An Overview of New Media Art Exhibitions in China (2017–2022)

Huan Fan
Sichuan University
Chengdu
China
crisl@foxmail.com

Jonathan P. Bowen
London South Bank University
London, UK
http://www.jpbowen.com
jonathan.bowen@lsbu.ac.uk

The new media art exhibition, where artists utilise scientific and technological materials to create artworks as a fashion trend, has been sprouting in China’s mainland key central cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, in the past six years. This paper divides developments into two different periods, before and after Covid-19 happened, to analyse the fluctuation of people participating in or visiting art exhibitions. During the pandemic, some of the shows supported by government sponsorship continued to attract attention, like the 2021 Chengdu Biennale, where nearly half of the artworks included new-tech features. Two aspects should be clarified: one is how to identify Chinese ‘new media art’; the other is why the development of the art scene occurs very quickly in China.

1. BACKGROUND

Digital culture is increasingly important in all aspects of life (Bowen & Giannini 2021; Li & Bowen 2022), including in the world of the arts and museums (Giannini & Bowen 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly had its effect and accelerating some developments worldwide (Giannini & Bowen 2022a; 2022b).

In a previous paper, the authors of this paper investigated the presentation of information relating to the Chengdu Biennale on Wikipedia (Bowen & Fan 2022) and some of the difficulties involved. In this paper, we consider a wider remit on recent developments in new media art around China, building on previous research work (Fan 2019; 2020).

2. THE TERM NEW MEDIA ART

New media art in China, often as an oral expression, refers to five types: video art, video and performance art, experimental art, technological art, and digital art. The concept of new media art is a collective term relative to the Western art context, which mainly means the opposite of traditional material art like oil painting, ink painting, and still sculptures. They mostly contain Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), sensing elements, computer programming, or at least an electronic screen. It is an ambiguous term because new material or media has been absorbed in a relatively short period, from around 1990. Historical and political reasons has caused a time delay for China to follow Western art movements, especially the post-modernism art that occurred after 1960, understandable when considering the parallel period in China.

The first Western contemporary art exhibition hosted in China was held in 1985. At that time, the American artist Robert Rauschenberg was conducting his project, Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), to find material in local areas in order to create and exhibit those ready-made artworks around the world (Rauschenberg 1986). He and his team chose two locations, Beijing (18 November – 5 December 1985) and Tibet (2–23 December 1985) in China, and the show hosted in Beijing attracted more than 300,000 people to visit over three weeks. Many local artists that visited and were shocked by the artistic idea of using material to create artworks that once belonged to the anti-art Dadaist trend of Marcel Duchamp (Rauschenberg 2022):
“In a country where traditional media and methods were the artistic norm, Rauschenberg’s unusual choice of materials and techniques was eye-opening.”

In short, Rauschenberg’s exhibition profoundly influenced and inspired Chinese contemporary art. Artists thought that Rauschenberg spread the notion of Western post-modernism to China (Wang 2008).

Four years later, the first new media artwork occurred in China, a video artwork named ‘30x30cm’ (displayed in a 1989 China modern art exhibition), which was created by Peili Zhang, seen as the father of Chinese video art. However, the consequence of the 1989 political upheaval in Beijing restricted the country’s subsequent development of contemporary art. A fortunate aspect is that the home computer became much more available and fashionable around the 1990s, and China entered the computer era. Nowadays, young artists are often fond of such new technological skills to express their ideas spontaneously, especially for those born during the 1990s and 2000s. Some who lack scientific and engineering knowledge will tend to cooperate with specialised teams of technicians. It is undeniable that technological art and art combined with science have made significant progress in recent years.

3. EARLY KEY ACADEMIC ORGANISATIONS IN ART AND SCIENCE

Before providing an overview of relevant organisations, an important book, New Media Art, written by Yanxiang Zhang (2005), needs to be mentioned. The author collects numerous foreign artistic works and introduces technologies, including 3D, VR, multimedia, holographic technology, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), to present art in the book, which is also a summary of his teaching experience about art and science since 1998. Yanxiang Zhang was one of the pioneering individuals and companies to share their news within China.

Four early organisations are leading academic institutions involved with new media art. The Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University hosted art and science symposiums in 2004, 2005, and 2006. Later in 2010, the Tsinghua Art & Science Media Laboratory (TAMSL) was established, directed by Zhang Ga, and the Symposium on Media Art / Design Laboratories was initiated. This provided exchange residencies for domestic and international artists, including cooperated with V2 lab (Germany) and Parsons, The New School for Design (New York, USA), and Media x Design Laboratory (LDM, Switzerland). The last web news update ended in 2020 and was inactive during 2015–2018. The Academy of Art and Design of Tsinghua University plays a vital role in new media art practice. Their teachers and students have participated in many design tasks related to Olympic events, including the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and the 2022 Beijing Paralympic Games.

In 2006, Tongji University established an international centre for new media arts (TIMAC), supporting Expo 2010 in Shanghai, aimed at being a preliminary preparation for studying how to use contemporary media art to spread Chinese culture. In 2010, the School of Intermedia Art (SIMA) was established at the China Academy of Art, located in Hangzhou (a city near Shanghai, situated in southeast China). It became a crucial active focus for young artists creating new media art. One major reason is that both Peili Zhang (the father of Chinese video art) and the leading media artist Zhijie Qiu work there as teachers. In 2013, the Chronus Art Center (CAC) was established, the first such non-governmental organisation and an academic centre focused on new media art in Shanghai.

The information above on new media art theory and practice in China is mainly based on higher education institutes, which also means that it is only known by a limited number of people. When considering why new media art prospered so quickly in China, the other reason may well be the widespread use of social media, such as Weibo, which started in 2009, WeChat began in 2011, and TikTok began in 2016. Nowadays, those three media giants are still mainstream for Chinese individuals and companies to share their news within China.

4. EXHIBITIONS IN CHINA

4.1 Three teamLab 2017 shows in China

2017 was a crucial turning point for new media art in China, when it gained more widespread attention from both adults and children, who were first exposed to this show style. The Japanese new media art group teamLab was supported by a Chinese investor, Yang Juze, who was planning to influence the Chinese market and create a schedule for exhibitions in 2017. The different approach taken by teamLab China compared to what they displayed in Western countries was to extend the display to nearly half a year’s duration. When they exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery in London (UK), their work, Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders (10–17 September 2015) was
conducted over just a week. Another of teamLab’s shows, Transcending Boundaries, was hosted in Pace London from 25 January to 11 March 2017, lasting seven weeks.

TeamLab’s first show in China, Living Digital Forest and Future Park (Designboom 2017; see Figure 1), was hosted by Pace Beijing, in northern China, from 20 May to 10 October 2017. The first four months attracted more than 200,000 visitors, which was encouraging, so it was announced on 20 September 2017 that they planned to extend the duration to 19 November 2017, providing an additional month to exhibit their artworks. The final total of visitors was more than 300,000 people in Beijing.

Figure 1: A part of the teamLab show in Beijing, 2017.

Quoting from the Designboom website (Narea 2017):

“teamLab transforms the 1,500 square meter exhibition space into a synesthetic labyrinth using real-time projections and interactive technology, the flower artwork shifts and grows under the influence of the viewer’s actions, ensuring that visual states can never be replicated.”

Considering the limited exhibition space, they had to restrict the visit time of spectators 60 minutes. The ultimate visitor numbers to the exhibition space were 1,200 people each day, with 150 people for each timed period. They also opened the show in the evening for a few days, from 6:30 pm to 9:00 pm (e.g., see Figure 2).

Figure 2: This ticket was for the evening, and the access time was 6:42 pm, reminding the visitor to manage their visiting time carefully.

Their second show was held from 8 July to 30 November 2017, hosted in Shenzhen, one of the southernmost cities in China. It exhibited 14 artworks like ‘Forest of Resonating Lamps – One Stroke’ and ‘Crystal Universe’, later adding two more works to exhibit, attracting 380,000 people to visit in person. The exhibition space was approximately 4,000 square meters. The total investment for this exhibition was 30,000,000 CNY (c. UK £3.5 million), and the organiser finally gained an income of 60,000,000 CNY (c. UK £7 million) (Qiu 2018). The third exhibition was in the city of Hangzhou on the east side of China, held from 20 December 2017 to 6 May 2018. The show’s theme was ‘Future Park’, showing nine artworks in a 1,800 square-meter exhibition space. Visitors were allocated 90 minutes, with 20 CNY (UK £2.32) for a further 10 minutes.

TeamLab’s artwork shows became successful very quickly in China (in the north, south, and east), spreading the notion of new media art and providing access to a wide range of spectators, including regular visitors and academic students. The organisers shared news of the shows on the Chinese social media platform Weibo in January 2017, before the first show started. In addition, the core designers, Inoko Toshiyuki and Takashi Kudo, gave speeches at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing, April 2017) and Peking University (Beijing, June 2017) separately. Later, they conducted a series of commercial cooperations in China’s other cities like Chengdu, Wuhan, and Shanghai, in 2018.

4.2 Other New Media Art Exhibitions in 2017–2019

In 2017, the exhibitions hosted by Today Art Museum deserve consideration. Today Art Museum (Beijing), China’s first non-governmental art museum, was established in 2002. Today Art Museum hosted 51 exhibitions in 2016, with an income of 39,690,000 CNY (c. UK £4.6 million), and reduced to 35 shows in 2017, receiving a revenue of 37,876,900 CNY (c. UK £4.4 million). A significant difference between the two years is that they hosted three new media art group exhibitions in 2017, attracting many people to visit. The ticket fee from the visitors covered the original contribution that the exhibition sponsor paid. They reduced by 16 exhibitions but still maintained approximately equal income compared to the previous year. The total number of spectators for the whole year of the exhibition was more than 350,000 in 2016 and 375,841 in 2017, thus increasing numbers with fewer exhibitions.

The three group exhibitions were Unzip the Future (16 July to 16 September 2017, see Figure 3), Arrested Time – New Media Art from Germany (17 September to 12 November 2017), and Lumen
An Overview of New Media Art Exhibitions in China (2017–2022)
Huan Fan & Jonathan P. Bowen

Matrix: British Lumen Prize for Digital Art (25 November 2017 to 7 January 2018). Before the exhibition Unzip the Future, the standard single ticket fee was 20 CNY (UK £2.32) for academic displays, but the ticket price of Unzip the Future was considerably more at 150 CNY (c. UK £17). Of course, the fee was discounted on different days and in various commercial ways. That means they sold the high-price tickets for only half a year from July 2017. From their annual report statistics, the percentage of ticket fees compared to their whole income increased from 2% (2016) to 25% (2017), which means the original revenue of 793,800 CNY (c. UK £92 thousand) rose to 9,469,225 CNY (c. UK £1.1 million), nearly 12 times as much within half a year.

In 2018, the Beijing Times Art Museum, a non-governmental art museum in China established in 2008, also hosted a new media group exhibition planned to celebrate its tenth anniversary. The tenth-anniversary feature exhibition Xcelerator (13 August – 14 October 2018, see Figure 4) combined with the Xiaomi technology company to present artworks, inviting Gary Hill to take the position providing the shows academic support. Ten artworks with VR, AR, and other technologies were displayed within a 2,000-square-meter exhibition space.

In the same year, the exhibition Animamix Biennale: Ballade in the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai (MoCA) provided a unique experience for spectators in one of their hall spaces, where they invited the viewer to sit in a wheelchair during their visit (e.g., see Figure 5). The price of Animamix was 80 CNY per person, which can buy two cups of American-style coffee in China (see Figure 6). In 2019, many non-governmental art museums or art centres in Shanghai hosted new media art exhibitions, such as the Ming Contemporary Art Museum, TANK Shanghai, chi K11 Art Museum, UNArt Center, West Bund Museum, Chronus Art Center, etc.

In 2018, the Beijing Times Art Museum, a non-governmental art museum in China established in 2008, also hosted a new media group exhibition planned to celebrate its tenth anniversary. The tenth-anniversary feature exhibition Xcelerator (13 August – 14 October 2018, see Figure 4) combined with the Xiaomi technology company to present artworks, inviting Gary Hill to take the position providing the shows academic support. Ten artworks with VR, AR, and other technologies were displayed within a 2,000-square-meter exhibition space.

Figure 4: Immersive theatre in Xcelerator, 2018.

Figure 3: A hall in the exhibition of 'Unzip the Future' at the Today Art Museum, 2017.

Figure 5: A visitor sitting in a wheelchair, experiencing the Animamix exhibition.
4.3 Chengdu New Media Art Exhibitions in 2020–2022

After Covid-19, the situation has become rather different for the Chinese population, with variable anti-epidemic political rules requiring people to stay in the local area to reduce contact with other cities. Thus, this section focuses on the art exhibitions in Chengdu, one of the southwestern cities in China.

New media art developed slowly in Chengdu before 2018. One reason is that organisation of the Chengdu Biennale (Bowen & Fan 2022) transferred to the local government, causing a seven-year gap from 2013 to 2021 with no exhibition taking place. A few new media artworks were exhibited at the Anren Biennale, another Biennale that was held in 2017, located at Anren, just west of Chengdu. In 2018, the opening show of the Zhi Art Museum, named Open, was an important step in reviving new media art in Chengdu. In addition, teamLab also exhibited in Chengdu at a commercial hall in 2018.

The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, located in Chongqing near Chengdu, was another local mainstream driver encouraging the development of new media art in southwest China. The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute initiated their Department of New Media Art in 2011. Still, the primary teaching trend was concerned with photography, performance art, and animation, which means they are less developed in art and technology.

In 2020, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute combined with the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (Chengdu) for collaborative teaching, aiming to promote the merits of each other, using art and technology to create more high-quality artwork (e.g., see Figure 7). Their first show was Break the Barrier: The mutualism of art and science (September 2020), first hosted in Chengdu and later in Chongqing. They also hosted their student’s artworks in 2021 as the second exhibition. However, in 2022, the display was cancelled due to the severe pandemic political controls in place at that time.

The 2021 Chengdu Biennale (Bowen & Fan 2022) was supported financially by the local government and opened to the public free of charge. A feature was that nearly half of the artworks belonged to new media art in the leading museums: the Chengdu Art Museum (District B) or the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art. This exhibition was an important art event during the pandemic, attracting many people to visit from 6 November 2021. On 28 March 2022, it was announced that visitors had exceeded 500,000, so they planned to extend the exhibition duration until 15 July 2022 (the original closing date was 6 April 2022). On 3 July 2022, it was announced the visitor numbers had reached more than 1,000,000 and that around 87% of them were from Sichuan, of which Chengdu is the provincial capital. Compared to the total residential population in Chengdu, which was recorded as 20,937,757 in May 2021, compared to Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing, this size is not so large by Chinese standards.

Finally, the total number of visitors was more than 1,100,000 over 252 days (6 November 2021 to 15 July 2022). These visitor numbers are three times that of teamLab in Beijing for 2017 or the data of Today Art Museum in 2017 (see Figure 8), but it should be remembered that the 2021 Chengdu Biennale was accessible to the public at no charge. It is unclear how many people would visit if there had been a charge, but we can be positive that contemporary art culture has been well-cultivated in Chengdu as a result. This show very likely became especially popular due to travel restrictions, meaning that most residents could not so easily visit to other Chinese provinces or abroad.
We obtain a different result, if we compare the data with the first Chengdu Biennale, hosted in 2001 by a non-government organisation that attracted more than 300,000 people to visit over 27 days (15 December 2001 to 10 January 2002). The Chengdu 2001 residential population was 11,342,200, nearly half that in 2022. If we use the total day numbers in 2001 to calculate the comparative number for 2021, we obtain the number 300,000/27 × 252 = 2,800,000). There is still a good potential for exhibition visitors in Chengdu.

5. CONCLUSION

Opening and exhibition information is available on the MANA Global New Media Arts platform (https://www.manamana.net), established in 2016, including details of new media art events in China. Also included are colleges providing education concerning technology and art, and other relevant information like jobs and competitions. Before this website, MANA has also used Weibo since 2011 and WeChat since 2014, two leading Chinese social media platforms, to share exhibition news or new media artistic stories or designs.

It has become a new fashion trend to combine high-tech with art and this is popular with people in China. One common feature of artworks in exhibitions is that they interact with people through technology. So, the term new media art can be seen as interactive art. There is a perceived need to attract plenty of visitors to participate.

As for reasons why new media art exhibitions have attracted so many visitors rapidly, one factor is the commercial discount through spreading the word on social media. For example, if a visitor shares the pictures that they have taken on WeChat and then gains more than 30 “likes” (thumbs up) from their friends, they obtain a discount from the Today Art Museum. The sale means one person spreads the news to at least 30 people with the help of social media. TikTok also plays a vital role in spreading videos of exhibitions. So, these factors of commercial discounts and social media, as well as longer academic lectures, have helped to increase the rapid development of new media art in China.

After Covid-19, the local government supported and sponsored the successful art culture in Chengdu. This has helped to cultivate contemporary art. China’s first contemporary art gallery was Upriver Gallery (see Figure 9), established in October 1998 with the approval of the Chengdu Bureau of Cultural Affairs. However, Upriver Gallery was closed in 2001 due to lack of financial resources from the investor. Then, the Chengdu Biennale began to help invigorate artistic culture in the city. In short, Chengdu has a different culture from other Chinese cities, with its ancient history and modern developments.

Acknowledgements

Jonathan Bowen is grateful to Museophile Limited for financial support.

6. REFERENCES


An Overview of New Media Art Exhibitions in China (2017–2022)

Huan Fan & Jonathan P. Bowen


Li, J. and Bowen, J. P. (2022) Female self-presentation through online dating applications. In Bowen et al. (2022), pp. 111–118. DOI: 10.14236/ewic/EVA2022.23


