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Caring for the Landscape: From Participatory Art to Everyday Aesthetics

Abstract

The essay aims to demonstrate that participatory ecological art focused on planting, sowing, and cultivation serves as a means to promote a culture of environmental care. After exploring several artistic projects involving community engagement in landscape stewardship, the essay focuses on the debate concerning gesture and behavioral patterns. Finally, by examining artist Egle Oddo's Performative Habitats project, it seeks to understand how art can influence the formation of new habits through both increased environmental awareness and repeated action, employing key theoretical frameworks of Everyday Aesthetics.

Keywords

Participatory Ecological Art, Everyday Aesthetics, Aesthetics of Care

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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, driven by the environmental crisis, significant artistic movements emerged, known as Land Art or Earth Art. While these works aimed to refocus attention on nature¹, they did not always demonstrate respect for it. For example, an iconic piece of environmental art, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, still existing today, was created in 1970 on the Great Salt Lake in Utah through the use of excavators and bulldozers. These machines were necessary to move materials and carve a 457-meter spiral with the hardness of steel teeth. Moreover, the best way to appreciate the work is from above, ideally via a helicopter. Thus, although utilizing natural spaces and elements, these projects are often invasive and driven by an anthropocentric perspective, lacking true ecological awareness (Iannelli 2023a). Within the broad category labeled as environmental art, projects of ecological art (or eco-art) stand out, characterized by an increasingly conscious and mature commitment to landscape respect (Ardenne 2019) and aimed at promoting a profound reconciliation between humans and nature (Iannelli 2023b).

Additionally, the debate on the Anthropocene (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000), which began at the dawn of the 21st century, has had significant repercussions in the art world (Turpin, Davis 2015). The art world has sought new ways to influence environmental policies and to more consciously foster actions of care towards “non-human” living beings (Morton 2018).

Following the theories of Gilles Clément (Clément 2014, 2017), artists have initiated projects focused not only on the relationship between humans and nature but also on participatory cooperation. In this context, cultural value took on connotations of social and political action. *Ecovention* (a term coined by combining ecology and invention) fits into this perspective, indicating artistic practices capable of guiding towards ecological transition (Spaid 2002).

The European Union has recognized the potential of art in awakening individual and collective sensitivity towards environmental issues, promoting the New European Bauhaus (NEB). This project is inspired by the famous art school founded in Germany between the wars, led by architect,

¹ An example of this trend can be found in the 1976 Venice Art Biennale, which dedicated an entire pavilion to exploring the relationship between art and the environment (Celant 1977).

designer, and urban planner Walter Gropius, and focuses on three fundamental principles: beauty, sustainability, and inclusion.

However, although it is evident that participatory ecological art generates awareness of environmental issues in the public, it remains unclear how it can induce new habits and behaviors in communities towards care for the landscape.

In an attempt to answer this question, this essay will initially examine some forms of participatory art based on planting, sowing, and cultivating public green areas to demonstrate how they can positively influence our attitude towards nature through direct involvement and community building. Subsequently, the contemporary debate on gesture and aesthetic habits will be considered. Finally, the *Performative Habitats* project by Italian artist Egle Oddo (Oddo, Adragna 2022) will be examined to demonstrate, through a specific case of eco-art, how it is possible to transition from extraordinary artistic gestures to everyday aesthetic habits, promoting not only awareness but also care for the environment that surrounds us. I chose to focus on this case study both because the University of Palermo was a partner in the project – thus facilitating continuous and direct dialogue with the artist – and because *Performative Habitats* constitutes an exemplary case to illustrate the transformative power of participatory art in light of the theoretical frameworks offered by Everyday Aesthetics (Saito 2007; Di Stefano 2018) and particularly the aesthetics of care, recently proposed by Japanese-American philosopher Yuriko Saito (Saito 2022).

2. *Planting, Sowing, and Cultivation as Participatory Art*

Many artists have focused their ecological projects on planting, sowing, and cultivation as forms of participatory art. One of the earliest examples is *Time Landscape* by American artist Alan Sonfist, created in New York City (Sonfist 1983). After extensive research on New York's botany, geology, and history, Sonfist and local community members planted a 25' x 40' plot at the northeast corner of La Guardia Place and West Houston Street in 1978. They used native trees, shrubs, wild grasses, flowers, plants, rocks, and earth. Their efforts resulted in a slowly developing forest that represents the Manhattan landscape as it was when Native Americans lived there in the early 17th century.

A notable example is Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks*, a landmark art installation created in 1982 during Documenta 7, which involved planting 7000

oak trees in the city of Kassel, Germany². This performance became a symbol of commitment to ecological and social regeneration.

Following a similar line of thought, Hungarian artist Agnes Denes executed an intergenerational ecological installation in Finland called *Tree Mountain*. This collective performance involved planting 11,000 trees to form a mountain. Participants received certificates recognizing them as tree custodians, inheritable for twenty or more future generations³. However, her most famous project, *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* (1982), involved cultivating a wheat field on abandoned land in Manhattan, New York. The vast expanse of golden wheat created a stark contrast within the urban space, offering a response to the city's congestion to highlight the importance of land stewardship and the need for a balance between nature and built environments.

In 1986, Dutch artist Herman de Vries initiated a project called *Die Wiese* (*The Meadow*) aimed at restoring primitive biodiversity damaged by intensive farming. The project began when the artist and his wife purchased a small plot of land within a large commercially cultivated area near their home in Eschenau, Germany, and concluded in 2013. Over these years, the couple cared for the land, working to return it to its natural state by avoiding pesticides and fertilizers used in surrounding areas and planting seeds. Over time, birds, insects, and mammals began to make the plot their habitat, initiating a relational exchange with the plant elements that proved beneficial for the well-being of the cultivated area⁴.

In the following years, American artist Mel Chin created numerous works centered around plant cultivation⁵. One of his most notable projects, *Revival Field* (1991), used plants to absorb and neutralize heavy metals in contaminated soil, showcasing the regenerative capacity of plants in the environment.

In these participatory projects, the ordinary act of planting a tree, sowing seeds, or cultivating vegetables becomes extraordinary through artistic performance. By focusing our attention on nature, the artist presents it in a new light, making us feel part of that ecosystemic harmony where

² https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_7# (accessed: 16/09/2024).

³ <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works4.html> (accessed: 16/09/2024).

⁴ The slow transformation of the landscape is documented in the photographic book *Die Wiese: Eschenau 1986 – 2013*. Additionally, it is possible to view a video illustrating the yearly progression of the land: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2J8ASyBicEM> (accessed: 16/09/2024).

⁵ <https://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field/> (accessed: 16/09/2024).

every element, inorganic and organic, plant and animal, plays an essential role in biodiversity. Through the selection of locations, plant species, and the creation of temporary or permanent artistic installations, these planting, sowing, and cultivation-based performances contribute to transforming urban or natural spaces, creating a visual and sensory impact that stimulates reflection and interaction with the environment.

While art has always possessed the ability to provoke thought, participatory performances, by actively involving the audience physically, can bring about a more intimate and profound transformation. The purpose of participatory artistic practices is not merely to create aesthetically pleasing urban spaces through tree planting or green area creation, but to discover the beauty of relationships with others and the environment through cooperation for the care of the common good. The tradition of participatory performances centered around planting, sowing, and cultivation has become firmly established, gradually adopting a more pronounced connotation of ecological and political activism over time. Through events and collective actions, the local community is invited to actively participate in transforming places, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility towards the surrounding environment.

However, how can the isolated gesture, connected to the extraordinary moment of participation in the performance, be transformed into an aesthetic habit and a daily practice aimed at caring for the environment?

3. From the extraordinary gesture of art to the habits of ordinary life

Reflection on gesture, not only artistic, lies at the heart of a broad debate that has given rise to a veritable field of study (Gesture Studies). Although the artist's gesture has sometimes been considered the extraordinary act of genius and the result of improvisation without rules, today there is a tendency to highlight how even in the production and enjoyment of art, there is a component of repetitiveness and a profound connection with aesthetic habits (Bertinetto 2022, 2023).

Many contemporary performances, such as Allan Kaprow's happenings, rely on the repetition of gestures from ordinary life (Formis 2010) to amplify their resonance and encourage the audience to abandon the role of passive observer. Even performances centered on planting, sowing, and cultivation involve the repetition of daily actions typical of farmers or public green managers. However, as is common in artistic practices, these actions are imbued with artistic significance, transcending their utilitarian

purpose and transforming into extraordinary acts, id est these gestures can be “artified” (Heinich, Shapiro 2012).

The topic of artification is complex and has been addressed by various authors through different interpretative frameworks (Dreon 2018). These can be broadly categorized into a separatist approach, which emphasizes the ontological differences between common objects and artistic objects, following the institutional theory of art (Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Peter Lamarque), and a continuist approach (Saito, Naukkarinen 2012), which focuses on the continuous intersections between art and everyday life (Andrzejewski 2015). The theory of ethologist Ellen Dissanayake (Dissanayake 1992, 2001) could also be included in this second approach. Dissanayake considers artification as “making special”, that is, rendering everyday actions extraordinary in the eyes of onlookers through the stylization or alteration of behaviors, thereby imbuing them with ritual value. This interpretative key, grounded in anthropological foundations, proves particularly fruitful in our case study, as it reinforces the idea that when ritualized even ordinary gestures become special and “bearers of meaning” within the community (Di Stefano 2023).

To comprehend how “artified” ordinary gestures can engender aesthetic habits, we can examine the insights of some scholars who have approached these matters from diverse theoretical viewpoints.

According to Giovanni Maddalena (Maddalena 2015), the gesture is an action that has a beginning and an end and carries meaning, as indicated by its name derived from the Latin verb *gero*, “to carry”. Every acquisition of knowledge derived from experience is manifested through gestures, which serve as a form of expression parallel to verbal or written language. While some gestures, like those in art, require a high level of symbolism, even mundane activities such as cooking, gardening, and crafts, as noted by Maddalena, can be regarded as gestures when they embody the fusion of practical and theoretical knowledge. However, following Peirce’s pragmatism, Maddalena states that for a gesture to carry meaning, it must have three characteristics: generate new feelings or ideas (*firstness*, in Peirce’s terminology); engage the body in physical action (*secondness*); establish habits of action (*thirdness*). In this context, performance, particularly those centered on planting, sowing, and cultivation, employs highly symbolic gestures that alter the landscape. If these performances also succeed in instilling habitual actions within the participating community, they can be deemed as synthetic and accomplished gestures. However, as emphasized by Maddalena, the establishment of a

habit requires the development of embodied knowledge, which is cultivated through repetition and practice (Pelgreffi 2018; Possamai 2017).

Mariagrazia Portera also takes this same line, studying habits from the perspective of biological and evolutionary aesthetics (Portera 2020). Following John Dewey, the scholar believes that changing a bad habit necessitates more than logical persuasion; instead, it requires addressing the dysfunctional environmental conditions. In humans, the acquisition of habits is indeed a condition of living itself; the elimination of dysfunctional habits can be effective only if awareness is followed by incorporation. From this point of view, artistic performances in which the audience is invited to do something produce an awareness that is not the result of rational knowledge, but of a gesture, an action that engages the body. However, for awareness to turn into aesthetic habit, aimed, for example, at caring for places and respecting the landscape, educational activity is required.

Already Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b 2-6 and 1179b 34ss) linked the acquisition of virtuous habits to the figure of the educator. He did not consider it possible to acquire good habits without the example of a teacher, or the observance of a rule, or even without a physical, social, and cultural context adequately arranged to foster the development of habits of virtue. In line with this tradition, today the acquisition of good habits, including aesthetic ones, must be supported by educational and didactic activities (Carmagnola-Senaldi 2005; Arielli 2016; Contini-Manera 2019); in fact, even contemporary arts often involve seminars, workshops, and laboratories (both with children and adults) to initiate the formative process that is preparatory to the performance itself.

To better understand the value of repetition and bodily action for the acquisition of ecological awareness and an aesthetic habit aimed at respecting the environment, I will focus on Egle Oddo's *Performative Habitats*, a participatory artistic project centered on caring for places.

4. Performative Habitats: *the care of places from art to daily practice*

For several years, Egle Oddo has been dedicated to the international project *Performative Habitats*, creating "participatory" gardens in various cities around the world, in collaboration with local communities. These are permanent installations where different plant species grow together, producing new varieties. The relation established between the local community and the urban green area generates a dual transformation, both

on the landscape and on the people. For this reason, the artist defines her vegetal installations as “evolving gardens” (Oddo 2021), as they initiate both social and botanical interactions that evolve spontaneously over time. One of these gardens was also created in Palermo, at Piazza Kalsa, and was inaugurated with the collective performance *Instauro*⁶ during the “Biennale Arcipelago Mediterraneo” (September 23, 2022 - January 22, 2023), an international festival of visual, performative, and theatrical arts held periodically in the city.

To fully understand the meaning of *Performative Habitats*, it is necessary to start from the field of biology, where habitat represents an identifiable and delimited place where a specific population of organisms lives and thrives. Every habitat can be considered “performative”, subject to a continuous process of self-transformation, as highlighted by the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (Uexküll 2010), as each species interacts with the environment based on its perceptual specificity, thus contributing to its modification. The idea of a habitat that generates a transformative action through the relationships that develop therein is also found in the studies of the philosophy of biology. According to Emanuele Coccia (Coccia 2018), nothing in nature is “natural”, but everything is the result of a constant metamorphosis generated by the life of species.

Egle Oddo’s *Performative Habitats* focus on the diverse forms of care and aim to develop social inclusion through landscape cultivation. However, it is not merely a performance that occurs at a given moment and in a specific space only to fade away afterward. Each installation involves several phases: the idea; observation and selection of the area; soil preparation; the pivotal and ritual moment of sowing; and finally, maintenance. Each of these phases takes time, involves repetitive actions, and implies various forms of interaction.

In *Performative Habitats*, we can observe all the characteristics of meaningful gestures as outlined by Giovanni Maddalena (*firstness, secondness, thirdness*). The expressive and symbolic value stems from the fact that the artist carries out the sowing operations while wearing long, brightly colored garments and performing slow and ritualistic movements. Interaction with the physical reality occurs when the soil is manipulated through actions like digging, fertilizing, sowing, and watering. Lastly, the

⁶ The *Instauro* performance was created with the contributions of music composer Timo Tuhkanen, stylist Suvi Hänninen, botanist Anna Scialabba, supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the Finnish Ministry of Culture, and the MeNo Association. The premiere of the performance took place at Area Madera (Palermo) on 23/09/2022.

third element, which makes the gesture complete and meaningful, concerns the habit of action. This aspect, capable of transforming an extraordinary gesture into a habit, unfolds over a long period ranging from the preparation phase to maintenance: it's the lengthy time required to establish daily relationships and routine actions⁷. During this time, Egle Oddo begins by identifying a suitable area from both an environmental and social perspective to realize her artistic idea. She then initiates negotiations with the local community: it's crucial to make residents and business owners in the area aware or even participatory. In the following months, she frequents the chosen location daily, talks to people, explains her project, piques the curiosity of the local community, and involves people in soil preparation activities, which include removing any waste, tilling, and watering the soil. When the preparatory phase is completed, Oddo inaugurates the garden with a performance during which, with the collaboration of the people, she sows "cultivars" (specific seeds for cultivation) that will grow, creating spontaneous relations with wild seeds.

The preparation phase is crucial, serving both to ensure that the soil is conducive to sowing and to make the local community aware and proactive. It is at this moment that the garden starts to gradually fill up and undergo transformation: insects such as bees and butterflies appear, and the performative action between the artist, plant elements, insects, and people begins. This interaction among the various components — social, plant, animal — acting on the garden can be interpreted in light of the aesthetics of the performative developed by Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Messori 2021). According to the German scholar, performance possesses a transformative power that arises, in a new and unplanned manner each time, through the influence and reciprocal action among the various subjects involved (in the case of the show, actors and spectators), united by an exchange of significant experiences. In Egle Oddo's evolutionary gardens, the performative action does not end when, after the preparatory phase, the garden is sown during a participatory performance designed for that specific installation. On the contrary, it is the maintenance phase that determines the success of the project in terms of social inclusion and care for the places. Usually, in Oddo's participatory gardens, the local communities that took part in the sowing continue to take care of the place by virtue of the sense of belonging and responsibility instilled by cooperation in the performance. During the

⁷ For the preparation of the garden in the city of Palermo, the artist spent about a year, as she herself recounts (Di Stefano, Oddo 2024 forthcoming).

maintenance phase, which takes place in the absence of the artist, interaction among social, animal, and plant components continues, and the garden evolves spontaneously and unpredictably.

Currently, the garden in Palermo has reached this final phase. In addition to the seeds planted in the autumn of 2022, many seeds planted by neighbors and the homeless community who take care of the plants daily have been added, and they have started to grow pumpkins, zucchinis, and tomatoes along with wheat and poppies. Although the result may not appear aesthetically pleasing, the project has achieved its goal in the perspective of the aesthetics of care.

By stimulating care for places, Oddo's performances incorporate some concepts of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art* (Phillips 2016)⁸. The works of the American artist, although not focused on planting, sowing, and cultivating vegetables, compare with the idea of "maintenance", drawing connections between the care of urban and natural environments and the care of our well-being. By focusing on ordinary and repetitive actions often related to cleaning and maintenance in public, private, and domestic contexts, Laderman Ukeles' performances seek to reframe maintenance not as a trivial necessity but as a vital part of our way of interacting with the world, and in this sense, they present some affinities with the theories of Yuriko Saito, considered the godmother of Everyday Aesthetics.

According to Saito, aesthetics should valorize the aesthetic potential of daily actions, even those considered repetitive, mundane, and tedious (such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and doing household chores), rediscovering the inherent beauty in caring for places and people. In the contemporary age, characterized by consumerism and widespread aestheticization (Di Stefano 2012), it is not easy to grasp the beauty of what we tend to take for granted. However, theorists of Everyday Aesthetics, highlighting the reassuring power of routine practices (Melchionne 2013, 2014) and the comforting value of what is familiar (Haapala 2005; Saito 2017), have sought to focus attention on aspects, gestures, and behaviors to which we pay little attention and which can instead become important in terms of sustainability, intergenerational aesthetics, and social inclusion.

The philosophy of gesture, elaborated by Giovanni Maddalena, can also help understand the aesthetic value of routine practices that are the

⁸ <https://feldmangallery.com/artist-home/mierle-laderman-ukeles> (accessed: 16/09/2024).

subject of Everyday Aesthetics. Here, the aesthetic is to be understood in the etymological sense of *aisthesis*, i.e., a “sensitive knowledge”, according to the definition of the philosopher Alexander G. Baumgarten (Baumgarten 1954), which is rooted in the vague dimension of experience. However, according to Maddalena, the gesture articulates the vagueness of experience towards a clearer meaning, and therefore the gesture is, as Richard Sennet (Sennet 2008) affirms, embodied knowledge. If daily actions of care and maintenance of private or public spaces are imbued with symbolic value, the gesture acquires full meaning and, despite being characterized by a normative and repetitive aspect, can be perceived as innovative. According to Maddalena, the possibility of grasping elements of novelty in meaning even in a repetitive action is what allows any daily practice to contribute to shaping a person’s identity. It is that sense of identity, belonging, and satisfaction — in line with Everyday Aesthetics, we could also speak of pleasure — that each of us feels when faced with a job well done: a DIY activity, food preparation, gardening practice, household chores.

In line with the thought of John Dewey (Dewey 1958), Everyday Aesthetics embraces the pragmatist ethos of meliorism, holding that valuing the aesthetic potential of everyday life can lead towards the construction of a better world. If it is true, as Dewey contends, that individuals form relationships with the environment around them and are positively or negatively influenced by these relationships, participatory art focused on the cultivation and maintenance of landscapes, transforming how we perceive and interact with the environment, also induces change in people, establishing new habits and rediscovering new forms of identity and social inclusion. This occurs because the act of planting a tree or cultivating a garden does not end with the artistic performance but endures over time through the daily practice of care. In doing so, it becomes an integral part of our relationship with the surrounding environment, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

5. Conclusion

Participatory art focused on planting, sowing, and cultivation is not merely an artistic expression but serves as a catalyst for social and cultural change, capable of transforming how we perceive and interact with the environment. Indeed, direct participation in landscape cultivation and care activities provides the public with the opportunity to engage with nature and

fosters a sense of responsibility towards the environment not only as individuals but also as part of a broader community.

To demonstrate how it is possible to transition from the extraordinary action of performance to daily aesthetic habits, the debate on the philosophy of gesture has been explored, and a specific case study has been analyzed: the *Performative Habitats* project by artist Egle Oddo, which involves the installation of evolving gardens. The active involvement of local communities in the preparatory phases and maintenance of these gardens contributes to promoting a culture of environmental care that extends beyond artistic performances, becoming an integral part of the community's daily life.

In conclusion, participatory art focused on environmental care teaches us that cultural and behavioral change begins with a gesture but is realized only through the constant practice of daily habits. Supporting and promoting these practices, in line with the New European Bauhaus, is essential to foster aesthetic habits of care and ensure a sustainable and environmentally respectful future.

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