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# Virtual connectedness in times of crisis: Chinese online art exhibitions during the COVID-19 pandemic

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When Chinese museums had to close their doors due to the outbreak of COVID-19, several online art exhibitions were created that were able to still create a sense of connectedness among their audience members during the pandemic. This article details three online exhibitions – by Chronus Art Center, by M WOODS, and by independent curator Yu Minhong – and explores how they communicate ‘being-in-common’ (a concept by Jean-Luc Nancy) in the online realm; it also proposes alternative forms of cosmopolitanism that do not rely on physical mobility. The exhibitions are analyzed using visual and discourse analysis and supported by semi-structured in-depth interviews with the curators. This study shows that a cosmopolitan art world does not need to rely on physical travel if connectedness is understood as being-in-common rather than meeting-in-person, digital technology is mobilized effectively, and cosmopolitanism is grounded in a re-localization. In an era when the global art world is looking for ways to reinvent itself and the mobility system on which it operates, the article contends that it would do well to look to and learn from the example of Chinese online exhibitions.

**Keywords:** connectedness; cosmopolitanism; Jean-Luc Nancy; COVID-19 pandemic; online art exhibitions; China

## Introduction

How we can see the art during [this] pandemic is, like, [on an] online platform, right? I think this is very limit [*sic*], because we can't go to the cinema, we can't go out to the museum. ... We only have the internet. ... [Many museums in China are] facing this question; what their role is in this

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process, and also after [the COVID-19 crisis]. Maybe this [kind of crisis] is coming again and will be the new normal in the future.

– Chinese digital media artist Cao Fei (2020)

In January 2020 the COVID-19 virus broke out in China and as society was trying to swiftly adapt to an entirely new situation, the art world followed suit. By 24 January, Beijing and Shanghai had ordered their citizens to stay home and quarantine, and by 25 January many museums had closed indefinitely (Movius 2020; “Wuhan Virus” 2020). As entire cities went into lockdown and WeChat was flooded with virus-related drawings and paintings (Feng Xiaodan 2020), museums opened innovative online exhibitions at a remarkable pace. Over time, the epidemic turned into a pandemic, forcing the global art world to adapt to this unprecedented situation. We saw ‘virtual tours, live-streamed artist Q&As and Instagram Live videos occupying the space once filled by physical exhibitions’ (Bakare 2020). The Chinese art world, however, took a particularly innovative approach by creating online art experiences that, I will contend, reimagine the art world’s discourses around connectedness and cosmopolitanism in a locally and globally relevant way.<sup>1</sup> The three online exhibitions I analyze in this article explore different ways in which human connectedness can be created in the online realm, as well as proposing alternative forms of cosmopolitanism that do not rely on physical mobility.

When the virus hit the West, many art professionals pointed to the importance of using digital technologies to create ‘new forms of viewer participation’ (Birnbaum 2020), ‘deliver interaction, communication and connection’ (Mason 2020), and ‘provide a way of coming together’ (Wang Xin and Steensen 2020). However, many of these art critics also noted that doing this would not be an easy feat for art institutions, as many had little experience with creating a sense of connection by non-physical means. As curator Wang Xin noted: ‘A few images accompanied by a text doesn’t necessarily make an online exhibition, let alone an engaging one’ (Wang Xin and Steensen 2020).

Although many museums and galleries saw some increase in their online visitors during the pandemic,<sup>2</sup> a report by Art Basel and UBS on the global art market in 2020 showed that many art organizations were struggling to ‘balance a more online-based market with the shared experience, social contact, and excitement of discovery that comes from visiting exhibitions and sales offline’ (McAndrew 2021, 346) and to create high quality online content that distinguishes itself from what other institutions are offering (McAndrew 2021, 344–345). Major museums like MoMA, The Getty Museum, and The Guggenheim all relied primarily on tools like educational videos and podcasts, 360° tours,<sup>3</sup> webpages with photos of artworks from their collection, and

social media campaigns, but rarely offered online exhibitions that were really native to the digital space.<sup>4</sup> As Sheila Hoffman (2020, 211–213) argues, many of the online projects that museums created at the start of the pandemic understood digitization as a process of copying physical objects and practices to an online space. This approach often resulted in projects that were neither designed specifically for the online context, nor took advantage of the unique opportunities that digital technologies and online contexts offer. In contrast, the Chinese exhibitions I have analyzed were able to produce connectedness because they were produced specifically for an online context.

In this article I use the term ‘connectedness’ to refer to the communication of what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991a, 1) calls ‘being-in-common’. Nancy argues that what all people have *in common* is their *being* – their existence – and the finitude of that existence. However, ‘being’ itself is not a *common* possession, as we are all separate, singular beings. In other words, although all people have the fact that they are *beings* in common with each other, everyone’s experience of being is separate, and that too is something that everyone has in common. This is why Nancy then speaks of ‘being-in-common’ and insists: ‘[t]he question should be the community of being, and not the being of community.’ In *The Inoperative Community* (1991b, 6, 28), he furthermore states that what he refers to as ‘community’ is not a community of subjects, but what happens to people as they define their singularity in relation to others. Only through ‘the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being’ can we know that our being is finite. In other words, we can recognize our own being only in relation to others by recognizing that we are separate from them: ‘[c]ommunity means [...] that there is no singular being without another singular being.’

Nancy’s theory of being-in-common provides us with two important insights. First of all, during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when people have to isolate or practice social distancing, they are pushed to recognize their own mortality as the fact that they are inherently separate from other people. Nancy (1991b, 26–29) uses the term ‘finitude’ to express that the thing that all people share, but that ultimately separates them, is death. As Van Den Abbeele (1991, xiv) explains, community for Nancy is ‘the exhibiting or presenting of their [singular beings’] singularity, which is to say, the copresenting of their *finitude* as the very basis or condition for their commonality’ (italics in original). In the online art exhibitions that I will discuss here, artists’ representations of their mortality as they experienced it during lockdown can be seen to communicate our being-in-common – the sense that ‘we are all in this together even if we are alone.’

Secondly, according to Nancy (1991b, 9–12, 31), because people are always in-common, community cannot be lost. Any nostalgic longing for

a time in which people still lived in community, with such community now considered to have disappeared, is based on a myth. Furthermore, because community is based on our inherent being-in-common, it cannot be produced. This prompts a critical attitude towards the claims made by many online exhibitions held during the pandemic that they would be able to create a community online to substitute for the physical human interactions prohibited by COVID-19 regulations.

By arguing that online exhibitions can communicate a being-in-common, I am therefore not proposing that an online art world can *stand in* for a physical art world and all the forms of human connection it offers. Nor am I proposing an art practice focused entirely on human relations, as is the case with the relational aesthetics approach.<sup>5</sup> What I contend is that by communicating people's being-in-common, online exhibitions can function as a community in Nancy's terms and provide to the audience a sense of connectedness.

This goes beyond merely replicating the communal experience of viewing art in physical venues and, as Wang Xin argues, can be achieved when the tools that digital platforms provide are used effectively:

One thing that is tricky to recreate virtually is the communal experience of viewing art. The viewing experiences are never perfectly synchronized, but that social space is crucial. At the same time, that communal aspect has already become technologically available: user-generated commentaries alongside screened content, for example, can produce the sensation of shared participation. (Wang Xin and Steensen 2020)

Technological connectivity – referring to the networks of communication provided by (digital) technologies – has often been criticized for how it has commodified people's desire for connection and has made disconnecting from online social networks almost impossible (cf. van Dijck 2013; Hesselberth 2018). José van Dijck (2013, 12) rightly argues that the 'social' in 'social media' has both the meaning of '(human) connectedness' and of '(automated) connectivity,' but that whereas internet users desire the former, companies are more interested in the latter, which is a source of revenue. What I will show is how, during the pandemic, when connecting with others through digital means has for many been the only way out of isolation, several Chinese online art exhibitions have successfully used *technological connectivity* to support *human connectedness* – that is, to communicate their *being-in-common*.

Art worlds have always relied on connectivity and connectedness, both among art industry professionals and between art institutes and the public. This brings me to the second key concept of my analysis: cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan discourse that underpins this system and its idea of connectedness, in which art professionals travel extensively to

visit biennials, art fairs, and grand openings on all continents, has been untenable for a long time. This untenability has been underlined in the pandemic. Curator Barbara Pollock (quoted in Cartter 2020) notes that ‘the feeling of crisis has been going on at least since 2016’ and Catherine Mason (2020) comments: ‘[o]verdue, and now perhaps more timely than ever, is a forced rethink of the art world’s high-carbon, large-scale event-based lifestyle and crowded exhibitions.’ The cosmopolitan model, which relies on transnational mobility, came to an abrupt stop due to the travel restrictions and other limitations on mobility imposed around the world from early 2020. As Daniel Birnbaum (2020) puts it:

It has become a common theme that today’s lockdown represents a kind of dress rehearsal preparing us for an environmental crisis that has long threatened life on this planet. [...] Nothing could seem more obsolete today than the corporate mega-museum built on mass tourism and blockbuster exhibitions shipped around the world. That kind of elephantiasis is not what our planet needs, and not what artists tend to ask for, either.

When looking for an alternative form of cosmopolitanism, we should not return to outdated notions of it as ‘a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole’ (Robbins 1998, 1). The idea that it is possible to define ‘humanity’ or create a global identity has been convincingly refuted (cf. Cheah 1998). Nor should cosmopolitanism be considered a universal project. As Bruce Robbins (1998, 1) puts it, cosmopolitanism should not ‘claim universality by virtue of its independence,’ but should instead ‘be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged.’<sup>6</sup> Moreover, such forms of cosmopolitanism are not compatible with Nancy’s being-in-common, which understands community as the sharing of finitude, *not* as a collectivity of individuals on any level, such as a nation or humanity (Van Den Abbeele 1991, xiv).

Crucially, the online Chinese art exhibitions that I study here produce forms of cosmopolitanism that offer a more ethical, as well as a less Eurocentric, alternative to the pre-pandemic cosmopolitanism of the art world. These forms accord with Kristian Shaw’s (2017, 6) advocating of a return to Martha Nussbaum’s emphasis on the ethical values of cosmopolitanism, which he defines as ‘cultural cooperation and empathy’ (2017, 3).

In the analysis that follows, I take stock of how three Chinese online art exhibitions negotiate varieties of cosmopolitanism. I look at how they criticize existing cosmopolitan systems and adopt new forms. Furthermore, I ask how they create connectedness in online spaces and navigate the balance between applying technological connectivity to create connectedness while avoiding commodification of the human desire for connectedness in the form of commercialized cosmopolitanism (Shaw 2017, 147) or

commodified connectivity (van Dijck 2013, 16). In doing so, I focus on the strategies that these exhibitions employ to produce connectedness rather than the effects those strategies had on the audience.<sup>7</sup>

The visual and discourse analysis of the content and framing of the three online exhibitions is supported by semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with the curators.<sup>8</sup> I selected case studies that use different platforms and technological infrastructures, and that are organized by institutions or people that take up different positions in relation to connectedness and cosmopolitanism. The first exhibition, *WE = LINK: Ten Easy Pieces*, was organized by Chronus Art Center (CAC), an independent media art institute based in Shanghai that presents itself as a global art institute collaborating with an international group of institutes; the second, *The One Minute Series: The Power of Transparency*, was created by an independent Chinese curator based in The Netherlands, who collaborated with the international The One Minutes Foundation; and the third, *Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum*, was organized by M WOODS, a Beijing-based art museum that presents itself as Chinese, rather than global, but distributes its exhibition through both Chinese and Western social media platforms. The case studies were selected based on my definition of an online exhibition as an exhibition that exists only in the online environment, has its own location on the internet, and exists for a significant period of time. I specifically chose exhibitions that displayed contemporary art, that opened during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (February, March, and June 2020), and that reflect on the pandemic.

In what follows, I will start with an analysis of *WE = LINK: Ten Easy Pieces*, which criticizes commercialized cosmopolitanism and commodified connectivity, while providing connectedness through humor. The project also makes clear why transnational collaboration is not the same as ethical cosmopolitanism. Second, I analyze *The One Minute Series: The Power of Transparency*, which employs relatable experiences to produce connectedness. It productively uses technological connectivity to establish human connectedness, but also draws attention to the dangers of technological connectivity. In addition, this exhibition provides a strong example of localized cosmopolitanism. Lastly, I look at *Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum*. This project highlights how integrated digital technology can be an effective tool to create human connectedness. In particular, it demonstrates how the Chinese art world took advantage of the thorough integration of digital technology in Chinese society for an efficient transition from offline to online art exhibitions during the COVID-19 crisis. Taken together, these three exhibitions provide the art world at large with ways to resolve the crisis it was already in before the pandemic.



### ***We=Link: Ten Easy Pieces***

*We = Link: Ten Easy Pieces* (*We = Link: 十个少品*; henceforth referred to as *Ten Easy Pieces*) was curated by CAC's artistic director Zhang Ga (张尜),<sup>9</sup> and opened on 30 March 2020, without a specified end date. The exhibition includes six commissioned works and four works that artists made prior to the pandemic or were already working on.<sup>10</sup> All are works of net art, a genre that Zhang defines as consisting of artworks that are native to the internet and that engage, creatively and critically, with the internet as a network (Siembieda 2020).

The show was instigated by CAC, but co-commissioned by Art Center Nabi from Seoul and the New York-based New Museum. These two institutions provided a financial contribution for commissioning of the art works. The exhibition is co-hosted by a further nine art institutions from around the world, who contributed by sharing the show via their own communication channels to expand its audience.<sup>11</sup> It is the first in a series of net art exhibitions, collectively titled *We = Link*, organized by CAC in collaboration with other international art institutes.

The exhibition was organized in response to the COVID-19 lockdown in China, which, in January 2020, forced all museums and galleries to close. The website describes its main purpose as follows:

Rather than an explicit outcry against the current public health crisis, this online project addresses a general state of humanity that is under pressing peril of natural and social disruptions and precariousness, demonstratively manifested in the coronavirus outbreak, which is partially the cause of the magnitude of the virus itself and partially beholden to a failure of governance. (CAC 2020)

As I argued previously, in terms of both cosmopolitanism and being-in-common, there cannot be something like 'a general state of humanity.' Therefore, the exhibition's claim to address this state and its causes should be taken with a grain of salt. What it does point to, however, is that there were pre-existing problems in Chinese and global society that were magnified during the pandemic, and that are thought to require a new way of connecting people.

Zhang felt that, when the pandemic forced CAC to switch to online exhibitions, this 'created an opportunity for us [at CAC] to re-instate the importance of net art' (personal communication, 8 September 2020), now that 'the network becomes so visibly essential and indispensable' (quoted in Thorpe 2020). He proposes a return to what he regards as the critical stance of the net art movement in the 1990s, and especially its criticism of the disproportionate amount of power that tech companies like Amazon and Google have. The exhibition's aim of criticizing



commercialized cosmopolitanism comes to the fore in Zhang's description of the desire to be connected as a 'phony kind of democratization' and his reference to the 'commodification of the notion of connectivity' by big corporations (personal communication, 8 September 2020).

Within the exhibition, this critique is particularly poignantly articulated in *Get Well Soon!* (快点好起来) (2020). For this artwork, the artists Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne collected 200,000 unique well-wishes from the crowdfunding platform Go Fund Me. The work criticizes the fact that in the USA many citizens have to rely on financial support from strangers to fund medical procedures because the government fails to provide appropriate health care, as well as the fact that those asking for donations have to convince people to give by revealing very private stories; the sense of connectedness created on Go Fund Me therefore appears to rely on solidarity and altruism but may actually be exploitative. I want to suggest that the exhibition's critique of powerful digital technology companies amounts to a critique of commercialized cosmopolitanism as a whole, as commercialized cosmopolitanism sells the myth that global community or connectedness has to be created through consumption, whereas, as Nancy points out, being-in-common is already part of our existence.<sup>12</sup>

Not all the artworks in the exhibition are as critical as *Get Well Soon!*, however. Some works use humor to address the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal problems, as Zhang (personal communication, 8 September 2020) believes that difficult topics are best addressed in a light-hearted fashion. It is for this reason that he gave the show the subtitle *Ten Easy Pieces*, which is a reference to the film *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) by Bob Rafelson. The film's plot follows a man who is running away from his past as a classical pianist and trying to deal with what the exhibition website describes as his 'existential anxiety, a sense of estrangement and soul finding' by playing from a beginner's piano book titled *Five Easy Pieces*. As in the film, the anxiety and estrangement that many people experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown were so oppressive that, according to Zhang, they could only be addressed by finding some lightness: 'I choose [sic] the title 'Five Easy Pieces' as an inspiration because it seems to be very light, but it's really, really heavy, so you only want to address something so heavy in a very light fashion' (personal communication, 8 September 2020).

An example of an 'easy piece' in the exhibition that uses humor to address a 'heavy' topic is Ye Funa's (叶甫纳) *Dr. Corona Online* (柯大夫在线) (2020). On this one-page website visitors can submit a COVID-19-related question and receive an answer from 'Dr. Corona.' The concept was inspired by a column in the magazine *Family Doctor* (家庭医生), very popular in 1990s China, which featured health-related questions posed to a 'Dr. Co'. The advice given by Ye's Dr. Corona is generated by

an AI system that has been fed articles about COVID-19, from reliable and unreliable sources, as well as texts from social media about the virus, and spiritual texts from the internet.<sup>13</sup>

The answers that Dr. Corona gives are often non-sensical. When I asked it whether COVID-19 is contagious, it answered: '[t]he first thing that comes to mind when reading this article is thè`oh [sic] yeah! The new app from samsung [sic] was a success!' We could interpret this as a reference to the COVID-19-related fake news and conspiracy theories that have been spread on social media, which can cause serious harm while at the same time adding revenue to the platforms on which they are shared. Yet we might also say that through these funny messages, the artwork is able to fulfil its purpose, which, according to Ye Funa, is to comfort people. It does this both aesthetically and conceptually. The website shows beautiful, utopian landscapes in the background of the main page and presents the virus as ethereal, golden and glass objects that innocently float through the sky. Furthermore, the page enables you to customize your image by changing the color and placement of your question and answer, and encourages you to share the image on social media so that you can share your worries with others to relieve some anxiety. Finally, Ye suggests that during the start of the outbreak there was so much conflicting news about the virus that Dr. Corona's answers can work like a placebo medicine, reducing stress precisely because it does not add another instruction or theory (Peh 2020; Siembieda 2020).

Arguably, COVID-19 makes people more aware of their mortality and makes them have to deal with this awareness in (near-)solitude. *Dr. Corona Online* allows its users to contemplate this finitude and share it with others, emphasizing that they have this in common, even if these others are not sharing their physical space. As such, it offers people an opportunity for experiencing something like Nancy's being-in-common.

As I have shown, *Ten Easy Pieces* challenges commercialized cosmopolitanism and uses humor to communicate connectedness. It also claims to offer an alternative, more ethical form of cosmopolitan collaboration among international art institutes in the form of a cosmopolitan network grounded in solidarity. To establish whether it actually offers this ethical cosmopolitanism, we need to first look at how connectedness is reflected in the exhibition title. *Ten Easy Pieces* suggests connection because although 'We = Link' is pronounced by Zhang as 'we link' or 'we equals link', it can also be read as 'we are linked' or 'we are all a link'. Those readings are supported by the background of the website's main page, which shows an animation of link chains. According to the website, the title 'denotes a community of solidarity as a network of empowerment' created by the art institutions that came together to support each other when, first in China and later around the world, art

institutions were forced to close their doors (CAC 2020). According to Zhang Ga (quoted in Siembieda 2020):

We Link, I think, primarily [...] [refers to] a community of all the collaborating institutions that come together to link and to support each other and show solidarity. The community as supporting mechanism is extremely important in this moment of crisis and uncertainty.

What Zhang refers to as ‘community’ is not Nancy’s community of being-in-common, but a network of international art institutions connected by bonds of solidarity. If *Ten Easy Pieces* was in fact produced through trans-cultural cooperation founded in ethical values, we could call it cosmopolitan in Shaw’s terms; but a closer look at how the exhibition was set up raises questions about this.

Given that the support and solidarity offered by the other institutions to CAC exclusively took the form of financial contributions that enabled Zhang to offer a higher commission fee for new works and pay artists for exhibiting existing works, can we really speak of ethical cosmopolitanism here? As film scholar Erika Balsom (2020) has written about the online video art exhibitions that mushroomed at the start of the pandemic: ‘[t]oo often artists receive payment for works exhibited online in that phoney currency, ‘visibility.’ What is free to the viewer comes at a price to them, and at a time of increased precarity.’ Although paying artists money for their contributions is more ethical than repaying them in ‘visibility,’ I would argue that this should be seen as a fundamental responsibility of art institutions, rather than as a distinctive ethical act.

The claim that the institutions which organized the exhibition collaborated out of a sense of solidarity should also be questioned. We = Link was intended to become a network of media art institutions that would create more exhibitions in the future. However, it turned out that most of the organizations did not want to commit long-term. Future We = Link exhibitions will therefore be made with different international partners each time.

What this shows us is that turning the art world’s pre-pandemic cosmopolitan system, which relied on transnational connections primarily as a source for financial gain, into a cosmopolitan network of solidarity cannot be done overnight, because it requires a different ideological underpinning. While Zhang Ga (personal communication, 8 September 2020) maintains that at CAC, ‘we [do] not position ourselves as a Chinese institution. We’re located in China, but our work is international. And we also work with a body of international institutions,’ an international institution is not necessarily a cosmopolitan institution. Here lies the challenge for the global art world: how to transform from a transnational system to an ethical cosmopolitan system in Shaw’s sense.

*We = Link: Ten Easy Pieces* reminds us to be critical of the commercialized cosmopolitanism that sells the myth of global connectedness to make profit, and provides an example of how online exhibitions *can* communicate connectedness in Nancy's sense through the use of humor and digital technologies. The next exhibition I will analyze offers a proposal for how to change the cosmopolitan model of the art world by integrating the local.

### ***The One Minute Series: The Power of Transparency***

The exhibition *The One Minute Series: The Power of Transparency* (henceforth referred to as *The Power of Transparency*) consists of a live event and a video. The latter is part of a series by The One Minutes, which hosts video exhibitions by independent curators. The exhibition is curated by Yu Minhong (于旻弘), a Chinese artist and curator currently based in The Netherlands. As I will show, *The Power of Transparency* proposes a localized version of cosmopolitanism.

The exhibition consists of two parts that, according to Yu (personal communication, 28 August 2020), are of equal importance: a video and a live online event. The video can be viewed on the website of the contemporary art platform *isthisit?* and comprises a collection of art films each exactly one minute in length.<sup>14</sup> There are 14 minutes in total and they all play immediately after each other. Only at the very end are the names of the artists shown. The live event was titled *The One Minutes: Online Premiere* and took place on 22 May 2020. It consisted of a screening of the video, followed by an interview with one of the participating artists, Ye Qianfu (叶倩甫), a Chinese multimedia artist based in The Netherlands. The event closed with a music performance by Rutger Muller and two spoken word performances, by Effy Fu and Yu Minhong. It was broadcasted live on the website of Het Nieuwe Instituut and on Facebook. The live event was added to the online video display to increase opportunities for connectedness.<sup>15</sup> Central to this instalment of *The Power of Transparency* is a claim to achieving connectedness in isolation. All 14 artists were in isolation in China, Germany, Italy, or The Netherlands when they made their works.<sup>16</sup> During the live event, Minhong (2020a) stated: '[n]ow that the whole world is locked down at home, we all are united in isolation. Despite of [*sic*] being restrained, there is no limitation to our imagination.'

How does this exhibition communicate the being-in-common of isolated artists and viewers? Like Zhang Ga, Yu Minhong chose a curatorial approach that does not address the pandemic and the COVID-19 virus directly. Instead, she chose artworks that she felt represent the 'emotions and feelings during lockdown' in a 'poetic' and 'indirect' manner (personal communication, 28 August 2020). The format of *The One Minutes* is very suitable for this because it is practically impossible to tell an intricate

narrative in one minute. As art critic Alex de Vries (2008, 21) wrote: '[a] One Minute should not so much tell a story with a plot or a storyline, [...] but it should show a sequence of images that stands alone because of an unfathomable internal logic at once self-evident and surprising.'

Yu explains that her emphasis on indirectness is rooted in Chinese culture, but also plays an important role in enabling interpretation. By including works that address the experience of being in isolation during the pandemic in a non-straightforward manner, she opens up the possibility for people to relate to the videos through their own experiences. This may make viewers aware of the being-in-common of all people living through the pandemic. As I will show, this exhibition is able to communicate being-in-common precisely because its videos address topics indirectly rather than providing a narrative with a clear message. It furthermore examines the ways in which indirectness can both aid and prevent connectedness during the pandemic.

To theorize the idea of indirectness, Yu uses the term 'transparency,' which she relates to the role of water in Chinese philosophy. She sees water and transparency as metaphors for a form of soft power that people can adopt. In the famous Taoist philosophy of Laozi, water symbolizes the softness and flexibility that people should strive for (De Meyer 2013, 387). But we may also think of something Bruce Lee said in an interview, when he was quoting some of his lines from a recent acting role that, he said, reflected his own philosophy. A quote that, in 2019, became a prominent slogan of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests (Lam, Ng, and Xinqi 2019) and also refers to the power of acting like water:

Be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow, or it can crash. Be water my friend. (Lee 1971)

Transparency can evoke the ability to adapt to a difficult situation and to find strength in this adaptability. Such a difficult situation can be a political protest but also a pandemic lockdown.

However, the press release of *The Power of Transparency* also states that '[t]ransparency is the perfect camouflage' (Yu Minhong 2020a). What this means becomes clear in the final sentences of Minhong's (2020b) spoken word performance at the live event,

I'm so transparent. You probably see right through me. Will sooner or later; I long for invisibility. For no one to notice or look twice. But also, for the truth of visibility to allow me to shine; honestly, transparent. And let me be seen without fear. To be subtly, but clearly, different from anyone else.

Here, Yu reflects on the duality of transparency: it can be a safe cloak of invisibility that causes someone not to be looked or stared at, but also a

curse when one's invisibility prevents human connection. Only by seeing others and being seen can we become aware of our being-in-common and this can be particularly complicated during the pandemic, when contact with others mainly takes place online.

That technological connectivity can also make people too transparent is highlighted in one of the other artworks in this exhibition. *Crystal Palace* (2020) by Louis Hothothot (Yi Liu) is a close-up recording of an aquarium of goldfish.<sup>17</sup> Subtitles provide one of the goldfish with a monologue in which it urges the other fish to make sure that they are ready for their performance. It explains that their home is the Crystal Palace, a theatre in which the show must always go on. The experience of the fish is similar to that of the human in lockdown. Not only is it not possible to leave, but the feeling of being in a transparent panopticon where you always need to be "on" is familiar to all those who complain of 'Zoom fatigue.'

The technological infrastructure and normative system of social media have been designed to make it almost impossible to opt-out of this state of transparency (van Dijck 2013, 154–176). Thus, a work like *Crystal Palace* warns us that connectivity does not necessarily lead to connectedness. As van Dijck (2013, 16) argues: '[c]ommoditizing relationships – turning connectedness into connectivity by means of coding technologies – is exactly what corporate platforms [...] discovered as the golden egg their geese produced.'

*The Power of Transparency* shows both the opportunities and challenges of creating connectedness using technological tools of connectivity. It also addresses the other problem of connectedness that has become more pressing during the pandemic, namely the art world's reliance on an unevenly distributed global mobility. It does so by offering an alternative, localized cosmopolitanism. This cosmopolitanism was first of all created by Yu Minhong reaching out to a community of senior Chinese migrants living in Amsterdam who were neither accustomed to using online technology nor familiar with media art and inviting them to watch the exhibition. What emerges here is what Shaw calls an ethical cosmopolitanism, as Yu created a cultural cooperation that does not just involve the elite but also a Chinese diaspora community that may otherwise not have had access to this cosmopolitan exhibition.

Second, the value of engaging with local communities is reflected in the exhibition's line-up of artists, many of whom are Chinese people who at some point worked or lived in The Netherlands, and who came across the exhibition's call for submissions because they are part of Yu's social network. By including viewers and participants in the exhibition who do not fit the category of 'Chinese nationals living in China,' Yu rejects essentialist notions of what can be considered a 'real Chinese exhibition' and instead creates an exhibition that is truly cosmopolitan, while being rooted in multiple local localities.



Many of the artists in *The Power of Transparency* are cosmopolitan citizens who are rooted in both China and The Netherlands and who bring this perspective to their representations of lockdown. We see this clearly in the interview with artist Ye Qianfu at the live event, where he reflects on the lockdown experience by contrasting it to his otherwise transnational lifestyle: 'I really like to travel, because travel give [sic] me the freedom to go to every place. And sometimes if I don't want to stay in one place, at least I have the choice to go a little bit [sic] another place, which is nice. But in another way, travel makes me a little bit lonely somehow, because you know that not so many people have your cultural background' (Yu Minhong 2020b). This remark shows that a mobility-focused cosmopolitan lifestyle does not automatically lead to cosmopolitan connectedness.

As an alternative to mobility-focused cosmopolitanism, *The Power of Transparency* offers a form of localized cosmopolitanism that creates connectedness by engaging with local communities and by emphasizing the multiple localities to which the identities of its cosmopolitan participants are tied. Another way to reinvent the cosmopolitan system while creating online connectedness is to make better use of the opportunities provided by digital technology. This is what the final exhibition I will look at does.

### ***Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum***

The title of the M WOODS exhibition *Art Is Still Here: A Hypothetical Show for a Closed Museum* (henceforth referred to as *Art Is Still Here*) describes it as a 'hypothetical show,' which may suggest that it is not real. In fact, in contrast to the English title, the Chinese title emphasizes its reality: 艺术还在:一场闭馆期间的展览 ('Art Is Still Here: An Exhibition of a Closed Museum'). Moreover, the online exhibition is shaped according to the physical gallery space of the museum, visualizing what it would be like if it took place offline.

For nine weeks, during the closing of the M WOODS museum, a new section of the exhibition was created and opened each week, always connected to a specific gallery room of M WOODS.<sup>18</sup> To visualize this concept, the exhibition shows the museum's floor plans and digitally rendered videos of what it would be like to walk into the museum and through the galleries. The exhibition opened on 13 February 2020 and closed by November 2020. It was curated by Victor Wang (王宗孚), the Chinese curator and artistic director of M WOODS. 'It's a historical moment,' he said when we talked about how we will look back on this time (personal communication, 20 September 2020). He believes that an important change is occurring in the art world, led by Chinese museums.

What propositions for a different art world does this exhibition provide? The press release for *Art Is Still Here* states that, by organizing



this show, the museum hopes to ‘continue our mission of working with artists to provide art for the public, making it accessible at all times and in all circumstances’ (M WOODS 2020). The text poses the main question to be answered as: ‘What are the forms that art and art museums must take when galleries become inaccessible to the public?’ Both the press release and Victor Wang have stated that, during this health crisis, art has a special ability to ‘comment and reflect’ on the times (Bhargava 2020; Calvo 2020; M WOODS 2020). I will show that in order to achieve its connective aim, the exhibition uses technological practices that are already commonplace in Chinese society.

Upon the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, the M WOODS team started thinking of ways to continue their work online, which was considered desirable out of solidarity with the museum staff, who might otherwise lose their jobs. At the same time, Wang (2020) wanted to use the museum’s platform to create a space where artists could connect and interact, and where the museum could ‘engage with our audiences during mass quarantine’ (Wang, quoted in Bhargava 2020). Chinese citizens were already widely discussing developments around the virus outbreak on social media, and he wanted to engage with this existing discourse (Bhargava 2020). He believes that digital technology can play a special role in communicating shared experiences: ‘[w]hat we needed was a new language to help navigate our heightened simulated reality – a new isolated interface – one that is being sustained by mobile applications and online location-based services’ (Wang 2020).

The exhibition relied on what van Dijck (2013) calls the ‘culture of connectivity.’ Whereas, as noted earlier, van Dijck, like Zhang Ga, is primarily critical of this culture’s commodification of the desire for connectedness, *Art Is Still Here* shows that technological connectivity can be a source of connectedness. The exhibition was accompanied by a variety of interactive programs and the museum also opened a virtual version of itself with representations of many of its old exhibitions in the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. People could visit the museum in the game using an avatar.<sup>19</sup> Other interactive online events organized around *Art Is Still Here* took the form of art auctions and live panels with artists and other guests.

To further stimulate connectedness through connectivity, the museum published the video of every new online gallery on WeChat, Weibo, Facebook, and Instagram. This is remarkable because the videos featured full versions of all artworks, including works by famous artists. It is very rare for museums to do this because they are usually not able to obtain the copyright permissions needed to distribute full works online. As digital artist Cao Fei (2020) mentioned elsewhere: ‘[f]or video artists [exhibiting online is] also difficult because you want to show [the] full duration [of] your video online, [but] this [is] related [to] copyright.’ Although sharing these full artworks via social media of course generated free

publicity for M WOODS, it also provided ways for people to share their experiences with others. This tactic of increasing connectedness by stimulating people to share art online as a way to share their experiences is similar to that of Ye Funa's artwork *Dr. Corona Online*, exhibited in *Ten Easy Pieces*. Whereas online exhibitions cannot offer an embodied sense of connectedness, they can enable people to create a shared experience online, which can also be a form of sharing being-in-common.

Notably, the exhibition was able to draw on the extensive experience with integrating digital technologies and platforms of Chinese society in general and the Chinese art world in particular. The website specifically refers to this: '[i]n the context of Mainland China, social media has now become a very powerful tool in sharing information and connecting communities both locally and internationally during the quarantine period.' The way everyday experience has been transformed by platformization has been aptly described by artist Ye Funa (quoted in Peh 2020):

[I]ncreasingly, we don't actually have an 'offline' state anymore — we are always online. Everything we want can be done on our smartphones. We have these apps that can engage in O2O, which means online-to-offline software. Through an O2O app, I can call my manicurist, order delivery, send mail and wash my clothes — all through my phone, so I'm never really 'offline.'

Although using a smartphone app to make an appointment with your manicurist is not uncommon in many other countries either, the degree to which the use of digital technology like O2O software has been integrated into everyday life is particularly high in China. Using one app, like WeChat, for all the actions mentioned by Ye, is not just possible, but standard. Arguably, a society in which offline and online merge in one's smartphone is better equipped to smoothly transition offline art viewing practices to an online space during a time of crisis.

That is not to say that the answer to the crisis of the global art world lies in a further platformization of society, or that the critique of the commodification of connectivity addressed earlier should be ignored. However, the strategies used by M WOODS show us that merging the offline and online world helps to provide a space for human connectedness. To reiterate Wang Xin's warning: 'a few images accompanied by a text doesn't necessarily make an online exhibition, let alone an engaging one' (Wang and Steensen 2020). Exhibition practices that were common at the start of the pandemic in many countries simply copied offline practices to an online space. We saw this for instance in the many museums that enabled people to 'walk' through their gallery spaces via 360° tours. In contrast, M WOODS reimagined, rather than mirrored, the museum as a digital space, and enabled human connectedness through connectivity.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, adopting practices from Chinese contemporary culture into the global art world could challenge Western perceptions of what the global art world is, as well as Eurocentric conceptions of cosmopolitanism. As mentioned in the introduction, the form of cosmopolitanism in which the global art world's system was rooted prior to the pandemic was one that was falsely understood as a universal project. The art world cannot and should not wish to return to such a system. A rethinking of cosmopolitanism as not based in the West could open up opportunities for the artworld to learn from Chinese as well as other local examples. In the Chinese art world, employing digital technologies and online platforms to produce exhibitions that cross the boundaries of physical and virtual spaces was not an anomalous practice created for the pandemic, but one that already existed and could be expanded upon.

### Conclusion

In December 2019, just before the outbreak of COVID-19, Kyle Chayka (2019) wrote the following about the global art world's problematic dependency on international travel: '[t]he trick might be coming up with new formats and new expectations, admitting that our current methods of drop-shipping shows are unsustainable at best. How do we re-localize art through curation, without sacrificing the global culture that we prize?'

The Chinese online exhibitions that took place in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic provide examples of forms that such re-localization may take. As I have shown, they manage to create connectedness even while artists and viewers are isolated by communicating people's being-in-common. The artworks in *Ten Easy Pieces* use light-hearted humor to do this, the works in *The Power of Transparency* offer poetic visualizations of emotional experiences, and *Art Is Still Here* uses the tools of digital platforms. All exhibitions address the pandemic only indirectly, leaving space for the audience to relate to the works in different ways and to recognize the being-in-common that these works communicate.

This form of connectedness is reinforced through an embracing of technological connectivity that builds on the way such technology has become integrated into Chinese society to an extent not yet matched in other parts of the world. In *Ten Easy Pieces*, artworks like *Dr. Corona Online* allow viewers to share the uncertainty and anxiety generated by the experience of living through a pandemic via social media. Similarly, *Art Is Still Here* posted videos that included full artworks on all their social media accounts, so that viewing art could be a common and communal experience even during a lockdown.

The exhibitions discussed here show that a cosmopolitan art world does not need to rely on physical travel if connectedness is understood as being-in-common rather than meeting-in-person, and if digital

technology is mobilized effectively. At the same time, the exhibitions are not utopian in their visions of the role that digital technology can play. *Ten Easy Pieces* critiques the phenomenon of commercialized cosmopolitanism, in which the promise of providing cosmopolitan connectedness is used to sell products. Moreover, critical perspectives on the ways in which digital communication technologies can make users feel like they are always on show, especially during this pandemic, can be found in works like the *Crystal Palace* in *The Power of Transparency*.

Through their use and critique of digital technologies, and their engagement with the pandemic, these exhibitions stage ethical notions of cosmopolitanism that, in Chayka's terms, are grounded in a re-localization that includes a global dimension; these are Chinese exhibitions, but they are not all in China, and they position Chinese artists as speaking to global questions. While Barabantseva (2009, 143) has said, with regards to cosmopolitanism, that 'practices of mobility are indispensable for experiencing the modern world, both within and outside China,' the art shows analyzed here illustrate that such mobility does not necessarily need to be literal movement through space occurring in the present. Cosmopolitanism can be linked to the local, for instance by engaging local communities as *The Power of Transparency* did; but when these local communities are a product of past migration, the local already comprises the global. Thus, I argue that, in an era when the global art world is looking for ways to reinvent itself and the mobility system on which it operates, it would do well to look to and learn from the example of Chinese online exhibitions.

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### **Ethics committee approval**

The research for this study included in-depth interviews with the exhibitions' curators. All subjects have provided appropriate verbal informed consent. The author has obtained formal approval for this research from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam. File number: 2019-FGW\_MED-11227.

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## Notes

1. Following the *2020 Future Art Ecosystems* report by the Serpentine Galleries, I understand the art world as ‘an enormous ecosystem. Or, more accurately, as a series of ecosystems, incorporating artists, cultural institutions, funders, collectors and many others’ (Mason 2020, Foreword). Therefore, I refer both to the global network of art ecosystems and the Chinese national ecosystem as art worlds.
2. A survey by the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) executed in March and April 2020 among museums from 48, mostly European, countries showed that 40% of the participating museums had seen some increase in visits to their online platforms in that period. Among more than 25% of the museums the increase was 0-20% and for 5% of the museums the increase was as high as 200% (NEMO 2020, 1, 14).
3. The 360° tours enable visitors to walk through a museum’s gallery spaces virtually. These tours are often produced in partnership with Google Arts and Culture and function in a way that is similar to the Google Street View function in Google Maps (Hoffman 2020, 211).
4. See Eric Longo’s (2020) blog post for MCN for an extensive overview of the different online resources that museums from around the world offered in response to COVID-19 lockdowns.
5. See Downey (2007) for a discussion of relational aesthetics and the criticisms it has received.
6. Here, I follow Robbins’ (1998, 12) understanding of cosmopolitanism as plural and as existing on multiple scales that can be both smaller and larger than the nation, although not as large as ‘humanity.’
7. Audience research is beyond the scope of this study, but for future research an analysis of audiences’ responses to the online exhibitions that were produced during the pandemic could offer valuable additions to the insights provided in this paper.
8. The interviews took place in August and September of 2020. I spoke face-to-face with Yu Minhong and, due to pandemic-related limitations, via Zoom with Zhang Ga and with Victor Wang. The interview with Zhang Ga was audio-recorded. The other two curators requested not to be recorded. For this reason, few direct quotations are included.
9. The exhibition has been archived here: <http://we-link.chronusartcenter.org/teneasypieces/> (Accessed 9 February 2021).
10. The exhibition includes artworks by the following artists: Raphaël Bastide (France), Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne (Australia, USA), artist collective JODI (*viz* Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans; The Netherlands, Belgium), Li Weiyi (China), Evan Roth (USA), artist collective Slime Engine (*viz* Li Hanwei, Liu Shuzhen, Shan Liang, and Fang Yang; China), Helmut Smits (The Netherlands), aaajiao (*née* Xu Wenkai; China), Yangachi (Korea), and Ye Funa (China).

11. These included: Arts at CERN (Switzerland); e-flux (USA); HeK (Switzerland); iMAL (Belgium); LABORATORIA Art & Science Foundation (Russia); Leonardo/ISAST (USA); MU Hybrid Art House (The Netherlands); SETI AIR/SETI Institute (USA); V2\_Lab for the Unstable Media (The Netherlands).
12. In a review of the exhibition, Huang Banyi (2020) wrote that it was successful in starting a critical dialogue about community and connectedness, stating that *Ten Easy Pieces* ‘succeeds at initiating a conversation around the way we think about community and connectivity.’
13. The fact that Dr. Corona’s replies are based on different sources also resembles the original Dr. Co because, as Ye Funa found out, the column was actually written by a group of Chinese doctors under the pseudonym Dr. Co (Siembieda 2020).
14. The video can be accessed here: <https://www.isthisitisthisit.com/the-power-of-transparency-screening> (Accessed 9 February 2021).
15. According to Yu Minhong, 80 people watched the event live, which already indicates a reasonable interest in an online art event like this one. Moreover, on 1 July 2021, the recording of the event had received a total of 1800 views on Facebook, which shows the significant potential of online exhibitions (Yu 2020b).
16. The included artists are: Fag Tips (*née* Virgil Benjamin Goodman Taylor; USA), Clara Rosso (Italy), Zuza Banasińska (Poland), Qiteng Wu (China), Sijing Zhang (China), Chen Feng (China), Qianfu Ye (China), Louis Hothothot (*née* Yi Liu; China), Lu Lin (China), Wenjing Chen (China), Alejandra Morote Peralta (Peru), Luca Heydt (Germany), Jun Zhang (China).
17. The work’s title refers to the Palace of Prolonging Happiness (*Yanxi Gong*) in Beijing’s Forbidden City. The original building burnt down in the nineteenth century and in 1909 construction started of a “Western style” building made of marble and cast-iron, and with glass walls that would allow people to watch a goldfish pool. This building, which was never finished, is colloquially called the Crystal Palace, possibly referring back to the building that staged the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London, which was dubbed the Crystal Palace for its innovative use of glass and cast-iron. (Chu 2012, 352; The Palace Museum 2021).
18. Over 50 artists contributed work to the exhibition. The full list of artists and the exhibition itself can be viewed here: <https://www.mwoods.org/Art-Is-Still-Here-A-Hypothetical-Show-for-a-Closed-Museum> (Accessed 9 February 2021).
19. The *Animal Crossing* exhibition only lasted for a short period of time because the game was removed from sale in China on 10 April 2020, after content supporting the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests had started circulating on it (Lai 2020).
20. In a review for Berlin Art Link, Hannah Carroll Harris (2020) expresses that the exhibition was able to produce connectedness through connectivity, stating that the show was ‘among the top examples of how you translate a real-life experience into a virtual one: one that suits the parameters of this very real crisis. Rather than the stock virtual exhibition view that we are



seeing galleries offer the world over, M WOODS have carefully considered what forms both art and art museums should take when galleries become inaccessible to the public.’

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