

Ecologies of belonging: public art and nature between the rural and the urban

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1 - Introduction

Talking about the art system in terms of spatiality allows me to say that, among the various changes in the artistic phenomenon in recent decades, the debate on art has progressively evolved from the discussion about physical location in closed spaces, such as museums, galleries and the like, to understanding the relationships they establish with territories, communities and the ecological processes that sustain them, forming another aesthetic ecosystem that can be called public art. So called, not only because it occupies the collective space, but, above all, because of the political dimension of the public sphere that surrounds the public space.

If for much of the twentieth century public art was often understood as the insertion of sculptural objects in open spaces, contemporary production has shown that its public dimension depends less on the place where the work is installed, than on the forms of interaction between themes, landscapes and modes of habitation it enables.

This change makes the debate on art carried out in spaces of nature, especially those located on the border, in the roots of the earth as an active matter in art, particularly fruitful: the interstice between the rural and the urban. In these circumstances, the landscape ceases to be a passive setting and becomes an active agent of the creative process. The work begins to continuously negotiate with ecological temporalities, collective memories, cultural practices, and environmental dynamics that escape the artist's exclusive control. Producing public art, in this context, means participating in the construction of relational ecologies in which nature, culture, and experience become mutually constitutive.

In this article, we propose to understand these relationships through the concept of *Ecologies of Belonging*. The term designates systems of affective, environmental, cultural, and political bonds that articulate subjects, communities, and territories in the shared production of the landscape. More than a feeling of identity with a certain place, belonging is understood as an ecological practice of coexistence and co-responsibility, built on the continuous interactions between human beings, natural environments, memories, and historical processes. Public art, from this perspective, ceases to produce only objects, for it produces relationships, activating forms of care capable of simultaneously reconfiguring physical spaces and the ways of inhabiting them.

This understanding is close to the notion of topophilia developed by Yi-Fu Tuan, for whom the affective relationships established between subjects and places constitute a fundamental part of the human experience of space. However, it is intended to broaden this perspective by understanding that such bonds do not remain restricted to the psychological dimensions of affection for the place, but constitute true ecological networks that involve cultural practices, political actions, environmental temporalities and collective processes of memory construction.

In this sense, landscape ceases to mean simply that which offers itself to the gaze. As Milton Santos and Javier Maderuelo argue, it constitutes a cultural elaboration produced by the interpretation of space. There is no landscape without intentionality. What you see is always the result of what you learn culturally to recognize. The landscape is, therefore, less an objective reality than a relational condition between subjects, environment and culture.

It is precisely at this point that reflection on public art acquires relevance. Its function is not only to occupy a certain space, but to produce new ways of perceiving that space. When an artistic intervention is capable of modifying the ways in which a community perceives, experiences and shares its territory, it ceases to act as a simple object inserted in the landscape to become a constitutive part of the production of the landscape itself. The work becomes a mediation between nature, memory and collective experience.

This perspective allows us to understand that different *public art projects* establish different *ecologies of belonging*. Some proposals maintain a modern logic of intervention in nature, in which the territory appears as an available, passive support for the realization of an idea previously conceived by the artist. Others develop collaborative processes in which the project itself is continuously transformed into a dialogue with the environment, incorporating its rhythms, its contingencies and its inhabitants.

More than methodological differences, these procedures reveal different conceptions about the relationship between art and nature. On the one hand, there persists a tradition that understands the landscape as a space to be occupied, transformed or dominated by artistic action. On the other hand, practices are consolidated that understand creation as an exercise in negotiation between multiple agents – human and non-human – capable of sharing the authorship of the construction processes of the work.

This second perspective is close to the discussions developed by Joseph Beuys around *social sculpture*, in which every aesthetic practice is equally a political practice of transformation of human relations. He also dialogues with Tim Ingold, when he understands that inhabiting a territory does not mean occupying a geographical surface, but continuously participating in the flows that constitute the

life of that environment. In a similar way, Félix Guattari proposes to understand ecologies as inseparable systems that articulate the environment, social relations, and the production of subjectivity, indicating that any effective transformation requires simultaneously considering these three dimensions.

It is in this horizon that the notion of *Ecologies of Belonging* proposed here is inserted. It seeks to show that public art, nature and community constitute inseparable systems of relationships. Belonging ceases to be a territorial identity to become a daily practice of care; the landscape ceases to be a scenery and becomes a process; and the work ceases to represent an autonomous object to become a relational event.

Based on these premises, this article analyzes two projects developed in Brazilian rural contexts that exemplify different ways of understanding public art. The first is *Mesa* (1997-2000), by Nelson Felix, whose intervention highlights a predominantly objectual relationship between work and landscape. The second is *Entre Saudades e Guerrilhas* (2012), by Piatan Lube, whose collaborative construction allows us to understand the emergence of an ecology of belonging based on collective memory, environmental recovery and community participation.



Fig. 1,2- Nelson Felix, *Mesa* (1997-2000), wood, trees and corten steel sheet, 51 meters



Fig. 3,4- Piatan Lube. *Environmental intervention. Dialogues with the community*

The comparison between both does not seek to establish a simplifying opposition between two artistic practices, but to highlight different ways of understanding the relationships between art, nature and territory, demonstrating that the contemporary possibilities of public art increasingly depend on the ability to produce shared landscapes and ecologies of care.

2. From intervention to relationship: two paradigms of public art in nature

The *Ecologies of Belonging* allow us to understand that public art carried out in spaces of nature does not constitute a homogeneous field of practices. Although many interventions in nature share the same physical environment – the countryside, the forest, the coast or the mountain – they differ profoundly in terms of the ways of understanding the territory and the relationships they establish with the subjects who inhabit it. More than aesthetic or formal differences, it is a question of distinct ontologies of the landscape, in which nature can be conceived sometimes as a support for creation, sometimes as a participant in the artistic process itself.

This distinction reveals two recurrent paradigms in contemporary production. The first understands the work as an autonomous element whose insertion reorganizes the landscape, according to a logic previously defined by the artist. The second understands that the work emerges from the shared experience between territory, community and environment, making creation a process of ecological mediation. Both operate in the public space, but produce radically different forms of belonging.

2.1 Nelson Felix and the ecology of intervention

The work *Mesa* (1997–2000), developed by Nelson Felix as part of the *Cruz na América* project, represents an exemplary traditional conception of artistic intervention on natural environment. Consisting of an extensive steel plate supported by a wooden structure and

flanked by trees, the work was conceived so that plant growth would slowly deform the metal structure over centuries, transforming time into sculptural matter.

At first glance, it is a project that seems to incorporate natural rhythms into the constitution of the work. However, a closer observation reveals that nature participates only as an executing agent of a previously established idea. The territory does not produce the project; he only receives it, passively. The landscape functions as a material support for a proposition whose logic remains outside the ecological dynamics of the place.

This condition becomes evident when one observes that the originally chosen location could be replaced by another without compromising, according to the artist himself, the meaning of the work. The spatial displacement does not significantly alter the project because its conceptual structure does not depend on the environmental, cultural or historical singularities of that territory. The place is necessary as a physical location, but it does not effectively participate in the poetic construction of the work.

From the perspective of the *Ecologies of Belonging*, it is perceived that authorship remains concentrated in the figure of the artist. Ecological processes are called upon only insofar as they contribute to realizing the predicted behaviour of sculpture. Nature becomes an involuntary collaborator of a narrative that is external to it.



Fig. 5,6- *Mesa* (detail of the growth and fencing with barbed wire). Photo J. F. Alves, 2012

Paradoxically, time has revealed another story. The growth of the trees began to suffer restrictions imposed by the sheet metal itself, producing bottlenecks, deformations and possible physiological impairments of the plant species used. The narrative initially imagined – trees moulding steel – began to coexist with another, unforeseen one: steel violently moulding trees. The inevitable stranglehold on nature.

This displacement highlights a central issue for the contemporary debate on art and ecology. Natural processes do not passively respond to human expectations. They have their own agency, specific temporalities, and often unpredictable dynamics. When the work seeks to control these forces, it ends up revealing the permanence of a modern rationality based on the idea of domination of nature.

The subsequent decision to surround the facility (with barbed wire) to protect it from cattle further reinforces this logic. The landscape ceases to be a living space to become a controlled environment, carefully regulated to ensure the survival of the artistic project as originally conceived. Instead of continuously negotiating with the environment, the work seeks to stabilize the conditions necessary for its permanence.

It is not, of course, a matter of disqualifying the aesthetic power of *Mesa*. Its relevance to contemporary art remains unquestioned. What matters here is to understand that its relationship with the landscape produces a specific ecology, centered on the permanence of the artistic object. Nature participates in the work but does not share its authorship. The territory welcomes sculpture, but hardly redefines its conceptual foundations.

This configuration can be called *the ecology of the intervention*. In it, ecological relations are organized around the centrality of the work, while the other elements – trees, soil, climate, time and territory – appear as necessary components for its realization, but not as agents that equally produce meaning. The belonging produced by this practice focuses on the permanence of the artistic object, preserving the distinction between work and landscape.

2.2 Piatan Lube and the ecologies of belonging

If *Mesa* evidences an ecology organized by the autonomy of the work, *Entre Saudades e Guerrilhas*, developed by Piatan Lube during an artistic residency in Viana (ES), points to a practically opposite direction. Since its origin, the project has not been structured as an

intervention on the landscape, but as an investigation of the affective, historical and environmental relations that constitute that territory. The aim was to build a small forest by controlled reforestation in a degraded area for animal pasture.



Fig. 9,10- *Entre Saudades e Guerrilhas* (2012) Digital design of the initial environmental intervention

Initially conceived to monumentalize the word “SAUDADE” on a hillside through the planting of thousands of native trees, the project suffered a decisive interruption when the owner of the area refused to carry out the intervention. Under a traditional logic, this event would mean the failure of the work. However, it was precisely this impossibility that allowed its true birth.

Instead of simply transferring the proposal to another location, the artist was “welcomed” by the residents; He and the community began to reconstruct the meanings of work. Having taken the proposition that generated the intervention, preserving the memory and recomposing part of the environment, together, they triggered the memories of the residents, their narratives about old disappeared springs, their knowledge about environmental transformations and their expectations regarding the future of the municipality, became the very material for the creation of the new aesthetic object under construction.

The work ceased to pursue a previously determined form to assume the form of the process.

This transformation constitutes the turning point between the two paradigms discussed in this article. In Piatan Lube, the territory does not function as a support for the work; becomes its co-author. The springs, the vegetation, the residents, the technicians, the students, the public institutions and the local memories become part of a single network of aesthetic production.

From this perspective, authorship dissolves in favour of a collaborative system of relationships. The artist ceases to occupy the position of a subject who intervenes in nature to become a mediator between different knowledges, temporalities and ways of inhabiting the territory. Its function is close to what Joseph Beuys called social sculpture: a practice in which artistic creation coincides with the reorganization of relationships between people, institutions and environments.

The *Ecologies of Belonging* become fully visible here. The planting of trees, the recovery of springs, community meetings, audiovisual documentation, the continued care of seedlings and the reconstruction of collective memory do not represent preparatory stages of the work; constitute the work itself. Its materiality is distributed among ecological processes, social relations and shared sensible experiences.

Unlike the traditional sculptural object, this production remains unfinished. Its continuity depends precisely on the permanence of the relations that sustain it. Each tree that grows, each spring recovered, each new resident who takes care of that environment prolongs the artistic process. The work is transformed into a landscape because it no longer has clearly delimited borders.

In this sense, Piatan Lube proposes something that goes beyond environmental art or ecological intervention. His production is close to what Tim Ingold calls a way of inhabiting, in which to create means to follow the flows of life instead of imposing an external form on them. He also dialogues with Félix Guattari by inseparably integrating environmental ecology, social ecology and the ecology of subjectivity. Belonging ceases to be an individual feeling and becomes a collective practice of care.

The *Ecologies of Belonging* manifest themselves, therefore, when art, nature and community cease to occupy hierarchical positions and start to constitute a network of co-responsibilities. The landscape is no longer contemplated but is continuously produced. The territory ceases to represent a scenario and becomes a subject of the artistic process. The work ceases to exist as a monument and becomes a permanent practice of reconstruction of common life.

3. Inhabiting the landscape: public art as an ecological practice of belonging

The analysis of the experiences of Nelson Felix and Piatan Lube shows that the debate on public art in natural spaces goes beyond issues related to the location of the works or their formal solutions. What is at stake is the way in which different projects understand the

relationships between artistic creation, territory and life. More than producing objects intended for public space, these practices produce different ways of inhabiting the landscape.

Throughout this article we have sought to demonstrate that the landscape is not a previously given reality on which art intervenes. It is continuously produced by the relationships that articulate memory, culture, nature and experience. In this sense, public art ceases to represent an element added to the territory to become a practice of territorial production, capable of simultaneously reorganizing perceptions, social bonds and ecological processes.

This perspective allows us to understand that the differences observed between the analysed projects do not result only from aesthetic options, but from different conceptions about the very role of art in contemporary times. In *Mesa*, the power of the work lies in the affirmation of a sculptural structure whose temporality is carefully designed by the artist. Although it dialogues with natural processes, its organization remains centered on the permanence of the object and the authorial conduction of the aesthetic experience. The landscape constitutes the physical condition of the work, but it hardly alters its conceptual structure. In *Entre Saudades e Guerrilhas*, on the contrary, the work does not precede the territory. It emerges from the relationships established between community, environment, and memory.

The episode of the impossibility of implementing the initial project, common in both poetic propositions, reveals precisely the epistemological difference of the works. While an interventional conception tends to preserve the autonomy of the work by displacing it to another place, the other work allows the territory itself to radically transform its configuration. The owner's refusal does not represent the failure of the project; it becomes the founding event of a new collectively constructed aesthetic proposition.

It is precisely in this displacement that what we call *Ecologies of Belonging* manifests itself.

It is proposed to understand the *Ecologies of Belonging* as relational systems in which artistic creation results from the co-production between human subjects, natural environments, collective memories and ecological temporalities. Unlike approaches that understand nature as a support for the work or a plastic resource available for the artist's action, the *Ecologies of Belonging* understand that the creative process distributes its authorship among multiple agents, human and non-human, whose interactions become the very materiality of the work.

From this perspective, belonging is no longer just an affective bond between individual and place, as traditionally suggested by the idea of topophilia. It comes to designate an ecological condition of co-responsibility. Belonging means participating in the processes of maintenance, transformation and continuity of shared life in a given territory. It is less about occupying a space than about taking care of the relationships that make that space habitable.

This broadening of the concept allows for the approximation of different theoretical traditions that, although developed in different fields, converge to a relational understanding of the landscape. In Yi-Fu Tuan, belonging is born from the sensitive experience of the place; in Milton Santos, the landscape constitutes a historical production inseparable from social practices; in Javier Maderuelo, it results from the cultural intentionality of the gaze; in Joseph Beuys, artistic creation becomes social transformation; in Tim Ingold, to inhabit means to participate in the flows that constitute the environment; and, in Félix Guattari, environmental, social and mental ecologies reveal themselves to be inseparable.

The *Ecologies of Belonging* seek to bring together these contributions from an aesthetic perspective, understanding public art as a practice of mediation between these different dimensions of experience. The work ceases to produce only meanings to produce conditions of coexistence. Its permanence no longer depends exclusively on the material conservation of the object and is sustained by the continuity of the relations that it is capable of establishing.

This shift has important implications for the very concept of public art. Traditionally associated with monumentality, physical permanence and the symbolic representation of power, contemporary public work tends to progressively move towards collaborative, procedural and environmentally situated practices. The monument gives way to the process; contemplation opens space for participation; individual authorship becomes distributed authorship; formal stability becomes continuous transformation.

From this point of view, the landscape ceases to be a scenery and becomes a method.

It is not only about producing works inserted in nature, but about producing forms of knowledge that emerge from permanent dialogue with ecosystems and the communities that inhabit them. Artistic practice is thus close to environmental restoration actions, education, cultural mediation and the construction of care policies. Aesthetics ceases to operate exclusively in the field of representation to act directly in the reorganization of the relations between society and the environment.

This perspective seems particularly relevant in the face of the environmental transformations that characterize the present. In a context marked by climate crises, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, and the growing rupture between society and nature, public art can play a decisive role in rebuilding bonds of belonging capable of bringing communities closer to their territories. Not because it produces technical solutions to such problems, but because it expands the collective capacity to perceive, feel and care for the landscapes that sustain life.

The Ecologies of Belonging are therefore less an artistic model than an ethic of creation. They shift the focus from the finished work to the processes that make it possible; they replace the logic of intervention with the logic of mediation; understand the artist less as an author of forms and more as an articulator of relationships. Public art ceases to occupy space to learn to inhabit it.

Perhaps this is precisely the main contribution that the experience of the rural environment offers to contemporary discussions on public art. Far from the speed of large urban centres, the countryside makes visible long temporalities, ecological dependencies and community forms of existence often made invisible by metropolitan culture. It is not a matter of idealizing rurality, but of recognizing that experiences persist in it capable of putting back into evidence what modernity has often relegated to the background: the interdependence between human beings, nature and memory.

In the end, it is understood that the landscape is not what remains after the work. In many situations, the landscape is the work itself when it is realized as a shared experience of belonging. Public art then ceases to add objects to the world to participate in the continuous production of habitable worlds. It is in this horizon that the *Ecologies of Belonging* can be understood as a conceptual key to thinking about artistic practices committed not only to the aesthetic transformation of places, but, above all, to the reconstruction of ecological, cultural, and affective relationships that make common life possible.

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