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CIRCULAR AESTHETICS AND ECOLOGIES OF REPAIR: WISHULADA PANTHANUVONG'S UPCYCLED ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This paper rigorously examines the upcycled art practice of Thai environmental artist Wishulada Panthanuvong, focusing on how her innovative approach transforms discarded materials into powerful agents for ecological awareness and social change. It synthesizes four critical theoretical dimensions: circular aesthetics, craft and object biography, visual culture in environmental communication, and local ecological aesthetics/cultural landscape theory. Panthanuvong's work assigns new aesthetic and ecological value to waste, reanimating materials through meticulous craft and an ethics of repair, as exemplified by pieces such as "Sustainable Map" and "The Last Bear." Her distinctive "cute" visual style is analyzed for its efficacy in mobilizing emotional engagement and facilitating environmental communication, particularly in the context of urban Bangkok. The study reveals how her art reorganizes urban spaces and public consciousness, offering a locally grounded, participatory, and educational model for sustainable art from a Global South perspective. This interdisciplinary analysis positions Panthanuvong's practice as a significant reference for contemporary eco-art, demonstrating art's potential to foster critical reflection and action towards a more regenerative future.

Keywords: Upcycled Art, Eco-aesthetics, Circular Aesthetics, Environmental Communication, Thailand

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Introduction

In the context of global environmental crises such as climate change, resource overexploitation, and waste pollution, art is no longer merely a vehicle of aesthetic expression. However, it increasingly serves as a powerful instrument for engaging with ecological and social issues. In recent years, a growing number of contemporary artists have committed to practices of sustainable and eco-art, using waste and recycled materials as creative media to address environmental concerns while redefining the relationships among art, everyday life, public space, and social responsibility (Demos, 2016; Gabrys, 2016).

Within this context, the upcycled artworks of Thai artist Wishulada Panthanuvong have drawn particular attention. Known for her vibrant use of color, diverse materials, and strong environmental messages, Wishulada's works are composed of socially discarded items such as plastics, foam, laundry pouches, and straws. Through processes of cleaning, sorting, and meticulous handcrafting, she transforms these materials into public installations and visual artworks that simultaneously perform aesthetic and pedagogical functions. Her representative works—including Sustainable Map (a map of Bangkok made from 200 kilograms of waste), The Last Bear (a bear figure made from multicolored straws or shredded detergent pouches), and whale installations placed outside Krungsri Bank and the Stock Exchange of Thailand—demonstrate a high-impact visual style paired with a clear objective of environmental communication.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on key theoretical concepts. Section 3 outlines the research methodology employed in this qualitative case study. Section 4 presents the research findings, analyzing Wishulada Panthanuvong's major works through the established theoretical lenses. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Literature Review

The growing intersection of art, ecology, and social practice has generated a rich and diverse body of scholarly work. This literature review situates Wishulada Panthanuvong's upcycled art practice within four interrelated theoretical streams: circular aesthetics, craft and object biography, visual environmental communication, and local ecological aesthetics.

Circular Economy and Circular Aesthetics: From Industrial Model to Artistic Practice
The foundational concept of the circular economy, which seeks to replace the linear “take-make-dispose” model with closed-loop systems, has profoundly influenced contemporary art and design (Fletcher, 2016). Kate Fletcher's work is pivotal in translating these economic principles into an aesthetic framework, advocating for a “post-consumer aesthetic” that visibly embeds the history of use. Within this context, art becomes a critical site for material resignification. Scholars like Demos (2016) and Gabrys (2011) have extensively documented how artists engage with waste as both medium and message, using it to critique consumption and visualize ecological cycles. Their research highlights how artistic interventions can make the “social life” of materials visible, transforming discarded objects into influential socio-ecological commentaries. The regional urgency of this practice is underscored by research noting that a significant portion of global marine plastic originates in Southeast Asia, providing both the impetus and raw material for artists in the region (Cornwel-Smith, 2023). Wishulada's work, particularly in projects like Sustainable Map, directly engages with this discourse by creating a tactile geography of consumption and waste, operationalizing circular aesthetics as both a creative and didactic tool.

Craft Revival and Object-Oriented Theories: Reanimating Material Narratives

The “material turn” in the humanities has revitalized interest in craft and object agency. Glenn Adamson's (2007) seminal work positions craft as a mode of critical thinking and ethical engagement with materials, a perspective crucial for understanding the labor-intensive, hands-

on processes of upcycling. This aligns with Appadurai's (1986) concept of the "social life of things," which argues that objects accumulate meaning and value as they move through different cultural contexts. The trajectory of a plastic straw—from consumer good to waste to artistic medium—exemplifies such a biography. Ingold's (2013) focus on "making" as a process of growth and correspondence further enriches this view, framing the artist's work not as an imposition of form but as a collaborative dialogue with materials. In the context of Southeast Asian environmental art, gallery owner Sukontip Nakasem observes a strategic evolution in which artists are moving beyond simple assemblages of found objects. Instead, they "semi-process garbage" to create works where the origin of the materials becomes a discoverable, often shocking, revelation for the audience, thereby enhancing the narrative power of the object's biography (Cornwel-Smith, 2023). Wishulada's practice, rooted in familial traditions of repair and her systematic, zero-waste studio workflow, embodies this sophisticated synthesis of craft ethics and narrative materiality.

Visual Culture and the Affective Turn in Environmental Communication

The communication of complex ecological crises demands strategies that transcend data and statistics. Visual culture studies, as articulated by Mitchell (2005), posit that images are active agents that shape reality and condition perception. In environmental communication, this translates to the use of art to create "affective geographies" that can reorient public understanding and ethical sensibilities (Hawkins, 2011). Scholars such as Heise (2016) and Peeples (2011) analyze how environmental narratives are visualized and circulated, emphasizing the roles of emotion, empathy, and aesthetic experience in fostering ecological awareness. A key strategy identified in this field is the use of "cuteness" or familiar, attractive forms to disarm viewers and facilitate engagement with complex topics. This approach is prevalent among Thai artists like Thanawat Maneenawa, who creates friendly faces from trash to make it "feel less repulsive," and is central to Wishulada's *The Last Bear* (Cornwel-Smith, 2023). The work's aesthetic seduction creates a productive tension between visual delight and material critique, exemplifying Bennett's (2005) concept of "enchantment" as a catalyst for ethical engagement. By leveraging visual pleasure, these artists bypass the fatigue associated with apocalyptic imagery and open a more accessible pathway to critical reflection.

Place, Landscape, and Localized Ecological Knowing

The global discourse on sustainability necessitates grounding in local contexts. Theories of place and cultural landscape, developed by geographers like Tuan (1977) and anthropologists such as Schein (1997), provide the framework for this localization. Schein argues that landscapes are palimpsests of cultural values and social relations, constantly being reproduced. Artistic interventions can actively reshape these landscapes, inserting new ecological narratives into urban space. The field of local ecological aesthetics, advanced by thinkers like Brady (2003), argues for an engaged, place-based appreciation that integrates cultural memory and sensory experience. This theoretical confluence is critical for analyzing site-specific works like Wishulada's whale installations at the Stock Exchange of Thailand, which juxtapose natural symbolism and financial architecture to comment on the economic drivers of ecological harm. Furthermore, artists across the region draw deeply on local contexts: Filipino artist Leeroy New connects his practice to the local culture of transforming surplus into festive decor, while Indonesian artist Ari Bayuaji weaves ghost fishing gear into textiles inspired by traditional lore (Cornwel-Smith, 2023). These practices demonstrate how a localized, culturally-nuanced approach can make global environmental issues resonate more powerfully with specific communities, fulfilling what Brady describes as an "aesthetics of engagement with the altered and the everyday."

Synthesis and Research Gap

While these theoretical bodies are well-established individually, there is a need for more integrated analyses that examine how they converge in specific artistic practices, particularly

from the Global South. Wishulada Panthanuvong's work offers a compelling case study because it simultaneously operationalizes all four dimensions: it applies circular economy principles through material practice (circular aesthetics), invests labor to create new object biographies (craft), employs a "cute" visual strategy for public engagement (visual communication), and is deeply embedded in the material and cultural landscape of Bangkok (local ecology). This literature review thus establishes the conceptual groundwork for analyzing her practice as a holistic model of contemporary eco-art that bridges systemic critique, material ethics, affective communication, and place-based action.

Research Questions

This study focuses on the works cited above to explore how Wishulada Panthanuvong realizes the aesthetic transformation of waste, engages in social education, and reconstructs local cultural landscapes through her artistic practice. The following research questions guide this investigation:

- 1) How does she apply principles of circular aesthetics to transform discarded materials into artworks of social significance and aesthetic value?
- 2) In what ways does her creative process reflect the afterlives of objects and the value of handcrafted labor?
- 3) How does she effectively communicate environmental messages and provoke public emotional resonance through visual strategies?
- 4) How are her artworks embedded in Thai local cultural and spatial contexts, and how do they interact with corporations, communities, and policy frameworks?

Theoretical Framework

To answer these questions, this study adopts a multi-theoretical framework composed of the following four perspectives:

Circular Aesthetics: This perspective examines how art engages with ecological cycles of resource use, consumption, disposal, and reuse, challenging traditional aesthetic values and material hierarchies (Fletcher, 2016; Lemkow, 2022).

Craft Studies and Object Biography: This approach explores the artist's material processes and manual labor, revealing how objects undergo social and aesthetic transformations throughout their lifecycle (Adamson, 2007; Appadurai, 1986).

Visual Culture and Environmental Communication: This lens investigates how art functions as a medium for visualizing environmental issues and mobilizing emotional and behavioral responses among the public (Peeples, 2011; Heise, 2016).

Local Ecological Aesthetics / Cultural Landscape Theory: This view considers how artworks are situated within the Thai cultural and spatial context, reconfiguring the meaning of waste within urban cultural landscapes and localized ecological discourse (Tuan, 1977; Spirn, 1998).

Research Methodology

This study is grounded in a qualitative case study design, selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth, multi-dimensional exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its authentic context. The artistic practice of Thai environmental artist Wishulada Panthanuvong constitutes an intrinsic case, investigated not primarily as an illustration of a broader theory but as a significant entity worthy of detailed examination in its own right. The selection of this case is purposive, predicated on its recognized exemplarity within Southeast Asian environmental art, its inherent engagement with the interdisciplinary theoretical concerns of this study, and the availability of a robust corpus of documentary and visual materials for systematic analysis.

Data collection was conducted through a multi-source documentary analysis strategy, a method well-suited to research focused on textual and visual discourse. Primary data was sourced from the artist's own digital portfolio, providing direct access to high-resolution documentation of key works such as Sustainable Map, The Last Bear, and the whale installations, alongside her

firsthand descriptions of process and intent. This primary layer was triangulated with secondary critical and contextual materials, most notably substantive features from institutions such as the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which offer verified accounts of the artist's public engagements, collaborative projects, and position within regional art circuits. These empirical sources were then engaged through the analytical lenses provided by the established scholarly literature across the domains of circular aesthetics, craft studies, visual culture, and cultural landscape theory.

The analytical process integrated qualitative content analysis with formal and semiotic visual analysis. The four core theoretical dimensions served as a guiding framework for an initial deductive coding of the data, ensuring that the investigation remained systematically aligned with the research questions. Within each dimension, an inductive approach was employed to identify and elaborate emergent themes—for instance, the concepts of material re-signification within circular aesthetics or the affective contradiction operative in the visual strategy of *The Last Bear*. Visual analysis attended specifically to the formal properties of materiality, color, and form, interpreting how these elements coalesce to produce meaning within specific spatial and cultural contexts, such as the juxtaposition of a waste-made whale against the facade of the Stock Exchange of Thailand.

While reliance on publicly available documents precludes insights from ethnographic methods such as direct observation or interviewing, this limitation is mitigated by the methodological rigor applied to the data. Trustworthiness is established through source triangulation, the provision of thick description to contextualize artworks and their milieus, and reflexive transparency regarding the interpretive process. Consequently, this methodology provides a coherent, structured, and theoretically informed pathway to elucidate how Wishulada Panthanuvong's practice articulates a complex synthesis of ecological critique, material ethics, communicative strategy, and place-based reimagination.

Research Findings

Introduction to Circular Aesthetics

Circular aesthetics emerges as a critical theoretical framework in response to linear models of production and consumption that dominate industrial and post-industrial societies. Rooted in the principles of the circular economy, it challenges the modernist tendency to separate aesthetics from utility and to treat waste as aesthetically void or materially exhausted. Instead, circular aesthetics foregrounds the aesthetic potential of used materials, advocating for design and artistic practices that embrace reuse, repair, and regeneration (Fletcher, 2016; Lemkow, 2022).

Rather than concealing environmental degradation, circular aesthetics highlights the material histories embedded within objects and invites reflection on their transformation. Artists working within this framework frequently use post-consumer waste not only as a medium but as a message, foregrounding both material cycles and the social conditions that produce environmental harm. The aesthetic dimension is not sacrificed for ethical considerations, but rather co-emerges with them in forms that are often colorful, tactile, and affectively engaging. Wishulada Panthanuvong's work offers a vivid example of circular aesthetics in practice. By employing common plastic debris—such as straws, foam, laundry pouches, and coffee containers—as core materials, she creates highly visual and emotionally resonant installations that articulate both ecological concern and artistic ingenuity. Her works, especially *Sustainable Map* and *The Last Bear*, serve not only as creative expressions but also as socio-material interventions that redefine the perceived value of waste.

Sustainable Map: Urban Cartography of Waste

One of Wishulada's most emblematic works, *Sustainable Map*, consists of a large-scale map of downtown Bangkok crafted from 200 kilograms of waste materials. As an artistic

cartography made entirely from discarded plastic and consumer refuse, the work functions simultaneously as a geographical representation, a material archive, and an environmental critique.



Figure 1 Wishulada Panthanuvong's Sustainable Map of downtown Bangkok displayed at Bangkok Design Week, Thailand

The use of waste as cartographic material highlights the deep entanglement between urban development and waste production. Bangkok, like many megacities, generates enormous volumes of plastic waste annually—an issue rarely made visible in conventional forms of city mapping. By reconstructing the city from its own discarded matter, Wishulada reconfigures cartographic practice into an aesthetic of confrontation, forcing viewers to reconsider their spatial and material relationships to the city.

From a circular aesthetics perspective, Sustainable Map exemplifies the principles of closed-loop materiality. Waste is no longer an endpoint but a point of departure for aesthetics and politics. As Lemkow (2022) notes, “circular aesthetics is fundamentally a practice of resignification, where discarded materials are imbued with new narratives of value and consequence. This approach enables artists to “make legible the social and ecological stories embedded in matter”. Lemkow further argues that “by treating waste as a primary medium, art can disrupt the linear perception of consumption and reveal the continuous, often hidden, life of materials”. In Sustainable Map, the viewer is not simply observing Bangkok’s geography but is invited to contemplate the metabolic flows of urban life—how consumption, disposal, and accumulation co-constitute the landscape.

Furthermore, its display at the UNESCAP headquarters ensures that the work enters not only public discourse but also policy spaces, where aestheticized waste becomes a prompt for institutional environmental reflection. This strategic placement embodies what Lemkow identifies as the potential for “aesthetic interventions to migrate from the gallery into the forums of governance, carrying with them a material testimony that abstract data alone cannot provide.” This part is going to be discussed in more detail when it comes to “5.3 Sustainable Map: Redrawing Bangkok’s Geography with Waste as a Re-politicization of Landscape”.

The Last Bear: Emotional Resonance through Waste Materiality

While Sustainable Map projects a macro-scale critique of urban waste systems, The Last Bear operates on a more intimate, affective scale. Described as one of Wishulada’s “cutest” creations, this sculptural series features bear figures whose fur is made from multicolored plastic straws or shredded laundry detergent pouches, which, when assembled, resemble vibrant flowers. The resulting forms are playful, even whimsical, yet carry an underlying sense of ecological urgency. This juxtaposition of charm and crisis is central to circular aesthetics.

Rather than deploying guilt or fear, *The Last Bear* captures attention through aesthetic seduction. Its tactile, multicolored surfaces invite viewers—particularly children and families—to approach, observe, and reflect. As Gabrys (2016) argues, the sensory dimensions of environmental objects are crucial for fostering new modes of awareness, noting that “aesthetic practices are central to how we come to know, represent, and inhabit environments.” Specifically, “It is through the aesthetic registers of waste that the possibilities for engaging environmental harm become perceptible.” Gabrys further contends that “the materiality of waste, when redirected through artistic practice, can provoke a visceral rethinking of our place within ecological systems.”

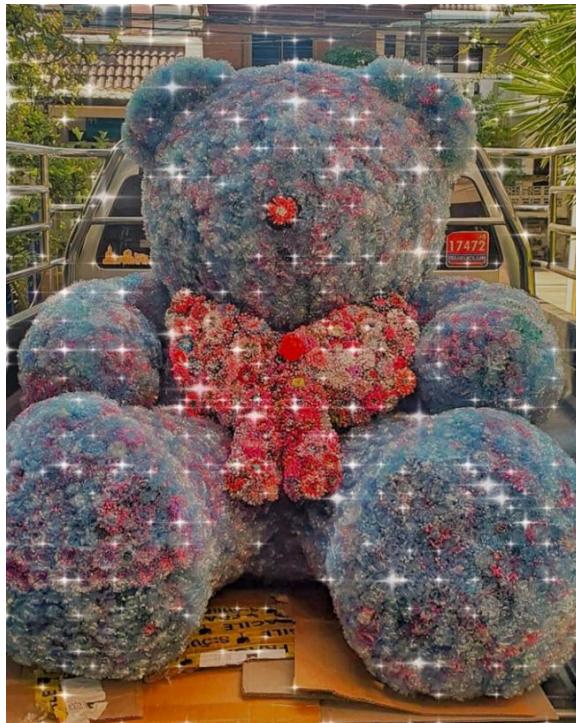


Figure 2 The Last Bear by Wishulada Panthanuvong

The work also provokes emotional identification. Bears, often associated with innocence and vulnerability, become visual metaphors for ecosystems under threat. The fact that their “fur” is composed of non-biodegradable microplastics intensifies the contradiction—beauty assembled from pollution. This aligns with Gabrys’s observation that “by making waste sensuously present, art can short-circuit abstract environmental statistics and generate affective, embodied connections” (Gabrys, 2016). Circular aesthetics thus functions here not only as a strategy of material reuse but also as a mode of emotional communication, in which the medium of waste becomes the message of ecological fragility.

Waste as Regenerative Resource

Both Sustainable Map and *The Last Bear* exemplify a central tenet of circular aesthetics: waste is not the end, but a possible beginning. In Wishulada’s practice, discarded materials are not merely repurposed but re-symbolized, undergoing an aesthetic regeneration that repositions them within the cultural and ecological imaginary.

Importantly, her works reject the minimalist “clean aesthetics” often associated with eco-design. Instead, she embraces a visual maximalism that reflects the heterogeneity and chaos of real-world waste—layers, colors, and textures that mirror the overwhelming materiality of environmental pollution. This aligns with what Fletcher (2016) call a “post-consumer aesthetic, which they define as “one that visibly embeds the history of use and celebrates the worn, the

patched, and the hybrid as an alternative to the seamless and the new.” This aesthetic framework, they argue, “does not sanitize or erase the signs of consumption, but rather renders them visible, legible, and productive.”

Furthermore, by crafting her artworks from widely recognizable materials (e.g., straws, detergent pouches), Wishulada enables viewers to locate themselves within the waste narrative. These are not abstract materials; they are everyday residues of domestic life, particularly gendered labor such as cleaning and childcare. In this way, the works extend the reach of circular aesthetics to include social and gendered dimensions of waste production and recognition, making tangible what Fletcher describes as the “material stories of consumption that are otherwise discarded and forgotten.”

In summary, through the lens of circular aesthetics, Wishulada Panthanuvong’s artworks illuminate the regenerative potential of waste, not only as material but as a message. Sustainable Map transforms a polluted city into a tactile, reassembled geography of accountability, while The Last Bear mobilizes affect and recognition through its contradictory surface—both adorable and alarming. Together, these works demonstrate that aesthetic engagement with waste can transcend mere representation, offering new ways of seeing, feeling, and ultimately acting within the ecological crisis. As her works suggest, waste is not an aesthetic absence—it is a resource for rethinking beauty, responsibility, and collective futures.

Craft, Object Biography, and the Artistic Process

This chapter applies the frameworks of Craft Studies and Object Biography Theory to examine how Wishulada Panthanuvong reanimates discarded materials through manual labor and transformative processes, granting them new life, function, and meaning. It focuses on her artistic methodology and material handling, with particular attention to the work The Last Bear, as well as her own reflections on practices such as repair, sorting, reuse, and the pursuit of a zero-waste system in artmaking.

Craft and Environmental Art: Labor, Technique, and Meaning-Making

Craft has long been regarded as an intermediary between art and the everyday. It is characterized by dense manual labor, material immediacy, and the maker’s (Adamson, 2007) embodied participation. In contemporary environmental art, craft not only critiques industrial aesthetics but also serves as a strategy for addressing resource scarcity and ecological ethics. Unlike mechanical reproduction, craft emphasizes the intimate relationship between object and maker, and the labor and emotional imprint embedded in each work.

Wishulada’s practice is deeply rooted in craft processes. She personally collects discarded materials from trash bins, donation channels, or individuals and organizes a team to sort, clean, and store them to ensure safety and usability. She then creates design drafts and material plans for each piece, followed by meticulous manual operations, including assembling, weaving, binding, and combining. She states: “My artworks are a way to communicate abstract environmental ideas in tangible form. I want to convey the concept of reuse-reduce-repair through visual works.”

This craft-based approach is not merely a technical process but an embodiment of ecological ethics: it prolongs the life of discarded matter, diverts waste from incineration or landfills, and manifests a respect for materials and resources. It also highlights the artist’s labor as a key component of material regeneration.

An Object Biography Perspective: The Social Journey of Materials

Object Biography theory emphasizes that objects are not static but accumulate their “life stories” through changing social relationships of production, use, disposal, and reuse (Appadurai, 1986). This framework is particularly suitable for analyzing how Wishulada grants a “second life” to waste materials.

Her The Last Bear series exemplifies the object biography in action. The bears' "fur" is composed of everyday plastic straws or shredded detergent pouches, some of which still show recognizable branding and color, revealing their prior lives as consumer products. After cleansing and reassembly, these fragments become integral to the artwork, bearing dual meanings: as environmental metaphors of pollution and as symbols of creative transformation through manual labor.

Viewers are initially drawn to The Last Bear by its soft, vibrant surface, only to realize later that the materials were once household trash. This perceptual shift constructs an object biography narrative: the discarded matter, through artistic labor, gains new aesthetic significance, emotional resonance, and social function.

Wishulada's practice also extends the temporal aspect of object biography. Her material collection is not limited to immediate reuse but includes preparation for future works. Her team archives and stores cleaned leftover materials for later creations. This process connects individual works into a continuum of material transformation, where each piece functions as a node in her ongoing regenerative system.

From Household Experience to Artistic Practice: Cultural Foundations of Reuse

Wishulada has mentioned that her awareness of reuse originates from her childhood family experiences: her father was skilled in repairing broken furniture and appliances, and her family regularly reused coffee cups and takeaway containers. They also categorized and sold used newspapers, plastic bottles, and electronic components. This household culture of "making full use of everything" became a driving force in her artistic vision, revealing the invisible labor and cultural resilience of reuse practices in Thai domestic life.

Therefore, her artistic process is not merely a "recycling gesture" but a material act rooted in cultural memory and everyday ethics. It continues a tradition of domestic reuse and repair and brings it into contemporary art. By embedding such practices into her creative work, she reinserts forgotten forms of "household craft labor" into public discourse and reassigned them cultural value.

Zero Waste and Systemic Circularity: Designing the Artistic Loop

Wishulada's artistic practice not only transforms materials within individual works but also aims to construct a zero-waste production system. Her team manages materials through reuse, reclassification, and storage, minimizing the generation of new waste during the creative process. She explains: "After finishing a work, we clean and archive the leftover materials to use for the next piece." This model reflects not only a commitment to environmental ideals but also a systemic design consciousness.

She explicitly seeks to embed a Circular Economy System into her artistic workflow, enabling her works to serve as prototype models of sustainability. Her process embodies a multilayered closed-loop structure that begins with material sourcing from public waste streams and community donations, followed by manual sorting, cleaning, and modification of the collected items. These processed materials are then transformed into artistic outputs such as installations, sculptures, and visual communication works. Finally, the cycle continues with careful management of leftover materials through recovery, archiving, and future reuse, reinforcing a sustainable and regenerative creative system.

Through this systemic approach, Wishulada not only realizes the ideals of circular aesthetics but also positions art as a laboratory for institutional experimentation in sustainable design.

In summary, through craft and object biography strategies, Wishulada Panthanuvong's artistic practice reintegrates discarded materials into systems of culture, emotion, and aesthetics. Her labor-intensive processes breathe new form and meaning into waste, affirming the cultural value and ecological ethics of craft. In her works, materials are not anonymous—they are living entities with identities, histories, and affective traces. Her artmaking is not merely about producing finished pieces but involves a process rich in ethical decisions, systemic design, and

cultural transformation. This process prompts us to reconsider how, in a future marked by resource exhaustion, art might reactivate human-material relationships and reimagine a world where “nothing is wasted, and everything is beautiful.”

Environmental Communication and Affective Mobilization in Visual Culture

This chapter approaches Wishulada Panthanuvong’s artistic practice from the intersecting perspectives of visual culture studies and environmental communication, exploring how she constructs narratives and emotional spaces of environmental concern through visual media. Her works do not merely convey environmental messages but activate emotional responses, ethical reflection, and behavioral awareness through visual strategies. At the visual level, her practice constitutes a socially mobilizing eco-aesthetic communication system.

Visual Culture as a Mechanism of Environmental Communication

Visual culture is not merely a form of aesthetic experience but a mechanism for cultural meaning-making. In today’s media environment, visual imagery shapes not only our perception of environmental issues but also our emotional reactions and social positions. As Mitchell (2005) argues, “visual culture is not just a part of our everyday lives; it is the very condition in which we live, move, and perceive our world.” He further contends that “what we call ‘seeing’ is never a neutral or natural act; it is always a form of cultural practice, loaded with expectations, conventions, and desires.” Therefore, artistic installations, social media imagery, and visual symbols in exhibitions form an “image ecology” of environmental topics, transmitting, stimulating, and regulating public understanding of nature in ways that go beyond verbal language.

Wishulada Panthanuvong fully utilizes this characteristic of visual communication. Many of her installations possess substantial visual impact and recognizability, employing vivid colors and unique forms often anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or landscape-like in presentation. This enables viewers to intuitively grasp core themes—such as plastic pollution, waste management, or ecological crises—without textual explanation. Mitchell’s observation that “images are not just passive reflections of reality but active participants in social and political life, capable of persuasion, emotion, and collective identification” resonates strongly with this approach. As Wishulada herself emphasizes: “Art is an instrument to change people’s ideas, and artwork is a useful channel to convey the artist’s message to the audience.”

Visual Strategies of Affective Mobilization: The Case of The Last Bear

Among Wishulada’s body of work, *The Last Bear* is one of the most representative cases of affective mobilization. This series stitches together plastic straws and shredded detergent pouches to form the “fur” of a bear, with the fur resembling vibrant flowers. The resulting visual experience is simultaneously endearing and alarming. The colorful “fur” attracts attention while concealing a message of environmental crisis: plastic micro-pollution, the non-biodegradability of household packaging, and the ecological harm caused by consumerism.

From the perspective of visual culture, *The Last Bear* employs an aesthetic strategy of emotional engagement: the bear’s visual familiarity (as an animal figure), the delight of color (resembling floral textures), and the material familiarity (everyday objects) draw viewers in. Upon closer inspection, the piece’s environmental implications become evident. This visual mechanism functions as an affective apparatus—a device that leads viewers from curiosity to empathy, from appreciation to critical reflection. As Bennett (2005) argues, “affect is a force that can emerge from aesthetic arrangements, traversing bodies and prompting new modes of attention and political sensitivity.” She further notes that “artistic encounters can serve as a ‘shock to thought,’ not by delivering a message, but by orchestrating materials in a way that charges perception with ethical potential.” In this sense, the work operates as what Bennett describes as “an ecology of affect, where the vibrant matter of the artwork activates a corresponding vitality in the viewer.”

Moreover, the bear, as a cultural symbol, carries meanings associated with childhood, gentleness, and protection. When viewers realize that the “adorable” bear is actually made from discarded plastic, the cognitive dissonance produces a more profound emotional impact. This strategy avoids the fatigue or avoidance often triggered by traditional “disaster imagery” in environmental campaigns, instead employing soft awakening to cultivate environmental awareness. It exemplifies Bennett’s observation that “enchantment—a state of wonder coupled with unease—can be a powerful catalyst for ethical engagement, precisely because it captivates before it critiques.”

Mediation and Cross-Group Communication of Artistic Works

Wishulada is highly conscious of the “mediality” of her works—their communicative function across various contexts. She installs her works in accessible public spaces—such as museums, exhibitions, social platforms, educational venues, and even the façades of banks and United Nations buildings—transforming them into both visual landmarks and vehicles for cross-sector communication. Her collaborations with institutions like the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), Museum Siam, and UNICEF ensure that her works resonate across educational, policy, commercial, and artistic spheres.

Particularly, works like *The Last Bear*, with its “cartoon-like cuteness, often become viral on social media and possess strong spreadability. These visually appealing yet meaningful works are readily incorporated into educational contexts such as children’s programs, parent-child activities, and environmental awareness curricula. Among younger audiences, they achieve high recognition and emotional retention. Thus, they are not only artworks but also templates of visual communication—reusable, adaptable, and open to re-creation.

Aesthetic Stimulation and the Mechanism of Environmental Awareness Transformation

From the broader lens of environmental communication, Wishulada’s works construct a mechanism that transforms aesthetic experience into behavioral awareness. This mechanism does not rely on rigid knowledge dissemination or fear-based messaging, but instead uses soft aesthetics to guide emotional responses and stimulate cognitive motivation toward environmental action. As Hawkins (2011) argues, “art’s power lies in its ability to generate affective geographies—spaces of feeling that can reorient our ethical compass and predispose us to certain forms of action.”

Wishulada once stated, “I hope that through the principles of the circular economy and zero waste, people will observe whether their actions affect the environment.” This indicates that her works do not merely transmit information but also foster self-awareness, encouraging viewers to internalize environmental issues into their daily decision-making.

This process of internalization is primarily accomplished through emotional engagement and visual perception. Hawkins (2011) notes that the “perception-emotion-action” chain in environmental art is a key pathway for shifting public attitudes, elaborating that “by first captivating the senses, art creates an opening for critical reflection; it is through this initial aesthetic arrest that new environmental imaginaries can take root.” Furthermore, she observes that “the materiality of the artwork acts upon the viewer, not symbolically but viscerally, forging a tangible link between the body of the observer and the substance of ecological concern.”

Therefore, we may understand Wishulada’s work as an experiment in sustainable aesthetics, concerned not only with ecological issues but also with how audiences are “drawn into” the formation of environmental consciousness, a process Hawkins (2011) describes as “the slow, subtle work of aesthetic cultivation, where changed perceptions gradually sediment into changed habits.”

In summary, Wishulada Panthanuvong’s practice demonstrates that visual culture possesses unique capacities for emotional mobilization in environmental communication. Through works such as *The Last Bear*, she constructs an image system that merges visual allure, symbolic

activation, and ethical appeal—enabling environmental issues to be communicated in more intimate, visual, and emotionally resonant ways. Her work is not merely about producing images but about activating visual discourse, creating emotional spaces that host environmental awareness. At this intersection of visual culture and emotional communication, we witness how art can intervene in environmental issues and evoke deep public responses to waste and ecological crisis.

Local Ecological Aesthetics and the Reshaping of Cultural Landscapes

This chapter combines the theoretical perspectives of local ecological aesthetics and cultural landscape theory to explore how Wishulada Panthanuvong's artistic practices intervene in urban spaces, social structures, and ecological issues in Thailand. Her works not only address the issue of waste reuse but also activate cultural identity, public participation, and environmental consciousness at the level of “place” and “re-landscaping”. Projects such as her whale installations and Sustainable Map not only reshape the city's visual landscape but also construct a local and future-oriented vision of public environmental imagination.

Local Ecological Aesthetics: The Intersection of Place-based Experience and Environmental Perception

Local ecological aesthetics emphasizes the regional characteristics of aesthetic experience, asserting that human environmental perception, ecological awareness, and aesthetic behavior are closely tied to the local culture, history, and ecological structures in which they occur. As Brady (2003) argues, “aesthetic appreciation of environment is not a passive reception of scenic views, but an active, participatory engagement that is fundamentally shaped by local conditions and cultural practices.” She further contends that “to appreciate a place aesthetically is to understand it in its particularity—its unique integrations of nature, culture, and history.” Unlike the abstract discourse of environmentalism in a globalized context, Wishulada's works are closely tied to the Thai context, highlighting the triple relationship between “local waste”, “local audiences”, and “local sites”.

Wishulada extensively uses waste materials commonly found in Thai households, such as foam food containers, laundry detergent pouches, plastic straws, and ready-to-drink coffee cups. These materials are not only byproducts of environmental problems but also concrete witnesses of Thailand's urbanization, consumerism, and industrialization processes. Brady's framework helps elucidate this practice, as she notes that “materials embedded in a locale carry aesthetic meaning precisely because they are integral to the stories of that place—they are the tangible residues of its ecological and social metabolism.” Therefore, the materials she chooses bear not only the implication of “material pollution” but also the weight of “cultural memory”. In this sense, the selection of materials itself becomes a form of local ecological narrative, responding to the ecological dilemmas and cultural discontinuities facing Bangkok as a rapidly developing metropolis, embodying what Brady describes as “an aesthetics of engagement with the altered and the everyday, where even degraded materials can become focal points for ecological reflection and reconnection.”

Cultural Landscape and the Reproduction of Urban Public Spaces

Cultural landscape theory emphasizes that the interaction between human activity and the natural environment transforms physical space into culturally meaningful landscapes. As Schein (1997) contends, “landscapes are not merely backdrops to human activity, but are themselves accumulations of cultural processes, embodying the values, aspirations, and tensions of the societies that produce them.” Furthermore, he argues that “every landscape is a palimpsest, a layered record of social norms and power relations written onto the physical environment.” Wishulada's public art projects use waste as a medium to create new landscape nodes in the city, turning ordinary street corners, institutional façades, and bank entrances into sites of ecological reflection and community participation.

Her whale installations, installed in front of Krungsri Bank and the Stock Exchange of Thailand, are made from large quantities of household waste contributed by urban residents. These works take the form of giant whales, suspended between commercial spaces and skyscrapers. The visual impact is striking, creating a strong sense of cultural tension: the juxtaposition of natural life forms with financial spaces, and the dislocation between waste materials and the symbols of capital, evokes associations between consumption, waste, and ecology. This tension directly illustrates Schein's observation that "the cultural landscape is a primary medium for social discourse, where competing narratives about identity, power, and morality become visible and are contested."



Figure 3 Care the Whale by Wishulada Panthanuvong, in front of the Stock Exchange of Thailand, 2021

The whale, as a symbol of marine life, also reflects Wishulada's concern with marine plastic pollution. She has previously pointed out that tobacco butts are non-biodegradable and can affect the marine ecosystem. Thus, this group of installations is not only sculptural but also functions as a spatial environmental education tool. Viewers encounter environmental issues unintentionally during daily commuting, shopping, or working, breaking the "otherness" and alienation often associated with environmental messaging, and transforming urban space itself into an environmental classroom within the cultural landscape. In doing so, her work activates what Schein describes as the landscape's role as "an active participant in the socialization process, instructing citizens about proper relationships to nature, to each other, and to the past."

Sustainable Map: Redrawing Bangkok's Geography with Waste as a Re-politicization of Landscape

Wishulada's Sustainable Map, exhibited at the 2023 Bangkok Design Week, is a model example of the integration between local ecological aesthetics and cultural landscape theory. As an artwork that uses 200 kilograms of waste to reconstruct a map of central Bangkok, it obviously emphasizes both the distribution of waste in urban spaces and the close relationship between city geography and ecological burden.

More importantly, this piece has become a reference model for policymaking and is now permanently exhibited at the headquarters of the United Nations ESCAP, serving as an important bridge between art, policy, and urban planning. Its regionality is reflected not only in the form of the "Bangkok map" but also in the locality of the materials, the site-specific analysis of pollution sources, and the correspondence to the daily lives of city residents.

From a cultural landscape perspective, Sustainable Map is not merely a representation of geography but a re-politicization of landscape. It reorganizes urban spatial knowledge through waste materials, bringing environmental issues from the abstract level of climate change back

to the micro-level of where you live, thereby prompting viewers to reflect on their own position and responsibility within the map.

Community Collaboration and the Dissemination of Local Knowledge

Wishulada has emphasized in several interviews that her art projects are often completed in collaboration with local governments, businesses, educational institutions, and community members, and she hopes that such collaborations will “allow every participant to gain some knowledge or inspiration about waste management and reuse.” This working mechanism reflects a model of “collaborative production of cultural landscape”—where the artist is not a solitary creator but rather a mediator, mobilizing various local actors to engage with and reconstruct local ecological issues collectively.

In particular, by carrying out CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) projects with institutions such as banks and the Stock Exchange of Thailand, she integrates eco-art into the local business structure, creating a sustainable support mechanism for art while bringing environmental issues from the periphery into the mainstream system, transforming them into part of the city’s public culture.

Thus, Wishulada’s artistic projects constitute a multi-layered reconstruction of publicness, aesthetics, and institutionality within the cultural landscape. They respond to the threefold dimensions of “environmental sensibility - local identity - social action” emphasized in local ecological aesthetics.

In summary, Wishulada Panthanuvong’s artistic practice demonstrates a deep fusion of local ecological aesthetics and cultural landscape theory. Through projects such as the whale installations and Sustainable Map, she transforms waste from pollutants into an ecological language for constructing urban cultural landscapes; she converts urban space from a site of consumption into a public storytelling space of environmental consciousness. Her works are not only artistic responses to environmental issues but also reorganizations of Thailand’s urban culture, social structures, and local identities. This form of artistic practice not only enriches the vocabulary of local eco-aesthetics but also provides an action-oriented model for place-based ecological art in the Global South.

Conclusion

Wishulada Panthanuvong’s artistic practice, as a path that combines locality, experimentation, and educational value, presents significant research potential within the contemporary context of environmental art and circular aesthetics. She treats “waste” as a visual carrier of socio-ecological structures, not only redefining the meaning of materials but also reconstructing the public’s understanding of the relationships among nature, consumption, and environmental responsibility. Her works, through interdisciplinary integration, engage with multiple theoretical domains, including circular aesthetics, craft studies, visual culture, environmental communication, object biography, and local ecological awareness, endowing waste with cultural, artistic, and social meaning through processes of reuse and re-creation.

Under the framework of circular aesthetics, Wishulada not only emphasizes the extended lifecycle of materials but also creates a sensually engaging visual experience of sustainability, imbuing environmental action with emotional and aesthetic appeal. The Last Bear series is a prime example: it attracts audiences with its colorful, soft, and approachable forms while, through the “waste” hidden within the materials, it reveals the latent severity of environmental crises. In doing so, it creates a tension between visual delight and critical awareness, achieving an artistic translation of ecological significance.

From the perspective of craft and object biography, she inherits and develops the Thai domestic tradition of repairing and reusing waste, treating “handicraft” as a mode of creation with a sense of temporality and emotional warmth. Through collection, classification, assembly, and repair, each of her works is imbued with a unique “biography of things.” Her creative process is not

only about material integration but also about social participation, sparking emotional attachment and reflection toward objects among audiences.

In visual culture and environmental communication, Wishulada skillfully employs strategies of color, form, and anthropomorphism to make her artworks highly communicative, easily recognizable, and emotionally resonant. Works like *The Last Bear*, with their “cute” visual language, serve as nodes of dissemination across social media, public education, and social advocacy. Through soft forms of communication, they break down the communicative barriers often found in environmental discourse and evoke empathy and willingness to act among viewers.

From the standpoint of local ecological aesthetics and cultural landscape theory, works such as *Sustainable Map* and the whale installations demonstrate the power of art to intervene in urban space and public structures. Through the integration of geographic imagery, symbolic species, and locally sourced waste materials, these works both localize environmental issues and re-politicize the cultural landscape. Waste enters not only the city's artistic system but also its semantic system, becoming a visual platform for social dialogue.

In summary, Wishulada Panthanuvong's creative practice not only responds to global environmental and climate challenges but also provides a feasible paradigm of “environmental art-social transformation-place-based action” from a Global South perspective. In an era characterized by increasing waste, ecological alienation, and information fatigue, she employs a composite method of visuality, materiality, and collaboration to propose an environmentally aesthetic system grounded in ethics, cultural memory, and the capacity for action.

Future research could further explore how different cultural groups engage with her work, how they interact with policy-making processes, and how her artistic model may be replicated or adapted in other cities of the Global South. Wishulada's practice demonstrates that truly impactful environmental art is not merely a representation of the “beauty of nature”, but a reconstruction of ecological relationships—discovering potential in waste, evoking ethics through vision, and calling for action through aesthetics.

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