

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, ENVIRONMENT, NATIONAL, POLITICS

## Felicia Young's Earth Celebrations: Using Art to Address Climate Change

4/21/2021 by **ELEANOR J. BADER**

Environmental activist and community organizer Felicia Young is passionate about using the arts to help New York City residents address climate change and demand government action.



A Earth Celebrations mobile mural in April 2019. Together, community members in the Lower East Side of Manhattan painted a 40-foot mural, later displayed at an Earth Day celebration. ([Earth Celebrations](#))

Over the past several decades, community-organizer-slash-environmental activist Felicia Young has had several epiphanies about the importance of art in fomenting progressive social change. As the founder and executive director of [Earth Celebrations](#), a 30-year-old New York City-based group that brings diverse constituencies together to support community gardens and promote urban ecology, Young is passionate about using the arts—dance, music, theater and an array of visual mediums—to help city residents address escalating climate change and demand government action in support of sustainable development.

Despite its focus on serious issues, fun is central to Earth Celebrations' work—ranging from online and in-person workshops that teach participants to use sustainable materials like kelp, kombucha and mycelium to make costumes, puppets and sculptures; to an annual spring pageant that moves through Lower Manhattan to promote creative solutions to the burgeoning environmental crisis.

"Earth Celebrations blends traditional community organizing with urban planning, partnership-building and collaboration," Young told *Ms.* "By bringing the arts into how we communicate our message, people develop an emotional connection to the science of climate change."



"By bringing the arts into how we communicate our message, people develop an emotional connection to the science of climate change," said Felicia Young. (Rachel Elkind / [Twitter](#))

In its earliest incarnation, Earth Celebrations focused on preserving the more than 60 small "vest-pocket parks" that had popped up on abandoned land on Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1960s and '70s. "It was a regular David and Goliath story," Young said. "Most of the gardens had been created by low-income people who were infused with community spirit. They had turned land devastated by crime and neglect into neighborhood hubs—but by the mid-1980s, the gardens were threatened because the city was facing a financial crisis and wanted to sell the land to developers."

Young was outraged by the city's devaluing of these green oases and called a meeting to bring local residents and organizational stakeholders together to talk about what they could do to derail the plan. The result was the 1994 formation of the [Lower East Side Garden Preservation Coalition](#). In addition to organizing letter-writing campaigns and petition drives, they demonstrated and testified at public hearings. For 15 years, the coalition sponsored an annual Rites of Spring Procession to Save Our Gardens.

But Young did not stop there.

In 1996, when she and her Lower East Side Coalition colleagues learned other community gardens were being threatened—then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had announced plans to sell 800 gardens located throughout the five boroughs to real estate moguls—they brought people from every corner of the city together to form the [New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens](#).

The Coalition scored a major victory in 2002 when then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg transferred hundreds of targeted gardens to the city's parks department. This removed the immediate threat—but Young told *Ms.*, "We're still pushing for the gardens to be designated as permanent parkland." Still, she said, it was amazing that, with the stroke of a pen, a moratorium on the gardens' imminent destruction was put in place.

It was a victory to savor, and while Young admits she is a natural organizer, she nonetheless credits several experiences with reinforcing her career choice. The first occurred when she was a teenage intern assigned to the African wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"I saw beautiful objects that were not meant to be seen in a museum, but were purposeful, made for rituals or agricultural purposes," she said.

Secondly, she continued, after her first year at Skidmore College, she spent a summer working at Christie's art auction house. "They sent me to the airport to pick up fancy clients and had me hold up pieces of art during the auctions," she said. "I thought: If this is what working in the art world is, I'm not interested."

Nonetheless, Young continued to study art history. A junior year abroad, with six months in France and six months in Italy, introduced her to artists who had created pageants in support of political objectives. "I began to see that art could exist in a public realm, outside of museums and galleries," she said.

This idea got an additional boost when she learned of the Mbari, a Nigerian tribe that responds to calamity by creating ephemeral art projects, and by a four-month visit to her mother's homeland, India, in late 1988 and early 1989. The trip introduced her to contemporary pageantry, including the annual Wedding of Meenakshi Festival in Madurai.

"There was a terrible drought that year in Madurai," Young said, "and the government sent water tanks to the area. People filled their pots with the precious liquid. I assumed they'd use it for drinking, cooking, the essentials and was incredibly moved to see them using it to spray the festival sculptures. They made it clear that they do not see art as a luxury; it is fully integrated into their daily lives and spiritual practices."

This idea that art is essential to everyday life stayed with Young and is infused into everything that Earth Celebrations does. Likewise, the importance of green spaces and gardens was underscored in the aftermath of 2012's Hurricane Sandy, when, despite significant flooding, the Lower East Side gardens she'd helped to save absorbed a great deal of flood water.

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"Gardens can be innovators for urban climate solutions," Young said. "They can be places for composting, rain water catchment, food production, pollination, and provide air filtration. Trees and plants sequester carbon. These urban climate solutions connect to green roofs, vertical and solar farming, and waterfront and coastal resiliency projects—things we celebrate in our pageants."



This idea that art is essential to everyday life is infused into everything that Earth Celebrations does. Pictured: An Earth Celebrations pageant in May 2018, an annual spring eve that moves through Lower Manhattan to promote creative solutions to the environmental crisis. (William Bourassa Jr. / Earth Celebrations)

Pre-COVID, each yearly Earth Celebration brought hundreds of costumed dancers, singers, actors and banner- and sign-carrying activists to 20 sites, including 12 gardens. Art filled the streets to support—or sometimes introduce—the creation and maintenance of sustainable ecosystems. Young calls it "art for learning and engagement."

This year, on May 8, the group will hold a "pop-up pageant," with several socially-distanced but site-specific performances that will be live-streamed. Young is not deterred by this necessary shift.

"Art is a bridge that can connect diverse people, making it possible for them to address pressing issues and mobilize," she said, and nothing—not even a global pandemic—can change that.

*Learn more about the Ecological City: Art & Climate Solutions Pageant on Saturday, May 8, 2021:*



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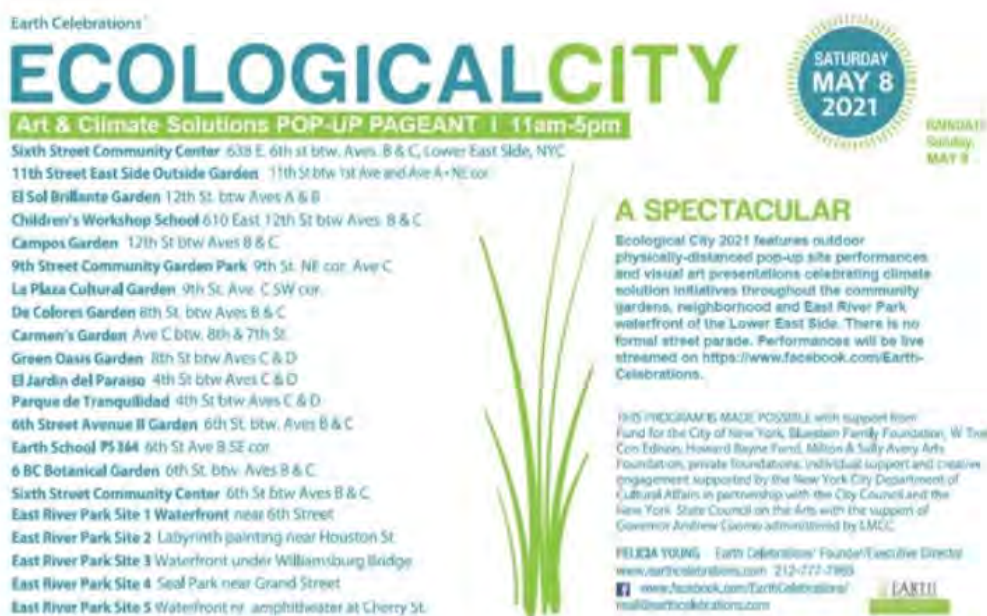
A participant in last year's socially distance Earth Celebrations climate-solutions pageant. (Photo by Rachel Elkind)

# Gardens pop-pageant yields bumper crop of climate solutions

MAY 1, 2021

Helping lift spirits with a splash of vibrant color as the pandemic fades, flowers are popping up all over the place right now. Fittingly, on Sat., May 8, there will be a “pop-up pageant” in the East Village and Lower East Side community gardens.

Organized by Felicia Young, the Earth Celebrations’ Ecological City – Art & Climate Solutions Pop-Up Pageant will be held from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., enlivening about 20 community gardens and sites between E. Fourth and E. 12th Sts. from Avenue A to the East River waterfront.



Earth Celebrations

## ECOLOGICAL CITY

Art & Climate Solutions POP-UP PAGEANT | 11am-5pm

**SATURDAY MAY 8 2021**

FUNDATED! Sunday, MAY 9

**A SPECTACULAR**

Ecological City 2021 features outdoor physically-distanced pop-up site performances and visual art presentations celebrating climate solution initiatives throughout the community gardens, neighborhood and East River Park waterfront of the Lower East Side. There is no formal street parade. Performances will be live streamed on <https://www.facebook.com/EarthCelebrations>.

THIS PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE with support from Fund for the City of New York, Skanska Family Foundation, W. Tree Con Edman, Howard Bayne Fund, Milton & Sally Avery Arts Foundation, private foundations, individual support and creative engagement supported by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo administered by LMCC.

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**EARTH**

Earth Celebrations logo: A stylized green plant with long, thin leaves.

There are more than 20 stops on the Sat., May 8, pop-up pageant circuit.

Like last year’s event, due to the lingering risk of COVID, there will not be an actual procession wending festively through the neighborhood’s streets and gardens. Instead, the pageant will feature outdoor physically distanced pop-up site performances, visual art, giant puppets and costumed climate costumes — happening all over, from street corners and fire escapes to rooftops and gardens.

Like last year's event, due to the lingering risk of COVID, there will not be an actual procession wending festively through the neighborhood's streets and gardens. Instead, the pageant will feature outdoor physically distanced pop-up site performances, visual art, giant puppets and costumed climate costumes — happening all over, from street corners and fire escapes to rooftops and gardens.



A River-Cleansing Mussel Woman at last year's Earth Celebrations climate arts festival. (Photo by Rachel Elkind)

Performances will include dance, music, theater and poetry, along with artwork, and will celebrate local climate-solution initiatives that are “designed and implemented throughout the neighborhood,” according to a press release. More than 50 partner groups are involved with the event.

People are invited to come safely masked and physically distanced to explore the pop-up pageant sites and “find the surprises of climate solutions tucked throughout the neighborhood.”



"Climate Consequences" safely behind the garden's gate...for now. At last year's pageant. (Photo by Rachel Elkind)

Per an Earth Celebrations press release on the pop-up pageant: "The gardens provide a myriad of solutions, including sequestering carbon, filtering air pollution and runoff, as well as absorbing floodwater from storm surges and sea-level rise. Visionary green infrastructure projects throughout the neighborhood include bioswales, rain and pollinator gardens, solar gazebos, permeable pathways, vertical farming, green roofs and sustainable urban farming. On the waterfront a now-controversial East Side Coastal Resiliency plan is addressed, with the community demanding the city not move ahead with a destructive and costly new plan that will destroy the park and has many unanswered questions."

## Lower East Side Zero-Waste Pageant Goes Virtual

EMILY NONKO APRIL 15, 2020



A past Ecological City pageant. This year's will be virtual to comply with social distancing requirements. (Photo courtesy William Bourassa Jr.)

In late March, New York-based artist Lucrecia Novoa started a livestream to capture her process of creating papier-mâché puppets. The puppets, she explained to the camera, are designed as characters who represent climate solutions, including carbon sequestration and zero waste. In prior years, Novoa designed and built these 10-foot-tall puppets during community workshops to be displayed as part of Ecological City, an environmental arts and climate action project based out of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Now in its third year, the collaborative process engages local residents, youth and community organizations to create visual art and performances of dance, music, theater and poetry inspired by local climate solutions and sustainability initiatives. The process culminates with a day-long pageant that weaves through the community gardens, blocks and waterfront of the Lower East Side.

This year, COVID-19 forced the process to quickly transition to remote collaboration and digital streaming. But organizers still emphasize the importance of artistic practices in telling the story of climate solutions in this community, while cultivating collaboration



and engagement during the social distancing of COVID-19. “By creating a cultural pageant, you pull in many more people,” explains Ecological City’s founder and director Felicia Young. “It’s through the arts that people build an emotional connection to a thing, and then it’s from a very deep place that they respond.” Young has been a pioneer of community-engaged art for over 30 years; she wrote her college thesis on the African practice of mbari, a communal art process in response to social calamity. She has also been a longtime advocate of community gardens in the Lower East Side, planted in response to blight and vacant lots that once dominated the neighborhood.

In 1991, Young founded the nonprofit [Earth Celebrations](#) and began formalizing the process of engaging communities and through the arts to push for ecological and social change. Throughout the 90s, when New York City’s community gardens were under threat of development, she organized annual theatrical pageants for 15 years that successfully fought for the preservation of hundreds of community gardens across the city.

In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy struck and flooded Lower Manhattan, community gardens emerged as a kind of “green infrastructure” to help absorb rain and stormwater runoff. (Post-hurricane, the city came to see the gardens as a key part of its future storm defense.) In the 90s, Young recalls, “we thought we were preserving open space — but what we ended up preserving is an amazing urban climate solution.” That experience inspired her to create a pageant to explore and amplify the neighborhood’s climate vulnerabilities and solutions. The resulting Ecological City theatrical pageant events span nine months of researching, gathering data on local sites and their climate solution initiatives, and creatively reinterpreting this data into artistic works. Through “a ceremonial procession,” as Young calls it, the pageant visits over 20 sites throughout the neighborhood over the course of one day. Each pageant responds to evolving concerns within the community. “Every year it has to engage the current story,” Young explains. In creating the first pageant, local public housing residents still felt the effects of Hurricane Sandy. [GOLES](#), a housing justice organization, collaborated with an Earth Celebrations theater director and youth living in public housing for a dance performance about surviving the hurricane and confronting the city’s lingering neglect. In 2019, nonprofit [Infinite Movement](#) worked with youth on a dance piece addressing a controversial East Side flood protection plan. 2020’s pageant is focused on concepts of zero waste, carbon sequestration, and connecting local climate solutions to the global [Sustainable Development Goals](#) released by the United Nations. Due to COVID-19, participating artists transitioned their public workshops to home live-stream sessions to capture their practice and collaborate remotely. Over 20 workshops with artists and volunteers working on parts of projects have been posted on [Earth Celebrations’ Facebook page](#).



Lucrecia Novoa livestreams from her studio, making papier-mâché puppets for what will be Ecological City's first virtual climate pageant. (Photo courtesy Lucrecia Novoa)

The culminating six-hour pageant will take place virtually on Saturday, May 9th, with gardeners, artists and community participants contributing selfie videos of the gardens and neighborhood sites as well as visual art, puppets, mobile sculptures, costumes, dance, music, theater and poetry celebrating climate solutions. A live-stream Facebook video the day-of will feature a walk past the 20 sites on the Lower East Side.

In past Ecological City events, artist Dee Dee Maucher traveled to the Rockaways to gather reeds for a sculpture that floated in the East River as the finale. This year, she presented a streaming video session growing kombucha leather from a basement. The “leather” will be used for pageant costumes, as part of the “zero waste” theme. “Climate change is such a big concept,” Maucher says. “So what can we do as a local community? Here, we can help the East River, we can help the soil around our houses, we can change our lifestyle.” Indeed, the goal of each pageant is to engage diverse sectors of the community — gardeners, artists, organizations, schools, youth and residents — to build collaboration and action and inspire them with local solutions underway. “It’s not just looking at the solution of a gardener at one community garden site,” Young says, “But seeing how their site connects to this larger ecosystem.”

*This article is part of “For Whom, By Whom,” a series of articles about how creative placemaking can expand opportunities for low-income people living in disinvested communities. This series is generously underwritten by the Kresge Foundation.*

# The Village Sun

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The waterfront closing tableau from the 2017 Earth Celebrations Ecological City Pageant. (Photo by Rachel Elkind)

Ecological City Pageant will be virtually dazzling

MAY 8, 2020'

The COVID crisis won't stop a pageant focused on the climate crisis. The pageant, though, will be virtual this year. Earth Celebrations' Ecological City: Art & Climate Solutions Virtual Pageant will be held Sat., May 9, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. It will be livestreamed on [Facebook](#).

There will be more than 100 remote participants, including visual artists, performers, dancers, musicians, poets, gardeners and community participants. They will livestream and post selfie videos from their apartments, rooftops, balconies, bathtubs and nature nearby from wherever they are under quarantine, lockdown or practicing social distancing.



Working on a costume for the Ecological City Pageant. (Courtesy Earth Celebrations)

From 1 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., the event will feature its centerpiece, the Climate Costume Parade-in-Place, which people can join through Zoom video. Participants will wear nature-inspired homemade costumes celebrating the natural world, gardens, rivers and climate solutions and share a selfie video. (The event has been in the planning stages for months, during which some participants worked on their costumes.) Register on [eventbrite](#).

There will be giant puppets and mobile sculptures and also a virtual view of the pageant's original planned route through the Lower East Side gardens and neighborhood and East River Park waterfront sites. The artistic works will explore these sites and the myriad climate resiliency and ecological sustainability solutions to mitigate carbon, pollution, runoff and flooding due to climate impacts of storm surges and sea level rise that are being designed and implemented throughout the neighborhood.

Earth Celebrations directs Ecological City in partnership with more than 50 partner groups, including LUNGS (Loisaida Urban Neighborhood Gardens), representing 48 Lower East Side Gardens, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, NYC Community Garden District, Green Map, East Village Community Coalition, Lower Eastside Girls Club, University Settlement, Educational Alliance, Sixth Street Community Center, Loisaida Inc. Center, GOLES, East River Alliance, East River Park Action, East River Park Coalition, Friends of Corlears Hook Park, Lower East Side Ecology Center, Solar One, Waterfront Alliance, Gaia Institute, FABnyc, Arts Loisaida, 4th Street Block Association, Infinite Movement, Time's Up, Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, One Brick, P.S. 364 – Earth School, Children's Workshop School, Hunter College – School of Community Organizing and New York University.



Getting ready for the Ecological City Virtual Pageant. (Courtesy Earth Celebrations)

Visionary green infrastructure projects throughout the community include bio-swales, rain and pollinator gardens, solar gazebos, permeable pathways, vertical farming, green roofs and sustainable urban farming. On the waterfront, oyster planting, wetlands, kayak launch river access and a rolling hillside seawall berm — now presented as a hard-edge seawall in the East Side Coastal Resiliency plan — offer varied resiliency approaches and solutions.

Ecological City is an evolution of Earth Celebrations' 30 years of pioneering “creative place-making” and “cultural organizing” strategies, including the 15-year Procession to Save Our Gardens and coalition efforts that led to the preservation of hundreds of community gardens on the Lower East Side and throughout New York City, as well as theatrical pageants, that engaged the community in river restoration initiatives on the Downtown section of the Hudson River Park.



## Q&A with Felicia Young of Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions

FEBRUARY 15, 2020

*The Village Sun recently caught up with Felicia Young, founder and director of Earth Celebrations, and asked her about this spring's upcoming Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions.*

### **Why and how did you start Earth Celebrations?**

I began to create large-scale theatrical pageants — processions with site performances — since that art form worked well for community collaboration and public action on local issues.

I was disillusioned with the commercial art world and was seeking an art form that could engage a diverse community through a collaborative process and function for a social purpose that could generate impact.

Much of my inspiration for the theatrical pageant art form comes from India, where my mother is from, as well as the social-reform pageants cultivated by settlement houses on the Lower East Side in the early 1900s.

I was living near the former site of Adam Purple's Garden of Eden, which was bulldozed for development in 1986. Realizing that the same fate could affect more than 55 magnificent gardens throughout the neighborhood, I had the idea to apply the community pageant strategy to build an effort to preserve the community gardens.

I reached out to local gardeners, artists, youth, schools, churches and community centers to organize the Procession To Save Our Gardens in 1991. Months of community art-making and workshops creating puppets, costumes and performances culminated in the eight-hour-long Procession to Save Our Gardens, which visited 45 gardens.



The procession wends its way through numerous environmentally significant locations in the East Village and Lower East Side. (Courtesy Earth Celebrations)

It grew into an annual community art and advocacy project for 15 years, building a local and then citywide coalition effort to preserve the community gardens.

Through the artistic pageants, along with the coalition effort, an effective broad-based effort led to the preservation of hundreds of community gardens on the Lower East Side and throughout New York City.

### **How are the arts effective in mobilizing action and generating change on issues?**

The arts have an ability to inspire and engage people to cultivate an emotional connection to their environment and natural world, as well as issues and ideas, and through that deep connection take action to generate change.

Earth Celebrations has applied the arts to engage communities to explore local sites, gardens, parks and rivers — the Hudson and East rivers — within a neighborhood that are embedded with history, issues and struggles.

The arts provide an accessible and inspiring entry point for residents, youth, organizations and stakeholders to participate and work together creatively as a neighborhood for solutions to issues impacting the community. Through the process of creating visual art, performance, dance, theater and poetry, participants develop a deeper understanding of the issues and solutions. Then, through the public enactment of pageant, participants take action, communicate to a larger public and affirm new narratives and visions for the community.



Last year's procession focused on the contentious East Side Coastal Resiliency plan. Earth Celebrations supports the idea of decking over the F.D.R. Drive as part of the plan. (Courtesy Earth Celebrations)

We can apply these creative strategies to the global climate crisis through effective actions that can be taken locally. The arts offer an inspiring method of engagement where we can cultivate a greater visceral connection to our natural world and mobilize action for its preservation and solutions for a sustainable future.

**Tell us about this year's Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions that you are working on now.**

I initiated the Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions, which is now in its third year for 2020, because I recognized it was a pivotal time in the East Village and Lower East Side, with a myriad of inspiring climate solutions and sustainability initiatives throughout the community gardens, neighborhood and waterfront that were underway, yet not acknowledged as an inspiring cohesive model of a sustainable urban ecosystem.

After Hurricane Sandy, the gardens that had been preserved proved themselves in a new role for climate resiliency as they absorbed the floodwater. A federal grant of Sandy relief funds enabled the gardens to expand and implement green infrastructure and climate resiliency projects. Yet the city still had not acknowledged the importance of these gardens within the city — for flood and runoff mitigation — and carbon sequestration solutions to the global climate challenges and the commitment to keep global warming temperature under 1.5 Celsius.

Also, throughout the neighborhood sustainability projects — such as green roofs — rooftop bee farming and solar energy microgrids had developed. On the waterfront, the E.S.C.R. (East Side Coastal Resiliency) waterfront redevelopment plan was in process. I saw how these climate resiliency and sustainability solutions functioned together as an inspiring model for an urban sustainable ecosystem, and that by connecting these initiatives through the Procession for Climate Solutions, the community could effectively move action on all the initiatives forward as a cohesive vision.

Residents, youth and organizations are invited to join the effort and participate through Ecological City: Art and Climate Solutions Workshops from Feb. 29 to May 6, led by our artists-in-residence and environmental experts.

Participants collaborate creating visual art, giant puppets, costumes and performances exploring local gardens, neighborhood and waterfront sites and their climate solution initiatives.





Participants at a puppet- and costume-making workshop create a mask for a giant puppet while using sustainable materials. (Courtesy Earth Celebrations)

Participants learn to grow costumes and sculptures with mycelium (mushrooms root) into a structural, biodegradable material that is grown into various forms; they will learn how to make kombucha (fermented mushroom tea) into a leathery textile that will be integrated into a zero-waste costume, and use seaweed to create a costume representing carbon sequestration. We also use natural dyes and make paint from fruits, vegetables and plants. We are integrating sustainable, natural and recycled materials and practices into what we create.

The visual arts and performance works created through workshops at our space at the Sixth Street Community Center, at 638 E. Sixth St. — in addition to collaborations with partner organizations, such as GOLES, Studio 55C, Children’s Workshop School, Lower Eastside Girls Club and University Settlement (P.S. 63) — will be featured in the culminating Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions on Sat., May 9.

The urban ecological pilgrimage will weave throughout the gardens, neighborhood and waterfront for six hours, visiting 20 sites for performances celebrating the inspiring array of climate solution initiatives that are living and thriving throughout the East Village and Lower East Side.

*For more about Earth Celebrations and getting involved with the Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions, click [here](#).*

## 7 Things to Do With Your Kids in N.Y.C. This Weekend



Photo Courtesy of Earth Celebrations by Rachel Elkind

**By Alexis Soloski**

• May 9, 2019

**ECOLOGICAL CITY: PROCESSION FOR CLIMATE SOLUTIONS** at various locations (May 11, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.). A long walk for a good cause, this free climate action, organized by [Earth Celebrations](#), asks New Yorkers large and small to wander through the gardens and waterfronts of the Lower East Side. (The parade begins at the Sixth Street Community Center and concludes at East River Park.) To make the walking a little more lively, giant puppets will come along, too, and in collaboration with 50 community group partners, there are 20 site-specific performances — a culmination of six months of workshops — encompassing music, dance, theater and poetry. Participants are asked to transform into garden, river and climate-solution spirits and imagine a sustainable future.

[earthcelebrations.com/ecological-city-project](http://earthcelebrations.com/ecological-city-project)

# ECO LOGIC

Enviro marchers tout solutions, sustainability

Page 25

## WOODY GUTHRIE'S TRUMP BLUES

Folk icon penned songs  
about Don's landlord dad

Page 22

## RENT-REGULATION EXPECTATIONS

Tenant advocates  
are aiming high in Albany

Page 6



PHOTO BY BOB KILMER

## Marching for Mother Earth and an 'Eco City'

May 14, 2019 | Filed under: Arts & Entertainment, News | Posted by: lincoln

**BY BOB KRASNER** | This is how the East Village throws a parade: colorful and loud, with heart and a sense of purpose.

In fact, Saturday's "Ecological City: Procession for Climate Solutions," organized by the nonprofit organization Earth Celebrations, was all of that and more.

The six-hour extravaganza ended at East River Park, where the city's reconstruction plan to safeguard against flooding is vigorously opposed.



The marchers oppose the city's plan to bury East River Park under nearly a dozen feet of dirt to raise it and protect it from flooding. (Photo by Bob Krasner)

Beginning at the Sixth Street Community Center, the creatively costumed group made their way to the beat of drums to 21 different community gardens and landmarks. They stopped at each one for a short performance, all with the common themes of our climate change and sustainability.



This costume was definitely getting some buzz. (Photo by Bob Krasner)

Dancers from the Artichoke Dance Company, covered in plastic bags, entertained the crowd at El Sol Brillante garden, on E. 12<sup>th</sup> St.

Elsewhere, poems were read, children sang and performers rolled in the dirt. The battle between Mother Earth and the Evil Pirates was enacted on E. Ninth St.

# Town & Village

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May 16, 2019

## Ecological City Procession for Climate Solutions returns



Ecological City, a march with performances aimed at highlighting climate change, made its way through the East Village and Lower East Side on Saturday. (Photos by Rachel Elkind)

Environmental activists resembling aquatic creatures as well as land animals and other nature-inspired characters marched, danced and recited poetry as they made their way through the East Village and Lower East Side on Saturday.

The colorful costume parade was the second annual Ecological City Procession for Climate Solutions, organized by Earth Celebrations founder/director Felicia Young.

The procession was a day-long event with about 20 performances at different sites, including community gardens and the East River waterfront. Other sites were the rooftop gardens on the Earth School and bee farming at the Sixth Street Community Center to celebrate the neighborhood sustainability initiatives. The procession finally reached the waterfront at 3:30 p.m. with five performances addressing the controversial ESCR (East Side Coastal Resiliency) waterfront development plan.



The performances and costumes were inspired by climate impacts of storm surges, sea level rise, flooding and pollution.

Ecological City involved over 50 community partner organizations including gardens, community centers, advocacy groups, schools and 5,000 residents, seniors and children over nine months of planning design sessions and ecological arts workshops.



Earth Celebrations' workshops hosted and sponsored by the Two Bridges involved collaborations with artists-in-residence Lucrecia Novoa, Katherine Freygang, Dee Dee Maucher, David McGreevy, Michele Brody and Yelaine Rodriguez along with numerous performers and dancers.

NEW YORK

## 'Ecological City' uses the arts to inspire environmental action in New York City

"The key component is that it's through the arts that you can build an emotional connection to the natural world," founder Felicia Young said.

By Nikki M. Mascali | Published : May 10, 2018 | Updated : May 11, 2018



For nearly three decades, Felicia Young has made it her life's work to use the arts to raise awareness for the ecological issues facing New York City, from climate change and conservation to sustainability.

New Yorkers are encouraged to become part of Young's mission on Saturday, when her nonprofit Earth Celebrations launches "Ecological City — Procession for Climate Solutions," a six-hour procession of visual art, giant puppets, costumes and more through the Lower East Side's community gardens, neighborhood and waterfront.

"The key component is that it's through the arts that you can build an emotional connection to the natural world, that you speak to people on a different level," Young said. "It's visceral, direct experiential connection to both physical sites — whether it's a river, a park, a garden, a tree, a flower — whatever we have within our city or neighborhood, it's rooted in site."

"Ecological City" is also rooted in similar processions Young has spearheaded in the neighborhood since 1991 to successfully save community gardens on the LES and around the five boroughs.

Saturday's pageant, which Young promises isn't so much a parade as it is a "transformative experience," will feature dance, musical, theatrical and poetic performances at 20 sites across the neighborhood to celebrate the area's climate resiliency and ecological sustainability.

"If people don't have a connection to the importance of our water or the importance of green and open space in our city, then they can't actively mobilize in wanting to preserve that," Young said.

Adding the arts into the mix of conservation and sustainability efforts brings that conversation to a whole new level, she added, "especially when you're not just having artists presenting work about a particular issue, but you're actually engaging the community through the arts to create themselves."

Earth Celebrations' "Ecological City" begins at 11 a.m. at Loaisaida Inc. Center, the event's partner, at 710 E. 9th St. It will then proceed through the LES to East River Park. (The event's rain date is Sunday). For more info, visit [earthcelebrations.com](http://earthcelebrations.com).

# Urban Environmentalists Bring Carnavalesque Procession to NYC's Lower East Side

jonah inerra 02/12/2018 ARTS & CULTURE, NEW YORK, NEWS

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Parade-goers at the Hudson River Pageant. Image courtesy William Bourassa

Artists, educators, and community activists crowded into a meeting room on the ground floor of the Loisaida Center in Alphabet City to discuss the Ecological City Project, a multi-faceted sustainability effort launching February 24 with a series of workshops. The project is organized by Earth Celebrations, an arts-based organization founded in 1991 by self-described “social action artist” Felicia Young that aims to promote sustainability and ecological harmony at a community level from its base on the Lower East Side.

Speaking to the Center for Artistic Activism in late 2016, Young elaborated on her perspective on art and its role in the community. “When you look at most cultures throughout history, art isn’t separate, it’s integrated into the life of a community. It’s part of culture, ceremony, healing,” Young said.

To that end, Ecological City aims to bring together gardeners, students, environmental activists and concerned residents of the East Village and Lower East Side for six months of arts-based workshops culminating in the Ecological City Pageant on May 12. Featuring giant, hand-crafted puppets and nature-oriented costumes, the Pageant will be a Carnavalesque procession along the myriad community gardens and green spaces of the Lower East Side and East River waterfront, stopping at fifteen spaces to highlight the various sustainability efforts undertaken there by community groups.



Giant puppets from the Hudson River Pageant in 2011. Image via William Bourassa

The Ecological City Project hinges on “gardens, neighborhoods, and the arts,” Young said. Earth Celebrations has been active in fighting to preserve community gardens across the Lower East Side against encroaching development while also promoting sustainability and urban resiliency projects. Far from a starry-eyed peapen to going green, Wednesday’s meeting took full view of the implications of climate change and the challenges facing coastal metropolises.

Young and others put the Ecological City project in the context of ongoing efforts to ready New York for rising seas and increasingly volatile weather events, including the proposed seawall—“The Big U” — intended to wrap Lower Manhattan in a protective berm. As for Mayor Bill de Blasio’s climate readiness strategy as a whole, “the gardens are a boon to the whole initiative going forward,” Young said. While they may not attract the attention of starchitects or elite design firms, Young said the gardens and green spaces are the sinews of the community and an important bulwark against coming environmental challenges.

In the meantime, the months between now and the pageant will turn the Loisaida Center into a hive of activity as volunteers construct the fabulously intricate puppets and costumes that will adorn marchers on May 12. Among the ideas being floated so far? Alternate energy spirits with wind turbine headdresses alongside avatars of climate change and pollution sporting gas masks and wild-fire inspired garb. To what extent our future is characterized by one or the other likely lies in the hands of governments. Even so, groups like Earth Celebrations are a reminder that sustainability is just as important — and all the more attainable — at the street level.



## A perfect storm of eco action and pageantry

May 10, 2018 | Filed under: News,Community,Scene | Posted by: The Villager



Artist-in-residence Lucrecia Novoa, with an "earth spirit" head, above, and volunteers made costumes and giant puppets at Loisaída Inc. for the pageant. Photos by Sarah Ferguson

BY SARAH FERGUSON | There's a last-minute frenzy building across the Lower East Side, as performers and activists finalize their costumes and scripts for the Ecological City Pageant that's happening Sat., May 12, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Orchestrated by local artist Felicia Young, this six-hour procession is like a roving theatrical production to dramatize our collective efforts to confront climate change.

And like New York's annual Village Halloween Parade, it's always better to be in it than to spectate.

"This is not a parade to watch, but a transformational experience," said Young, who hopes that by enacting mythic dramas about our climate plight, we may engage more deeply in seeking common-ground solutions.

Part passion play, part "eco pilgrimage," the event's aim is to help us envision a greener, more sustainable city.

Young and her nonprofit Earth Celebrations have partnered with more than 50 community and arts groups to put on the pageant, but they are hoping to attract many more participants.

They're inviting people to show up on May 12 and throw on a garden sprite costume or help carry one of the giant puppet ensembles that volunteers and artists have created during the last three months. They're also looking for people to help paint faces, marshal the crowd and videotape events. To sign up, go to [earthcelebrations.com/volunteer-ecological-city-sign](http://earthcelebrations.com/volunteer-ecological-city-sign).



Pedro Alomar showed off one of the "climate change spirit" costumes he helped sew and paint at the workshop space at Loisaída Inc.

But it's also fine to just dip into the spectacle anywhere along the route. Led by samba players and Afro-Dominican percussionists, costumed dancers and bicycle floats, the march will set off at 11 a.m. at Loisaída Inc. on E. Ninth St. between Avenues C and D. Some 20 different site performances will be staged at various community gardens and street corners along the route, and at the closing ceremonies along the East River.

Highlights include an "upcycling" performance, featuring dancers in plastic bags performing to Vivaldi's "Concerto in F Major" (El Sol Brillante garden on E. 12th St. between A and B); a "mythic" battle between "pollution pirates" and garden river spirits at La Plaza Cultural (E. Ninth St. at Avenue C); and an "aria for climate solutions" sung by mezzo soprano Kat Hall (Parque de Tranquilidad, E. Fourth St. near Avenue C).

Earth School students in handcrafted headdresses will stage a ceremony to honor the green roof at their school, where giant paintings of vegetables will be strung across the facade. Folkie Stephan Said will sing an homage to the pond at Sixth St. and Avenue B Garden.

The pageant will coalesce around 4 p.m. in East River Park. Vangelina Theater is doing a butoh dance about pollution runoff (near the park's Sixth St. bridge entrance); and a group called Not Fog will stage an interdisciplinary work about sea-level rise (at the painted labyrinth near Houston St.). Members of GOLES (Good Old Lower East Side) and LES Ready! are staging a play about surviving Hurricane Sandy beneath the Williamsburg Bridge, directed by Drew Vanderberg.

There will also be a "water dance" by choreographer Jody Sperling and Art of Motion. At the finale, a goddess sculpture made of bio-remediating mud will be "sacrificed" to the river. In addition, Crystal Field has composed a tribute to the Ecological City, to be sung by the Theater for the New City Chorus.

"It's all about allowing people to really connect through making stuff," said volunteer coordinator Christian Tandazo. "There's a lot of concern about the environment. So, the idea is to use creativity to allow people to connect with each other in a more human and passionate way."

## Eco City Pageant will celebrate wide array of local green efforts

March 7, 2018 | Filed under: News, Community | Posted by: The Villager

**BY SARAH FERGUSON** | For artist Felicia Young, the process of making art is as important as the outcome.

Twenty-seven years ago, she envisioned a pageant to help save the Lower East Side's community gardens. The annual "Rites of Spring Procession to Save Our Gardens," which wended its way around the neighborhood from 1991 to 2005, helped tell the story of these communally-tilled spaces, at a time when the city, under Mayor Giuliani, was seeking to auction garden lots for private development.

By bringing together the area's disparate gardeners and greening activists, that pageant helped spark the creation of the Lower East Side Community Garden Preservation Coalition, which in turn became a catalyst for the citywide New York City Garden Coalition — a grassroots trajectory that succeeded in preserving more than 400 garden sites.

Now Young is hard at work on another community pageant, this one built around the theme of the "Ecological City."



Artist Michele Brody, above, is incorporating live grasses and plants into her designs for the giant puppets and "ceremonial totems" to be carried during the Ecological City Pageant. Photo by Felicia Young

The six-hour event, which takes place Sat., May 12, will showcase the various climate resiliency projects that have sprung up in the East Village and Lower East Side in the wake of Hurricane Sandy — everything from bioswales that are being installed in community gardens to absorb storm runoff, to the solar grid that's being erected at Village East Towers on Avenue C, and the "living berm" / "Big U" seawall that will line the East River to fend off rising tides.

"I don't think there's any other neighborhood — certainly not in New York City — where you could find all these different sites where climate solutions are happening," Young said.

"It's easy to feel helpless with the Trump administration and their willful political assault on the environment," she pointed out. "But communities are envisioning pathways to an ecologically sustainable future. It's happening right here on the Lower East Side; so, this pageant is a way to connect the dots between the solutions that exist now and what's being proposed.

"The idea is we're not just creating an art project. It's also a form of organizing and mobilizing through the arts," explained Young.

Her past projects include the Hudson River Pageant — held annually from 2009 to 2012 — to honor water restoration efforts on the West Side, and another one she staged in 2015 in Madurai, India, to address the pollution crisis in the sacred Vaigai River.

Young first pitched the concept of the Ecological City Pageant to the LES community during the LUNGS Harvest Festival last September. Since then more than 50 local organizations have come on board.

"The planning meeting we had in February was packed," she said. "It's bringing together the old crew of all the people I knew from the gardens and that struggle. It's really nice to see everyone committed again and moving together."



A sketch of a "Climate Consequences" character designed by artist Michele Brody. Volunteers will be helping Brody construct this character and other puppets and costumes for the Ecological City pageant, from now until May 9. Photo by Felicia Young

The shape of the event is all still very much in process, and Young said she welcomes input. She and her nonprofit group, Earth Celebrations, are holding a series of free workshops where adults and teens can collaborate with artists Lucrecia Novoa and Michele Brody to craft the giant puppets, costumes and props for the pageant. Workshops are happening Wednesdays, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturdays, from noon to 4 p.m., at the Loisa Inc. Center, at 710 E. Ninth St., between Avenues C and D.

The plan is to parade to 15 sites in the East Village / LES, including a “mythic battle between climate consequences versus climate solutions” to be staged at La Plaza Cultural, on E. Ninth St. (Young is still searching for a spoken-word poet to help out with the script.) There will also be an elaborate closing ceremony on the East River, where a giant Gaia sculpture created from bio-remediating mud balls will be “sacrificed” to the water gods, accompanied by Butoh dance and a choir performance by Theater for the New City.

The Lower Eastside Girls Club is creating solar-energy bike floats.

Dancer Jody Sperling — who has performed on ice floes in Antarctica — is choreographing a piece about water quality with local youth to honor the gray-water system that is going in at the LES Ecology Center.



Earth Celebrations’ “Procession to Save Our Gardens” was held annually from 1991 to 2005 on the Lower East Side. The eight-hour procession visited 47 gardens with performances and ceremonies telling the history and struggle to save the community gardens from slated development plans. Photo by Vince Eng

Local children are crafting butterfly and bee costumes to celebrate the Sixth St. Community Center’s new bee farm and the Earth School’s rooftop veggie garden.

And theater director Drew Vanderburg is working with public housing residents to create a short play about rising floodwaters to be staged beneath the Williamsburg Bridge.

“It’s all about engaging people who wouldn’t ordinarily be involved, or who wouldn’t consider themselves as activists,” Young explained, “and yet they do find an entry point for engaging on this issue — whether it’s kids and parents creating art projects to illustrate the impacts of climate change or groups like GOLES and LES Ready!, who are trying to work with NYCHA tenants living along the East River on disaster preparedness.

“It’s pretty hard to get people excited about disaster preparedness,” she noted. “Most people don’t even want to think about it. But you can engage them through performance, and with something that’s fun, and which you can take part in at all different levels.”

Young concedes she’ll need an army to pull off this event. She’s hoping to recruit hundreds of volunteers to help with everything from sewing sprite costumes to marshaling the parade, distributing postcards, and videotaping and promoting the event on social media.

Ultimately, Young hopes the Ecological City Pageant will illustrate the cumulative value of local actions to strengthen our environment — both to reinforce those efforts and to put pressure on City Hall and Albany to do more.

“Both Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo have pledged to meet the carbon-reduction goals outlined in the Paris Climate Accord, even though [President] Trump pulled out of it,” Young noted.

“So they’re financing all these sustainability projects — even though the mayor is doing things like working to destroy the Elizabeth St. Garden [in Nolita].

“It doesn’t make sense,” she said. “So this is about looking at the larger impact of what it means for the city and state to meet our climate goals, so we can have this model to look at and reaffirm it.”

For information or to register for the free puppet and costume workshops, visit [www.earthcelebrations.com](http://www.earthcelebrations.com).

# The New York Times

By Laurel Graeber

May 10, 2018

**ECOLOGICAL CITY** at various locations in the East Village and on the Lower East Side (May 12, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.). You can encounter characters of all kinds on the streets of New York City, but how often do you get to march with river sprites, earth gods, garden spirits and various towering flora? They'll be out in force for this extravaganza, more of a participatory pageant than a parade. Presented by [Earth Celebrations](#), an environmental and arts nonprofit founded by [Felicia Young](#), **Ecological City** employs mobile sculpture, giant puppets and costumed performers to celebrate conservation, sustainability and solutions to climate change. Starting at the Loisaida Inc. Center, the procession will spend the day offering theater, poetry, music and dance at various sites, ending with a river-cleansing ceremony at the waterfront in East River Park. (A [full schedule](#) is on the website; the rain date is Sunday.)  
*212-777-7969, [earthcelebrations.com](#)*

# The New York Times

By Laurel Graeber

March 29, 2018

**ECOLOGICAL CITY — ART AND ECOLOGY PUPPET AND COSTUME WORKSHOPS** at the [Loisaida Center](#) (through May 9). For centuries, art and activism have gone together. [Felicia Young](#), the founder and executive director of the Lower East Side nonprofit Earth Celebrations, has united them in an annual spring pageant and parade of giant puppets, mobile sculptures, costumed characters and site-specific performances. Originally dedicated to the preservation of New York City's community gardens, Ms. Young's efforts have evolved into [Ecological City](#), an arts and environmental action project to promote sustainability and combat climate change. She welcomes young people 12 and older to participate in these [free workshops](#) (registration is required) to make costumes with the artist [Michele Brody](#) (on Wednesdays, 6-9 p.m.) and puppets with the artist [Lucrecia Novoa](#) (on Saturdays, noon-4 p.m.). The creations will become part of the six-hour Ecological City Pageant on May 12.

*212-777-7969, [earthcelebrations.com](#)*

# Town & Village

Stuyvesant Town, Peter Cooper Village, Gramercy, Waterside

May 18, 2018 Parade shines light on environment



Costumed dancers from the Artichoke dance company perform as part of the procession that made 20 stops along the East Village and Lower East Side. (Photos by Kristin Reimer for Earth Celebrations' Ecological City-Procession for Climate Solutions)

By Sabina Molot

On Saturday, hundreds of costumed revelers walked, marched and danced their way through the East Village and the Lower East Side for a day-long event aimed at celebrating local green spaces, the East River and sustainability efforts.

The event was organized by Lower East Sider, artist and activist Felicia Young, who has a long history of similar events aimed at (successfully) saving community gardens, through her organization Earth Celebrations. Participants in the event, which was modeled after pageants in India, where hundreds of celebrants from multiple communities take part, made 20 stops throughout the neighborhood.

A few included Campos Garden on East 12th Street between Avenues B and C, El Sol Brillante Garden an avenue to the west, the Earth School on East 6th Street and by the day's end, East River Park for oyster planting and a river cleansing dance.

Young later said that she'd personally been in communication with 500 people in different organizations who were involved in the event somehow, and that it was the culmination of two years' work. But unlike the previous costume parades she's organized since the 90s that were aimed at keeping community gardens from getting bulldozed by developers, this time, it was more about connecting local environmental activists and drawing attention to their projects from rooftop beehives to vertical farming (food grown on sides of buildings) to a rickshaw-driven compost collective. Along with interpretive dances, other participants sang songs or read poems that were specific to the East Village procession's stops.



Young said she was also inspired by communal art projects in a Nigerian community she'd learned about as an art history student at Skidmore College, in which residents would build large-scale works, usually in response to a social calamity.

"It's not art as decoration. They commit to it as a community process," said Young. "Like an elaborate mud hut representing a god. Then they leave it to decay. I said, 'That's exactly the kind of thing we needed.' Ephemeral and in response to some social problem. I don't know if I believe the magic of it, like all of a sudden malaria or drought goes away, but I do feel that the solidarity is what strengthens the community."

Her first procession was in response to the AIDS crisis in 1988. She was a gallery coordinator in Tribeca and got sick of what felt like preaching to the choir with politically-charged installations that would only reach arts scene insiders. So she suggested doing a Dio de Los Muertos-style procession to City Hall, working with homeless shelters and poets. She wound up using that type of event over the years to draw attention to the fact that gardens maintained by Lower East Side volunteers were at risk of being reclaimed by the city. After getting gardeners involved in processions she wound up, without really intending to, becoming a community organizer, warning the gardeners she knew whenever their green spaces were on the agenda for redevelopment at local community board meetings. While many of those gardens ended up being saved by an unexpected ally — Mayor Michael Bloomberg — Young said she is once again concerned about the future of those spaces — this time because of natural disasters.

"The wakeup call came from Hurricane Sandy," she said. "On this side of Manhattan, you have a much more vulnerable community."

*Correction: The print version of this article incorrectly stated that Young was in coordination with 50 people, while the correct number is 500. Additionally, Young wanted to clarify that she is still more concerned about the community gardens being redeveloped for market-rate housing than being destroyed by flooding.*