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## **Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Contemporary Mural Art in China and Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the reconceptualization of contemporary mural art in China and Malaysia since the 1980s. Through analyzing specific artworks and artists, it investigates how shifting socio-cultural dynamics reshape mural art's forms and functions in both countries, the findings reveal distinct patterns of cultural adaptation and artistic innovation, influenced by forces of globalization and local traditions, which demonstrates complex interactions, influenced by forces of globalization and local traditions. The comparative analysis demonstrates how mural art reflects broader cultural politics while contributing to urban development and community engagement, offering insights into public art's evolving role in contemporary Asian societies.

**Keywords:** Public Art; Cultural Identity; Visual Culture; Urban Development

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Mural art, as a form for public expression, has played a significant role in human civilization since prehistoric times. From cave paintings to contemporary street art, murals have served as powerful media for conveying cultural values, social commentary, and aesthetic visions (Jalaluddin et al., 2022). In the contemporary era, particularly since the 1980s, mural art in China and Malaysia has undergone significant transformations, reflecting the broader social, cultural, and political changes in these societies. The concept of "reconceptualization" is used here to describe the critical re-examination and creative transformation of established ideas, practices, and values of mural art in light of changing contexts and perspectives.

With the emergence of various new materials and technologies, mural artists are now able to create works that are more dynamic, interactive, and responsive to the environment (Fig. 1). These technologies also enable artists to collaborate remotely more easily and create large-scale works that would be impossible with traditional methods (Poon, 2023). However, the development of mural art is not just a matter of technological advancement, but also a reflection of the complex social, cultural, and political dynamics in each context. In China, for example (Fig. 2), mural art had transitioned from primarily serving as a tool for political propaganda to becoming a medium for public expression and social commentary (Feng, 2020). In Malaysia, on the other hand, mural art has been increasingly used to celebrate cultural diversity, engage with local communities, and promote urban regeneration.



Fig. 1: Iron sculpture mural in Penang, Malaysia  
(Source : Author, Penang, Malaysia, 2024)



Fig. 2: Chinese subway station murals  
(Source : <https://www.163.com/dy/article/FOTL16GL0516AKQ0.html> , 2024  
<https://www.meipian.cn/1ph4e99i> , 2024)

Contemporary murals have become a comprehensive art form that not only satisfies basic human needs for survival and behavior in the material environment but also injects human will, ideas, emotions, and aesthetic feelings into the environment (Li, 2022). "Cultural Promotion" is one of the most prominent features of contemporary murals, which determines that it presents an artistic quality of "public environment" in contemporary life and presents an aesthetic quality different from traditional murals in its "symbiosis" with the environment (Li, 2022). Traditional murals art is an important part of traditional painting art, while contemporary mural art is an art form created in the context of modern society. Contemporary murals have reconceptualized traditional murals in many aspects such as expression techniques, theme content, and artistic concepts.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to contemporary mural art in Asia, existing research remains largely confined to single-country analyses, leaving comparative cross-national perspectives underdeveloped. Notably, systematic comparison between China and Malaysia is absent, despite both countries experiencing parallel developments in mural art since the 1980s under markedly different political systems, cultural structures, and urbanization trajectories. This study addresses this gap by adopting a comparative framework that situates mural art within broader socio-cultural contexts.

The comparative selection of China and Malaysia is analytically justified. Both countries have undergone rapid economic growth and urban transformation over the past four decades, providing comparable conditions for examining mural art's responses to social change. At the same time, their contrasting cultural governance models—China's centralized cultural policy versus Malaysia's multicultural framework—offer a productive basis for exploring how institutional structures shape artistic practice. This comparison not only contributes to theoretical debates on public art and cultural globalization but also provides practical insights for cultural policy and urban development strategies.

This study investigates how socio-cultural dynamics have reconceptualized contemporary mural art in China and Malaysia since the 1980s, focusing on the interaction between globalization, local traditions, and artistic innovation. Four objectives guide the analysis: (1) to trace the historical evolution of mural art in both countries; (2) to identify dominant themes, styles, and artistic approaches; (3) to examine socio-cultural influences on mural production, reception, and function through comparative case studies; and (4) to assess the role of key artists in shaping contemporary mural discourse and practice.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This study draws upon three interconnected theoretical frameworks to analyze contemporary mural art. Lefebvre's theory of social space production provides a lens for understanding how murals participate in the construction of urban spaces, transforming physical environments into socially meaningful places. Hall's cultural identity theory helps explain how murals negotiate and represent collective identities in the context of globalization and cultural diversity. Giddens' concept of time-space distanciation illuminates how global artistic influences interact with local traditions in contemporary mural practices. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of how socio-cultural dynamics shape mural art across different national contexts.

### 2.1 Defining Contemporary Murals

Contemporary murals, as a unique form of public art, have emerged and undergone significant evolution since the 1980s (Zhu, 2023), and in the contemporary world, with increasing globalization, scientific and technological advancements have made the world smaller and distances closer, which has led to cultural awareness and value concepts becoming more unified, and cultural awareness and value

concepts have become more unified, leading to a diversified development of mural art. Contemporary mural art is a product of contemporary social culture, and its formation is inseparable from the high development of social material civilization (Hao, 2020). In this environment, murals are constructing and expanding their field with a new face, and the forms and functions of murals are continuously expanding, showing new features and playing new roles, which has become an unstoppable trend in the development of murals (Wan, 2024). In contemporary visual development, murals have undergone reconceptualization, with factors such as the characteristics of the times, local culture, historical traditions, public influence, regional characteristics, psychological factors, environmental functions, and technical materials all becoming factors in the reconceptualization of murals (Liu et al., 2024).

## 2.2 Reconceptualization of Murals and Socio-Cultural Dynamics

The concept of reconceptualization refers to the critical re-examination and creative transformation of established ideas, practices, and values in response to changing contexts and perspectives. In contemporary mural art, this process involves challenging traditional notions of murals as static, monumental, and elite-oriented works, reimagining them as dynamic, participatory, and socially-engaged art forms that actively respond to evolving socio-cultural conditions.

Socio-cultural dynamics encompass the complex forces that shape artistic production and reception. These include globalization processes that facilitate cross-cultural exchange while potentially threatening local cultural identities, urbanization patterns that transform physical and social landscapes, technological advancement that introduces new materials and modes of audience engagement, shifting political contexts that influence artistic freedom and public space utilization, and evolving community values regarding cultural heritage and public participation. Recent scholarship has explored various dimensions of mural art reconceptualization. Zheng (2023) examines how contemporary Chinese murals negotiate between state ideology and artistic autonomy, revealing tensions between official narratives and grassroots expressions. Abdullah (2021) investigates Malaysian murals as sites of political and social commentary, demonstrating how public art can challenge dominant discourse. Rahman (2022) analyzes the role of cultural heritage in shaping Malaysian mural aesthetics, showing how artists selectively appropriate traditional motifs to construct contemporary identities.

However, existing literature reveals significant gaps. Comparative analyses across different national contexts remain limited, with most studies focusing on single-country cases. The specific mechanisms through which socio-cultural dynamics influence artistic decision-making and public reception remain under-theorized. Furthermore, the role of individual artists as cultural mediators who translate broader societal changes into visual forms deserves greater scholarly attention. This study addresses these gaps by providing systematic comparative analysis of mural art development in two distinct yet comparable Asian contexts.

## 2.3 Mural Art in China and Malaysia

The development of Chinese murals can be divided into two main periods: ancient and contemporary. Ancient Chinese murals, dating back to prehistoric times, have a rich and varied history, with examples found in tombs, palaces, temples, and other public buildings. Reflecting broader social and cultural transformations, the 1980s saw Contemporary Chinese murals undergo significant changes in terms of style, content, and function. (Zhu, 2023). Key trends in contemporary Chinese mural art include the integration of traditional Chinese art forms with contemporary concepts, increased focus on urban issues and social commentary, and the emergence of independent artist collectives and street art movements.

In Malaysia, the development of mural art is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the art form gaining prominence since the 1970s and 1980s. Early Malaysian murals were primarily decorative in nature, focusing on abstract designs, floral patterns, and geometric motifs (Rahman, 2022). However, since the 1990s, Malaysian murals have become more diverse, socially-engaged, and politically-conscious, reflecting the country's multicultural heritage, postcolonial identity, and democratic aspirations. Key trends in contemporary Malaysian mural art include the representation of multiethnic harmony and cultural heritage, the use of murals for urban rejuvenation and tourism promotion, and increasing engagement with social and environmental issues (Abdullah, 2021).

While both countries share similar timelines in contemporary mural development, their trajectories diverge significantly. Chinese murals often navigate between national identity construction and individual artistic expression within a relatively centralized cultural policy framework. Malaysian murals, operating within a federal system and multicultural context, tend to emphasize ethnic diversity and regional identities. These differences reflect broader distinctions in political systems, cultural policies, and approaches to managing cultural diversity (Zhu et al., 2025). Understanding these comparative dynamics provides crucial insights into how socio-cultural contexts shape public art practices across different Asian societies.

## 3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design integrating visual analysis, case study methodology, and document analysis to examine contemporary mural art in China and Malaysia. A purposive sample of twenty-four murals (twelve from each country) created between 1980 and 2024 was selected based on five criteria: historical significance, public visibility in major urban areas, thematic relevance to socio-cultural issues, stylistic diversity, and availability of reliable documentation. Within this sample, four murals were selected for in-depth case studies due to the controversies they generated and the extent of public discourse they provoked, enabling closer examination of interactions among artists, authorities, and audiences.

Data were collected between January 2023 and June 2024 using three complementary approaches. Visual data were obtained through systematic photographic documentation and descriptive recording of each mural, capturing compositional features, color relationships, surface conditions, and spatial context. Field notes documented site conditions, surrounding environments, and observable forms of public interaction. Documentary sources included artist statements, media reports, institutional records, academic

literature, and policy documents, providing contextual insight into cultural governance, historical development, and social conditions influencing mural production and reception.

Analysis was conducted at three interrelated levels. Formal analysis examined visual properties such as composition, technique, material, and spatial organization to identify aesthetic characteristics. Content analysis focused on themes, symbolism, narrative structures, and cultural references to interpret socio-cultural meanings. Contextual analysis investigated commissioning processes, cultural policy frameworks, site specificity, and public reception to understand institutional and societal influences on mural creation and interpretation. Comparative analysis was applied across both national contexts to identify similarities and divergences in aesthetic strategies, thematic orientation, and socio-cultural positioning.

Ethical considerations included proper attribution of authorship, responsible representation of cultural materials, protection of informant privacy, and reflexive acknowledgment of researcher positionality. Institutional ethical guidelines for research involving cultural materials were followed. Methodological limitations include the restricted representativeness of the purposive sample, partial inaccessibility of Chinese-language sources, the ephemeral nature of some murals, and limited opportunities for direct artist interviews, which necessitated reliance on secondary materials in certain cases.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Evolution of Mural Art in China and Malaysia

#### 4.1.1 China: From Propaganda to Public Expression

Having undergone significant transformation since the 1980s, the Maoist era saw Chinese mural art primarily serving as propaganda tools, promoting revolutionary ideals and socialist values (Zhao, 2021). However, the reform and opening-up period witnessed a shift towards more diverse and experimental forms of mural art.

Key trend's include: Integration of traditional Chinese art form's with contemporary concept's.Increased focus on urban issues and social commentary.Emergence of independent artist collectives and street art movements.

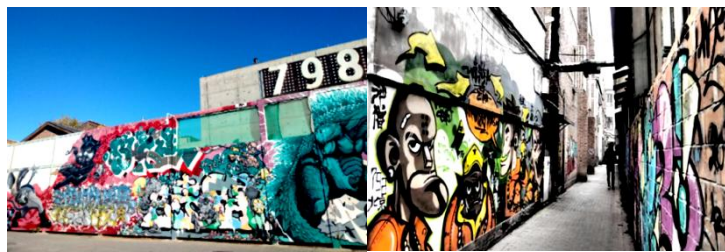


Fig. 3: Beijing 798 Art District Mural  
(Source : Author, 2023)

Example: The "798 Art District" (Fig. 3) in Beijing exemplifies this shift, featuring murals that blend socialist imagery with pop art aesthetics and critique of consumerism (Liu, 2023).

#### 4.1.2 Malaysia: Celebrating Multiculturalism and Heritage

Malaysian mural art has evolved from primarily decorative functions to become a powerfully medium for expressing cultural diversity and national identity. The development of mural art in Malaysia is closely tied to the country's postcolonial narrative and efforts to forge a unified national culture.

Key trends include:Representation of multiethnic harmony and cultural heritage.Use of murals for urban rejuvenation and tourism promotion.Increasing engagement with social and environmental issues.



Fig. 4: Murals in George Town, Penang  
(Source : Author, 2023)



Example: The "Mirrors George Town" (Fig. 4) project in Penang, featuring works by Ernest Zacharevic, demonstrates how murals can both celebrate local culture and attract international attention (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2019).

## 4.2 Comparative Analysis of Themes and Styles

### 4.2.1 Thematic Focus

Analysis of the twenty-four mural projects reveals distinct thematic priorities between the two countries. Among Chinese murals, national identity and cultural heritage themes appear in five projects, modernization and urban development in four projects, historical narratives in two projects, and environmental themes in one project. Malaysian murals demonstrate different emphases, with six projects focusing on multicultural harmony and diversity, three on local heritage and traditions, two on community life and social themes, and one on tourism promotion. These patterns reflect how socio-cultural contexts shape artistic priorities, with Chinese murals more frequently engaging with national narratives and modernization, while Malaysian murals emphasize cultural diversity and community engagement.

### 4.2.2 Artistic Approaches

Visual analysis reveals contrasting artistic strategies between the two countries. Chinese murals more frequently employ realistic and representative styles, with eight projects using traditional Chinese painting techniques integrated with contemporary approaches. The average scale tends toward larger works in prominent public locations, with most projects commissioned through official channels and executed by professional artists. Malaysian murals demonstrate greater stylistic diversity, including abstract and contemporary approaches alongside traditional motifs. The creation process more frequently involves participatory elements, with community members contributing to design and execution in several projects. These differences suggest how cultural policy frameworks and artistic traditions influence not only what is depicted but how murals are created and who participates in their production.

## 4.3 Case Studies of Controversial Murals

### 4.3.1 China: "Water Splashing Festival - A Tribute to Life" Mural (Fig. 5, Beijing, 1980)

Artist: Yuan Yunsheng

Location: Beijing Capital Airport

Commissioned by: Beijing Municipal Government

Background: This mural depicts the Chinese Dai people splashing water on each other during the Water-Splashing Festival, symbolizing holy baptism and auspicious and good wishes to each other.



Fig. 5: "Water Splashing Festival - A Tribute to Life" Mural, Beijing, 1980

(Source : <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/406064859>,2024 )

Controversy: The mural incorporates Western artistic styles and body art, it utilizes nude figures to depict scenes of traditional Chinese festival celebrations. In Chinese cultural customs, public displays of nude art are highly controversial. Due to significant public and media criticism surrounding the work at the time, the mural has been covered multiple times from 1980 to the present. Supporters argue that the work represents the liberation of Chinese intellectual and cultural thought, signifying a renaissance and innovation in contemporary Chinese mural art (Chen, 2022). Opponents contend that the mural's content severely undermines traditional Chinese cultural values and constitutes a desecration of national culture. Which caused significant controversy. Because of cultural sensitivity. Leading to multiple coverings of the artwork.

### 4.3.2 Malaysia: "Pillars of Sabah 2.0" Project (Fig. 6, Kota Kinabalu, 2020)

Artists: Various local artists, curated by Jared Abdul Rahman

Location: Former Land and Survey Department building, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Initiated by: Sabah Art Gallery and local art collectives

Background: This project transformed a colonial-era building into a public art space, featuring portraits of Sabahan heroes and cultural icons painted on the building's pillars.



Fig. 6: Pillars of Sabah Mural  
(Source : <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20190325/>, 2024  
<https://news.seehua.com/post/641032>, 2024 )

Controversy: The project generated debate due to its representation of Sabah's complex colonial history and the selection of subjects. Some community members criticized the exclusion of certain ethnic groups', while others questioned the appropriateness of using a colonial structure for postcolonial expression.

#### 4.3.3 Comparative Analysis:

Historical Narrative: Both projects engage with complex historical narratives. The Beijing project demonstrates the evolution of traditional ideas and national culture towards openness in contemporary visual development. In contrast, the Sabah project emphasizes local and indigenous histories that are often marginalized in national discourse.

Artistic Approach: The Beijing project predominantly employs Chinese traditions as its foundation, integrating novel creative elements and other styles, thus fusing socialist realism with contemporary elements. In comparison, the Sabah project exhibits a diverse range of artistic styles, reflecting the multicultural nature of the region.

Public Engagement: Both projects have sparked public debate, albeit with differing natures of discussion. The Beijing murals primarily reflect the conflict between traditional national culture and contemporary new ideologies. In Sabah, controversies are more centered on issues of representation and colonial heritage.

#### 4.4 Comparative Analysis of Prominent Mural Artists and Styles

##### 4.4.1 China: Chen Yingjie - "Residual Temperature" (Fig. 7, 2017, Shanghai)

Chen Yingjie, a renowned contemporary Chinese mural artist, is skilled in calligraphy and ink painting. After completing high school, he continued his studies in ink painting at Raffles Design Institute in Singapore. During this period, he began to engage with street art and experimented with combining these two art forms. Following his exposure to graffiti, he became active on social media platforms such as Weibo and Instagram under his childhood nickname "Drawing Boy" (Chen, 2019).



Fig. 7: "Residual Temperature" Mural  
(Source : <https://image.baidu.com/>, 2024 )

Style: A fusion of traditional Chinese artistic techniques and contemporary street culture, characterized by meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail, resulting in powerful visual impact. Themes: Chinese zodiac and abstract art.

##### 4.4.2 Malaysia: Yip Yew Chong - "Old Kuala Lumpur" (Fig. 8, 2018, Kuala Lumpur)

Yip Yew Chong, a self-taught Malaysian artist, created the "Old Kuala Lumpur" mural series in the heart of the capital, and they depict scenes from its past, showcasing the city's multicultural heritage and everyday life in the mid-20th century (Woon, 2023).



Fig. 8: "Old Kuala Lumpur" Mural  
(Source : <https://thehoneycombers.com>, 2024 )

Style: Realistic, nostalgic, rich in cultural details. Themes: Cultural heritage, nostalgia, multiculturalism, urban history.

#### 4.4.3 Comparative Analysis:

The comparative analysis reveals distinct approaches to mural art in China and Malaysia, shaped by their unique sociopolitical contexts and cultural aspirations. Chinese murals, exemplified by contemporary artists like Qiu Zhijie, demonstrate a synthesis of traditional techniques with modern concepts, reflecting the nation's drive toward modernization while preserving cultural heritage. These works often address more broad themes of national development and technological progress than other works, typically serving educational and ideological purposes aligned with state narratives.

In contrast, Malaysian mural art, represented by artists such as Yip Yew Chong, emphasizes realistic portrayals of cultural heritage and community life. These works focus primarily on celebrating multicultural identity and local history, often emerging from grassroots initiatives and contributing to cultural tourism. The emphasis on community engagement and preservation of diverse cultural traditions distinguishes Malaysian mural art from its Chinese counterpart.

The influence of globalization and localization has created unique hybrid forms in both countries. China's mural art shows increased adoption of international artistic movements and technological innovations while reinterpreting traditional forms for contemporary contexts. Malaysian murals demonstrate a similar global-local dialogue, incorporating international street art influences while maintaining strong connections to indigenous artistic traditions and local social issues. This interplay between global influences and local contexts reflects each country's distinct position in the contemporary cultural landscape, with China emphasizing modernization and global presence while Malaysia focuses on preserving multicultural heritage amid globalization.

## 5.0 Discussion

The findings reveal both convergent and divergent trajectories in the reconceptualization of mural art in China and Malaysia. In both contexts, mural practice has shifted from traditional forms toward contemporary expressions influenced by global visual culture. However, their developmental paths diverge significantly. In China, mural reconceptualization unfolds within tensions between state cultural policies and individual artistic autonomy, resonating with Lefebvre's theory of the production of space in which urban surfaces become contested sites reflecting ideological negotiation. In contrast, Malaysian murals operate within a multicultural social structure, foregrounding ethnic diversity and community representation, consistent with Hall's cultural identity framework, whereby murals function as visual arenas for negotiating plural identities.

Both Chinese and Malaysian mural practices demonstrate selective appropriation of global street art aesthetics, supporting Giddens' concept of time-space distanciation. Rather than passive adoption, artists integrate international stylistic influences through localized cultural lenses. Chinese murals increasingly engage with contemporary global idioms while retaining symbolic and historical references to traditional heritage. Malaysian murals similarly hybridize international techniques with indigenous narratives, with stronger emphasis on multicultural visibility reflecting national demographics.

The case studies further establish murals as active sites of socio-cultural negotiation. Controversial works in both contexts reveal how visual interventions provoke public discourse on cultural boundaries, identity politics, and ideological values. These findings extend existing scholarship by highlighting artists' strategic agency in shaping cultural debates, rather than merely responding to institutional or social constraints. Artists such as Chen Yingjie and Yip Yew Chong demonstrate how aesthetic decisions and community engagement practices function as forms of cultural mediation, reflecting broader distinctions in governance structures and degrees of artistic autonomy.

Finally, mural art is shown to exceed its decorative function, emerging as a strategic instrument in urban regeneration, cultural tourism, and identity construction. While Chinese murals frequently serve educational and ideological purposes, Malaysian mural projects prioritize community participation and tourism-driven cultural economies. The documented participatory practices, particularly in Malaysia, position mural creation as a mode of civic engagement and cultural production, underscoring murals as mediators between global artistic flows and localized cultural politics.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This study examined the reconceptualization of contemporary mural art in China and Malaysia since the 1980s, identifying both shared patterns and culturally specific trajectories shaped by divergent social and institutional frameworks. While both countries have transitioned from traditional mural functions toward contemporary expressions, Chinese mural practice remains closely linked to state ideology and cultural governance, whereas Malaysian murals foreground multicultural identity and community participation. In both contexts, artists engage in selective integration of global influences, supporting theories of glocalization rather than cultural homogenization.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The sample size limits representativeness, privileging institutional and permanent works over ephemeral street practices. Language constraints restricted access to some Chinese sources, and limited field access necessitated reliance on secondary documentation. Urban bias and the qualitative methodology further constrain generalizability and temporal sensitivity.

Based on the findings, recommendations are proposed for multiple stakeholders. Artists should adopt culturally grounded practices that balance international aesthetics with local engagement. Policymakers are encouraged to develop regulatory frameworks that protect

artistic autonomy while promoting cultural inclusivity. Urban planners should integrate murals into sustainable development strategies through maintenance mechanisms and public consultation. Communities should be supported in sustaining participatory models that foster dialogue between artists and residents.

Future research should pursue longitudinal analysis, ethnographic inquiry into artistic production, and cross-regional comparisons across Asia. Thematic expansion into digital media, environmental narratives, and cultural economies is also recommended. Theoretically, further development of region-specific public art frameworks and investigation into transnational networks would enrich Asian art discourse.

Overall, contemporary mural art in China and Malaysia demonstrates the continued relevance of public art in negotiating modern Asian identities. Despite different political and cultural systems, murals function as dynamic platforms for cultural expression, engaging with global trends while articulating localized meanings. These practices confirm mural art's role as a critical intermediary between tradition and modernity, state narratives and grassroots voices.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research makes three significant contributions to the field of contemporary art studies and cultural research. First, it provides a novel comparative framework for analyzing mural art development across different Asian contexts, moving beyond single-country studies to reveal how diverse cultural and political environments shape public art practices. Second, the study advances understanding of how globalization and localization forces interact in artistic expression, offering new insights into the transformation of traditional art forms in contemporary urban settings. Third, through detailed analysis of controversial mural projects, this research illuminates the complex dynamics between artistic innovation, cultural preservation, and public engagement in Asian societies, providing valuable perspectives for both art practitioners and cultural policymakers.

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