Urban Practice and The Public Turn

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Abstract
By reflecting on the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum in Shanghai March 2012 in the context of changes in concepts of artistic collaboration in art within China and within the China–Australia public art dialogue, Dr Maggie McCormick argues that contemporary art has gone beyond the multiple variations on the collaborative turn to what she describes as ‘the public turn’. Public art, long relegated to the sidelines of the contemporary scene or located as a ‘between’ practice is now set to be centre stage, as a practice of the times. As new urbanism, changing urban consciousness, urban flux and transience are central to changing perceptions that define public art practice, she argues that much can be learnt from the urban turn of Chinese experience that is reshaping not only cityscapes but also mindscapes. Concepts within the paper draw on research undertaken by McCormick leading to her doctoral thesis, The Transient City: mapping urban consciousness through contemporary art practice (2009), which investigated the changing nature of urban consciousness through a study of contemporary artistic and curatorial practice emerging out of the Chinese experience.

Biography
Dr Maggie McCormick’s research focus is on the relationship between urban consciousness and cultural conceptualisation and how this is evidenced through contemporary art practice. The research forms the basis of exhibitions, presentations and publications in Australia, Asia and Europe. She has a particular interest in contemporary China where she has undertaken a research residency, presented papers and exhibited in Hangzhou, Shanghai and at the 798 Art District in Beijing. She lectures in Art in Public Space at RMIT University and tutors at The University of Melbourne.
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Introduction: Beyond Mao

If Mao Zedong were alive today he would see that his image still hangs in Tiananmen Square and his legacy is still playing itself out in the political arena as the children of the leading revolutionaries, the ‘princelings’ (Garnaut, 2012), jostle for power.1 Mao would also see that in a mere thirty-six years after his death, China has transformed. Today standing in Tiananmen Square one can still see Mao’s portrait but one can also see the floating glass and titanium egg-like shape of the National Theatre by French architect Paul Andreu. Theatres and opera houses staging works from across the world are dotted across China’s ever-increasing and expanding cities. Art districts are now numerous, artists move on the global stage and contemporary Chinese art is a significant player in the international art market. Mao himself can be seen immortalised in ways never conceived possible by him or others shaped by the Cultural Revolution, such as in ceramic, naked and winged, in the form of small sculptures for sale to tourists in the art shop outside the Shanghai Art Museum. This is the China that Deng Xiaoping set in train with his 1978 economic reforms that he called the second revolution of the Open Door Policy. As head of the Chinese government, Wen Jiabao2 and leaders to come now preside over a third revolution – an ‘Urban Revolution’ (Brugmann, 2009; Lefebvre, 2003).

This is the China I experienced when in Shanghai in March 2012.iii I was invited to address the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum at the Shanghai Expo Center.iv The forum was organised in association with Green Building China 2012. The gathering drew together academics, artists, curators and writers to discuss the changing role of art within the public space of new urbanism.”v It has been observed that there is ‘a deficit of critical discourse’ on public art (Hackemann, 2012).vi In both China and Australia, critique goes little beyond a general enthusiasm for, in Australia in particular, the temporary manifestations of public art, such as the public art programs of both the City of Melbourne and the City of Sydney, while on the other hand permanent commissioned works in both places remain remarkably lacking in reflection on the changing nature of urban culture. The City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum in Shanghai marked a significant point in dialogue around art and public space and marked an important step in the establishment of public art as contemporary art and of a new direction within the educational arena in China. Current limitations of public art perceptions are being questioned and future possibilities explored within the context of a rapidly urbanising China and a complex political and economic scenario that is defined by a new urbanism not formerly experienced. The forum identified that this brings with it ecological challenges both in relation to the urban environment but also in relation to culture and cultural practice. The City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum specifically addressed possible urban cultural strategies that ‘create a path of eco-city in the cultural sense’ (2012), that is as a practice responsive to the times.

The paper that I presented at the forum, Art in Public Space: art as mediator within new urban public space (McCormick, 2012), posed public art in the role of mediator between players in public space – artists, public, architects, commissioners and developers – as a means to achieve better understanding of the nature of contemporary urban space and consciousness through an aesthetic emerging out of hyper-urbanisation. The experience of being in China and reflection on the issues that arose out of the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum, on intercultural public art practice between Australia and China, and on the changing nature of contemporary art more generally, led to this expanded paper. My reflections led me to question the role of public art practice as one of mediation in the context of changes in perceptions of artistic collaboration. While the concept of mediation addresses points of difference in approaching public art practice, it does not fully explain how and why that practice is in flux. The question arises as to whether or not the changing nature of contemporary art practice and aesthetic generally towards process, and the move from gallery to public space, has positioned it as what is essentially public art. Has public art and its collaborative practice, long relegated to the sidelines within contemporary arts debate and often seen as a kind of ‘between’ practice, emerged as an artistic practice and
aesthetic that has found its urban time? This paper is positioned within dialogue around the limitations and possibilities of contemporary art as public art. It explores changing notions of collaboration in the context of a rapidly urbanising China, with its dense cityscapes and emerging new mindscapes – within new urbanism, changing urban consciousness, urban flux and urban transience.

**New Urbanism, Urban Consciousness and Urbaness**

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), in its report *State of the World’s Cities 2008–2009*, has identified that a century ago only 10 per cent of the world’s population lived in cities, whereas by 2030 five billion of the estimated eight billion people worldwide will be urban dwellers. Some 300 million people in China are in the process of being relocated to urban centres between 2000 and 2020. The year 2008 was a tipping point when the world’s urban population moved to over 50 per cent of the total population. In this context China sits as an intriguing case study in that the current hyper-urbanisation of China is a rapid ‘leap within an ancient tradition of cities’ (Friedmann, 2005). Of all historical civilisations, it is China that has been characterised most by great cities. Until the Industrial Revolution in the West, ‘Chinese cities were ranked amongst the world’s top three cities by population in every century over a millennium’ – Kaifeng in 1100, Hangzhou in 1200, Nanjing in 1400, Beijing in 1500 and Beijing again in 1800, ahead of London (Taylor & Hoyer, 2008). Post-1900 China’s urbanisation slowed compared with the West. Now China’s urbanisation outstrips everywhere. ‘Cities and the people that inhabit them are bound together in an urban century that may well prove to be an Asian Century in which all manner of cultural assumptions will be challenged and questioned’ (McCormick, 2010: 42).

The location of the forum in Shanghai, the growing population of which is estimated to be around 23 million when the floating population is included (Wang, 2011: 5) is symptomatic of the urbanisation of the twenty-first century. Shanghai is an early example of urban China, as it was one of the first ports to be opened up to the West, with the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing leading to international trade and international concessions within the city. By the 1920s and 1930s East and West were in contact and to some degree there was flow through shared space and between cultural concepts. It was a favourite destination for Western elites and celebrities who perceived it through an exotic lens as the ‘Paris of the East’. Mind-space changes have taken place within and about China in a relatively short time frame as it has moved from exotic other to a powerful global player, from imperialism to communism to what is referred to by Premier Wen Jiabao as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (Wen, 2011), perceived by many on the outside as capitalism. Such changes that grow out of the global urban state are economic and political in essence, but bring with them changes in perception of the self within the life experience of people in China and beyond. China is again in the midst of consciousness change as it grapples with the spatial breakdown within China and between China and the rest of the world, the changing nature of public dialogue and the increasing blurring between art practice and activism, between the art institution and public space. All are defined by the feeling of being urban within speed, density, transience and flux not formerly experienced.

Urban vocabulary to describe this state of being is slow to evolve as urban studies have a relatively short history of inquiry. New urban geographical understandings have emerged with terms such as urbanisation, conurbation, urban agglomeration, urban region and urbanism. At the Shanghai forum, the language used was that of new urbanism. In this context, this was not the New Urbanism that arose in the United States in the 1980s as an urban design movement that aimed to recapture a sense of interaction between urban citizens. Neither was it referring to Rem Koolhaas’s use of the term as doubling for the concept of the generic city (2001). Rather, in the Chinese context, the language used reflects recognition that the contemporary urban state is a unique experience. The term ‘urbanity’ has been used to describe urban consciousness within new urbanism, but as its Latin root *urbanitas* implies it brings with it a sense of refinement or sophistication that sits uneasily with the reality of being urban today. The word ‘cosmopolitan’ derives from the Greek *kosmopolites*, meaning citizen of the world,
but its multiplicity of uses makes it a problematic term. Saskia Sassen (2005) posed ‘cityness’ and Darko Radovic (2007) coined the term ‘urbophilia’, both of which have added to the urban lexicon. In my doctoral research I used the term ‘urbaness’ (McCormick, 2009). This is a term found more often in popular language, particularly in blogs and other online communication, rather than academic discussion. As it is a word that has emerged out of the experience, the feeling itself, it holds a strong place in the new urban lexicon.

Urban consciousness, that is the perception of oneself as urban, is of course as old as cities themselves. New individual and collective states of consciousness have emerged with each wave of urbanisation. As trains, planes and now new technologies expand our urban spatial perceptions, while concurrently merging mind space, the nature of urban identity is continually under challenge. The mind and the mystery of consciousness is a field of study in its own right outside the field of expertise of this paper, but as new experiences and feelings are central to conceptualisation of the self and the collective selves in the context of new urbanism, it is useful here to refer to the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. His work explores the relationship between the ‘feeling of what happens’ and ‘the feeling of knowing’ (Damasio, 2000: 313). Damasio argues that emotion is essential in the construction of the self. He defines the making of self through three levels of consciousness – proto, core and autobiographical self. The first of these maps moment by moment; the feeling of knowing in the second emerges from many fleeting encounters with various objects. He use the term ‘transient self’ to explain this state of consciousness. Equally the term could be used for the final state of consciousness – the autobiographical self. It is partly based on memory of who we are, our name, where we were born and so on, and partly on the constant process of remodelling to ‘reflect new experiences’ (Damasio, 2000: 174). What those experiences are, the state of urbaness, tends not to be considered in great detail in cognitive science. For that we need to move to art. First though, there is a need to understand the state of flux and transience that these new experiences and feelings grow out of.

Urban Flux and Urban Transience

While earlier in 1970 Henri Lefebvre had recognised that an urban revolution was in progress (Lefebvre, 2003), the current worldwide ‘Urban Revolution’ is a process of ‘organization of the planet itself into a City: into a single, complex, connected, and still very unstable urban system’ (Brugmann, 2009: ix). This is a period of transition both physically and mentally. Curator Hou Hanru describes the experience as ‘on the mid-ground’ of a ubiquitous flow towards an urban destiny of our own making (Hanru, 2002). It is by nature a destabilising process and creates a cultural ‘ideological vacuum’ in the short term. The art/activism of Ai Weiwei within contemporary public space serves as a good example here, as it is symptomatic of a multitude of spatial and cultural disturbances in China and beyond. Ai’s art and activism are difficult to separate within a spatial context that spreads well beyond China’s physical borders through his own global movement, his international fame and his online ‘writings, interviews and digital rants’ (Ai, 2011). His arrest in 2011, the bulldozing of his studio by the Chinese government, the international outcry and questions over his avoidance of tax all add up to, at this point, a confused state of consciousness at multiple levels. Ai himself is symptomatic of this flux in identity as he ‘remains a profound nationalist’ (Smith, 2011: 59) while his practice can be seen to be an expression of erosion of nationally perceived culture. While his content such as Han and Ming Dynasty vases and furniture are drawn from a past, less dense, more nationally culturally bound urban consciousness; his practice reflects a different state of mind. The contemporary urban phenomenon has, of course, its physical expression but it is also a category of thought and experience that has produced a ‘unique way of seeing and being’ (Donald, 1999: 121). Although Ai may not express it as such, his practice, like that of many other contemporary artists, reflects being urban as being transient.

At the centre of urban flux is transience that has redefined both practice and aesthetic. In my doctoral thesis I defined the urban revolution as ‘the transient city’ and its associated aesthetic as ‘transphilia’ (McCormick, 2009). Earlier concepts of
‘topophilia’ (Tuan, 1974: 1) or love of place, that shaped aesthetic have been transformed into love of transience – transience as an everyday state of being physically and mentally. This aesthetic can be seen, for example, in the practice of Hou Hanru, beginning with Cities on the Move (1997–2000) which was influential in changing curatorial practice from loosely linked cities to ubiquitous engagement, in itself always in a state of change or transience. Cities on the Move began in Vienna, celebrating the centenary of the Secession movement. The exhibition moved to multiple cities, each time transformed by movement. ‘Trans is the key word’ (Hanru & Storr, 2007: 7) in turning ‘the exhibition into an act in which the process of de-identification, re-identification and re-invention of the self’ happens (Munroe, 2008: 79). Another example from the Chinese context is the Long March Project (curated by Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie), which began in 1998 and followed the historical Red Army route (1934–36), but this time used the public realm of China itself as its platform for the creation of artworks along the way. Movement and the juxtapositioning of difference were integral to the concept. These examples are just two among many that reflect how contemporary urbanisation reconceptualises perceptions of space, public art practice and aesthetic within transience in ways not formerly experienced. Much can be learnt from the hyper, exacerbated, urban expansion of the People’s Republic of China and its inter-relationship with the rest of the urban world, about these changing perceptions and public expressions of urban consciousness. In applying what impact these new experiences and feelings might have on public art practice and aesthetics, the contemporary experience of urbanism, urban consciousness, urban flux and transience needs to be grounded in an historical framework. In this context changes in understandings of collaboration can be identified – as cultural identification in the Cultural Revolution context, as desire for a different kind of art practice in the early China–Australia inter-cultural public art projects as they drew together multiple but equal artistic participants, and more recently in contemporary art generally as what has been described as a ‘collaborative turn’ that hinges on process (Lind, 2007).

From Cultural Revolution to The Collaborative Turn
In general, when one first thinks of public art in China one thinks of monumental sculptures. Monumentality, though, has a multiplicity of understandings. Monumentality, in terms of more traditional understandings of ‘bigness’ is a strong part of public art aesthetic in China. An example is the industrial city of Changchun that promotes itself as the ‘Sculpture Capital of China’. Symposiums have been held there since 1997 to which selected sculptors have been invited to create permanent sculptures leading to a massive collection of works and now a huge dedicated Sculpture Park. Similar in intention and aesthetic, works recently installed by Tianyu Wei at the East China Normal University campus are all stone, large in scale and imbued with a sense of permanency. Within the contemporary art scene generally in China, there is an aesthetic sense of bigness reflected in the huge warehouse spaces that house artworks across a multitude of art districts such as the 798 Art District in Beijing and M50 in Shanghai. Symposium themes such as that at Changchun of ‘Friendship, Peace and Spring’, focus on harmony and by implication, on a collaborative spirit (Scarlett, 2012: 29) which underlies such monumentality of expression. Forms of monumentality as collaboration can be seen in the practice of contemporary artists such as Ai Weiwei who have emerged out of the Chinese experience of both the Cultural Revolution and increasing urban transience. Ai grew up during the Cultural Revolution, moved to New York in the 1980s and now has returned to a very different China to the one he left. The production of his work Sunflower Seeds, shown at the TATE Modern, London in 2010, was done by 16,000 artisans from Jingdezhen city, where Imperial porcelain was once produced. One hundred million ceramic seeds were produced and hand painted. While in its contemporary context it may be said that it speaks of the devaluation of the individual within the mass, it also can be seen as pure Cultural Revolution aesthetic – monumentality as a form of collective collaboration for the common good.

The political propaganda posters of Mao’s China and their ‘Cultural Revolution aesthetic’ were grounded in a ‘Cultural Revolution narrative, namely, monumentality’ (Evans & Hemelrijk, 2010: 9). Monumentality can be defined by scale
as ‘bigness’, but also by the state of mind that creates that scale as seen in the contemporary example of Ai Weiwei above. Monumentality can be seen across many cultures as an assertion of cultural power. Examples in the Chinese context of ‘bigness’ include the Yongle Emperor’s construction of the huge expanse of the Forbidden City in the fifteenth century, as well as in the more recent large-scale character banners across the factory walls of the Mao era. Today the architecture of the Pudong in Shanghai soars above the remnants of the Concession buildings along the Bund that in their time were also imbued with a monumental ‘bigness’ that signified Western power on Chinese soil. On the other hand, perception of scale can be achieved through sheer mass. A poster in its own right may be comparatively small, but en masse it is monumental. This is monumentality created through physical multiplicity, in the posting across the vastness of China, but also created through a mutual identification expressed in the iconography of the posters, within a shared spatial perception and a shared cultural aesthetic. Monumentality seen in this light is intertwined with collaborative perception and action, albeit at times under coercion.

The Cultural Revolution ran from 1966 and was not officially declared to be over until 1977 at the 11th Party Congress after the arrest of the Gang of Four. While in retrospect there are extensive criticisms of the Cultural Revolution, its ambition to create new consciousness and practice was also being played out in multiple guises in many other places. In Australia, posters and reproductions of peasant paintings such as the village murals of Huxian and Jinshan began to be seen in the 1960s and 1970s. These sparked the interest of artists in Australia who were themselves seeking new ways of working and ‘alternative values and forms of social development’ (Hogg, 2010: 14) and led to an engagement that continues today. This interconnected cultural practice is traced in a recent chapter by Geoff Hogg (2012),6 who was one of the first Australian artists to engage in crossover art practice between China and Australia. The engagement hinged on Cultural Revolution concepts of monumentality and implied meaning of collaboration. Hogg’s early murals in China and Australia, undertaken with Chinese artists such as Lou Zhijianzhou, Shang De and Wen Jun, reflect this approach. The artists adopted much the same process as that used to produce more traditional peasant wall murals. In the production of the murals different painters undertook specific roles emphasising the importance of the process as a collaborative act between differing skills. Hogg (2010: 17) notes that although largely forgotten today, this kind of artistic engagement was a significant influence on cultural policy in Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s, citing the examples of the Victorian Ministry for the Arts ‘Artists and Community’ program and the Australia Council ‘Art and Working Life Policy’. The 1996 and 1999 murals, undertaken in Xianyang, China and in Moreland, Melbourne, Australia continued to display Cultural Revolution aesthetic in their production practice and also in their scale. The Xianyang mural ‘was believed to be the largest mural in China at the time (Koenig, 2010: 51); monumentality was also imbedded in its spatial connections back to Australia. Contact between Australia and China was accelerated by Gough Whitlam’s visit to China in 1971 and continued by successive governments as connections between Australia and China became more and more commonplace. This has impacted on artistic engagement both in the amount of intercultural artwork undertaken and the nature of that practice, which has progressively redefined the meaning of monumentality and collaboration within a now transient spatial context and an urban consciousness. The strength of the engagement is exemplified by such forums as City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology.

Today many artists move between Australia and China, on the one hand taking advantage of the numerous residencies offered such as the Red Gate Gallery art residency in Beijing, while on the other hand undertaking inter-university residences such as the iAIR Program offered by RMIT University in Melbourne. Inter-university public projects are ongoing and several recent projects between Art in Public Space at RMIT University and universities in China serve to illustrate changes in spatial perceptions and collaborative practice. In 2006 Ceri Hann, Tom Grey and Tim Ryan, together with Chinese artist Wen Jun and theatre students from Xianyang Normal University, combined performance, design and decoration of pedal-powered vehicles to
investigate movement. ‘The project was completed in three weeks but it could be argued that it had taken thirty years to emerge’ (Hogg, 2010: 25). Although in some ways reminiscent of the earlier intercultural mural practice between Chinese and Australian artists, especially in its regard for the local context, changes in practice are evident, in particular the way that transience now frames practice. Movement and mobility were also central to Travelling the Distance 2008, which again drew together artists from Melbourne and Xianyang, Shaanxi province as well as artists in Shanghai. The project explored the movement of people within a transforming cultural urbanscape, looking particularly at the movement of the ‘floating population’ within China from rural to city space. Earlier ‘collaborative’ mural works undertaken by Geoff Hogg together with Chinese artists was open-ended in its collaborative practice between artistic equals and in its outcomes. The collaboration evident in the 2006 work is one in which the underlying methodology is also grounded in an open-ended practice, but now one in which the practice itself becomes an equal player within a spatial context that is very different to that experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. Transience is central to the practice in this case in both content and process.

In her discussion of this project, Kristen Sharp (2010) rightly identifies the collaborative process in this kind of practice as one of negotiation between individuals and between cultural differences, but rather than resulting in the creation of a hybridity in the sense of Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’ (1994), she cites Ien Ang (2003) to identify another element that Ang poses as a framework of ‘incommensurability’. That is, the impossibility of full communication, full negotiation. The most important aspect of this is the recognition of the importance of miscommunication to collaborative practice. The architect Rem Koolhaas, who has worked over a long period in China, has taken this idea a step further in his recognition of urbanisation as a site of ‘exacerbated difference’ (Koolhaas, 2001: 21). He developed this concept through observation of places such as the Pearl River Delta as a new form of urban existence. Like Ang, Koolhaas identifies friction rather than consensus as the point of creative contact. The Latin root of the word ‘art’ is ars meaning skill. Artistic skill is now located in ‘exacerbated difference’. Like the public space it inhabits, this practice is unique to the experience and feeling of the urban revolution of our times as it grapples with the complexity of redefining collaboration within cultural collision. Such practice is now best described as taking a ‘public turn’.

The Public Turn

Within the Chinese art context the word ‘public’ has to some degree been defined as ‘making public’ contemporary art. That is, the appearance of experimental or Avant Garde art outside the official socialist realism exhibitions, but still within the gallery system. This dates back to the mid 1970s with collections of artists such as the No Name Group (Wuming, active 1972–1982), the Star-Star association (Xingxing, active 1979–1983), the Grass Society (Caocao She, active 1975–mid 80s) and later the 1985 New Wave art movement. The emergence of art districts such as the 798 Art District in Beijing and M50 in Shanghai takes ‘making public’ to the next level through the extended international connections of the many galleries that occupy these district spaces. While this way of looking at the meaning of ‘public’ is to a large degree specific to the Chinese situation, ironically contemporary art itself has undergone a change in practice that could be described as ‘making public’.

While China’s experience of ‘making public’ occurred through the inclusion of contemporary art in galleries, contemporary art in both China and elsewhere has gone into public spaces, that is the space outside galleries. Quite different in context and intention, this latter change has been identified in a number of ways including as ‘new genre’ (Lacy, 1995), ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud, 2002) and the ‘collaborative turn’ (Lind, 2007: 15). This ‘turn’ in practice finds its antecedents in the social sculpture of artists such as Joseph Beuys but perhaps also equally in the practice of the Cultural Revolution. What is different is the spatial context and its associated transient mindscapes resulting in conceptualisations of art as ‘aesthetic moments’ (Papastergiadis, 2012: 177) located in ‘a place between’ contemporary art
and contemporary architecture (Rendell, 2006). While Jane Rendell’s examples are
drawn substantially from Western artists in her positioning of public art as a ‘between’
practice, her position is reinforced by the enormity and density of China’s architectural
boom parallel to the explosion of Chinese contemporary art onto the international
scene. Ai Weiwei, sometime artist and sometime architect, in his work *Fairytale* at
Documenta in 2007 demonstrates this position. He introduced 1001 antique chairs,
window shutters and Chinese people into the urban space of Kassel, the German city
where Documentas take place. ‘Alien’ architectural and human visual fragments moved
in, around and between physical and mind space, causing momentary aesthetic
perceptions based on collisions of understanding. What has been seen as a ‘between’
practice is rapidly transforming into a practice in its own right. It is no longer ‘stuck
between disciplines’ (Hackemann, 2012). Within the public sphere as artists and
architects jostle for position in the creation of urban interventions, within both
disciplines, an interdisciplinary understanding of the urban spatial context is emerging.
Grounded in transient moments of collision, new urbanism practice must also grapple
with the changing central role of imagination and creativity in knowledge gaining and
knowledge making around the issues emerging out of an urbanised, transient world.

**The Urban Turn**

While debates around the public turn of contemporary art go on, public practice is
responding to the way creativity, and imagination generally, is formed in the ubiquitous
urban scenario. Concepts of ‘the creative class’ (Florida, 2003) beyond artistic
boundaries, as a means of addressing uncertain times, are extended in a recent
publication on imagination and urbanisation (Lehrer 2012). Like consciousness,
creativity and imagination are hard to quantify. Lehrer notes that in a recent survey of
psychology papers published between 1950 and 2000, fewer than one percent of them
investigated the creative process (2012: xvi). Examples from contemporary business
scenarios illustrate the premise that in today’s complex world, imagination and creativity
can only grow out of ‘collaboration’ based on difference and more particularly on points
of collision. Various studies cited by Lehrer demonstrate how the collision of ideas in
teamwork scenarios and the deliberate placement of work spaces so that different
people are forced to engage with one another leads to a higher level of creative
outcomes and consequently success in businesses such as Pixar, Apple Mac and
Google. While this may seem a far cry from the concerns of public art, like public art,
business has responded to the impact of urbanisation forcing it to recognise the
collaborative process through exacerbated difference. Geoffrey West and Luis
Bettencourt’s urban studies revealed that the denser the city, the greater the potential
for collision and the more people ‘exchange ideas and generate more
innovations’ (Lehrer, 2012: 187). As cities grow, creativity and imagination grows. Like
business practice, urban art practice is embedded within this new spatial construct.
Although the examples above are within private company scenarios, they have utilised
public practice to facilitate imagination and creativity. In their case the aim is
commercial gain. In terms of public art practice, it is for social/cultural gain to enable the
capacity to form common urban identity within transience and difference and a common
eco-culture.

Just as the early public intercultural practice between artists in Australia and China
hinged on recognition of the need for new practice, so too within new urbanism there is
an exploratory practice emerging reflective of today’s needs. This is a time ‘rich with
possibilities for creating new human values and aesthetic standards’ (Wu, 1999: 128).
Central to the *City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology* forum was a sense of transition within
the challenges urbanisation brings, including challenges to cultural value and aesthetic,
and a desire to develop what they referred to as ‘eco-city’ strategies in the cultural
sense. At one end of the spectrum this implies efforts to retain what is perceived as
Chinese culture. While increasingly there are private art museums being established in
China by companies and banks (examples include Minsheng Art Museum and
Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai) and by wealthy individuals (examples include the
UCCA Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing), the Museum Cluster Jianchuan,
Chengdu City in Sichuan Province is one of very few museums set up outside the major
cities by a private Chinese individual. The presentation by its director, Fan Jian Chuan, emphasised his passion for documenting through the collection China's national culture. Equally he valued the everyday Chinese contemporary experience reflected in the Earthquake Museum. Similar museums can be seen across the country. Perhaps even more interestingly, his collection included objects such as milk cartons from the 2008 toxic milk scare when at least six babies died and health problems were diagnosed in many other children. While on the surface, a sympathetic gesture, it is also symptomatic of the desire to value one’s own times and to engage in discourse on the good, the bad and the possible. Similarly, this desire is reflected in public artistic practice emerging out of urbanised Chinese, and reflected in the seeking of new definitions of public art, space and practice by the forum participants. All of which implies new definitions of cultural perception. The speakers and respondents at the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum in Shanghai displayed differing views as to the nature of art in the public sphere, as one would expect, but all were in agreement that this is a point in time when the nature of art and public space needs to be reassessed within twenty-first century experience.

While not definitive in conclusions, reflection on the issues that arose out of the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum, on intercultural public art practice between Australia and China, and on the changing nature of contemporary art more generally, proposes that contemporary art practice has been transformed by urbanisation. Changing notions of collaboration in the context of a rapidly urbanising China with its dense cityscapes and emerging new mindscapes, changing urban consciousness, urban flux and urban transience have contributed to a greater understanding of the nature of new urbanism and its emerging art practice and aesthetic grounded in exacerbated difference. The changing nature of contemporary art practice and aesthetic generally towards process, and the move outside the gallery space, has positioned it as what is essentially public art. Public art and its adaptive collaborative practice, long relegated to the sidelines within contemporary arts debate and often seen as a kind of ‘between’ practice, is emerging as an artistic practice and aesthetic that has found its time in the new world-wide urban cartography.

Endnotes:
i. The term ‘princelings’ refers to the now adult children of former Cultural Revolution leaders in the People’s Republic of China. The term is used in numerous newspaper articles by China political correspondent John Garnaut, who is currently writing a book on China’s princelings.
ii. Wen Jiabao (b. 1942) is the sixth Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China and China’s head of government at the time of writing.
iii. Dr Maggie McCormick first travelled to China in 2002 to exhibit in Hangzhou and Shanghai, and in 2006 undertook a Red Gate Gallery art residency in Beijing, where she exhibited at the 798 Art District.
iv. Dr Maggie McCormick, Coordinator Major Project, Master of Arts (Art in Public Space) and Fiona Hillary, Teacher Public Art/Painting, TAFE, School of Art, RMIT University were the key international speakers at the City, Public Arts & Cultural Ecology forum held at the Shanghai EXPO Center in conjunction with the Green Buildings China (GBC) 2012 and at Shanghai’s East China Normal University in March 2012. The invitation to present papers came from Jessica Zhu, Director, VNU Exhibitions Asia, organisers of GBC 2012 and Professor Tianyu Wei, Department of Fine Arts Director, East China Normal University.
v. Present from East China Normal University (ECNU) were Yong Bai, Director; Lixiao Ying, Chairman; Xiaoying Li, Department Secretary; Professor Tianyu Wei, Department of Fine Arts Director; Associate Professor Yuan Wang, Department of Fine Arts Deputy Director; Lv Qi Zhong and Liu Yuanjie. Post Graduate Fine Arts student Dia Yan (Suedy) acted as translator. Other participating universities were Tonji University (Wu Jiang, Assistant Principle and Professor Wu Guoxin), Shenzhen Sculpture Institution (Sun Zhenhua, Director), China Art College (Yang Qirui, Public Art Director), Shanghai University (Professor Chang Jian Wei), Fudan University, School of Visionary Art (Din Yi Sun Naishu, Assistant Director), Lanzhou City College, School of Art (Zuo Yilin,

vii. This *China Daily* article reports on studies done by the East China Normal University’s School of Social Development that take into account the different layers of population moving through Shanghai on a daily basis, including the floating population that is often left uncounted as most do not hold official registration cards (*Hukou*) and are not eligible for such services as schooling and health care in the cities.

viii. *Cities on The Move* was jointly curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist.

ix. Dr Geoff Hogg is the Public Art Program Director at the School of Art, RMIT University, Melbourne. He has worked on numerous artistic and curatorial collaborations between China and Australia. Most recently these include Meridians and the Lumens Festival.

x. Although recent allegations that Lehrer has misquoted Bob Dylan have led to this book’s withdrawal, this does not undervalue the central aspect of Lehrer’s argument in relation to imagination and urbanisation.

References


