
One House, Many Paths.

A sculpture for challenging the disempowering high art object.

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Abstract

This article describes the methodologies and processes that gave birth to a sculpture called One House, Many Paths. It does so by taking in to consideration the context in which it was developed, relating the encounter that triggered its development to the moment when everyday objects are discarded and reflects critically on a type of art that generates what is described as disempowering high art object. This reflection touches on points such as how the observer sees this type of sculpture and the knowledge or information it conveys, highlighting the power relations it produces and the socio-environmental problems it masks which are supported by myths such as those of high art, sacralization, autonomy, universal truths or intrinsic value that still persist, although with less strength, after the digitalization and globalization of the art world. It also uses a methodology based on artistic practice to describe how, through this sculpture, materials are chosen and manipulated in such a way as to produce a form that proposes a new way of looking at the object, i.e. on a broader temporal and spatial plane conveyed to the reality. This is argued to be essential to an art that situates itself inside a capitalist and consumerist society in ecological crisis.

Keywords

Sculpture; process; art market; autonomy; digitalization; power.

1. Introduction

This article focuses on presenting a sculptural proposal for viewing the object in a Western context of socio-ecological crisis by describing the process of idealizing, executing and presenting a sculpture. It seeks to criticize an still existent elitist art that presents itself as autonomous and separate from the so-called extra-artistic reality and describes ways of counteracting it through artistic practice.

The importance of criticizing the elitist artistic object is linked to the socially unjust and ecologically degrading models of production and consumption found in Western privileged society, of which high art can be considered an exponent and of which we are now, more than ever, becoming thanks to the growing transparency provided by the digitalization of several aspects of the art world.

The aim of this article is to propose ways of producing art in a more sustainable way within a socio-ecological context characterized by the predominance of the city and consumption linked to international networks for the exchange of goods, even though it is developed in a rural context. In addition, the sculpture described in this article aims to provide an alternative way of getting to know the object through sight and directing it towards its observer, offering them more information and consequently a chance to be challenged.

2. Reflexive considerations on pre-execution.

This sculpture was developed during an artistic residency that took place over the two first weeks of July 2023. Organized by the Lisbon-based cultural association POUSSIO - Arte e Cultura, it took place at the Gandarinha's College run by the Condessa de Penha Longa Foundation, a Private Social Solidarity Institution located in the village of Cucujães, half an hour's drive south from the Portuguese city of Porto. It is situated on a 5-hectare farm and was awarded the Eco-School award in 2023 which, according to the foundation's website, "also aims to encourage an ever greater commitment from our entire school community to adopt more responsible and conscious attitudes in favor of Nature, the common good of which we are all a part" (Condessa de Penha Longa Foundation, n.d.).

Having been reflecting for some time on what a more ecological artistic practice would be like, walking was adopted as a methodology to begin to create a relationship with the surrounding land that the college encompassed.

Trough the walks it was discovered that, in addition to the main building, which housed the bedrooms of the resident artists, the owners of the college and the Catholic nuns who lived there, the classrooms, the playground and the canteen, there was a garden with various types of medium and large trees with an artificial lake and a cave, orchards, farmland where permaculture was practiced as well as pens for pigs, sheep, chickens and other animals. Next to these pens was a fenced-in area where the sheep grazed. At the beginning of its considerable length, right next to the corrals separated by a chicken coop, there was a ruined house. This house, as I later learnt, was the first home of the Pinto Leite family to which the Countess of Penha Longa, the founder of the Foundation, belonged. As we can see in Figures 1 to 3, the roof and part of the walls were collapsed. Instead of being on top of the house, the roof tiles were covering the floor and so were the timbers that supported them. Some of the stones that made up the walls dotted both its interior and exterior. Plants, vines and even small trees grew on top of and along the ruins.



Figures
1 to 3

In a first impression, what was attractive about this place for me was the decadent romantic scenery and the limbo that it seemed trapped in to. On the one hand, and in a broader time frame, was the inevitability that resided in the natural course of this house that was its return to the earth. On the other, in a smaller time frame, was the possible delay of this process, a wish expressed latter by its same owners in order to preserve the family's material history. From my point of view, this situation resembled the moment when, in the face of discarding an object, there is a time where we can decide to preserve, keep or fix, between other strategies to extend the life time of what we own and with the motivations we have to take this matters into our own hands. Being mindful of the enormous quantity of objects that are discarded before they stop being able to fulfill their purpose in exchange for the act of buying something new as well as the ecological impacts of this process, I was compelled to size the availability of materials and objects that this place offered. So, in line with my interest and search for more ecological sculpture production and at the same time reflecting on the material condition of this place, roof tiles, rocks, wood and other objects and materials that were not used in the sculpture, were selected and brought to the atelier manly from this ruins.

Other important point for this sculpture's idealization is related with a critical reflection about what I will call disempowering high art object. It has to do with several considerations about how the object is made known under capitalism, as we will see. On one side, it is related with the way in which the observer perceives it only by its appearance, shape, color, brightness, composition, etc. On another it is related with other factors such as the price on the market and knowledge or information that is given through a sculpture. A last one relates to the others in the sense that these way of knowing the art object disregards the processes by which it comes into existence. As Jaimey Hamilton Faris puts it, objects exist in an hermeticism perpetuated by capitalism which nurtures a comprehensive ignorance about the ontological condition of the commodity (Faris, 2013, x).

This, ultimately, makes it difficult for a more comprehensive and empowered reading from the observer stance and thus taking away their power to contest the object presented. More, this hermeticism can hide injustices and negative

social and ecological impacts that happen during extraction and production, and are perpetuated by their approval and transaction. At the same time, this is a type of sculpture that positions it self in a highly elevated artistic position, so high that it becomes elitist to a level that renders other art forms as lesser instead of different and so positioning itself in a place more difficult to be contested, contributing to a less democratic world. This conception of art accepts art that lives from its high speculation and financialization. Such situation is problematic once it is only possible and supported thanks to a unjust western white privileged continuously built in the expense of the other through violent neo colonialist and neo liberalist structures and systems. As we can understand by John A. Fisher's account, when he describes ways in which art was ranked in the renaissance disputes between sculpture and painting (Kemp in Fisher, 2013, 474) they seem highly interested on stratification and overlapping. This rendering of fine art is, in my point of view, based on discussions driven by egos. These that seem to emerge from power relations that, like Bourdieu defended, create such hierarchies between low and high art and drive their power from social discrimination (in Fischer, 1993, 129). This view of high art is also attached to an idea of an autonomous art and art object which has not to preoccupy itself with mundane matters such as economic, social and ecological inequalities. These art spheres, as Bourdeau adverted, crated a 'sacralization of culture' which 'fulfils a vital function to contributing to the consecration of social order' (1993, 236). In fact, in the defense of a conservative elitism, as Fischer describes it (2013, 481), Scruton (2007, 49) renders value in 'canonic works' which he defends as more valuable because they illuminate the 'universal truths of the human condition' and because they are 'intrinsically valuable when judged aesthetically'. I come here to underline some ideas that seem problematic in Scruton's view. In line with my previous considerations, I would like to highlight that 'canonic works', 'universal truths' and the 'intrinsic value', that are defended by Scruton, are only conceived from a western self-centered society point of view that renders non-western cultures, even if unconsciously, less human or 'other'. These ideas were created by the powerful that were in privileged positions within empires, and which gained and imposed their will and ideas through brutal ways.

On the other hand, in a democratic and pluralist point of view (Fischer, 2013, 480), such truths and canons would be agreed on rather than imposed by few. Pluralist visions of high art can be found for example in the critique of the modeling of art into artistic research by the artist Renate Lorenz (in Kaila, Seppä, & Slager 2017, p. 31). According to her, artistic investigation has been positioned at the crossing between the Academia and the Art Market, two institutions that, in her opinion, distribute opportunities in unequal ways, therefore valuing and producing unjust exclusions and inclusions. To sustain her view, she resorts to Ranciére (2016) to defend an art that resists these powers. For this she defends an art that positions aesthetics in a negotiation between legibility of its message, that threatens to destroy its form of sensible art and the radical strangeness which threatens to destroy all political meaning (idem. p. 36). But this search for freedom and from constraints of unjustly discriminatory institutions, that Lorenz exposes is, in my opinion, a cage in itself. In my understanding, this view of art's 'total freedom' beside an impossible utopia, is in accordance with the conservative elitism defended by Scruton because such utopian idea of autonomy, as I mentioned before, is only possible in privileged circles and reinforces social discriminations which Lorenz seems to try to escape.

If we take in account recent developments of how digitalization is changing the art world, we can see that some changes in the realms of worldwide transparency, connectivity, accessibility, democratization of art forms and power decentralization are in process in many interconnected dimensions. On the level of the artist, through the internet not only is made available more information about other artists, which is essential for one's academic evolution as well as to take them into consideration if one truly wants to go beyond or add something to the art world or work in collaborative ways. More, it came to offer to the artists the possibility of being their own intermediaries between their work, potential buyers and followers. This, according to Kanellidi (2019, 8), concedes several degrees of independence from galleries and the art world elite to make their work known, even though it is without a doubt more prestigious to exhibit in a respected gallery. This, as Kanellidi explains further (idem.), makes it easier to live from their own art taking into consideration the money they save on gallery commissions for example.

In another dimension, for art buyers, what digitalization came to do was not only to connect more directly the artist with its audience but also to make the buying process more secure, fair and transparent. Now, with globalization enhanced by digitalization, cross border exchanges are potentiated diversifying and rising economic activity for more people (Kanedelli, 2019, 16), which means that art financing grows globally. Buyers can gain from the greater information provided regarding prices of the pieces and their authors, ultimately being able to make a more informed and therefore more just decision on their purchases, something that did not always occur with other intermediaries. Despite this, the role of these intermediaries is not overthrown. As Kanedelli explains, consultants and art advisors are usually called when someone is not interested in taking the time to inform oneself (2019, 27).

In a wider picture, the considerations above, as Kanedellidi (2019, 14) tells us, distributes power beyond the dicutomical European-U.S. hegemony that begins to dissolve as worldwide connections between all sorts of art players takes place with the support of social media and the internet. This ultimately means, as Kanedelli explains (2019, 15-16) that the big authorities of the art world progressively start to be more susceptible to contestation and competition and therefore to share with more actors their authority. In spite of this, in an early stage, the biggest auction houses had an leading role in foster connectivity in the art market by producing and stimulating demand with new digital ways (Kanedelli, 2019, 17). The same has happened with museums and galleries which attract more people either by using social media to advertise what they are showing and their agenda luring the public to come in person or to reach a public that although will never go physically to such events, will interact digitally with the collection. With internet and social media, as Kanedelli (2019, 19) lets us know, newer generations are more inclined to receive information passively selecting content, controlling interactive experiences, instantly sharing and distributing content and even co-creating participative artworks (Furness in Kanedelli).

On the other hand they learn about preferences of their audience and can make decisions about events and exhibitions that meet the audience preferences once or their potential buyers. This institutions struggle to keep their hegemony in

determining everything that is determined as culture and art, not letting it stand alone outside and separate from the art spaces (idem, 22).

This understanding of user preferences has a dark side, once it is used to manipulate and direct their choices limiting their right to choose. Although the decisions are more informed by user data the idea of choice is twisted once there are not presented with any options to choose from. On the other hand, this information not only is used instrumentalizing users but in ways that potentiate profits and commercial interest taking valuable information without providing something meaningful in return (Raine & Anderson in Australian Council for the Art Response, 2017, 4). More, although many has been done regarding transparency and the democratization of culture through digital means, some high end galleries, for example, still do not advertise not even their sale prices (Kanedelli, 2019, 26). This spaces, even though are apparently decreasing, are the ones that validate art pieces and art circles that preserve their unattainability and whose sole purpose seems to be the accumulation of power and wealth in order to attain a state of dream like autonomy from the rest of the world by taking much more than they distribute.

This understanding of this high art of course has material repercussions. The art that is made in accordance with this conservative elitism often privileges the tension between the unspeakable and high perceptive characteristics of its form as defended by Lorenz. This seems to be only conceivable under a suspended temporal-spatial notion, where the abstraction of thought detached from reality prevails and which, if it comes to exist, only can do so in highly privileged environments by privileged artists funded by highly privileged people. Environments like this, also by its desire to step outside reality at all costs, are unfolded in structures that perpetuate social and ecological damaging production and consumption models and for this reason I see them as negative ways of approaching the practice of sculpture and art in general.

Taking all the above into consideration, as a precondition for making a sculpture, it was prioritized a search for the earthliest ideas of the unattainable, the beautiful or the perfect trough practice. These were assumed within the

social, ecological, and economic fabric of the daily context in which the sculpture would be made that was described above. Here, the materials become actors and entities that would compose the sculpture and would be thought of as leveling them in a fairer and more visible way in the hierarchy of the elitist cycles of art that are nonetheless interconnected with the cycles of wealth and salary distribution of Western neoliberal structures. The execution of this sculpture therefore, more than taking into account the means by which it would be made, focused on creating a form that aimed to challenged these aesthetic cultures.

To this end, as can be understood buy the previous considerations, the sculpture made use of local materials, transforming them as little as possible with tools already owned or borrowed. On the other hand, the form achieved sought to create new ways of seeing the object, in this case a house. To do this, first, it was reflected on what an object unpacks rather that in visually perceptible condition. The way to rethink a house in these circumstances of proposed “meta” or “post apparent” realism would be to see the house as it really is, in other words, on a broader temporal and spatial plane. In these circumstances, I interpret it more as a set of material flows that are also in flux and in transformation which can be thought of more as a sort of conceptual cubism than a unitary, autonomous, and fixed entity.

3. Reflexive Practice Based Execution.

With all of the above in consideration, in the first place, it was defined that it would be a central element of the piece that would be crossed axially by other elements. This was thought to be subtly representative of a house. Tho make it there were made experiments with a rock and a roof tile (Figs. 4 and 5), but it was a solution that jointed two balanced roof tiles together in a way that would resemble the simplest way to built a shelter or a top of a house that was chosen (Fig. 6).



Figures 4 to 6

After this, other roof tiles were broken and disposed axially in the same direction as the two first elements in decrescent order in relation with their size and width as shown in Figure 6. On one side, the elements were left in pieces so that their color gained by the dirt they brough would remind of the dirt they would eventually go to. On the other side of the composition, the same was done, but this time, it was used roof tile dust produced with the help of a hammer by hand. On this dust were done slightly drawn lines in the shape of small waves so as to refer to the processes of sedimentation that are in the origin of the ceramic natural deposits.

The following section of the piece was made with the rocks collected. Firstly, after a quick research, they were identified as granite, a type rock that is formed by the cooling of magma at depth (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). For this reason another stone was collected. This instead of found was reached for and when found was not chosen by chance. Her shape resembled a ridge of a mountain with two peaks, as can be seen in the Figure number 7 already with the holes that would serve to help break the rock later.



Figure 7

Before this, given that in the beginning of her formation she went through a transition from a liquid to a solid state of matter it was decided that a glimpse of this process was going to be represented. Having this in mind, a small visual search to get a hold of the volume of magma was done. At the same time, the shape of the rock was taken in to consideration.

The holes shown in the previous figure were used to take a big part of the rock that would be later inserted in the composition as well. The remaining fractured side of the rock was smoothed out to understand better the possibilities that the rock had (Fig. 8).



Figure 8

Finally the shape pretended was drawn and craved with the help of an angle grinder and finished with water sand paper (Fig. 9 and 10). This was later placed in a extreme far of the composition in relation to the central roof tiles. Between the tiles and it the fragment separated from the rock was placed with the hole markings facing the center. On the other side

of the tiles smaller rocks and fragments were arranged in the manner as the ceramic fragments, ending with the dust that resulted from the processes of braking, carving and finishing the modeled stone.



Figures 9 and 10

The third section that would cross axially the balanced roof tiles was made with wood. On one side a wooden slat was laid down in line with the center of the composition and dust from this same slat was placed as to give the impression that it came out of it. On the other side a horizontal wooden slab was placed up right leaning against another slat facing the center as well, so as to give the impression that the slat would come out of a tree section. By this time each fragment in particular in combination with the hole was arranged to give the sense that each material came from the earth, passed through the house and returned to the earth that was present as well in the extension that would make two different materials cross filled with dirt. The end result (Fig. 11), then, shows a house as a passage point for different materials that eventually

come from and return to the earth, as well as a suggestion of the respective processes that make this possible. Thus, the house is represented not as a unitary and autonomous entity but as a material and temporal state that is part of reality. It also serves as a metaphor for the sculpture itself, which is no longer seen as an apparition detached from reality. At the same time, the form of the mandala was assumed in the execution process. This emerged generatively in the process of arranging the elements and was adopted because of its relevance to the work. It is appropriated and presented as a vehicle for a new and more enlightened vision of reality, the self and the world, and therefore of transformation (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022).



Figure 11

Conclusions

This paper presents a perspective on what could be a fusion between a reflexive artistic practice and research based on artistic practice. Through this, it is exposed a more sustainable way of making sculpture by considering its insertion in a capitalist and consumerist Western society. Starting from the specificity of the place but being scalable and thus useful for a wider context, it argues that even in a rural context, the interconnectedness of production, consumption and transport systems between the city and the countryside must be taken into account in order to achieve a more ecological artistic practice.

Although we can see an increase of power decentralization, transparency and desacralization inside the art world thanks to digitalization, I come here to argue that we have to expand this characteristics and go beyond prices, artist biographies and other practical information. With the boost given to globalization thanks to the internet and social media we must take into account a wider context. The working conditions, salaries ways of producing and transporting art works have social and ecological impacts that will soon stop to be acceptable. The avalanche of information available in the world wide web has made us more connected and aware of the injustices, disparities and impacts of our western way of living than ever before. Although the greater responsibility

of the way things are produced fall on the artist's shoulders, we should make every step of the process known to a wider audience. If a buyer refuses to purchase a work of art from the other side of the globe that is made with petroleum derivatives that destroy ecosystems in the extraction process or cause life threatening diseases to the workers that transform this raw materials In third world countries that are exploited by western countries but do not match European production requirements I think it is more than legitimate. As we can see, there are more than good reasons to extend transparency to the whole life cycle of the work of art. This perspective comes to advocate for an art that contributes to a greater good, greater than the artists, curators and elite players hunger for autonomy and power, a global greater good. We must acknowledge the connections between a four dimensional way of seeing the world, in its physicality, and a zero dimensional brought by the apparent simultaneity of the digital realm, which we still perceive in our single point of focus. We need to face the information that is out there and make it available to reach a true Sustainable world were the art world is inserted and based. This ultimately means that we must tackle our western ontologies and approach our neo-colonial and neo-liberal space ship earth. Taking this wider context into account, a form was developed that contradicts a way of knowing the object that is given under capitalism, as well as a type of art that is assumed to be elitist and claims its autonomy from extra-artistic reality. It does so by representing an object, making it appear as a crossing point for various material flows, reclaiming its position in the world. Thus, this article simultaneously describes ways of making sculpture and art in a more sustainable way it also creates a discourse that criticizes the reality in which it is inserted.

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