artists adopted a non-interpretative strategy in exhibition-making, expecting the setting of the exhibition to construct a narrative of the process of their work in the Shuijingfang neighbourhood. Interestingly, the artists' strategy of rejecting institutional interpretation, which was born out of an intention to break from the elitist and inaccessible text-rich exhibitions commonly foisted upon audiences of SEA exhibitions, in fact, colluded with the visual-centred strategy that their entire practice was set against. According to Assistant Curator Cai Liyuan, who conducted a few guided visits for the exhibition, the exhibition was difficult to interpret and might not be able to enact audiences to take actions,

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[125] Cao Minghao, exhibition planning meeting, 13 September 2015, Chengdu.

The artists were very excited as they achieved their aim and there were quite a few good discussions. The workshop was also helpful for their future work. However, it is still difficult for audiences to understand what the artists were doing. Artists have many advocacies, but they may be invalid for audiences.[126]

To challenge institutional means of representation and the discourses they stand for, the artists were directing the discussion towards a 'larger artistic debate' (Helguera 2011: 36), which might have led to a lost opportunity of tapping the opportunities of the visual.

<u>A lack of voice from the curator/researcher</u>

Looking back, the major problem with my activities was treating 'process' as neutral. Back then, the 'action' for me was to open up the processes of SEA to audiences and to enact discussions on how we can approach SEA through means other than their aesthetic qualities, which was lacking in China. Also, in the preparation of the exhibition, what I found missing in the artists' strategy was access for audiences to engage with the 'difficult' moments of the project, which I think is the starting point for audiences to examine the artists' role in this project. Together with texts, the photographs lend a lens to audiences about the thoughtfulness and the temporal dimension of the process.

My presentation of the documentation of the process revealed some difficult moments of decision-making and the different opinions participants held. I did not, however, go further and explain the negotiation process, as well as

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[126] Cai Liyuan, Email communication with the author. 25 November 2015.

why and how certain decisions were made. Such as the confusion of participants, were left unanswered.

For Li Jie, artists' visions were the top priority in exhibition-making, and the role of curators was supporting the realisation of artists' visions. Another focus of Li Jie was on evoking audiences' feelings, to make them understand how artists communicate with people and establish strategies. In the curatorial process, Li Jie stressed a few times that it was important to 'show the powerful and shock of the sites.'[127] As a result, Li Jie's decision-making mostly took place after the narrative was decided by the artists, and his role lied in assisting the artists in developing the details of the narrative. For Li, this was a useful strategy to demonstrate to the local art community, which stressed artists' visual language as the measure of success, that there could be other ways of art-making and other ways of experiencing SEA.[128]

We were focusing on our definition of action, which all centred around artists and circumvented the fundamental issues in the project. Subsequently, problems in narrative-making were overlooked. The title 'workshop' suggested experiments during the process, instead of a conclusive presentation. As a result, by allowing imperfections in the 'process', it gave up a critical perspective of making a voice about the project itself. From my current perspective, there were discrepancies among what the different stakeholders wanted to achieve, resulting in an ambiguous and often conflicting direction of action for the project as a whole.

Conclusion

While we recognise curators' and SEA artists' efforts to initiate experiments on the institutional grounds, we should also be careful with the many faces of

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[127] Fieldnotes of the author, November 2015.
[128] *Ibid*.

actions. Otherwise, actions might only exist in the curatorial discourse and evaluation can be ambiguous.

Such 'failure' may not cause any immediate damaging effect. However, it influences the reception of SEA, of the relationship between art and society, among project participants and the general public. Anthropologist and scholar Corinne Kratz (2002: 96) points out the wide dissemination of politics of representation,

> exhibits are not only sites where politics of representation can be debated, but places where they are also developed and disseminated— through visitor interactions, conversations, press reviews, influences on future exhibitions, and other traces that stretch far beyond the exhibition itself.

There were multiple factors that contributed to the 'failure' discussed in this chapter, such as art world systems that make and break careers and institutions cause artists, curators, and researchers to wittingly or unwittingly circumvent problematic moments in their work. In fact, every actor had good intentions in this case. It is necessary to ask some fundamental questions about curatorial responsibilities in such scenario to begin a conversation: how do curators position themselves in relation to documents made by SEA artists? Should curators make a judgement about the practice and how can they embed that judgement into the curatorial process? Is curating SEA curating art or history?

Discussions on curatorial responsibilities where SEA exhibitions are produced are hardly seen. Making the above considerations visible will not only challenge curators' authority, but will also illuminate the difficult question of power relationship in SEA. Both can upset the investor logic of

art institutions. However, being transparent is not contradictory to the new social relations institutions hope to facilitate. For artists, addressing challenges from a public platform can only be an opportunity to nuance their practices. When exhibitions do not assert a voice for a project, the messages of action might not be clear to audiences or may even inadvertently contradict the intention of artists and art institutions.

Chapter 5 Conclusion and anecdotes

Introduction

Two years after my initial field research in 2015, I still keep regular contact with various practitioners, although not being able to participate in their projects in the same way as I did in 2015. I follow changes in their projects and collaborated with them on various projects, which provides me with additional data and helps to clarify practitioners' positions more. There have been moments of doubts, frustration and confusion when I developed perspectives that contrasted my previous understanding in the field, of the practices of both the various practitioners I studied and myself. After the initial unwillingness in addressing these turbulences and making appropriate changes, which caused a stagnancy in this research project. After several rounds of interrogation and revision, I developed a more balanced tone in writing. I believe that the present themes and structure of this thesis tell the most revealing stories and findings of this research in relation to the relationship between SEA and art institutions.

Previous Chapters of this thesis focus on how an examination of curatorial practices in relation to SEA in art institutions can provide an expanded lens for us to engage with the processual nature of SEA, to interrogate how the discourse of SEA in China is produced and shaped, and to follow debates about the quality of such practice. In addition, the thesis has another twofold contributions. Firstly, it addresses an ontological aspect of socially engaged art. The focus of socially engaged art on process raises questions as to 'what constitutes "art,"' as art historian and critic Grant Kester (2011: 10) suggests. This research looks into process on multiple levels: the process in site-specific projects and its transformation in art institutions; the process of new creations on institutional grounds; and the impacts of institutional contexts on the process of site-specific projects as a whole. It aims to expand the

ontological framework of socially engaged art and to diversify the channels through which we can study them.

Secondly, the thesis expands discussions on ethics associated with socially engaged art and its curation. It pays special attention to the relationship between projects in their original sites and their presentation in art institutions, shedding light on issues of authenticity and authorship, amongst others. By using an ethnographic approach and highlighting critical moments of decision-making, I locate discussions on the evaluative criteria of socially engaged art in specific situations and explicate their implications for future institutional and artistic practices.

The following sections review and compare existing theories of art interrogating its relationship with society and people, in an attempt to calibrate a language to describe shared concerns of the cases that have been studied in this research project, so the differences of practices in enacting relationship and art-making in different contexts are better revealed.

The position of institution in artists' work

The thinking of what is avant-garde and what is critical work influences artists' strategies greatly. The particular focus on art institutions in my research makes this issue more evident. They feel the need to answer art historical questions of legitimacy.

The cases examined in this thesis are based in specific places as a result of artists' personal experience and a practical consideration of available resources and networks at hand. While not setting the projects' goals as solving a particular social issue, the artists do aim at opening up space for social changes and are interested in their concerns being recognized by

people who they interact with, thus treating art-making as a medium in making interventions. They grow over the years, respond to changing situations and modify their goals over time, with increasingly more collaborators joining in and their funding structure becoming complex. By focusing their engagements with art institutions and how they are related to art medium's taking into effect, this thesis aims to further the discussion on the quality issue of SEA. The artists involved in these case-study projects demanded the institutional context to facilitate their respective projects. However, the motivations of these artists, and the effects of their different approaches, were different in each case. For instance, in the case of AiT, exhibition was considered a tool to gain feedback from villagers and to have an impact that mutually benefitted both artists and villagers. The decision not to exhibit the project to a wider audience before exhibiting it to the villagers themselves and the proposal to set a satellite exhibition in the village for the Chengdu Biennial were in line with the project's priorities and aims, and with its focus on the use of exhibitions as a method to generate affects and seek feedback. In the case of the 'Water System Museum' project, the exhibition-making served as an affirmative moment for the artists, pointing to future strategies for the WSP project by emphasizing the potential of participant-led initiatives. While translating a certain aspect of experience and sending a clear message in exhibitions might have the potential of facilitating the participation of a project, the complicated scene and multiple motivations in the original site of the project could have got lost.

The relationships between artists and institutions change over time and extend beyond the walls of institutions. In June 2018, Li Jie, one of the Hyundai Blue Prize 2017 winners, held the group exhibition *Boat Travelling on Land* in Beijing (Aleph 2018). The WSP was presented retrospectively as a part of this exhibition, and in the presentation of the project, the visual was given a central place to provide a robust sense of the artists' journeys. Back in Chengdu, Cao Minghao, Chen Jianjun and Li Jie have played increasingly

crucial roles in IYouShe's community art development and interdisciplinary projects. At the same time, in the Village of Ciman, in addition to continuing to be the organizer of artists' residency programme, He Wenzhao has established a local art organisation and begun to work with universities and local organizations on more long-term projects, opening up further experiments of collaboration and exhibiting. These projects, in other words, are ongoing; this thesis, as a form of 'delayed' writing, serves as a snapshots of these developing projects at a specific time, and aims to thereby contribute towards a holistic approach to the analysis of SEA. As art institutions have more established directions and programming, they may have less flexibility and capacity to work on projects with many uncertainties and many resources. For instance, with the non-profit status, institutions are required to have more strict budgeting structure and need to report their activities in detail to local administration, which increases the possibilities of their work being mediated.

For art institutions, working with artists in such a way is also a method for them to navigate their working methods. For the Water System Project, it was at a critical moment for A4, when they were preparing to change their identity from 'art centre' to 'art museum', expanding their space and diversifying their working directions. For the WSP exhibition at A4, it was at a time when the institution was going to establish a long-term plan of local work. The programme was the last project before the institution moved to its newer, bigger, site and expanded their staff team. Sun Li and Li Jie were considering whom to work with and make connections with, so further collaboration could be made. They were also thinking about how to work with local artists in the best way. In addition to giving artists time and space, the staff also participated in artists' work. Put the exhibition project under the '7 Day Workshop' programme, part of the education realm', was 'safe' for the institution as compared to a formal exhibition in the institution's main exhibition halls, an education activity format gives the institution less pressure to answer questions about academic value.

Actions in the field: personal, relational, and larger social and cultural motivations

All cases discussed in this thesis did not start with a requirement to work with a particular group or in a specific geographical area;[129] rather, they were driven by a sense of urgency, the connotations of which depended on each artist's personal experience. The relational aspect then facilitated personal pursuits (such as a deeper understanding of a place), while the personal aspect decided the ethics of action in handling the relational.

For example, in Artist in Transit and the Qiuzhuang Project, the people artists worked with were immersed in their lives. The projects were born out of the artists' affections for the places and the people. For Li Mu of the Qiuzhuang Project, if it was not for his relationship with the Qiuzhuang Village, 'a project like this was not valid.'[130] The projects aimed to re-examine the artists' relationship with the local communities and to influence the relationship between the local communities and their circumstances in some way. There was no predetermined goal regarding what the influence would be. Art, as the most familiar tool of the artists, was used as a communication approach first and foremost to start a conversation.

These personal and relational considerations decide how one acts in a project; the artists had to adjust their ways of working according to every problem generated by the presence of art. The ethics of a project is a result of these considerations, such as He Wenzhao's principles of not disturbing villagers and treating the whole project as a companion of the village, which was introduced in Chapter 3. I once asked him, as someone who had been

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[129] Scholar Shannon Jackson (2011: 44) summarises the barometers of evaluating community projects as 'artist-as-community-helpmate': 'its efficacy is measured in its outreach strategies, its means for providing access, the representational demographics of its participants, and its identifiable social outcomes. Such critical barometers also worry about the mediating role of the artist, about whether an artistic vision enables or neutralises community voices.'
[130] Li Mu, interview with the author, 15 October 2015, Suzhou.

living in the village and collecting oral histories for a long time, what was the moment when he felt he was ready to use artistic methods to research the village. He Wenzhao immediately responded,

'Once you think that the village or the villagers are a research subject, the project is not valid and what you do is pointless. I am not in a mindset to do research; I am reconstructing my relationship to them… I never feel ready. My work methods were developed from my experience in working with artists and my understanding of them. Still, I need to consider carefully every step we take. This is not a technical issue, but an affectional issue.'[131]

At the same time, personal motivations and the choice of a familiar place often serve better artists' larger social and cultural pursuits. For He Wenzhao of the AiT project, and Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao of the WSP, they feel uncomfortable with what was happening in society, but there was no room for direct action. A familiar local area, which reflects common social issues in one way or another, provide for a spot of focus, more resources, and conditions for developing a long-term relationship, where negotiations can take place. Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao spent two years communicating with and doing pilot projects with IYouShe before they launched a formal collaboration in the Shuijingfang Neighbourhood, to make sure staff of IYouShe understand their ways of working and the different positions between them. These prepared IYouShe staff to handle unexpected changes taking place during the collaboration, including budget, based on artists' judgment on the progress of the project.[132]

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[131] He Wenzhao, interview with the author, 28 August 2015, the Ciman Village.
[132] Whether a collaboration can take place depends on the one in charge of an organisation to a large extent. As introduced in Chatper 3, Liu Fei, the Director of IYouShe, was open to different working methods and good at making connections between artists' critical lens and her work. It is also not uncommon to see, in a few projects, when a supportive official moved, a collaboration fell apart.

These intertwined motivations, personal, relational and social, make how one always acts a complicated issue, and it is art that connected the dots. This is not only for the artists but also for the artists' collaborators. Chen Yun, the organiser of the community-based Dinghaiqiao Mutual Aid Society in Shanghai, reflects on the project's relationship with community residents in this way, 'They think what I do is a good thing. As for why it is good, maybe they cannot give a specific answer. They do not really need us.'[133] He Wenzhao considers this constant negotiation one essential aspect of a project's growth,

> 'More often than not, it is difficult to give a concrete definition of what exactly we are doing, but you can describe it as an art project. "Socially engaged art" may not sound reasonable to everyone. People join you out of friendship, understanding, and trust... Artists come with their understanding of art. However, when they leave, they might bring a different idea of art back to where they are from. The project grows in this way.'[134]

The foundation of artists' work is local issues rather than an interactive model which can be applied elsewhere. It is in those familiar places artists can identify and constantly revisit issues that matter, instead of parachuting into a place, taking materials and doing works at a distance with the place. At the same time, artists find a connection between local issues with broader social issues, and that is usually what motivated them to start a project.

Evolving goals and working methods – different positions of art institutions
One major approach to defining such practice is emphasising the social issues a project deals with, with its aim to attract public participation, to

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133 Chen Yun, interview with the author, 15 April 2017, Shanghai.
134 The original Chinese is "其实很多组织者也无法定性自己做的是什么，但是艺术项目是一个很方便的组织方式。有时候说社会介入性艺术也不管用。更多时候是情义，理解，信任."

open up discussions and act on these issues.[135] In my opinion, the evolving nature of a project, along with its journey of adjusting its goals and working methods, is an equally important defining feature of SEA in China.

First of all, artists worked in a condition with many limitations; they did not have the luxury of being able to claim at the beginning of a project what they wanted to achieve. Artists were constantly identifying and exploring what they could and what they could not do. One obvious issue was funding. Most artists and their collaborators examined in this thesis worked on a voluntary basis, with occasional funding sources coming from friends, foundations, art institution projects, or collaborations with social organisations.[136] Much of their work relied on finding connections with others' work and figuring out a way to share and learn from each other. For instance, in AiT, many of the participating artists did not label themselves as SEA artists. They participated in the project because they found connections between their work and He Wenzhao's work. They found some aspects of this Ciman Village address some issues in their practices.[137]

These projects can be termed as life practice, without an end date, where artists coordinated project operation with other aspects of their lives. AiT will be in its seventh year in 2018. He Wenzhao's family courtyard, where his parents lived, now is vacant as his parents moved to his sister's house. He Wenzhao decided to convert it into a base for projects with longer terms.[138]

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[135] For instance, in the Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China MOOC (https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art, accessed 2 March 2017), one of SEA is defined as: '…the social issue being addressed is kept in the foreground. Arguably every artwork touches on some social issue, but on many occasions, the social issue does not occupy a prominent place in the intention of the artist nor in the public discussion generated by the artwork. In contrast, for socially engaged art, addressing the social issue is one of the top priorities for the artist, and the issue gets discussed when people talk about the artwork.'

[136] To fully respect the processual and growing nature of projects, rather than promising artistic outcome or setting a goal of reaching a certain of number of people, many artists chose to not actively seek funding, especially at the initial stage of a project.

[137] Conversations with Na Yingyu, Lu Zhiqiang and Cheng Xinhao, who were participating in AiT in August 2015, 26-29 August 2015.

[138] He Wenzhao. WeChat communication with the author. December 2017.

Secondly, a project had different work foci at different stages; the techniques artists used and their relationships with participants were different at different times. For example, the 'Eastlake Project' was originally an open online platform calling for using art-making to create a channel for expressing opinions.[139] Later, participants of the project developed more specific directions and began to organise discussions on topics of social architecture, land use and property laws in China (Huang 2014). Li reflected on the changes of goals, from making voices to education,

> At the beginning, I thought all participants had some views about the Lake incident and had something to say, but later I found out that some of them were not so familiar with the background of the issue. This is a result of the limited opportunities young artists have in art institutions. It is understandable that they take this project as a chance of making art. Later I began to think about the project more academically. Because my background is in architecture, I pay special attention to the rights of space. Art is more effective than academic languages are regarding making the public to pay attention to this issue. I began to work with more people from an architecture background, as I believe a precise focus, combined with art, will trigger more imagination.[140]

A focus on the elements of time and change in a project is helpful for us to avoid an arbitrary or romanticised reading of a project, enriching the

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[139] In Li's words, 'Just like other citizens [I feel angry and want to voice my opinions]. There was no channel of expression back then. Social action is not possible, so we think an art project is a good way [to circumvent censorship]. It is a specific action under specific circumstances. It is a natural reaction. The project is more about the right to know and the right to speak, rather than trying to stop the urbanisation process – it is unstoppable. Even residents were not against the plan, because they could gain compensation fees from the construction.' Li Juchuan, video interview with Zheng Bo, the Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China MOOC (https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art, accessed 2 March 2017).
[140] Li Juchuan, video interview with Zheng Bo, the Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China MOOC (https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art, accessed 2 March 2017).

languages we can use to identify different aims and participants of a project.[141] At the same time, a project may not look 'effective' regarding addressing immediate social issues at any given moment, but its endurance and constant navigation may have a long-lasting effect, driving people to think about their relationship with the society, especially in a context where direct action is not possible.

Understanding efficacy of SEA through art institutions

> Focusing on methodologies is also an attempt to shift the conversation away from the arts' typical lens of analysis: aesthetics ... This is not to say the visual holds no place in this work, but instead this approach emphasizes the designated forms produced for impact. By focusing on how a work approaches the social, as opposed to simply what it looks like, we can better calibrate a language to unpack its numerous engagements.'
>
> — Nato Thompson (2012: 22-23)

This research project integrates institutional grounds into the investigations of the 'process' of SEA. It examines three dimensions regarding how institutional grounds constitute SEA and to facilitate our reading of efficacy of SEA. Firstly, transforming the process in site-specific projects into representations in art institutions raises new challenges for artists and art institutions. Secondly, parallel projects initiated on institutional grounds add a new layer and new meaning to projects in the original sites. Thirdly, institutional contexts offer an additional lens to examine the goals of a project and its relationship with participants.

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[141] For instance, Bishop (2006) discusses conditions of participation as the emancipation of individuals and actions towards the political and community reconstruction, and collaboration as a democratic model. How can we explore a better language of discussing participation which is not centred around emancipation or equality, when a project's goal is long-term companionship and direct collaboration with participants is not always an option? In AiT, artists do not have to always work with villagers. Nonetheless, they have to take traces of people in the village into consideration and navigate their actions according to villagers' responses.

It argues that examining interactions between SEA and art institutions can throw a light on our understanding of both institutional history and the trajectory of SEA. For instance, Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 analyses Cao Minghao's and Chen Jianjun's long-term engagement with art institutions and how it influences their strategies, leading to the conceptualisation of the WSP Workshop at A4.

It also argues that processes on the institutional grounds, including artists' decision to engage with art institutions or not, and curatorial strategies, is also helpful for us to evaluate projects' goals and methodologies to achieve them. For example, as analysed in Chapter 3, in AiT, He Wenzhao rejected the invitation to attend the Chengdu Biennale in 2014, because the setting of the Biennale was against the goals of the project. It did not allow him to organise an exhibition in the Ciman Village where the villagers could be the first audience for the project exhibition. In this case, a crucial element is timing; the 'entry point' of SEA into art institutions is a crucial reference to locate discussions in specific situations and to avoid violence in evaluation.

<u>The impulses of action</u>
In Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, I identified several crucial characteristics, from literature and my personal contacts with artists and curators, of SEA in China. SEA is not only related to artists' efforts to realise social justice but also their efforts to find directions for artistic developments. These endeavours lead to innovations from reflective individuals within and outside of art education systems, who open up space for artistic and social expressions. At the same time, many institutions, in an age of transformation, are responsive to emerging practices and open to curatorial experiments. At the same time, SEA makes art institutions have more

conversations with the public. They become a tool art institutions would love to use to make themselves relevant to audiences, diversifying the ways audiences engage with artworks and demonstrating arts' social concern.

While many SEA practitioners started their projects out of a critique towards the art system, the relationship between SEA and art institutions are not antagonistic. Many players in the two camps share the goal of working out new approaches to contemporary art in China, for which the regeneration of art institutions is part of the task. Shared among artists interviewed in this research project is that rather than expecting a well-established institution structure, practitioners take current situations as the condition of work.

On the one hand, many artists are cautious about the neutralising effects of exhibitions, which could make artworks and documentation of their projects into spectacles, divorced from collaborators in the project's original site. On the other hand, the understanding of artists and curators that it is impossible to condense all the elements of a complex project into the limited space available for an exhibition facilitated innovative curatorial thinking.

'Action' is a core strategy of many site-specific SEA in art institutions. Drawing from their research and work experience in the site-specific projects, many artists used art institutions as a domain to facilitate ongoing projects, or initiated new projects with local communities on issues of common concern, such as the Kunshan Project in the 'Positive Space' exhibition (Chapter 3) at the Times Museum, and Liu Weiwei's advocacy for taxi drivers (Chapter 3) at the Xi'an Art Museum.

Chapter 4 looked into a case of exhibition-making that aimed to make a representation of an SEA project. It revealed the complexities actions could generate, which might serve everyone's aim, while not telling a true story.

Actions and efficacy of exhibitions sometimes need to be examined in a longer time span and broader social scope. One of the projects I studied was in a village in South-eastern China. The project used artistic research methods in interrogating public issues in this village. After three years' relationship-building, and after three public exhibitions held in this village, the project initiator accepted an invitation to do a retrospective exhibition in the opening group exhibition of a museum in Beijing in 2015. When the initiator was preparing for the exhibition, one villager came to her and asked her to bring the documents he prepared to Beijing government officials. The documents were about the conflicts the village had with local government and the failed efforts the villagers had made to argue for their rights. The initiator finally decided not to bring the documents. How do we position participants' expectations beyond the scope of a project and its presentation?

The roles of curators in SEA: participant, mediator and art professional-
Curating SEA from outside institutions is a fundamentally multidisciplinary work, where curator does not occupy a dominant power. In the cases studied in this research project, curators took up three types of roles at different times, or at the same time. The first one was a participatory role, where curators were within the community of practice and contributed opinions along the ongoing process of SEA. The long duration of SEA means that, practically, curators are not able to be present for most of the time in a project. Instinct, friendship and how flexible curators can participate in a project all matter. Curators were engaged in critical conversations about the pressing social concerns SEA provoked, through contributing personal experience and conducting extra research. Compared to one-off research, long-term companionship offers more chances for conversations between institutions and artists, bringing more learning opportunities for each side. Through close contacts, institutions are sensitive to the changes taking place.

Because of the knowledge curators gain in this process, long-term engagement makes curators an indispensable commentator on practitioners' work. Ni Kun joined a few curatorial programmes of Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao as a commentator, mapping out the significance of artists' site-specific research and artistic experiments. In interviews and research about SEA, his view as a curator forms an important knowledge of artists' work. Having been observing and working with SEA artists for a long-time, Li Jie from A4 in Chengdu has his evidence-based ideas about the efficacy of SEA,

I think for socially engaged art to work; it is very important to make it a continuous thing in people's daily lives, as everyone is surrounded by all kinds of problems and information nowadays. For artists, for sure, they will be transformed and educated by their practices as they practice every day. However, what we can see now is not necessarily for the participants. Sometimes it is not enough to have theories alone. Fieldwork and dialogues are only the beginning. Sometimes you think your involvement changes the participants' trajectory, but it might not be so. Since such practices emphasise interaction and participation, you need to do it long-term and learn from the process. You need to use the language the participants can understand, and work with them in doing something together. How to arrange the details of the activity, as detailed as every single action? How to collect feedbacks and really respond to these feedbacks so that you can be reflexive about your original plan? How to use the field and convert the field, or whether to use the field at all in your artistic strategies? They are all important issues.[142]

Such discussions extend the scope of critiques of SEA, out of an aesthetics-ethics binary.

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[142] Li Jie, interview with the author, 28 May 2015, Chengdu.

The second role curators took up was a mediator, between SEA and the public, between SEA and funders of art institutions, and between SEA and government officials. Curators are problem-solvers, taking on the tasks to solve the many logistics problems of SEA as these projects interact with diverse groups and social realms, such as seeking approval from management bodies for artists' activities and finding volunteers. For one project, the artists relied on the institution's staff to get permission from the management team of the local real estate company for access to communities and informants. When there were disputes between security guards and the artists, the curator stepped in to persuade the guards that the artists would not cause any issue. This help opened many doors for the artists to conduct investigations and interviews which they would not have been able to do otherwise. Curators become an intermediary between the bureaucracies and the artists.[143]

As the projects studied in this research project combined personal, relational and cultural concerns, it was difficult to use a single concept to convey their subtleties. Art institutions needed to consider how to present projects to the public. A common strategy of curators in this project's cases studies was to work with researchers to organise lectures and discussion events to facilitate discussions about artists' work and public participation. Curators' knowledge of a local place and its issues of concern played a key role in connecting artists' experience and audiences' experience.

At the same time, much of the curators' work was devoted to finding a common language between institutional frameworks and SEA so the funders of art institutions and other staff in the institutions could find SEA relevant to their agenda. In presenting the proposal of the 'Self-awareness and Reconstruction' exhibition (Chapter 3) to his colleague at the Xi'an Art Museum, Man Yu highlighted the role of woodcut in the exhibition, a

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[143] Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, conversations with the author, 4 April 2015, Chengdu.

medium familiar to this traditional institution, without mentioning its activism ambition. Mediating between SEA and government officials required a similar strategy, but it highly depended on the executive style of officials and the way to approach them. In many case studies in this research, on occasions where the government was involved, institutional support granted SEA projects a sense of legitimacy and opened many doors for artists. For instance, Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun submitted a proposal for Forest Art Festival in Chengdu in 2015, a project initiated by Chengdu municipal government and international curators. Their works were rejected at the beginning as the officials in charge thought they were too critical. Li Jie managed to persuade the officials to work with the artists by interpreting the artists' work as a positive contribution to local culture and tourism.[144]

It is hard to predict the effects of such mediation, and social situations were always in a state of flux. The latter half of my Ph.D. journey witnessed changes in the relationship between some institutions studied in this research and the governments.[145] One institution, after many years' efforts, finally gained the official status of the non-profit organisation. It would enable the institution to have more decision-making power regarding financial management and human resource arrangement, as its staff did not report every decision to their funding company. At the same time, it would also lead to greater scrutiny from the local government as the institution was required to report their programming to the local government. The impact of this change on the institution's engagement with SEA is yet to be seen; however, it can be foreseen that extra work is needed to realise projects. Another institution gained the non-profit title long ago, but its staff had rarely been asked to report their programming, as the local regulation had been not strict with them. However, a piece of work in an exhibition held in early 2017 upset local officials, which led to the cancelation of the exhibition

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[144] Meetings with Li Jie, 12 July 2015, Chengdu.
[145] For privacy protection purposes, I would not specify the names of institutions here.

and possibly the resignation of the curator later. After this incident, the institution needed to report to local officials regularly.

The third role curators took up was art professional, a role defined by the context a curator was situated in, such as the local art communities and the institutional agenda, as well as a curator's judgement on what is urgent in his or her work. As Chapter 4 introduces, Li Jie's interests in Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun firstly came from his interest in changes taking place in artists' approaches. Ni Kun of Organhaus in Chongqing (Chapter 4) worked with the artists in 2012 because the working strategy of the institution back then focused on process-based work and curator's role in shaping a project. For many curators interviewed in this research project, their attitudes towards artists' endeavours were something that could be put away.[146] This facilitated many collaborations and research, as explained above. However, it should also be noted that it could lead to different expectations in collaborations, as demonstrated by the conflicts between artists Ni Kun brought to the Kunshan Project and the local villagers in Kunshan (Chapter 4).

Another prominent issue generated from the intermingling of multiple roles curators took, as demonstrated in the analysis of curating WSP Workshop in Chapter 4, is that questions and decisions curators had for a project could be easily circumvented in the curatorial process, in the name of supporting artists' work and respecting artists' ideas.[147] If institutional presentation becomes an accumulation process for curators and the artists, then it is difficult to get critical reflections.

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[146] For instance, for Ni Kun, 'Even when I do not identify with the strategies the artists take, out of the purpose of cultivating diverse artistic practice, I will work with them professionally and do not put personal emotions in them.' Interview with the author, 2 may 2015, Chengdu.

[147] In Chapter 4 I discussed about how I, as a researcher, encountered this issue. While I presented artists as people in their lives, by presenting the various debates between them, I did not offer enough contextual information about the conflicts and how artists addressed the conflicts. As a result, audiences were not able to make a fair judgment.

Future research directions

This research project is situated at a particular historical time. Observing how the relationship between SEA and art institutions is changing over time is an ongoing work. In this section, I suggest some directions for future research.

First of all, what impact will the increasing professionalisation of art institutions have on their space for experimentation? Shared in the case studies on art institutions of this research project was an openness for artists to shape and change institutions. Some collaborations took place as a result of friendships and temporary decisions, and subsequent support and trust for artists.[148] In turn, artists' working methods influence art institutions in one way or another. Will changes in art institutions narrow the space for experimentation? Perhaps a more important question is what impact changes in art institutions will have on artists' practices both in and out of institutions. For instance, will the various residencies programmes generate a specific group of institutional SEA artists? How will various funding streams divide artists' time in and out of institutions? What tools can we apply to better evaluate artists' individual experiences and the structural changes?

Secondly, how can we better address issues in making representations of SEA on the institutional ground? The cases studied in this research experimented in different ways. At the same time, they produced new problems, such as the absence of a recognition of multiple voices of participants and a lack of curatorial judgment in the social issues presented. It remains to be seen how the strengths of art institutions and other social

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[148] For instance, in 'Hinterland Project' (27 September – 15 November 2015, the Times Museum, Guangzhou), the exhibition organiser and artist Shi Qing worked with Liang Jianhua, curator of the Times Museum, on site-specific projects in Guangzhou for over one month, including workshops, discussions, happenings, and screenings. Reflecting on this experience, Liang Jianhua commented that if the museum would do similar projects again in the future, they would not have such a long project cycle considering the limited labour and resources they have. Liang Jianhua, interview with the author, 10 April 2017, Guangzhou.

organisations can be drawn, both in and outside China, to develop experimental methods to open up discussions. The literature on history curatorship (Kavanagh 1990) presents a similar dilemma between museums' position to enact social change by deciding on a preferred narrative and presenting multiple narratives which may contradict each other. Discussions on curating context (Szyłak 2013), which defines the role of curator as activating a context and changing people's views about a context, encouraging revelations of 'what does not fit, what is unwanted, troublesome, awkward and impossible to theorize' (ibid: 218). These thinking all reflect on the position of exhibits and curators about a context.

Equally important is the role of participants, both from projects in their original sites and audiences on institutional grounds. While it is not necessarily appropriate to involve busy individuals into the institutional setting, a thinking involving participants can expand curatorial thinking and offer an important lens of evaluating efficacy. Dominic Willsdon (2017), Leanne And George Roberts Curator Of Education And Public Programs of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, reflecting on the curatorial process of Suzanne Lacy's coming retrospective exhibition in 2018, emphasised the importance of asking 'what traces of each process live with each group of participants (individually, collectively) and mark the social structures and institutions through which they and we move.' The literature on participants in curation (Graham and Cook 2010) focuses on visitors' exhibition experience — what they bring to exhibitions and what exhibitions bring to them. If SEA aim to enact further actions and learn from non-experts, as artists expressed in this research, how audiences receive the representation of SEA is a necessary area to explore. One challenge will be to identify who are the participants in SEA. Projects researched in this research all span over a few years. Artists often use a long time to identify a research focus, understand a place, establish relationships and try out different ideas. During the process, participants come and go. One participant of a project can be involved in another project in a way. Some participants can play an

important role in the shaping of a project but are not necessarily involved in art-making.

While curatorial practices regarding SEA are not a particular issue to China, it has a significant resonance in the Chinese context. While art institutions in China have begun to consider their role as public institutions, curating SEA offers an important opportunity to frame a conversation about the public responsibilities of museums in China, how they can position themselves as sites for social learning and exchange and how they can challenge established modes of museum making. The exhibition space could be transformed into a place where the complexities of socially engaged art are collectively addressed, an arena for discussing and implementing research. Such a reformulation requires, instead, greater and more effective collaboration between artists, curators and participants in the curatorial process, increased sensitivity to audience needs, new models of exhibition making and mediation skills. Such new thinking could challenge the automatic tendencies to characterise SEA as 'artworks' and instead allow the diverse facets of SEA to be acknowledged in their right for their civic agency.

Last but not least, what other approaches can art institutions take to support artists with a vision in social engagement, both in terms of exploring curatorial forms on the institutional ground and actions outside the institutional ground? How can art institutions grow with SEA together? For instance, how can art institutions work with discrepancies between the level of care institutions can offer and the uncertain requirements put forward by the evolving nature of SEA? In cases studied in this research, such as the collaboration between A4 and Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun, institutional practitioners sympathised with the resources a project required and offered to help the artists when they saw the work develop unexpectedly, through rearranging budgets or arguing for support. On other occasions, curators, assistant curators and educators often used their private time and resources

to develop projects together with SEA artists.[149] When art institutions have to accommodate artists' needs among other needs, these endeavours are not necessarily a positive experience for staff and can cause labour issues. How can art institutions move from those individual endeavours to support SEA in a systematic manner?

This thesis is a first step in identifying institutional practitioners' efforts, which might be considered inconsequential otherwise. More empirical studies, including participatory action research, are needed, to take into account the dynamic, contested and locally contingent nature of transformation and action. When art institutions decide, to a large extent, what we see and understand as SEA, it is important to examine the process of decision-making between various actors who are involved in this process. If we are to champion the possibilities for the work of SEA's in art institutions or to make a critique of such collaborations beyond concerns simply with aesthetic autonomy, techniques in the translating process or complicity, we need to scrutinize this processual relationship more carefully so that the dimensions of ethics, aesthetics and curatorial responsibility within these collaborations can become more available for analysis.

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[149] Chen Dongyang, former staff of the Education Department of the Times Museum in Guangzhou, and Cai Liyuan, Assistant Curator at A4, all worked closely with Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun in realising projects.

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