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The Enlightenment of Socially Engaged Art for Ecological Restoration in China

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Abstract

As a common social issue for humanity, the ecological crisis has also shifted today's art world from thinking about the ontology of art to exploring engaged art in the social field. The difference between ecological art and art that creates a relationship with nature, such as environmental art, landscape art, and earth art, is that the former emphasizes what is done for the environment, while the latter highlights what is done on the environment. Ecological art intervenes in society not by creating art in the form of reproduction or representation, but by using art to turn social activities into a public art event. Moreover, ecological art's means of social transformation is mostly in the form of engaged art, aiming to promote the restoration of human-damaged environments to sustainable ecology. Such activities often do not affect the environment directly, but rather by enlightening the institutions and people who can have a clear impact on the environment. Ultimately, considering humans and nature as a community and trying to live a modern life with natural richness through art in the future is perhaps the fundamental pursuit of art's social intervention in the ecological field.

Key Words

Socially engaged art, ecological art, performance art, naturality, modernity

Socially Engaged Art refers to the direct intervention of art in society, which emphasizes community participation, cooperation, and dialogue in art, and also represents one of the comprehensive turns toward the social transformation of avant-garde art and the contemporary development of public art. The social intervention of art expands the public choice of art, the participation between artists and the public in the creation promotes the creation of art as a kind of event and spreads the ideas carried by art more effectively in the process of participation.

In the face of current events and issues, the consciousness of some works in art museums or artists' independent creations are hardly effective in many cases, and always maintain a professional barrier with the public. Socially engaged art actively removes the field boundary between the public and artists while "expanding the possibilities of art in reality, eliminating the folding effect of specialized exhibition space, and bringing art back to its sociological meaning".¹ Artists

and public participants confront common realities through art, provoking thoughts and attempts to find solutions, in addition, there is no doubt that ecological issues are a crucial area of social intervention in art.

1. A Modern Spectacle Waiting to be "Restored"

No period has ever seen such a concern for environmental issues as we see today. Humans are facing a series of irreversible ecological crises, such as frequent extreme weather, ocean acidification, the hole in the ozone layer, species extinction, forest destruction, sea level rise caused by melting glaciers at the poles due to global warming, a huge amount of garbage being landfilled, burned or put into the ocean, and continuous exploitation and consumption of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, natural gas, and various non-renewable mineral resources. On December 12, 2015, the 21st United Nations Climate Change Conference (Paris Climate Conference) adopted *The Paris Agreement*, which was

co-signed by 178 parties, with the long-term goal of limiting global average temperature increases to 1.5°C over pre-industrial levels, working to limit temperature increases to 2°C, and urging countries to take proven initiatives to achieve carbon neutrality, or net zero carbon emissions, as soon as possible by mid-century. In March 2022, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Sixth Assessment Report Working Group II report, “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability”, in which it stated that “Human-induced climate change, including more frequent and intense extreme events, has caused widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people, beyond natural climate variability. Some development and adaptation efforts have reduced vulnerability. Across sectors and regions, the most vulnerable people and systems are observed to be disproportionately affected. The rise in weather and climate extremes has led to some irreversible impacts as natural and human systems are pushed beyond their ability to adapt.”² Our lives have also undergone subtle changes regarding serious survival problems, such as the ban on free plastic bags, waste sorting, various energy conservation and emission reduction measures, and clean energy development in recent years.

This dilemma lies in the separation of human beings from nature in the modern development process. Industrial civilization has made us increasingly adept at using our “transcendent force of nature”, and the resources available have contributed to a qualitative change in needs. Furthermore, the division of labor and mechanization of production has not only reduced the amount of energy necessary for living but have also minimized the required time to produce necessities.³ People are no longer immersed in nature and get more free time because of the division of labor. To fill this excess, industrial civilization has also produced consumable entertainment products to complete the metamorphosis into a modern civilization that is alienated from nature. Industrial production keeps de-naturalizing human society and recreating human-made “nature” with high technology, leading the evolution of urbanization to an irreversible process isolated from the natural ecology. Bill Mollison has proposed the concept of “Permaculture”, which advocates “cooperate with nature, not against it; prolonged observation with reflection, rather than prolonged unreflective labor; consider all functions of plants and animals, instead of seeing these elements as separate products.”⁴ Ecological consciousness is the most urgent survival awareness that people need following the nihilistic inflation of material

things in modern society.

Art, as a spiritual and cultural activity unique to human beings, is even more defined as a human creation in modern culture in developed human spaces such as galleries and museums. In its self-consistent spiritual aspirations, modern art has gradually moved away from nature, the constant object of creation, and depicts more human emotions and aesthetics to gradually construct a humanistic art view. After modernist art, metaphysical arguments have become increasingly embarrassing today, and artists’ confusion about the ontology of art has mostly ceased to be trapped in the question of what art is but has become increasingly concerned with what art can do. This is a pragmatic pursuit. The debate of content versus form is still quietly going on among a small group of elites. However, with the development of We-Media and Social Media, the masses are occupying the increasing mainstream discourse. “What can art do?” has gradually become an issue in the social field. When art began to intervene in society in a participatory way through art development in the West, it was likewise an attempt to fight for democracy and freedom, or to rebel against capitalism and power. The current problems we face are not only individual disputes over interests, but the entire living environment. As Wang Chunchen said, “For today’s art, if we do not mention the sociality, but only start from the ontological form of art, it is often not practical, or point to meaningless illusion argument. There is also no historical and social value for the existence of art, only purely commercial value and superficial aesthetic value remains.”⁵ As a sensitive group, artists today are concerned with issues that go beyond art itself and focus more broadly on people within society, and nature.

Ecological art focuses on the environment and survival issues that have occurred since the Great Industrial Age. Art, as a gentle communication, attempts to relate the habits of each individual to the question of the existence of nature. When art begins to be concerned with ecology and society in an engaged way, it is to bring art back to reality itself once again. Therefore, art related to the theme of nature and ecology should be more realistic art or practical art. But socially engaged art with ecological themes is different from the humanistic thinking of realist art in the past. The realism of ecological art is not a selective reproduction of reality, but a thorough intersecting with real problems concerning practical issues such as environmental restoration and cultivating citizens’ awareness of environmental protection. As an important part of contemporary art, ecological art is no longer loaded with the issue of art forms but moves towards a kind of

realism that restores and interrogates the current reality of existence. It articulates an attitude and spirit towards reality through artistic creation and tries to trigger a chain of reflections on reality among society and the public through intervention, questioning, criticism, and transformation. Art in the process of ecological intervention is no longer a purpose, but a way to penetrate reality, a way of revelation for active change.

2. Consumption of Nature and Dialogue with Nature

For the ecological environment, whether it is the ecological balance proposed in the 1970s or the sustainable development proposed by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its report *Our Common Future* in 1987, the starting point is still our survival. The report states that “sustainable development meets the needs of the present without threatening the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”⁶ This sense of crisis is our inclination to maintain the recent phase of the Cenozoic Quaternary of the Earth, which is full of natural richness and on which we are currently dependent for survival. Earth’s ecology has gone through many epochs of change. Compared to the carbon neutral concept and the greenhouse effect recognized by the IPCC, the Earth has undergone greater ecological changes during its evolution before, and most of the carbon-based life that lives in symbiosis with us is unable to adapt to another ecological change. So, what we are trying to maintain is simply the state of the Earth’s environment that is suitable for ourselves and the other creatures that live with us, and what we are doing now is simply trying to protect ourselves and the Earth’s natural richness at the present.

In the 1960s, ecological art began to take off in the environmental movement⁷ in the West. Artists have made many contributions to this movement, from the emergence of land art during the environmental movement, followed by ecological sculpture, ecological installation art, and ecological-themed socially engaged art. The theme of ecology and environment has led artists to gradually create and display works outside of museums, directly in the here-and-now environment in a struggle with reality. However, not all creations with nature as the object advocate environmental protection. There are still many creations that are artificially transformed by borrowing natural space to create a grandeur of borrowed natural space, but do nothing to improve ecology. So, ecological art has some differences from environmental art, landscape art and Earth art. Many artworks that focus on the natural environment place more emphasis on recreating the landscape, while ecological art places more emphasis on restoring the ecosystem. Although the Earth artists of the early years produced many breathtaking works, there were many questions about the way they used the Earth as a canvas and “sculpted” nature. Ecological artist Newton Harrison questioned Earth art: “From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, I was competing with artists like Michael Hauser, who were calling themselves Earth artists. I couldn’t see what they were doing for the Earth, only what they were doing to Earth.”⁸

Creation in a natural environment is not necessarily environmentally friendly, which is the biggest problem when intervening in ecology. Some artists have achieved great aesthetic success with their environmental art creations, but the actual impact on the environment in terms of energy consumption, labor and material consumption has in many cases been less than positive.



Figure 1. Lin Bing. *Heavenly Disc Series-Earth 001* (《天碟系列——大地 001》). Earth art, 52 meters in diameter, near the highway of Lanzhou Zhongchuan International Airport, Gansu Province. 2002.



Figure 2. Wang Gang. *Earth Gazing* (《大地凝视》). Earth art, 290×420m, Shawan City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. 2017. Photo credit: <https://wg.arttron.net/>

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1972), as we know it, has irreversibly transformed the local natural environment since its creation. Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014), which moved several huge blocks of ice from Greenland to Copenhagen, Denmark; Paris, France; and London, England, has been questioned by many environmentalists for its transportation consumption. In 2002, Lin Bing (林兵) created *Heavenly Disc Series -Earth 001* (figure 1) near the highway of Lanzhou Zhongchuan International Airport, Gansu Province. The work uses twenty-two bags of construction white powder, as well as salt, sugar, chili powder, shrimp, and Chinese medicine powder to draw three circles with a maximum diameter of 52 meters. The creation of this kind of giant schema is the opposition between the pursuit of pleasure and the waste of materials. In 2017, Wang Gang (王刚) organized the created of a huge portrait 290 meters wide and 420 meters long in the Shawan region of Xinjiang, called *Earth Gazing* (figure 2). This work took a lot of manpower, material, and financial resources, using several excavators, bulldozers and sprinklers to realize a magnificent work on natural space. Paul Ardenne said "The 'place' work, automatically imparts to the work a self-evident authenticity: a relationship with nature, in this case that is, a work of art is created directly and co-creatively realized with nature, and is created amid nature with good logic. This view has its value of consistency in principle. However, we must distinguish among the nuances."⁹ Some creations that interfere with nature make the environment an appendage. Art as a form of transformation is more a manifestation of man's desire to conquer nature, even if it reveals some mysticism in the admiration of nature, but what they do is still absurd and unhelpful to the ecological environment.

Therefore, the reality faced by eco-art in the intervention process is not only the aesthetic confusion of art, but more importantly, whether the creative process produces restoration of the ecological environment, creates beneficial repercussions among the public, and provides forward-looking enlightenment into government policies. Engaged ecological art is a type of social activity that uses artistic approaches and mixes ethical, political, economic, technological, and psychological fields.

3. Ecological Art as a Public Event

The plight of the ecological environment is humanity's plight. No matter what creative forms artists adopt or what platforms or channels their creations are presented through, ecological art points to the public, and a narrow

or elitist view of art is completely unsuitable for ecological art visions. Therefore, in a rather absolute sense, all successful cases of ecological art are public art, and all are art practices with social intervention. Only when ecological art triggers social repercussions and becomes event art is the meaning of its work maximized. Clare Bishop argues that "Aesthetic experience is 'just' showing, as opposed to the more valuable 'with great effect' work. This unequal inclination towards the social element of the project suggests that the 'social turn' in contemporary art implies not only the orientation of art towards specific goals, but more importantly the recognition that they are more substantial, 'real' and important than artistic experience."¹⁰ The purpose of ecological art is not to create an object of the artist's spirituality; style and form are ways and even appendages. The works are inevitably aimed at correcting the behavior of the public, criticizing socially undesirable phenomena, popularizing environmental protection methods, or practicing realistic ecological restoration actions such as "starting from me" with personal actions.

Caravans were a common way for artists to conduct public service campaigns in the 1990s, and the media in China during this period often reported that artists drove to the south and north, with Xiong Wenyun's (熊文韻) *Flowing Rainbow* (《流動彩虹》) environmental project being one of the largest and most influential caravans at the time. From May 1998 to July 2001, Xiong Wenyun made seven trips to Tibet. Initially, the series of *Flowing Rainbows* was created in 1998 on rocks, water, and roadside hut doors along the Sichuan-Tibet route. In October 1999, the *Flowing Rainbow* campaign was launched at Southwest Jiaotong University, with fourteen colorful caravans forming a rainbow convoy from Chengdu to Changdu along the northern Sichuan-Tibet route, during which truck masters continued to join. The *Flowing Rainbow* campaign was a project to promote public welfare using a large number of colorful caravans. While the vehicles were driving to deliver all kinds of goods, the colorful tarpaulins also played the effect of sheltering from the wind and rain, and on the return trip the vehicles were mostly loaded with round logs cut down from the forests in the Sichuan-Tibet region, which led to serious soil erosion on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. Xiong Wenyun put environmental motifs and slogans on the rear of the trucks to call attention to ecological issues and develop new policies on forest protection. The charity event continued to receive attention from people from all walks of life: "One by one, people began to get involved, painters, businessmen, and audience members



Figure 3. Xiong Wenyun. The *Flowing Rainbow* caravan, July 11, 2001, on the Qinghai-Tibet route. Photograph from the Beijing Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive.



Figure 4. Xiong Wenyun. The participants of the *Flowing Rainbow: Beijing-Everest Earth Environmental Protection Art Campaign*, July 22, 2001, at Everest Base Camp. Photograph from the Beijing Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive.

they had never met before, and they volunteered to share the financial problems of the tarps, donating one hundred and eight of them.”¹¹ On June 29, 2001, the *Flowing Rainbow: Beijing-Everest Earth Environmental Protection Art Campaign* (figures 3, 4) started from Beijing, passing through Lhasa, Golmud and Shigatse and holding environmental protection publicity activities, reaching Everest Base Camp on July 21. In addition to the donor’s or the donor’s organization’s signature, the donated tarpaulin was also printed with the environmental protection slogan “Western Development, Environmental Protection First”.

In 1998, Zhu Qingsheng (朱青生) discovered that an old chemical plant in Guilin had made it impossible for green plants to grow on a nearby hill due to pollution problems, and applied to the Guilin municipal government to paint the hill red to “build it as an altar to nature”. After he unveiled his plan for *Lacquer Mountain* (《漆山》), the environmental issues to which the work pointed sparked widespread controversy in the art world and the community at large. Although the project did not come to fruition, Zhu Qingsheng has continued to practice this conceptual experimentation over the years, repeatedly painting some rocks red in polluted environments or public scenes, and having this performative work participate in a series of national and international exhibitions. In 2005, Zhu Qingsheng planned another artistic event, *Washing the Yellow River*. He solicited river washing proposals on the internet, initiated online exchanges and discussions, and simulated the implementation of some of the solicited proposals through animation, allowing the pollution problem to enter the public opinion space in the form of absurd art. Zhu Qingsheng’s ecological art practice lies in generating as much social opinion as possible and extensively soliciting public participation, allowing obscured ecological issues to become the focus of the online conversation. In his conception, public art is a kind of event art, and to be repeatedly debated and questioned is to be public. Events become issues due to controversy and are brought to public attention to make them public art.

The cases of socially engaged ecological art have one thing in common, namely the demand for artistic creation to go public. The common problem they face is also the need for, and handling of, public opinion. In the process of implementing the project, the most difficult part is how the ecological issues initiated by the artists ferment into social topics, and even if there is a certain response, it is difficult for the issues to maintain a lasting impact. Artists need to keep using every possible way to squeeze into the space of public opinion and make it a

social event in the process. “Out of the circle” is a strong demand for socially engaged art creation, and it is the basic way to present ecological issues in a realistic way through art. When an issue elicits a controversial response among the public, event-based art has achieved the desired impact on the public regarding its concerns.

4. Survival Confrontation: Irony and Criticism

China began to pay attention to ecological and environmental issues in the 1990s, when the economic boom after the reform and opening up led to increasingly prominent industrial problems. It was also in the 1990s that Chinese artists began to gradually focus on social and ecological issues. After the humanistic fever of the 1980s, the creation of art forms and expressions was gradually assimilated by the art market, and the modernist-style pursuit of individualized forms was no longer recognized by the avant-garde art world. As critic Wang Lin criticized, “Formal expression for art is an avoidance of social suffering, a rejection of historical memory, and an abandonment of humanistic concern for the margins, the underclass and the wilderness. The artist is looking for a patent schema in self-obsession to adapt to the needs of the art market and media communication at home and abroad.”¹² The artist community began to pay more attention to the reality of life and popular culture, and the interaction and communication between art and society, and with others. Artists also realize that focusing on the existential issues around them is the contemporary way out to keep art from coming to an end. Therefore, “Chinese contemporary artists are only concretely present and authentic artists when they are confronted with the social, cultural and spiritual problems of contemporary China.”¹³ The artist is first an individual existing in the here and now, and then an artistic revolutionary distinct from the public. They have a social sensitivity that partly determines their profundity in the implementation of engaged art.

In China, one of the earliest social practices of eco-art was by a group of artists in the southwest of the country. From 1995 to 2000, American artist Betsy Damon, along with more than twenty other artists including Ang Sang (昂桑), Dai Guangyu (戴光鬱), He Qichao (何啟超), Song Dong (宋冬), Yin Xiuzhen (尹秀珍), Yu Ji (余極), Liu Chengying (劉成英), Zeng Xun (曾循) and Zhu Gang (朱罡), initiated a series of art activities related to water conservation. From July 29 to August 14, 1995, the “Keepers of the Waters—Water Quality Protection Week of the Funan River” was launched in Chengdu’s Binjiang Park and along the Jinjiang River. The artists performed performance art or



Figures 5, 6. Ang Sang, Ge Ci (格次), He Qichao, Kristin Caskey, Suri Lamnu (次仁拉姆), Tang Liping (唐利平), Yu Leiqing (俞雷庆), Zhou Zheng (周正). *Washing Silk by Jinjiang River*. Performance art, Funan River, Chengdu, China, July 29-August 14, 1995. Photograph from Asia Art Archive.

exhibited installation works at the event, and more than twenty events were conducted. They communicated directly with the public during the event, while using the media for extensive coverage. In September 1996, they held the “Second ‘Keepers of the Waters’ Exhibition” in Lhasa, Tibet; in October 1997, “Origin-Life: An Environmental Art Exhibition” was held at Flying Sand Spillway and Anlan Lesteribridge, Dujiangyan City, Sichuan Province; in December 2000, they held “Release Water—Keepers of the Waters 4th Exhibition” in Dujiangyan City. This was the first collective social intervention art project by Chinese contemporary artists on the theme of ecology and environment, and it was also a more successful art case. They received attention from various sectors of the community during the event and received funding to further advance the project into a series of exhibition events. For example, He Qichao planned the act of *Washing Silk by the Jinjiang River* (《錦江河畔可浣紗》, figures 5, 6). In her planning proposal, she wrote: “The water of the Jinjiang River used to be clear and pure, and the silk was even more beautiful after being rinsed in the water. But today such things are non-existent, and the more white silk is washed in water, the dirtier it gets. Efforts to wash, after an hour of

washing, the result can only be white silk turned black. This will make the public understand how polluted the water of the Jinjiang River is now.”¹⁴ The event included seven or eight women washing silk on the banks of the Jinjiang River and explaining the story of the Jinjiang River to the public, including Betsy Damon’s installation *Black and White* (《黑與白》) and Yin Xiuzhen’s performance art *Washing the River* (《洗河》, figure 7). Both of them were reminding the public of the water pollution problem of Jinjiang River in a simple and clear artistic act, and in a mildly ironic way reminding the society of the urgent survival problem. The success of the “Keepers of the Waters” series also shows us the lack of environmental awareness in China, which had just entered the market economy.

Since 2013, haze has become the most concerning topic among Chinese netizens, especially in the northern cities led by Beijing, where the haze problem is the most serious. Since then, Chinese artists have frequently created a large number, and different types, of works on the theme of air pollution, and many corresponding exhibitions and art events have been held. In 2015, a “haze brick” made by the artist Nut Brother (堅果兄弟) aroused the attention of all walks of life. On July 24,



Figure 7. Yin Xiuzhen. *Washing River*. Performance art, Funan River, Chengdu, China, July 29-August 14, 1995. Photograph from Asia Art Archive.

2015, Nut Brother started the *Dust Project* (《塵埃計劃》) in Beijing (figure 8). He pushed a barrel battery vacuum cleaner from the 798 Art Zone to the Yonghe Lamasery, 10 kilometers away, during which the vacuum cleaner was turned on for four hours a day for 100 days, from summer to winter. Finally, he burned the haze dust collected by the vacuum cleaner into a brick (figure 9) and took it to a quadrangle under construction in the Xicheng District, where construction workers working on the project built the brick into the wall. During the national and international media coverage and interviews with Nut Brother, he was also subjected to many public questions, causing the story to intensify and have a wider impact.

Xiaohaotu Township is located in Yulin District, Yulin City, Shaanxi Province, bordering Ordos City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, which is part of the Ordos Basin. Xiaohaotu Township is rich in oil, natural gas, and coal, but the site is located in the Mauwusu Desert, and the sand layer is pollution-proof compared to the soil layer, which makes it easier for pollutants to enter the groundwater. The site still uses hydraulic fracturing technology to extract shale oil and gas, and a large amount of wastewater gushes to the surface during the extraction process and infiltrates the groundwater, seriously polluting the local water resources. Since 2018, Nut Brother and his friends have launched the *Bringing Salt Project* (《帶鹽計劃》). They exchanged 10,000 bottles of Nongfu Spring water for 10,000 bottles of their daily contaminated drinking water with the farmers in Xiaohaotu Township, transported the contaminated water to Beijing and Xi'an for exhibition, and invited nearly 1,000 netizens to endorse the 10,000 bottles of "Farmer's Spring". In this project, they

launched activities such as "Farmer's Spring Supermarket" (figure 10), "The First Xiaohaotu Township Heavy Metal Music Session", "Selecting Xiaohaotu Township Environmental Heroes", "Little Goat Mountain Spring Press Conference", "For the Chairman of the Coal Mine Crowdfunding Air Tickets, Thousands of Miles to Shanghai to Learn Garbage Classification", etc. "They have triggered massive public attention and supervision through the joint participation of overseas and domestic media, NGO, enthusiastic people from various fields and local villagers. During the investigation, the coal mine involved in China Coal suspended production and rectification, SINOPEC suspended production of some drilling wells, as well as some local officials involved in the suspension. Currently, the local government is spending more than 100 million dollars to build deep water wells and install water purifiers in 17 villages in Xiaohaotu Township, as well as to launch some groundwater protection measures."¹⁵

In January 2021, Nut Brother formed a "heavy metal band" with friends and went on a nationwide "Heavy Metal Country Tour" to bring more attention to the problem of heavy metal pollution in China through artistic touring. By June 2023, they had performed in more than ten places in the country to draw attention to heavy metal pollution and research involving chemicals, coal mining, gas mining, smelting, waste incineration, battery plants, toxic copper sludge, industrial waste gas and other pollution treatment questions. They generated social opinion by way of creating artistic events, with social effects such as the act *Zibo Hot Pot Fish* (figure 11) organized in Zibo, Shandong Province in September 2021, which forced the local government in Zibo to build



Figure 8. Nut Brother. *Dust Project*. Day 98, Wangjing SOHO, Beijing, 2015.



Figure 9. Nut Brother. *Dust Project* "haze brick" fired by Nut Brother, 2015.



Figure 10. Nut Brother. Farmer's Spring Supermarket opening in progress, June 20-July 3, 2018, 798 Art Zone, Beijing.



Figure 11. Heavy Metal Band. Zibo Hot Pot Fish. Performance Art, Xiaofu River, Zibo City, Shandong Province, China, March 27, 2021.

a sewage treatment plant; the *Dirty-Water-Sprinkling Festival* organized in the town of Guoluo (Golog) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province in November 2021 which led to a planned investment of 90 million RMB in Qinghai Luozhou to improve drinking water; and “Beijing’s Most Magical Phone Booth”, launched for Huludao City, Liaoning Province in July 2022, which sparked various media and public reports and concerns about air pollution in Huludao, after which the local government began planning for air pollution prevention and control. Nut Brother has launched a series of events that use a legal but playful approach to satirize and criticize some of the darker sides of society that the power structure has obscured. They use more direct actions to fight for the rights of the underprivileged, but in their actions they are also constantly subject to power coercion and profit temptation from all sides. In discussing the context of the existence of ecological art, Changping Zha has said “The technology created by man and used to conquer nature far outweighs the capacity of nature to endure. Thus, this remaining power is turned to the subjugation and control of people.”¹⁶ How many of the ecological problems we face today are environmental conflicts caused by the immediate need to survive? Overwhelmingly, it is the exploitation of the bottom out of the selfishness of a few, expanding into the ongoing destruction of a speechless ecology. This partial and limited control and conquest of the environment will eventually come back to bite itself.

The contexts for artists who engage in ecological art practices are genuinely social issues, and they aim to denounce the anomalous relationship between human activity and their living space. For them, art is simply a way of satire and criticism. They are increasingly taking practical effects as the purpose of their creations, and they are acting in an increasingly direct manner, paying more and more attention to the resonance of public groups and even going so far as to confront the power institutions; this is social care carried out by a small number of artists with a conscience.

In the process of the artist’s artistic intervention in the ecological environment, they need to face the tension between the collective and the individual. How to turn an individual artist’s vision into a creation for public participation or public implementation? How do artists create works that can be understood by multiple levels of audiences? How do artists control the feasibility of ecological concepts in art creation in reality? These are all issues that artists may need to take into account in their work. Thus, engaged art that takes society and nature as its subject is usually conducted with the dual

ideals of antagonism and amelioration. The first thing the artist denies is the mainstream market norms and cancels out their creative aspirations of art for art’s sake as a hypothetical leader. Successful examples of ecological art need to go beyond the trap of denial and self-interest in present-day art; they do not provide artistic commodities for the market, but rather transform the functionality of art into constructive social change.

5. Art is a Way to Bring Back the Naturalness of People

During today’s policy, education and research on ecology, the question of what art can contribute to ongoing conservation efforts is what every artist concerned with ecological issues needs to consider.¹⁷ It has been more than half a century since human beings advocated for the environmental protection movement and attempted to create art on the theme of ecology and environment but the initiative to protect nature has always had a fundamental fault, namely that most people still act in a way that identifies nature as a fragile link attached to us rather than as a coterminous part of nature itself. Although it is said that the measures we take to return farmland to forest, for energy conservation and emission reduction, and the development of a circular economy have made tangible improvements in the reduction of air pollution, soil pollution, and water pollution, these are only a correction of behavior, not a complete improvement of concepts. Michel Foucault, in his exposition of natural history, once said “When one finally understands that it is impossible to make the whole world move in a straight line, when the complexity of flora and fauna has sufficiently resisted all the single forms of a wide range of entities, nature must express itself in all its singularly rich diversity.”¹⁸ The urbanization and mass consumerism brought about by modern society have divorced more and more people from real nature. The modern man shaped by modern industrial mass production is merely the mastery of the production capacity of a certain type of commodity, or even a link of a certain commodity, in exchange for a reward that can be exchanged for the products of life and entertainment needed in modern society. This is what Herbert Marcuse called the “One-Dimensional Man” for developed industrial societies, the assimilated man who has lost the ability to deny, criticize and transcend. The growth in material abundance brought to us by the great industrial development was destructive, and through this enduring dependence on economic growth accelerated social development became the norm. Marcuse noted: “We had to peacefully produce the instruments of

destruction, had to be extremely wasteful, and had to be trained for defense. This defense makes the defender and what they are defending monstrous. ... Developed industrial societies have become richer, larger and better while perpetuating this danger. The defensive structure of society has made life more comfortable for an increasing number of people and has expanded the control of man over nature.”¹⁹ As far as we are concerned in the face of natural ecological diversity, modern man no longer has the full capacity to survive in nature. This is a development, but also a degradation, which is making more and more people completely detached from nature. How can a person who is detached from nature protect it and live in harmony with it? Even if they follow all the initiatives and regulations related to environmental protection without ever realizing that nature is intrinsically important to the humanity of man, a future harmony with nature will remain paradoxical. Therefore, the first thing that ecologically concerned artists need to do is to try to restore this naturalness to modern people through art.

In 2021, Jin Lipeng, a teacher at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, launched the *Healing Garden* ecological art teaching project. The creation site was an abandoned space that he found during his research on campus with his students, where construction debris had been piled up for a long time. They began by working with the school’s cleaning aunts, cafeteria, and neighboring stores to turn fruit peels, leaves, and pre-food waste from student meals into fertile soil for community farming by composting and cultivating the soil on site. Based on the restoration of the soil, they carried out various related research and teaching activities, such as the more interesting *Ceramic Earthworm Tower* (figures 12, 13). “*Ceramic Earthworm Tower* is a small installation that transforms fruit and vegetable leaves into compost and nourishes the soil on-site in the community. The project integrates the idea of vermicomposting, Darwin’s late research on the wisdom of the earthworm, and pottery nonfiction. The activities link students and children to the soil, nature and each other, culminating in a public landscape with ongoing educational, aesthetic and ecological transformation functions.”²⁰ Their hands-on activities allow participants to perceive the richness and restorative power of nature through regional ecological creation, from soil modification to understanding insects, collecting food, planting flowers and plants, beekeeping on campus, river investigation, and building birdhouses. Each activity is an experience in which the knowledge of ecological maintenance is shared with the participants. Although the *Healing Garden* project only maintains a small area of the campus, it spreads the ecological

healing experience far and wide. Their field of practice is not only gradually going off of the campus, but also getting cooperation in other places. For example, Chen Lin, a teacher at Shandong University, initiated the *Shandong University Qingdao Campus Healing Garden—Future Garden* project at the Qingdao campus of Shandong University to continue to promote the ecological concept of *Healing Garden*.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess constructed a system of ecological holist thought (Eco-Wisdom T) that is considered to be a turning point in environmental ideology and environmental movements from shallow to deep. He opposes the anthropocentric worldview and treats “human—nature” as a unified whole to understand, deal with, and solve ecological problems. The starting point of his conception of the philosophy of sameness is for man to first recognize his place in nature. In his initiative “Deep Ecology Movement Platform”, Arne Naas writes that he is more interested in making people feel and know nature than in popularizing environmental methods: “(1) Both human and nonhuman life on Earth have intrinsic value for their flourishing. In terms of human purpose, the value of nonhuman life is independent of their narrow usefulness to humans. (2) The richness and diversity of life forms is valuable in itself and contributes to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.” He further states that “Today’s human intervention in the non-human world is excessive and is deteriorating rapidly.”²¹ This ecological view of nature is the basic cognition that modern people are missing today, and it is this cognitive omission that has led to the detachment of people from nature, which in turn has led to the imbalance of the ecological environment. Only when more of the public realizes that the once distant and powerful “nature” is not an “other” but inseparable from ourselves will the human world be enabled to develop into a modern society with a rich naturalness?

6. Conclusion

Art, as a conceptual activity, is one of the ways that humans have to maximize the combination of thinking and practice. Art is not old or new, and it should not unquestioningly follow today’s science and technology. It can adapt to all new things, and it can also jump out of all formal limitations to maintain its independent spirituality. In ecological issues, art can then try to do some natural and noble character building in its unique way. As a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world, the self-negation creation of art can sometimes serve as a powerful backing to the projects of



Figure 12. Jin Lipeng. *Healing Garden-Ceramic Earthworm Tower*. Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2021. Photograph by Zhang Xiaoshu @Foodthink.



Figure 13. Jin Lipeng. *Healing Garden-Ceramic Earthworm Tower*. Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2021. Photograph by Zeng Kaimin.

the future world. Through some accidental infiltration of ideas, art is used to guide society or individuals beneficially. In the future of the Anthropocene, art should be an integral part of people's lives. The purpose of making life artistic is not only to increase aesthetics, but to also increase the richness of life, and the most important part of the richness of life is reconciliation, interaction, and combination with nature. Therefore, from today's intervention in society with an ecological perspective to its future intervention in life, what art is calling for is a modern human being with complete naturalness.

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社會介入性藝術在中國生態修復中的啟示

李洋

摘要: 生態環境危機作為今天人類共同的社會議題，也讓當今藝術界由藝術本體的思考轉向了介入性藝術的社會領域探索。生態藝術與環境藝術、景觀藝術、大地藝術等與自然產生關係的藝術的不同之處在於，前者是強調為環境做什麼，後者是突出在環境上做什麼。生態藝術介入社會的方式不是以再現或表現的方式創作藝術，而是用藝術的方式，把社會活動變成一種公共藝術事件。而且，生態藝術對社會改造的手段多是用介入性藝術的方式，旨在推動遭到人為破壞的環境向可持續生態的修復。這類活動常常不是直接作用於環境，而是通過啟示那些能夠對環境產生直接影響的機構和人來修復環境。因此，將人與自然作為一個共同體來思考，並在未來試以藝術的途徑訴求一種含有自然豐富性的現代生活，才是藝術在生態領域進行社會性介入的根本追求。

關鍵詞: 社會介入性藝術；生態藝術；行為藝術；自然性；現代性