

participatory public art
institutional translation
afterlives

AFTER

THE

INVITATION



The Researcher's
Polyphonic Dossier

Linna Chen

notes on
listening
& the
incomplete
gesture

field notes
fragments
methods
questions

who speaks
after
an
invitation
?



voice / site / labour / closure

THE QUESTION THAT HOLDS THE DOSSIER

Under what relational, evidential, artistic, institutional, managerial and spatial conditions is a participatory public art intervention in China justified, and how should decisions to proceed, adapt, transfer, pause or responsibly close it be made?

THREE NON-NEGOTIABLE POSITIONS

01

Participation is not a virtue by default. It must name real influence, bounded authority and a usable right to refuse.

02

Durability is not permanence. An appropriate afterlife may continue, adapt, transfer, pause or close.

03

Art must justify its intervention. Support, labour, evidence and exit are part of the form, not work left outside it.

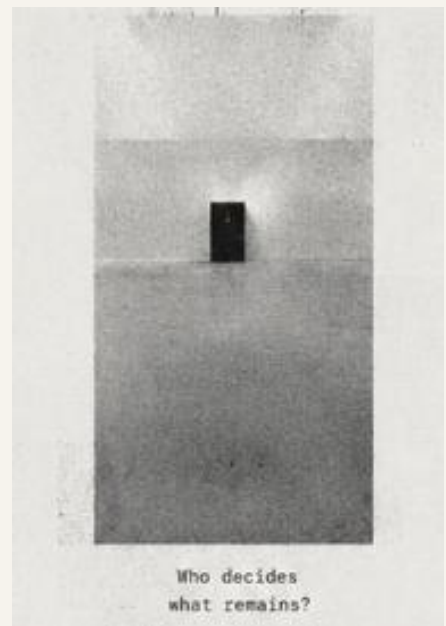
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01

A Beginning, A Promise

A Manifesto for What Public Art Might Become



| *A manifesto for art that listens, adapts and remains accountable.*

I begin not with an answer, but with a belief.

I believe that art can create a space in which people are not merely represented, but heard. A public artwork does not become public simply because it occupies a square, a street, a gallery or a community centre. It becomes public through the relationships it creates, the questions it allows people to ask and the responsibilities it is prepared to carry.

I want to make and study art that stays attentive. Art that listens before it speaks. Art that asks before it assumes. Art that makes space rather than simply occupies it. Art that does not disappear from people's lives when the exhibition closes.

I do not believe that the artist must arrive with all the answers. The artist can arrive with a question, a method, a material or an invitation. The work can begin with walking, listening or a memory of a place that left a trace. Public life is made from such fragments.

I stand for participation in which people are not treated as audiences, evidence or decoration. Participation should offer more than the opportunity to attend. It should offer the possibility to influence, question, refuse, change and continue the work.

Every participant brings knowledge: knowledge of place, memory, exclusion and care. My role is not to give people a voice. People already have voices. My responsibility is to examine why some voices are repeatedly unheard, how artistic processes can listen more carefully and how institutions might respond more responsibly.

I stand for creation with care. Care is not an emotion added after a project is designed. Care is a structure. It is found in how people are invited, how consent is negotiated, how labour is recognised and how relationships are sustained. Care also asks what happens next. Who will maintain the work? Who may change it? Who remains responsible when the artist leaves?

I want public art to leave behind more than documentation. A photograph can record that an event happened, but it cannot prove that people were respected. A number can count attendance, but it cannot measure trust.

I will therefore pay attention to the invisible parts of practice: the idea never realised, the print that failed, the participant who chose not to speak, the conversation that changed direction. These are not empty spaces in the research. Sometimes failure is where knowledge begins.

I stand between different places and artistic traditions. I was educated as a painter in China, and I am now developing my research within a British academic context. I carry habits of image-making, observation and material sensitivity, while learning to understand art as a relationship, an institution and a form of public responsibility. This position shapes what I see, what I misunderstand and what I must continue to question.

I do not want to copy a Western model of socially engaged art and place it unchanged into China. Ideas do not travel without being transformed. Translation requires attention to language, governance, history, institutions and local expectations. It also requires humility. Some ideas may travel. Some must change. Some may not belong. Some may need to be created again with the people and places involved.

I stand for adaptation rather than replication: for frameworks that guide without controlling, and for methods that can travel while allowing each place to remain specific.

I want participatory public art to become more durable, but durability does not mean that every artwork must become permanent. A temporary artwork can leave a lasting capacity. A conversation can change an institutional decision. A workshop can begin a relationship. A small archive can protect a memory. What matters is not only how long the object remains, but whether knowledge, responsibility or collective agency can continue.

My ambition is not to create monuments. It is to create conditions: for listening, negotiation and recognition; for people to see themselves within public space; for institutions to become more accountable to the communities they claim to serve.

I will work with modest materials and revisable forms. Prints, cards, recycled surfaces and portable archives can be changed, carried and reinterpreted. Their modesty is not a limitation. It is an invitation.

I want my research to ask difficult questions without closing down hope. I want it to recognise inequality without reducing people to victims, challenge institutions without pretending they cannot change, and value artistic imagination without allowing art to escape responsibility.

My manifesto is therefore also a promise.

I will listen before I define the problem.

I will make room for refusal as well as participation.

I will recognise the knowledge already present in a place.

I will document uncertainty instead of hiding it.

I will treat maintenance as part of creation.

I will ask who benefits, who decides and who remains responsible.

I will not measure success only by what becomes visible.

I will remain willing to change the work when the people, place or evidence demand it.

I want an art that does not simply enter public life.

I want an art that learns how to belong there.

An art that remains open.

An art that leaves responsibility behind.

An art that helps people imagine not only what public space is, but what it might become.

02

In Other Voices

A Night Meeting in the Unfinished Public Room

STAGED DIALOGUE



| *A staged conversation exploring what participatory public art leaves behind.*

The room is not finished.

It stands somewhere between a gallery, a community cultural centre and a temporary archive. Six mismatched chairs surround a folding table. On the wall hangs a map with no fixed scale: Los Angeles touches Liverpool; a community cultural centre sits beside Plum Tree Creek. At the centre of the room, a question is written:

How can participatory public art move from a one-off event into a durable, supported and spatial public practice?

SUZANNE LACY:

Public art cannot remain an object placed in civic space and called public because people pass it. It must engage the social questions already living in the street. In *Three Weeks in May*, I began not with an object but with violence that had been hidden and normalised. A map below Los Angeles City Hall connected reported cases of rape with resistance and support services, turning a private danger into a public issue (Lacy, 1995; Lacy, 2010).

But your question goes further. You are asking not only what public art can do, but what it leaves behind.

GRANT KESTER:

And what remains may not be a structure. It may be a changed relation. I would begin with listening. Dialogue is not decoration; it is a form of aesthetic labour. Conversation can shift perception and allow artists and participants to encounter one another differently (Kester, 2004). If you ask only what remains, you may value the visible remainder more than the encounter that made it possible.

CLAIRE BISHOP:

But dialogue is not innocent, and neither is participation. Words such as “community”, “collaboration” and “co-creation” can make a project sound ethical before anyone asks who decides, who benefits, who is excluded or who is being used.

Participation is not automatically democratic. It can become instrumental, especially when institutions want evidence of inclusion. So who has the power to decide that participation has succeeded? (Bishop, 2006, 2012).

MIWON KWON:

And where does that decision take place? A site is not only a physical location. It is a set of relations, histories, institutions and discourses (Kwon, 2002).

If this research moves toward China, it cannot treat China as one site. Museums, community cultural centres, universities, local authorities and commercial spaces have different permissions and limits. Publicness must be remade in relation to each site.

SHANNON JACKSON:

We also need to see the support that holds the work together. Participatory projects depend on people and systems that disappear from the final image: someone opens the building, contacts participants, stores the materials and cleans the floor.

In *Social Works*, I argued that social practice cannot be separated from the labour and infrastructure that sustain it (Jackson, 2011). If you are asking about durability, maintenance is not secondary. It is part of the artwork's public life.

The question is not only “what remains?” but “who is asked to remain?”

JEANNE VAN HEESWIJK:

Sometimes participation must move towards organisation. In Liverpool, *2Up 2Down / Homebaked* responded to a neighbourhood shaped by housing policy, demolition and long periods of waiting. Residents were invited to rethink empty property, affordable housing and shared space. The process contributed to Homebaked Community Land Trust and the reopening of the bakery as a social enterprise (Liverpool Biennial, 2012).

Community ownership involves law, money, conflict and exhaustion. But participation that never develops capacity may remain only an invitation.

WU MALI:

Translation is equally difficult. Western theories of New Genre Public Art and dialogical practice do not arrive as ready-made tools. They enter local languages, institutions and histories.

In *Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, the river became a meeting point between memory, pollution, education, urban development and public responsibility. The project brought together residents, schools, artists and public-sector actors through walks, ecological research and community activities (Taishin Bank Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2012).

But no model can simply be transferred. We must ask again: who may gather, who authorises the site, who takes responsibility, and what kind of public is being imagined?

ELEONORA BELFIORE:

And who pays for it?

Socially engaged art often hides its costs. Artists, community workers and participants carry emotional, administrative and care labour that institutions may not recognise. Institutions like visible outcomes, yet the labour behind them is often underpaid or invisible (Belfiore, 2022).

Durability must not become another demand placed on exhausted people. If a project is expected to last, support must last too. If care is required, care must be resourced.

KESTER:

Critique must not make us afraid of encounter. Without dialogue, the project risks becoming another institutional plan.

BISHOP:

But dialogue can still extract. A resident may speak while the artist edits; a participant may be called a co-author while the funder decides what counts as success.

JACKSON:

That is why support and power must be analysed together. Institutions do not simply enable work; they shape it through interpretation, legitimacy, funding and visibility.

LACY:

Still, visibility matters. Some issues need to be made public with force. A map, an action, or an event can disturb silence.

VAN HEESWIJK:

But after disturbance comes organisation. Can the energy of a public moment become a structure that people can use without the artist remaining at the centre?

WU MALI:

And can that structure remain open enough to continue listening? A river is not restored by one event. It requires repeated attention.

BELFIORE:

Repeated attention costs money.

JACKSON:

And care.

A silence follows. It is not agreement. Several truths remain in the room at once.

The researcher finally speaks.

Researcher:

I need all of these positions, but I cannot live entirely inside any one of them.

From Suzanne Lacy, I take the demand that public art confront public issues and move beyond object-centred ideas of publicness. But I cannot stop at visibility.

From Grant Kester, I take listening and dialogue seriously, but I cannot treat dialogue as proof of public value.

From Claire Bishop, I take the refusal to romanticise participation. I must ask who decides, who is absent, who gains authority and who becomes material.

From Miwon Kwon, I take the understanding that site is social and institutional as well as physical. I must also ask who opens, pays for, repairs and closes it.

From Shannon Jackson, I take the idea that support is not background. It is part of the work.

From Jeanne van Heeswijk, I take the possibility that participation can become local capacity, shared structures and spatial continuity.

From Wu Mali, I take the difficulty of translation. Chinese contexts do not simply receive Western public art theory; they test and transform it through local institutions and relations.

From Eleonora Belfiore, I take suspicion toward easy evaluation. If a project counts participants but ignores labour, care and cost, it has misunderstood its public value.

My research will therefore not ask whether participatory public art is good. It will ask under what conditions it becomes durable, supported and spatial, and how participation might leave behind more than attendance: a method, relationship, archive, maintenance plan, shared space or new institutional habit.

The map on the wall shifts slightly. Los Angeles touches the Liverpool bakery. The bakery leans toward Plum Tree Creek. Behind them appears a Chinese community cultural centre that has not yet been visited. A door appears, but no one knows who has the key.

Maintenance Worker:

You forgot to ask me.

Everyone turns.

When the opening is over, who labels the box? Who checks whether the paper has curled from damp? Who answers when a resident returns next month and asks whether their story is still there?

You speak of afterlife. I am usually the one who meets it first.

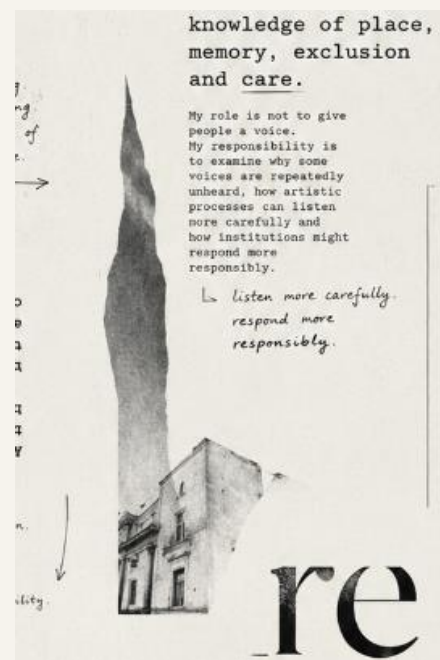
The room becomes quiet again. This time, the silence feels less like theory and more like a method.

03

Scenes from a Researcher's Life

The Consent Form at Midnight

MONOLOGUE ON FUTURE ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS



| *The page has not solved the room.*

The consent form lies on my desk as if it has already solved the room.

Its boxes are square. Its sentences are calm. It promises information, choice, storage, withdrawal and contact details. Beyond the page, however, I can already hear chairs moving. The site has not been selected. No participant has been recruited. The practice may not proceed at all. Still, the possible ethical moments have begun to gather around the form, asking it questions it cannot answer alone.

I place my hand over the box marked YES.

A signature can record a decision, but it cannot freeze the meaning of that decision. A person may agree to join a workshop and later dislike the way a contribution looks in public. They may consent to audio but not to a photograph, to anonymous quotation but not attribution, to a temporary display but not an archive. I will therefore separate these choices. Participation, recording, image use, naming, public display, online use and future reuse will not be folded into one generous tick. Consent will remain active. It will be checked when the form, audience or visibility of the work changes.

The form shifts under my hand.

I imagine an open event. Someone comes in for tea, listens for ten minutes and leaves. Another person appears in the background of a photograph. A child reaches towards a movable object. A staff member says that everyone in the building has already agreed to publicity. None of these scenes will automatically create research participants. Public attendance, artistic encounter and research consent are different relations. I will need clear signs, camera-free routes, identifiable research zones where appropriate, and a way for visitors to experience the practice without entering the dataset. Any work involving children or adults who may need extra protection will require specific approval, suitable information, and procedures that do not use a gatekeeper's permission as a substitute for the person's own assent or consent.

I turn the page. The word WITHDRAWAL waits near the bottom.

Withdrawal sounds simple until a contribution has been edited beside others. If one image is removed, does the sequence collapse? If a collective sound piece contains an identifiable voice, can it be separated? If the work has travelled, who can retrieve every copy? These are not reasons to weaken the right to withdraw. They are reasons to design with withdrawal in mind. Materials should remain modular where possible. Permissions should be attached to items, not remembered vaguely. The information sheet should state any real limits before consent, especially after anonymised analysis or publication. The practice must be able to lose a part without treating the person as damage.

The next imagined visitor speaks Mandarin. The information sheet does too. Yet translation is not finished because the grammar is correct.

Words such as public, participation, community, archive and ownership carry institutional and cultural histories. A direct translation may sound formal, promotional or politically different from its English twin. I will test language with people who understand the local setting. Translators and bilingual collaborators will be treated as interpretive partners, with confidentiality, time and recognition. My own Chinese background may help me hear tone and context, but it will not make me an insider to every place. I may understand a phrase and miss the risk attached to saying it in that institution. Situated knowledge demands that I mark these limits rather than hide them (Haraway, 1988).

The host institution enters my thoughts wearing a helpful smile.

It may offer a room, staff time, access and legitimacy. It may also want names, photographs, positive stories or a finished outcome on a fixed date. A manager may ask to see interview transcripts. A communications team may assume that hosting the project gives it permission to use participant images. A gatekeeper may invite only people who will not cause difficulty. Before recruitment, I will need a written agreement that separates support from control. The host will not receive raw data or participant lists unless an approved safeguarding process requires specific action. It will not approve my findings. It will not gain new rights over participant-made material. Participants must be able to criticise the institution without their access depending on praise.

The artist in me protests. She wants coherence. She wants a line, a rhythm, a room that holds together.

The researcher answers that coherence can become an ethical pressure. I may select, crop, sequence, translate and spatially arrange what others offer. These are real acts of authorship. I should neither deny them nor disguise them as collective inevitability. Participants may check factual details, quotations and how they are named. They should be able to challenge a harmful portrayal. Yet they will not be asked to approve the whole analysis, especially where

accounts conflict. My task is to keep the route from material to claim visible and to show where interpretation remains mine.

The form has no box for exhaustion.

Participatory practice often draws on time, memory, emotion and local knowledge. Payment or other recognition may be appropriate, but compensation must not become pressure. The amount, timing and meaning of any payment will be considered with the host and ethics reviewers. I will not invite disclosures that the project cannot safely hold. If difficult experiences emerge, I will need boundaries, pause procedures and locally suitable sources of support. The artist-researcher is not automatically a counsellor, mediator or advocate. Care includes knowing when another kind of help is needed.

Now the desk fills with data that does not yet exist: recordings, contact details, photographs, consent records, translation notes and versions of the work.

I will collect no more than the question requires. Identifiers will be separated from research material. Files will be encrypted, access limited, retention periods stated, and deletion routes planned. Photographs and voices will be treated as identifying data even when names are removed. Because the doctorate is based in the United Kingdom and the fieldwork is planned for China, storage and any cross-border transfer will require university review and compliance with applicable data protection rules, including appropriate safeguards for research data (Information Commissioner's Office, n.d.; Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Legal compliance will be a floor, not the whole ethics of the work.

The material objects raise their own claims. A drawing, recording or text made by a participant does not become mine because it entered my project. Ownership, licence, attribution, display period, travel, archival access and destruction will be discussed in plain language. Limited permission is better than a vague permanent surrender. A person may prefer their name, a pseudonym, a collective credit or no credit. The form must allow that complexity.

At one in the morning, the boxes begin to resemble small rooms. Each has a door, but none tells me who feels able to use it.

Procedural ethics will matter. Approval, risk assessment and data planning will create necessary limits. Yet ethical life will also appear in moments that no form predicts: a joke that exposes discomfort, a translator's pause, a participant who agrees in front of a manager and withdraws outside, a photograph that becomes sensitive after local events change. Guillemin and Gillam call attention to such ethically important moments, when reflexivity must become action rather than private feeling (2004). I will keep a decision log, refusal log, translation record and reflexive journal so that these moments can alter the method.

Trustworthiness will grow from that visibility. I cannot repeat a public encounter like a laboratory test. I can make the process examinable. I will compare accounts across roles, use observation and documents, seek negative cases, record versions, and return later where possible. Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability will be supported through detailed context and an audit trail rather than a claim that one site represents China (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Artistic intensity will not stand in for validity. A moving room may still support a weak conclusion.

The final box on the form is not printed. I draw it myself.

PAUSE / ADAPT / CLOSE.

Ethical approval will not be a command to continue. If consent becomes uncertain, access narrows, risk rises, labour becomes unfair, or the artistic premise no longer fits, the practice may pause, change or end. A responsible stop will count as knowledge, not administrative failure.

I leave the signature line blank.

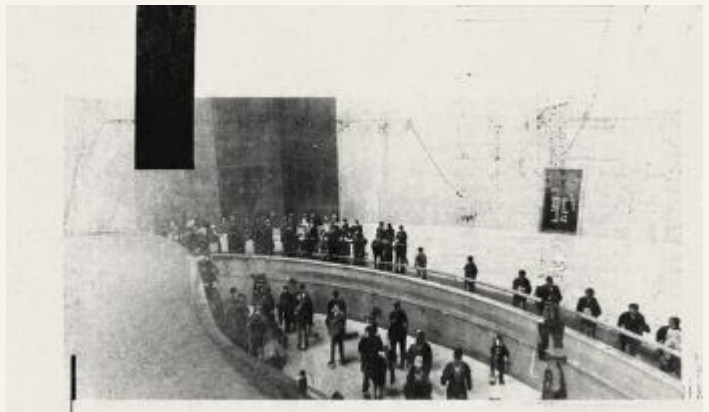
The page has not solved the room. It has taught me where the room must remain capable of correction.

04

Ecologies

The Field Is Not a Circle

INTERRELATIONSHIP MAPPING AND COMMENTARY



| *A line that ends at the exhibition is a disappearance.*

A circle is elegant. It is also dangerous. It can make every person look equally present, every line reciprocal and every absence accidental. Participatory public art rarely works like that. Authority, knowledge, money, exposure and labour move through different routes. My ecology therefore begins with a broken map rather than a harmonious diagram.

The first image separates the visible event from the support field beneath it. Above the line are the forms that usually enter documentation: the gathering, the workshop table, the public image, the artist's statement, the opening. Below it are keys, permissions, translation, safeguarding, cleaning, administration, technical judgement, storage, transport, data protection, repair and the work of answering people later. The upper layer may be photographed. The lower layer often becomes visible only when it fails.

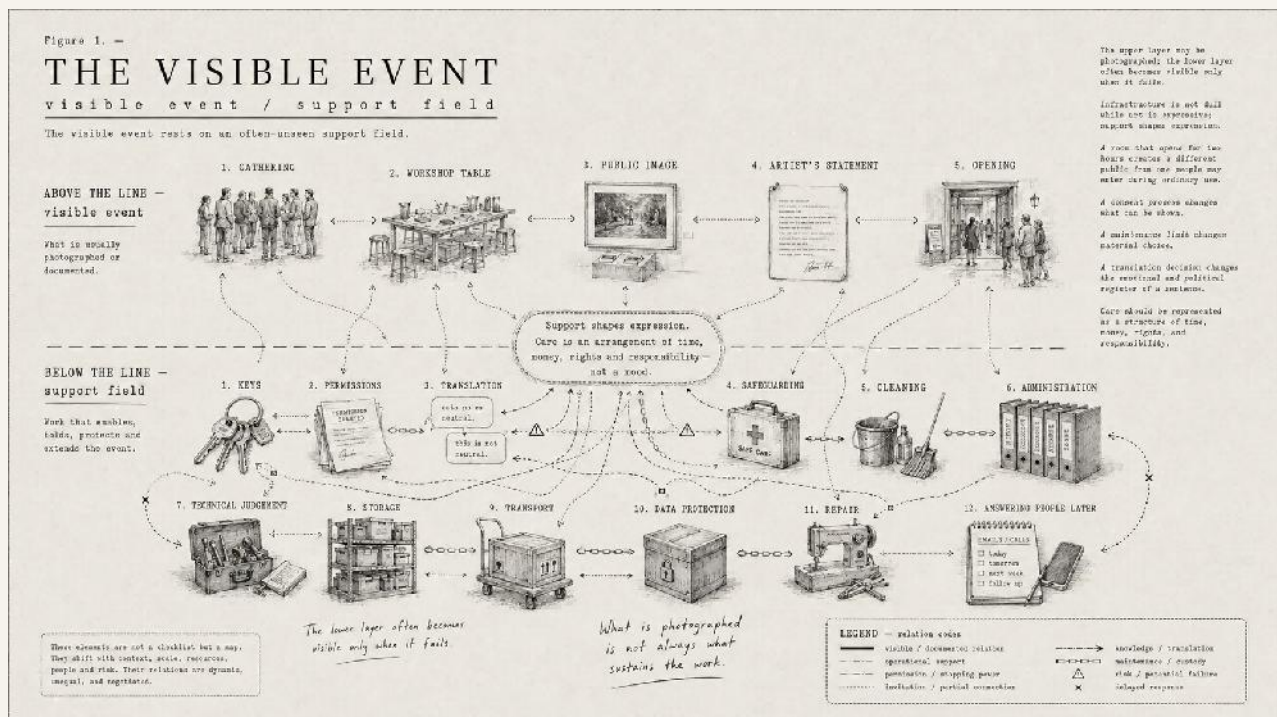


Figure 1. The visible event rests on an often-unseen support field.

This division is not a claim that infrastructure is dull while art is expressive. Support shapes expression. A room that opens for two hours creates a different public from one that people may enter during ordinary use. A consent process changes what can be shown. A maintenance limit changes material choice. A translation decision changes the emotional and political register of a sentence. Jackson's account of support makes these systems part of the aesthetic field, while Belfiore asks who carries their cost (Jackson, 2011; Belfiore, 2022). The diagram therefore treats care as an arrangement of time, money, rights and responsibility, not a mood.

The second image maps the wider ecology. At its unstable centre sit a public issue and a specific site. Around them are residents, everyday users, participants, non-participants, the artist-researcher, host institutions, curators, managers, funders, local authorities, educators, translators, technicians, cleaners, maintenance workers, commercial actors, policies, archives and material systems. The lines are coded by what they carry: permission, money, knowledge, risk, representation, labour or custody. Some lines are thick because one actor can stop the work. Some are broken because the relation exists only through an invitation. Some point in one direction because visibility is extracted without equal influence returning.

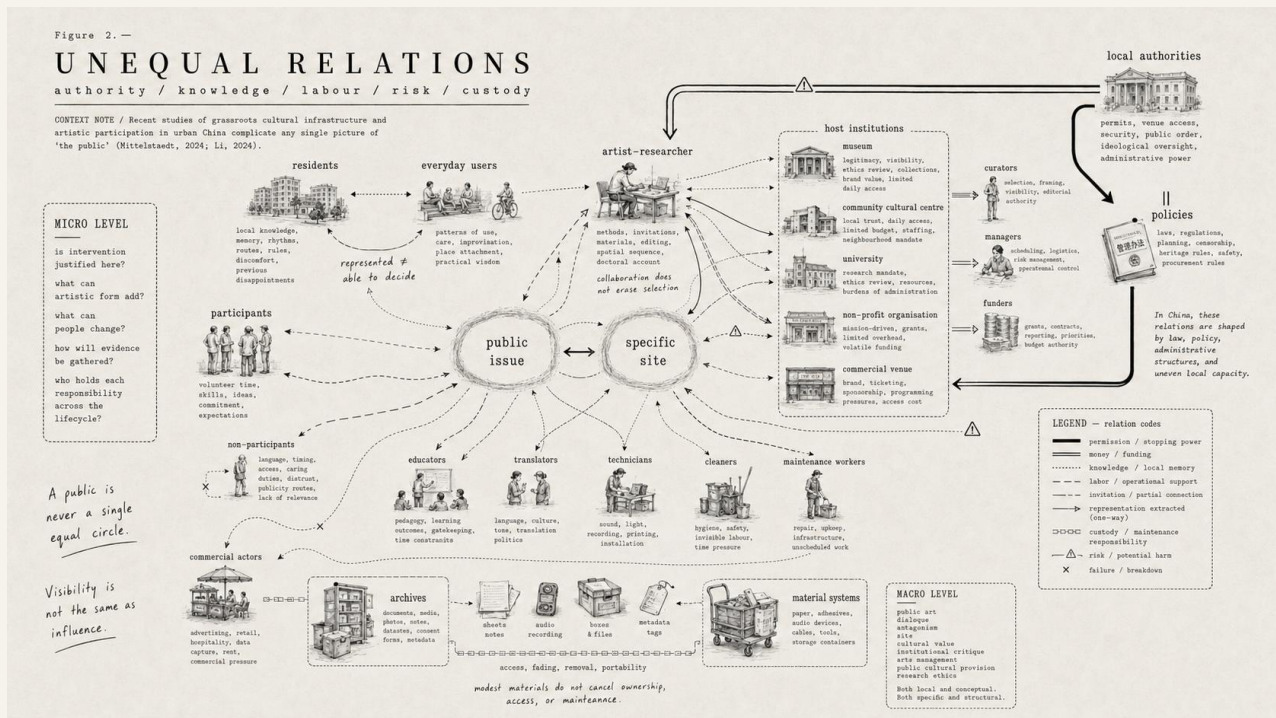


Figure 2. Unequal relations of authority, knowledge, labour, risk and custody.

CONTEXT NOTE / Recent studies of grassroots cultural infrastructure and artistic participation in urban China complicate any single picture of 'the public' (Mittelstaedt, 2024; Li, 2024).

At the micro level, my inquiry will ask whether an intervention is justified in one place, what its artistic form might add, what people can change, how evidence will be gathered and who will hold each responsibility across the lifecycle. At the macro level, that decision sits inside debates on public art, dialogue, antagonism, site, cultural value, institutional critique, arts management, public cultural provision and research ethics. The map is therefore both local and conceptual. It locates one future decision inside a field that has already argued about the public for decades.

Residents and everyday users hold knowledge that a visiting artist cannot replace. They know routes, memories, informal rules, previous disappointments, rhythms of use and places of discomfort. Yet knowledge does not automatically bring budget authority, ownership or access to a commissioning process. A project can celebrate local stories while leaving those limits untouched. My mapping will therefore distinguish being represented from being able to decide.

The artist-researcher holds formal and interpretive power. I may frame the issue, choose methods, invite people, select material, edit a spatial sequence and write the account that enters the doctorate. Collaboration does not erase these acts. The map marks each point of selection so that authority can be bounded, explained and challenged. The aim is not to remove authorship. It is to stop authorship from hiding behind the word shared.

Institutions carry several powers at once. A museum may offer legitimacy and visibility while imposing an exhibition timetable. A community cultural centre may provide daily access but have limited staff or resources. A university may offer ethics review and technical support while turning a place into a source of evidence. A non-profit organisation may hold trust but lack secure space. A commercial venue may offer footfall while translating public value into brand value. These differences matter in China, where public cultural provision is shaped by law, policy, administrative structures and uneven local capacity. The national framework establishes responsibilities for public cultural services, but it cannot tell me how one room is governed or whether one local concern needs art (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2016; Ministry of Culture and Tourism et al., 2021).

The non-participant appears as a broken line, not an empty category. I cannot know why a person did not enter without evidence. I can examine the boundary made by the project: language, timing, physical access, institutional association, caring duties, prior distrust, publicity routes or lack of relevance. Open attendance, research consent and

authorship remain separate relations. The ecology must show whom the invitation could not reach without pretending to own their reason.

Materials also act. Paper fades. Adhesive fails. Audio needs equipment, quiet and permission. A portable archive can travel, but only with custody, metadata and someone who answers requests. Reversible forms may reduce some risks, yet reversal still needs labour. The planned practice will favour modest materials that can be moved, removed or returned, but modesty will not cancel ownership, access or maintenance.

The third image distinguishes multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. A multidisciplinary project places art, policy, management and spatial studies beside one another. An interdisciplinary project moves concepts or methods between them. My question requires a transdisciplinary approach because it also depends on knowledge beyond academic fields. Nicolescu describes transdisciplinarity as work between, across and beyond disciplines (2002). Here, artistic judgement must meet institutional records, legal and ethical limits, budgets, maintenance knowledge and the situated experience of people who use the site.

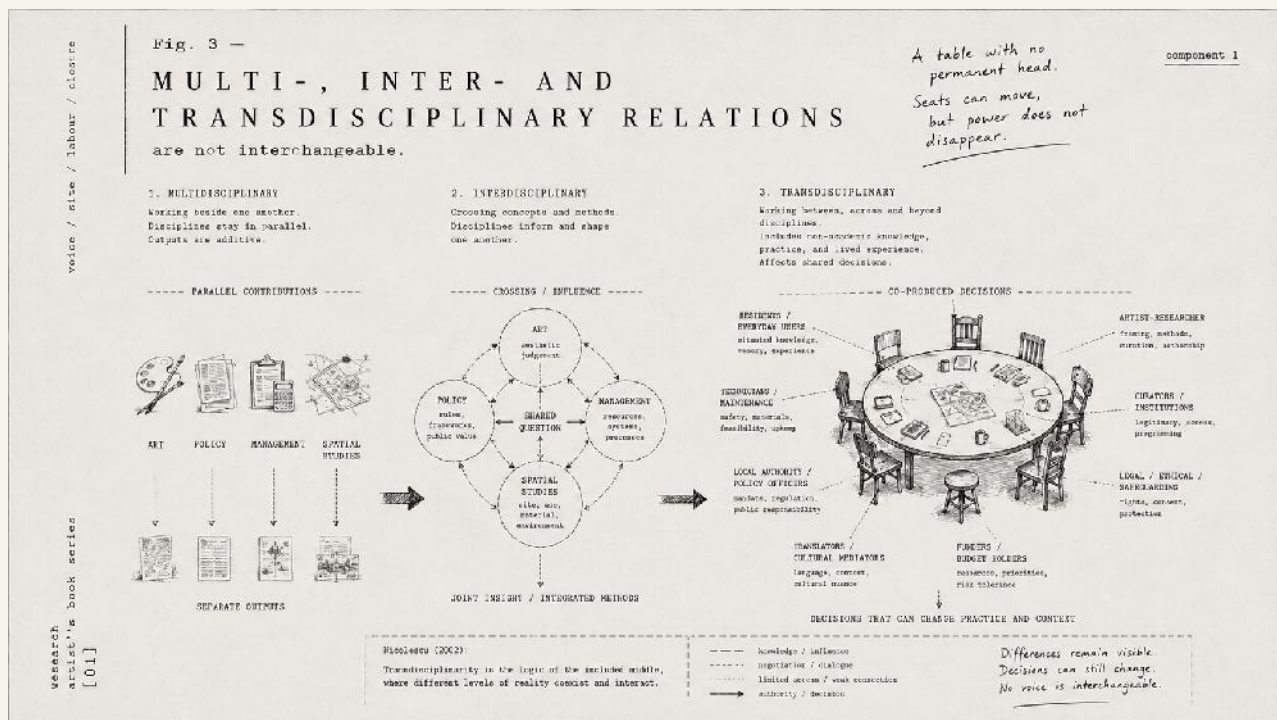


Figure 3. Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary relations are not interchangeable.

This does not mean blending every voice into one smooth language. A resident's memory, a technician's safety judgement, a curator's interpretation and a policy officer's authority are not interchangeable. Transdisciplinarity becomes useful when these forms of knowledge can alter a shared decision while their differences remain visible. The diagram shows a table with no permanent head. Seats can move, but power does not disappear because the furniture has changed.

The fourth image is a lifecycle, not a success ladder. Five verbs sit on a route that loops, breaks and doubles back: PROCEED, ADAPT, TRANSFER, PAUSE, CLOSE. They are not stages every project must complete. They are decisions that may become responsible at different moments.

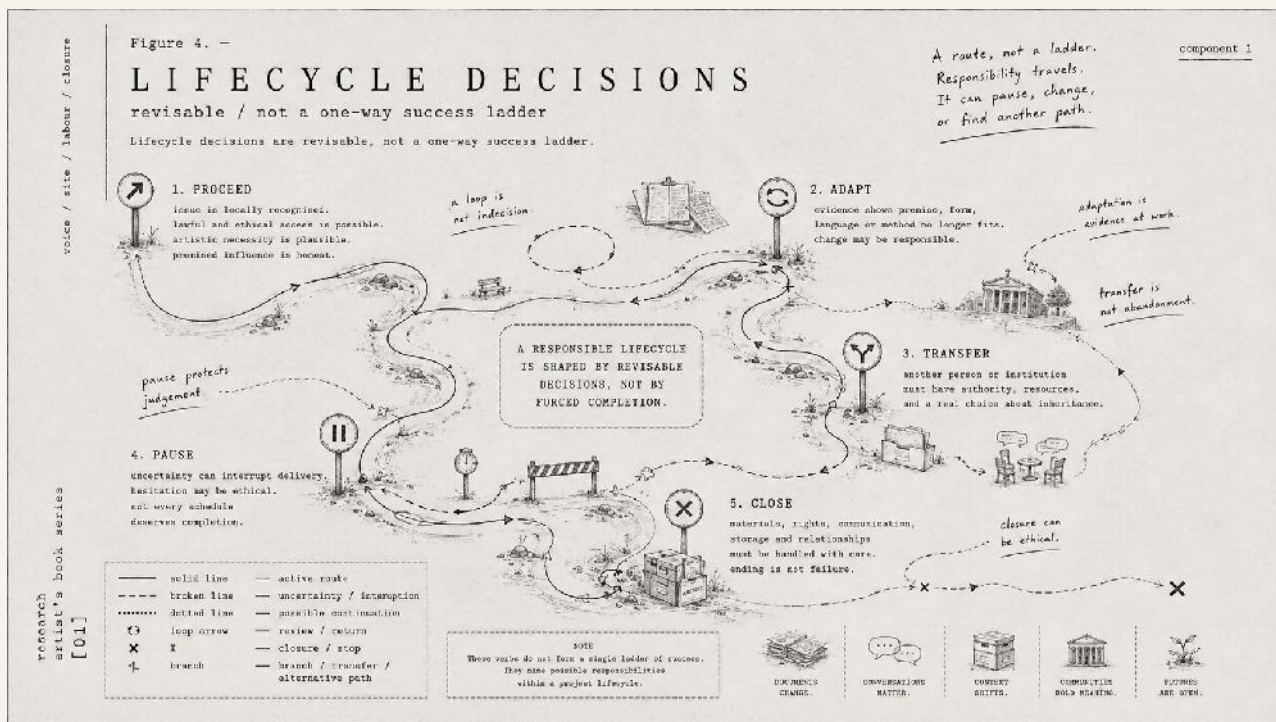


Figure 4. Lifecycle decisions are revisable, not a one-way success ladder.

To proceed, the issue must be locally recognised, lawful and ethical access must be possible, artistic necessity must be plausible, and the promised influence must be honest. To adapt, evidence must show that the premise, form, language or method no longer fits. To transfer, another person or institution must have authority, resources and a real choice about what they inherit. To pause, uncertainty must be allowed to interrupt delivery. To close, materials, rights, communication, storage and relationships must be handled without pretending that ending equals failure.

Together, the maps form an accountability architecture. They do not predict a clean project. They show where a claim should meet a question, where support should meet recognition, and where responsibility must go when the visible event is over. A line that ends at the exhibition is not an afterlife. It is a disappearance.

05

The Unsettled Image

The Photograph I Did Not Take

AN IMAGINED AUDIENCE MEDITATION



| *The image becomes honest when it can no longer look complete.*

FORM NOTE / An imagined audience meditation in dialogue with Hervé Guibert's 'The Perfect Image' in *Ghost Image*. It is not field evidence.

What follows is an imagined audience voice. It does not report completed fieldwork. It tests how a proposed practice might be experienced, resisted or changed.

I enter because it is raining.

The corridor has turned the colour of wet stone, and the door is open. Nothing announces an exhibition. There is a room, a loose circle of chairs, several paper routes fixed to a wall, a low sound I cannot yet separate from the building, and a table with small cards. The arrangement looks careful enough to make me cautious and unfinished enough to make me curious.

I reach for my phone.

The image on the screen is better than the room. It removes the hum of the light. It straightens the chairs. It turns the paper into a soft pattern and excludes the notice beside the door. In the photograph, the work would look complete. In front of me, it does not know whether I am allowed to touch it.

I lower the phone.

A card says: YOU MAY MOVE THIS CHAIR. Another says: YOU MAY LEAVE WITHOUT CONTRIBUTING. A third has been turned face down. I cannot tell whether the gesture is part of the work or the act of someone who did not want to be read. The uncertainty changes my body. I stop behaving like a visitor who has been asked to admire and begin behaving like a person who might cause a consequence.

This may be the first thing the practice can reveal that an essay cannot. Writing can tell me that participation involves power. The room can make permission felt as hesitation in the hand. A sentence can define authorship. The movable chair can show whether another person's action actually alters the composition. A paragraph can discuss refusal. The face-down card can occupy space without explaining itself.

I move the chair a few centimetres.

The sound becomes clearer. A voice describes a route through the neighbourhood, then pauses before naming a place. Another voice enters from a different speaker and disagrees. The two accounts do not resolve. The room has not edited them into harmony. I feel relief, then suspicion. Perhaps disagreement has become another attractive material. Perhaps the artist has designed conflict so well that it no longer threatens anyone.

On the wall, a small note names who selected the sequence and what participants could change. It also states that some materials were removed after consent changed. The gap is visible. I find myself looking harder at the absence than at the remaining images.

I think of the perfect photograph I almost took. It would have shown a generous room full of traces. It would not have shown the permission attached to each trace, the labour of translation, the person who stored the audio, or the possibility that the arrangement may close next month. The photograph would have made the project beautiful by making its conditions disappear.

This beauty is more difficult. It is made from edges that do not meet.

I read a route drawn in blue pencil. It passes a stairwell, a locked door and a place marked ONLY AFTER SIX. I do not know whether the map records access, memory or fear. The caption refuses to decide for me. I want more explanation. I also sense that more explanation might take the route away from the person who made it. The practice holds me between curiosity and entitlement.

Another visitor enters. He glances at the wall and asks, "Is this just consultation made to look like art?" The question is sharp enough to embarrass me, because I had been enjoying the uncertainty. He may be right. If the work only collects opinions and displays them attractively, its artistic claim is weak. The form must do more than illustrate research. It must reorganise attention, relation or space in a way that can be tested.

I watch him move nothing and leave.

His resistance also tests the work. Does the invitation allow scepticism, or does it treat scepticism as failed participation? Can the practice be experienced without confession? Can someone reject its premise and still affect its meaning? The empty chair near the door now seems less like an absence than a position.

I return to the table. One card asks where I would place the boundary of the site. I dislike the question. The boundary may not be mine to place. I write nothing.

For a moment, I feel that I have disappointed the room. Then I notice a box labelled NO RESPONSE REQUIRED. It is not decorative. It offers no reward. My silence is not collected, interpreted or converted into a quotation. This small refusal changes my reading of everything else.

The practice may discover its research value through such moments. Making can test whether influence is legible, whether withdrawal can occur without collapse, whether materials invite use or demand reverence, whether access exists for different bodies, and whether the work can survive another person's edit. It can expose the difference between a claim and a spatial fact. A method that sounds open in writing may become controlling when the object is fragile, the caption is authoritative, or the route assumes one kind of body.

The room can also fail more honestly than an argument. Tape may lift. Audio may become inaudible when the corridor fills. A participant's preferred wording may sit awkwardly beside the visual rhythm. A staff member may move a piece for safety. Each disturbance can reveal whether the project values the public relation or only the intended image.

I pick up my phone again at the door.

Now there is no perfect frame. The chair I moved cuts across the map. The face-down card is nearly outside the shot. A reflection covers the title. I could correct all of this by stepping to the left, but I do not.

The image I keep is the one I did not take. It remains in the body as a question: who is allowed to frame whom, and what must escape the frame for the work to stay public?

06

To the Stranger

A Letter Left Beside the Key

EVIDENCE-INFORMED LETTER



| *Do not give another person a fragile structure and call it local ownership.*

Dear Stranger,

Perhaps you found this letter after the chairs were stacked. Perhaps the tape has left a pale line on the floor, and the room has returned to its ordinary work. You may be an artist, a researcher, a cultural worker, a resident, or someone who entered only because the door was open. I do not know which part of the project reached you. I hope the key did not arrive without an explanation.

Before you make anything, put the object down.

Listen to the place before you name its lack. An empty wall may be used through routines you cannot see. A quiet building may hold memories, agreements and disappointments that do not announce themselves to a visitor. Ask who recognises the issue you have noticed. Ask what has already been attempted. Ask whether art can add attention, sensation, imagination or spatial understanding that another response cannot offer. Sometimes the honest answer will be practical support, research without display, or no intervention.

The field has taught us much about dialogue, conflict, site, collaboration and support. Lacy showed how art might organise a public issue. Kester defended the knowledge formed through sustained listening. Bishop warned against treating participation as automatic virtue. Kwon made site larger than location. Jackson exposed the systems that hold social work up. Belfiore followed care towards its hidden costs. Long-term practices such as Homebaked and Plum Tree Creek show how artistic work can become entangled with organisation, place and everyday life.

Yet a gap remains between these insights. We still need a way to judge the whole lifecycle of an intervention without assuming that beginning, participation or continuation is good in itself. We need evidence beyond the opening. We need to know what people could change, who carried the work, which institution shaped it, what survived, what became a burden, and whether ending was handled responsibly. In China, this problem also requires careful attention to public cultural institutions, local authority, commercial involvement, language, policy, law and the many meanings attached to publicness. A model cannot simply be imported and renamed.

This research will try to build an adaptive framework around five possible decisions: proceed, adapt, transfer, pause and close. It will not be a recipe. It will be a structure for making reasons visible. The framework will ask whether the issue is locally recognised, whether artistic form is necessary, whether participation carries real influence, whether evidence supports the claim, whether labour and risk are fairly held, and whether an afterlife has a responsible owner.

You may be tempted to begin with an invitation. Wait.

Study the institution as closely as the people it hopes to involve. Who controls the key, timetable, budget, public statement, archive and final approval? Who is allowed to criticise the host? Who translates? Who cleans? Who answers when the artist has left? The technician, administrator and maintenance worker may know the future of the work more clearly than the opening speaker. Bring them into the research before their labour becomes invisible.

Write down what participants can change. Can they challenge the premise? Can they remove an image, alter a route, reject attribution, question the edit, or influence what continues? Tell them which decisions remain yours. False equality is less ethical than honest limits. Leave room for refusal. The person who says no has not failed your project. Do not invent a private reason. Examine the boundary your invitation made.

Carry a second map for evidence. On it, separate what you observed, what someone told you, what a report claimed and what you inferred. Seek different roles and conflicting accounts. Return after the event where possible. A crowded room does not prove trust. A moving testimony does not prove wider benefit. A beautiful photograph does not show who had to repair the wall.

The planned study will compare selected Chinese and international cases, including work that changed, struggled or ended. It will use documents, interviews, observation and later follow-up. It will speak not only with artists and curators, but also with managers, educators, funders, technicians, maintenance workers, residents and former participants where appropriate. Two small future practice cycles may test the framework through reversible spatial forms. The second will revise the first rather than repeat it. Both will remain subject to ethical approval, local relevance and the possibility of not proceeding.

You may ask what such a practice can know that words cannot.

A room can make authority physical. A movable object can test whether influence is real. A sound that disappears beneath ordinary noise can reveal the limits of an imagined audience. A blank panel can refuse the researcher's premise. Materials can show where an ethical claim breaks under use. Making does not replace analysis. It gives the question a body that can resist us.

Design the ending while the room is still empty. Decide who will remove, store, repair, return or archive each material. Agree who will answer participants later. Set review dates. Do not give another person a fragile structure and call it local ownership. Transfer requires consent, authority, resources and the right to refuse the inheritance. Closure may be kinder than a continuation sustained by guilt.

Keep traces of uncertainty. A decision log, translation note, version history, consent record and failed invitation can show how the method changed. These are not administrative leftovers. They are part of the evidence. They allow another person to examine your judgement rather than simply trust your voice.

Stranger, you may still make mistakes. I will too. The aim is not innocence. It is answerability: the ability to show what you knew, what you missed, who corrected you and what changed because they did.

When you reach the door, do not ask only whether it opens. Ask who feels able to enter, who can alter the room, and who will hold the key when you are gone.

Leave your reply in the margin.

Yours,

A researcher learning to draw the exit before the entrance

07

Afterword

What the Writing Taught Me

META-REFLECTION



| *The research begins when I become answerable for the invitation.*

I began with duration. I thought the problem was that participatory public art often ended too soon. Writing through seven forms made that diagnosis less comfortable. A project cannot deserve an afterlife merely because it calls itself participatory. Before asking how it might last, I must ask whether it should begin, what art adds, what people can change, what evidence supports the claim and who carries the consequences.

The manifesto turned values into demands. Its absurd room exposed the ease with which attendance becomes proof and care becomes decoration. The dialogue prevented those demands from hardening into a new orthodoxy. Each voice kept a different danger visible: public issue, listening, conflict, authorship, support, hidden cost, organisational duration, translation and site.

The ethics monologue changed the role of the consent form. It remains necessary, but it cannot contain the whole moral life of the study. Ethics will have to enter material choice, translation, institutional agreements, data planning, authorship, withdrawal and the permission to stop. A relational ontology directs attention to changing arrangements rather than fixed entities. A situated epistemology makes my partial knowledge explicit and open to correction.

The ecology maps broke the simple pair of artist and community. Once keys, budgets, policy, maintenance, non-participation and materials entered the picture, participation became a question of governance as well as encounter. Transdisciplinarity now means designing decisions in which academic, artistic, institutional and everyday knowledge can alter one another without becoming the same.

The imagined audience took the work away from my intention. Hesitation, misunderstanding and resistance became possible evidence. Practice-led research will allow making to generate questions; practice-based evidence may emerge when a spatial form, revision or ending carries knowledge that writing alone cannot hold. Yet no artwork will prove its own value. The route from encounter to claim must remain visible.

METHOD NOTE / Practice-led and practice-based distinctions are used here in dialogue with Sullivan (2010) and Candy and Edmonds (2018).

The visual language also changed my thinking. Broken lines, empty areas, rotated words and incomplete maps do not illustrate a finished argument. They keep hierarchy, absence and instability in view. The page becomes another research space. It asks where the eye is directed, which information is enlarged, and what remains faint at the edge. This does not make design evidence by itself. It makes design accountable to the question, so that the dossier's form rehearses the same demand it places on practice: show the frame, expose the support, and leave room for revision before any public encounter begins.

The letter clarified the contribution I can responsibly pursue: not a universal model for China, and not a promise of permanence, but a tested accountability architecture for decisions to proceed, adapt, transfer, pause or close. The next stage will begin with approved case research and non-intervention reconnaissance. Any participant-facing practice will remain small, reversible, site-specific and conditional.

The question now reads:

Under what relational, evidential, artistic, institutional, managerial and spatial conditions is a participatory public art intervention in China justified, and how should decisions to proceed, adapt, transfer, pause or responsibly close it be made?

The research will not begin when I invite people to enter.

It will begin when I become answerable for the invitation.

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