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Article

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# *GARDEN OF EDEN*. ART AND THE ARTIFICIALITY OF THE NATURAL

SUMMARY: Inspired in Joana Vasconcelos' artwork called *Garden of Eden*, this paper discusses the sociosemiotics relationship between "nature" and art. In turn, the notions of garden and landscape are also considered as fundamental in order to understand the meaning-making process of our contemporary sensitive experience. In fact, the technological conditions of individual and social perception of the surrounding phenomenological world produce a continuous resignification of our embodied imaginary.

What does "nature" (or natures) nowadays mean? In what way the garden, as an artefact, represents a cultural paradigm of our (non)human nature? The very notion of *landscape*, permanently re-created by visual artists, can be useful to problematize our connection to the other living beings, rather animals or plants, in a planet at serious risk or, at least, subject to an irreparable transformation.

KEYWORDS: art, garden, *Garden of Eden*, Joana Vasconcelos, semiotics and landscape/garden/nature, sociosemiotics, meaning-making process, visual-performance art/garden and semiotics.

## 1. Introduction

The question about the relationship between art and reality can lead us to a second, classic and more specific question, which is the connection between art and nature. In particular, as Cooper (2008) points out, art and nature constitute

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two models for the appreciation of gardens, which we have chosen for reflection and analysis in this article. In the garden, nature and culture come together: "Gardens—at least those that are 'typical'—are natural places transformed by creative human activity, and contain natural elements, such as flowers, chosen, located and organised, at least in part, according to aesthetic considerations" (Cooper, 2008, p. 21).

Based on the case of the *Garden of Eden*, a work by the artist Joana Vasconcelos, we propose to stimulate a critical discussion about the meaning of the garden in contemporary art, taking into account that the deep climate crisis we are experiencing has catapulted us into rethinking our connection with nature. As an artefact that gives expression to a certain cultural and aesthetic vision of nature, the garden can be perceived as a mediating instance between nature and art, or even, by analogy with landscape painting, a work of art in itself. One might even wonder whether all the pleasure in enjoying gardens derives from their association with landscape paintings (Hunt, Willis, 1988, p. 350).

In Joana Vasconcelos' *Garden of Eden*, an artistic work that we will try to analyse, art and nature are mixed, despite the fact that the "nature" to which the work refers is constituted according to mechanisms that produce a kind of artificiality of the natural. Rejecting a simple *mimesis* of the natural, while at the same time suggesting the production of a *simulacrum* that replaces that same natural, the *Garden of Eden* appears to be an exercise in critical thinking about the contemporary conditions that constrain our relationship with the surrounding living world. At the same time, it concerns the aesthetic experience of enjoying a time and space suspended from the ties that bind us to the capitalist reality of production and consumption.

## 2. The Garden, Art and Nature

If we understand nature from a classical perspective as an original work of art, resulting from divine action, can we think of the garden as a kind of imitation of it? Or even a perfected, rationally controlled version of nature?

We can recognise a similarity between the art of gardening and the art of painting landscapes if we consider nature as a model in both cases. In this way, the garden is understood as a sign, whose nature, indexical because of the organic nature of the material of which it is composed, is confused with the referent. From this point of view, gardens are "garden-images": "to plant a plot of land is to paint a landscape with living things", a practice among the fine arts (Jekyll, 1991, p. 160).

However, it is worth highlighting a few differences between the "garden-image" and a landscape painting. Firstly, the garden is the most impermanent art, it changes all the time. Secondly, unlike a painting, a garden is never complete (Cooper, 2008, p. 29). In addition, unlike painting, where the work is the exclusive result of the artist's action and will, the art of gardening partly consists of the gardener's action and partly goes beyond that action, beyond the gardener's

absolute control. Weeds grow among the flowers, insects eat the leaves of plants, the sun and rain, as well as the changing characteristics of the soil, constrain or mould the (de)growth of species. Finally, it should be noted that a garden is not just an object of contemplation, but above all a place of enjoyment to be travelled through and discovered as we move around or through it. The experience of enjoying a garden is therefore not only visual, but also corporeal, kinaesthetic and multi-sensory:

> The viewer finds himself *in* and surrounded by the natural landscape being admired; is typically *moving* through it, and, hence is *active*, the landscape is not *framed* for the viewer, and nor are there *privileged viewpoints* from which to regard it. (Cooper, 2008, p. 36)

Thus, gardens are not only part of the visual arts, but also of the performing arts. A garden is not just a limited aesthetic composition separated from what is outside it. It invites bodily interaction and not just visual interaction (Berleant, 1993). However, the garden's performative potential does not exclude the possibility of mere aesthetic appreciation. Seeing the garden, admiring it from a static bodily position, gazing at the flowerbeds, trees and flowers, smelling their scent and letting oneself wander in suspended time, is also a possibility: "sometimes the garden, or some bit of it, is the 'object' of a quiet, attentive, even contemplative gaze, not a theatre providing and 'occasion' for experience" (Cooper, 2008, p. 37).

Although the garden is discussed as a kind of second nature, and it is true that many gardens—especially in China and Japan—"imitate" or represent natural settings, the nature they contain is a "transformed", "improved", "methodised" nature. We can consider the gardens of Capability Brown (English landscape architect, 1716–1783), one of the masters of the English garden, as an important reference. In contrast to the French garden, which was geometrically designed and disciplined, reflecting a certain rationalising vision of the world, the English garden is distinguished by its imitation of the more spontaneous character of nature, simulating an intermediate point between what would be an indomitable and dynamic flow and human intervention. In one way or another, the garden is always an artefact: "to appreciate it as a place transformed by human artifice, then its appreciation is not of something as nature" (Cooper, 2008, p. 40).

Having done the maths on what brings it closer to and separates it from both nature and pictorial landscape art, it could be said that "the garden is neither art nor nature: it is art-and-nature" (Cooper, 2008, p. 41). According to Hegel, it is precisely because the garden is a difficult combination or a fragile fusion of art and nature that it is not an object to be admired. As part of the group of German idealist philosophers between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Hegel is not very enthusiastic about the art of gardens: "Nature, as we find it in the garden, lacks the 'grandeur and freedom' (Hegel, 1975, p. 699), it enjoys when left alone by man" (Cooper, 2008, p. 43). The enjoyment of the garden is in any case associated with the hedonistic life, with pleasure, happiness and well-being. When meditating in a garden, one is left to oneself

(Cooper, 2008, p. 83), left to one's intimate sphere, to one's most unconfessed thoughts and daydreams (Bachelard, 1994).

Another issue to consider is the question of representation. Can the garden communicate an idea or thought? Does it represent the world of nature, imagined as wild or agrarian? In fact, these questions imply the problem of semiotics and reality. Concerning either the relationship with thought or with "reality", what are the criteria of truth we should consider? What is the "real nature" it must be assumed as a model and its faithful representation? Is there a fundamental distinction between the material nature of the referent and the material nature of the representation? These problems remain unsolved:

> [A] practical semiotics should have some account of the relationship of semiosis and "reality", that is, the material world that provides the objects of semiosis and semiotic activity. Unless semiotics confronts this relationship, it can have no relevance to the world of practical affairs with its confident assumptions about "reality", and it cannot account for the role of semiotic system in the world. This relation bet ween semiosis and reality bears on some problems that have bedevilled. (Hodge, Kress, 2007, p. 23)

From a Peircean perspective, semiosis defines an infinite process of creating meaning, arising from the possibility of an infinite association of thoughts and ideas with each other. Thus, depending on the values of a particular time and culture, in a specific situation, the meaning of the garden (and landscape) is produced. This is why the significance of gardens (Francis, Hester, 1990) responds to the need to legitimise a certain vision of nature, adding to it a rationality and discipline that deceive the illusion of control over its perceived unstable and unpredictable nature, while at the same time giving expression to a social model that changes with the times: "To explain the meaning of an item is to show how the item is suited to, or legitimate, or apt for, communicating, expressing, or standing for something, for being employed in a certain way, and so on" (Cooper, 2008, p. 111).

Since the 18th century, and especially from the moment the Industrial Revolution and Modernity, materialised in the growing urbanisation of culture in the Western world, gained strength with the capitalist system, gardens have been an essential place for well-being, as opposed to the sphere of work and productivity. Thus, from gardens we can discuss the relationship between human beings and "nature", as well as between work and leisure. We can even say that, from a semiotic point of view, the garden is both an expressive meaning (Cooper, 2008, p. 117), representing the emotional universe of its owner, creator or gardener, as a sign or symptom of an artefact whose meaning is opened up and produced by the uses of its practitioners or visitors. This last perspective fits in with the social semiotics approach (van Leeuwen, 2005), according to which what matters are situated social practices and the way in which meaning is produced in these specific contexts. This same assumption is argued by Mieke Bal (1994; 2025), in what concerns the meaning-making process as an act of percep-

tion that implies the spectators and the moment of perception, in this case, of the work of art.

### 3. The Garden or the Pre-Conception of Landscape?

Taking into account Simmel's notion of landscape (2011), defined as an aesthetic experience of connection with nature, a feeling—*Stimmung*—that allows the individuals, in fragmentary modernity, to connect to that same nature, gardens can be related to the idea of a unity and a flow of which they are a part. It can also be admitted that the garden is expressive of the desire of continuity in what concerns spatial and temporal existence. We can therefore question the gardens today in their relationship with a new phantasmagoria: the catastrophes caused by climate change, the extinction of species diversity, uncontrolled pollution, overproduction and hyper-consumption. How can gardens, today, be used to discuss the relationship between humans and non-humans, including plants, animals and technology (Pires, Pinto-Coelho, Magalhães, 2025)? What is the meaning of creating a garden in contemporary times from a symbolic point of view, as a material that signifies a certain vision of the surrounding natural and socio-cultural world? In its approach, or even as an artistic creation, can a garden serve as a critical essay on how we integrate "technology" and "nature" into our everyday practices? Above all, from the garden we can rethink our current doubts about the naturalness of "nature" (Serrão, 2011, p. 66). On the one hand, the garden currently appears to be a kind of last stronghold, a cut-off from the "natural" world that can be enjoyed with some safety. On the other hand, it is a contradictory place in itself, since it contains both the possibility of connecting with the "natural" and the desire to control and discipline what, by definition, escapes absolute human will. A place of otherness, the garden is also a place of imaginary production, a place of dreaming and of confronting human limitations. It should be added that "[…] the distinction between the primitive or untouched natural, the worked natural or the threatened natural is no longer evident" (Serrão, 2011, p. 66). Today, the perception of a certain (in)distinction between the natural and human order prevails (Serrão, 2011, p. 67).

From a semiotic perspective, we can use Augustin Berque's (2016) notion of trajectivity (*trajectivité*), meaning the simultaneously objective and subjective nature of the relationship that, according to the author, can be defined in reference to the notion of landscape, to try to trace the semiosic complexity of the garden: "A mixed category, cultural in form and natural in content, landscape implies the subjective-objective synthesis, the duplicity of reality and ideality where Life and concept are inseparable" (Serrão, 2011, p. 62).

The notion of landscape, in its aesthetic-philosophical sense, always refers to representation, at the same time as to the apprehended reality. The garden can be understood as an artefact that pre-announces the concept of landscape in the visual arts. Firstly, considering that it already serves as a mediation (*médiance*, Berque, 2016) between nature ("objectivity"), as a continuous and infinite flow

of which we are a part, and a vision ("subjectivity"), a space-time cut-out. In Simmel's perspective, moreover, the notion of "landscape" implies two operations. An operation of analysis, as the delimitation of a "piece" of nature, and an operation of synthesis, which consists of restoring to the elements that make up the "landscape" their sense of intrinsic connection. Secondly, from a formal point of view, the notion of a garden implies, as illustrated in medieval illuminations, a space that is separate and demarcated, although not necessarily opposed, from the universe outside it. Delimiting the space of the garden, structured as a "frame", and the space outside it, there is often a fence, railing or other type of marking, of varying material, acting as a real limit.

Inside the frame, a set of fragments scattered throughout nature are organised in a given, more or less free structure. In this way, we can recognise in the garden the paradigm of all constructions known as "landscapes" (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 18).

The link between the garden and landscape painting is intimate. We only have to think of the impressionist record of artists such as Monet or Renoir, who gave us the delight of depicting playful environments for enjoying the outdoors and the culture of leisure. As with various artefacts, both the garden and pictorial landscapes are expressive of a taste, a norm or convention and a culture. Such an evaluative framework is the semiotic key to reading a painting by Cézanne, Poussin or Lorrain. What are the symbolic forms that underpin the structure of the landscape, be it a garden building or a painting? Can we consider our appreciation of nature as shaped in itself by a certain symbolic framework? Let's look at the following passage:

> This nature composed itself before us in a series of pictures, artificial images, placed before the confusion of things, organised the diverse and mutable matter according to an implicit law, and when we thought to delight in the truth of the world as it presented itself to us, we were only reproducing mental schemes, full of a distant evidence, and of thousands of previous projections. (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 20)

The perfect garden, or the symbolic landscape, ultimately evoked by the *Garden of Eden*, is a place where nature and landscape (con)merge. On the one hand, the garden, especially the English type, which is closer to a less disciplined character, is a quasi-nature, a medium of access to the "pre-human origin of the world". On the other hand, as a cut-out and structure that gives shape to a given vision of the world, it is a quasi-frame, a pre-landscape, as a cultural form imprinted on the natural. We could therefore say that the garden is the zero degree of the landscape:

> Starting from a zero degree of the landscape, when neither the word nor the thing forced its idea. From the zero degree of the image, simply an insufficient copy of the wonders of nature, to question the moment of its emergence and the way in which we must proceed to maintain it. How, then, was this image able to establish itself as the framework and condition of possibility for a vision of nature as landscape? And, no doubt, we must hypothesise a rhetoric worked out in the smallest of our "landscape" gestures, in its domain, in an obstinacy of language in its figures. (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 24)

As Cauquelin (2021, p. 25) states, the landscape, as an expression of our perceptive mechanisms, both hides and reveals nature. The garden enhances the "enjoyment of a part of a chosen fragment of nature and not its condensed metaphor" (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 49).

Although nature serves as its model, the garden constitutes itself as an autonomous artefact, following the invention of leisure and recreation, practices associated with the upper social classes or privileged groups, whose activities lend themselves to contemplation by philosophers, poets and artists:

> The garden is therefore not the small form of the landscape, it has its own symbolic scheme. From the perspective of *otium*, it is not the reduction, to the so-called human scale, of generous Nature, but rather a metabole or synecdoche through which it would present itself. Quite the contrary, it is through a separation from it that it is constituted—and almost in the opposite direction. (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 51)

We can also recognise in the garden its function of creating a *third place*, a more intimate than social one. Thus, it should be differentiated from Oldenburg's (1982; 1989) notion, according to whom a "third place" is neither a public nor a private place but rather a place of sociality, halfway between one thing and another. In what concerns the garden, we can argue that it is not absolutely natural nor urban, but a place that is a reserve of the paradigm of the human relationship with the natural universe, while at the same time being a form of cultural expression. It is in this sense that, even today, the practices of creating gardens (Pires, Mora, Azevedo, Bandeira, 2014), whether amateur, in landscape architecture or inserted in contemporary arts, persist with interest in the discussion about the experience and the sensitive relationship that is currently changing, in terms of interaction with the surrounding living and material world:

> The garden is not an intermediary, a foetus or an embryo of landscape; it communicates, in the form of the eclogue, the bucolics or the ode, the elements that make up the "countryside"—the tree, the cave, the spring, the meadow, the mountain, the hill or the slope, the animals and the tools that complete its lexicon. They will be taken up again in the medieval tradition, and to this day they are inseparable from the attributes that we confer on the landscape nature. We will find them again in the contemporary and immutable arts of the landscape. The garden draws one of the folds of memory, and remains, beyond the landscape, a model of naturalness. (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 50)

As with the notion of landscape, which expresses a symbolic scheme of our close contact with nature, the garden also embodies a certain imaginary. From this point of view, it can function as a refuge, an escape that allows us to find a place of protection from the risks of a nature that is increasingly out of control. This happens especially when climate catastrophes surprise us at a dizzying pace, and the perception of insecurity that comes from the traumatic experiences, accentuated since September 11, in the Western world, have transformed public space into an unpredictable and dangerous arena: "Between the two dangers of nature and society, the garden offers the desired shelter" (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 48). Cauquelin also states that "the landscape object does not preexist the image that constructs it for a discursive purpose" (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 36). Can we say the same about the garden, as a construct, even if we admit the indicative nature of its symbolic or representational nature? What discourses does a garden produce? How are these discourses articulated, considering the relations of power and dominance?

It should be noted that, according to sociosemiotics, discourse can be defined as a recontextualized social practice. Based on Malinowski's (1923; 1935) work, van Leeuwen (2008) discusses discourse as a practice itself. From a sociological perspective, what keeps individuals connected are common practices rather than representation. These practices, including discourses, are often motivated by a strategic and proceduralised purpose, according to certain criteria of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1994), as well as by the mechanisms of power that inscribe discourse in a supra-subjective order (Foucault, 1997). Instead of asking what gardens or landscapes represent as discursive and cultural constructs, we should ask how they function, what purposes they serve and how they (de)legitimise a given vision of our relationship with a given idea of "nature".

Namely, it is important to distinguish between public and private gardens. While the former correspond to an urban model that was imposed as the bourgeois classes acquired economic and symbolic power (which required strategies to display their new status and flaunt their material well-being through the practice of strolling along the boulevards), the latter depend on the conditions of ownership and the type of housing of each individual. In fact, they were associated with houses of the villa or townhouse type, which immediately implies a greater or lesser adjacent space. Looking at the garden as the origin of the pre-notion of landscape, understood as a performative place, at the same time as a symbolic one, Cauquelin argues: "Its presentation is, therefore, purely rhetorical, it is oriented towards persuasion, it serves to convince, or even a pretext for developments, it is the scene for a drama or for the evocation of a myth" (2021, p. 37).

## 4. The Garden Is a Symbolic Place

The garden, although linked to nature and art, does not establish a cause-effect relationship with either one or the other. It is not, therefore, a simple symptom that allows us, like a fever referring to an illness, to assess the state of nature

or art, based on the diagnosis of the garden. Nor it is simply a sign that represents or stands in place of nature, by analogy with what would be the representational function of a landscape painting. Neither is an index nor a sign, in its most common sense, considering Peirce's typology. In particular, we admit that the garden can be considered a symbol, an artefact that is at once traversed by a matter and a meaning that confuses it with its dual model, natural and cultural. Symbol and epiphany (Cooper, 2008, p. 129), mystery, the garden always eludes possible decoding. Its changing, unpredictable character, despite being the object of countless disciplinary human practices, goes beyond the limits of what is known, of control, of meaning. Furthermore, at the same time that the changes in the natural world have an effect on gardens, transformations in the latter also change our perception of the world, both natural and social:

> A symbol is related to what it symbolizes, neither in the merely contingent, causal manner of a symptom to the condition it indicates, nor in the purely conventional manner of signs, such as words, to what they stand for. Instead, symbol and symbolized are somehow "fused", or as Wilhelm von Humboldt puts it, in "constant mutual exchange" with one another. (Molesworth, 1995, p. 413)

From this point of view, can we say that in the garden, sign and referent are mixed? That they are co-constituted through a relationship of interdependence? That they are linked in an intimately motivated way, contrary to the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, according to the semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure, making it impossible to separate art from nature and nature from art? Let's take a look to the following passage: "[…] symbols have meaning through exemplifying what they mean: an item is 'fused' with the properties it refers to in virtue of possessing those very properties" (Cooper, 2008, pp. 129–130).

Ultimately, *nature* itself does not pre-exist a certain conception, a mental framework through which we perceive it, associating it with the idea of an (in)finite unity, of an origin without origin, a material, living flow, to which we both belong and from which we find ourselves separated. The garden, contrary to the partly ineffable and "spiritual" character of nature, is a body, a fabric that exemplifies what lacks materialization:

> Symbols are in "mutual exchange" with what they symbolize, since they enable us to understand, "get a handle on", or become attuned to, the latter. The symbol is not an aesthetically pleasing, but otherwise redundant device for drawing attention to what we are already and independently able fully to grasp and articulate. Rather, it is indispensable to enabling a sense for, an attunement to, what symbolizes. (Cooper, 2008, p. 130)

Let us think of Epicurus' Garden: a place far from the city, as approached by Rousseau, a pleasant place protected from the excesses of the *polis*, conducive to philosophical thought and shared tranquillity. A kind of *Garden of Eden*, exempt from religious value judgments and guilt. The idea of happiness is associated

with moderation and sweet pleasures. Pleasure is what is learned and cultivated, and gardening is the practice of caring for ideas as one would care for fruits or flowers: "'Epicurus' Garden' is the metaphor for a philosophy, the wisdom of a life sheltered from the storms of the world. This remoteness requires an enclosure, almost a cloister, a partition […]" (Cauquelin, 2021, p. 46).

There was already enthusiasm for gardens in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In the ancient empires of Persia, China and Japan, a feeling and taste for gardens seems to be as old as that for painting or sculpture (Cooper, 2008, p. 46). It is therefore not possible to separate the appreciation of gardens from the appreciation of art in general.

Through the illuminated manuscripts of the 13th and 16th centuries, we can glimpse representations of the medieval garden. In common, such representations often reveal a fence, delimiting the garden and separating it from the "infinite" space that extends beyond the walls. Sometimes, the fence appears as a more obvious artifice, when it consists of a wall or similar construction that fortifies the garden (e.g., Lambert de Saint-Omer, *Liber Floridus*, 13th century; Évrard de Conty*, Le Livre des Échecs Amoureux Moralisés*, 15th century). In other cases, it is interesting to note the existence of a fence in the form of a palisade or even alluding to the art of basketry. Composed of plant material, this type of fence seems to impose a less rigid frame on the garden, suggesting a less contrasting relationship between the inside and outside of the walls (e.g., Guiard des Moulins, *Bible Historiale*, 15th century; Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, 15th century). In many of these representations, what is depicted is the Garden of Eden, the garden of Paradise, narrating the scene of temptation, the apple tasted by Eve and Adam. At the same time as a symbol of happiness, the garden represents the scene of sin, the scene of temptation. Breaking with the harmony of the scene, after being unable to resist tasting the apple, Adam and Eve end up expelled from the universe. Even so, it is a place that is both material and symbolic, a place of the useful activity of the herbalist or of the encounter between lovers, associated with pleasure and aesthetics, with the metaphysical reflection of Eden. In profane representations, as in the original narrative of Creation, the gardens do not appear to be enclosed. However,

> most of the illuminators portrayed gardens as enclosed spaces. Although there was no enclosure, constituting a separation from the outside world, it was used as a more realistic way to signify that happiness is precarious and that it needs an opening. (Gousset, 2001, p. 7)

In biblical mythology, the garden is the centre of the world, since it is assumed to be the historical starting point, according to Genesis. Such a symbolic representation materialises in the form of an enclosed space, cut off from the outside world. The palisades that serve as its boundaries take on a variety of shapes and materials, seeming to fulfil the function of the frame which, in painting, and in this case, by analogy, in landscape painting in particular, marks the thresholds of the space of representation. In the case of the garden, however, the

boundaries do not necessarily mean an opposition between the peaceful interior and the nature that surrounds it (Gousset, 2001, p. 23). Sometimes, bushes, woods or orchards separate the garden from the land that adjoins it. In the Middle Ages, it is common to see fences with bars alongside natural structures. In one way or another, the garden appears as an ideal place. And more than that, as a sacred place: "Genesis imprints on the garden a sacred character that the human being has transposed into all the domains of its existence: religious, sentimental, intellectual, scientific and even political" (Gousset, 2001, p. 32). The importance of the garden as a symbol of the transition from active life to contemplative life is equally notable: "A special place where love is forged, the garden is also an ideal setting for artistic creation, where the poet, withdrawn from the world, devotes himself entirely to composition" (Gousset, 2001, p. 16).

## 5. Case Study: Joana Vasconcelos

Joana Vasconcelos is one of the most international Portuguese artists of all time, having exhibited her work[1] in many of the most renowned museums and exhibition spaces around the world for thirty years. Her official website states:

> Born in 1971, Joana Vasconcelos is a Portuguese visual artist with a career spanning nearly 30 years and a huge variety of media. Recognized for her monumental sculptures and immersive installations, she decontextualizes everyday objects and updates the arts and crafts concept for the 21st century, establishing a dialogue between the private sphere and public space, popular heritage and high culture. With humor and irony, she questions the status of women, consumer society and collective identity. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

Her work stands out, therefore, for its large scale, for the articulation between popular culture and high culture, for the feminist criticism implied in some of her works, as well as for its ironic and challenging character, stimulating critical thinking about the conditions of our contemporary times, namely consumer culture and the issues of identity.

It should be noted that Joana Vasconcelos' exhibitions have not only gained the attention of the media and critics, including the specialized press, but have also achieved record attendance in multiple noble and international exhibition spaces:

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[1] Among her works, the following stand out: *Flowers of My Desire* (1996), *Aspirin Sofa* (1997), *Valium Bed* (1998), Spot Me (1999), *Meeting Point* (2000), *Strangers in the Night* (2000, *The Bride* (2001–2005), *The World at Your Feet* (2001), *Pantelmina #1* (2001), *Mariquinhas' Boat* (2002), *Blup* (2002), *WWW.Fatimashop* (2002), *One Direction* (2003), *Independent Golden Heart* (2004), *Passerelle* (2005), *Nectar* (2006), *Big Booby* (2007), *Maiden* (2007), *Contamination* (2008–2010), *The Jewel of the Tagus* (2008), *Piano Dentelle* (2008), *Marilyn* (2009), *Valkyrie Enxoval* (2009), *Portugal a Banhos* (2010), *Sr. Vinho* (2010), *La Théière* (2010), *Loft* (2010), *Mary Poppins* (2010), *Sugar Baby* (2010), *Tutti Frutti* (2011), *War Games* (2011), *Suspensão* (2017), *Valkyrie Mumbet* (2020), *Valquíria Miss Dior* (2023).

> International acclaim arrived in 2005 with The Bride at the first Venice Biennale curated by women, where she has returned three times to date, in 2013 at the helm of *Trafaria Praia* representing Portugal, with the first ever floating pavilion of the event. The youngest artist and first woman to exhibit at Versailles' Palace; in 2012 her exhibition was the most visited in France in 50 years, with a record 1.6 million visitors. In 2018 she became the first Portuguese artist to have a solo show at the Guggenheim Bilbao, the fourth best that year for The Art Newspaper and the third most visited in the history of the museum. In 2023 she has been granted the honor to exhibit at the Uffizi Galleries and Pitti Palace, in Florence, alongside classical masters such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo or Caravaggio. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

## 6. *Garden of Eden*

Considering the problematics and what distinguishes the artistic discourse of Joana Vasconcelos' work, we will seek to reflect on the work of art, in particular, *Garden of Eden*, in order to discuss its social meaning and its relevance with regard to the representations and practices that, today, characterize our relationship with the "natural" world.

According to Lipovetsky and Serroy (2021), Joana Vasconcelos' work is distinguished by

> an attitude that is expressed through a somewhat strange formal universe, but whose strangeness is less worrying than happy and offers an almost familiar side, as if we were in the presence of a work from which we receive the sensation that it does not have the deciphering code, but which does not, in fact, seem unknown to us. All of this is marked by the seal of paradox. (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2021, p. 15)

This same discussion applies to the *Garden of Eden* as, on the one hand, the use of an imagery that is known to our culture projects us into the familiarity of a symbolic place associated with the civilisational origins of the Christian West. On the other hand, it presents us with a garden whose materiality, technological, causes us profound strangeness. This will be one of the dual aspects to be developed in more detail in the analysis of the *Garden of Eden*.

In Portugal, the piece *Garden of Eden*, the first version of which was created in 2007, was on display at the then Electricity Museum in Lisbon, in 2009, as part of the exhibition *Remade in Portugal*, and has already been shown at the Venice Biennale and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Malta.

As a work of art exhibited in various places and contexts, the *Garden of Eden* is a work whose meaning is co-determined by its relationship with the specificity of that same place. Assuming itself as an artificial installation, the Joana Vasconcelos' *Garden* reproduces, with technological resources, the model of "nature", both vegetal and animal, inviting contemplation and the practice of the Walk:

> *Jardim do Éden* is an installation produced using artificial flowers emerging from cylinders coated in black Lycra. Inside the cylinders, lights, synchronous motors and transparent polychrome discs rotate, activating a light conducting effect similar to that produced by optical fibre, generating stunning colour variations and an illusion of movement resembling insects or a light breeze. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

In particular, we will consider the immersive installation exhibited in the interior space of the Centro Cultural de Vila Nova de Foz Côa, in the North of Portugal, a place known for its unique rupestrian art inscriptions, on display from 14 November to 31 December 2024.

## 7. The Site Specific

From a sociosemiotic perspective, meaning is always produced in a specific spatio-temporal situation. Thus, the symbolic value of a work is neither immutable nor fixed, but must be articulated with that situation. Furthermore, interactions and social practices should be considered as practices of permanent recontextualisation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 4). Both from the point of view of public enjoyment and artistic creation, contexts contaminate the process of producing meaning. First of all, it is important to emphasise the appropriateness of the work of art to the characteristics, both physical and symbolic, of the exhibition site in which it is located. The Palaeolithic art of the Côa Valley has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is an Iberian cultural repository of inestimable value:

> The two Prehistoric Rock Art Sites in the Côa Valley (Portugal) and Siega Verde (Spain) are located on the banks of the rivers Agueda and Côa, tributaries of the river Douro, documenting continuous human occupation from the end of the Paleolithic Age. Hundreds of panels with thousands of animal figures (5,000 in Foz Côa and around 440 in Siega Verde) were carved over several millennia, representing the most remarkable open-air ensemble of Paleolithic art on the Iberian Peninsula. (*Prehistoric Rock Art Sites*, 1998)

It is precisely with this regional heritage in mind that the artist uniquely adapts her work to the local symbolic ambience, establishing an analogy between the original character of the garden and the recognition of the Palaeolithic art of the Côa as signs of both the genesis of Western culture and national identity. If we consider that the historical roots of the identity of the Portuguese nation state are identified in the north of Portugal, it is curious to note how the double reference to the origin of national identity and the civilisational origin of our culture on a global scale intersect. Joana Vasconcelos takes this double inspiration. "According to the author—as *agência* Lusa noted—*Garden of Eden* represents the beginning of time and, in Vila Nova de Foz Côa, 'there is the beginning of time through the cave paintings'" (Lusa, 2024). In turn, the artist explains:

> This tradition and this past are very strong, and in some way, I wanted to bring something that was connected to this idea of the beginning, of, at its core, this being the Portuguese heart, which starts beating here in Foz Côa. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

We can also understand that the idea of a garden may, even remotely, be associated with the approximation between the inscriptions of Palaeolithic art in the Côa Valley and the concept of *land art*, as mentioned by the architects who created the Côa Museum:

> Inaugurated in 2010, the Côa Museum was designed by Camilo Rebelo and Tiago Pimentel, a team of architects from Porto. Its design departs from the notion that "Paleolithic art in the Côa Valley is perhaps the first manifestation of 'Land art'". (*Côa Parque*, n.d.)

The suitability of the work to the place, not necessarily inscribed in the genre of *land art*, is also a concern that the artist shows with her artistic work in general. On the other hand, from a semiotic perspective, we can ask whether this approach does not express a paradoxical desire to break away, to separate the work from its model, the sign from its referent. Co-existing with each other, the work and the place, art and reality are somewhat mixed in the artist's work. Yet, the territory that Joana Vasconcelos appropriates is simultaneously a place of identity, considered by some to be one of the possible places of *Portugueseness*, and a place without a place, a symbolic place that goes beyond the boundaries of localism and becomes a truly global instance of communication:

> Even though Joana Vasconcelos' art is deeply characterised by her native Portugal, it is not completely enclosed in a territoriality that would limit her field. Born somewhere, her creations find a place everywhere: the spaces for which she creates literally constitute a territory that the artist appropriates. (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2021, p. 83)

The expression *art in situ* illustrates the relationship that Joana Vasconcelos' works establish with the places and spatial structures in which they are installed. Both from the point of view of the creation of the work, for example suited to a specific public space (*Coeur de Paris*, 2018), and from the exhibition point of view (Joana Vasconcelos exhibition in Versailles, Château de Versailles, France, 19/06/2012–30/09/2012)[2] and even contextual (*Trafaria Praia*, 2013),[3] her crea-

[2] She explained as follows:

> I consider the Palace of Versailles to be one of the greatest exponents of Western culture. It showcased important conquests and is still today a symbol of excellence in art and a leading example of the most daring aesthetical experiences of the West. Versailles' boldness, its penchant for experimentation and creative freedom are my biggest sources of inspiration and admiration. While the fascination and its influence over me is so present in the exuberance of the baroque form, it is no less in perceptible in the discreet conceptual silence that structures the work. When

tions take into account, in different ways, the forms and functions of the signs that make up the surrounding environments. Objects among objects, signs among signs, her works thus produce texts in contiguity with their surroundings. The effects of meaning are often provocative and unexpected, inviting a semiotic re-reading of specific places. Frequently, the relationship with the past is updated by the use of the most avant-garde and modern languages, of which technological imbrication is just one example, as well as it is related "with space that structures her realisations in a different, but no less essential way" as Lipovetsky, Serroy emphasize (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2021, p. 83).

In the case of the *Garden of Eden*, the choice is above all symbolic, stemming from the associations of meaning that emanate from the territory, an ancestral and original place par excellence. In a more or less immediate, more or less subtle way, Joana Vasconcelos' Garden re-establishes our relationship with nature in the context of a present time in which humans' sensitive disconnections with the environment make us think about the urgency of rethinking that same relationship.

## 8. The Garden-Simulacrum

Produced using artificial materials and technological mechanisms, the *Garden of Eden* is an artefact that initially causes some strangeness, given its character as a sign-*simulacrum*:

> This journey through the dreamlike paradise reveals the artificiality of nature through an unusual optical experience, made possible only by the requirement for its presentation in an indoor space deprived of natural light. Joana Vasconcelos creates an astonishing simulacrum that invariably leads to questioning, subversion, and the appropriation of an ancestral narrative. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

Based on the Saussurean model, the notion of *simulacrum* is understood here in its approximation to Jean Baudrillard's (1995) expression "symbolic exchange". As the author points out, rather than the relationship that each sign establishes with the referential world, it is through the relationship between signs, through their differences in a given system, that their value is defined.

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> I walk through the salons and the gardens of the Palace, I feel as though I am between reality and dream, everyday life and magic, between the festive and the tragic. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

[3] The Artists said about this project:

> *Trafaria Praia* is Joana Vasconcelos' project for Portugal's participation in the 55th International Art Exhibition—*la Biennale di Venezia*. The project analyses the historical connection between Portugal and Italy, which developed through trade, diplomacy and art. Lisbon and Venice intersect at various points; the two cities played key roles in the expansion of the European worldview during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, redefining the imago mundi by establishing networks between the West and the East. (Vasconcelos, n.d.)

We could also discuss the possibility of art being able to recreate new sensory experiences, not in response to a mimetic function, representative of a "natural" universe, but as a producer of a new corporeality, materially and technologically co-constituted. In this way, the *Garden of Eden* could be seen as a stimulus for another type of post-phenomenological embodiment (Ihde, 2002), recreated from a feeling of nostalgia for a lost idea of "nature" similar to Simmel's *Stimmung*.

The materials used by the artist to create her garden-*simulacrum* are as follows: Plastic flowers, synchronous micromotors, compact fluorescent light bulbs, transparent polychrome acrylic discs, electric system, spandex, PVC, MDF. Using skilful mechanisms, the work creates the illusion of movement, both for the artificial plants and the simulated insects.

It is inevitable to associate such a creative strategy with the principles of op art, illustrated by the works of artists such as Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley, Frank Stella, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesus Rafaela Soto and Josef Albers. In the 50s and 60s, intrigued by optical effects and the creation of illusions, some of the op art artists at the time painted abstract patterns in contrasting colours or in black and white. In fact, op art is characterised by the creation of the illusion of movement and was used both in art itself and in the media and even fashion. The scientific advances of the modern era, as well as the new aesthetics of both television and computing, seem to have influenced op art. Some art critics argue that the roots of op art may lie in the Renaissance, if we consider other optical illusion resources such as *trompe l'oeil* or anamorphosis (Hodge, 2019, p. 37).

In addition to op art, *Garden of Eden* shares some of its language with other movements, namely pop art and environmental art in the context of contemporary art. As an example of artists whose work could be considered to be in dialogue with Joana Vasconcelos' work, we can mention the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, whose work was exhibited in a retrospective at the Serralves Museum in Portugal in 2024 (*Yayoi Kusama*, n.d.).

In what concerns environmental art, it is important to underline that as the social and cultural aspects of climate change came to the political agenda, we can observe more and more exhibitions motivated by that same theme. This artistic genre can include both historical approaches to nature and media arts' approach. Indeed, it can be discussed in terms of an artistic relationship to nature through the use of its natural materials or by its intervention in the territory, as is the case of land art, or, on the other land, it can be the subjet of an artist work, as in the case of Adam Basanta's media arts projects (Pires, 2020) Often, the field of ecological art embrace ideas from science and philosophy.

In the case of Joana Vasconcelos' *Garden of Eden*, the approach to the environment is materialised with artificial and technological resources, as if, through irony, the artist was trying to stimulate a critical reflection on the current risks of the disappearance of the truly "natural" character of nature today. By creating a garden-*simulacrum*, Joana Vasconcelos challenges us to question the artificiality of our own experience of (dis)connection with our surroundings. Is the garden in this perspective a virtual double of a real garden? And what does this virtual

double mean? A pure *simulacrum* with no real relationship to its apparent reference? Baudrillard says:

> But if our world does indeed invent its virtual double, we have to see that this is the fulfilment of a trend that began a long time ago. Reality, as we know, has not always existed. We only talk about it once there is a rationality to affirm it or certain parameters that allow us to represent it through coded or decodable signs. (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 36)

Just as Simmel (2011) invented the term "landscape" to designate the experience of relating to the natural environment, precisely at a time when this same experience was at serious risk of disappearing with modernity, so the production of virtual realities and experiences, of which the *Garden of Eden* could be an example, stems from a phenomenon of extinction of what was previously understood as the status quo.

The current realisation that the planet is not an inexhaustible source of resources, the worsening climate crisis resulting from human action, which is corrosive to the balance of the ecosystem, as expressed in the term Anthropocene (Sousa Basto, 2022), the growing pollution, the overproduction or hyper-consumption (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2021), put into question the existing models of economic and social organisation, such as the infinite growth model (Taibo, 2021), and thus lead us to suspect about the sustainability of these very models that structure our daily reality. Considering the ruined "natural" world, gardens can be seen as one of the ways of expressing another place, a utopian, or heterotopic, place dreamt up and cut out of lived reality. Can the sensitive experience of enjoying a real garden be transported to a virtual garden? Does the production of an artificial experience mean that the collective imagination is dominated by the perception of an extinct natural world? The assumption of an irreversible loss?

## 9. Final Remarks

Emergent climate epistemologies have inspired artistic practices for some time now. From land art, environmental and ecological art (Fowkes, Fowkes, 2022) to some approaches concerning media arts, there are several contemporary artists whose projects, some of them research-based, illustrate a critical view on the way we, as humans, relate to the living and surrounding world. Furthermore, such projects, motivated by a socially shared concern with the profound environmental crisis that, in part, can be illustrated by the expression Anthropocene, also highlight the current paradoxical gap between culture and nature, the symbolic and reality, art and life.

The recognition of the unprecedented impact of humans on Earth systems, considering that humans' action in the natural world has taken on geological proportions, has been the subject of broad public discussion in the most varied domains. Art has not been indifferent to this discussion. Thus, it can be said that contemporary reality has influenced artistic practices and representations in

a very intense and politically committed way. In this context, considering the solidarity with non-humans and their respective agencies, including animals and plants, as a condition for reestablishing the connection with the sensitive universe, constitutes an urgent issue to which art can give voice.

Some artistic practices discuss that "there is in 'no longer' a 'human' who is not already enmeshed in the 'non-human', the 'more-than-human, the 'beyond human', or the 'otherwise-than-human'" (Fowkes, Fowkes, 2022, pp. 7–8). Considering, in particular, the hybrid ontological character that links humans and technology, we could even say, in Haraway's words, that "today, we are already cyborgs". In fact, many contemporary artistic projects allow us to discuss both the relationship with plant or animal agencies, as well as technological ones.

Critically thinking about the way in which changes occur both at the level of practices and representations, based on these real transformations, is one of the issues that has most inspired some of the most recent artistic production, often in close articulation with scientific research. Examples of this include the interactive installation *Calling the Glacier* (2007), designed by German artist Kalle Laar, *La voix des glaces* (2023), a collaboration between photographer Joan Sullivan and sound artist Robin Servant, Felix Hess' *Air Pressure Fluctuations* (2001) or *Sounds of the Anthropocene* by artist Sebastien Vera (2017), a multimedia installation. We find references to all of these examples in the article *Letting the Planet Speak: Non-human Voices Through Narrative, Sound Art, and Technology*, by Mengozzi (2024), where the author includes a discussion of the way in which contemporary artistic practices make the inaudible audible.

Can Joana Vasconcelos's *Garden* be understood as a symbol of the discontinuity that defines our (dis)connection with the natural world? The assumption of artifice? The work *Garden of Eden*, as discussed, does not literally fit into the category of *environmental art*. However, it shares with this genre the concern regarding the importance of maintaining our connection with the idea of nature. In creating a garden, even if artificial, the artist finds a strategy to encourage us to think about the relationship between culture and nature, even when culture, today, is inextricable from technology.

All our experience in contemporary times is permeated by technological processes, equipment and language, so that "artificiality" is increasingly the only mode of aesthetic experience. It is in this new *sensology* (Perniola, 1993) that we can find space for the exercise of critical thinking, particularly through artistic practices. By emphasizing the simulated nature of feeling, creating flowers, insect sounds and the illusion of movement through mechanical and technological resources, Joana de Vasconcelos challenges us to rethink our experience of the "natural" as a way of drawing attention to the transformations in our relationship with contemporary reality, marked by hyperconsumption and the distancing from "nature". A sensory experience, corporeality, space (Marrone, 2022) as an experience of (re)connecting with what we have inherited, often with a sense of nostalgia, and which we call "nature", is today also recreated by technology. This is a new form of perception and aesthetic experience that we should not underval-

ue. In fact, our contemporary (post)human condition forces us to rethink our ontological status, as well as the social semiotic meaning of sharing a new *sensology* in common space (Perniola, 1993).

This is not an explicit discourse, but rather a more or less subtle critical essay that explores the relationship between representation, art and reality. The aim we sought to achieve was to understand the process of producing meaning from all these different layers of significance. In order to do so, it was necessary to highlight the philosophical, socio-cultural, political and aesthetic dimensions that the *Garden of Eden* articulates. With this effort, we hope to have contributed to illustrating how socio-semiotics, from an interdisciplinary perspective, can be useful in understanding the relevance of art to, in contemporary times, revive our critical thinking about the most pressing problems facing us all, (non)human and more-than-human.

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