

How public ceramic art installations touch empathy

I spent five years of my university life in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. Although I was born in Zhuhai, a city close to Guangzhou, Zhuhai is a small coastal city known mainly for its tourism industry. Despite their proximity, the pace of life and cultural atmosphere of these two cities are very different.

The contrast between Guangzhou and Zhuhai undoubtedly epitomises the diversity between cities in southern China. Guangzhou, as the capital of Guangdong Province, is not only a commercial and economic centre, but also a gathering place of deep history and culture. Its cultural heritage can be traced back to the Qin and Han Dynasties, through the prosperity of the South Vietnamese Kingdom and the glory days of the Tang and Song Dynasties, until it became the frontline of reform and opening up in modern times. Every street and building in the city seems to tell a story of growth and change.

In contrast, Zhuhai is a relatively young city whose development has relied heavily on recent tourism and border economy. Zhuhai's beautiful scenery and pleasant climate make it an ideal tourist destination, and the city has been designed with a greater emphasis on the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature. Although Zhuhai cannot compare with Guangzhou in terms of historical depth, its novelty and freshness provide a different cultural experience.

In the early days of moving to Guangzhou, the pace of life inevitably underwent a drastic adjustment. The hustle and bustle of Guangzhou may have initially made me feel uncomfortable, but the city's vibrancy and multiculturalism are also part of its charm. The transition from the tranquillity of Zhuhai to the hustle and bustle of Guangzhou is not only a geographical move, but also a cultural and psychological leap. Guangzhou's cultural landscape, such as its ancient temples, busy commercial districts, and variety of local cuisine, have influenced me in their own unique ways, shaping my attitudes and values.

From Zhuhai to Guangzhou to Swansea, each geographical change has been accompanied by the adaptation to a new environment and the review of old habits. These experiences have made me treasure cultural diversity and understand the deeper meaning behind different rhythms and lifestyles. Such contrasts and experiences may just be rich material for future creations and reflections.

In this article, my aim is to recount my discoveries and reflections on this period of study in Swansea, as well as the creative process. Finally, I will attempt to answer the question "How do public ceramic art installations touch empathy?" This question is answered. In order to do so, I will explore three research methods.

In Autoethnography(cited in Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 740; as discussed by Butz and Besio, 2009), David Butz discusses the concept of autoethnography as a form of self-narrative that situates the self within a social context. The author outlines the main features of autoethnography, its relationship to the 'crisis of representation', and describes five categories of autoethnography practice. The five categories of autoethnography practice described are: personal experience narratives, reflexive or narrative ethnography, grounded auto-ethnography, so-called aboriginal ethnography, and insider or full-membership studies.

Norman Denzin(Denzin, 1989) defines personal experience narratives as "the stories people tell about their personal experiences." Personal experience narrative is a type of autobiographical ethnographic practice in which

scholars use their own life circumstances as a way of understanding broader social or cultural phenomena, and often use personal narrative writing as a performance strategy to incorporate feelings and emotions into their analyses. This type of autobiographical ethnographic practice requires the researcher to make themselves the primary object of study in an endeavour to understand aspects of the world that involve, but transcend, themselves. It is the personal experience narrative approach to autobiographical ethnographic practice that is primarily used in this paper.

I was able to explore and describe the spiritual core of my own artistic practice in depth through the method of autoethnography, which not only helped me to recognise my own artistic motivations and the cultural influences behind them, but also allowed me to compare these findings with the practices of other artists.

For example, by comparing Gormley's spiritual world with McEwan's profound reflections on the real world (McEwan, 2006), I can see more clearly the uniqueness and commonalities in my own work. Gormley's work often reflects a deep understanding of the intertwining of nature and culture, while McEwan's work delves into human emotions and moral complexity. Such contrasts have not only enriched my understanding of my own work, but also inspired me to pursue deeper cultural and emotional expression in my creations.

Bachelard's phenomenological framework (2014) provides poetic depth for understanding the relationship between space and people. By analysing the structure of the 'house', we not only learn about the function of physical space, but also explore how space affects and shapes individual perceptions and experiences. In my art, this understanding helps me to design works that are not only objects to be viewed, but also spaces to be experienced, which can trigger emotional resonance and deep reflection in the viewer. For example, by creating sculptures that lead the viewer on a physical and psychological exploration, I try to make sure that everyone can find their own "space" in art to experience their personal feelings and memories.

At the same time, I will refer to Nietzsche's account of the "will to power" and consider in depth how to stimulate human emotions and creativity from the depths of the spirit. Nietzsche's philosophy emphasises the power of individual existence and the importance of self-transcendence, which provides a unique perspective for understanding and stimulating human potential. Through Nietzsche's theories, we can explore how creative self-expression can be achieved by strengthening one's will and emotions.

Two years ago, I began transitioning from a relatively closed state of self-exploration to focusing more on the relationship between the work itself and people. This process was not completed overnight. As I continually reflected on the interactions between artists, audiences, and society, I gradually realized that the core task of an artist remains to use their work as a medium to convey ideas and emotions. Only when an artist's work can truly and effectively express the ideas they wish to convey can their identity as an artist be genuinely established.

In a society filled with complex social relationships, requiring cognition and comprehensive awareness, the role of art becomes particularly important. Art not only inspires the construction of social relationships but also enlightens people to recognize and change social realities. Art is not merely a simple description of reality; its deeper function is to touch the heart, connect people's life experiences, and help individuals understand and empathize with the lives of others. Thus, artists not only express their own perspectives but also enable audiences to experience life experiences they have never had through their works.

This deep connection between the artwork and the audience also gives artists the opportunity to redefine their identities and the social value of their works. In this process, the artwork becomes a unique language through which artists can explore and express broader themes such as the relationship between the individual and the collective, social change, and cultural conflicts. Such artistic practices not only enrich the creative dimensions of artists but also bring reflection and inspiration to society, prompting a deeper understanding of life and existence.

As stated in *The Necessity of Art* (2010, p. 14): "But whether art soothes or awakens, casts shadows or brings light, it is never merely a clinical description of reality. Its function is always to move the whole man, to enable the 'I' to identify itself with another's life, to make its own what it is not and yet is capable of being." Therefore, the key to breaking the internal consumption of spirit and contemplation of nihilism lies in abandoning the blind pursuit of metaphysics and returning to exploring the relationship between works and people.

In this process, I began to focus more on how art functions within different cultural and social structures, and how it helps us understand and accept diverse ways of living. Art has become a bridge, linking different individuals and groups, allowing us to discover our similarities through shared human experiences. Through art, we not only see the diversity of society but also feel our shared humanity, offering us a new way to view the world and helping us find our place and purpose in a complex social environment.

Therefore, we must detach from familiar environments, which actually place us in a state of numbness, specifically referring to a state of emotional and mental numbness. This numbness is not just insensitivity to external stimuli but also a reduction in internal mental activity. Therefore, attempting to leave such environments to seek new stimuli and challenges is crucial for individual growth and the restoration of mental vitality. Nietzsche's concept of "the will to power" emphasizes the proactive creation of subjectivity and life-affirming values. It refers not only to the individual's desire for power and control but also more deeply to how individuals face life's hardships and shape themselves and reality through their own strength. This is also reflected in Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche, 2019) "What is the actual worth of our valuations and tables of moral laws? What is the outcome of their dominion? For whom? In relation to what?—answer: for Life." Just as when I returned to being in nature, that sense of emptiness on the internal consumption of the spirit suddenly disappeared. For when I am in nature, my creativity is stimulated.

This reflection further led me back to the artwork itself, contemplating what influences how the work affects people's feelings. Based on past experiences, form, material, and space are key dimensions that shape the perception of artworks. To further explore how these dimensions affect human perception, I decided to seek inspiration from natural environments. In a large city like Guangzhou, people's perceptions are often overwhelmed by the crowded environment, as if they are in an unceasing machine. There, whether on buses, subways, or streets, people are always in a rush, which suppresses my perception of form, material, and space.

However, when I arrived in the natural surroundings of Wales, I was pleasantly surprised to find that this perceptual ability gradually recovered. The tranquility and natural beauty of Wales allowed me to reconnect with nature and rediscover the significance of form, material, and space. This change not only affected my understanding of art but also profoundly influenced the way I create art. In the embrace of nature, I found a new way of expression, which is not only a pursuit of beauty but also an exploration of a deeper understanding of life.

Zhuhai and Swansea share many similarities, particularly in the overall ambiance as residential cities, but they

exhibit significant differences in climate and cultural landscapes. Zhuhai's summers are typically hot, whereas Swansea is relatively cool, and this climatic difference profoundly impacts the lifestyles and daily activities of the residents in both places. More importantly, there are fundamental differences between the two places in the management of natural landscapes and urban planning. Zhuhai's greening efforts tend to be more functional, such as urban beautification and providing recreational spaces, while Swansea maintains a more natural state with extensive parks and green spaces rarely disturbed, presenting a stark contrast in the preservation and utilization of natural landscapes.

Zhuhai's functional greening emphasizes the social roles of parks, such as recreation, entertainment, and social interaction, leading to these spaces often being overdeveloped and overused, making it difficult to offer a genuine natural experience. Conversely, Swansea's parks preserve vast natural areas with minimal human intervention, centering on natural landscapes, making these parks true green oases within the city. In Swansea, people can experience true grasslands, woodlands, and streams, almost untouched by human hands, showcasing the beauty of nature.

In such environments, people's perceptions and psychological experiences also change. The expansive green spaces and sparse crowds allow individuals to truly relax and reflect in nature, away from the urban noise. This close contact with nature is not just a visual pleasure but also a nourishment for the soul. In Swansea, you might only see a few people or dog walkers, who, along with their pets, can freely run in these green spaces, enjoying the tranquility and freedom bestowed by nature.

Ian McEwan has aptly described this intimate relationship with nature in a conversation with Antony Gormley (McEwan, 2006): I feel bigger, freer It's hard to describe without falling into a well of clichés. It kicked in for me with the hormones, the first stirrings of adolescence. It was very strong, that sense of the earth, the rocks, the sky. It was very strong, that sense of the earth, the rocks, the trees, the earthly realm really filled me at that age with joy, and nothing, not literature, not even sex could fulfil me in that way. fulfil me in that way.

Choosing Clyne Gardens as a case study exemplifies how parks can represent a universal natural experience, resonating in many places. The simplicity of Clyne Gardens not only reflects Swansea's respect for nature but also showcases a nearly universal park design philosophy: to keep nature in its original state, allowing visitors to experience the true face of nature at any time.

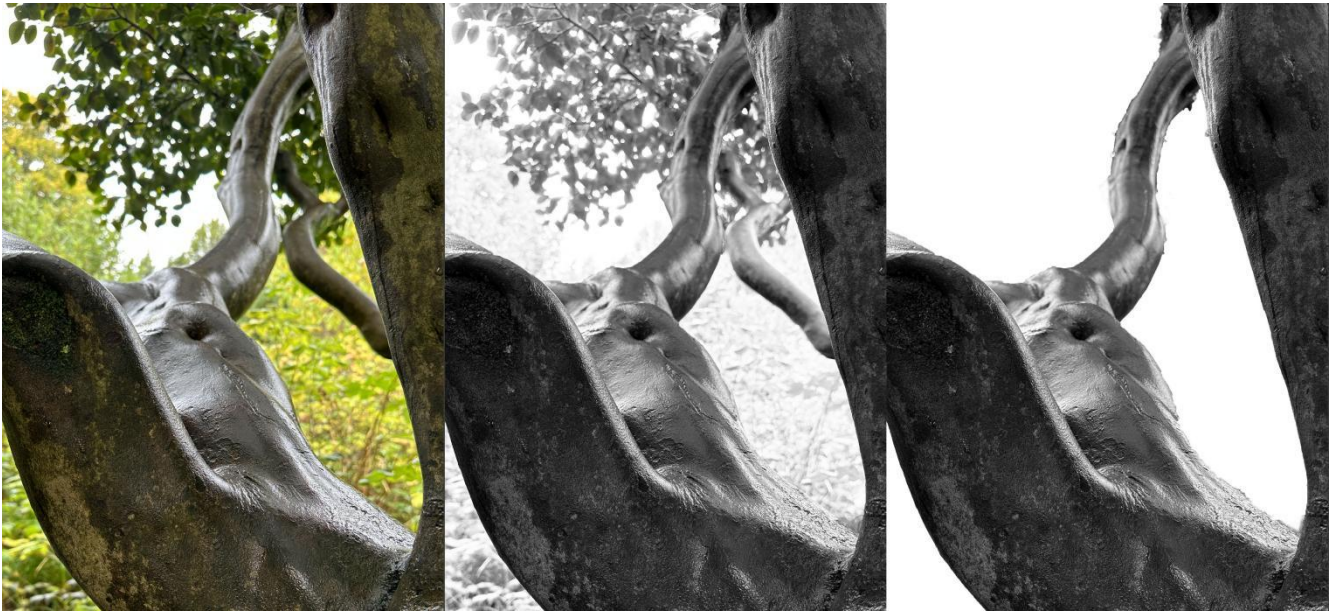
When I first stepped into the park during autumn, the drizzling rain and the cool air mixed with the faint scent of the earth on the grass created a special sensation. This feeling was both familiar and foreign—the familiarity of nature's aroma, and the unfamiliar tranquility and openness, starkly different from Guangzhou's congestion and noise. In Guangzhou, natural spaces are especially precious due to urban crowding, whereas in Swansea, the vast parks and sparse crowds make each experience with nature deeper and more serene.



This transition from one distinctly different environment to another is not just a change in geography, but also an adjustment in psychology and emotion. Moving from a vibrant but sometimes oppressive metropolis like Guangzhou to a more tranquil and nature-intimate place like Swansea, I experienced a new way of life. In Clyne Gardens, each breath seemed to clearly capture every particle in the air; each step on the soft grass felt like a connection to the earth. This was not just a simple walk, but a moment that made me rethink what nature is and the role it should play in our lives.

As Antony describes the Arctic in Ian McEwan & Antony Gormley: *A Conversation about Art and Nature* (McEwan, 2006): For me the wonderful feeling when we went up to the Arctic was actually how tiny one was, how tiny the boat was, and the way that the rhythm of the arctic ice forming, freezing, melting, breaking, the sense one had that those things have been going on, the sense one had that they were going on, the sense one had that they were going on. It is contradictory that, on the one hand, you feel tiny but you also feel completely free. It is contradictory that, on the one hand, you feel tiny but you also feel completely free.

While walking in Clyne Gardens, I was particularly drawn to the variously shaped trees. These trees were captivating in their posture, some resembling the figures of dancing humans, elegant and flowing as if they were dancers of the natural world. The trees appeared both grand like giants and also possessed an elfin lightness and agility; their natural forms and poses needed no human embellishment, their beauty deriving from their most primitive, purest natural state.



Especially after the rain, the droplets left on the trees added a subtle sheen that made the trees seem to have a skin-like texture, providing a visually impactful sensation. It was this pure natural beauty, this vitality emitted by the trees, that brought me a profound sensory and psychological impact. In that moment, I felt as if I were merging with the trees, no longer just an observer but part of them, dancing together, swaying in the wind.

This experience transcended simple nature watching; it was an experience of deep communication with the natural world. The forms of these trees were not just visually beautiful; they represented a life force constantly growing upward and outward, a universal strength shared and expressed by all living beings. At that moment, I felt a deep connection, almost a spiritual unity, a feeling that is hard to fully express in words. It made me deeply understand how closely linked art and nature are, and that true beauty, whether in art or in nature, has the power to touch the heart.

During my first visit to Clyne Gardens, the landscape painted by rain and strong winds left a unique and profound impression on me. However, during my second visit, everything seemed much more peaceful and warm. The sunny winter afternoon brought a different atmosphere and experience. The sky was clear, windless, and the temperature mild; the entire park was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, creating a tranquil and almost secluded ambiance.

This atmosphere made the beauty of the park even more serene and captivating. The low-hanging sunlight filtering through the treetops created a dappled effect on the path, making each step feel like entering a magical world. In such an environment, time seemed to slow down, making those brief moments feel prolonged and profound. The texture of this time was not only a visual beauty but also a touch on the soul, deepening my emotional connection to this place.

During this second visit, I no longer hurried to explore every corner as I did the first time but instead lingered in particular spots to deeply appreciate the tranquility and beauty here. It was this change that enriched and added layers to my perception of Clyne Garden. It became more than a place to admire natural beauty; it became a space to slow down, reflect, and reconnect with oneself. This experience evolved and deepened with time and repeated

visits, each leaving a unique and profound impression, making every experience rich with new discoveries and insights.

Experiencing the park space and the weather as a whole highlights the powerful influence of the natural environment, which transcends visual scenery to become an emotional resonance. In Clyne Garden, each visit seems like a deep conversation with nature, where the weather plays a key role in modulating the mood.

A gloomy feeling on a rainy day might make the park appear more mysterious and introspective, with raindrops falling on leaves and grass creating a contemplative and tranquil atmosphere, bringing a profound sense of peace and solitude to those who enter. On sunny days, the sunlight fills every corner, making the park's scenery vibrant and warm, with shadows dancing on the ground, bringing feelings of joy and hope to visitors.

In this way, nature seems to be endowed with a personality capable of expressing and conveying emotions. Each time you step into the park, you are not just observing nature, but experiencing its "mood." This makes the park more than a physical space; it's a stage for emotions, where every expression of nature deeply touches the heart.

This emotional interaction with nature also reminds us that our connection with the natural world is deeper than we often think. We do not merely live in nature; our emotions and feelings are intimately linked to it, influencing each other. Such understanding can deepen our respect and protection for nature and make our lives more meaningful and layered. Through such experiences, Clyne Garden becomes not just a showcase of external landscapes but also a place for reflecting and exploring inner emotions.

The experience in Clyne Garden creates an intriguing dialogue with Martin Heidegger's philosophy of being. Heidegger's concept of "Dasein," (Heidegger, Schmidt and Stambaugh, 2010) which emphasizes that human existence is discovered through interaction with the world, is also realized through our actual contact with the world. Under this philosophical perspective, the natural setting of the park provides an ideal space to experience and reflect on the mode of existence of "Dasein."

In natural settings, we are not merely physical beings; our perceptions, emotions, and thoughts become active through interaction with our surroundings. As experienced in Clyne Garden, how different weather and environmental conditions affect our moods and feelings fundamentally explores our relationship with the world. Within the framework of Heidegger, this experience underscores the core characteristic of "Dasein"—that our existence is not static or isolated but dynamic and continuously intertwined with the world.

Heidegger delves deeper, suggesting that the essence of being involves exploring the temporality of existence (Heidegger, Schmidt, and Stambaugh, 2010). Our time spent in the park, especially those moments that seem to "stop," is actually a way we experience the passage of time. This sensation of time makes our existence not just confined to the present, but also connected to past memories and future anticipations. Each visit to Clyne Garden varies slightly, reflecting how our existence evolves and changes over time.

Through such experiences, we are not merely enjoying the beauty of nature, but are actively experiencing Heidegger's described mode of "Dasein"—an active, interactive state of being with the world. This deep philosophical reflection can help us better understand our place and role in the world, and how our everyday activities and experiences shape our understanding and feelings about existence.



By utilizing Bachelard's (2014) analytical approach to the "house" in *The Poetics of Space*, we can reinterpret my memories of Clyne Garden as a "space" imbued with rich intentionality. Just as various parts of a house—such as the cellar, attic, and drawers—can trigger specific emotions and memories, the natural landscapes and elements of Clyne Garden (like trees, grasslands, and pathways) also evoke deep emotional responses and contemplations .

Under such an analytical framework, every element of Clyne Garden transcends mere scenery to become a space filled with meaning, where each location is like a room in a house, endowed with unique emotional value and symbolic significance.

Trees serve as the "attic," providing an upward and outward perspective. They symbolize freedom and forgotten memories but also represent the ongoing growth of life and the passage of time. Beneath the shelter of trees, we can reflect on the journey of personal growth and the meaning of life, similar to rummaging through old items in an attic, where each look can trigger recollections of the past and contemplations of the future.

Grasslands act as the "living room," offering a space for socializing and relaxation, symbolizing togetherness and tranquility. Here, people can escape the pressures of daily life, share relaxed moments with family and friends, or sit alone on the grass to meditate, feeling nature's soothing touch. The openness of the grassland encourages everyone to appear as their true selves, enjoying the pure joy and peace brought by nature.

Pathways symbolize the route to the "cellar," not only serving as transit routes within the garden but also as paths that lead us deep into our own inner selves. Walking along these paths, the surrounding scenery fades, and we begin

to enter our own internal worlds, exploring thoughts and feelings that are usually hidden. These paths may lead to deep memories, uncovering long-hidden secrets or inspiring new thoughts and insights.

Through a natural environment like Clyne Garden, we experience a space full of symbolic meaning, where every corner is loaded with emotional implications and psychological reflections. Bachelard's views remind us that these are not merely physical existences but stages for emotional and spiritual experiences. Through interaction with these "spaces," we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and feel our connections with nature and others. Therefore, Clyne Garden is more than a park for leisurely visits; it is a venue for emotional and psychological exploration, where each visit is a new inner journey.

The article explores how methodologies like personal ethnography and phenomenology aid in artistic creation and discusses their importance in understanding and expressing the relationship between artists and audiences. By employing personal ethnography, particularly narratives of personal experiences, the author delves into their own artistic practices and cultural influences, enhancing self-awareness and enabling artworks to more authentically express underlying thoughts and emotions. The application of phenomenology, especially through Bachelard's spatial theories, aids the author in profoundly understanding the interaction between space and people, thus creating artworks that evoke emotional resonance in viewers.

Additionally, this deep self-reflection and cultural exploration allow artists to address broader social and cultural themes in their work, reflecting on the relationships between individuals and collectives, social changes, and cultural conflicts, thereby enriching the layers and social value of their creations.

However, the article also points out a major shortcoming of these research methods: the data collection is overly focused on personal experiences and lacks a broad analysis of emotions in public spaces. This limitation restricts the universality and depth of the research, potentially making it difficult for the artworks to fully engage a wider audience.

Overall, personal ethnography and phenomenology provide profound tools for self and cultural exploration in art creation, but they also require more comprehensive data collection and analysis methods to better understand and express the diverse human experiences in public spaces. These insights offer directions for artists to improve and expand their research scope, helping them achieve broader social and cultural resonance in future creations.

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