

Social Imagination

Xin Cheng's Seeing Like A Forest

by Lance Pearce

Published on 20.11.2020



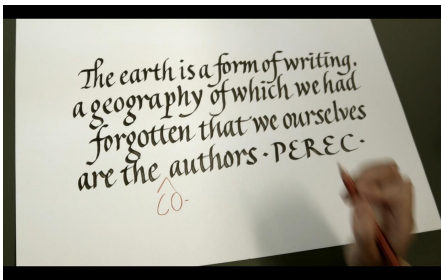
Seeing Like a Forest showing during making like a forest: a space for resourcefulness and workshop, as a part of Absolventenausstellung HFBK Hamburg, July 2019. Photo: Tim Albrecht.



Publication release for a seedbag for resourcefulness and special screening of *Seeing Like a Forest* at Werkstatt Gröninger Hof / LU'UM, Hamburg, December 2019. Photo: Felix Egle.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Mountain potato shelter, Kobe, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.



Xin Cheng, *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Hamburg: Materialverlag, 2019). Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist and writer Lance Pearce discusses Xin Cheng's work Seeing Like A Forest, which was made by Cheng during her study at HFBK - University Of Fine Arts Hamburg from 2017-2019 and was exhibited twice in Germany in 2019 and subsequently in Aotearoa at The Dowse Art Museum and in an online program by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

Cheng's work encompasses video, photography, installations, workshops and publications focusing on issues such as sustainability, communities, and resourcefulness. Lance addresses these themes and their relevance to a world in the midst of a pandemic and reflects on the opportunities presented for resetting unsustainable practices.

Guest edited by Chloe Lane.

As I write this, Aotearoa New Zealand is no longer in lockdown but we carry on a little nervously, hoping to limit instances of Covid-19 community transmission. We have felt the sting of restrictions on the use of public space and physical proximity to protect public

health. New Zealanders, like many others throughout the world, share an uncertainty about what lies ahead, fearing that our sense of place and space may be permanently transformed. As countries implement partial or full lockdowns, travel restrictions have significantly reduced air pollution in large cities. Consequently, there appears to be a surge in concern surrounding environmental issues and, with the pandemic highlighting how precarious the relationship is between human and planetary health, individuals are looking for ways to commit to changing their behaviour to support sustainability. So how might this global pandemic alter our approach to resourcefulness and social innovation within our cities and regions?

Xin Cheng's 32-minute digital video *Seeing Like A Forest* (2019) could offer some solutions. Declaring itself a multitude, its title alone affirms a plurality of perspectives, making space for diverse orders of existence. Cheng's practice—which includes different formats and strategies for producing artwork, organising workshops, and publishing books—reflects her interest in craft, design, collaboration, and sustainability. *Seeing Like A Forest* was made by Cheng during a three-year course of study at HFBK University of Fine Arts Hamburg and exhibited twice in Germany in 2019.^[01] The video then screened in New Zealand at The Dowse Art Museum and was part of the Spheres video project on the Christchurch Art Gallery website in 2020.



Seeing Like a Forest showing during 'making like a forest': a space for resourcefulness and workshop, as a part of Absolventenausstellung HFBK Hamburg, July 2019. Photo: Tim Albrecht.



Seeing Like a Forest showing during 'making like a forest': a space for resourcefulness and workshop, as a part of Absolventenausstellung HFBK Hamburg, July 2019. Photo: Tim Albrecht.



Poster for *making like a forest*: a space for resourcefulness and workshop, as a part of Absolventenausstellung HFBK Hamburg, July 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.



Xin Cheng, *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Hamburg: Materialverlag, 2019). Image courtesy of the artist.



Xin Cheng, *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Hamburg: Materialverlag, 2019). Image courtesy of the artist.

Seeing Like A Forest consists of three recurring parts. The first features Cheng showing and explaining photographs she took of makeshift constructions encountered during her travels across Asia-Pacific and Europe. The second presents static shots, each approximately two minutes long, of architectural and landscape spaces in Hamburg. The third offers intertitles—white text on a black background—of design-themed literary quotations. In keeping with the themes of resourcefulness and community livability at the heart of the artist's practice, the intertitles call for action: "Imagine a building being made like a basket ... Its structural strength comes from the cooperation of all the members."^[02] Cheng's interest in resourcefulness, sustainability and livable, enduring neighbourhoods emerges in and through the

intersection of these various parts, in a rich nexus of artistic, philosophical, and media interrelationships.

During the six months that *Spheres* (28 April to 31 October 2020) was exhibited online at Christchurch Art Gallery, *Seeing Like A Forest* was particularly well suited to the post-lockdown references to social distancing and our personal environments.^[03] Describing the video over email, exhibition co-curator Melanie Oliver wrote, “It is beautiful and simple and connects with many people because across so many cultures there are ordinary people who are resourceful in this way, who want to remake, reuse and extend their creativity in ways that are surprising, delightful and about community.”^[04] In a world of excess production and consumption, *Seeing Like A Forest* offers examples of human-scaled, environmentally attuned design that is at odds with capitalism’s unsustainable depletion of natural resources.

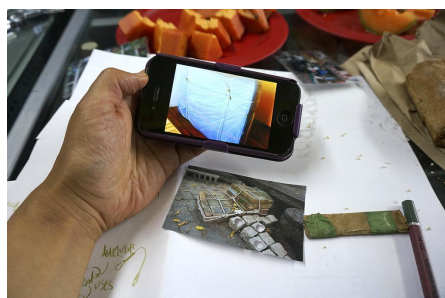


Image taken during *Pequeñas Modificaciones taller* (Small Modifications workshop) at hackerspace Rancho Electronico in Mexico City, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.



Image taken during *Pequeñas Modificaciones taller* (Small Modifications workshop) at hackerspace Rancho Electronico in Mexico City, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.



Image taken during *FabCoop* in Seoul. Workshops like this make up part of the artist's photo-research (makeshifting.net) on the small modifications of shared spaces made by non-specialists around the Asia-Pacific and Europe. Image courtesy of the artist.



Image taken at HFBK Hamburg, during a research session in which the artist used laminated photocards as starting points for convivial workshops. Image courtesy of the artist.

Each of the photographs presented in the video represents the artist's discovery of makeshift constructions and their distinct non-expert design—in other words, design without a formal title that is caring and resolutely resourceful. According to design theorist Ezio Manzini, social innovation is a process of “design[ing], when everybody designs.”^[05] Through the confluence of ‘non-specialist’ and professional design, Manzini challenges contemporary designers by reminding them that they “find themselves in a world where everybody designs and where, as we have seen, their task tends to be to use their own initiatives to help a variegated array of social actors to design better.”^[06] Relatedly, industrial designer Angus Donald Campbell undermines professional human-centred design methods: “Although human-centred design is participatory, the focus is on understanding users and their contexts rather than exploring how people are already designing to meet their own needs.”^[07] Campbell contends that professional designers of public space miss the valuable insights and, in some cases, solutions, offered by ‘lay designers’. Cheng's video highlights the importance of non-specialist design within culturally diverse communities, and invites viewers to redirect their gaze beyond professional design to users driven to design due to unmet everyday needs.

Cheng's hands, shown in close-up in the video, place the succession of photographs on the ground for the camera, while she reflects on their content in a voice-over. The first photograph is of a street lamp covered with various ‘blind-spot mirrors.’ One is a large, fit-for-purpose blind-spot mirror, while another two are automotive side-view mirrors. On the issue of individual agency, Cheng notes that this anonymous and unsanctioned intervention in the traffic management system enables multiple perspectives, thus improving traffic safety. However, these automotive side mirrors are interlopers – motor vehicle parts assimilated into public space for as long as the intervention exists. Cheng then compares this photograph to the jacket design of the 1956 German edition of *Streifenzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* (1934) by German biologist Jakob von Uexküll. The design features small, nonhuman creatures, each encompassed by a circle. These circular motifs serve as symbols for the unique perceptual world of a species. According to von Uexküll, the *umwelt* (perceptual world)

differs for each organism, which means that it is difficult for us to truly understand how another organism perceives the world.



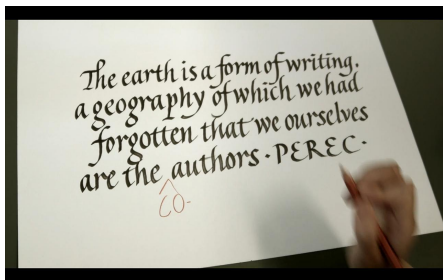
Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screenshot from *Seeing Like A Forest*, featuring calligraphy by Wigger Bierma, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Filming with Jesús Pulpón in a vacant field near Bahrenfeld, Hamburg. Image courtesy of the artist.



Filming with Jesús Pulpón by the canal in front of the artists' school, HFBK Hamburg. Image courtesy of the artist.

The video then cuts to a wide shot, without commentary, of a quiet, tree-lined street in Hamburg. In this camera shot, the stretch of road from the bottom of the frame to the horizon locks the sight of the viewer onto one-point perspective, with the central vanishing point symbolic of an individual perception. According to theorist Joseph Manca, artistic single-point perspective “is an objective and scientific method of spatial organisation, but it is also intensely subjective, showing the world as it is seen by an

individual spectator who occupies a particular position in the world.”^[08] The one-point perspective, as Manca describes it, not only includes a scenography, but also offers a unique point of view. Another factor relevant here is that the making of *Seeing Like A Forest* was fundamentally a collaborative and interactive act between Cheng and videographer Jesús Pulpón who was a fellow student in Hamburg. Cheng explains: “Everything was done together, through conversation, from the initial concept to shooting to the final editing. The ideas developed through talking with him. He was much more than a videographer. I could only have made that film with him, as it contained the unique ways he frames and perceives spaces.”^[09] In this instance, Pulpón’s use of one-point perspective translates Cheng’s concerns in a visual language that speaks to the audience, alluding to the prior discussion of individual perceptual worlds and different ways of seeing. From the outset, the video asks: where are we looking from, and how might we make our way without overlooking or neglecting other perspectives?



Street-sign orchid-hammock, Phnom Penh, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Cheng's interest in 'co-caring' is insatiable—co-caring evident in structures of display, storage, and support in different geographical and social settings, co-caring understood as the ability to create, share, and improvise with limited means. The built environment in a Western context has become increasingly regulated and predetermined. This represents an obstacle to the re-appropriation of public space by citizens, particularly when it comes to less conventional cultural practices. In one section of *Seeing Like A Forest*, Cheng discusses improvised structures that enable social and environmental engagement. There is a bowl of seed bombs in a park zoned for development (Münster), a kete of feijoas hung on a fence (Tāmaki Makaurau), a handmade puppet theatre stage (Tainan), and an 'open living room' in a park (Taipei). As Cheng explains:

In this *liangting* [pavilion] in a neighbourly park, a concrete pole became an open living room, starting with a repaired metal shelf and a stack of disposable tea cups piggybacking with coiling plastic string. From walking by over a couple of weeks in 2015, I noticed many retired residents lounging here, reading newspapers, while the younger ones play in the outdoor gym.^[10]



A place to dwell, dream and swing, Auckland, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.



Carpark-shed-garden-ecosystem, Tainan, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

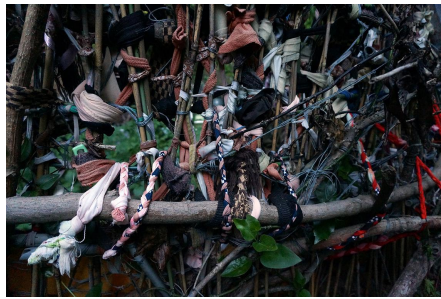
In these examples of active citizenship in the public realm of cities, there is a transformative intent to make the status quo better – all done in the name of enhancing individual and collective well-being. Cheng is more interested in raw materials and their surprising uses than the more formal concerns of contemporary design. She writes:

These encounters of everyday resourceful making have opened up my imagination to other ways of relating with our material surroundings. Here, the lines between ‘waste’ and ‘resource’ is a matter of perspective. A ‘user’ is also a ‘hacker’ is also a ‘carer’ is also a ‘repairer’ is also a ‘re-designer’. Nothing is ever finished, we are all participants in the ongoing processes of transforming, mixing, blending and recombining, with our material and ecological surroundings.^[11]

Given this focus on small-scale, sustainably minded making, Cheng suggests that shared spaces should be produced by users’ interventions, and that urban designers should produce spaces where a variety of events (e.g. permaculture, waste minimisation initiatives, natural habitat restoration, and improvised community hub making) can occur. This, in turn, produces social exchange and highlights issues concerning people’s rights to a city.



Mountain potato shelter, Kobe, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.



Mountain potato shelter, Kobe, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.



A collection of stories written down by the artist were published as two essays on the online journal hainamana.com: *7 drifts on the possibilities of shared spaces* (2019) & *encountering everyday resourcefulness: a drifting assemblage* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.



Screen shot from *Seeing Like a Forest*, video by Xin Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist.

In order to account for complexity in design, Cheng extends the register of design through an ecological framework. Her method brings to mind theorist Tim Ingold’s material culture studies of “an ecology of materials that focuses on their enrolment in form-making processes.”^[12] In one section of the video, the artist describes her encounter with a ‘shed-garden-ecosystem’ growing in a carpark in the southern city of Tainan in Taiwan.^[13] This ‘living structure’, as the artist puts it, clashes with its urban surroundings, making manifest its ecological diversity. Unlike the contemporary building envelope, the dynamic scaffolding of the shed-garden-ecosystem is a conglomeration of “old ladders, treasured scraps, living plants and other creatures.”^[14] This observation alerts us to the complex, mutable, and entangled processes through which this structure is continuously transformed and stabilised. The structure is highly permeable; noise and air penetrate everywhere. Nevertheless, the space feels full, dense with the weight of human and nonhuman entanglements. In her excellent multipart publication *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (2019) Cheng recounts meeting the ‘caretaker’ of this shed-garden-ecosystem:

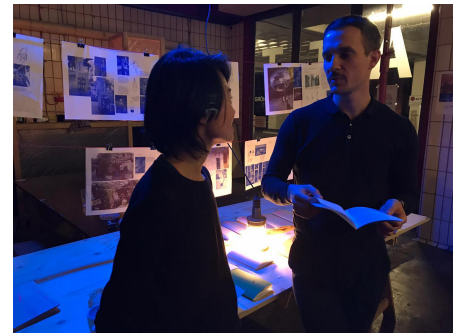
During my repeated visits, I met their human companion, who told me that the ladders were discards from his workplace, for climbing telephone poles. He liked to collect wood for their fragrance, and even gave me a small bottle of a special kind, made into delicate shavings.... Another morning, the whole family was engaged in a careful excavation of the piles, since the neighbours worried they were fostering mosquitoes. Under rotting wooden boards, we uncovered eggs of geckos, which hunt mosquitoes. I was gifted some.^[15]



Publication release for a seedbag for resourcefulness and special screening of *Seeing Like a Forest* at Werkstatt Gröninger Hof / LU'UM, Hamburg, December 2019. Photo: Felix Egle.



Publication release for a seedbag for resourcefulness and special screening of *Seeing Like a Forest* at Werkstatt Gröninger Hof / LU'UM, Hamburg, December 2019. Photo: Felix Egle.



Publication release for a seedbag for resourcefulness and special screening of *Seeing Like a Forest* at Werkstatt Gröninger Hof / LU'UM, Hamburg, December 2019. Photo: Felix Egle.

Commenting on the structure as its own self-contained ecosystem, Cheng adds: “Here, string, wire, roots, branches, plants alive and regenerating were entangled together in a porous coexistence” behaving as meaningful agencies in their own right.^[16] In this instance, she alludes to a model of human and nonhuman interaction where human individuals intervene and engage with the nonhuman in ways that go beyond simple exploitation. Cheng is interested in “how human beings support the livelihoods of other beings, and in turn, derives pleasure and nourishment from it. [This is possible with limited resources] and a daily bit of care.”^[17] Cheng’s ability to reconcile opposites means that human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, and nature and culture, interact in complex interplays, both unifying and blurring the distinctions between each. In doing so, she approaches the perspective that Jane Bennett writes of in *Vibrant Matter* (2010); a non-anthropocentric view in which our own processes are placed

alongside the myriad others present within “what is experienced as the ‘natural.’”^[18]

Given the environmentally and philosophically attuned remit of her art practice, it is clear that Cheng is concerned with the world around her. In an age of widespread and complex issues such as extractive industries, globalisation, climate change, finite resources, and now Covid-19, Cheng’s *Seeing Like A Forest* maps the city from different vantage points, recognising the variety of perspectives that constitute a lively material world. Currently, the global pandemic is redefining our relationship to both personal and public space. Coincidentally, at this time, *Seeing Like A Forest* presents forms of design created with the care, ingenuity and capability of human beings not limited by preconceived ideas, a manifestation of a frugal making do. Instead of presenting a prescriptive message heralded by a statement of intent, Cheng restricts herself to a refreshingly realistic optimism, “hoping the work may spark a different way of seeing one’s own surroundings.”^[19]

Footnotes

01. *Seeing Like A Forest* had its first exhibition in Montabaur (Germany), at B-05 Gallery as part of the 2019 group show *Composting the Universe*.

02. Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, et al., *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

03. *Spheres: An Online Video Project* curated by Melanie Oliver and Nathan Pohio, (28 April to 31 October 2020) Christchurch Art Gallery, www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/blog/note/2020/04/spheres-of-relation

04. Melanie Oliver, email to the author. 23 September 2020

05. Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

06. Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, p. 2.

07. Angus Donald Campbell, ‘Lay Designers: Grassroots Innovation for Appropriate Change,’ *Design Issues* 33:1 (2017): pp. 30-47.

08. Joseph Manca, *Andrea Mantegna and the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2012), p 23.

09. Xin Cheng, email to the author, 28 September 2020.

10. Xin Cheng, 'Patterns of Resourcefulness: Human(e) Edges,' in *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Hamburg: Materialverlag, 2019), p. 21. Cheng's multipart publication complements *Seeing Like A Forest* by providing annotated photography of improvised creations throughout the Asia-Pacific and Europe.
11. Xin Cheng, 'Encountering Everyday Resourcefulness: A Drifting Assemblage,' *Hainamana: Asian New Zealand Art and Culture*, 2 October 2018, www.hainamana.com/encountering-everyday-resourcefulness-a-drifting-assemblage/ (accessed 4 October 2020).
12. Tim Ingold, 'Toward an Ecology of Materials,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): pp. 427-442.
13. 'Shed-garden-ecosystem' is a term Cheng uses in *Patterns of Resourcefulness: Human(e) Edges*, in *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Hamburg: Materialverlag, 2019), p. 49.
14. Cheng, *Patterns of Resourcefulness: Human(e) Edges*, p. 49.
15. Cheng, *Patterns of Resourcefulness: Human(e) Edges*, p. 49.
16. Cheng, *Patterns of Resourcefulness: Human(e) Edges*, p. 49.
17. Xin Cheng, '7 Drifts on the Possibilities of Shared Spaces,' *Hainamana: Asian New Zealand Art and Culture*, 8 June 2019, www.hainamana.com/7-drifts-on-the-possibilities-of-shared-spaces/ (accessed 10 October 2020).
18. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 1.
19. Xin Cheng, email to the author, 25 October 2020.

Biographies



Xin Cheng likes to walk, and do stuff around making by hand, ecology, conviviality. While living in Hamburg from 2016 to 2019 she hosted performative talks and workshops on everyday resourcefulness in Berlin, Sheffield, Mexico City; befriended dancers, film-makers, philosophers, junk traders; wrote stories for hainamana.com; made books with Materialverlag and organised a multidisciplinary show on rubber trails. Returning to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland before a virus changed the world, she is happy to continue her making-do(ing) with old and new friends. Her works have been shown in public galleries throughout Aotearoa and at International Biennial of Graphic Design Brno (Czech Republic), Sprint Milano (Italy), Frappant Galerie (Hamburg). She has done residencies in Norway, Taiwan, Cambodia, Switzerland, Korea, and Japan. She was previously a co-director of the artist-run-space RM, Auckland and holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (Germany), and studied ecology, psychology and fine arts at the University of Auckland. xin-cheng.info, small-workshop.info

Lance Pearce is an artist and writer living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand. He graduated with a Doctor of Visual Arts from AUT University in 2020. Selected exhibitions include: *While You're On Your Way*, ST PAUL St, Auckland (2019); *A Quick Countdown to Set the Tempo*, RM, Auckland (2015); *Something shimmers, something is hushed up*, Window, Auckland (2014); and *New Artists Show*, Artspace Aotearoa, Auckland (2012). His writing has appeared in *Art New Zealand*, *Circuit Artist Film and Video Aotearoa*, *Distracted Reader*, and *Eye Contact*.

