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On the Ground of the Discarded

Integrating Ecology and Socially Engaged Public Art in Chongqing

Abstract: This chapter explores the 2020 Chongqing Eco Art Festival (CEAF) as a case study in the intersection of contemporary art, community engagement, and environmental responsibility in China. Situated within the larger framework of China's ongoing urban transformation and the national eco-civilization movement, CEAF illustrates how contemporary Chinese artists creatively engage with discarded materials, neglected neighborhoods, and disenfranchised populations to foster a deeper ecological awareness. Through public interventions, community-based art projects, and participatory ecological initiatives, CEAF integrates creative reuse by repurposing discarded objects and revitalizing urban spaces. These efforts reflect a sustainable ethos grounded in traditional agricultural practices and local ecological knowledge. CEAF also highlights how Chinese eco art practitioners adapt their work to local environmental challenges while contributing to the broader global discourse on ecological awakening in contemporary art-making. The festival's focus on micro-urban renewal and grassroots social co-governance demonstrates art's potential as a catalyst for rethinking humanity's relationship with the environment. By reintegrating art into everyday life and addressing the often-invisible environmental consequences of carbon-intensive living and its disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities, CEAF fosters ecological visibility while empowering local residents to take active roles in the stewardship of their shared environments. Ultimately, the chapter argues that CEAF exemplifies the transformative potential of eco art to inspire collective ecological action, offering place-specific approaches to sustainable living through creative reuse, community regeneration, and socially engaged public art.

Keywords: sustainability, ecological consciousness, ecological sensibility, social regeneration, community engagement

On December 26, 2020, Jixing Farmers Market, a modest neighborhood market in Youdian Zhilu Community – an old, rundown area adjacent to Huangjueping Street in the Jiulongpo district of Chongqing – unexpectedly became the focal point of city-wide attention. It served as the venue for the opening of Chongqing's first community ecological garden, attracting visitors from across the city and beyond. They were presented with creative and artistic interventions of the less-than desirable environment, which had been characterized by the dull monotone of hard-core industrial architecture and unsightly litters of discarded objects around corners of terraces and corridors, spaces frequented daily by the community's residents. The transformation began at the entrance, set along a long staircase adjacent to a local kindergarten (Fig. 1). This placement imbued the entrance with a sense of formality as visitors ascended toward

the garden. The once drab concrete stairs and weathered walls, cracked and peeling, were now adorned with brightly colored paintings of flowers, plants, and animals – fitting references to the kindergarten nearby. Children’s artworks hung on the walls, while vines and flowering plants, strategically placed along the narrow terrace, further enlivened the open space.

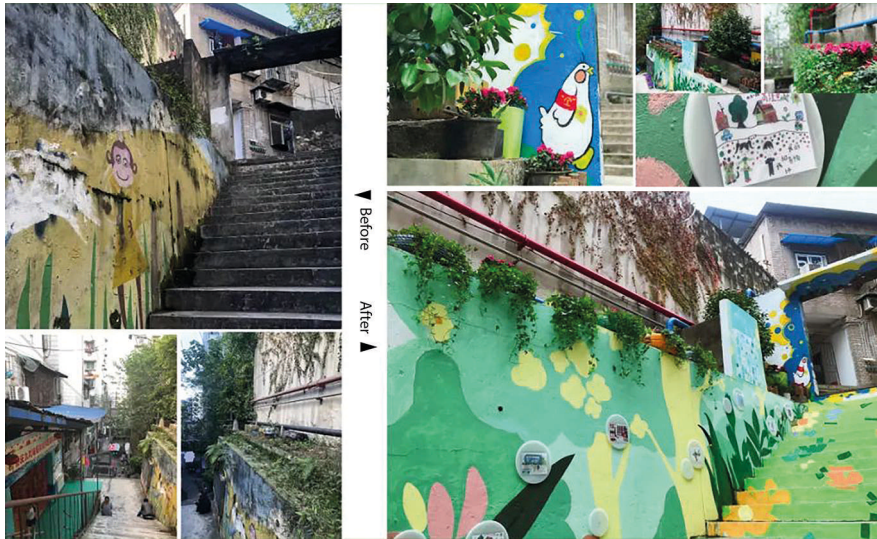


Figure 1: View of the staircase leading to the kindergarten before and after the construction of the eco garden. Photos taken in 2020.

Continuing beyond this welcoming staircase, visitors encountered a series of small gardens – each distinct in size, shape, and elevation – including the “climbing garden,” “herb garden,” “sky garden,” “edible garden,” and “planter garden.” The tour culminated at the “ecological pool.” These diverse gardens transformed an ordinary walkway into a verdant corridor, inviting visitors to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between landscape planning and organic growth. Named “Spring of Huangjueping,” the garden embodied its creators’ aspirations to infuse a sense of “green” renewal into this neglected neighborhood, symbolizing the potential for revitalization through ecological art. Conceived as a community-based ecological art exhibition, “Spring of Huangjueping” was curated by art professors Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (SFAI), Beijing-based landscape designer Gao Jian,¹ and

¹ Gao Jian is the founder and chief designer of Gaia Design Studio, a landscape design expert with a Master’s from Peking University, and co-founder of Gaia Nature School, with roles in various environmental and design committees in China.

Chongqing-based urban planner Ni Lan.² This project sought to engage the local community in efforts to rejuvenate their living environment. It involved 50 artists and art students collaborating with a dozen local residents to transform the neighborhood through painting and planting, with the goal of raising public awareness of ecological art's potential while fostering a sense of agency among ordinary citizens. The project encouraged grassroots collective actions to improve both the ecological and aesthetical conditions of the neighborhood.

As one of six parallel exhibitions of the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival (CEAF), “Spring of Huangjueping” exemplified CEAF’s emphasis on environmentally conscious artistic practices, grounded in community participation. CEAF, led by SFAI faculty in collaboration with various experts from public and private institutions across China, spanned the megacity of Chongqing, offering exhibitions, performances, workshops, forums, and community-based projects centered on ecology. Under the banner of ecological art (hereafter eco art), the festival featured a wide range of creative endeavors by artists engaging with themes such as sustainability, regeneration, and environmental responsibility. In their work, eco art, an evolving category of contemporary art recently reconceptualized by some as planetary art,³ manifests as a constellation of diverse practices that seek to “inspire caring and respect, stimulate dialogue, and encourage the long-term flourishing of the social and natural environments in which we live.”⁴ It can also be said that they are producing what Dipesh Chakrabarty conceptualizes as “habitability,” making “a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life” through locally specific, ecologically charged interventions.⁵

This chapter situates CEAF within the growing enthusiasm towards the intersection of art and ecology in China, evident in both large and small ecology-themed exhibitions across the country.⁶ This momentum is bolstered by the Chinese government’s promotion of eco-civilization as a national discourse, aligning with the broader goal of “building a beautiful China” championed by the Xi Jinping administration. First introduced by Chinese scholars in the 1980s as a critique of state-led developmentism and its environmental toll, the concept of eco-civilization entered official discourse under Hu Jintao in the early 2010s, reflecting belated recognition of severe

2 Ni Lan, Deputy Chief Planner and Senior Engineer at China State Construction Design Group, researches the relationship between the art and cultural industries and regional development, with a focus on urban renewal and rural revitalization.

3 Hai Ren, Bo Zheng, and Mali Wu, “Planetary Art in the Sinophonecene,” *Verge* 8, no. 2 (2022): 24–45.

4 Amara Geffen, et al, *Ecoart in Action* (New York: New Village Press, 2022), xx.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category,” *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019): 21; also see Ren, Zheng, and Wu, “Planetary Art.” 25.

6 Notable exhibitions before 2020 include the 2016 “Ecology · Art · Human” in Shijiazhuang Art Museum, Shijiazhang, the 2019 “Global Exhibition of Ecological Art” initiated by the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the 2019 “Imbalance—Ecology · Environment · Art” in OCT Creative Exhibition Center in Shenzhen; the 2019 “Future · Garden · World—Ecological Art Festival” in Lixianghu Art Center in Chongqing, and the 2019 “Healing Land Exhibition” in the True Color Museum in Suzhou.

ecological degradation.⁷ Under Xi's leadership, eco-civilization gained elevated prominence, becoming a cornerstone of environmental policies and being enshrined in the Constitution in 2018.⁸ However, its political adoption has not necessarily translated into substantive environmental progress.⁹ Additionally, Paolo Magagnoli notes that the discourse has led some to frame the environmental crisis as a non-Chinese issue by idealizing Confucian and Daoist traditions, releasing elites from their responsibility for ecological destruction since the Mao-era.¹⁰ Nevertheless and regardless of whether this was intended or not, the state's endorsement of eco-civilization has also opened avenues for grassroots ecological mobilizations. Ecologically conscious artists, tapping into this official discourse, are now merging critical reflections on China's environmental challenges with public art projects aimed at embedding ecological awareness into the daily lives of citizens. Chongqing, a city that has undergone significant transformation from its industrial past, has emerged as a focal point for this artistic movement, due in part to many local art professionals actively pursuing ecologically charged public art practices.

Delving into the origin, programing, and key works of CEAF, this chapter explores how the festival's curators merge socially engaged public art with ecological sensibility to address pressing environmental and social issues in Chongqing while experimenting with grassroots social co-governance. Socially engaged public art, in this context, refers to creative practices situated in urban neighborhoods, rural villages, or everyday spaces, where community involvement, dialogue, collaboration, and social transformation are paramount.¹¹ Focusing on CEAF's reimagining of the discarded—whether objects or places—this chapter explores the environmental and ecological implications of artistic interventions that involve repurposing, renewing, and restoring discarded elements. It posits that such practices bring art, people, and nature together for mutually beneficial “metabolic exchanges,”¹² thus enhancing habitability.

7 For an in-depth study of the transformation of ecological civilization from an intellectual discourse to a political discourse, see Maurizio Marinelli, “How to Build a ‘Beautiful China’ in the Anthropocene,” *Chinese Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 3 (2018): 365–386. For an official account of it, see Zhang Yunfei, “Developing socialist ecological civilization,” *China Daily Global*, August 26, 2019, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-08/26/content_37505503.htm.

8 See Arthur Hanson, “Ecological Civilization in the People's Republic of China: Values, Action, and Future Needs,” 2019, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/545291/eawp-021-ecological-civilization-prc.pdf>; PRC, “China's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2018,” https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China_2018.pdf?lang=en.

9 Marinelli, “How to Build a ‘Beautiful China’,” 378.

10 Paolo Magagnoli, “The Civilized Artist Beautifies Pollution: Zhao Liang's Water and Beijing Green,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 372.

11 See Mei Qin Wang, “Introduction,” in *Socially Engaged Public Art in East Asia*, ed. Mei Qin Wang (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022), 1–21.

12 In referencing “metabolic exchanges,” I draw on John Bellamy Foster's concept of the “metabolic rift,” rooted in Marx's analysis of the disrupted relationship between humanity and nature under capitalism. This rift has contributed to the global ecological crisis by severing the vital, material interactions between society and the environment. Foster's work calls for a dialectical approach to

The chapter's title, "On the Ground of the Discarded," reflects this exploration: "ground" signifies both the physical terrain and the foundational principles that underpin material interactions between artists, recycled objects, aging communities, neglected places, and the deteriorating environment. "The discarded," whether tangible objects or intangible spaces, becomes a catalyst for critical artistic expressions that transcend aesthetic boundaries, contributing to a broader ecological narrative.

Chongqing Ecological Art Festival (CEAF) and regeneration of the discarded

The 2020 CEAF was a large scale, technically grassroots-initiated, and officially endorsed public art event that reflected the growing momentum of ecological art in contemporary China. It comprised a core, six parallel exhibitions, three special action plans in the form of community-based projects, workshops, and a diverse array of public talks and other educational programs as well as an academic conference focused on eco art and ecological agriculture. The festival was co-conceived by Wang Lin, a renowned art critic and curator of numerous contemporary Chinese art exhibitions both in China and abroad. Wang, who has long been a leading figure in the art scene in Chongqing and its neighboring regions, collaborated with the aforementioned curators Zeng Tu and Zeng Linxiang, both active in community engagement and socially engaged public art, and Jin Lipeng, an artist and educator devoted to ecological discourse.

All four figures are faculty members of SFAI. The three curators have founded their own non-profit art organizations to advance their artistic visions and support creative practices outside the academic sphere. Zeng Tu established Dimensions Art Center in 2013 as a platform for fostering both local and international art, with a focus on community engagement.¹³ Wang Lin founded Tongmen Art Center in 2019 to promote social and community outreach through art education and public welfare initiatives.¹⁴ In the same year, Zeng Linxiang founded Essence Art Center, dedicated to

addressing environmental challenges, critically examining the socio-economic structures that perpetuate environmental degradation while advocating for solutions that respect ecological limits. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) and "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (1999): 366–405.

¹³ Dimensions Art Center, as introduced on its website, integrates art exhibitions, international cultural exchanges, artist residencies, creative incubation, charitable projects, community art education, and eco art initiatives, combining academic research with practical engagement to serve as a platform for fostering both local and international art, and cultural development.

¹⁴ Tongmen Art Center, as introduced via its WeChat public account, focuses on social and community outreach through art education, charity work, and public welfare initiatives, offering training programs, residencies, and forums while promoting local engagement, public exchanges, and online

preserving and innovating traditional Chinese arts, promoting urban and rural art education, and producing socially engaged public art.¹⁵ Jin Lipeng, on the other hand, launched China's first eco art course at SFAI in 2017, which he subsequently developed into a major. Wang Lin, the most senior and well-connected of the group, assumed the role of chief curator for CEAf and led the core exhibition, while the others were responsible for various festival components. Each curator also invited other experts to join their respective curatorial teams for individual exhibitions and projects, expanding the festival's pool of human resources.

As a joined endeavor led by these art professors, CEAf benefited greatly from their professional, institutional, social, and governmental networks, which allowed them to secure support from major public institutions and relevant government agencies in Chongqing. These included SFAI and Chongqing Artists Association as major official sponsors, and three neighborhood committees as key partners. Funding for the festival came from diverse sources, including curriculum funds from SFAI, social funds secured by the curators through their respective organizations, and projects funds from neighborhood committees. The festival's venues were city-wide, ranging from university exhibition halls and outdoor spaces to independent art spaces, an international convention center, and streets and open areas of residential complexes in various neighborhoods. In scale, public outreach, and community engagement, CEAf was a major collective endeavor, marking a significant development in the emerging field of eco art in China.

CEAf's realization is primarily the result of various community-engaged public art projects that Zeng Tu and Zeng Linxiang had led since 2018. Through these projects, they had established a broad collaborative network of art professors and art students from universities within and outside Chongqing also including local districts offices and neighborhood committees.¹⁶ Additionally, CEAf built upon a small-scale eco art exhibition curated by the two Zengs for SFAI in 2019. These initiatives culminated in the impressive scale of CEAf, which involved hundreds of participants, including professional artists, art faculty, students, volunteers, and community members, all contributing to its various programs. Wang Lin envisioned the festival as a multidimensional platform exploring the potential of eco art not only as an art category but also as a methodology to stimulate community engagement and foster a paradigm

exhibitions, all with a commitment to socially engaged art, innovative contemporary culture, and professionalism.

¹⁵ Essence Art Center, as introduced via its WeChat public account, is dedicated to the preservation and innovation of traditional Chinese arts, urban and rural art education, public art projects, cultural exchanges, and consulting on intangible heritage, folk culture, and design, while also developing art derivatives and conducting historical, and cultural research.

¹⁶ Those universities are based in seven cities spreading along the upper and lower reaches of the Yangtze River – one of China's two most crucial waterways, including Chengdu, Chongqing, Wuhan, Nanjing, Wuxi, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. Recognizing their interconnectedness through this vital river system, the curatorial team of CEAf considers these cities as components of a major ecological network, strategically situated for collaboration and synergy.

shift in how art, nature, and human life are interconnected.¹⁷ He and the other curators proclaimed an ambitious mission for CEAF:

To repair and protect ecosystems, engage in socially conscious practices and community actions with a problem awareness in political, economic, cultural, rights-related, and ethical issues, enable ecology to become a public concern, increase public participation, promote fair environmental sharing, and rebuild a new way of life for the community.¹⁸

The core exhibition of CEAF, titled “Regeneration,” focused on the value of discarded objects under the theme “respect trash, reject waste,” showcasing their regeneration into aesthetic works through creative processes.¹⁹ Although the least community-engaged of CEAF’s programs due to its conventional format as an exhibition held in an established institution, “Regeneration” presented a concentrated display of works by contemporary Chinese artists – twenty in total from across China, invited by Wang Lin – who engaged with ecology-related sociocultural issues. Wang Lin reflected on the exhibition’s theme, drawing from his observation as a professor at SFAI:

Every graduation season, I see discarded objects piled up like mountains from students who are leaving school; the property management staff have to transport the waste to landfill sites, truckload after truckload. This is a shocking waste of resources.²⁰

Here, Wang identifies a familiar phenomenon and a pressing issue in contemporary Chinese society: the prevalence of a disposable culture, particularly in urban areas, where rising material abundance has contributed to rampant wastefulness. This imprudent throw-away behavior is not limited to university students; it can be observed across society, from kindergarten children to the general populace. Against this backdrop, the curators of CEAF sought to use eco art to challenge this pervasive wastefulness and critique the rampant disposable culture. The exhibition featured works by artists who explored the aesthetic value of discarded objects or critically reflected on ecologically insensitive lifestyles. It was the curators’ hope that artworks, created mostly from recycled materials, would encourage viewers to see objects that they tend to discard so easily in a new light. Through the act of recycling, the artists put theory in practice.

17 Li Jiali 李家丽, “Wang Lin tan shengtai yishu: yi wanwu wei chidu” 王林谈生态艺术: 以万物为尺度 [Wang Lin talks about ecoart: using wanwu as the measure], November 12, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9959636.

18 Li Jiali 李家丽, “Zunzhong laji zunzhong feipin! 2020 Chongqing shengtai yishuji kaimu 尊重垃圾 尊重废品! 2020重庆生态艺术季开幕 (Respect the trash, respect the discarded: 2020 Chongqing Ecoart Festival opens), November 9, 2020, <http://www.sinology.cn/mess/w18huod/20201109147342.shtml>.

19 Sohu, “Zaishen—2020nain shengtai yishu zuopin quanguo yaoqingzhan kaimu shi! 再生—2020年生态艺术作品全国邀请展开幕式! (Regeneration—opening ceremony of the 2020 national invitational exhibition of eco art works!), November 28, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/430777154_100132389.

20 Li Jiali, “Wang Lin Talks.”

As I have argued elsewhere, the artistic trend to use discarded items simultaneously reflects and critiques the rapid accumulation of waste resulting from China's embrace of global consumerism and urban-focused development.²¹ My analysis of artists working with waste emphasizes their critical approach, which raises awareness of the increasingly severe social and environmental consequences of overconsumption and waste production. From another standpoint, Margaret Hillenbrand critiques the omission of the figure of the waste picker in many artworks that engage with waste, suggesting that this absence reveals deeper issues of appropriation and class tensions.²² She contends that this trend in art, while grappling with precarious experiences of (post)modernity, often distances itself from those who are most affected by the waste economy such as marginalized laborers. Despite these differences in scholarly interpretation, both positions recognize the prominence of waste as a crucial subject in contemporary Chinese art.

This chapter proposes an additional perspective on the creative reuse of discarded materials, which relates to the environmental footprint of artistic production.²³ As the world faces an escalating ecological crisis, marked by extreme weather events, resource depletion, and pervasive pollution,²⁴ art professionals across the world find themselves at a critical juncture. Many are increasingly compelled to address environmental challenges through their artistic practices. Notably, art curator and educator Linda Weintraub advocates for a comprehensive examination of the environmental impacts of art-making, urging a deeper consideration of how art materials are sourced, processed, transported, exhibited, and eventually disposed of.²⁵ Her critique calls attention to the entanglement of the art world with extractivist and unsustainable capitalist systems, a mode of operation that dominates much of global culture. Deep reflection concerning ecology has also emerged among art scholars writing about East Asian art, so much so that Zheng Bo and Sohl Lee argue that it is unethical to “delay the incorporation of ecological thinking in our teaching and research.”²⁶ Their assertion highlights the urgency of engaging with environmental issues in a world facing profound ecological challenges, adding that artists can no longer afford to be uninformed by ecological thinking in their creative work.

It has become significant for artists to adopt ecologically responsible practices, such as the recycling of materials, to reduce their environmental impact in light of

21 Mei Qin Wang, “Waste in contemporary Chinese art,” *The Newsletter-International Institute for Asian Studies* 76 (2017): 32–33.

22 Margaret Hillenbrand, “Ragpicking as Method,” *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 16, no. 2 (2019): 260–297.

23 IPCC, “IPCC Sixth Assessment Report,” March 20, 2023 <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>.

24 IPCC, “IPCC Sixth Assessment Report,” March 20, 2023 <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>.

25 Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 44.

26 Bo Zheng and Sohl Lee, “Contemporary Art and Ecology in East Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 220.

the growing imperative for ecological thinking as the foundation of art-making, also addressed as “ecosensibility” in Zheng Bo’s recent artistic practice.²⁷ By doing so, they challenge the environmentally harmful conventions of the art world, which often rely on unsustainable production and consumption patterns. In China, a nation both contributing to and suffering from severe environmental degradation and waste pollution, the emphasis on creative reuse and critical reflections, as seen in the “Regeneration” exhibition, takes on particular significance. The exhibition’s curatorial vision critiques the pervasive throwaway culture and promotes a more prudent attitude towards materials.

Among the artworks presented in “Regeneration,” Li Xiangming’s installation *Repair 3* offers a poignant commentary on resourcefulness and sustainability. It is composed of scrap wood, steel bars, and burlap bags, which Li collected from rural households and sometimes construction sites since the early 2000s. As part of his *Repair* series initiated in 2012, the piece explores “patchwork aesthetics,” a concept inspired by patched fabrics and repaired farm tools that he gathered from the countryside.²⁸ Li employs these found objects to highlight what he calls “common people’s aesthetics.”²⁹ These aesthetics reveal the beauty in the frugality of China’s agricultural traditions. This frugality, deeply ingrained in rural communities, reflects a mindful interaction with the material world. It serves as a reminder of a time when the principle of “cherishing resources” guided daily life in rural China – an era in which waste was minimized as everything was recycled either for farming or domestic purposes.³⁰

Other works in the exhibition respond to the ongoing urban transformation in China and its material consequences. For example, *Community Myth: Eternal Deconstruction and Construction* (Fig. 2) by Zeng Lingxiang, the aforementioned curator and also a leading practitioner of public art in China, commemorates the cyclical human activity of dismantling, deconstructing, and constructing in their efforts to

27 Charmaine Li, “Practicing Ecosensibility,” August 12, 2021, <https://atmos.earth/practicing-ecosensibility-zheng-bo/>.

28 Li Xiangming 李向明, “Wo bushi benzhe yishu xiangjian er lai de” 我不是奔着艺术乡建而来的 (I didn’t come here for artistic rural construction), *Art Market* 8 (2019): 28–29; “Wo zai Hongjiang xiu laofang” 我在洪江修老房 (I am repairing an old house in Hongjiang), *Kuart* (October 28, 2019), https://www.sohu.com/a/350142826_455444.

29 Ibid.; also see Wang Shu 汪素, *Buding heyi chengwei yishu* 补丁何以成为艺术 (How can patches become art) (Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2016).

30 See Franklin Hiram King, F. H., “The Utilization of Waste,” in *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2011), 193–215 and Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). The situation changed fundamentally when chemical agriculture became the major farming method in China from the 1970s, resulting in ever more intense environmental pollution; in domestic life, the majority rural households have adopted the trash-producing lifestyle by the beginning of the twenty-first century. See Wang Xiaoming 王小明, “L xian jianwen” 县见闻 (What I saw at L County), *Tianya* 6 (2004): 1–9; Qianhui Li et al, “Pollution-Induced Food Safety Problem in China,” *Frontiers in Nutrition* 8 (2021): 703832; Huanan Fu and Xiaochun Li, “Rural–Urban Migrants’ Remittance and Agricultural Pollution in the Presence of Agricultural Dualism,” *The Annals of Regional Science* 70, no. 2 (2023): 535–558.

build homes and communities. While this process has long been part of the evolution of humanity, its extensiveness and intensity in contemporary China is unprecedented.³¹ Adopting the form of a pyramid, Zeng's large installation monumentalizes discarded objects he found from construction sites and demolished neighborhoods. Equipped with built-in sound and LEDs, the work appears to be an ecological theater with various discarded things, electronic devices, household items, toys, street signs, door number plaques, concrete slabs, bricks, and many others, taking central stage. Despite being stripped of their original purposes, these objects acquire new kinds of qualities, energetic properties, and relations by being assembled into a monumental structure like this.

The "Regeneration" exhibition also featured artworks that address pressing anthropogenic environmental disasters. Shen Xiaonan's 2020 installation *Breathing* is composed of hundreds of discarded facial masks, primarily blue and a few black ones, mounted in a grid on the wall. The mask, a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic, became omnipresent during those years, worn by billions and discarded in equal numbers. While essential for public health, the surge in disposable mask use has exacerbated the environmental challenges posed by single-use plastics.³² Improper disposal and inadequate waste management of masks have led to both short term and long-term detrimental impacts on our already fragile ecosystems.³³ Shen's simple large installation provides a glimpse of the newly emerged tension between immediate need for hygiene and the importance of sustainable practices, calling public attention to the environmental consequences of pandemic-related waste.

In these artworks, which are primarily crafted from repurposed objects, the resonance with Jane Bennett's "thing power" theory is palpable.³⁴ Bennett asserts that objects, even the discarded, possess a unique force capable of shaping human experiences. The inherent agency of these materials disrupts conventional views of waste and disposability. Bennett's theory invites a nuanced exploration of the artworks' material agency, where each discarded object exerts influence on the composition, transforming them from mere waste into meaningful components. The entanglement and connectivity of these objects, as shown in *Repair 3*, *Community Myth*, and *Breathing*, create a network of relationships, mirroring the interdependence of materials and their connections to diverse contexts, be it rural households, demolished neighborhoods, or the people who wore and then discarded facial masks. Encounters with

31 For a comparison of the speed of urbanization between China and other countries, see You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–3.

32 Saeida Saadat, Deepak Rawtani, and Chaudhery Mustansar Hussain, "Environmental Perspective of COVID-19," *The Science of the Total Environment* 728 (2020): 138870; Joana C Prata, et al, "COVID-19 Pandemic Repercussions on the Use and Management of Plastics," *Environmental Science & Technology* 54, no. 13 (2020): 7760–7765.

33 Oluniyi O. Fadare and Elvis D. Okoffo, "Covid-19 Face Masks," *The Science of the Total Environment* 737 (2020): 140279.

34 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).



Figure 2: Zeng Lingxiang, *Community Myth: Eternal Deconstruction and Construction*, installation, 2019.

the artworks become ecological experiences, prompting reflection on the life cycles of these materials and their role in narrating changing life circumstances of individual households, communities, the whole human population. Consequently, these artworks also introduce a political dimension, challenging norms of consumption, highlighting environmental impacts, and questioning societal attitudes toward waste. They thus embody an ecological ethics by revaluing materials and contributing to a more sustainable approach to art-making. They become dynamic assemblages, to borrow Man-

uel DeLanda's concept,³⁵ where discarded objects are revitalized to challenge preconceived notions of disposability, inviting viewers into a more ethically conscious engagement with the material world.

In conjunction with this exploration of "thing power," artists who reclaim the intrinsic material value of discarded objects can be seen as rekindling an appreciation for traditional Chinese conception of human-nature relationship, encapsulated in the ancient principles of *jingtian xiwu* (revere nature, cherish resources) and *wanwu* (10,000 things or myriad things). Rooted in Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoism and Confucianism, "revere nature" acknowledges the natural order of the cosmos and recognizes one's place within it, emphasizing humility and a sense of duty to maintain harmony with the natural world. "Cherish resources" emphasizes the responsible use and conservation of natural resources, reflecting an understanding that the Earth's resources are finite and should be used judiciously to ensure sustainability. The concepts of *wanwu* and *jingtian xiwu* embody a broader sense of environmental stewardship, urging humans to be mindful of their impact on the ecosystem and to protect the environment for future generations. This concept encourages a symbiotic coexistence with the natural world, underscoring the idea that humans are an integral part of nature and should live in balance with it rather than exploiting it recklessly.

Similarly, embracing *wanwu* signals a paradigm shift that replaces the human-centric ideology with an inclusive and holistic perspective. Initially developed in Daoism and later gaining "paradigmatic importance" in Chinese philosophy and cosmology,³⁶ *Wanwu* refers to all living and non-living entities, emphasizing the diversity and interconnectedness of all phenomena. This holistic view, much like *jingtian xiwu*, advocates for harmony between humans and the natural world. The transition from (post)modern anthropocentric viewpoints to an inclusive understanding of *wanwu* emphasizes the interconnected contributions of all things, both living and non-living, to the broader world. This traditional concept has regained attraction in recent years among contemporary art circles interested in eco art, with figures such as the aforementioned Hong Kong-based artist, educator and scholar Zheng Bo playing a key role.³⁷ CEAf's curatorial team perceived *wanwu* as a guiding principle in its efforts to integrate eco art with public art for social engagement and community development—a vision particularly evident in many programs in addition to its core exhibition.³⁸

35 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society Assemblage Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006)

36 Chiayu Hsu, "The Authenticity of Myriad Things in the Zhuangzi," *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 218. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030218>.

37 Bo Zheng, "Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council," https://zhengbo.org/2021_WWC_ex.html.

38 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks."

“Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological”

The artworks exhibited in “Regeneration” engage with the concept of *wanwu* as it pertains to our global ecological crisis on a conceptual, imaginative, and aesthetic level. What distinguishes CEAF from other exhibitions is its effort to catalyze ecologically conscious changes reflecting the spirit of *wanwu* for practical impact on various communities, not only just within the art community and in the aesthetic realm but also among ordinary citizens who might never visit an art exhibition. CEAF’s approach spans several strategies, aiming to foster ecologically conscious actions and collective engagement at both the grassroots and institutional levels.

First, CEAF actively promotes the discourse of eco art within university communities. Through displays of texts and artworks as well as competitions, it engages students in ecological learning, instilling a heightened ecological consciousness that values prudence and frugality. This educational outreach aims to inspire young people to integrate ecological values in their daily interactions with the material world. Second, the theme of regeneration permeates in CEAF’s six parallel exhibitions and three action plans, which take place across university campus, public and private art spaces, cultural centers, and various neighborhoods in Chongqing. While the core exhibition and the related conference occurred within the festival’s month-long duration, several parallel exhibitions began beforehand and continued well afterward, taking on community lives on their own. They were designed as socially engaged public art projects that can live on with the participation of community members.

In the curatorial team’s conception of various parallel exhibitions for CEAF, the participation of communities was a crucial component in their aspiration to popularize eco art and support collective actions at the grassroots level. The purpose for community engagement was to foster public interest and skills in environmental protection, cultivate a sense of ecological responsibility in everyday life, and ultimately stimulate civic participation through eco art making for a greener lifestyle and greener earth.³⁹ These ideas evoke notions such as “sustainability literacy” formulated by David Orr,⁴⁰ and “learning society” discussed by Kate Davies who argues that the future of humanity “depends on developing a society that can learn to live sustainably on the Earth.”⁴¹ In this sense, CEAF operates as a form of public pedagogy for ecology and sustainability literacy as it strives to transform ordinary citizens from passive recipients of environmental and social degradations into active participants who are capable of re/creating more ecologically sound environments.⁴²

39 Li Jiali, “Wang Lin Talks.”

40 Ecological Literacy involves a comprehensive understanding of nature’s intricacies and a commitment to responsible stewardship of the Earth, fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment; David D. Orr, *Ecological Literacy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

41 Kate Davies, “A Learning Society,” *Resurgence Magazine* 257 (2009): 42.

42 Li Jiali, “Wang Lin Talks.”

“Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological” is an example of a parallel exhibition of CEAF that illustrates well its efforts to foreground community participation as the purpose of eco art practices. It was staged in Huangjueping district, the historic downtown of Chongqing that had an important history as Chongqing’s heavy industry hub but has declined as one of the most polluted and rundown areas in the city, becoming one of the sacrifice zones amid China’s overall economic restructuring and urbanization since the 1990s.⁴³ The exhibition was curated by Zeng Lingxiang, in collaboration with his colleagues Zhang Lang, Shao Lihua, and a neighborhood officer Deng Jie. While referred to as exhibition, “Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological” was conceived to be a socially engaged public art project aiming to regenerate the neglected Tielu Sancun, a shabby neighborhood in Huangjueping, and to stimulate the growth of public culture and collective identity within this community by introducing ecology-conscious art to its public spaces.⁴⁴

The population of Tielu Sancun are mainly elderly retirees or family members of railway industry employees responsible for the building of the Chengdu-Chongqing Railway in 1952, the first railway after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. The name of their neighborhood, railway 3rd village in English, speaks to its history as one of many villages founded by railway employees. Like other members of the population and their neighborhoods who were once employed by major state enterprises, inhabitants of Tielu Sancun enjoyed social and economic prestige during the era of planned economy. However, it has declined along with Chongqing’s upgrade from a city of heavy industry, which largely relied on railroads for transportation, to a global megacity of multiple economic sectors relying on tertiary and high-tech industries as the leading force since the 1990s. The completion of the Three Gorges Dam in 2008, which dramatically increased the waterway transportation capacity of Chongqing, and the rapid transformation of China’s land transportation system also known as the high-speed-rail revolution,⁴⁵ has further rendered the old railway system obsolete. The public housing structures in Soviet style that had been hastily built for these former state employees during the 1950s have long suffered from neglect and disrepair.

Zeng and his team sought to respond to these historical and contemporary specificities of Tielu Sancun as a place and a community.⁴⁶ The descriptive title of the proj-

43 Here I borrow the term “sacrifice zone” from Naomi Klein in her description of areas disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and the consequences of extractive industries. The concept underscores the social and environmental injustices embedded in the current economic and environmental paradigm, where certain communities and ecosystems are sacrificed for the sake of profit and resource exploitation; Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 165–169.

44 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, exhibition catalogue, 2020.

45 Peter Fairley, “China’s High-Speed-Rail Revolution,” January 11, 2010, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2010/01/11/206748/chinas-high-speed-rail-revolution/>.

46 Zeng Lingxiang and Li Jialu, “Ecological and Public,” *Contemporary Artists*, no. 2 (2021): 30–33.

ect reveals a lot of its focus. The project involved faculty and students from participating universities soliciting the participation of local residents as an integral component of their socially engaged eco-public art making. They conducted surveys, collected oral histories, ran community workshops, and consulted with the residents before coming up with creative solutions to various environmental, spatial, and cultural problems that would be welcomed by the local residents. *Public Herb Station* (Fig. 3) is an example that illustrates this point well. This installation work consists of a row of medicine cabinets commonly found in Chinese herbal pharmacies. Instead of containing dry herbs, the drawers are retrofitted planters for fresh herbs known to locals for their medicinal benefits. On the sides are more plants growing in recycled plastic bottles. This is the outcome of two months' collaboration between Sun Lei and some residents of Tielu Sancun knowledgeable in medicinal herbs and interested in gardening. Sun conceived this project to be a community micro-renewal endeavor and worked with local residents to transform the exterior of a small shed for janitorial supplies, formerly a messy and unsightly place, into a mini communal herbal garden using mostly scavenged materials. Locally available herbs were then planted and accessible to residents invited to claim them on the promise of continuous care. The work stimulated greater interest among residents in sharing knowledge about Chinese medicine and made them participate in communal planting while voluntarily maintaining the tidiness of the place.⁴⁷

Like *Public Herb Station*, all artworks featured in "Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological," including site-specific mural paintings, installations, sculptures, and performances, were created to intervene with the existent physical conditions of the neighborhood and to become new outdoor fixtures, telling local histories, creating interesting visual effects, or repairing and enhancing the functionality of public facilities. Most of the artworks utilized repurposed objects and materials, such as time-worn clothes, disused tools, and household items donated by residents.⁴⁸ For example, *Memory Stitching*, led by artists Chen Yuxuan and Gou Yumeng, transformed old clothes into cushions and other fittings to be used in a communal resting area where people gather to relax and chat. *Tielu Sancun* (Fig. 4) by Zhang Binbin and Liu Sijia reactivated this community's original railway-bound identity and memorialized the bygone era through a steam locomotive made of discarded household appliances and utensils such as steamers, fans, chairs, and even routers.

Collectively, Zeng led his team of thirty-two members to design over twenty pieces of public artworks, most of which were co-created by local residents.⁴⁹ Many of these art pieces are still maintained and enjoyed by the local community. They have not only

47 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, exhibition catalogue, 2020, 141; see also Xiao Yu 肖雨, "Jiulongpo: 'weigengxin' hou laojiu xiaoqu 'ni shengzhang'" 九龙坡: "微更新"后老旧小区"逆生长" (Jiulongpo: 'reverse growth' of old communities after 'micro-renewal'), *Chongqing Daily Network*, December 02, 2020, <http://cq.people.com.cn/n2/2020/1202/c36541134449864.html>.

48 Zeng Lingxiang and Li Jialu, "Ecological and Public."

49 Zeng Lingxiang, phone interview with the author, July 3, 2023.



Figure 3: Sun Lei and residents of Tielu Sancun, *Public Herb Station*, installation, 2020.

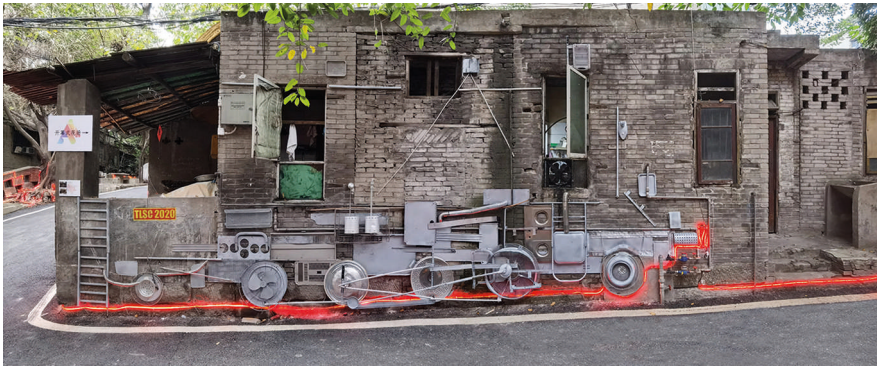


Figure 4: Zhang Binbin and Liu Sijia, *Tielu Sancun*, installation, 2020.

given new life and order to various deserted and messy corners of the old residential complexes but created new public spaces for the preservation of the collective memory of the community. This in turn helps strengthening the community's self-image and (public) identity. Some artists organized community-based events such as workshops and performances with local residents as key participants to showcase the wisdom and creativity hidden among ordinary residents, especially elderly people, to stimulate the growth of public culture within the community and to promote ecological consciousness in contemporary urban living. By addressing the neighborhood's physical conditions, fostering collective identity, and promoting sustainability, the

project exemplified CEAF's broader vision of eco art as a tool for social engagement and environmental consciousness. Through the use of aesthetically engaging objects and participatory cultural activities, the project created opportunities for residents to become active contributors to the ecological and cultural renewal of their community, embodying the spirit of *wanwu* in both form and function.

“Ecological New Communities”

As a community development project, “Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological” reflects and forms part of an emerging trend of urban transformation in China, which has shifted from the typical top-down management mode to a more participatory approach of “co-governance, co-construction, and co-sharing.”⁵⁰ This shift accompanies the Chinese government's embrace of micro-transformation or micro-renewal as a novel approach to urban development in recent years.⁵¹ In contrast to the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of yesteryear, micro-renewal emphasizes upgrading the appearance and functionality of old residential complexes through strategic interventions like partial demolition, functional replacement, infrastructure enhancement, and maintenance. This method prioritizes preserving the existing spatial and material characteristics of old neighborhoods while enhancing their livability.

Such a new approach to urban transformation offers artists abundant opportunities to engage in community development, as their expertise is sought after by governmental entities and private sectors involved in micro-renewal projects. Notably, art and design professors from universities in major cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Chongqing have become important players in these community development initiatives. For example, Liu Yuelai, a professor at Tongji University in Shanghai, has led efforts in Shanghai to establish community gardens since 2014, inviting residents to engage in planting and maintaining urban plots to reclaim neglected land and foster public responsibility to strengthen residents' connection to their environment while improving urban living spaces through collective effort and ecological education. Similarly, Hou Xiaolei, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, has led a microgarden project with her students since 2015 to revitalize the city's ancient hutongs by creating tiny gardens along narrow alleyways, aiming to integrate art into daily life, enhance public spaces, and increase community participation. By developing socially engaged curricula that align with community needs, these educators empower students to consider practical community needs as part of their professional

⁵⁰ See Yuan Ma et al., “Towards the Healthy Community,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (2020): 8324.

⁵¹ Tiziano Cattaneo, et al, “Landscape, Architecture and Environmental Regeneration,” *Sustainability* 11, no. 1 (2019): 128; Yue Yu, et al, “Urban Community Public Space Micro-Renewal Environmental Planning,” *Earth and Environmental Science* (IOP Conference Series) 693, no. 1 (2021): 12107; Fei Liu and Xinru Xiong, ‘Urban Elderly Community Micro-Renewal Planning and Design’, *Earth and Environmental Science* (IOP Conference Series) 693, no. 1 (2021): 12115.

training. Most of CEAF's parallel exhibitions are such community development projects aiming to revitalize the city's old neighborhoods in the manner of urban micro-renewal.⁵² In addition, they are also joining the momentum of the eco-civilization discourse with their envisioning of eco art as a catalyst for community regeneration.

The intersection of micro-urban renewal and the ecological movement becomes particularly evident in "Ecological New Communities," another community engagement project of CEAF unfolding in the neighborhood of Youdian zhilu, which culminated in the creation of the ecological garden "Spring of Huangjueping" discussed in the introduction of this chapter. Like Tielu Sancun, Youdian zhilu is also an old downtown area of Huangjueping that has suffered from depopulation and neglect, becoming a forsaken rust belt with dilapidated apartment complexes and aging public infrastructure. The suboptimal state of Youdian Zhilu served as the impetus for Zeng Tu in collaboration with Zeng Lingxiang, Gao Jian, and Ni Lan, to initiate a project aiming to rejuvenate the area and address the challenges faced by this marginalized community. The four curators took a team consisting of around fifty professional artists and student artists to conduct in-depth research through observations, interviews, and survey questionnaires in order to understand how the public space and the environment factored in the residents' daily life. Along the way, the artists created small site-specific artworks such as interior decorations for stores and signages for street stalls that can be used by local business owners. They also offered free portrait drawings to interested residents. These allowed them to build connections with community members and encourage their participation in the collective project. After nearly two months of collaboration among artists, designers, volunteers, and local residents (including children), they opened the community ecological garden, "Spring of Huangjueping," on December 26, 2020 (Fig. 5).

The eco garden was situated within the small commercial hub of the neighborhood centering around Jixing Farmers Market, a local vegetable market, and small shops on its sides and rear. Embracing the hilly topography of the neighborhood, consisting of scattered terrains, stairs, and narrow aisles, the garden is a series of material, spatial, and aesthetic interventions carefully designed to accommodate the existent physical conditions. It showcases creative reimagination, artistic appropriation, and small-scale alternations that not only produce new spaces for community gathering and gardening but also enhance the orderliness and visual charm of the overall built environment. The garden integrates permaculture practices such as edible landscaping, companion planting, composting, and organic fertilizing as part of the effort to build a sustainable community ecosystem. Much of the garden's construction repurposed local materials, embracing recycling as a key strategy for environmental regeneration. The curatorial team envisioned the eco garden to be at once a showcase of community regeneration and a platform to further the discourse of community engagement and public participation in transforming collective living environments. Ac-

52 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*.



Figure 5: Views of the neighborhood in Youdian zhilu before and after the construction of the eco garden Spring of Huangjueping. Photos taken in 2020.

cording to Zeng Tu, the eco garden is an experiment in grassroots social co-governance, aimed at fostering a sense of agency among ordinary residents to take action in improving their communal spaces in both ecological and aesthetic terms.⁵³ To achieve this, his team adopted a “participatory design” approach, starting with having discussions and exchanges with local residents in order to seek their active participation in the entire process. Although initiated by art professionals, the making of Chongqing’s first community eco garden involved thorough consultation with residents for its design, their participation during its construction, and their continuous and voluntary maintenance of it afterwards.⁵⁴

The curator Gao Jian, with expertise in landscape design and permaculture, emphasized the multifaceted value of the community eco garden, asserting that it embodies the directives of “care for nature (the ecological environment), care for people (community residents), and promote fair sharing (of resources, economy, and wis-

⁵³ Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, 188.

⁵⁴ Zeng Tu, in interview with the author, July 14, 2023. See also Kyomien, “Banjing chuntian de shengtai huayuan, huangjueping niangniangmen de xin shishang” 扮靓春天的生态花园，黄桷坪嬢嬢們的新時尚 (Dress up the eco garden in spring, the new fashion of Huangjueping ladies), March 19, 2022, <http://chongqingdac.org/?p=8179>.

dom).”⁵⁵ The garden’s design revolves around the establishment of self-sustaining living spaces by integrating replicable ecological relationships found in nature, incorporating elements such as soil, water, sunshine, plants, animals, and insects. Residents are invited to participate in the garden’s construction and planting activities, develop a meaningful connection with the land, and enjoy therapeutic benefits from the processes. The eco garden contributes to local biodiversity, food production, soil reconstruction, and water conservation. Beyond providing exposure to nature through planting, the eco garden also creates opportunities for residents to share surplus resources and collaborate with each other in the development of a shared community space.⁵⁶ These tangible benefits identified by Gao underscore the widespread appeal of gardening, and permaculture in general, as acknowledged by scholars as well as environmentally conscious artists and organizations globally.⁵⁷ By showcasing eco garden design as a form of socially engaged public art with ecological purposes, the curatorial team highlights the connection between localized practices in Chongqing and global trends in environmentally conscious art and permaculture.

Embracing eco gardening as a strategy, method, and platform for urban renewal and community development, Chongqing-based art professionals have joined their peers from other major cities in China. It is recorded that the first community eco garden in the contemporary sense appeared around 2011 in Beijing and since then similar projects have emerged in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.⁵⁸ Although Chongqing was a latecomer to this trend, “Spring of Huangjueping” has garnered significant attention and positive coverage from the public media, even months after its inauguration.⁵⁹ Municipal, district, and neighborhood officials in Chongqing responsible for implementing policies related to the official discourse of eco-civilization and community development have taken a keen interest in this project. Many have visited the eco garden to learn about the strategies, processes, and challenges behind its creation and maintenance.⁶⁰ As a direct result of this impact, the municipal government

55 Gao Jian 高健, “Gongjian kongjian, gongsheng shequ” 共建空间, 共生社区 (Co-building space, symbiotic community), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

56 Gao Jian 高健, “Gongjian kongjian, gongsheng shequ” 共建空间, 共生社区 (Co-building space, symbiotic community), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

57 See for example Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill, “Notes towards Autonomous Geographies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 6 (2006): 730–746; Nils Norman and Nina Folkersma, *Eetbaar Park: Edible Park* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012); George McKay, *Radical Gardening* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2013); T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature* (London: Sternberg Press, 2016), 229–258; Lindsay K. Campbell, *City of Forests, City of Farms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

58 Gao Jian, “Co-building Space, Symbiotic Community.”

59 See Zhang Jinhui 张锦辉, “Huangjueping youge shenqi ‘mofa huayuan’” 黄桷坪有个神奇“魔法花园” (There is an enchanting “magical garden” in Huangjueping), *Chongqing Daily*, April 07, 2021; Xiang Ting 向婷, “Chongqing yidong laoju shequ youge xiaoxiao shengtai huayuan, que youzhe shengqi ‘mofa’” 重庆一栋老旧小区有个小小生态花园, 却有着神奇“魔法” (An old residential community in Chongqing has a small ecological garden with enchanting “magic”), *Southwest Metropolis Daily*, April 26, 2021.

60 Zeng Tu, interview with the author, July 14, 2023.

launched the “‘Neighboring Nature’ Eco Garden Co-construction Project” in July 2021.⁶¹ Notably, Zeng Tu and his colleagues were selected as experts to supervise the implementation of this experimental project in two other old neighborhoods awaiting renewal. These new eco gardens, respectively opened in April and May 2022, have engaged local residents in the co-construction process, resulting in two distinct spaces that address unique local challenges while embodying the same spirit evident in “Spring of Huangjueping.”⁶² Along with them, ideas such as sustainable living, reciprocal nature-human relationships, citizens’ environmental responsibilities, co-governance, and fair resource-sharing are also being promulgated and experimented with by various communities.

Conclusion

The artworks and projects from CEAF discussed above encapsulate a transformative dialogue between art, environment, and community – a dialogue of paramount significance amid the looming ecological crises. These endeavors extend beyond the conventional boundaries of artistic practice, materializing as tangible interventions engaging with disregarded objects, neglected neighborhoods, and disenfranchised populations. Resonating with ancient Chinese wisdom embodied in “revere nature, cherish resources,” eco art practitioners infuse their work with contemporary ecological imperatives. Their collective contributions enrich the global discourse of ecological awakening in art-making, emphasizing frugality, prudence, and a profound understanding of the intricate interplay between human actions and environmental sustainability. In doing so, they reintroduce a sustainable ethos aligned with traditional agricultural practices and some contemporary Indigenous communities, whose predominantly ecologically conscious interactions with the natural world serve as a guiding beacon in an era marked by environmental degradation.

The pervasive adaptation of the carbon-intensive modern way of life has separated many from the material base of existence, rendering the material consequences of daily activities invisible. This detachment often results in entire communities being consigned to zones of environmental and social degradation. Against this backdrop, eco art practitioners emerge as custodians of ecological visibility, exposing the negative material consequences of industrialization and urbanization processes on both

61 Wang Tianyi 王天翊, and Mei Yao 梅耀, “Zhucheng dushiqu shouge ‘qinlin ziran’ shengtai huayuan luocheng” 主城都市区首个“亲邻自然”生态花园落成 (The first ‘neighbouring nature’ eco garden in the main urban area was completed), *Chongqing Daily*, April 1, 2022; Liang Qingqing 梁钦卿, “Shengtai huayuan zhuli xiangcun zhenxing” 生态花园助力乡村振兴 (Eco garden helps rural revitalization), *Chinanews.com*, May 25, 2022, https://www.cfej.net/city/djpxb/202205/t20220525_983376.shtml.

62 Cui Li 崔力, “Yi shengtai zhili qiaodong shehui zhili chuangxin de Shijian tansuo” 以生态治理撬动社会治理创新的实践探索 (Practical exploration of leveraging ecological governance to promote social governance innovation), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

the environment and humanity itself. Rooting their artworks in culture, community, and place-specific environmental issues, they bridge the chasm separating humanity from its material foundation. In reorienting art to its biophysical roots, eco art becomes a catalyst for sustainable “metabolic exchanges” between art, human society, and nature.

The resonance of CEAF extends beyond the artistic realm, permeating public awareness and fostering a profound connection between individuals and their environment. Through endeavors in community regeneration, participatory design, and the establishment of ecological gardens, which often repurpose local materials as part of a recycling strategy for environmental renewal, art becomes a conduit for grassroots social co-governance. These initiatives rejuvenate neglected neighborhoods and empower ordinary residents to contribute actively to communal spaces in ecological and aesthetic terms. As Chongqing aligns itself with the national development trend of eco-civilization,⁶³ art professionals there actively participate in and carve out an eco art discourse. Their efforts, exemplified by projects like “Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological” and “Ecological New Communities,” transcend artistic expression to become agents of change, gaining attention beyond the art world. The initiation of the “‘Neighboring Nature’ Eco Garden Co-construction Project” underscores the ripple effect of these works.

In essence, CEAF embodies and contributes to an ongoing global paradigm shift – a reintegration of art into the fabric of everyday life, with artists actively working to restore the symbiosis between humanity and its surroundings. The projects discussed demonstrate how eco art has become a potent vehicle for elevating ecological consciousness in China’s public sphere. These diverse yet interconnected initiatives stand as a testament to art’s potential to catalyze meaningful change and inspire collective commitment to a more sustainable existence. The integration of ecology and communities in various eco art projects in Chongqing exemplifies the transformative power of art to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship between society, the environment, and artistic expression.

⁶³ This is reflected in Chongqing’s launch of the “National Ecological Garden City” project in 2022. See Chongqing Government, “Chongqingshi chuangjian guojia shengtai yuanlin chengshi gonguo fangan” 重庆市创建国家生态园林城市工作方案 (Chongqing’s work plan for creating a National Ecological Garden City), March 1, 2022, https://www.cq.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxgkml/szfwj/qtgw/202203/t20220311_10496232.html; Vivian Yan, “Chongqing Aims for National Ecological Garden City by 2025,” March 17, 2022, <https://www.ichongqing.info/2022/03/17/chongqing-aims-for-national-ecological-garden-city-by-2025/>.

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