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Creative Industries or Wasteful Ones?

Submitted by
admin on Sat,
06/12/2008 -
18:30.

**By Richard
Maxwell and
Toby Miller**

The much-acclaimed creative industries are supposedly clean and green post-manufacturing utopias. The by-products are electronic code rather than sickening smoke. That sounds nice, doesn't it? But what about electronic waste (e-waste) from televisions, computers, cell

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 - Constructing The Real (E)state of Chinese Contemporary Art: Reflections on 798, in 2004

phones and so on
 – the fastest-growing element in First-World municipal dumps? Aren't they part of the 'creative industries?'

E-waste recycling poses severe health and safety risks, including bone disease, brain-damage, headaches, vertigo, nausea, birth-defects, diseases of the stomach, lungs, vital organs, and disrupted biological development in children because of exposure to heavy metals (lead, cadmium, mercury, among others), dioxin emitted by burning wires insulated with polyvinylchloride, flame retardants in circuit boards and plastic casings containing polychlorinated biphenyls or newer brominated compounds, and poisonous fumes emitted while melting electronic parts for precious

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metals such as copper and gold (Leung et al., 2008). And China is a major player in the entire life-cycle of electronic technologies. A typical trajectory is for computers made in China to be sold, used, and discarded in Australia; disassembled in the Philippines; sent back to China for partial reassembly; then returned to Australia for the extraction of valuable metals (Tong and Wang, 2004).

Because imports of e-waste have been illegal in China since 1996, there are no official figures on the amount being smuggled into the country's 'informal' e-waste recycling economy. Estimates range from one to fifteen million tons annually, and volume is growing steadily (Human Rights Advocate

Mapping Creative Industries in Beijing

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- Introduction to Section 2: Information Geographies vs. Creative Clusters
- Introduction to Section 3: Migrant Networks and Service Labour
- Introduction to Section 4: Centrality of Real-Estate Speculation for Creative Economies
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2008: 5; Manhart 2007:18). The number of people involved in e-waste recycling is also hard to pin down. There may be over 700,000 people working throughout China in the collection and disassembly of e-waste, with an estimated 98 per cent working in the informal sector. The nation's two major recycling centers are Lùqiáo Qū (路桥区) in Zhejiang Province and Gùiyǔ (贵屿) in Guangdong Province, our principal focus here. Gùiyǔ (population 155,000 in 2003), was once a farming town. That changed in the 1990s with the arrival of e-waste from the 'creative industries' of the West. Today, more than 80 per cent of local families work in e-waste recycling alongside rural migrant workers (100,000 in 2003). The latter undertake some of

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- the most hazardous work, and lack the security offered by family businesses (Manhart 2007: 19-20, 22).
- E-waste has transformed Gùiyǔ in three ways: 80 per cent of local families have left farming for recycling jobs; soil and water contaminants from recycling saturate the local human food chain; and the pollution of land and water with persistent organic pollutants has prohibited the safe return of affected agricultural lands to future generations (Manhart 2007: 20; Wong et al., 2007). Dioxin has been found at levels 56 times higher than World Health Organization standards (Human Rights Advocate 2008: 5). Twenty per cent of recycling workers are estimated to use no basic

protection against exposure to toxic metals – and exposure to 50 times the 'safe' level of lead has been reported – while many others carry toxic dust residue on their clothing and into their homes. Contaminants from incineration and landfill of residual waste saturate local dust, soil, river sediment, surface and ground water, and air. Much of this has spread to surrounding villages, where it will persist in the environment (Leung et al. 2008; Manhart 2007: 16, 19).

So next time that creationists lecture you on the supposed virtues of their brave new post-industrial world, ask them to pause a moment and consider facts like the ones presented above. Nothing like a good bit of competition if you want to be an

ideologist, we imagine. While you're at it, you might also turn to advocates for the precariat and ask them where the population of Gùiyǔ fits into their vision of theory and action. Nothing like a bit of cross-class collaboration if you want to be an ideologist, we imagine.

Bios

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