



The Application of Participatory Public Art in University Public Art Education

Shumei Tian ¹

¹ Master's degree, Assistant Lecturer, Chongqing Industry Polytechnic University, China

✉ **Corresponding author:**

shumei.tian0316@gmail.com



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.
To view a copy of this license, visit
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

ABSTRACT: Participatory public art emphasises the joint participation of artists, students, and the public. This study aims to explore the application paths and educational value of participatory public art in university public art education. Drawing on literature analysis and international representative case studies, the study examines the characteristics and practical model of university teaching. The study found that participatory public art exhibits unique social and practical advantages in art education, effectively promoting the comprehensive improvement of students' aesthetic experience, creativity, teamwork, and emotional expression. This model enhances the public art curriculum in universities, providing students with a platform for in-depth artistic practice. Its significance lies in the fact that through collaborative creation, students can better understand the relationship between art and society, thereby enhancing their comprehensive qualities, such as artistic appreciation, teamwork, and social engagement.

KEYWORDS: Participatory Public Art, University Public Art Education, Collaborative Creation, Aesthetic Competence, Comprehensive Literacy, Teaching Practice.

How to cite: Tian, S. (2025). The Application of Participatory Public Art in University Public Art Education. *International Conference on Pedagogical Science and Digital Learning 2025*, (pp. 166-173). Futurity Research Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17514779>

Introduction

In recent years, public art education in universities has received increased attention; however, practical teaching still faces challenges, including a disconnect between theory and practice, insufficient curriculum resources, and low student engagement. Participatory public art, which emphasises collaborative engagement among artists, students, and the public, offers new possibilities by integrating visual arts, social design, and community practice. Through this open creative process, students' creativity and social responsibility are stimulated, broadening curriculum content and strengthening their understanding of art's social value.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study is to clarify the application paths and practical significance of participatory public art, specifically within university public art education. This will be addressed by examining the following focused research questions:

- 1) What are the core characteristics, development trends, and educational benefits of participatory public art?
- 2) How can participatory public art promote students' aesthetic abilities, creativity, teamwork, and emotional development?
- 3) How can universities effectively incorporate participatory public art into their curriculum and practical activities?

Research Results

I. Characteristics and Development of Participatory Public Art

Participatory public art is a distinctive art form that can be found in public spaces. Artists, students, and the public conceive, create, and implement these projects together. Unlike traditional top-down art, it uses an open and democratic process. This approach integrates art with social life (Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2004). It centres on collaboration through group discussions, workshops, and on-site work. Art becomes a tool for expressing shared emotions and advancing social issues.

This concept gradually emerged in the late 20th century. Its development can be roughly divided into two phases. The first phase, in the late 20th century, featured early participatory public art, such as community murals and sculptures, with a focus on environmental improvement. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, founded in 1984, is a prime example. Since then, the program has produced over 4,000 murals and engaged thousands of citizens in direct participation. It has integrated art into the community and served as an important platform for social education (Finkelpearl, 2001). The second phase began at the start of the 21st century, when societal attention to empowerment and community building grew.

The core of participatory art gradually shifted from "work" to "process" (Bishop, 2012), its forms became more diverse, and its themes grew more complex. Issues now include urban memory, environmental protection, and social justice. Contemporary participatory public art emphasises social connections and emotional exchanges fostered by the act of creation. It focuses on stimulating the creativity of all participants, aiming for deep integration of art and community. This collaborative, educational, and socially practical nature has gradually extended into educational practice. Participatory public art is now recognised as a vital means of connecting artistic learning with social engagement.

II. Challenges Facing Public Art Education in Universities

Insufficient Concepts and Priority

Although the significance of public art education is widely acknowledged, it is often given inadequate emphasis in university curricula. Curriculum development often fails to address the diverse needs of students, particularly those in science and engineering disciplines, who have limited opportunities to participate in art courses. In non-arts universities, public art education is frequently marginalised and lacks sufficient institutional and resource support. Even in prominent art institutions, course offerings are typically confined to theoretical instruction or brief workshops, rather than sustained, practical projects. These limitations diminish both the effectiveness and practical relevance of public art education (Li, 2024; Zhang, 2021).

Lagging Teaching Management and Resource Allocation

Significant deficiencies in teaching management also hinder public art education in universities. Administrative departments in many institutions lack a unified understanding of public art education, leading to inadequate scientific and systematic planning. Consequently, teaching resources are distributed unevenly, and curriculum formats remain uniform, failing to address the diverse developmental needs of students. Furthermore, public art education programs are frequently sporadic and lack continuity. The absence of consistent, systematic management mechanisms negatively affects both curriculum quality and teaching efficiency (Kang, 2023; Guo & Guo, 2019).

Lack of Professional Faculty

A shortage of qualified faculty poses a significant challenge to the advancement of public art education. The limited availability of instructors with interdisciplinary expertise and substantial practical experience impedes the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application in course offerings. While many faculty members have strong academic backgrounds, they often lack experience in practical teaching and interdisciplinary instruction. Additionally, as students' artistic literacy and needs diversify, some faculty members are unable to implement individualised teaching strategies. These factors collectively hinder the effective development of students' potential and compromise overall teaching quality (Hu et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020).

III. The Impact of Participatory Public Art on Students' Comprehensive Literacy

Improving Students' Aesthetic Abilities

As an art form that values collaborative creation, participatory public art sharpens students' aesthetic literacy. It often merges disciplines such as visual arts and social design. Through interactive communication and joint expression during the creative process, works emerge that are evocative and rich in narrative. These creations not only reflect humanistic meaning and distinctive beauty but also allow students to experience the link between art, emotion, and social issues throughout the inception and creation process, thereby steadily elevating their perception and appreciation of aesthetics.

This aesthetic experience emerges in the collective and social dimensions of participation. For instance, in the London Underground's "Art on the Underground" project, contemporary artist Mark Wallinger invited students from 27 London schools to collaborate on creating the "Labyrinth" series. Through this process, students not only witnessed shared creativity but also gained a clearer understanding of how artwork merges with urban space and public service, thereby refining their aesthetic judgment. Additionally, material and style choices often stemmed from group discussion, giving students direct experience with art's democratic and inventive aspects. The "Labyrinth" installations were ultimately permanently displayed at 270 subway stations (Liu & Yang, 2021).

Enhancing Students' Creativity and Imagination

Participatory public art prioritises creative ideas and open expression, giving students platforms to hone their originality and imagination. Through group discussion and planning, students must suggest novel concepts and construct unified artistic themes and spatial stories tailored to particular sites and circumstances. This unbounded process sparks imagination and builds interdisciplinary thinking and design abilities.

For instance, in the required general education course "Public Art" offered at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, students from diverse majors joined an art project titled "Fighting the Epidemic." Using media such as photography, silhouettes, and light boxes, they created commemorative public art on campus documenting this collective experience. This art practice refined students' creative abilities and expanded their spatial storytelling and problem-solving skills.

Cultivating Students' Teamwork

Another key aspect of participatory public art is teamwork. The creative process encompasses stages ranging from concept development to selecting materials, creating the artwork, and final display. Each phase depends on clear communication, negotiation, and cooperation among team members. Students learn to listen, coordinate, and collaborate, ensuring projects are completed.

In Seoul's "Urban Regeneration Art Project," students partnered with residents and artists to build temporary public art installations. They overcame technical obstacles during construction and

developed mutual understanding through cross-cultural interaction. This direct involvement not only strengthened teamwork but also highlighted the importance of collaboration for complex projects (Poxie & Le, 2020). Through this experience, students saw firsthand the results of collaboration –a skill they would develop for future studies and careers.

IV. The Impact of Participatory Public Art on Students' Emotional Development

Improving Students' Emotional Cognition and Expression

Participatory public art is not only a form of visual presentation but also a means of emotional expression. Its themes often draw on participants' life experiences and inner feelings, touching on multifaceted emotional issues such as social concerns, historical memory, and interpersonal relationships. When participating in creative works, students need to understand and empathise with diverse emotions as they engage with others' narratives and social realities, thereby gradually improving their own emotional cognition.

For example, within Zhejiang University's "Aesthetic Education and Society" series of practices, students participated in the "Art Therapy and Community Care" project, visiting communities and engaging in activities such as painting, music creation, and improvisational theatre with groups including autistic children and elderly individuals who had lost their only child. Through these interactions, students not only witnessed how art can help others express and release their emotions, but also learned to respond to others' psychological needs and to reflect further on social issues. These experiences allow them to free themselves and express themselves through collaborative creation, gradually developing more mature emotional expression skills.

Cultivating a Positive Mindset in Students

Themes in participatory public art often encompass beautiful visions of life or responses to social issues. This positive orientation itself can inspire students to develop a positive mindset. During the creative process, they often face difficulties with space, materials, or technology. Only through persistence and collaboration can they achieve their goals, and overcoming challenges is inherently educational.

Philadelphia's "Community Mural Project" is a prime example. This project has engaged at-risk youth in mural painting, helping them escape drug addiction and violence. Through artistic practice, they rediscover a sense of belonging and value, and experience accomplishment and pride in their creative work. This case study also reminds us that participatory public art can help students develop a positive attitude in the face of challenges and resist giving up easily in the face of setbacks (Finkelpearl, 2001).

Strengthening Students' Social Skills and Emotional Intelligence

Participatory public art makes students communicate, listen, and collaborate throughout the

creative process. These interactions enhance social skills and allow students to practice emotional intelligence.

For example, faculty and students from the School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University have been actively involved in community-building projects for some time. Students form teams with peers from diverse disciplines to design public art installations or small public spaces for their communities. Not only do they need to solve technical problems during their creations, but they also engage with residents, listen to their needs and stories, and incorporate these into their final works. This process enables students to gain firsthand experience in cross-cultural and cross-class communication, while also teaching them to develop empathy and a sense of social responsibility.

Through these practices, students gradually master managing complex interpersonal relationships and responding to and expressing life experiences through art. This enhances their social skills and emotional intelligence, which in turn lays the foundation for more comprehensive social practices in the future.

V. Application of Participatory Public Art in Public Art Education in Universities

Incorporating Participatory Public Art into the University Curriculum

Introducing participatory public art into university curricula has practical value. It provides students with a more comprehensive art education experience. Such courses allow students to learn public art theory and deepen their understanding of its planning, design, and social significance. As a result, students enhance their practical skills and awareness of innovation in real-world contexts.

For example, in its general education course "Art and Society," Fudan University encourages students from various majors to develop art projects within campus or community spaces. Students conduct on-site research, propose public art intervention proposals, and collaborate in groups to create temporary installations or performances. Both science and engineering students, as well as students from the humanities, participate. Interdisciplinary collaboration sparks creativity and strengthens social responsibility and public awareness (Li, 2024).

Through this curricular approach, students master the fundamentals of public art. They also engage in creative, reflective, and communicative work within real-world projects. This shift from classroom-based learning to public spaces offers new possibilities for aesthetic education. It also creates excellent conditions for cultivating social responsibility and comprehensive abilities. Universities can expand these practical activities through student clubs, interdisciplinary communities, or themed workshops. These efforts encourage students to participate and form a broader network for art education.

Conducting Extracurricular Activities Related to Participatory Public Art

In addition to incorporating participatory public art into the curriculum, universities can provide practical platforms for students through extracurricular activities. By integrating artistic creation and

public space experiences, students collaborate across disciplines and interact with faculty. This approach enhances their artistic practice.

In 2023, the Wuhan Institute of Design and Engineering and the Hubei Artists Association jointly organised the inaugural "Wu Xing Wu Se Public Art Festival." This event is a typical example. It encompassed sculpture, installation, new media, fibre art, and ecological art. Faculty, students, and professional artists participated in the event. The process emphasised integrating art and the environment. It also focused on the works' interactivity and public expression. University leaders, artists, and students jointly promoted the event. Public art creation became part of daily campus life. The festival fostered an atmosphere of empathy for campus life through art and the co-creation of the campus environment through design. Through these activities, students enhance their aesthetic literacy, creativity, and practical skills by engaging in creation, observation, exchange, and teamwork. The public interaction generated by the works enhances the campus's cultural atmosphere and the effectiveness of aesthetic education. Public art becomes a truly integral part of campus life (Zhang, 2020).

Conclusions

In summary, the introduction of participatory public art into university education not only provides students with opportunities to understand the relationship between art and society but also fosters their aesthetic sense, creativity, collaboration, and emotional development. By integrating curricular and extracurricular activities, students can gain experience in real-world social and public spaces, thereby enhancing their comprehensive literacy and awareness of humanistic care. This research aligns with the core goals of modern aesthetic education, confirming that participatory art serves as a necessary bridge between theoretical learning and social responsibility.

Future teaching practices should prioritise integrating diverse disciplinary backgrounds and educational needs to design more open and sustainable participatory art projects. Educators and administrators are encouraged to collaborate in continuously implementing and refining these projects. By doing so, the educational value of participatory public art will be further realised, deepening the connection between university aesthetic education and social practice.

References

- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso.
- Finkelpearl, T. (2001). *Dialogues in public art*. MIT Press.
- Guo, H., & Guo, R. (2019). Gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu jiaogai mianlinde kunjing yu celüe yanjiu [Research on the dilemmas and strategies of public art education reform in colleges and universities]. *Zuojia Tiandi [Writer's World]*, (29).

- Hoshina, T. (保科丰巳), & Le, L. (乐丽君). (2020). Dongjing yishu daxue gonggong yishu canyu shi jiaoxue [Participatory teaching of public art at Tokyo University of the Arts]. *Gonggong Yishu [Public Art]*, (1), 249.
- Hu, W., Deng, Y., & Xiong, Y. (2022). Gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu mianlinde kunjing ji chulu—Ping 《Gonggong yishu jiaoyu yanjiu》 [Dilemmas and solutions of public art education in colleges and universities—Review of “Research on public art education”]. *Zhongguo Gaoxiao Keji [China University Science and Technology]*, (2), 408.
- Kang, C. (2023). “Yi meiyu ren” shiyu xia gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu fazhan yanjiu [Research on the development of public art education in colleges and universities from the perspective of “educating people with aesthetics”]. *Daguan (Lun Tan) [Grand View (Forum)]*, (4).
- Kester, G. H. (2004). *Conversation pieces: Community and communication in modern art*. University of California Press.
- Li, H. (2024). Xin shidai meiyu shiyu xia gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu yanjiu [Research on public art education in colleges and universities from the perspective of aesthetic education in the new era]. *Xin Meiyu [New Aesthetic Domain]*, (5), 108.
- Li, T. (2023). Xin shidai gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu de yuanjing, kunjing yu fazhan celüe [Vision, dilemma, and development strategy of public art education in colleges and universities in the new era]. *Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Jiaoyuxue Kan [Journal of Education Science of Renmin University of China]*, (8), 859.
- Liu, Y., & Yang, J. (2021). Yishu yu shequ gongsheng: Mo’erben huangjia ligong daxue de canyu shi gonggong yishu jiaoyu [The symbiosis of art and community: Participatory public art education at RMIT University, Melbourne]. *Gonggong Yishu [Public Art]*, (3), 336.
- Zhang, D. (2021). Meiyu shiyu xia gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu de gaige yanjiu [Research on the reform of public art education in colleges and universities from the perspective of aesthetic education]. *Jiangsu Gaojiao [Jiangsu Higher Education]*, (39), 2687.
- Zhang, H. (2020). Gaoxiao gonggong yishu jiaoyu kechixu fazhan lujing chutan [Preliminary study on the sustainable development path of public art education in colleges and universities]. *Jiaoyu Lilun Yu Shijian [Theory and Practice of Education]*, (2020-04-25).