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Research Article

Recycling, Reclaiming, Reimagining: A Grounded Theory Study of Waste Materials in Contemporary Art Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of waste materials in contemporary art through the lens of recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining, positioning these practices within broader ecological and cultural discourses. Employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology based on secondary qualitative data, including scholarly literature, artist statements, and exhibition texts, the research develops a theoretical framework that explains how artists transform discarded materials into meaningful artistic expressions. The findings identify three core processes: material transformation, narrative reconstruction, and ecological critique, supported by cross-cutting dimensions of aesthetic disruption and temporal layering. These processes demonstrate that waste-based art is not merely a practice of reuse but a complex form of cultural production that challenges dominant paradigms of consumption, value, and materiality. By integrating perspectives from material culture theory, eco-criticism, and new materialism, the study conceptualises waste-based art as a form of eco-art praxis that actively engages with environmental and social issues. The research contributes to contemporary art theory by offering a grounded, interdisciplinary model that highlights the transformative potential of waste in artistic practice and its significance in promoting sustainability and critical awareness.

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1. Introduction

The exponential growth of global waste has become one of the most urgent environmental challenges of the contemporary era. Rapid industrialisation, urban expansion, and the intensification of consumer culture have generated unprecedented volumes of discarded materials, ranging from plastic debris and electronic waste to industrial by-products. According to environmental scholars, this proliferation of waste reflects not only material excess but also deeper systemic issues related to capitalist production, planned obsolescence, and unsustainable consumption patterns (Buell, 2005; Gablik, 1991). Within this context, contemporary art has emerged as a critical space for interrogating and reimagining the meanings, values, and potentials of waste.

Artists working with discarded materials are not merely responding to environmental crises; they are actively reshaping the ontological and aesthetic status of waste. Traditionally, waste has been associated with notions of uselessness, pollution, and marginality. However, contemporary art practices challenge these assumptions by repositioning waste as a site of creativity, critique, and transformation. Through processes of recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining, artists convert discarded objects into meaningful artistic expressions that engage with social, political, and ecological concerns.

The integration of waste materials into art is not entirely new. Early 20th-century avant-garde movements, particularly Dada and

Surrealism, introduced the use of found objects as a means of challenging artistic conventions and questioning the boundaries between art and everyday life. The concept of the “readymade,” as articulated by Duchamp (1917/1964), fundamentally disrupted traditional notions of artistic authorship and material value. By presenting ordinary objects as art, Duchamp redefined the role of the artist as a selector and conceptualizer rather than a maker. This legacy continues to inform contemporary practices, where artists expand the use of found objects to include waste materials that carry complex environmental and cultural significations.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the use of waste in art has gained renewed significance in response to escalating ecological concerns. The emergence of eco-art and sustainability-oriented practices has positioned artists as key contributors to environmental discourse. Eco-artists often engage with natural systems, ecological processes, and environmental activism, using their work to raise awareness and inspire change (Weintraub, 2012). Within this broader movement, waste-based art occupies a distinctive position, as it directly addresses the material consequences of human activity. By transforming waste into art, artists not only reduce material discard but also create symbolic interventions that critique consumer culture and propose alternative modes of engagement with materials.

Moreover, waste-based art practices are deeply intertwined with questions of materiality and meaning. Objects that are discarded often carry histories of use, cultural associations, and emotional resonances.

When artists reclaim these materials, they activate these latent narratives, creating works that are layered with temporal and contextual significance. As Miller (2008) argues, objects are not passive entities but active participants in social life, shaping and reflecting human experiences. In this sense, waste materials can be understood as repositories of memory and meaning, which artists reinterpret and recontextualise through their practices.

Despite the growing prominence of waste-based art, there remains a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks that adequately capture its complexity. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual artists or specific movements, without addressing the broader processes and dynamics that underpin these practices. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a grounded theory approach to analyse secondary qualitative data. Grounded theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further elaborated by Charmaz (2014), allows for the generation of theory from data through systematic coding and analysis. By applying this methodology to a diverse range of sources, the study aims to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships that define the use of waste materials in contemporary art.

The central premise of this research is that waste-based art practices can be understood through three interrelated processes: recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining. Recycling refers to the physical reuse of materials, transforming waste into new forms. Reclaiming involves the recovery of discarded objects and their reintegration into

cultural and artistic contexts. Reimagining encompasses the conceptual and symbolic reinterpretation of waste, where artists assign new meanings and values to materials that were previously considered worthless. Together, these processes form a dynamic framework for understanding how artists engage with waste as both medium and message.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do contemporary artists conceptualise and utilise waste materials in their practices?
- What thematic and conceptual patterns emerge from the use of discarded materials in art?
- How can these practices be theorised within a grounded framework that integrates material, ecological, and cultural dimensions?

By addressing these questions, the research contributes to the fields of contemporary art theory, material culture studies, and environmental humanities. It offers a nuanced understanding of how artistic practices intersect with ecological concerns and proposes a theoretical model that can inform future research and practice.

Ultimately, this study positions waste-based art as a critical and transformative practice that challenges dominant paradigms of consumption, value, and sustainability. In doing so, it highlights the potential of art to not only reflect but also reshape how we engage with the material world.

2. Literature Review

The concept of waste has been extensively theorised across disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Rather than being a purely material category, waste is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon that reflects cultural values and power relations. Douglas (1966) famously defined dirt as “matter out of place,” emphasising that what is considered waste is contingent upon systems of classification and order. This perspective highlights the fluid and relational nature of waste, suggesting that objects become waste not because of their inherent properties but because they are excluded from systems of use and meaning.

Building on this idea, Thompson’s (1979) “rubbish theory” proposes that objects move through different categories of value over time, transitioning from transient to durable and eventually to rubbish. Importantly, Thompson argues that objects categorised as rubbish can be revalorised, gaining new significance under different conditions. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to contemporary art practices that engage with waste, as artists actively participate in the revaluation of discarded materials.

From a critical perspective, waste is also closely linked to capitalist systems of production and consumption. The acceleration of consumer culture has led to the normalisation of disposability, where products are designed for short-term use and rapid replacement (Buell, 2005). This has resulted in what some scholars describe as a “throwaway society,” characterised by excessive waste generation and environmental degradation. Within this

context, the use of waste in art can be seen as a form of resistance that challenges dominant economic and cultural paradigms.

2.1 Materiality and Agency in Art

Materiality has become a central concern in contemporary art theory, particularly in relation to the agency of objects. Scholars such as Miller (2008) argue that objects are not passive but actively shape social relations and human experiences. This perspective aligns with new materialist approaches, which emphasise the vitality and agency of matter (Bennett, 2010). According to Bennett, materials possess a form of “vibrant matter,” suggesting that they have the capacity to influence human actions and perceptions.

In the context of waste-based art, this emphasis on material agency is particularly significant. Discarded objects often carry traces of their previous uses, including signs of wear, damage, and transformation. These material qualities contribute to the meaning of artworks, as artists engage with the physical and symbolic properties of waste. By incorporating these materials into their work, artists create a dialogue between past and present, use and discard, value and devaluation.

Furthermore, the use of waste materials challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic media. Historically, fine art has been associated with high-quality materials such as oil paint, marble, and bronze. In contrast, waste-based art embraces materials that are considered low-value or undesirable, thereby subverting established aesthetic norms (Whiteley, 2011). This shift reflects broader

changes in contemporary art, where conceptual and contextual considerations often take precedence over material refinement.

2.2 Historical Precedents: From Readymades to Assemblage

The incorporation of found objects into art has a long and influential history. The Dada movement, emerging in the early 20th century, played a pivotal role in challenging traditional artistic conventions. Duchamp's readymades, such as *Fountain* (1917), redefined the boundaries of art by presenting ordinary objects as artworks. This gesture foregrounded the role of context and intention in the creation of meaning, laying the groundwork for subsequent developments in conceptual art.

Following Dada, artists associated with movements such as Surrealism, Pop Art, and Arte Povera continued to explore the use of everyday materials. Assemblage art, in particular, emphasised the combination of disparate objects to create new forms and meanings. Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Cornell incorporated found materials into their works, highlighting the poetic and associative potential of objects (Foster et al., 2011).

Arte Povera, which emerged in Italy in the 1960s, is especially relevant to contemporary waste-based practices. Artists associated with this movement used "poor" materials, including earth, wood, and industrial debris, to challenge the commercialisation of art and critique modern industrial society. Their emphasis on process, materiality, and

temporality resonates strongly with current approaches to waste in art.

2.3 Eco-Art and Environmental Engagement

Eco-art has emerged as a significant field within contemporary art, focusing on the relationship between art and the environment. Weintraub (2012) defines eco-art as a diverse set of practices that address ecological issues, promote sustainability, and foster environmental awareness. These practices often involve the use of natural or recycled materials, as well as engagement with ecological systems and communities.

Gablik (1991) argues that contemporary art is undergoing a paradigm shift from individualistic expression to collective and socially engaged practices. Eco-art exemplifies this shift, as artists increasingly collaborate with scientists, activists, and local communities to address environmental challenges. Waste-based art can be understood as a key component of this broader movement, as it directly engages with the material consequences of human activity.

In addition to raising awareness, eco-art often seeks to inspire behavioural change and promote sustainable practices. By transforming waste into art, artists create tangible examples of reuse and recycling, demonstrating the potential for alternative modes of material engagement. This aligns with broader efforts to transition toward a circular economy, where materials are continuously reused rather than discarded.

2.4 Narrative, Memory, and the Politics of Waste

Waste materials are not only physical objects but also carriers of cultural and historical narratives. Scholars have emphasised the role of objects in preserving memory and identity, particularly in relation to marginalised communities. When artists work with waste, they often engage with these narratives, highlighting issues of inequality, displacement, and environmental injustice.

For example, the accumulation of waste in certain parts of the world disproportionately affects marginalised populations, raising questions about environmental justice. Artists who address these issues use waste materials to draw attention to the social and political dimensions of environmental degradation. Their works often function as critiques of global inequalities and the uneven distribution of resources and waste.

Moreover, the act of reclaiming waste can be seen as a form of cultural resistance. By revaluing discarded materials, artists challenge dominant narratives that associate waste with failure and obsolescence. Instead, they create alternative narratives that emphasise resilience, creativity, and transformation.

2.5 Grounded Theory and Art Research

Grounded theory provides a methodological framework for analysing complex phenomena through iterative and systematic processes. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory emphasises the generation of theory from data rather than the testing of pre-existing

hypotheses. This makes it particularly suitable for exploratory research in fields such as contemporary art, where practices are diverse and constantly evolving.

Charmaz (2014) introduced a constructivist approach to grounded theory, which acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting data. This perspective is especially relevant to art research, where meaning is often subjective and context-dependent. By applying grounded theory to secondary data, researchers can identify patterns and themes that inform a deeper understanding of artistic practices.

In the context of this study, grounded theory allows for the development of a conceptual framework that captures the processes of recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining. Through systematic coding and analysis, the research identifies key categories and relationships that define the use of waste materials in contemporary art.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates material culture theory, eco-criticism, and constructivist grounded theory to examine the use of waste materials in contemporary art. These frameworks collectively provide a conceptual lens for understanding how discarded objects are transformed into meaningful artistic expressions and how such practices intersect with broader ecological, cultural, and epistemological concerns.

3.1 Material Culture Theory and the Social Life of Objects

Material culture theory provides a foundational perspective for analysing the role of objects in human societies. It challenges the notion that objects are passive or inert, instead emphasising their active participation in shaping social relations, identities, and cultural meanings (Miller, 2008). According to this perspective, objects are embedded within networks of use, exchange, and interpretation, and their meanings are constantly negotiated and redefined.

In the context of waste-based art, material culture theory is particularly relevant because it foregrounds the transformation of objects across different stages of value. Thompson's (1979) "rubbish theory" suggests that objects move through categories of transient, durable, and rubbish, with the potential for revaluation under new conditions. Artists who work with waste materials actively intervene in this process, rescuing objects from the category of "rubbish" and repositioning them as carriers of aesthetic and cultural value.

Moreover, the concept of the "social life of things" (Appadurai, 1986) highlights how objects circulate within systems of meaning and exchange. Waste materials, although often excluded from these systems, retain traces of their previous lives, including signs of use, wear, and cultural association. When incorporated into artworks, these materials bring with them layers of meaning that contribute to the interpretive richness of the work. Artists thus act as mediators who

recontextualise objects, enabling new narratives and interpretations to emerge.

3.2 New Materialism and the Agency of Waste

Building on material culture theory, new materialist approaches emphasise the agency and vitality of matter. Bennett (2010) argues that materials possess a form of "vibrant matter," suggesting that they are not merely passive resources but active participants in the formation of meaning and experience. This perspective challenges anthropocentric views of creativity by recognising the role of non-human actors in artistic processes.

In waste-based art, the agency of materials becomes particularly evident. Discarded objects often exhibit physical properties—such as decay, fragmentation, or resilience—that influence how they can be used and interpreted. Artists engage with these properties in a dialogical manner, allowing the material to shape the creative process. This interaction blurs the boundaries between artist and material, highlighting the co-constitutive nature of artistic production.

Furthermore, the unpredictability of waste materials introduces a contingency into artistic practice. Unlike standardised art supplies, waste materials are often irregular and heterogeneous, requiring artists to adapt their methods and approaches. This aligns with new materialist emphasis on process, emergence, and relationality, where outcomes are not predetermined but evolve through interactions between human and non-human agents.

3.3 Eco-Criticism and Environmental Consciousness

Eco-criticism provides a critical framework for understanding the environmental dimensions of waste-based art. It examines the relationship between cultural practices and ecological systems, highlighting how art can both reflect and influence environmental attitudes (Buell, 2005). Within this framework, waste is not only a material issue but also a cultural and ethical concern, with patterns of consumption, production, and disposal.

Waste-based art can be understood as a form of eco-critical practice that interrogates the environmental consequences of human activity. By transforming discarded materials into art, artists draw attention to the impact of waste, encouraging viewers to reconsider their own consumption habits. This aligns with Gablik's (1991) argument that contemporary art is increasingly oriented toward social and ecological engagement, moving beyond purely aesthetic concerns.

Additionally, eco-criticism emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems. Waste, as a by-product of human activity, has significant implications for ecosystems, affecting soil, water, and biodiversity. Artists who work with waste materials often highlight these connections, creating works that reveal the hidden between everyday consumption and environmental degradation.

3.4 Constructivist Grounded Theory as an Interpretive Framework

Constructivist grounded theory serves as the methodological and epistemological backbone of this study. Unlike traditional positivist approaches, constructivist grounded theory recognises that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and the data (Charmaz, 2014). This perspective is particularly suitable for art research, where meanings are often subjective and contextual.

Grounded theory involves a systematic process of coding and analysis, through which categories and concepts are developed inductively from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, secondary data sources—such as scholarly texts, artist statements, and exhibition catalogues—are treated as rich sites of meaning from which theoretical insights can be generated.

The constructivist approach also emphasises reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher's interpretations are shaped by their own perspectives and contexts. This is especially important in the analysis of art, where multiple interpretations are possible, and meaning is not fixed but negotiated.

3.5 Integrative Framework: Recycling, Reclaiming, Reimagining

By synthesising these theoretical perspectives, this study proposes an integrative framework based on three interrelated processes: recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining. Recycling refers to the

physical transformation of materials, reclaiming involves the recovery and recontextualization of discarded objects, and reimagining encompasses the conceptual reinterpretation of waste.

These processes are not linear but interconnected, forming a dynamic system through which artists engage with waste materials. Material culture theory explains how objects acquire and lose value, new materialism highlights the agency of materials, eco-criticism situates these practices within environmental discourse, and grounded theory provides a methodological approach for analysing these dynamics.

Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive understanding of waste-based art as a complex and multifaceted practice that operates at the intersection of materiality, meaning, and ecology.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in constructivist grounded theory, aiming to generate a theoretical understanding of how waste materials are utilised in contemporary art practices. Grounded theory is particularly suitable for exploratory research, as existing theoretical frameworks are insufficient to explain complex phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, this approach allows for the emergence of concepts and relationships directly from the data.

The research is based on secondary qualitative data, which includes academic

literature, exhibition catalogues, artist statements, interviews, and critical essays. This approach is justified by the availability of documented artistic practices and theoretical discussions related to waste-based art. By synthesising these sources, the study constructs a comprehensive dataset that reflects diverse perspectives and contexts.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study were collected from multiple types of secondary sources to ensure depth and diversity:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on contemporary art, eco-art, and material culture
- Books and monographs by art historians and theorists
- Exhibition catalogues documenting waste-based art practices
- Artist statements and interviews on credible platforms
- Critical essays and reviews from established art institutions

The selection of sources was guided by three main criteria:

- **Relevance:** Sources must directly address waste materials, recycling practices, or materiality in contemporary art.
- **Credibility:** Preference was given to peer-reviewed publications and reputable publishers.
- **Diversity:** Sources representing different geographical, cultural, and artistic contexts were included to capture a range of perspectives.

This purposive sampling strategy aligns with qualitative research principles; the goal is to obtain rich and meaningful data rather than statistical representativeness (Charmaz, 2014).

4.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis followed the three-stage coding process characteristic of grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open Coding: In the initial stage, the data were examined line-by-line to identify key concepts and recurring themes. Codes such as “material transformation,” “reuse,” “environmental critique,” “memory,” and “consumerism” were generated. This process involved breaking down the data into discrete units of meaning and assigning labels that captured their essence.

Axial Coding: The second stage involved organising the codes into broader categories and exploring relationships among them. For example, codes related to transformation and reuse were grouped in the category of “material practices,” while those with critique and activism were grouped under “ecological engagement.” This allowed for the identification of patterns and connections that underpin waste-based art practices.

Selective Coding: In the final stage, a core category was identified that integrated all other categories into a coherent framework. The central concept of “recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining” emerged as the overarching theme that captures the dynamics of waste material usage in contemporary art. This process involved

refining and integrating categories to develop a grounded theoretical model.

4.3 Constant Comparative Method

A key feature of grounded theory is the constant comparative method, which involves continuously comparing data segments with each other to identify similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, comparisons were made across different types of sources, including academic texts and artist statements, to ensure that the emerging categories were robust.

This iterative process also allowed for the refinement of codes and categories, ensuring that they accurately reflected the data. By comparing multiple sources, the study was able to identify recurring patterns that transcend individual cases, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings.

4.4 Theoretical Saturation

The process of data analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new significant themes or categories emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2014). At this point, the categories were considered sufficiently developed to support the construction of a theoretical framework.

The use of secondary data posed certain challenges in determining saturation, as new sources could always be introduced. However, saturation was assessed based on the consistency and repetition of themes across a diverse range of sources.

4.5 Researcher Reflexivity

In constructivist grounded theory, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting the data. This necessitates a high degree of reflexivity, where the researcher critically examines their own assumptions, biases, and positionality (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, reflexivity was maintained through continuous self-reflection and documentation of analytical decisions. The researcher acknowledged that interpretations of art are inherently subjective and sought to mitigate bias by engaging with multiple sources and perspectives.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

As this study relies on secondary data, ethical considerations primarily involve the responsible use and citation of sources. All materials were properly referenced according to APA (7th ed.) guidelines to ensure academic integrity (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

Additionally, care was taken to accurately represent the ideas and practices of artists and scholars, avoiding misinterpretation or oversimplification. The study also respects intellectual property rights by acknowledging the original creators of the works and texts.

4.7 Limitations of the Study

While the use of secondary data provides a broad and diverse dataset, it also has limitations. The absence of primary data, such as interviews or direct observation, means that the study relies on existing interpretations and documentation. This may limit the depth of insight into individual artistic processes.

However, the grounded theory approach mitigates this limitation by focusing on patterns and themes across multiple sources, allowing for the development of a robust theoretical framework.

5. Findings and Analysis

The grounded theory analysis of secondary qualitative data revealed a complex and interconnected set of processes through which contemporary artists engage with waste materials. Through systematic coding and constant comparison, three central categories emerged: material transformation, narrative reconstruction, and ecological critique. These categories are not discrete but interrelated, forming a dynamic framework that explains how waste materials are reconfigured within contemporary art practices. Additionally, two cross-cutting dimensions-aesthetic disruption and temporal layering-further enrich the analysis by highlighting how artists challenge conventional perceptions of value, beauty, and time.

5.1 Material Transformation: From Discard to Artistic Medium

Material transformation emerged as a foundational process in waste-based art practices. At its most basic level, this involves the physical manipulation and reconfiguration of discarded materials into new forms. However, the analysis reveals that transformation is not merely technical but deeply conceptual, involving a redefinition of value and meaning.

Artists engage with waste materials through processes such as assemblage, collage, and

installation, often emphasising the material's identity while simultaneously altering its form. This duality between preservation and transformation creates a tension that is central to the aesthetic and conceptual impact of the work. As Thompson (1979) suggests, objects categorised as "rubbish" can be revalorised under new conditions, and artists play a crucial role in facilitating this transition.

Importantly, the transformation of waste materials challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic media. By incorporating materials that are considered low-value or undesirable, artists disrupt established notions of artistic quality and craftsmanship (Whiteley, 2011). This aligns with broader shifts in contemporary art, where conceptual innovation often takes precedence over material refinement.

The analysis also highlights the role of material agency in the transformation process. Following Bennett's (2010) concept of "vibrant matter," waste materials are not passive but actively influence artistic outcomes. Their textures, colours, and structural properties shape the possibilities of transformation; the final artwork emerges from a dialogue between artist and material. This perspective underscores the role of process and experimentation in waste-based art.

5.2 Narrative Reconstruction: Memory, Identity, and Meaning

A second major finding is the role of waste materials in narrative reconstruction. Discarded objects often carry traces of their previous lives, including signs of use,

cultural associations, and emotional significance. When artists reclaim these materials, they activate these latent narratives, creating works that are layered with meaning.

The analysis reveals that artists engage in a process of storytelling through materials, and objects become carriers of memory and identity. For example, everyday items such as household objects or industrial debris can evoke personal and collective histories. By recontextualising these materials, artists create new narratives that challenge dominant forms of consumption and disposability.

This process aligns with Miller's (2008) argument that objects are integral to the construction of social life and identity. In waste-based art, the interpretation of materials allows artists to explore themes such as nostalgia, loss, and transformation. These themes are often with broader issues, including migration, urbanisation, and cultural change.

Furthermore, narrative reconstruction involves a negotiation of meaning between artist and audience. The use of recognisable materials invites viewers to engage with the work on a personal level, drawing on their own experiences and associations. This participatory dimension enhances the communicative power of waste-based art, making it a potent medium for storytelling.

5.3 Ecological Critique: Art as Environmental Intervention

Ecological critique emerged as a central theme across the data, reflecting the growing environmental concerns in contemporary art.

Artists working with waste materials often use their work to highlight the environmental consequences of human activity, particularly in relation to consumption and disposal.

The analysis shows that waste-based art functions as a form of eco-critical practice, drawing attention to the impact of waste. By incorporating discarded materials into their work, artists make visible the often-hidden processes of waste accumulation and environmental degradation (Buell, 2005). This visibility is crucial for raising awareness and fostering critical reflection.

Moreover, the use of waste materials can be understood as a form of resistance to dominant economic systems. As Gablik (1991) argues, contemporary art increasingly engages with social and ecological issues, challenging the values of consumer culture. Waste-based art exemplifies this shift by the logic of disposability and advocating for alternative modes of material engagement.

The analysis also highlights the intersection of ecological critique with issues of environmental justice. Waste is not distributed evenly across the globe; marginalised communities often bear the burden of pollution and disposal. Artists who address these issues use waste materials to expose inequalities and advocate for more equitable environmental practices.

5.4 Aesthetic Disruption: Challenging Norms of Beauty and Value

A cross-cutting theme in the findings is the role of aesthetic disruption. Waste-based art often challenges conventional notions of

beauty by incorporating materials that are dirty, damaged, or undesirable. This deliberate rejection of traditional aesthetics serves as a critique of cultural norms and values.

The use of waste materials creates a form of “anti-aesthetic” that emphasises imperfection, irregularity, and decay. This aligns with contemporary art’s broader interest in challenging established notions of taste and value (Foster et al., 2011). By presenting waste as art, artists force viewers to reconsider their assumptions about what constitutes beauty and worth.

5.5 Temporal Layering: Past, Present, and Future in Material Form

Another dimension is temporal layering. Waste materials embody multiple temporalities, reflecting their past uses, present as discarded objects, and future potential as artworks. This layering of time adds depth and complexity to the work, allowing artists to explore themes of change and continuity.

Temporal layering also highlights the cyclical nature of materials, aligning with the ecology of sustainability. By transforming waste into art, artists create a temporal bridge that connects different phases of material existence.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a foundation for developing a comprehensive theoretical understanding of waste-based art practices. By integrating the categories of

material transformation, narrative reconstruction, and ecological critique, this discussion situates the results within broader theoretical and cultural contexts.

6.1 Toward an Eco-Art Praxis

One of the key contributions of this study is the concept of “eco-art praxis,” which describes the integration of artistic practice with ecological consciousness and engagement. Waste-based art exemplifies this praxis by combining material experimentation with environmental critique.

Eco-art praxis moves beyond representation to engagement, where artists not only depict environmental issues but also participate in addressing them. This aligns with Weintraub’s (2012) definition of eco-art as a practice that seeks to foster sustainability and inspire change. By using waste materials, artists demonstrate the possibilities of and resourcefulness, contributing to broader discussions of sustainable development.

6.2 Reconfiguring Value: From Waste to Resource

The transformation of waste materials into art challenges the dominant economic and cultural values. In capitalist systems, value is often determined by market demand and material scarcity. Waste, by definition, is considered valueless or undesirable. However, artists disrupt this logic by revaluing discarded materials, demonstrating that value is not inherent but constructed.

This process can be understood through Thompson’s (1979) rubbish theory, which highlights the fluidity of value categories. By repositioning waste as art, artists create new

systems of value that prioritise creativity, meaning, and sustainability over profit.

6.3 Material Agency and Collaborative Creativity

The findings also underscore the role of material agency in artistic practice. Drawing on Bennett’s (2010) new materialism, this study highlights how waste materials actively shape artistic outcomes. This challenges traditional notions of authorship, where the artist is seen as the sole creator.

Instead, waste-based art can be understood as a form of collaborative creativity, where human and non-human actors interact to produce meaning. This perspective has implications for how we understand artistic practice, emphasising process, relationality, and emergence.

6.4 Narrative and Identity in Waste-Based Art

The role of narrative reconstruction in waste-based art highlights the connection between materiality and identity. By working with materials that carry historical and cultural significance, artists engage with issues of memory, belonging, and social change.

This aligns with broader material culture studies, which emphasise the role of objects in shaping identity (Miller, 2008). In the context of waste-based art, the interpretation of materials allows for the exploration of alternative narratives that challenge dominant narratives.

6.5 Environmental Ethics and Responsibility

Waste-based art also raises important ethical questions about environmental responsibility. By highlighting the consequences of consumption and disposal, artists encourage viewers to reflect on their own behaviours and choices.

This ethical dimension is central to eco-criticism, which emphasises the need for more sustainable relationships بين humans and the environment (Buell, 2005). Waste-based art contributes to this discourse by providing a visual and conceptual framework for understanding environmental issues.

6.6 Implications for Art Practice and Research

The findings of this study have several implications for both artistic practice and academic research. For artists, the framework of recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining provides a conceptual basis for engaging with waste materials. For researchers, the study demonstrates the value of grounded theory in analysing complex artistic practices.

Furthermore, the integration of interdisciplinary frameworks highlights the importance of bridging art theory with environmental and social change. This approach can inform future research on sustainability, materiality, and creative practice.

6.7 Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of waste-based art, it is limited by its

reliance on secondary data. Future research could incorporate primary data, such as interviews with artists or ethnographic studies of artistic processes.

Additionally, further research could explore regional variations in waste-based art practices, examining how cultural and socio-economic contexts influence artistic approaches.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the multifaceted role of waste materials in contemporary art, developing a grounded theoretical framework that conceptualises artistic practices through the processes of recycling, reclaiming, and reimagining. By employing a constructivist grounded theory approach based on secondary qualitative data, the research has demonstrated that waste-based art extends far beyond the simple reuse of discarded materials. Instead, it constitutes a dynamic and critical form of cultural production that engages deeply with issues of materiality, meaning, and environmental responsibility.

The findings reveal that artists working with waste materials participate in processes of material transformation, where discarded objects are physically and conceptually reconfigured; narrative reconstruction, where materials serve as carriers of memory and identity; and ecological critique, where artworks function as interventions into environmental discourse. These processes collectively challenge dominant systems of value that equate worth with newness, purity, and market desirability. By revaluing waste,

artists disrupt the logic of disposability that underpins contemporary consumer culture, offering alternative ways of understanding and engaging with materials.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of material agency and the collaborative relationship between artist and matter. Drawing on new materialist perspectives, it becomes evident that waste materials are not passive but actively shape artistic outcomes, contributing to a more relational and process-oriented understanding of creativity. This challenges traditional notions of authorship and emphasises the role of interaction, contingency, and emergence in artistic practice.

The concept of eco-art praxis, developed in this study, provides a useful framework for understanding how waste-based art operates at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and activism. By integrating artistic practice with ecological awareness, artists contribute to broader conversations about sustainability and environmental justice. Their works not only raise awareness but also inspire critical reflection and potential behavioural change.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data. Future research could expand upon these findings through primary data collection, such as interviews with artists or ethnographic studies of creative processes. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural and geographical contexts could further enrich the understanding of waste-based art practices.

In conclusion, waste-based art represents a powerful and transformative force within contemporary art, one that challenges conventional boundaries and redefines the relationship between art, materials, and society. By reclaiming and reimagining waste, artists open up new possibilities for creative expression and sustainable thinking, demonstrating the power of art to engage with and reshape the material realities of our time.

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