

## China-Australia 'Remote collaboration': Enriching Artistic Dialogue through Cultural Collage in the 2nd Huaniao Island Public Arts Festival

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### Abstract

This essay discusses how to conduct artistic practice and 'remote collaboration' during COVID-19 to contribute to an active space for public art dialogue and social exchanges. This working paper reviews the multi-layered collaboration model of the 2nd Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival (Hereinafter referred to as Huaniao Art Festival) in China. It proposes to combine "remote collaboration" with public art production, field visits and local community participation to enhance the sustainability of cultural and artistic exchanges between China and Australia.

### Keywords

remote collaboration; artistic dialogue; Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival; common construction; cultural exchanges

### Communication problems during COVID-19 period

The series of consequences of COVID-19 have greatly affected people's daily contact and communication and have become an enormous challenge for cultural and artistic production, especially international collaboration. However, digital communication technology has become the primary social communication and education method in the post-epidemic era and affects art education and production. But how can digital communication serve as a bridge to actively respond to international education and public art projects? This article attempts to take the 2nd Huaniao Art Festival as an example (2021, Figure 1). We will explore the curatorial concepts and methods of combining public art production with 'remote collaboration' in a global and local environment.

Huaniao Island (2021, Figure 2) is a remote and quaint place in China. It is located at the northernmost end of this wind-blown archipelago composed of about 400 islands, known as the Shengsi Islands. There are two ancient villages on the island. One has a long history and supports the stone build-

ings of the fishermen's community, and the other has modern facilities and has become a popular tourist attraction. According to the Shengsi government (2020), the current permanent population is about 800, but it is marked by an aging community with an average age of over 55. Facing the construction of diversified industries and the development of new communities, the elderly have lost their sense of belonging, pride in the community and local cultural identity.

### A collaborative model of Huaniao Art Festival

Since 2018, the local government has launched public art and cultural tourism on the island. However, after the 2019 COVID, the tourism industry has been hit, increasing the island's isolation and society, and extreme weather threatens this place. Therefore, the local curatorial team has been trying to find a new way of 'remote collaboration'. The team intend to activate regional and local people through the production and participation of international and local public art and explore ecologically sustainable solutions for new cultural tourism.

In 2020, the Huaniao Art Festival team implemented the model of China-Australia international art collaboration and cultural exchanges with open practice and education. The curatorial teams from these two countries highlighted the key curatorial concepts of 'encounter' and 'field', combining local activation and remote cooperation to attract local communities. Due to international travel restrictions, Australian artists could not travel to the island. Hence, artists in China organized a resident team to develop 'participant observation' for site investigation, a sociological research method widely used in field surveys (Musante & DeWalt, 2010).

The 'participatory observation' of the artist-in-residence (2021, Figure 3) involved the specific experience and listening of the locals, which was the key to exploring inter-subjectivity. Since artists from Australia could not enter the island to experience life, local artists needed to get an inter-subjective understanding of the island and then communicate with artists far away. Achieving embodied and interdisciplinary perception and translating other cultures and places is a significant challenge for local artists. To find a solution, local artists lived with residents, communicated with them, experienced their lives, cooperated with them, and sought their voices to convey information more effectively (2021, Figure 4). Local artists used different formats, such as text, pictures and videos, or interview recordings. These more narrative methods could help artists from afar get more impressions and imaginations about the island.

#### **Unexpected results from 'remote collaboration'**

Although the inaccessible site visits have caused some restrictions on artistic creation, these inconveniences have brought some surprises. The message conveyed by local artists may look like fragments of local culture. It might not provide all the details of the island with full readability, but the author in Australia believed that these fragments created opportunities for public dialogue and broader discourse. When artists in Australia received these fragmented cultural works and considered them in the context of their artistic experience and practice, a process of cultural collage took place. These collages were the extension of the artists' pallet to be combined and presented at the same time and in the same space (Kenny, 2009).

Collage became a poetic method piecing together fragments to the point of intersection, creating a 'space in between' where these artists could realize a transition from one point to another point (Biggs 2011). Therefore, the long-distance could be shortened to a certain extent, and the 'remote collaboration' could be more localized. In addition, Australian artists also provided a global perspective for local artists and residents. They extracted their concerns from limited information and then incorporated them into discussions of personal experience and social and environmental development, demonstrating contemporary global nature. Their works of art have become the epitome of the status of Huaniao Island in the broader and even global context of contemporary social and ecological development.

For instance, the site-specific artwork, *The Tension Between* (2021, Fig. 5), was set as an immersive theater. Its sensory experience and interaction become an announcer, showing the audience the opportunities for cultural tourism and the potential problems of environmental sustainability. Another lighting artwork, *I see the clouds of September*, (2021, Figure 6) described a healing story in an isolated period, involving multiple landscape fragments and the artist's personal life experience. Haoran Yuan, a Chinese artist living in Sydney, combined real-life, self-experience, and aesthetic forms to create a poetic expression. The works were installed in the form of lightboxes on the buildings on the Huaniao Island, forming a harmonious state, and at the same time carrying out a dialogue of 'nature and symbioses'. The lens-based installation, *Tears of Blue* (2021, Fig. 7), was settled in abandoned old houses with local life scenes, forming a grotesque and mysterious scene. Australian artist Rory Daniel simulated marine life by reconstructing the limb, presenting an alternative form of life. He encouraged the audience to re-perceive the relationship between humans and other living things. There, the fluorescent algae and objects from the old house established a close connection with the place. They served as a medium for the audience to enter deeper and broader thinking.

Despite the remotely involved artists did not directly collaborate with locals and used local materials in the creative process, they all found a vital issue to discuss from the

fragmented information, broadening the public discourse through culture collage. In addition, artists pointed out the local problems with keen intuition. They extended these details to a global contemporaneity, spanning time and space, allowing viewers and residents to rethink the development of Huaniao Island from a worldwide view. In this case, the artists' public artworks could be a bridge connecting the local and the global, proposing the narrative of geological politics under global trends. On the other hand, the problems pointed out by these artworks also may educate a local knowledge for intervening in the global context (Somerville, 2008).

However, the 'remote collaboration' method in the festival production process also has some limitations. First, 'remote collaboration' requires project coordinators to work and communicate more between artists and the local artists and the local producing team. This meant the team have to develop 'reciprocity' and 'mutual generosity' because they must find a way to meet multiple needs (Hall, 2019). Second, the remote artists could not exactly negotiate the space due to the distance, so it was also challenging to change during the production process. It might also lead to missing stories that might deeply listen to each other and generate new engagement (Hall, 2019). Third, remote creation limited the form of artworks so that it was evident that most of the artworks were video installation, immersive installation, and sculptures. Finally, although cultural collage enriched the public dialogue of Huaniao Island and explored the place in both local and global view, there was no obvious clue to developing the sustainability of cultural exchanges and generate a framework for knowledge intersection.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although COVID-19 has caused communication challenges to many places, especially scenic spots like Huaniao island, the 'remote collaboration' between domestic and foreign artists in an International Public Art Festival has helped bring the island's residents and tourists closer together. Most importantly, this collaboration method not only gives a small island an international perspective but also stimulates deeper thinking about 'connection'. A common rural construction or art curation mechanism was inspired through the 'remote collaboration' approach, from reality to fiction and then to the community, which promoted cross-geographic collaboration between artists of diverse backgrounds.

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Image List



Fig. 1 Huaniao Art Festival and its representative work: Finding the Children of Compost, Mee-Yee Chan, 2021, Photo by Edward.



Fig.2 Huaniao Island, 2021, Photo by Suye



Fig.3 Participation observation on Huaniao Island, 2021, Photo by Suye



Fig.4 Communications and collaborations during the Tying Knot's creating, 2021, Photo by Ruijia Fan



Fig. 5 The tension between, Amvrazis Ourania, 2021, Photo by Suye



Fig. 6 I see the clouds of September, Haoran Yuan, 2021, Photo by Suye



Fig. 7 Tears of blue, Rory Daniel, 2021, Photo by Ye Liu