Activist Art and Ecological Art: Exploring the Interplay of Culture, Environment, and Society, Artistic Approaches, and Cultural Production Contexts

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Abstract

Environmental activism, expressed through art, prompts an educational process, generating reflections and evoking a sense of vulnerability experienced by human bodies before the reality of the climate emergency (Rodriguez-Labajos, 2022). Because ecological art sparks subjective responses aimed at raising awareness and driving action on socio-environmental concerns, this theoretical, reflective, and interpretive article seeks to explore the concepts of "activist art", "ecological art", and analogous designations in order to analyse the interplay between culture, environment, and society and the conditions shaping cultural production practices. In pursuit of this objective, our inquiry delved into the framework of Félix Guattari's concept of "eco-art" (1989/1990), the nature of ecological art approaches and the primary environmental causes they address, the contextual landscape in which environmental activist art practices unfolds and the dynamics of cultural production. Examples from Portuguese artists and projects were used to elucidate the nuances of creative practices and strategies linked to environmental sustainability, aspects relating to environmental education, ethical issues and cultural policies that align with ecological art. This article aims to contribute to the discussion on ecological art by exploring the political identity of art and emphasising the indispensable and inherent analysis between cultural practices and the environment.

Keywords

ecological art, environmental art activism, culture and environment, political identity of art, cultural production

Arte Ativista e Arte Ecológica: Uma Discussão Sobre a Relação Entre Cultura, Ambiente e Sociedade, Abordagens Artísticas e Contextos de Produção Cultural

Resumo

O ativismo ambiental, através da arte, estimula um processo de educação, ao mesmo tempo que gera reflexões e uma experiência de vulnerabilidade sentida pelos corpos humanos diante da realidade da emergência climática (Rodriguez-Labajos, 2022). Devido às subjetividades desencadeadas pela arte ecológica para a consciência e ação sobre as questões socioambientais, este artigo, de cunho teórico, reflexivo e interpretativo, tem o objetivo de abordar os conceitos de "arte ativismo", "arte ecológica" e outras nomenclaturas análogas, de forma a analisar a relação entre cultura, ambiente e sociedade e as condições por meio das quais as práticas de produção cultural se desenvolvem. Para tanto, procurou-se compreender a perspetiva das três ecologias e

da noção de "ecoarte" de Félix Guattari (1989/1990); a natureza das abordagens de arte ecológica e as principais causas ambientais associadas; o contexto em que ocorrem as práticas artísticas de ativismo ambiental e a atividade de produção cultural. Recorreu-se a exemplos de artistas e projetos portugueses para perceber: as particularidades das práticas e das estratégias criativas ligadas à sustentabilidade ambiental; os aspetos referentes à educação ambiental, às questões éticas e às políticas culturais que se adequam à arte ecológica. Com este artigo, pretende-se contribuir para a discussão sobre a arte ecológica sob a ótica da identidade política da arte e da análise necessária e intrínseca entre práticas culturais e ambiente.

Palavras-chave

arte ecológica, ativismo artístico ambiental, cultura e ambiente, identidade política da arte, produção cultural

1. Introduction

This article sets out to delve into the concepts of "activist art"[1] and "ecological art" through a theoretical review that considers the interplay between culture, the environment, and society. It invites reflection on the various artistic approaches and the nuances that shape cultural production practices. In the context of activist art, it addresses the relationship between art and resistance, underlining the political role of art. Drawing from Rancière's work (2007), we understand the assertion that politics is a fundamental dimension of art's identity, and the preservation of the tension between these domains (art/politics) is crucial for the effectiveness of resistance. Regarding ecological art, the focus was on presenting the various approaches on which ecological artistic practices develop. Amidst the diverse and non-consensual array of approaches presented (Kagan, 2014; Ribeiro & Almeida, 2021; Rodriguez-Labajos, 2022; Sanz & Rodriguez-Labajos, 2021; Wallen, 2012), one can observe artistic practices that both highlight and inform audiences about environmental issues. These practices also explore the dialogical interplay between multiple areas and themes, shedding light on numerous aspects associated with climate change, including the failure to preserve biodiversity, waste generation, overexploitation and excessive use of fossil fuels, as well as concerns regarding water quality and availability, among others. From the standpoint of the close connection between artistic and cultural practices and socio-environmental struggles, the concept of eco-art was reviewed through the contribution of Félix Guattari (1989/1990), emphasising his three ecologies — mental, social and environmental — and the ethical-aesthetic alignment the philosopher termed as "ecosophy".

Amplifying the environmental dimension in cultural discourse is crucial, especially considering the tendency of political, governmental, and market entities to employ rhetoric accompanied by superficial actions in sustainable development, the disregard or neglect of the concept of coexistence between society and the environment, coupled with the ignorance stemming from a lack of political will to understand environmental issues

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[1] Art activism, also known by the terms "activist art" and "artivism", lacks consensus regarding its terminology. These terms are used interchangeably by different authors, as explained in Section 3. This article opts to use the term "activist art".

within a situational and temporal evolving context. Raymond Williams' (1961) position on culture as a nexus connecting various spheres, in *The Long Revolution*, holds particular significance for this context, allowing the democratic use of the notion of "culture" to advocate for social change (Cevasco, 2003). The notion of "culture" aligned with this integrative perspective upholds Williams' (1998) vision of culture as encompassing a way of life, practices, emotions and articulated thoughts (Ribeiro, 2017).

This article adheres to the theoretical and epistemological principles of cultural studies, adopting a theoretical, reflective, and interpretive approach. The author's perspective — who has 14 years of experience as a cultural producer — also informs the methodological investment. The discussion was contextualised through examples of artists and projects and their practices related to environmental activism, with a particular emphasis on the Portuguese context. In Section 2, this article presents a reflection on the contexts in which the creative processes of ecological art develop, either shaping the creative processes of ecological art, exploring conceptual notions of "culture" and "environment", or mentioning the role of cultural policies and the economy of culture. Sections 3 and 4 provide a theoretical overview of aspects relating to activist art and ecological art. In Section 5, the perspective of cultural goods production is underscored through the lens of professional activity of cultural production to provide examples of Portuguese artists and projects and their potential for fostering education and environmental sustainability.

2. Culture, Environment and Cultural Production

From the standpoint of knowledge production and critical thought inherent in cultural studies, it constitutes an integral component in fostering constant intellectual self-reflection and scrutiny of scientific output concerning societal phenomena (Hall, 1992). To this end, it is essential to contemplate the critical intersection between political and intellectual work and academic work, as delineated by Walsh (2012), to enable broad, dialogical discussions about society and its cultural concerns, a discourse that inherently and urgently encompasses the environmental context. In this paper's case, such a perspective is exemplified by an examination of environmental issues through a cultural analysis, which initiates a process of theorising about artistic practices and socio-environmental struggles. Engaging with environmental issues through artistic critique inevitably involves confronting reality and human responsibility for climate change. Raymond Williams' position, which posits that culture is interwoven with diverse spheres such as the economic, ideological, and historical (Cevasco, 2003), underscores the need to include the environmental dimension into the debate, as it ensures what Williams referred to, according to Cevasco, as a democratic use of the notion of "culture" that holds the potential for fostering social change. In essence, culture remains at the heart of social struggles across various approaches. For Williams (1998), a definition of culture should encompass not only intellectual, educational, and artistic output but also institutional

practices and modes of human behaviour. This requires examining social meanings and values and the entirety of human creative activity.

Considering the multi-relational nature of the array of cultural transformations shaping contemporary human existence (Hall, 1980), it becomes essential to adopt a comprehensive definition of the concept of "environment" that integrates environment, society, and culture into a unified vision. Hence, as noted by Freitas (2008), "the environment is intricately linked to both nature encompassing human and non-human environments, and to the social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions" (p. 26). Furthermore, Gorz (2011) states that the term "ecology" refers to environmental principles and awareness of the consequences that capitalist modes of production have on the environment. The concept of "environment" also relates to the dialogue between public managers, civil society actors, the private sector and academics on issues such as environmental management, sustainable development and the creation of a culture of sustainable responsibility (Nações Unidas, 2023). The notion of the physical environment seems to be as present in this concept as the concern for societal well-being in terms of sustainability and social and political participation and collaboration, which configures a multidimensional view of the concept, as is the case with the definition of "sustainability", according to Jacobi (2003). In this vein, it is important to consider factors such as environmental quality and justice (Nascimento, 2012), which are not always encompassed by multidimensional approaches to the "sustainability" concept.

Guattari (1989/1990) reinforces the idea of integrating culture, environment and society as he discusses the three types of ecologies, which together contribute to an expanded notion of subjectivity. In this sense, tackling contemporary environmental challenges requires reconciling mental, social and environmental ecologies. In other words, comprehending the environmental crisis entails not only understanding the physical degradation of planet Earth but also considering social, socio-environmental, and subjective aspects. This suggests new paradigms for imagining and analysing production and consumption, as well as new approaches to thinking, living, experimenting, and fighting, encapsulated by Guattari's concept of "ecosophy." This fusion of ecology and philosophy would represent a new way of being and thinking about contemporary society and, therefore, contemplates a perspective of subjectivity marked by the singularisation of experiences and a functional multicentrism that diverges from universal societal projects. Regarding eco-art, in a sense analogous to ecological art, we can see Guattari's (1989/1990) view that the enunciation proposed through art forms part of this array of ways of thinking and feeling adapted to interactions with all species and reflection on practices within the molecular realm of existence, encompassing urban, familial, and occupational spaces, among others. Therefore, the production of subjectivity serves as the primary arena for shaping power relations and their resistance.

While Brunner et al. (2013) argue that the interpretation of eco-art in relation to Guattari's three ecologies (1989/1990) can be prone to misinterpretation and may still retain utopian traces of "an identitarian or moralistic projection of a full, complete and uniform community" (p. 10), the authors nonetheless underscore significant aspects

of this perspective. The eco-art referenced by Guattari cannot be reduced to a form of "green" art that neglects the political dimension of art or merely aligns with "green" parties. In contrast, the authors propose questioning the evolution of such ecologies and how they activate their potential for interconnection. They also assert that the ecological crisis must be understood as a political, cultural and social crisis, which calls both for an ecosophy and an eco-art, as a political, social and cultural revolution capable of redirecting production objectives, forms of organisation and ways of being together (Brunner et al., 2013).

Through this article, we aim to provide a brief insight into aspects linked to the production and consumption of cultural goods, supported by Guattari's (1989/1990) vision of eco-art. As such, cultural production, as viewed by Menezes (2018), primarily involves public policies for the arts and their consequences for the economy of culture and the cultivation of audiences. The latter is predicated on several questions: what types of audiences make up cultural product consumers? What do they consume? What do they want to consume? Are they primarily interested in engaging with cultural expressions or seeking entertainment? In the author's reflections, significance is given to analysing the conditions under which cultural production unfolds, particularly the transformations that shape the identity composition of contemporary societies. Menezes (2018) asserts:

> yet, to this unmistakable characteristic of inhabiting a totally globalised world, where the cultural references of a community are experienced (and intermingled) in any corner of the planet, whether due to the constant relocation of people or as a result of access to technologies that have swallowed up spaces and times, another no less relevant is added: that of existing today (in a world that is clearly asymmetrical, in the distribution of wealth) within a society driven by desire, by the relentless pursuit for new intimate and emotional experiences, new ways of living, and new lifestyles. Consumers, or perhaps even, as Lipovetsky argues, hyper-consumers. While the first of these characteristics has had a clear effect on modes of production, circulation, and cultural consumption, the second has certainly been no less impactful, even in the construction of the civilisation of the spectacle. (p. 14)

This context is a parameter for both what defines the public's desire to consume and what drives the producers of cultural goods, including artists, cultural producers, and cultural managers. Here, the notion of "cultural production" is associated with the economy and sociology of culture, forming the complex structure of cultural industries encompassing aesthetic, ethical, financial, and social standards. With regard to the perspective of art related to the economy of culture, Guattari's three ecologies (1989/1990) can be interpreted through the following lens: (a) social ecology — social relations and structures that, in the economy of art, entail examining how economic practices associated with the production, distribution and consumption of art impact social relations.

This would entail considerations regarding access to art, equity in the allocation of resources to artists and the impact of economic structures on artistic production; (b) mental ecology — suggests that economic practices related to art also influence people's perceptions and cognitive understanding of culture, which can pose challenges in contemporary approaches, whether they are more conceptual, participatory or activist. Moreover, the economic system influences the valuation of art, thereby impacting access to different forms of artistic expression; and (c) environmental ecology - although the connection between environmental ecology in the context of the art economy is not explicit, the implications are apparent. It is possible to contemplate the ecological impacts of the production of works of art, the use of materials, exhibition, performance and communication practices and how artists address environmental issues.

Given ecological art's interdisciplinary nature, the diversity of its creative, conceptual, and performative approaches, and its relational capacity, it is imperative to align suitable cultural policies. Cultural policies articulated at local, regional, national (and European, in the case of Portugal) levels, with a funding scheme and the promotion of long-term aesthetic experiences rather than solely one-off acquisitions of cultural goods, are crucial aspects of cultural production practices in ecological art. That is because, through effective cultural policies in terms of approach, timing and funding, it is possible to maintain a consistent process of artistic creation that fosters a wide range of experiences, participation and reflection among diverse audiences. That is a fundamental aspect of the realisation of environmental activist art or even the implementation of environmentally sustainable artistic practices.

3. The Multiple and Flexible Nature of Activist Art

Artistic activism, also known as "activist art" and "artivism," can be compared to public art, political art, or intervention art. There is no universally agreed-upon concept or terminology for artistic activism, and its approach varies widely. According to Vieira (2007), it is a multidimensional practice with interchangeable strands within the context of artistic production. The author further notes that

> some commentators have refrained from using the adjective "activist," opting instead for alternative terms such as interventionist, progressive, oppositional, experimental, critical, or committed art, among other synonyms, including political, politicised, socio-political, confrontational, subversive, or radical art. Some proponents of activist art even eschew the pairing of these two terms, favouring alternatives such as left-wing visual culture, performative activism, activist cultural practice, or cultural activism. The meaning of these terms can sometimes be more positive when emanating from the left and derogatory when originating from the right, connoted with propaganda, which does not mean that these perspectives are shared. (Vieira, 2007, p. 6)

In "Será que a Arte Resiste a Alguma Coisa?" (Does Art Resist Anything?), Rancière (2007) delves into the complex relationship between art and resistance. He contends that art engenders dissent, inquiry, and emancipation, irrespective of its overtly political character. Nevertheless, given art's association with and reliance on the market realm, it is not possible to assert that artists consistently subvert systems and provoke contestation. From this standpoint, Rancière suggests that the connection between art and politics is an essential dimension of art's identity, underscoring the significance of the tension between these domains for effective resistance. In essence, activist art is not conceived as a favour provided by the artist or art to politics but rather embodies an inherent dimension characterised by the permanent tension between art and politics. Therefore, art establishes a tangible and symbolic space that provides a new sensible freedom (Rancière, 2007). For artists, the aesthetic freedom of activist art lies in the interaction among art, the social context, and the public in a space where subaltern voices can be heard and traditional forms of power can be challenged. From the audience's perspective, Rancière introduces the concept of the "emancipated spectator", referring to the active and critical art spectator who is willing to get involved in interpretation and question power structures. The production of meaning itself presents an opportunity to challenge discourses and positions of power.

Among the various approaches to activist art, some manifestations are related to community communication practices, aligning with the perspectives of Homi Bhabha and Grant Kester, or even forms of dialogue with institutions and other public spheres, as explored by Finkelpearl (Vieira, 2007). According to the artist Andrea Fraser, political art is characterised by its conscious commitment to intervening in power dynamics, shaping artistic production with this organising principle in mind, and covering aspects spanning from form and content to methods of production and dissemination (Bordowitz, 2004). Theoretical contributions by Lucy Lippard, an American art critic and curator, suggest a distinction between political art and activist art: political art tends to be socially concerned, and activist art seems to be socially committed. In Simon Sheikh's (2017) critical essay on Lucy Lippard's text "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power", published on the website of the activist and cultural network Void Network[2], the metaphor of the "Trojan horse" emerges as an argument to explain the strong activist art movement that has disguised itself inside an alluring aesthetic object since 1980. The critical text states that, unlike the Trojan horse, activist art is not instrumental in the violent overthrow of a regime but works rather by subverting the very idea of an aesthetic object. Particularly in artistic and activist circles, this debate continues as to whether this subversion is merely a masquerade—a purely strategic universalism that pretends to be "art" in order to gain access—or whether we are dealing with a Janus-faced identity at once activist and aesthetic (Sheikh, 2017).

Assuming that politics is part of art's identity, we can conceive of activist art as a collection of creative and artistic practices founded on political performance and the

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[2] Void Network is an activist and cultural network based in Greece that is dedicated to a wide range of activities and projects related to counterculture, radical politics, art, music, and social awareness. It is renowned for its contributions across various domains, encompassing political activism, ecology, art, and alternative culture.

integration of various social agents and fields of knowledge. In the context of art's interaction with the environment, American writer, art critic, and professor Suzi Gablik (1992) advocates for a transition away from viewing art merely as a commodity or individual expression towards art that is participatory, inclusive, and oriented towards the common good. In this vein, she contends that art must address global environmental challenges through practices that foster sustainability, community, and a connection with nature.

4. Predominant Environmental Approaches and Causes in Ecological Art

Ecological art traces its roots to an art movement that emerged in the late 1960s, spearheaded by pioneering artists like Hans Haacke, Helen and Newton Harrison, Patricia Johanson, Alan Sonfist, and Joseph Beuys (Wallen, 2012). Early artworks included the concept of using the earth as a central creative element, using natural materials and working in remote landscapes. However, Wallen observes that these forms were primarily focused on challenging the conception of art rather than engaging with ecological principles. The term "ecological art" gained recognition in 1990 and, as noted by Kagan (2014), encompassed approaches such as land art, recycling, and the use of natural resources as labels representing (a) collaborative, participatory, and socially engaged practices involving humans and non-humans; (b) reconstructive practices leading to transformative artworks; and (c) artistic practices entailing ethical responsibilities towards communities. On the other hand, ecological art has been studied through the lens of its artistic and scientific roots (Wallen, 2012), its artistic engagement driven by immersion in nature and its potential for environmental education (Vasko, 2016). One of its defining features is its collaborative and multidisciplinary essence. In his production, there is also a broad interdisciplinary knowledge facilitated by the interplay between feeling and thinking, an ecological ethic and a systems theory that addresses a web of connections between the physical, biological, cultural, political and historical facets of ecosystems (Wallen, 2012).

An illustration of both the dialogical potential and the breadth inherent in ecological art is its integration into the broader nexus between art and sustainability, extending beyond its environmental dimension. Lopes et al. (2017) highlight the advantages of artistic intervention in public spaces within the sustainability framework and how participatory artistic endeavours can foster social cohesion. The primary contributions of artistic intervention in public spaces encompass the conservation and protection of the environmental territory, the promotion of sustainable development, the enhancement of physical accessibility (facilities) and environmental quality in the surroundings. Additionally, such interventions promote vitality and vibrancy in public spaces. These benefits align with sustainable development practices advocated by political-governmental entities. Among these contributions is the rehabilitation of spaces, achieved through the reuse of materials and the use of eco-friendly materials. This rehabilitation fosters social and economic revitalisation, spurring activity in the local economy, creating job opportunities, and attracting tourism. It also garners interest from public managers in investing in cultural

sector development plans. In the realm of sustainable development, it is crucial to critically analyse two aspects: (a) artistic interventions in this field are not inherently linked to reducing environmental impact or raising awareness about the climate emergency. Should the artistic approach and the communication of the work (on the part of the public body) fail to facilitate discussions about production and consumption practices or to stimulate introspection regarding leisure and tourism spurred by the artistic intervention, the effectiveness of the environmental discourse subsides. Additionally, (b) approaches to sustainable development should steer clear of simply regurgitating political and institutional narratives to avoid a neutral and ineffective stance on environmental issues (Krieg-Planque, 2010). In this regard, these artistic interventions bear the responsibility of understanding the social and political context within which they operate, thus requiring an analysis of the power dynamics at play.

The absence of consensus on ecological art approaches highlights criticisms of land art projects that solely prioritise "green" ethics by emphasising the connection with nature but fail, for instance, to advocate for or inform the viewer (Ribeiro & Almeida, 2021). From the standpoint of the members of the Ecoart Network (2023) — a network of professionals dedicated to a multidisciplinary practice of community ecological art — the following principles merit consideration: (a) attention to the network of correlations within the environment — the physical, biological, cultural, political and historical aspects of ecological systems; (b) the creation of artworks using natural materials or engaging with environmental forces like wind, water or sunlight; (c) the restoration and preservation of natural environments; (d) the dissemination of information to the public about ecological dynamics and contemporary environmental challenges; and lastly, (e) the quest to rethink ecological relationships and creatively propose innovative approaches to coexistence, sustainability, and healing.

Additionally, Kagan (2014) underscores the interchangeable and superficial treatment of terminology associated with ecological art. The author emphasises that, along with elements like connectivity, ethical and environmental responsibility, dynamic balance, and exploration of life's complexity, there are guiding principles of ecological art, like considering various scales of ecological relationships at local, regional, national, bioregional (example given, river basins), continental, and global levels; balancing perspectives between ecocentrism and egocentrism to acknowledge the need for the development of all life forms; connecting everyday, productive, and scientific activities across different levels, particularly emphasising systemic questioning and critical reflexivity.

Current studies aimed at analysing the environmental purposes and causes reflected by environmental artistic activism, as well as their effects, include Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos (2021) and Rodriguez-Labajos (2022).

Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos (2021) explore art as an ally in the movement's strategies against coal exports to understand the contributions of activist artists to environmental movements. The research case study focuses on the iconic resistance against the establishment of a coal export terminal in Oakland, United States. The research revealed the involvement of various artists in public protests organised by the environmental

movement through the creation of visual identity products and materials (posters, banners, T-shirts), music, film, poetry readings and visual arts. The association of art with the environmental movement has yielded several significant effects. These include enhancing media visibility for environmental causes and raising awareness among audiences of various age groups, particularly through emotionally resonant poetry, texts, images, and visually impactful installations. Artists and activists engaged in direct dialogues with decision-makers, particularly concerning the construction of the coal terminal. Furthermore, they organised sharing sessions and workshops within the community to address the consequences of fossil fuel use and transportation. A series of sensory apparatuses were artistically created in order to broaden the scope of the contestation. Sanz and Rodriguez-Labajos conclude by identifying several types of transformations derived from environmental art activism that have the potential to influence environmental justice: (a) material transformations (in the case of Oakland, the city council's ban on coal exports, at least temporarily until the terminal developer filed a federal lawsuit against the council's decision); (b) political transformations involving regulatory changes, public participation in decision-making processes demonstrating local political support for the cause; and (c) socio-cultural transformations characterised by interactions between individuals, identity representation, sharing of values and knowledge.

Rodriguez-Labajos's (2022) study provides a comprehensive review of the environmental claims in the literature on ecological art published between 1991 and 2021. Among the main findings in the research on ecological art projects, Rodriguez-Labajos highlights several contributions, including (a) the application of digital technologies in environmental monitoring, underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of these approaches; (b) the staging of art exhibitions or performances during significant events in the environmental field, providing strategic visibility for socio-environmental issues; (c) the valorisation of the diversity of projects, encompassing literature, visual art and participatory and performative initiatives, as exemplified by the walks or dances of indigenous women in Canada; (d) the exploration of the conflicting relationships between human beings and the environment within the context of the anthropocene, an era that delves into humanity's deep and enduring impact on the environment. The core themes of these environmental activism projects revolve around topics such as climate change, air pollution, and the vulnerability of the non-human world. The activist art discussed in the examined studies spans from criticism and contestation to action with tangible outcomes. Projects that use technologies for environmental monitoring or involve audience participation in the creative process exemplify approaches focused on results or sustainability through art. Conversely, highly performative projects with a strong sensory appeal can align with the opposition approach.

Reflecting on ecological art can extend to the cultural sectors' ability to embrace sustainable practices in creation, production, and communication. One example is the *Recycling Tour*[3] by Manu Delago, an Austrian musician renowned for his hang drum performances. He incorporates electronic music and instruments made from recycled

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[3] Information is available on the *Recycling Tour* project website: https://recyclingtour2023.com.

materials into his artistic endeavours. During his 2023 tour, he travelled by bicycle from Austria to the Netherlands and transported equipment boxes with solar panels to minimise the tour's environmental footprint. The performances, partially acoustic, used the accumulated solar energy, prompting audiences to reconsider the way they travel to concerts and overall consumption habits. In Portugal, the Directorate-General for the Arts has integrated environmental sustainability into its arts funding competitions, requiring project applicants to propose strategies for promoting ecological practices in the arts. Notably, in 2021, it initiated a support program in collaboration with the Portuguese Environment Agency. Since 2022, this partnership has resulted in the approval and implementation of 18 projects focused on the intersection of art and the environment, fostering reflection and intervention in this field[4]. The objective was to encourage artists and cultural professionals to engage in the processes of change and the battle against climate change. By April 2024, the Directorate-General for the Arts has not published any new calls for proposals on this subject. In the next section, this article examines practices within the cultural sector related to environmental sustainability.

5. Cultural Production Activity and Its Unique Aspects in the Context of Environmental Artistic Activism: Some Examples from Portugal

Following an exploration of the contextual backdrop through which cultural production is perceived and embraced as a fundamental human right (Section 1), this section proposes a reflection on the intricacies involved in the practice of artistic output. Cultural production and management encompass various tasks in the execution of creative projects. When aiming to secure funding for a project, the process typically commences with conceptualisation, involving discussions with the artist about the project's concept or idea. Depending on the type of funding application, conceptualisation entails writing (argumentation, justification, description, specific artistic objectives, public interest objectives, compliance with guidelines and regulations, activity schedules, among others); budgeting; management, logistics, and communication planning; description of partnerships; and other aspects. In competitions with an environmental focus, these elements need to be carefully planned and articulated to promote environmental sustainability and the adoption of ecological practices within the artistic domain. Hence, every phase of the artistic project presents opportunities for the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices. Furthermore, the artistic object and aesthetic approach can be harmonised with ecological art across its diverse nuances.

In the context of environmental art activism projects, the role of cultural production and management requires a professional who comprehensively understands these aspects and adeptly coordinates and integrates them. In multidisciplinary projects, which are common in ecological art, the role involves not only managing individuals (artists, technicians, activists, scientists, and other professionals) but also coordinating space

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[4] Information on this "Arte e Ambiente" (Art and Environment) support programme was sourced from the website of the Directorate-General for the Arts (DGARTES, 2022).

and time to facilitate dialogue, knowledge sharing, and experimentation with diverse artistic, interpretative, and performative avenues. To further explore this topic, it is crucial to examine how cultural production unfolds across various artistic areas.

Environmental activist art developed from sound art and instrumental music, particularly in its contemporary iteration, exhibits a notable degree of subjectivity, both in creative production and in audience reception. Cláudia Martinho and Luís Bittencourt are two Portuguese artists whose approaches emphasise sound as the primary connecting element between the artwork and the audience. Architect, sound artist, and researcher Cláudia Martinho[5] describes her work as including:

> creating spatial sound installations, compositions, and performances to reveal through sound what cannot be seen, emphasising the vibratory qualities and essences of places, as well as the presence of water and wildlife in relation to human activities and disturbances. (para. 4)

Additionally, the artist guides groups of people who wish to experience resonance with their bodies and places. She organises field trips, immersive walks, and singing sessions associated with the acoustics of natural landscapes. According to Polli (2012), soundscape[6] experiences enable the creation of a bond with the natural environment. Sound walks, whether formal or informal, are viewed as exercises that foster environmental and social awareness and encourage shifts in social and cultural behaviours. In this case, the production activity associated with artistic residencies, exhibitions, and performances entails tasks such as conducting preliminary spatial assessments (whether in a natural landscape, museum, or gallery), ensuring the preservation of materials used in installations, selecting appropriate sound diffusion materials for the spaces, planning the public's access to the artwork, and ensuring the quality and safety of the aesthetic experience. In her artistic project, Wetland, Cláudia Martinho tackles a theme related to climate change mitigation factors: the preservation of wetland ecosystems, specifically in the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve region in Portugal. Through a multi-channel audio installation that spatialises environmental sounds, the artist explores a range of bird and water current sounds to create an immersive listening experience. According to the artist, the intention is for "this experience [to] invite us to tune into threatened biodiversity while also being able to perceive the overwhelming pressure of the infrasonic noise of aeroplanes" (para. 8). This location is where possibilities for constructing an airport are being studied[7]. Aesthetic experiences with this artwork can foster a connection with the natural environment, as noted by Polli (2012), while also promoting an understanding of this environment and the associated environmental risks. Regarding the quality of the aesthetic experience to be constructed by the public, the work of cultural production

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5 Information extracted from Cláudia Martinho's website, available at https://claudiamartinho.net.

6 "Soundscape" is a term coined by Canadian composer Murray Shaeffer to define a collection of sounds from a given environment (see more in Polli, 2012).

7 For more information on the environmental impact studies related to the construction of an airport in Montijo, refer to Peixeiro (2024).

not only serves a technical function in promoting a clear appreciation of sound but also a responsibility for the informative function relating to biodiversity, environmental risks and climate change.

For composer, music producer, and multi-instrumentalist Luís Bittencourt, whose artistic identity revolves around experimental instrumental music, attention to detail in production and presentation is also important. Above all, it is important to ensure the sound quality of unconventional objects that will be amplified, as well as the sound, light, and auxiliary equipment (racks, tables, and other devices).

Throughout his career as an artist-researcher, he has developed arrangements and compositions using water and everyday objects as primary sound sources. In his project *Sons de Resistência*[8] (Sounds of Resistance), the musician explores a series of sound objects that seek to raise awareness about global consumption, waste production and contemporary lifestyles. One of the concert's pivotal pieces is "Import/Export: Suite for Global Junk" by British composer Gabriel Prokofiev. This work uses a wooden pallet, a metal drum, plastic bags and glass bottles as instruments. Throughout the seven movements of the music, accompanying video imagery depicts human overconsumption and waste production.

In another project by the artist, titled *Memórias Líquidas*[9] (Liquid Memories), water serves as the primary source of sound, being percussed using a variety of creative and interpretive techniques. Here, prioritising the minimal use of water and ensuring its reuse must be a fundamental production principle. In *Memórias Líquidas*, the artist has also delved into performances in which both he and the audience engage in commentary and reflections during the presentations. This can be valuable in contributing to a reflection on the water issue, its scarcity, quality, and sustainability. These two projects by Luís Bittencourt entail a longer preparation time for assembling the concerts, as various objects and musical instruments are amplified and sometimes interact with electronic sounds (such as soundscapes and other synthesised sounds) and images that relate to and complement the senses of the musical proposal. It is also fair to say that the experimental music created by the artist seeks to blur the conventional boundaries between sound, music, and noise, challenging societal norms regarding what constitutes a musical instrument. It could be likened to creating music with whatever resources are available, emphasising a sustainable approach, as he highlights himself in promotional materials for his concerts[10].

In plastic arts approaches, there is often a hands-on aspect involving the selection and collection of materials, and larger projects may require the assistance of artisans or specialised technical professionals. In ecological artworks, aside from the conceptualisation, the choice of materials and the scale of the piece significantly influence the environmental footprint. Artist Bordalo II — Artur Bordalo — is recognised worldwide for his

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[8] Information extracted from Luís Bittencourt's website, available at https://www.luisbittencourt.com/projects-1.

[9] Information extracted from Luís Bittencourt's website, available at https://www.luisbittencourt.com/projects-1.

[10] Information extracted from Luís Bittencourt's website, available at https://www.luisbittencourt.com/.

sculptures made from discarded material. He describes his work as centred around "the excessive production and consumption of things, which results in the continuous production of 'rubbish' and consequently the destruction of the Planet"[11]. One of the main motifs of his works is biodiversity, with an emphasis on sculptures of endangered animals. His series of Big Trash Animals sculptures, consisting of types like "Neutral," "Half-Half," "Plastics," and "Floating," establishes a continuous line of reflection. In "Neutral," the artist proposes the total camouflage of objects by using colours closer to those found in nature. These objects, mostly reused plastic, are coated with paint to create a contrasting representation that closely resembles the realistic colour and shape of the chosen animal. In "Half-Half," half of the artwork represents the realism of the colours, while the other half features plastics, metals, and other raw materials with textures and bright colours (see Figure 1). This combination encourages the public to construct and unravel the part of the image that is not obvious at first glance. In the "Plastics" works, the idea of camouflage is lost, giving way to the contradictory beauty of the colours and textures of common rubbish objects recognisable to the public. In the "Floating" series, Bordalo II explores the concept of animals floating entirely made from plastic materials, aiming to raise public awareness of the environmental problem of plastic pollution in the oceans[12].

Figure 1. *Half owl*

Credits. Bordalo II

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[11] Information extracted from Bordalo II's website, available at https://www.bordaloii.com/about.

[12] Information extracted from Bordalo II's website, available at https://www.bordaloii.com/big-trash-animals-series/floating.

These works are publicised through photographic and videographic recordings, as they are removed from the oceans to avoid interference with the natural environment. In 2019, the artist launched the Paris Agreement exhibition in Paris, featuring 30 artworks depicting endangered animals crafted from discarded materials[13].

Xicogaivota — Ricardo Ramos — is another Portuguese artist who uses rubbish found on beaches as the exclusive raw material for his artistic activism. In order not to increase the environmental footprint of the fragments by turning them into works of art, the artist uses them as they were found, without breaking them up or using paints or glues. All the pieces are attached with screws or ropes. The structure is also made from these materials, following the same rules (see Figure 2). This meticulous search for the perfect piece for each sculpture not only reflects the artist's own ideology but also embodies a lifestyle that he imparts through environmental education projects. Art education is a hallmark of his work, as he has held workshops in Portuguese and African companies and schools[14].
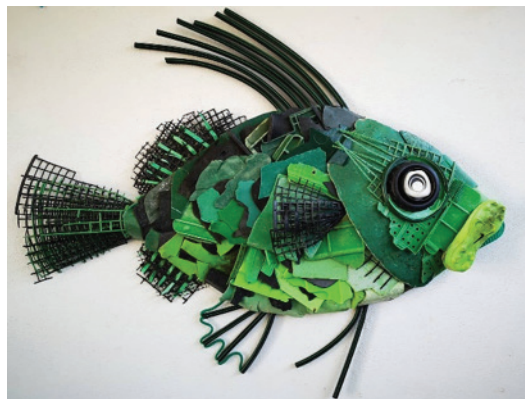

Figure 2. P*eixe golo (Goal fish)*
Credits. Xicogaivota

These two artists' production activity is characterised by the concept of public art, which involves intervention in public spaces and the collection of discarded materials. In the case of Bordalo II, who, in addition to Portugal, has artworks in countries such as Spain, France, Italy, Germany, and the United States, the logistics involves identifying suitable locations and available materials for creating his pieces. Xicogaivota operates primarily from a stationary workshop but engages in material collection activities that can foster community participation and raise awareness about the environment. Bordalo II, known for creating large-scale works that involve paints and glues, requires equipment, machinery, and possibly people to assist with manual tasks.

The cultural production process for audiovisual or cinema projects typically involves establishing institutional partnerships and securing funding from both public and

[13] Browse Exposição de Bordalo II Alerta Para os Perigos da Destruição do Planeta (Bordalo II's exhibition Warning of the Dangers of Planet Destruction; 2019).

[14] Information extracted from Xicogaivota's webiste at, available at https://www.xicogaivota.com.

private sources. That is because it operates in a continuously expanding sector of the cultural industry, which, due to its links with new communication technologies and its potential to portray social problems, fosters audience identification (Prado & Barradas, 2023). Cinema typically entails lengthy pre-production, production, and post-production processes, which often incur significant costs. Similarly, audiovisual productions related to environmental cinema may follow this pattern, but they usually attract support from patrons and institutions dedicated to environmental sustainability. To fully leverage the potential of environmental cinema, it can be associated with a series of initiatives. "Cine-Eco Seia" serves as a prime example, showcasing a comprehensive event with a primary focus on organising an environmental film festival in Seia, which has already hosted 29 editions. The event brings together filmmakers, activists, biologists, and other experts to engage with the public through film screenings, exhibitions, educational materials, concerts, conferences, eco-talks, and more. It represents a collective investment in cultural production, the dissemination of specialised content, and funding, requiring numerous institutional partnerships with organisations and cultural venues hosting event extensions. Additionally, it involves support from investors, including companies aligned with environmental sustainability and the media, as well as backing from national, European, and global entities, such as the United Nations[15]. Indeed, "Cine-Eco Seia" exemplifies an expansive and multidisciplinary cultural production endeavour, highlighting the diverse array of activities involved, each requiring specific equipment, materials, services, and personnel depending on their associated artistic and activist qualities.

Additional examples of artistic endeavours include literature, photography, and the performing arts, all of which possess the capacity to engage in activism and promote sustainability. In addition to rethinking the practice of cultural production within the realm of ecological art, the creative approach significantly shapes the conception of the artwork. Projects that embody a participatory, site-specific, and interdisciplinary nature stand out, as seen in artist residencies and works addressing specific territories and local environmental challenges (examples can be found in other Portuguese projects like *Sustentar*[16] and *Terra Batida*[17]).

The Portuguese examples highlighted in the article serve as a starting point for considering the nuances of cultural production within ecological or environmentally

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[15] Information extracted from the project's website http://www.cineeco.pt.

[16] *Sustentar* — a programme of creative laboratories produced by Ci.CLO — a platform for creation, research, and intervention in the field of photography — which promotes the "development of photographic and videographic projects aimed at providing artistic perspectives on experimental initiatives in the field of sustainability". Sustentar developed projects that delved into themes such as integrating innovative systems for harnessing sunlight, climate change, and the agroecological transition, focusing on local issues. Information extracted from the content made available at https://ciclo.art/pt.

[17] The "Terra Batida" project comprises a network that coordinates residency programs and commissions research, facilitating collaboration among artists, scientists, and activists to address socio-environmental conflicts in different territorial contexts in Portugal. One of its residencies, "Terra no Fundão," delved into the region's century-long mining history and the potential exploitation of lithium under the banner of decarbonisation. During the residency, a range of techniques were developed, encompassing performative, artistic, informative, and research methodologies. Information extracted from the project's website https://terrabatida.org.

sustainable art projects. It is crucial to emphasise that, across all artistic endeavours, careful attention must be paid to the choice of materials, logistics, management, and communication to minimise environmental impact. Ethically speaking, three key points emerge as fundamental: (a) for participatory and site-specific projects, understanding the context and fostering a process of respectful engagement and collaboration with residents and other local stakeholders; (b) ensuring that the community benefits in terms of learning opportunities and increased awareness of local environmental issues; and (c) recognising that activism does not occur in isolation. Thus, respect for different species, ethnicities, cultures, genders, and social diversities is paramount. Additionally, broader issues concerning the rights of artists and cultural professionals, accessibility for audiences, and the facilitation of mediation sessions to share the creative process and educate audiences about the arts are also crucial considerations.

6. Final Considerations

From a broader perspective on ecological art, it is important to highlight the potential for dialogue and joint action among different areas, disciplines, and practices. This collaborative approach also hints at the dissolution of traditional boundaries in knowledge creation. Discussing disciplines or boundaries between knowledge may be at odds with the integrated approach that characterises effective environmental art activism. Activist artists often exhibit sensitivity to various issues, as exemplified by Bordalo II and his provocative pieces that denounce pressing social issues like the housing crisis and economic challenges in Portugal. We might consider activism as inherently intertwined with performance, eliminating the need to delineate between artistic and political dimensions. Instead, art and politics merge, providing audiences with diverse expressions, sensitivities, meanings, and insights within a unified dimension.

This article provides an opportunity to contemplate the potential of ecological art in fostering environmental education processes and actions and communicating about the climate emergency and strategies for its mitigation. Some of the themes explored by Portuguese artists or art projects delve into topics such as overconsumption, reliance on industrialised products and fossil fuels in daily life, and the significant production of waste. The scope of water-related themes is comprehensive, encompassing issues such as scarcity, quality, impacts on aquatic ecosystems, and groundwater resources. As a result, marine biodiversity and debris in freshwater and saltwater environments are implicitly or explicitly addressed. Overall, these artists' examples serve as warnings about environmental risks and, in an effort to avoid contradiction, prompt a reconsideration of their own ecological footprint as stakeholders in the cultural sector. These projects' ability to raise awareness is influenced by the various meanings generated through the diverse, interdisciplinary discourses and perspectives that shape their aesthetic composition, creative approaches, and communication strategies. For the audience, there is a chance to engage in sonic experiences within aquatic environments, prompting reflection

on water's significance in daily life and contemplating its potential future scarcity. There is also an opportunity to consider the profound impact of waste on oceans, urban areas, and the interconnected lives of both humans and non-human inhabitants of the planet, all of which are intricately linked to climate change.

Several specific aspects of the cultural production process define the work's environmentally sustainable nature. However, the aesthetic concept, creative strategy, and underlying environmental cause are crucial in shaping its impact on environmental awareness. Participatory and territorial projects, in this regard, have the potential to mobilise the public, organisations, associations, and local authorities to address local environmental challenges collaboratively.

Ultimately, it is crucial to underscore the necessity for cultural policies that understand the procedural, temporal, and dialogical essence of ecological art, particularly projects aimed at monitoring and spotlighting the effects of climate change through their artworks. Therefore, funding streams and the direction of public policies must be comprehensive enough to recognise the aesthetic experience as fundamentally important in the long term, on par with the consumption of cultural offerings. Public access to creative processes, rather than just the end product, can serve as a productive strategy for raising environmental awareness. This entails adopting more participatory and contextualised approaches for individuals to engage with cultural goods and, above all, involving a spectrum of stakeholders, including the public, governmental bodies, and the private sector. Ecological art projects are tasked with engaging diverse social stakeholders and fostering the development of environmentally sustainable knowledge and practices that contribute to education, awareness, and action in addressing environmental challenges.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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