

Creative Responses to Sustainability

Cultural Initiatives Engaging
with Social & Environmental Issues

PORTUGAL GUIDE



ciclo

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CREATIVE RESPONSES TO SUSTAINABILITY

Cultural Initiatives Engaging with Social & Environmental Issues
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The Ci.CLO Bienal Fotografia do Porto is a platform to challenge existing cultural, environmental, political and economic contra-

dictions in our contemporary world. Ci.CLO celebrates artistic practice and champions research and experimentation in collaboration with artists. Focusing on photography and its trans-disciplinary and relation with other artistic fields, Ci.CLO provokes and proposes possible future sustainability narratives, both utopian and dystopian, motivated by cultural and environmental change. The majority of works in the Bienal program result from residences and research laboratories carried out within the framework of the Bienal. The Ci.CLO creation and exhibition programmes support innovative approaches to visual representation that contribute to a heightened critical awareness of ecological and social vulnerabilities that confront us.

About the Ci.CLO Bienal'19 "Adaptation and Transition"

How can we contribute to transitioning towards a better adapted and more sustainable society? How can thought and artistic practices creatively expand discourse around these issues and translate thinking into action? Adaptation and Transition, the title of the first Ci.CLO Bienal Fotografia do Porto, suggests a dialogic relationship within the current context marked by social and environmental crisis. Being both a constructive and destructive force, we are drastically shifting the structure of our planet. It is an unavoidable challenge to adapt to a changing and increasingly uncontrollable environment, where all forms of life negotiate their survival. Adapting to transition is already an inevitability. Accepting and embarking on this transition is an opportunity for us to act. It is a matter of urgency to discover other ways of living in and interpreting the world. To continue on this evolutionary journey of adaptation and transition it is critical we reorganize our knowledge and perceptions, and explore new interactions and daily practices, to create symbiotic relationships between humans, other living beings and the earth. That is, establish alternative social, political and economic values that are ecologically sustainable.

Co-Organization and Production:



BIENAL'19
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DO PORTO

Support:



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Thoughts on Future Directions

Art and Culture in Transformations Toward Greater Sustainability

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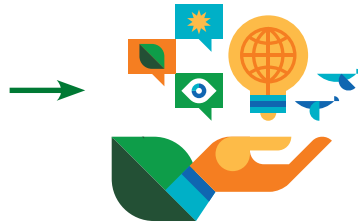
A deep current of concern underlies artistic work addressing sustainability, expressed through searches for alternatives and a growing urgency to envision and practice new ways of living in a more sustainable manner. As artists and other creators investigate and illuminate the entangled issues of sustainability and experiment with solutions, many artistic projects are underpinned by the principles of empowering people and/or communities to act and to facilitate progressive change. Recent research has shown that processes inherent to engagement in the arts foster 'divergent perspectives, creative problem solving and an ability to work with complexity, emergence and uncertainty at an individual and community level' – all important skills when dealing with continuous community adaptation.³⁷ Artistic expressions and processes also generate and embody the symbolic cultural resources that individuals need in order to navigate the world around them and, potentially, to act as agents of broader change.

The historic absence, or at the least very weak position, of art and culture in 'mainstream' sustainable development discourse and policy documents has propelled numerous initiatives to investigate and articulate the roles of culture in sustainability. Over the last two decades, growing interest and activity has been observed internationally: within a wide

³⁷ Ortiz, Jude. (2017). *Culture, Creativity and the Arts: Building Resilience in Northern Ontario*. PhD thesis, University of the West of England, p. 1. <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/28296>

diversity of artistic practice directly interrogating and addressing issues of sustainability; embedded in activist (combining art and activism) and other grassroots experiments; across a range of disciplines in academic research and writings; and in policy and planning contexts from local to international scales. While artistic engagement with environmental issues has a long tradition, the rise of diverse policy, planning, and research initiatives aiming to examine, articulate, and advance the issue of integrating culture within a holistic vision of sustainability is relatively new.

Within these contexts, there are important discussions on the roles of art in the transition towards greater sustainability. For example, it has been demonstrated that artistic activities and interventions can:



Provide new ways of perceiving and inquiring about the world, provoking and fostering changes in thinking, acting, and living together;



Activate public engagement, catalysing social relations and evolving new ways of working and living; and



Physically and symbolically change the spaces in which we live and relate, fostering greater connections with our natural and built environments.³⁸

In a public setting, art works and processes can take on the role of instigator and challenge our assumptions and habits; act as a point of inspiration for different ways of thinking and knowing; connect dispersed realities and help us understand complex interdependencies; demonstrate and teach us new manners of acting; and guide us forward, individually and collectively, into renewed ways of living. The organisations that commission, curate, and otherwise bring such sustainability focused art works to specific spaces and situations play an important role, actively fostering the connection between art production and collaborative appropriation, discussion, and (potentially) transformation in our communities and societies.

With this as context, thinking about connections between art, culture, and sustainability has two possible beginning points: on the one hand, how sustainability is addressed in the context of art and culture and, on the other hand, how culture is addressed in the context of sustainability. Linking these two perspectives is a core question: *How can art and culture advance our society's transformation into more sustainable modes of living?*

³⁸ Duxbury, Nancy. (2013). *Animation of Public Space through the Arts: Toward More Sustainable Communities*. Coimbra: Almedina



Sustainability in the Context of Art and Culture

The Portuguese organisations profiled in this report define and address sustainability in a myriad of ways, altogether generating holistic, multi-faceted, and locally embedded understandings of sustainability. The art works and practices focused on sustainability frequently link together multi-dimensional issues, combining ecology, social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. These works investigate and make visible relationships and interdependencies, and shape new ways of seeing and understanding the complexities of our contemporary situation. Such artistic practices can play a fundamental role in transformation processes, informing and reforming our ways of knowing and providing us with tools to act. They enable us ‘to experiment with, and feel the experience of alternatives’.³⁹

Among the initiatives profiled, a number of themes interlink the projects and their intentions, jointly contributing to some key dimensions of artistic approaches to sustainability practiced in Portugal:

- *Use art to reengage connections with nature.* The projects reinforce connections to the land by locating programmes within nature, coupled with offering immersive experiences and narratives that ‘thrill, provoke, disturb and instigate’ in order to raise awareness and inspire reflections on how natural areas are being impacted by human actions, as well as other fundamental issues concerning the future of humanity. The natural environment is the support and inspiration for these activities, yet a more-than-nature holistic view of sustainability is also put forward.
- *Emphasise sustainability as a collective process.* Sustainability is promoted as a participatory process and an on-going shared endeavour. The projects emphasise processes of imagining and forging solutions together, co-creating future visions that help to implement more sustainable solutions. To support these processes, the projects critically interrogate the current paradigms of ‘progress’ and ‘development’, explore new ways of acting, and support alternative narratives of resilience.
- *Valorise the local and attend to local realities.* Many projects focus on affirming local cultures, identity, and other specificities of place. They attend to locally grounded, incremental processes of development, including attending to cultural vitality and the use of cultural activity and expression in order to engage the public in important issues of place. By decentralising cultural actions to local, often rural, settings they are creating artistic hubs engaged in the territory and involving local residents to develop cultural programmes that are intrinsically rooted in their locale. In the process, these projects are instilling living memories, heritage, and local identity with agency as building blocks for the future, and promoting integrated local and sustainable development.

³⁹ Kagan (2012), p. 18.

- *Be a catalyst for change.* Acting on the conviction that ‘in the arts lies a potential for transformation and positive impact on society’, artistic events are used to catalyse and deepen public learning and engagement in sustainability issues. The organisations act as intermediaries in society bridging different groups and sectors. They also act as important demonstration sites, focusing on and advancing green operational practices. While some projects focus on local impacts and the added value of their activities, reinforced through local and regional networks of support, others focus on local to global connectivity, aiming to transform and enable participants to become global citizens.

These approaches align well with a broader movement among artists and scholars calling for a renewed perspective on sustainability that recognises social relations, practices, and cultural meanings as entangled with the environment. This widened perspective opens up our thinking about sustainability to interrogate the ideas and practices through which nature is experienced, used, and understood. It also underlines a growing realisation that holistic perspectives on sustainability are needed; approaches that explicitly incorporate social and cultural dimensions in discussions on sustainability issues and in taking action.

The projects demonstrate that sustainability includes (and needs) art and culture—as a change agent, as a repository of knowledge, as a means of inquiry into solutions, and for the aspirational and inspirational potential of culture-based and artistic actions, agents, and projects. The organisations presented in this report demonstrate how this potential can be catalysed, turned into action, and realised. They also show how the vitality, imagination, and knowledges embodied in art works and processes are integral to provoking and guiding collective approaches to envisioning, learning, experimenting, and shaping more sustainable futures.



Culture in the Context of Sustainability

Looking back, in the late 1990s, a three-pillar model of sustainability prevailed, containing only environmental, economic, and social dimensions. While the social pillar sometimes included cultural aspects, more often the model was silent on culture. This situation served to inspire and propel various initiatives to differentiate ‘culture’ from ‘social’, which occurred in different contexts beginning around 2000 to 2002. These efforts largely focused on integrating cultural dimensions in local public policy and decision-making processes, highlighting culture-relevant issues in developments, and suggesting avenues for change. By about 2004 to 2006, a small wave of national initiatives appeared internationally, aiming to initiate policy frameworks that might better institutionalise the integration of culture in local development. Attention to the topic of

culture and sustainability continued to grow, and by 2008 a new wave of efforts emerged to advance the place of culture within sustainability, especially at national and international levels. A growing critical mass of individuals and organisations became engaged in these discussions. The widening and diversifying trajectory reflected a growing concern with the state of the planet and the urgent need to rethink our ways of living in order to take action locally and globally. It also linked to discourses pointing to the knowledges inherent in our cultural diversity as essential resources to better understand our environment and inform the redesign of our interactions with nature and each other.

This rising interest and level of activity concerning culture and sustainability was propelled by international meetings and negotiations that were part of the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the New Urban Agenda (2016), and the UN Climate Change Summits. Throughout these processes, proponents pointed to the exclusion of culture in the sustainability discourses and argued for its inclusion. An array of arguments were put forward for the important role of culture in sustainability and sustainable development, and advocates advanced evidence that demonstrated the ways in which culture could contribute to the transformation required to live more sustainably. Today, art and culture are gradually coming within the framework of mainstream sustainability discussions, but it is still an on-going effort.

“Imagining transformation entails a deeper understanding of ways by which a person transforms views about the world and shapes new modes of engagement with change...transformative change entails both personal and social transformation.”

-KEI OTSUKI (2015)⁴⁰

A key issue is that both culture and sustainability have a variety of meanings and are discussed in very different settings. The proliferation of activities and initiatives has resulted in a wide array of perspectives and ideas, which has caused some confusion. Sustainability is a pluralistic concept centred on processes of negotiation and dialogue in order to reach collective decisions on future paths and objectives and to catalyse progressive actions, circumscribed by environmental limits. Culture also has a profusion of definitions. Three prevalent discourses linking culture and sustainability tend to be prominent: *culture as a fourth dimension of sustainability*, alongside and interacting with environmental, economic, and social dimensions; *culture as a central aspect or world-view mediating any decisions or trade-offs* in interactions among the three other dimensions; and *culture as a new set of values and understandings* forming the dynamic new foundation for a true sustainable development.⁴¹ These three approaches, while somewhat overlapping in practice, assist in clarifying the nature of the definition of ‘culture’ used in various reports and policies. They also provide a basic structure for thinking through the roles of culture in sustainability and therefore in designing initiatives that transfer these ideas into practices.

Revisiting the question, *How can art and culture advance our society’s transformation into more sustainable modes of living?*, it is clear that diverse approaches and experiments can inform these pathways, and that locally situated, on-going collective engagement is needed. Artistic

⁴⁰ Otsuki, Kei. (2015). *Transformative Sustainable Development: Participation, Reflection and Change*. London; New York: Routledge, p. 3.

⁴¹ These models were articulated as an output of a COST Action research network on ‘Investigating Cultural Sustainability’ (2011-2015): <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu>. For further details, see the final report: Dessein, Joost, Katriina Soini, Graham Fairclough, and Lummina G. Horlings (Eds.). (2015). *Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development: Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu/conclusions.pdf>

and culture-based activity can influence, demonstrate, and enable individual and collective transformations in thinking as well as acting. Looking forward, I propose four dimensions that deserve further attention in order to build on the impressive work that is being conducted:

1. *Increasing public engagement.* The agency of art works on sustainability issues gains force in their reception. How can arts organisations more effectively engage with the larger public and with specific publics (for example youth, families, public decision-makers)? How might arts organisations collaborate with diverse media outlets in these efforts to ensure their initiatives become part of the ‘public record’ and reach broader (or specialised) audiences? How can exhibits, events, and presentations become catalysts for longer-term, multi-way public conversations and practices?
2. *Going beyond awareness-raising and questioning.* An important role for art is to question the way we live and the values we take for granted, and to engage in challenging conversations. Beyond these crucial and foundational roles, art projects can also be used as sites of experimentation and to provoke wider community actions, as can be seen in the projects profiled in this report.⁴² How can arts organisations play a greater part in inventing strategies for continuous adaptation to our changing world, providing a mediating and learning platform, and suggesting pathways forward? How can these processes gain more support and influence in wider society?
3. *Advancing sustainable practices in the cultural sector.* Greening the operations of arts organisations and the work they produce is crucial to ensure coherency between messages and actions. In addition, this process would enable organisations to more completely become learning, experimentation, and demonstration sites of practice. The networks and resources to achieve this are readily available. Collaborations with researchers and supportive policy frameworks could accelerate solutions to environmental challenges. A holistic view of sustainability would also entail an expanded responsibility to incorporate and advance ethical practices that consider the social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability.
4. *Engaging with public decision-making processes and policy.* Global attention to advancing culture within sustainable development policy and programme frameworks, while still a work-in-progress, has been progressing from local to international scales. It is important to continue to advance the overall momentum to include art and culture as an integral dimension of sustainability frameworks in order to ensure our collective future is formulated and actualised. Greater engagement and involvement by cultural agents and organisations in these discussions could provide creative and pragmatic contributions to addressing the many pressing issues of sustainability.

⁴² See, for example, Julia Bentz’s ‘Art for Adaptation’ research project at the Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes (CE3C), University of Lisbon: <https://artforadaptation.com>.

⁴³ Kagan, Sacha. (2012). *Toward Global (Environ) Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, p. 31.

“Art understood as a verb, rather than as a noun, is about interactions, experiences and processes in their vitality, rather than about fixed end products, objects and achievements in their excellence and glorious intemporality.”

-SACHA KAGAN (2012)⁴³