

# Multidisciplinary View on the Link of Environmental Activism with Art Creation - a Case Study of Recycled (Junk) Art

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## ABSTRACT

It is reported that the world of art needs more social enterprise and the world of social enterprise needs more art. Therefore, a case study of recycled art was carried out in order to investigate how the link between the art movement and the environmental movement has been formed. Recycled art is often considered as a form of environmental activism. However, there is a time lag of about half a century between the initiation of recycled art in the early 20th century and that of environmental activism (e.g. 3R's - reduce, reuse and recycle) in the 1970s. Recycled art is not historically linked with environmental activism, but it is currently and practically linked with environmental activism. The reuse/recycling of waste as an art tool was new and novel for the then progressive artists from the artistic viewpoint. Since there is now increasing concern over environmental issues and measures to address such issues across the world, the reuse/recycling of waste as an art tool is environmentally friendly from the 3R's viewpoint. That is, these two viewpoints are quite different, but the outcome of recycled art fulfills both interests – artistic creativity and waste abatement. Our modern society has a lot of complex problems; therefore, cooperation across different sectors is often required. Recycled art seems to be a thought-provoking example for working together across sectoral boundaries.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary art, Dada, New Material, Recycle, Upcycle, Waste Management*

## INTRODUCTION

We humans are naturally drawn to art as a form of expression and communication. On the other hand, it is reported that the world of art needs more social enterprise and the world of social enterprise needs more art, and both these fields have just scratched the surface of how interacting with one other could lead world-changing breakthroughs (World Economic Forum, 2020).

A modern historical example is given to consider the relation between society and art: the years leading to Japan's involvement in World War II saw the rise of militarism, ultra-nationalism and increasing imperialism. During this era of war (1930s to 1940s), Japan used art to promote its war machine (cf. Ikeda, 2018). Inspired by Nazi Germany's policies, Japan began placing a greater emphasis on the male body as the country became increasingly militarized (Ikeda, 2018), and artists used their canvases to craft their idea of male identity in Japanese society (Kaneko, 2015). After World War II, art historians have largely placed the then painters into two categories – (i) supporters of the war who wrongly collaborated with a militaristic government, and (ii) artists who heroically opposed the war (Kaneko, 2015). However, this categorization seems to be too simple. Artists who were closely tied to the

militaristic government also produced artwork that presented an ambivalent interpretation of the war; in the meantime, artists seen as anti-war painted works that can be interpreted as nationalistic and patriotic (Kaneko, 2015).

Intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation have been widely known, and the distinction between them is important in light of contemporary research and theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000): intrinsic motivation can be measured in studies as "free choice" to do something without any external reward; and extrinsic motivation is doing something in order to obtain an independent outcome. The given example (i.e. militaristic promotion using art) embraces various factors such as nationalism, male identity (image of the strong soldier), work done under compulsion, and different artistic interpretation, so it is not easy to make a clear distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, nor to grasp a consensual link between society and art. Although external reward is not always detrimental to intrinsic motivation and creativity, research has investigated extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for creative writers and found that creativity would be higher for writers with intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1985). In posing the question of 'what motivates an artist to use creativity to make art?', it seems proper to preferentially focus on the intrinsic motivation.

The main purpose of this paper is not to discuss a large volume of viewpoints in detail, but to draw a simple picture of the "voluntary" relation of society with modern art. The presented case study is based on the discrete areas of "the environment" and "art creation". Basic information about this relationship is briefly reviewed first.

## **WASTE MANAGEMENT – MEASURES AND ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIORS**

Solid waste is a generic term that describes those materials that are of little or no value to humans; in this context, disposal may be preferred over usage (Pichtel, 2005). Solid wastes have also been termed municipal solid waste, domestic waste, and household waste. The regulatory definition of solid waste is an inclusive one, incorporating hazardous wastes, nonhazardous industrial wastes, and sewage sludges from wastewater treatment plants, along with garbage, rubbish, and trash; however, not all of the above wastes are necessarily managed in the same manner or disposed in the same facility (Pichtel, 2005).

The world generates 2.01 billion tons of municipal solid waste annually, with at least 33% of it, an extremely conservative figure, not managed in an environmentally safe manner (Kaza et al., 2018). Worldwide, waste generated per person per day averages 0.74 kg (Kaza et al., 2018). Looking forward, global waste is expected to grow to 3.40 billion tons by 2050, more than double the population growth over the same period (Kaza et al., 2018).

Waste in times immemorial had less negative effects on the environment due to the lower population (Wilson, 1977) – until recently, waste was given a low priority in the conference rooms of municipal, state, and federal offices responsible for public health and safety. Waste management has since emerged as an urgent, immediate concern for industrial societies, a result of the generation of massive waste quantities as a consequence of economic growth and lifestyle choices. Concomitant concerns have arisen regarding the inherent hazards of many such materials, as well as the cost of their overall management and disposal (Pichtel, 2005). Throughout the 1970s, many different laws were enacted – both at the federal and state level – to promote conservation efforts and raise awareness of them among the general public. Thus, the concept of the 3R's (i.e. reduce, reuse and recycle) was born (Gordon, 2015). It is reported that the 3R's have definitely influenced society to be more conscientious in supporting our planet's health (Gordon, 2015).

Environmental measures have been influenced by ulterior motives and intentions, and these measures have often been adopted according to people's interests (Yamashita & Suzuki, 2014); pro-environmental behavior (PEB), also called environment-friendly behavior or ecological behavior, is

defined as behavior that deliberately seeks to minimize the negative impact of an individual's actions on the environment (Kurusu, 2015). Although many studies find positive associations of environmental attitudes with or influence on pro-environmental behaviors, some studies show non-significant, weak, or inconsistent relationships (review in Miller et al, 2022). Doubt remains as to whether 3R activities and/or pro-environmental behavior are related to artistic motivation; accordingly, there is doubt as to how such activities and/or behavior influence artistic creativity.

## HISTORY OF WASTE IN ART

Recycled Art, also referred to as Junk Art, can be defined as an art form that uses old or used items or day-to-day trash to create something that is brand new, attractive, and useful in most cases (Annette, 2008). However, the word "junk" has some terminological limitation; i.e. something that is being recycled is not necessarily junk. In this sense, recycled art is about repurposing and reusing materials, so there is no limit to what kinds of materials can be used. It seems understandable to start with the "Ready-made" movement that emerged in the early 20th century in terms of pursuing the history of waste in art.

### Ready-made movement

The French artist Marcel Duchamp was the first to use the "Ready-made" concept. "Fountain", created in 1917, is made from an upside-down porcelain urinal (Figure 1.a), and was recognized as the most controversial piece of art of the 20th century (Schwarz, 2000). Duchamp was part of an art movement called "Dada (Dadaism)" that emerged in reaction to the horrors of World War I (Schwarz, 2000; Trachtman, 2017). Dada was art that confronted the viewer's expectations and challenged ideas about art itself (Trachtman, 2017). Duchamp argued, "an ordinary object could be elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist". Some time later, Pablo Picasso also used manufactured objects in his work, such as a bicycle seat and handlebars, to create the sculpture Bull's Head (Figure 1.b).



(a)



(b)

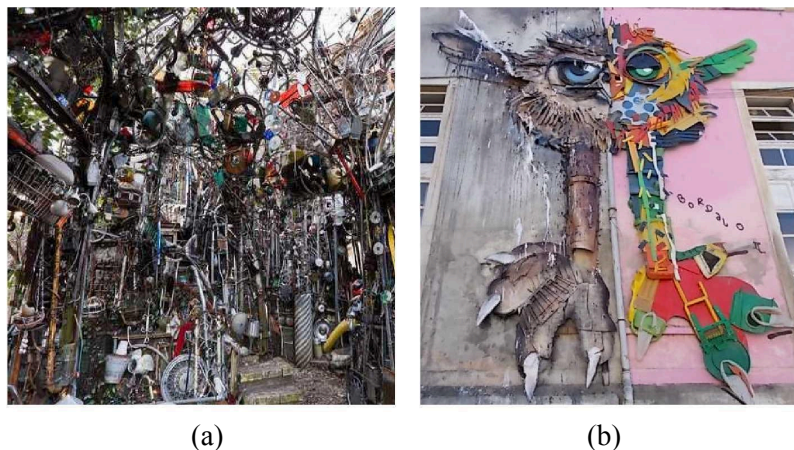
**Figure 1. Ready-made movement in the early 20th century: (a) Marcel Duchamp's sculpture "Fountain", created in 1917; and (b) Pablo Picasso's sculpture "Bull's Head", created in 1942.**  
(Source: courtesy of (a) Alfred Stieglitz/Associated Press and (b) Musée Picasso, via Wikimedia Commons)

## The second half of the 20th century

Based on published data (Working Scholar, 2023; Art in Context, 2022), this period may be summarized as follows. The use of waste in art reflects the evolution of society and art. Free from the obligation to represent noble subjects (religion, mythology, portraits, landscapes), artists began to draw their inspiration from more trivial sources such as waste and discarded objects. During the second half of the 20th century, artists were increasingly using those new materials in their works, founding the artistic movement "Recycled Art (or Junk art)". Daniel Spoerri permanently captured a volatile moment and demonstrated that art can be made from dirty dishes, used napkins, broken wine bottles and even cigarette butts. Another artist that was inspired by waste is the French artist César Baldaccini. In his work, he compressed discarded objects such as newspapers, fabric, cans or even cars. These sculptures represent the huge quantity of waste inevitably generated in the society of mass consumption.

## Contemporary artists

A lot of contemporary artists are now using waste as a new raw material (Working Scholar, 2023; Art in Context, 2022). For example, Vince Hannemann was inspired by trash. Since 1989, he has been building a Cathedral of Junk in his garden located in south central Austin, Texas (cf. Figure 2a). He started by collecting discarded objects and trash to build his massive structure step by step, and today people bring him waste directly instead of throwing it away (Collins, 2023). The Cathedral of Junk is 10 meters high and is as impressive outside as it is inside (Collins, 2023). Artur Bordalo, also known as Bordalo II, was born in 1987 in Lisbon, and he is famous for using street garbage to create stunning animal sculptures (Street Art Bio, 2020). Since 2012 he has created about two hundred animal sculptures using more than 60 tons of reused materials (Street Art Bio, 2020). His installations can be found all around the world.



**Figure 2. Contemporary art using waste: (a) Vince Hannemann's "Cathedral of Junk" in Austin (TX), under construction since 1989; and (b) Bordalo II's "Young Owl" at College of Arts - Coimbra University, created in 2022.**

*(Source: Courtesy of (a) Adlfo Isassi and (b) author's personal collection)*

As stated above, the idea of reusing old materials to make art is not new. It may be concluded that the early 20th century was pivotal in the development of recycled art. Artists who make recycled art take unusual materials (disposed goods) and make them into something new; to put it differently, it can be considered that since the early 20th century they have attempted to evaluate/reconsider ordinary trash from the artistic viewpoint. In this sense, there is doubt about the designation "Recycled Art" because

recycling and upcycling are different and espouse an entirely different way of looking at and dealing with trash.

Recycling is the process of recovering material from waste and turning it into new products; on the other hand, upcycling (cf. also known as creative reuse) refers to the process that transforms or repurposes an unwanted object(s) to a product having equal or higher value than the current value of its component(s) (Sung et al., 2014). Considering the above-mentioned art history, the name "Upcycled Art" seems to be more suitable than the name "Recycled Art" in order to represent its artistic concept.

## CONSIDERATION

It is already known that many artists are using discarded objects and waste in their pieces of art, and recycled art is often considered as a form of environmental activism. There is no objection to these standpoints. However, there is a time lag of about half a century between the initiation of recycled art in the early 20th century and that of environmental activism (3R's) in the 1970s. In other words, recycled art is not linked with environmental activism from the historical viewpoint, but it is currently linked with environmental activism from the practical viewpoint. It is logical to consider that the artistic motivation (i.e. recycled art) overlapped with the social tendency (i.e. environmental activism) by chance.

### Material and creativity

As stated in section 3.3, many contemporary artists recognize waste as a new raw material, and this concept was introduced to art making in the early 20th century: M. Duchamp (1961) claimed to have chosen everyday objects based on a reaction of visual indifference. The following consideration is given to the artistic recognition of waste as a raw material.

Most artists rely on good work habits to solve technical, aesthetic or intellectual problems. These include maintaining a regimen of drawing or painting for a certain amount of time every day as well as pursuing certain ideas to their completion in the hope that they might lead to other, new and interesting concepts. If an artist loses a sense of what makes art exciting (creativity), this loss gives rise to a serious problem. Therefore, it seems to be worthwhile to contemplate the relation between creativity and materials. This contemplation will help to interpret the reason why non-art materials (unusual goods, waste, etc.) were incorporated into 20th-century art, and it will help to answer the following simple question – how do innovative artists come up with their most brilliant ideas?

The four-stage model (Wallas, 2014) is one of the classical theories of the creative process, and this model developed in the 1920s. The creative process consists of four stages: (1) *preparation* - the creative process begins with preparation; (2) *incubation* - as ideas slowly simmer, the work concept deepens and new connections are formed. During this period of germination, the artist takes their focus off the problem and allows the mind to rest; (3) *illumination* - after a period of incubation, insights arise from the deeper layers of the mind and break through to conscious awareness, often in a dramatic way; and (4) *verification* - the vision is committed to paint or clay, so artists use critical thinking and aesthetic judgment skills to hone and refine the work. Although the creative process tends to look more like a zigzag or spiral than a straight line, it can offer a road map for understanding human creativity.

On the basis of this model, the creative process begins with the preparation stage, and this stage includes gathering information and materials, identifying sources of inspiration and acquiring knowledge about the project; that is, "materials" are considered as one of the essential factors in the initial stage of the creative process. The important rank of material choice in the creative process seems to support the

fact that the introduction of new materials and theretofore non-art materials helped to drive change in art during the 20th century.

### **Art and awareness**

Recycled art is penetrating society as a form of environmental activism. Consequently, there is doubt as to whether the concept of this type of art has been changing. Bordalo II presented in section 3.2 argues (Street Art Bio, 2020): "One person's rubbish is another's person's treasure. The idea is to depict nature itself, in this case, animals, out of materials that are responsible for its destruction". His creations show depictions of bears, foxes, various species of birds, elephants, felines as well as numerous different sea animals (cf. figure 2). He has been creating animal sculptures from scrap, old tires, car carcasses, plastic stuff, aluminum cans, etc., and these sculptures bring awareness to the excessive amount of waste and the necessity of 3R activities (reduce, reuse and recycle).

Many animal sculptures by his own choice may not simply aim to enlighten people about the importance of environmental activism. The original concept of the 3R's was not created to implement waste management but originated in a proposal made in 1954 for laboratory animal experiments (i.e. minimization of experimental animals) – replacement alternatives, reduction alternatives and refinement alternatives (Russell & Burch, 1959). Around 70 million animals per year are currently used in laboratory experiments worldwide (Mikulic, 2023), so there is a possibility that over 200 animal sculptures made from waste may attempt to raise awareness of the problems relative not only to nature conservation and environment protection but also to the great number of experimental animals.

### **CONCLUSION**

It should be mentioned that there is a time lag of about 50 years between the initiation of recycled art in the early 20th century and that of environmental activism (3R's) in the 1970s. Since the municipal waste stream was of little or no concern to the local hauling firms, city councils and citizens a few decades ago (Pichtel, 2005), the then artists (cf. section 3.1) must have started to use unusual goods/waste as art materials without environmental awareness. The reuse/recycling of waste as an art tool was new and novel for them from the artistic viewpoint. Since there is now increasing concern over environmental issues and measures to address such issues across the world, the reuse/recycling of waste as an art tool is environmentally friendly from the 3R's viewpoint. That is, these two viewpoints are quite different, but the outcome of recycled art fulfills both interests — artistic creativity and waste abatement.

In conclusion, our modern society has a lot of problems such as environmental issues, infectious disease epidemicity, civil wars, wealth and population explosion. Therefore, cooperation across different sectors is often required. Recycled art seems to be a thought-provoking example for working together across sectoral boundaries in order to solve social problems that are becoming increasingly serious and complex.

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