Banyan Commune Project: Mapping & Exploring the Community

Yan Zhou

Abstract

Banyan Commune is a community art project of Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou, China. The article examines how Guangdong Times Museum has positioned itself through *Banyan Commune* project to seek a locality in the complex flux and symbiosis of the Pearl River Delta in relation to de-Euro-American-centered art world dominance, and to build a new type of relationship with its community. By presenting several cases of *Banyan Commune* project and analyzing the reflections of their practice, with a focus on the anthropological and immersive mapping practice employed by the museum and the artists to learn about and to feel the community, the article explores the contexts, the connections, and the potentiality of the type of innovative community art as experimented by *Banyan Commune*.

Keywords

community art; institutional critique; urbanization; mapping; post-globalization

In February 2019, I conducted pilot field research for the research project called *Chinese Art Worlds: Contemporary Art Curating Practices, Interactions and Communications as Social Contact Zone*, a University of Toronto doctoral research study supported by a SSHRC - Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS) Doctoral Scholarship grant in Guangzhou, China. The pilot research aimed to interview art communities in Guangzhou and Shanghai. Guangdong Times Museum was one of the cases I looked at in Guangzhou art communities. During my stay in Guangzhou, I interviewed the staff of the museum, including Nikita Yingqian Cai, the curator of the museum; Cathleen Siming Pan, the curator of Banyan Commune project, which is the museum's community-oriented program; and Tan Yue, the associate curator of the museum. I also visited the exhibition "Bald Spot of an Eight-Year-Old Balloon," created by the artists collective *aoandaoband* for *Banyan Commune* project at the time and observed the audience's participation in the exhibition space. Later, I communicated with Hui Ye, an artist who participated in the previous year's *Banyan Commune* project.

In this article, I examine how Guangdong Times Museum has tried to position itself as a community-responsive art institution in the complex entangles of contemporary capital-state realities through the *Banyan Commune* project, and how the *Banyan Commune* project has performed and developed in a process of conceptual and immersive learning practice together with artists and the community. In the latter part of the article, I reflect on the practice of mapping and walking as a contemporary way of art-making to understand and reconstruct the relationship between the institution, the artist, the community, and the environment, which can be both urban or natural environment. The images used in the article include photos taken by the author in the Times Museum in February 2019, images provided by the museum and the artist Hui Ye. Some images are obtained from the websites of artists Henry Tan and *aoandaoband*.

Figure 1. *Banyan Commune* space on the ground floor of the Times Museum, photo by the author, February 2019.

Since ancient times, banyan trees were planted at the entrance, in the center, or by the river of a village or a town in southern China, where it served as a public space for locals to meet, entertain, and rest. In a sense, it is like a public space sanctified by a maypole tree in the old times in Europe. *Banyan Commune* is a community-oriented art program of Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou, China. Since the program's initiation in 2016, it has served as a window and a lobby connecting the museum with its community and the public. *Banyan Commune* is a unique community cultural center for the neighborhood in Huangbian, Guangzhou.

Flux and Symbiosis

Positioning its "PLACE", which is understood as a space of "critical consciousness" as proposed by Wieslaw Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, and Mariusze, and developed by Hans Haacke as a space of "dialectics consciousness" (Alberro, 2009), has been the crucial strategic concern of Guangdong Times Museum. It signifies the museum's aspiration to seek a unique institutional identity in the

context of post-colonization and post-globalization period. Therefore, understanding the spatial and demographic context of the museum and its conceptual positioning is the first step to capturing the ripples and the confluence of the local and the global networks of people, capital, cultures, politics, and spaces involved in the museum's community art project: *Banyan Commune* project.

Guangzhou is situated at the center of the Pearl River Delta and is "the capital city" of the World Factory. Huangbian is a developing area at the borders of Guangzhou city, where Guangdong Times Museum is situated. The museum has witnessed the shaping and changing hybrid forms of urbanization of the Pearl River Delta and the mobilization of complex demographics in the area. Native rural populations, the new middle-class drawn by real estate development, and migrant workers, all cohabitate in this symbiosis and experience the growing gentrification of the area. The phenomena have been explored in the 7th Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture (UABB) and have been written about by several authors for an e-flux Architecture special edition: "Urban Village" (Axel et al., 2018).

Figure 2: An aerial view photo of Huangbian where the museum is situated, courtesy of the Guangdong Times Museum.

Guangdong Times Museum is embedded in a building in the Rose Garden residential community. It occupies the 1st, 4th, and the 19th floor of the building facing the main street. The residents of the Rose Garden are new Guangzhou people. They are middle-class and not local-born. There are

many teachers and staff from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. The majority of the residents are around 40 years old. Opposite the museum are the rental places. There are many small industrial processing factories. Further away, there are several derelict mining factories, such as the old coal mine – the Second Mining Factory of Guangzhou. In the west, there is a cluster of urban-villages (*chengzhongcun* 城中村). The continuous mobility of people in these villages creates a constantly changing flux. The typology of the neighbouring community is so diverse that it has constantly challenged the museum's communal existence with the community's pastiche spaces.

These diverse communities: native rural populations, the new middle-class drawn by real estate development, and migrant workers gathering around small manufacturing processing factories, are facing the process of rapid gentrification. In the new round of urban planning, Huangbian community will be replaced by the Design Capital of Guangzhou, one of the largest industrial design clusters in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. The wood prints made by artist Liu Qingyua and the accompanying texts below illustrate the entangles of people, culture, and capital in the area (Liu, 2017):

Figure 3: Liu Qingyuan: Urban Village ABCs. Wood Print.

Listen to the words of others, go your own way.

Uh... I can't tell, I'm just a worker.

In the near future, culture and industry will begin to push and block each other.

Guangdong Times Museum was designed by Rem Koolhaas. Koolhaas and OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) have actively participated in the movement of Chinese rapid urbanization and industrialization in recent decades. They have completed several high-profile architectural projects in the Pearl River Delta, including Guangdong Baosteel Building, Binhai Mansion, and the Guangzhou Opera House. Koolhaas conceptualized what he perceived as the characteristics of the Pearl River Delta's socio-economic development and urbanization situation in *The Great Leap Forward*. In the book, Koolhaas proposed the concept of "A City with Exacerbated Differences" (CWED), which has been widely quoted to address the problems with the rapid process of industrialization and globalization in China and other places of the world where traditional forms of living have been displaced. Koolhaas finds that the CWED is based on the biggest differences possible between its various parts (constituents), and these differences are both complementary and in competition with each other. The main characteristic of the CWED is not "the methodical creation of the ideal, but the opportunistic exploitation of flukes, accidents, and imperfections." (Chung et. al., 2001, p. 704). This concept fits perfectly with "crossing the river by feeling the stones," a famous saying of the previous Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s, and which has been the guiding moral of Chinese society in the past three decades.

Koolhaas also borrowed the term *suburbia*, which the Czech geologist Václav Cílek described as the monopoly of the modernist city planning under the influence of Le Corbusier, such as Jižní Město, in Prague. The characteristics of this kind of living space are geometric and self-replicating *suburbia* (Cílek, 2015, p. 12). Koolhaas redefined the term as the essence of urbanization in China. It is a hybrid between the city and the country that brings together the genetic features of the contemporary Chinese city such as golf courses, pleasure parks, luxury apartments, and villages in the city; it is "the conversion of rice paddies and villages into postmodern villas and office towers" (Chung et. al., 2001, p. 143).

The cultural desert is the third concept that Koolhaas borrowed from the Chinese geographical-cultural distinctions and applied to the realities of the Pearl River Area. The term implies a critique of the mercantilist tradition and spirit in southern China in contrast to more political-concerned and literati-oriented northern areas in China. It suggests a prejudice of northern China's conservative Confucianism-State culture over the local cultures of the southern China. This subtle Chinese cultural bias seems to have escaped Koolhaas' attention. Nonetheless, the anxieties that the usage of the term suggests are true for the cultural workers and the locals of the area. Sophia Al Maria, a Qatari-American artist, writer, and filmmaker, expressed the same concern over the conflict between the hyper-capitalist and local cultures in the Gulf nations in her work; especially in *Black Friday* (Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival, 2018).

Nikita Yingqian Cai, who has led the museum as its curator for over a decade, departed from Koolhaas' conceptualization of the Pearl Delta Area. She positioned the museum as a frontier to

experiment with “institution critique” in the state-capital dominated art world and analogized it as a dragon boat re-orienting towards the connections with the Great South countries and areas. She strategically re-framed how the museum will dialogue with the Euro-American centered art world and art history narratives and participated in a more diversified and localized world art communications (Cai, 2015, 2016, & 2017).

Mapping & Exploring the Community

Banyan Commune program was initiated in 2016. So far, every year there have been two new projects, each one was presented for five months. Reflecting on the role of being a contemporary art museum in a residential community, the program aims to bring the artists, the museum, and the community together; to explore and create organic relations among them; and to share their experiences of the communal discoveries. The first floor of the museum is used as an experimental space for this purpose.

In the beginning, *Banyan Commune* commissioned the artists to create exhibitions. After two attempts, the team found that this approach was unsatisfying. They found that one month’s residence was too demanding for the artists to complete their work. Moreover, they came to recognize that the aim of the project should be altered. Instead of creating an exhibition, the program should strive for approaches that evoke more cognition, memory, and imagination; and emphasize the process of participation and exploration. Since 2019, the artists are requested to immerse into the community for at least two months to create their works. The new selection criterion requires, first, that a project must have layered contents and design to engage the audience and the community; and second, that a project should be more visually impacting, more participatory, and reducing the usage of texts.

Cases

The first case of *Banyan Commune* project that I will introduce is called “What It Meant to Me Will Eventually Be a Memory” presented at the museum from December 2017 to March 2018. Bangkok-based artist Henry Tan (nicknamed “Ar Liang” during his residence in Banyan Commune project), became the first artist selected in *Banyan Commune* Artist Residency open call competition. His project composed of three parts. First, during his six-weeks residency, Ar Liang carried out a personal exploration of the museum’s surrounding area in the Huangbian Community by playing badminton with local residents, visiting every corner of HuangBian area, searching for repair shops, and trying various restaurants every day. The second part is “Ar Liang Fix’em All”, which is a repair shop the artist opened during his residence. He offered free repair and repurposing services for locals in exchange for a story or a memory about their items. These stories were integrated into the exhibition later. Then the artist converted *Banyan Commune* space into a repair store and story-sharing space. In this temporary space of memory sharing, the exhibit not only presented personal memories with a sincere and

endearing human touch, but also challenged people to reflect on the excessive supply of goods and immoderate consumption habits in the contemporary society. After the exhibition, the repaired items were returned to their owners (Times Museum *Banyan Commune* project WeChat posts, 2017 & 2018, Henry Tan's online documentation of the project, 2018).

Figure 4: Logo of Ar Liang, designed by the artist for the project.

The second case is Hui Ye's "We Are Singing the Song of Our Time," presented at the museum from June 2018 to September 2018, in which Hui Ye explored local residents' sense of identity through music. During the eight weeks of residency, Ye carried out her research in the physical and cyber community of the museum's neighborhood, and interaction with the Huangbian community through music culture. Ye submerged into the Huangbian neighbourhood after nightfall in search of the stories and histories related to music. From popular revolutionary songs known by the elder generations in the era before the 1980s, to the pop music of Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 80s and 90s, she allowed herself to approach songs that represent lifestyles, values and social contexts particular to a certain time; and which have become collective memories in several generations. In her two-channel video installation, Ye documented three distinct groups in the community: street singers wandering about the eateries at night markets, newly formed community in the youth apartments, and orchestras made up of the middle-aged people and the elders who gather to perform music next to the subway station all year round.

Figure 5: Photo of the residents singing together at night, courtesy of the artist.

The presentation of the project includes three parts: 1) *Hits Banyan*: The artist invited the public to upload homemade music/singing videos and playlists from personal collections. A guest was invited to take part in the tailoring of the themed playlist every week, and the music videos he/she made and selected were looped on the big screen in the exhibition space. 2) The public can scan a QR code on WeChat and add “Lafayette the Museum Cat” as a friend, then they can upload their music video. 3) *Banyan KTV*: The artist set up a temporary Karaoke at Banyan Commune space. Groups and individuals were invited to book the space for free and sing there (Times Museum Banyan Commune project WeChat posts, 2018; personal communication with the artist via emails in March 27 &28, April 2, 6, 9, 2019).

The third case is the artists collective *aoandaoband*’s project “Bald Spot of an Eight-Year-Old Balloon” presented at the museum from December 2018 to March 2019. The artists Sam Yi Yao Chao and Toni Zhao, teamed up as *aoandaoband*, collaborated with local children and conducted mapping and walking tours using a low-cost aerial camera – the “Bald Balloons” in the neighbourhood. Nine groups of children participated in the tours. In “Huangbian Kids Balloon Parade”, the artists and the project team let these children lead them tracing the routes, sites and routines related to their family, friends and classmates, to discover the community, the urban surface, and the landscape from the children’s perspectives in this playful mapping and recording activity.

Figure 6: Project image, captured from the artist's project website.

During the residency, the artists also held five workshops. The maps and shapes gathered during “Huangbian Kids Balloon Parade” were made into a movable set for alternative family portraits. During the night, a video documentation was projected on the front-face window of the *Banyan Commune space* in the museum (Times Museum *Banyan Commune* project WeChat posts, 2019; aoand-aoband project online documentation, 2019).

Reflections from the Project Team

In my interview with Cathleen Siming Pan and Tan Yue, they shared with me their reflections on *Banyan Commune* project. First, they found that the meaning of the project appeared in the development of the museum's relationship with the community. Second, they recognized that by having the community participate in the creation of the projects, the museum became the neighbour of the community. “We are equal” has become the motto of the project. Third, they noticed that all the selected projects were related to mapping practice. The artists, the museum, and the community members walked together in the community as a way of witnessing changes in their environment and lives through mapping and walking. By accumulating and reflecting on the rich experience, they have come to recognize that community art should not simply be an intervention in the physical space; instead, it should be creative and constructive for a meaningful and lasting relationship with the community. The museum needs to keep on building its experiences to develop various types of community art programs, and to create a new kind of community platform for culture and art with an approach that is sincere, pro-active and sustainable, not attention-seeking, passive, or one-off. The final, and not the

least important realization, is that the community participatory projects enriched more conceptualized and experimental exhibitions and public programs of the museum.

Can Contemporary Art Reduce Social and Cultural Gaps in the Audience?

The museum team believes that the community-oriented *Banyan Commune* project contributes to the museum's other exhibitions and public programs in some ways. Like the public space around a banyan tree in old times, *Banyan Commune* creates a space that is friendly, welcoming, and interactive. It banishes the social hierarchy often imposed on the "commoners" by contemporary art, its narratives, and the accompanying intimidating conceptualism and elitism. However, Guangdong Times Museum is a contemporary art museum that prompts serious and explorative works and programs, many of which are theoretically and conceptually challenging. Some community members who enjoyed their experience with the *Banyan Commune* projects, would buy a ticket to go upstairs to the 19th floor to see an exhibition. Some of them found they could not understand the exhibition or felt shocked by some work, they would complain and demand reimbursement of their tickets. This gap could not be filled easily. The society will never be intellectualized or "uplifted" as one homogeneous world. The varied worlds are the realities that the contemporary art world needs to attend to in more flexible ways.

A New Type of Mapping and Connection

Mapping and walking as a way to feel and to conceptualize the relationship between the human being, the environment, and the world has been employed by artists for at least six decades. One significant representation of this is the emergence of Land Art in the 1960s. However, there is a difference between the early Land Art generation artists, those lonely explorers of a territory such as Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Hamish Fulton; and recent community-involved, urban spaces trekkers, such as Patrick Ford in Saigon, Sarah Cullen and Simon Pope in Canada, and Xu Zhiqiang and a group of *Xisancun* artists who have mapped the folded-up fabrics of urban villages in Guangzhou. The spaces that these new generation artists physically and mentally walked are anthropological and distinct from abstract, totalizing, and geometrical spaces that previous generations had mapped and conceptualized (Pope, 2014). This anthropological turn in contemporary art practice is accurately described by Jacques Rancière:

Walking alongside becomes a means to negotiate a flow – of conversation, of movement. Moreover, it becomes symbolic of an ideal type of relation, where moving together, shoulder-to-shoulder, conveys the potential for mutuality, parity or equality. (2009, p.14)

Banyan Commune could be said is a good example of this approach, in which participants have explored the potentiality of being with the community in its richness, depth, and locality. *Banyan Commune* has also been benefited from communication and collaboration with some art activism groups and social participating art movements in China and the Asian countries. They include the *Dinghaiqiao Mutual-Aid Society* in Shanghai (2015-2019); Hajime Matsumoto and Shiroto No Ran (Amateur Revolt) Movement in Japan (gyaku interview with Matsumoto Hajime, May 27, 2007; Shiroto No Ran); *ruangrupa* in Jakarta (gudskul.art), to name a few. They represent the trend of rooting art activities in local realities and histories, and also seeking to bid farewell to the Euro-American centered art world dominance.

In contemporary China, people have limited freedom to create and make use of social and public spaces. Art world practitioners, nevertheless, devote time to finding alternative ways to connect people and to build “micro citizen society”. Working together with the public, they educate themselves to become “critical citizens” through performative activism art practices (Weibel, 2015, p. 60). *Banyan Commune* is one of these active social transformers.

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