



Climate Change, Sustainability
and Socio-ecological Practices

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Editors

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When Culture Meets Sustainability

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Abstract: Social change towards more sustainable lifestyles is not caused and implemented by normative directives and political decisions alone. Cultural production can act as a factor that promotes or prevents public awareness of the worldwide challenges we face today. On the one hand, high and popular artworks attract local and global audiences and impact the social imaginaries of many. On the other hand, what we call culture has a long-term effect. Culture constitutes accumulated resources, material or immaterial, which individuals inherit, use, change, add to, and transmit. When socially recognised and valued, the cultural elements handed down from generation to generation become heritage, linking the already-dead to the not-yet-born.

This brief essay explores why culture matters for sustainability and how creative and artistic endeavours may sharpen people's consciousness of their actions and aspirations, promote feelings of responsibility for the environment, and trigger civic agency in the face of a climate and ecological emergency. The argumentative framework draws from recent developments in the disciplinary subfields of the sociology of culture and the arts and the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies.

These pages also approach the so-called ecological turn in the arts, demonstrating its plausibility through empirical analyses of examples from the plastic, visual, and performing arts that currently cover an array of environmental topics, from natural disasters to climate change, helping us cope with the precariousness of near and distant scenarios. All art pieces were selected from a single-case study conducted in Quinta do Pisão, a nature park on the outskirts of Cascais, a coastal town west of Lisbon, in Portugal. Three open-air art installations or interventions, part of the broad movement known as land art or environmental art, are briefly reviewed and contextualised.

The findings, even if quite provisory and limited, reinforce the idea that environmentalism is already established within the art world. The ecological ethics of twenty-first-century artworks are, in fact, integral to their overall aesthetic value. However, further research is needed to understand how artworks may reach individuals and society and how their webs of significance can be bequeathed to future generations.

Keywords: *Arts, culture, sustainability, land art, Quinta do Pisão, Cascais, Portugal*

1 Preliminary Insights

Anthropogenic climate change is a pressing societal issue that requires immediate action. Its irreversible impacts will last for centuries and can no longer be overlooked. Such ecological disequilibrium requires an unprecedented metamorphosis involving both the macro-level of the world and the micro-level of daily existence (Beck, 2016). There is little doubt that truly transformative actions must have, as their horizon, an environmentally sustainable way of living. At least sustainability has been the buzzword of the last decades, but we still struggle to determine how it will be reached. This is also a serious cultural challenge.

Art is essential in highlighting the imperfections of our world, disturbing assumptions taken for granted, and encouraging us to consider new perspectives. Once publicly accessible, art compels us to look for deeper cultural meanings that the aesthetically shaped surfaces often conceal more than reveal (Alexander, 2008). Art might call attention to the most controversial, urgent issues and catalyse conversations around utopian or dystopian representations of future scenarios. More nuanced, art is not entirely self-sufficient and does not merely reflect the artist's concerns. Various factors contribute to how a work of art is conceived and perceived, including its possible appearance, purpose, intended audience, and the questions it raises.

Over the last few years, I have been interested in the influential role of heritage, culture, and the arts (e.g. Gonçalves, 2013, 2022). This short essay represents a new step in a long-lasting journey. Yet, the coronavirus pandemic played a significant role in this small-scale, low-budget study. During the lockdown, people were not authorised to leave their homes or walk further than a few kilometres. All moments outside were restrained to the orbit of the housings, for example, in the nearby public parks. One of those became my improvised research setting.

In the pages ahead, I will generically address the ecological turn in art based on an exemplary empirical case study and drawing from the conceptual apparatus of the disciplinary subfields of the sociology of culture and the arts and the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies (e.g. Kagan, 2011; Baker, 2019).

2 Setting Up the Terrain: Quinta do Pisão, Cascais, Portugal

Quinta do Pisão (literally, fulling mill farm)¹ is a 380-hectare nature park located on the southern slope of the Sintra Mountain at the western edge of the Cascais municipality. Whilst anthropised it may be, Pisão is covered by overlapping protection types and levels, being fully inserted in the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park and 2000 Natura Network. As a pleasuring area attracts visitors for the mosaic of ecosystems — forest, meadows, woodlands, farmlands, streams and ponds — offering just as many ecological opportunities for a large number of species and enabling wide-ranging experiences, such as hiking, cycling or donkey riding; birdwatching, wildlife watching, plant observation; harvesting organic crops straight from the farm; and the chance to contemplate recent land art installations.

Throughout history, the area had various landowners, residents, and forms of land utilisation. The oldest evidence of human occupation comes from the natural cave of Porto Côvo, which is thought to have been used, albeit not continuously, as a necropolis in prehistoric times. As may be supposed, such a vast territory comprises vestiges of historic rustic properties, such as the Casal de Porto Côvo, the Quinta do Copeiro (also known as Pisão Velho) and the Quinta dos Perrinhos (or Pilrinhos).

For a decade and a half now, Quinta do Pisão has been hosting a regularly recurring exhibition that promotes artistic works rooted in environmental aesthetics. This cultural event has brought clear benefits to publicising the nature park and presenting and promoting a mode of artmaking called land art.

It is worth emphasising that land art, also known as earth art, ecological art, or art in nature, has boomed since the late 1960s, with the simultaneous rise of environmentalism, especially in Western societies. The artists classified under these labels explore crossovers between art and environment, creating site-specific artworks and using natural elements to intervene and modify the landscape. The artworks are made outdoors, in situ, destined to perish, to be naturally degradable and assimilable by nature. By taking concrete form in the public space and becoming accessible to all, the art installation pieces suggest that their creators also seek to establish a closer connection with the audience. Rather than an aesthetic experience in the traditional sense, this art form is as much to be seen as it is to be explored, given that it is a hodological experience that involves a journey and incorporates travel constraints (Riado, 2020).

Table 1. Artists Exhibited at LandArt CASCAIS from 2009 to 2022

Artists	Editions	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
		1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th
Alberto Carneiro		•									
Ana Vieira					•						
André Banha						•					
António Bolota							•				
Amanda Duarte											•
Bruno Cidra								•			
Catarina Câmara Pereira					•						
Cristina Ataíde			•								
Edgar Massul								•			
Eduardo Malé					•						
Fernanda Fragateiro				•							
Filipe Feijão										•	
Hamish Fulton		•									
Ilda David'										•	
Inês Botelho									•		
João Castro Silva			•								
João Ferro Martins							•				
Joaquim Pombal			•								
José de Guimarães									•		
José Pedro Croft						•					
Luís Valente					•						
Manon Harrois											•
Manuel Rosa										•	
Manuela Pacheco			•								
Maria José Oliveira										•	
Mariana Dias Coutinho								•			
Mariana Gomes											•
Marisa Alves			•								
Marta Wengorovius							•				
Meireles de Pinho			•								
Miguel Ângelo Rocha						•					
Orlando Franco						•					
Paulo Neves			•								
Pedro Cabral Santo									•		
Rablaci					•						
Ricardo Lalande					•						
Robert Smithson (1938-1973)				•							
Samuel Rama				•							
Sara Bichão											•
Susana Anágua			•								
Susana Neves		•									
Susana Tereso					•						

Note: The author elaborated this table using secondary data available in exhibition catalogues from 2009 to 2022.

The first edition of the LandArt Cascais exhibition was held in the late 2000s in the town centre. It was organised by the Cascais Natura Agency and the Environment Department of Cascais Town Council, with artistic supervision by the D. Luís I Foundation. According to the deputy mayor's statement at the time, Land Art — hand in hand with another art show, ArteMar Estoril — intended to instil the crucial value of sustainable development in the people of Cascais, particularly the exhibitions' visitors. It would also ensure the quality of life for all and democratise culture, opening art, in all its many forms, to all generations and social strata.

In 2010, the organisers of the Land Art exhibition decided to move the event to the Pisão area. They invited several reputable Portuguese artists to showcase their work in the new location. The art productions have clustered around installation and sculpture, implying venues able to provide the resources, scale, and public prominence required by these works. Since the second edition, LandArt Cascais has become the most recognisable cultural event in Quinta do Pisão, and from the mid-2010s onwards, it became an art biennial.

3 In the Land of Art: outlines from Three Sculptural/Installation Works

In close association with the biennial exhibition of Land Art, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Cascais City Council delegation of the European Environment Agency has invited internationally renowned artists to create site-specific works during artistic residencies at Quinta do Pisão. As we will see, these are the cases of *Rise and Fall*, authored by Stuart Ian Frost; *Daydreamer*, by Will Beckers; and *One Seed Created a Forest*, by Roger Rigorth. All three artworks share common traits: they boldly cross the boundary between sculpture and installation art, incorporate the surrounding environment in their very form, and, therefore, cannot be moved from where they were created and displayed.

To gain a deeper understanding of each work of art, I gathered information from various sources, including the artwork captions, artists' websites, reviews in periodicals, and statements by mayors, curators, and artists themselves. These sources gave me valuable insights into the artists' perspectives and intentions. Additionally, during the fieldwork in the Quinta do Pisão, I took photographs, shot short videos, and wrote notes to document my observations systematically. The following review of the selected artworks has been prepared using the data collected.

Rise and Fall
Stuart Ian Frost, 2018

Following the Porto Côvo trail, close to the historic lime kiln, a single eucalyptus trunk, smooth, slightly twisted, with several branches, bare of foliage, stands out in the natural scenery (figure 1). Tragically, this 15-meter Tasmanian blue eucalyptus (*eucalyptus globulus*) died due to the severe drought that hit the region in the summer of 2017. Stuart Ian Frost, a British artist based in Norway, has etched deep into the trunk's and broad limbs' surface hundreds of clusters of four cylindrical holes with different diameters, forming symbolic raindrops or tears (figure 2). If the drops of water are a vital resource, the tears express attachment and loss. One sustains or regenerates with rain, drizzle, dew, and droplets; with the welling-up and overflowing of the eyes, one surrenders or succumbs. *Rise and Fall* is not a general metaphor for the natural life cycle and the passing of time as it might sound. Instead, it displays the telluric vulnerability of all living beings and prognoses that the climate is already changing. This artwork is quite disquieting and evokes contrasting feelings of hopefulness in the desired nature and hopelessness in the face of the feared nature.

More recently, the tree trunk was cut down for safety reasons. According to the Quinta do Pisão's staff, the weather-beaten, lifeless eucalyptus was in danger of falling. Surprisingly, this unfortunate amputation adds more *gravitas* to Frost's initial contribution (figure 3).

Figure 1. Standing Eucalyptus
(11 September 2011)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. Detail of the Drops
Falling (1 April 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 3. Amputee Eucalyptus
(3 February 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 4. Fallen Eucalyptus (23 March 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Daydreamer
Will Beckers, 2019

Climbing the stone steps that lead to the top of the decommissioned lime kiln and walking along the path accessible to blind and visually impaired outdoor enthusiasts, a small clearing appears on the right, surrounded mainly by maritime pines (*pinus pinaster*), some oaks and a bursting eucalyptus tree. In that spot, environmental artist Will Beckers created a hut-like structure, mostly made of skilfully interwoven tree branches (Figure 5), supported by a row of wooden columns stretching around the entire interior enclosure (Figure 6). At the heart of the fragile shelter, a skylight-like opening allows a glimpse of the sky, clouds, and trees (Figure 7). This artisanal structure, called *Daydreamer*, serves as a doorway to self-reflection, retrospection, and nature contemplation. It's a rustic refuge to slow down, sit quietly, close your eyes, and breathe in the natural scents that follow the season's rhythms while listening to the wind in the pines and birds chirping on branches. Beckers' project is sensitive to impermanence and aims to represent the fleeting nature of life and the cyclical process of regeneration in the natural world. Visitors are invited to take a place and feel part of the environment. By immersing ourselves in nature, we can let it resonate within us and reconcile us with it. Light filters through the interwoven branches. The interplay of light and shadow, the natural textures, and the surroundings' soundscape gives everyone — impaired or otherwise — an aesthetic and sense experience of the sculpture.

Figure 5. External entwinement (3 February 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. Internal entwinement (3 February 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. The skylight-like opening (3 February 2024)



Photograph by the author.

One Seed Creates a Forest
Roger Rigorth, 2024 –

On the right bank of the Porto Côvo stream, alongside a narrow-leaved ash (*Fraxinus angustifolia*), and just a few steps away from the former lime warehouse, which now houses the interpretation centre and the farm shop, is an art installation created by Swiss (now living in Germany) environmental artist Roger Rigorth. The artist has installed two hand-woven acorn-like structures of different dimensions to a Quercus Sober oak, an endemic tree species safeguarded by Portuguese law (figures 8, 9, 10, 11). The shape of the acorn (a seed as much as a fruit) takes on symbolic importance, summoning the ecosystem's invisible mechanisms and strategies for reproduction, which allow it to protect itself, adapt, and evolve. A seed hypothetically grants species survival and generational renewal. Seed dispersal and seedling establishment – often animal-mediated – may lend to an endless forestation (or reforestation) process. And so, the artwork *One Seed Creates a Forest* reminds us that proper regeneration can occur.

The hand-twisted ropes, made of natural fibres, and skilled crafted iron structure used in the sculptural work are reminiscent of ancient craftsmanship. The elements catch the viewer's attention, arousing their curiosity and leaving them free to decide the meaning of what they see.

Figure 8. The cork oak (*quercus suber*) (23 March 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 9. Two acorns (*achene*), handwoven using plant-based fibres (3 February 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. Bigger acorn (*achene*), handwoven using plant-based fibres (1 April 2024)



Photograph by the author.

Figure 11. Smaller acorn (*achene*), handwoven using plant-based fibres (23 March 2024)



Photograph by the author.

4 Closing remarks

This essay uses the question recently raised by Fabian Holt (Holt, 2022) — “How (...) might the arts be a meaningful and relevant subject of sociological inquiry in the era of climate change?” — to pursue a brief empirical exploration. Even if there are no easy answers or ready-made solutions, there is a need to fashion case studies suitable for the ecological crisis that could yield a deeper understanding of how and why culture matters. The arts can no longer be seen as a frivolous matter.

By bringing the community's concerns into the public realm, contemporary artworks still have the potential to critique and emancipate society. Art can often alter our perceptions of what is and is not visible, thinkable, and understandable. Such is the latent power of cultural stuff.

It is quite questionable whether the artists' work might achieve the intended effects. At best, it will only accomplish a little in public opinion; at worst, it will be pointless. Yet, we must make room to acknowledge the artworks' impacts (as opposed to the artists' intentions). What kind of commitment to the environment does the artwork elicit in their putative audiences? Will passive or caring art receptors change their priorities and do something different in the face of everyday situations? These are still now open problems.

To conclude these few remarks, we must look beyond, address more questions, and conduct detailed examinations to clarify the transformative power of art in the journey towards sustainability, how it operates and what variables are involved.

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Methodological Appendix

This explorative research is based on an in-depth case study analysis, which involves collecting data and making empirical observations in one setting: Quinta do Pisão, a natural park in Cascais, a coastal resort town west of the Portuguese capital. The fieldwork began during the COVID-19 pandemic and is ongoing. New advancements will depend on applications for research funds and should investigate how the artworks are received and their effects on the visitors.

Many sources and research data have fed the study. The primary data embrace a wide range of forms (e.g., video recordings, photographs, field notes, casual

conversations and email correspondence with key informants). The secondary data sources used include the Land Art Cascais exhibition catalogues (2009-2022) deposited in the digital library of the D. Luis I Foundation and on the Cascais City Council websites, artwork captions, artists' websites, and reviews in periodicals. All provide accurate data on each work of art, including statements by the mayors, curators, and artists, offering insights into their artistic perspectives and political intentions.

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Biographical Note

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Notes

1. The place name is associated with evidence of fulling mills in the area, although Quinta do Pisão has not preserved any of these structures or machinery. When the Real Fábrica de Lanifícios de Cascais (Royal Wool Factory of Cascais) was founded in 1774, the looms were manual, and the cloths were loosely woven and easily unravelled. For this reason, they had to be beaten to tighten and amalgamate the fibres and remove excess hair and fat. Filling mills were, therefore, infrastructures designed to crush fabrics. They were rustic constructions in which a wooden mill used two large water-powered mallets, alternately beating the fabric. As they were not abundant in the country, the Royal Factory had to find a water mill that could be adapted for the task. As the Copeiro farm, in Pisão Velho, already had a water mill, the wool fabrics were first macerated there and later, probably to make the operation more profitable, at the neighbouring Perrinhos (or Pilrinhos) farm, where two new filling mills were installed.



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