

Chinese Whispers

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Chinese Whispers is a sound art project to be staged in China in 2005 along the route of the Long March. It will consist of a number of distributed installations that are computer driven and operated interactively by the public. Each installation will collect spoken stories on the theme of reform and share them with the other installations using computer networking. Playback at each site will be composed of interwoven narratives from across the country, with individual voices overlaid on soundscape compositions of common origin. The project will establish a dialogue and find common ground between isolated groups.

Keywords: interactive art, narrative, sound, distributed, installation, peer-to-peer, networking, storytelling, China, Long March, soundscape, speech, reform

Precursors

The current project has developed from reflecting on earlier interactive sound art works created with Marc Raszewski and Jim Sosnin such as *The Talking Chair* (Mott, 1994 & Mott and Sosnin, 1995) and *Sound Mapping* (Mott & Sosnin, 1997 & Mott et al. 1998). These were gesture and movement oriented and featured sonic landscapes that were semi-composed. That is, they required the engagement of participants in order to be fully realised and the result was one that bore the imprint of all involved. After creating these works I became concerned that while they offered the public an active listening experience and a good deal of creative input, the impact of each participant on the works was transitory. Werner Jauk's *Interactivity Instead of Reactivity*, differentiates participatory works as either *reactive* or as *interactive proper* (Jauk, 1995). It describes how genuine interactive works undergo lasting behavioural change on interaction. While artist in residence at the CSIRO Mathematical and Information Sciences in Canberra and Sydney, I was introduced to various audio analysis techniques and their combined use with database structures and techniques for correlating events. A project developed that involved cumulative verbal interactions with an installation, whereby spoken interactions were analysed by a computer system for salient characteristics and stored in a growing repository of sound files and database entries. Apprehended characteristics were cross-referenced after each interaction with those of prior recordings in order to recall related audio fragments from the repository of sound files. These recalled fragments were replayed in various ways with the original voice, affecting phrase substitutions, overlays and convolutions. The analysis was such that individuals could quickly learn how recall certain sounds by varying the quality of their voice.



Figure 1. *Summoned Voices* (2003)

These modes inevitably had influence on subsequent interactions and at the end of the exhibition, the work produced sound collages mirroring aspects of the personalities of those visiting the exhibition and their manner of cultural exchange.

The ultimate work, *Summoned Voices*, was realised in Eindhoven, Netherlands with designer Marc Raszewski and consisted of three separate installations, distributed in a large exhibition space, each networked to a shared file-server and database (Mott, 2003). The work addressed the notion of behavioural change by incorporating the creative input of participants. Individuals were asked to "speak, sing or make sounds" into the intercom of each installation. Aside from the visual metaphors used in the physical construction, the public's entries constituted the bulk of the aesthetic content of the work. When first installed *Summoned Voices* represented a clean slate and with interaction its content was enriched: its sensitivity to related audio fragments becoming subtler. *Cultures* developed through the course of interaction, whereby certain trends in communication emerged, such as humour, vulgarity, song and personal recollection.

New Focus

Chinese Whispers will expand on this notion of exchange but focus on storytelling and site-specific narrative rather than *vocal play*. In order to facilitate a discourse the work will pose a particular question to participants. In responding to that question individuals will contribute ideas along a particular theme from the context of their own circumstance. The use of networked and distributed installations will be extended to encompass a broad geographical region. Distance and the isolation of individual installations will introduce regional variation in accents and dialect, along with divergent ideas and expression, resulting from the different environments.

Long March

In May 2004 I visited Beijing to exhibit a binaural video installation *Close* (Mott, 2001) at the Dashanzi International Art Festival and to investigate staging the then untitled narrative project in China. In Dashanzi I was introduced to the Long March Foundation as a possible group to work with (See Huang, 2004, for a detailed account of the Dashanzi Art District) and ultimately they invited me to participate in their *Long March - A Walking Visual Display* project. The foundation is engaged in local and international curatorial projects, including this ongoing project that consists of contemporary art installations and events staged along the route of the Long March. One of the main aims of the project is to counter a perceived shift of focus of contemporary art away "from the broad masses of the people toward the elite, from private studios towards hierarchical structures.....and from China toward the world beyond China" (Lu & Qiu, 2003). This curatorial scope and sensibility offers great potential with existing venues and support networks throughout the country. The environment of China itself is also disposed to grand narrative, with its dramatic social upheavals, both past and present, widely varying landscapes, ethnic groups and social stratifications.

The Question of Reform

In order to engage with the contemporary landscape of China, *Chinese Whispers* will prompt responses from participants by posing a question relating to reform. Individuals will be asked to tell stories about their lives and how changes in the economic and cultural landscape have affected them. *Chinese Whispers* will function as a collector of stories, an active oral history project that acts as a conduit for transmission. It will interweave narratives from multiple locations so the listener can reflect on stories from varied perspectives.

Chinese Whispers will be distributed in a number of separate installations along the trail from Ruijin in Jiangxi Province through to Beijing. Ideally the project will run for an extended period capturing stories from a wide geographical and temporal space. Each site will pose a particular question asking about the affects of change. The question will vary subtly from site to site to reflect local conditions. I will collaborate with Chinese visual artists on the project and potential collaborators will be found with the assistance of the Long March foundation. The visual artists will provide local knowledge and create materials and strategies for the work's implementation at each site. They will also be involved in formulating the question for the installation they work on, as there will be profound relationships established between the visual materials and the question asked. Chinese texts on the project have been prepared in order to communicate aims to the artists involved.

Operation

The installations will each have a device such as a telephone for entering stories, loudspeakers and a computer connected to the Internet. Computers will be unobtrusive, if visible at all, and no monitor will be used. Text panels, prepared with the collaborating artists, will describe the project and state the question. The loudspeakers in each installation space will play a constantly changing array of stories from around the country. On picking up the phone, the stories will stop and the participants will hear the question spoken in their local dialect and be prompted to speak. They will then tell their story. Once they hang up, they will hear fragments of their own story over the loudspeakers and new interwoven narratives from around the country accompanied by pre-recorded environmental sounds corresponding to the origin of each voice. Eventually these stories will run their course and new narratives from different locations will be introduced until another participant refreshes the cycle with a new story.

Visual Design & Venues

If we view the work as a form of oral history, individual installations will have the unusual quality of being both *interviewer* and *published outcome*. In ordinary interviews the interviewer may bring items such as news clippings or photographs to spark memories and to offer points of reference. They do this to encourage new ideas and disrupt any pre-existing narratives that the interviewee may have rehearsed over the years, delivering the same details of their lives repeatedly to family, friends and colleagues. The items act as "facts" and leave the interviewer free to ask the questions "how" and "why" rather than "what" (Rasmussen, 2004). Objects created by collaborating visual artists in each installation will similarly serve as facts, either real or bogus. They should act as prompts leading participants to unexpected places—places within their memory they may not have explored. Caution must be observed however not to frame the participant in a context foreign to them. If they feel their stories are being used for some purpose they don't understand or to which they feel apart, they will be reticent to communicate. The question asked must therefore be direct but fairly neutral and not loaded with hidden agendas. The installation too must somehow be familiar, yet offer a challenge to the participant's way of thinking.

At the time of writing I have no fixed plans of what the visual components might be with the exception of those objects functionally required for audio and networking. To the collaborating artists however, I will convey the idea of the space functioning as an interview, although not necessarily appearing as one. I will greatly encourage their own interpretations and ideas, as their input and local knowledge will be essential for meaningful engagement of the work with the domestic audience.

Venues will be diverse will number at minimum 3 and at maximum 7. In large cities, art galleries may be used, for example the Long March Foundation's ironically named 25000 Cultural Transmission Center in the Dashanzi district of Beijing. I will however work with the foundation to explore alternative venues, such as shopping centres and make all attempts to ensure the work reaches a general public. The Long March foundation has a strong history of using alternative spaces throughout China. One suggestion of Lu Jie, founder of the Long March project, is to implement mobile venues, installed on trucks or vans to reach remote locations.

Mechanics & Sound

Data transfer, or story sharing between sites, will be achieved using peer-to-peer networking or an automated emailing process between machines. Networking will achieve synchronisation of content; with each computer on the network sharing compressed audio and database files with every other site. Mobile units, if used, will bridge the gap in remote locations where Internet connections are unavailable, collecting stories and providing playback before reconnecting with the network at a suitable location to share files with the rest. Database files will contain information about each recording such as its origin and other information including where pauses occur in the speech. Playback will be composed locally on each machine in a semi-random fashion. Narratives to accompany fresh recordings will be selected with an even geographical and temporal distribution. For example a storyteller in Yunan may hear four stories in addition to their own: a recent story from Beijing, one from Huining made the same day, an old message from Kunming and one from Jingtangshan made at the very start of the project. The integrity of each story will be maintained, so even if a particular story is suspended to introduce a new story from another time and location, it will later resume at the place it left off. Database files will be used in the selection of recordings and to find suitable places to interweave new material, for example, at the end of a long pause in the speech. They will also be used to recall soundscape compositions made from recordings of common origin.

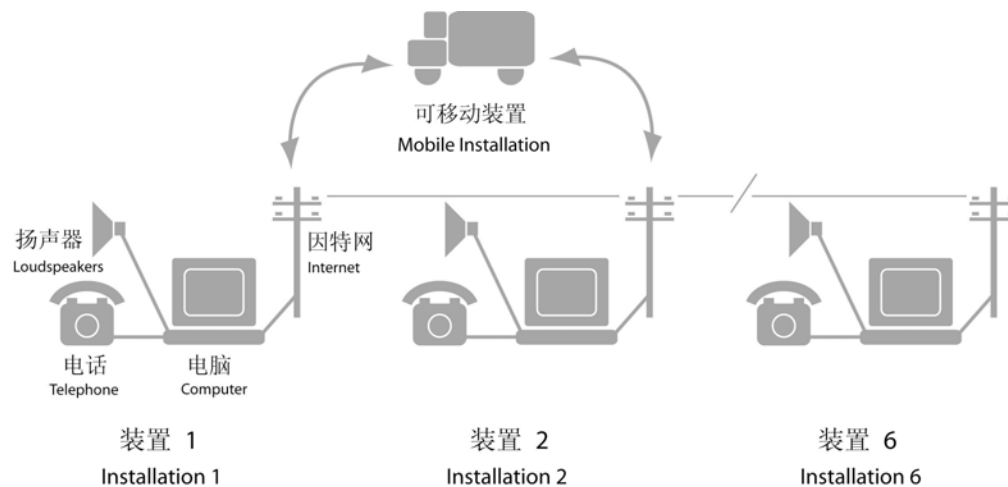


Figure 1. Diagram illustrating one mobile and six fixed installations

In contrast to *Summoned Voices*, where the system recalled audio in highly fragmented and modified form, *Chinese Whispers* will impose few modifications on the recorded speech. Voice recordings will undergo data compression to aid transmission over the network however and will also undergo dynamic-range compression and amplitude normalisation for consistent and predictable playback levels.

Soundscape compositions to accompany voices from particular regions will be prepared in advance and loaded onto each machine on the network. Each will have an entry in the database listing the geographical origin and location of *highlights* in the audio. For example, if a soundscape for Beijing includes a recording of a café, highlights might include verbal outbursts from patrons or the disposal of bottles by staff. The computer will coordinate the playback of the soundscape and narrative such that highlights occur in pauses in the speech or in the transition of monologues from one

individual to another. Multiple soundscapes will be prepared for each region and these will be selected by the system for playback in a semi-random fashion. Soundscapes will be iconic in character to aid the identification any given narrative's origin. For example, a soundscape might include a distinctive food preparation sound of a regional dish.

The computer operating system will likely be Windows rather than Linux as was used in *Summoned Voices*, as the machines may at times require servicing by individuals more familiar with the Windows platform. Audio programming will use Miller Puckette's Pd software (Puckette, 2004) with my own extensions written in C. The database will be PostgreSQL. The file synchronisation software (peer-to-peer or email) has not yet been decided on, but will be one of a number of existing varieties available. Scripts and utilities will also be employed for such things as database and synchronisation management as well as audio compression.

Conclusion

Through storytelling and story sharing *Chinese Whispers* will establish a discourse between remote communities. It will create a form of cultural exchange and an outlet for creative expression. It strives to find commonalities between people by providing a window to shared hardships, shared hopes and concerns. As well as being a means for communication, the piece will act as record, a growing bank of stories recorded at specific times and locations. That the work's content is derived from the public means it becomes their character, an imprint of various communities involved. In the beginning, the work will be empty. As stories are added, its aesthetic value will become enhanced. Much like any other forum, people will listen to the ideas of others, then synthesise their own in response. In this way *cultures* will develop in the work, with dialogues established over distance and time. New stories will not obliterate the old and the system will reach back at varying depths in the strata of its narrative memory. Audio will be used to communicate stories rather than text and the system will automatically juxtapose material to create contrasts and unexpected relationships. The use of site-specific environmental sound to accompany each voice will provide insight, illuminating and contextualising each voice. Visual materials used in each installation as well as venue-specific characteristics will provide cultural and historical references for interaction.

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