Reluctant Gardener

Sofia Lemos

Gardens are one way that culture does nature.[1]
Rebecca Solnit

A garden holds more than what can be visibly perceived. From the lush vitality of Eden to the secretive paths of Eros, every garden tells a story. Think of Epicurus' Garden of Learning, enriched by thoughts and ideas, or of the Italian Renaissance and English landscape gardens, where nature was painterly arranged. The rock and sand gardens of Japan stand in contrast to the vibrant Persian gardens of Damascus, Córdoba, and Granada—each a glimpse of what lies beyond ancient walls, an imaginary largely concealed from view.

Over the centuries and across the globe, gardens have shaped our collective imagination as spaces of pleasure, knowledge, and aesthetics. They have drawn poets, philosophers, artists, and mystics into their fold. They have borne witness to the violence of enclosure and control and, conversely, to the quiet rebellion of roots and seeds. At times, gardens are cast as ideals to aspire to. At others, they are the ground upon which ideologies take root: places where meaning settles beneath the surface.

Beyond this dualist framework, gardens can also be understood as ethical and aesthetic figures—active forces that shape histories and cosmologies. As Rebecca Solnit suggests, gardens are not natural, they are allegories of nature: thresholds of perception that actively participate in how we imagine and inhabit the world. Allegories rely on the known to reveal the unknown, positioning

gardens not merely as representations of what is, but as generative sites that structure entire worldviews. Rather than passive backdrops onto which meaning is projected, they emerge as symbolic agents that embody and enact the complex systems—ecological, political, mythological—through which humans construct reality.

In the *karesansui*, the Japanese dry garden, I discovered a way of seeing with all my senses. There, beauty centres on what sight is not immediately privy to—on events that unfold and reveal the "aliveness" of all things, even those that appear static, like rocks, or sessile, like plants. In its shy disclosure, the *karesansui* articulates a metaphysical space, one that pertains to yet extends beyond material reality. Its apparent barrenness is, in truth, self-seeding: a revelation that revitalises the gaze—long saturated by the modern dominance of the ocular—and fosters an inner attentiveness and a perceptual humility that allows silence to speak and the invisible to come forth in its own time.

Historically, Japanese gardens were cultivated by monks who were often poets and simultaneously skilled at gardening. It comes as no surprise, then, that allegory plays such a vital role in these gardens, connecting word and symbol, the material and spiritual worlds. As the gardener Oguni Syuchi writes, "Thoughts take shape in my garden, and the quality of those thoughts appears in the garden."[2] There, rocks may represent islands or mountains, but they essentially symbolise time in its longest conceivable extent and, therefore, the impermanence of all things. While this impermanence may not be available to sensory perception and, consequently, cannot be directly depicted, rocks in Japanese gardens evoke moods and feelings, revealing expressive meanings that transcend mere representation. In this sense, the Japanese dry garden is neither wholly contemplative nor

purely aesthetic; rather, it is allegorical, holding the potential for symbolic expression.

In the Moorish gardens of southern Spain, I learnt that our word 'paradise' originates from Avestan, a language spoken in Persia three thousand five hundred years ago. It derives from the word *pairidaeza*, which comes from *pairi* (around) and *daeza* (wall), denoting a walled garden. The Greek historian and military leader Xenophon of Athens encountered the word while fighting in Persia with Greek mercenaries, describing how the founder of Persian gardens, Cyrus the Great, planted gardens as part of a territorial strategy. Over time, this term evolved into the Greek *paradeisos*, from which the Latin *paradisus* and the modern word 'paradise' derive.

Over centuries, the Persian garden spread throughout the Islamic world, becoming known as *char bagh* for its fourfold geometric structure divided by paths and waterways—symbols of the four rivers mentioned in the Quran: rivers of fresh water, milk, wine, and honey. These pathways guided visitors through the world cardinally, representing the four seasons and elements. They can be found in Iran, Egypt, and Andalusia. In the sixteenth century, they were introduced to Northern India by the first Mughal emperor, Babur. Although many have since been lost or destroyed, they endure in the form of Persian tapestries and Mughal miniatures.

The walls of the Persian garden offered protection from the wilderness beyond, a function epitomised in the garden of the Middle Ages: the *hortus conclusus*. Within these walls, the division between good and evil and the first great exile—the expulsion of humanity from nature—took root. It was the Greek word *paradeisos* that was employed in Genesis to refer to both the Garden of Eden and heaven itself, inextricably linking the celestial and the terrestrial. Eden came to obsess the medieval imagination:

consistently exceeding our efforts, perpetually in growth, lavish, excessive, intransigent, and abundant. Adam had to be created to prune, trim, and crop it. Christianity assumed that his fall was caused by nature's (and Eve's) wildness: its unruly and even bestial qualities are equally disavowed by Jewish and Christian faiths.

In the so-called original exile, we observe the emergence of the divides that came to define and shape contemporary culture—such as world-self and nature-culture. In the Augustinian tradition, which shaped much of Latin medieval thought, nature and sin became inextricably linked, with human nature seen as divided between its original, pure state and its fallen one (*natura lapsa*). While some theologians viewed the expulsion as temporary, Augustine's doctrine of original sin made it permanent, reimagining humanity as alienated from its nature. No longer belonging to their *oikos*, their original dwelling, humanity was sentenced to displacement and environmental strife.

From then onwards, human nature was conceived as a pre-existent and imperfect reality, which must be inscribed through grace into an economy of salvation.[3] For Giorgio Agamben, the Greek *paradeisos* "was destined to furnish Christian theology with one of its essential technical terms and to the imagination of the West one of its most persistent fantasies."[4] And this fantasy, as Jamaica Kincaid argues, is far from neutral; it arises from and perpetuates a world-historical order that justifies the exploitation of land and peoples as resources.

Paradise Lost

The emergence of *garden* as a verb—meaning 'to cultivate'—coincided with the onset of colonial modernity in the late 1400s. Alhena Katsof notes that this linguistic change was

not accidental but reflected the broader transformations of the time: the rapid enclosure of public lands, the rise of the scientific paradigm, and the gradual transition of power from the Latin medieval church to secular humanist institutions. Following Sylvia Wynter's insights, she argues the actions of European explorers and settlers were not contingent but were driven by a "new worldview," introduced by Christopher Columbus, whose true feat was not the crossing to the Americas and the Caribbean, but the unleashing of a "root expansion of thought" that profoundly reshaped contemporary beliefs. This expansion entailed "the uprooting, dispersal, and replanting of people, ideas, and seeds," and, paradoxically, the rise of the myth of autochthony as absolute rootedness and belonging.[5]

As I have written elsewhere, medieval Christian theology, articulated in the prevailing Augustinian tradition, explicitly sanctioned the subduing of "nature" through necropolitical rule over vegetal, animal, and human life—distinctive features of European colonial expansion.[6] This tradition of thought begins with Aristotle, who, building upon Plato's zoocentric perspective and assertion that plants were created expressly for the use of human beings, constructed a hierarchy of life with plants placed firmly at the bottom. Underpinning this hierarchy, plants were rendered ensouled yet radically different from human and non-human animals, regarded as lacking the faculties of sensation and intellect. Removing all continuities between plant and human life, Aristotle effectively erected a philosophical wall between the vegetal and the so-called sentient.

Nowhere is this passive vision of plants more starkly expressed than in *Politics*, where Aristotle declares that nature exists in a hierarchy of purpose: plants exist for the sake of animals, animals for the sake of man. This view finds an uncanny counterpart in the Biblical tradition,

where creation is shaped toward utility. In different translations of *Genesis*, the flora of Eden is arranged not in wild abundance, nor in tangled or unruly thickets, but in measured provision—every plant useful, every tree bearing fruit. The Old Testament echoes this refrain: plants are meant to be cultivated, harvested, and consumed. The wilderness, chaotic and untamed, lies beyond the garden's borders. This idea—that most references to plants appear in horticultural or agricultural contexts—may not seem surprising. After all, the Middle East, where the Israelites lived, was among the first regions where agriculture began to thrive.

The fusion of Greek and Biblical hierarchies found a strong echo in Augustine, whose *City of God* sought to reconcile Aristotle's theory with Christian doctrine. He recognised plants as living beings, yet, bound by *Genesis*, denied them a soul. A thousand years later, Thomas Aquinas would refine this division still further. While Aristotle had viewed even the highest faculties of the soul as corporeal, Aquinas transformed it into something incorporeal, eternal, exclusively human. Aquinas succeeded in embedding Aristotle's great chain of being into Church doctrine, where it would shape medieval thought for centuries.

Aristotelianism, sanctified by theologians, permeated well into the Renaissance, its shadow extending across emerging fields of knowledge. Francis Bacon, a pioneer of the scientific method, observed the movements of heliotropic plants, roots stretching toward water, and seeds responding to unseen forces—motions that might have unsettled Aristotle's hierarchy. Yet, rather than assigning sensation or purpose to plants, he described them as mechanical, their movements the reflex of an animate machine.[7] If plants were passive, insentient, and created by God for human use, then their submission was a natural law.

Given how deeply entrenched these ideas were in the Western social imaginary, it is unsurprising that its most iconic representation of a garden, Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*—a visionary triptych from the late 1490s—coincided with the so-called discovery of the New World. The central panel might represent paradise as if the Fall never happened: a utopian vision of a world that never existed. Or it might depict a fleeting moment of anticipation, a world on the brink of corruption, foreshadowing the theological tensions of sin and redemption alongside the colonial violence and extractive economies that would soon reshape the globe.

This doctrine extended to one of the most consequential controversies in human history: the Valladolid debate (1550–51) between Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and humanist scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, which centred on the treatment of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean by Spanish colonisers. Commissioned by the Spanish crown, the arguments employed by Las Casas and Sepúlveda regarding the humanity of the Indigenous peoples hinged on the Augustinian-Aristotelian definitions of soul and reason. The Augustinian denial of a soul justified not only the establishment of the new plantation economy but also provided the foundational narrative for the Indigenous genocide at the root of the Spanish Empire and European Enlightenment.[8]

Olivia Laing notes that "the story of Eden is lodged right at the heart of colonial endeavours," emphasising that the urge to capture and possess an unspoiled paradise, abundant in new resources was a key motivation for initiating colonial modernity.[9] However, Eden also supplied a rationale: a divine justification for the brutal realities of colonisation. This logic parallels the Augustinian view of original sin, which sees paradise as a historical place

created by God, from which humanity—contaminated by sin—was permanently expelled.

This ecomythology has long held sway over the Western mind, where paradise and Eden are used interchangeably to symbolise a yearning for a lost origin. In this sense, autochthony can no longer hold any significance for today's ecopolitical challenges. In our age of global displacement, Michael Marder argues, the once-theological experience of exile becomes universal, extending beyond humans to encompass the Earth and the atmosphere, as well as plants, animals, microorganisms, bacteria, and fungi. Every organism and ecosystem, he writes, is affected by climate change, "rendering ecologies exilic, without the chance of returning to a stable origin."[10]

Realists of a Larger Reality

Perhaps the word "paradise" could point to other locations besides Eden. In a lecture delivered at the Colloquium on Symbolism in Paris in June 1964, Henry Corbin, a French philosopher and Islamic scholar, proposed the term *mundus imaginalis,* or imaginal world, to describe a spiritual topography where art, vision, thought, and reality intertwine—an intermediary realm where visionary, symbolic forms become apparent.[11] He emphasised prophetic vision as a way of accessing this dimension: a way of seeing beyond ordinary perception. Vision, in this sense, is more than sight—it is an act of ontological perception: a mode of knowing that allows access to the interconnectedness of life.

Dubbed creative imagination (*imaginatio vera*),[12] this way of seeing unfolds in the *barzakh*, the threshold between the subtle and the senses, where reality is neither

fixed nor illusory but revealed in its full, symbolic depth. In the Islamic tradition, particularly in Sufism, *barzakh* is a space of continuity—similar to the subtle parting of shadow from light. Can we truly differentiate between one side and the other? In the Buddhist thought that shapes most Japanese gardens, *shinzui* is reminiscent of *barzakh*, residing in the nearly imperceptible transition between *shigan*, the here and now, and *higan*, the symbolic otherworld. In the Japanese garden, *shigan* is represented by perishable items such as wood, while in *higan*, stone takes precedence. The in-between, *shinzui*, corresponds to the subtle materiality that creates continuity and contrast between the elements, transcending dualism and allowing us to sense their multiple dimensions.

Marder, too, speaks of an in-between—a vegetal threshold that does not mark boundaries between elemental worlds so much as weave them. He reinterprets the opening line of *Genesis,* "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," not as a dualism but as a movement through them, a "phytogenesis" where plants, rooted in the soil yet reaching for the sky, exist in a state of simultaneity. In this reading, creation is not a singular event with a fixed origin but an ongoing process. In other words, *Genesis* is not a beginning that happened but a beginning that happens—much like the perpetual growth and renewal of plants. Like the interplay of stone and wood in the Japanese garden or the *barzakh* between shadow and light, plants register the density and dispersal of time, revealing continuity as a form of difference. To exist in the in-between is not to be suspended but to grow across, through, and with.

Corbin's intermediate world of the imaginal is co--terminous with other Persian and Arabic expressions, such as *alam al-mithal* (the world of images), *alam-i-malakut* (the world of the imagination), *hurqalya* (the world of the

celestial Earth), and *nâ-kojâ-âbad* (the land of nowhere), all of which express the contrary to *'aql* (reason), which delimits, defines, and analyses by means of definition and distinction. Corbin confesses that the choice of Latin *mundus imaginalis* became inevitable when translating to Western readers the cosmological force of the imagination he found in the Arabic and Persian texts. He found it challenging to content himself with the word 'imaginary,' which, for him, is equated with the unreal—with something outside the framework of being and co-existing, in brief, with something utopian.

The idea of *utopia*, particularly in the Western tradition, is often a projection of an ideal society, whether in a political, social, or philosophical sense. Utopias—from Thomas More's to socialist and anarchist visions—tend to be abstract constructions, operating within or against historical time. While the imaginal may seem akin to *ou-topia*—derived from classical Greek to denote a place that is no place, somewhere recognisable yet beyond our reach—the imaginal does not share this exile. Utopia is often future-oriented and social, whereas the imaginal is ontological, located in the here-now. Where utopia risks becoming a fixed projection, the imaginal resists closure, exceeding the historical and the material while remaining inseparable from them.

"Each park dreams of paradise," Derek Jarman once wrote,[13] and I would add that is equally true that gardens haunt utopias. The two are closely linked, as the inextricable connection between gardens and paradise has formed the foundation for the characteristics and conditions of an ideal society while also serving as one of its enduring metaphors. If utopia is not merely a political blueprint but an actual space of transformation, we could read it as an imaginal space. Conversely, we could also read the imaginal as a critique of utopia: an approach that resists the flattening

of reality into a singular materialist vision. If Eden is something of a utopia, it lives in the fold between myth and matter—a garden not found but still felt, for better or worse—where the imaginal offers not escape but a mode of reorientation. In this sense, it is from the imaginal that the most vital social propositions emerge—not by turning away from the world, but by loosening its certainties and reshaping the ways we come to know and sense it.

Reorientation

Marder tells us that time, as it has been historically conceived, is often represented through spatial metaphors—circles, spirals, arrows—transforming an unfolding process into geometry. His phytogenesis resists this geometric fixation, proposing that the temporality of plants is time itself: a rhythm of emergence and disappearance, an unfolding rather than a trajectory. As such, we need not seek Eden on a map but as a springing forth in time—as a chronology of becoming instead of a specific location, a season rather than an origin. This reorientation of time—from a fixed point of departure to a living rhythm—cultivates grounds for the imaginal as a vegetal mode of perception that does not separate what is seen from what is felt, but dwells in their entanglement, as plants do.

It is precisely from within this sprouting that the *Reluctant Gardener* exhibition and publication takes form. Unlike the Persian garden or its medieval counterpart, the *hortus conclusus*—it sets no clear temporal or spatial boundaries. The exhibition unfolds in landscapes—sculptural, filmic, and performative—with one artwork growing into the next, moving between vague impressions, moods, and operatic intensities that entwine like garden time, in seasons of life and decay.

The curatorial parcours of the exhibition, as much as the editorial layout of this book, embrace the Japanese technique of *shakkei* (borrowed landscape), where cultivated arrangements harmonise with the surrounding environment, incorporating background landscape into the composition of a garden—for example, the view of a distant mountain.

Like paradise, the word "landscape" is more elusive than it seems—less a place than a way of seeing. Borrowed from the Dutch in the sixteenth century, it first referred not to the land itself but to its representation: paintings of rural scenes, framed and composed. Over time, the world outside was reshaped in the image of its depiction. With their orchestrated views and sculpted terrains, landscape gardens extended this logic—a living echo of what had already been rendered in oil and pigment. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, the age of landscape did not come about simply when gardens, mountains, and lakes were rendered into poetry and painting, but when the landscape asserted itself as a conceptual force that defined beauty and the meaning of the word "art" in Western thought.[14] This was the dawn of aesthetics as a discipline. But if classical landscape imposed a way of seeing onto the world, *shakkei* does the inverse: it allows the world to impress itself upon vision.

In *Reluctant Gardener*, the artists, like gardeners, cultivate both what is visible and what remains unseen. Ariel Schlesinger's *How Fire Thinks*, a 16mm film presented as a 4-minute loop in colour, lends the exhibition its sonic environment—an experimental blend of slowed-down cumbia and reggaeton, composed by Miruna Boruzescu. Shot in the courtyard of the artist's studio in Mexico City, the narrative depicts a single flame rising from a floating candle, gradually expanding to reveal a broader view. In the film, fire does not merely consume; it reveals,

illuminating the uneasy space between loss and persistence, presence and absence. The film's immersive sound operates independently of its visual narrative, building in a crescendo that intensifies anticipation and varies with each viewing.

In a new essay for this book, "A Flame and Nothing Else," Marder describes fire as an entity that "thinks itself into being," echoing Schlesinger's work, which suggests that fire embodies a form of cognition. Composed frame by frame, following the film's methodology, the essay emphasises the ambiguous nature of fire—burning in nothing and leaving "nothing else" in its wake. However, in its destruction, there is a kind of creation. Schlesinger's work lingers in this paradox: fire erases itself, yet in that erasure, something emerges—the absence, the change, what is left behind. Regardless of whether it manifests as a small flame or a cosmic conflagration, Marder suggests that *How Fire Thinks* is not only about fire, but also about the world we have set ablaze and the fragile hope that, from the cinders, something else might rise.

Born in Jerusalem, Schlesinger is attuned to the spectrality and suspense that shape the surpassing continuum of life and death in a region both occupied and in a state of exile—where the ghostly can be sensed and experienced in its own way. Shot at dusk, the short 16mm film *La Avellina* (2024) portrays a tree aflame from within, with smoke escaping through its branches. Set against an eerie, desolate landscape, the film implies a forced removal, as if the tree, affected by the forces of displacement, has been put into motion, uprooted, and replanted elsewhere. The tree was painstakingly cut into pieces, hollowed out, and reassembled on a farm in Quito, Ecuador, before the artist ignited it. In the exhibition, the film stands as a presence that is both spectral and defiant, reminding us of the inseparability of life and death in the garden.

Three taxidermied birds (*It's Always Somebody's Bones*, 2024) are displayed atop cardboard boxes resembling museum plinths. A colourful laser beam is projected through fibre optic cables, piercing the birds' bodies in an uneasy encounter between nature and technology. Schlesinger describes this work as arising from uncomfortable feelings about death, explored in its beauty and tragedy. *The Unavoidable Consequence of You* (2024) continues this exploration, featuring butterfly portraits resting on faeces. Taken in Ecuador, the photos are framed by intricate, hand-painted patterns that resemble the wings of butterflies—creatures born from "imaginal discs," the biological structures that guide a caterpillar, enfolded by its chrysalis, to transform from formless potential into flight.

In *Untitled* (2024) by Rei Naito, a fragrant, living flower rests in a glass jar meticulously filled with water, alongside a marble stone from Hiroshima. Naito's body of work, which encompasses poetry and writing, demonstrates a profound sensitivity to the rhythms of time, often utilising ordinary materials to craft immersive environments that foster contemplation and a heightened awareness of the present. In the installation, the flower's fragile, perishable nature co-exists with the stone's geological timescale—itself a silent witness to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima in the Second World War—underscoring the transience and fragility inherent in our ecological worlds. The flower's subtle fragrance fills the gallery, creating an olfactory landscape that travels through the exhibition space. Drawing from this essence, Naito has also written a new poem for this book.

Planting a garden could be seen as a form of dreamwork—an outcome of dedicated creative effort. Although I haven't gardened myself, I find pleasure in caring for plants as well as in reading and writing about them. This

reflects the dilemma many artists and thinkers face regarding their subjects of inquiry, as Katsof discusses with artist Nina Canell in this book. They examine the interplay between materiality, time, and transformation, connecting gardens, artistic practice, the exhibitionary complex, and ecological processes. The biological concept of a "boundary layer" emerges as a central theme, symbolising the transitional space where materials, histories, and living elements such as moss or dust interact. Their conversation also explores energy exchange, vibration, and the unseen forces shaping both natural and artistic environments, reinforcing the idea that art—much like a garden—continually balances chance and control.

In the conversation, Canell describes her work *Muscle Memory (2.5 Tonnes)* (2021–25), an immersive installation that transformed the gallery floor at Fidelidade Arte in Lisbon into a fragile, shifting surface covered in seashells used for hardscaping, inviting visitors to engage with material history through touch and sound. As bodies move across space, the crunching of shells underfoot compresses deep geological time into a single, corporeal moment—bridging the gap between natural and industrial cycles. The work reflects on the incomprehensible scale of material stress in the built environment, drawing parallels between the calcium carbonate of seashells and the concrete most museum and gallery floors are made of. In the act of walking, there is tenderness and brutality as each step reconfigures layers of organic matter, echoing the silent accumulation of bodies, structures, and histories that shape our world. Gathered in the Netherlands, where shell dredging from the seafloor remains permitted—unlike in Portugal, where it is banned for its ecological toll—these shells live in tidal motion. After each exhibition, they are offered to local gardens or returned to the sea, in a gesture of regeneration.

Canell's *Tea Leaf Paradox* (2024) is part of an ongoing series of vibrational sculptures that assemble human detritus—fake fingernails, tape, rivets, ball chains, among others—suspended from tenuously knotted vertical strings, shoelaces, cords, and wires. Stretching from floor to ceiling, they attach to a vibratory mechanism connected to a frequency generator, severing the materials from their original value while recomposing them into something new. The assemblages first become apparent through their acoustic presence: a discrete white noise that invites a heightened auditory awareness of the space. Canell's frequent collaborator, Robin Watkins, describes them as "sculptures in the present tense," [15] capturing the "spell of frequencies passing through in real time."

For this exhibition, Canell employed common tea bags found in local supermarkets—"miniature dry gardens" where colonial botany and human action are vividly clear. Similar to the ongoing crushing of shells in *Muscle Memory*, the tea bags in *Tea Leaf Paradox* release dust into the surrounding galleries, with both works alluding to the motions of vibration and revealing an intermediary state of transformation.

The artist's floor sculptures, *Days of Inertia* (2023), reflect and interact with surrounding conditions, including vibrancy and the feeling of distant tremors. For the exhibition, two slabs of Japanese Daté-Kanmuri stone lay flat on the floor, each containing shallow pools of water, illuminated by a dusk-like filter that altered the influx of natural light through the gallery windows throughout the day. Their edges are treated with a nano-scale hydrophobic layer, preventing water from spilling and making every vibration perceptible on the water's surface.

Alongside Canell's vibrant sculptures, inert botanical elements inhabit the installation—all meticulously cast in bronze and hand-painted by Álvaro Urbano.

A magnolia tree and a pomegranate blossom reference an imagined encounter between the Mexican architect Luis Barragán and the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca. Urbano envisions this meeting as a garden, drawing from the plants he found in the poet's verses and the architect's gardens. In his attunement to the botanical world, Urbano captures time itself—the subtle passage and quiet accumulation of seasons past—etched into the fragile surfaces of his sculptures.

This imaginal encounter takes root in Casa Franco, designed by Barragán in 1929. The Moorish influence is evident in its patios, intricate woodwork, and the interplay of light and water in its intimate, walled garden—elements that fascinated Barragán during his first visit to Andalusia. In the summer of 2022, Urbano travelled to the Huerta de San Vicente, where García Lorca's family spent their summers in Granada. Within the garden's walls, Urbano perceived the tension between memory and myth. Later, in Mexico City's Casa Jardín Ortega, he found Barragán's infatuation with the city of Granada and his confessed admiration for García Lorca embodied in a pomegranate blossom. In the exhibition's second iteration at Culturgest in Porto, its fruits lay scattered throughout the exhibition—some split open, glistening with life; others darkening, collapsing inward and stretching in time. Here, ripeness and decay unravel the timelessness of this imaginal dialogue.

Reminiscent of the ruins of Dungeness, Urbano's work speaks of the passage of time and the persistence of life in forgotten or neglected spaces—an idea that Elise Lammer explores in her new essay, "Survival as a Creative Act", in relation to Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage. Lammer examines the garden at La Becque, an artists' residency in Switzerland, modelled after Jarman's as a space for reflection, resistance, and transformation.

Rooted in his legacy, it reinterprets the filmmaker's garden within contemporary ecological and social theory, particularly through the lens of queer ecology. During the AIDS crisis, Jarman's garden was a sanctuary for queer communities against a systemic climate of oppression. Lammer's essay posits that survival within this context is a creative act, citing the poet Ocean Vuong, and connects queer histories of loss and mourning with ecological grief. It proposes that gardens can provide new means of grieving, resisting, and envisioning alternative futures amid political injustice.

Finally, *Reluctant Gardener* also featured a performance by Vica Pacheco in Fidelidade Arte's late eighteenth-century palace-garden, blending experimental music with sounds inspired by mythological hybridity, pre-Hispanic technologies, and the interaction between human and non-human elements. Titled *Animacy or a Breath Manifest* (2021–), Pacheco's performance creates a compelling sonic environment that connects animism, ritual, and technology. Inspired by pre-Columbian Mesoamerican whistling vessels—ceramic instruments that generate sound through air and water—she created hydraulic ceramic sculptures using 3D modelling. These vessels form a chorus, blurring the line between human and non-human. Breath serves as a medium for reimagining the links between body, territory, and collective memory, enabling a syncretic exploration of materiality, sound, and spirituality, where the distinctions between the animate and inanimate fade.

Reconciliation

Reluctant Gardener draws on my experiences visiting the Moorish gardens of Andalusia and Japanese temple gardens to explore the garden itself as a site of worldbuilding

—one that actively engages with and questions the narratives shaping our reality. As we have seen, these narratives are sometimes rooted in—and, conversely, help to establish—our sense of belonging within the Biblical creation myth. Yet, they can also symbolise resistance and resilience against the self-serving stories that justify the uprooting of peoples and the extraction of lands in pursuit of a "garden state." This yearning lives in the metaphor long used to describe Portugal as a "garden by the sea"—a phrase that echoes the conformity historically woven into Portuguese colonial narratives and the passivity towards today's resurgent tides of nationalism, as reflected in the recent victories of the Portuguese far-right.

The exhibition rehearses a way of seeing the world—one shaped by the beauty the artists and I would like to see in it—while drawing on humor to summon disquiet moods and shifting intensities in what I call a dramaturgy of experience. It does not seek to resolve our origin stories, but instead creates a space for reconciling the political, environmental, and social fractures that emerge from them. As such, my choice for the title of this exhibition and publication reflects a deeper need for "growing down"—an expression coined by American psychoanalyst James Hillman, a close interlocutor of Corbin. It describes the process of transcending dualism and integrating duality, fundamental to reconciling self and world—perhaps the most enduring division following Adam's fall from Eden. Hillman situated the imaginal as their intermediary and equated this reconciliation to a mode of deepening into life, much like how plants root into darkness while reaching for light.

While many contemporary art exhibitions have turned to the garden as a concept—treating it as metaphor, method, or motif—*Reluctant Gardener* seeks not to explore

the garden as a reference but as an expression—both experiential and performative—of ecology. An ecology that is necessarily critical and creative, one that, like plants, is born in-between and resists notions of the garden as a space of control, order, or mere representation. Instead, I invite the reader to engage with the garden as an imaginal topography: a space where human and non-human lives intersect; where the visible and the unseen remain present; where reality is neither fixed nor illusory; where growth embodies as much uncertainty as cultivation; and where the garden, imaginal and alive, serves as a transformative space to which each of us has access, reluctantly or not.

As a tree perceives in itself the growth of the leaves, fruits and flowers from its body; so I beheld all these arising in myself.
Yogavāsistha

1 Rebecca Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*. (London: Granta Books, 2021), 149.
2 Carola Platzek, *Teachings of the Garden* (Vienna: Schlerbrügge Editor, 2020), 13.
3 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden* (London and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2024).
4 Ibid., 5.
5 Alhena Katsof, "Autochthony," in *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation*, ed. Laurie Cluitmans (Utrecht: Valiz, Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2021), 24.
6 Sofia Lemos, ed., *Meandering: Art, Ecology, and Metaphysics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2024).
7 Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011).
8 For a more extensive discussion of the Valladolid debate, see Lemos "On the Practice and Poetics of the Creative Imagination," in *Meandering: Art, Ecology, and Metaphysics*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2024), 40–43.
9 Olivia Laing, *The Garden against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024), 119–20.
10 Michael Marder, "Exilic Ecologies," *Philosophies 8, no. 5* (October 9, 2023): 95, https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8050095.
11 Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme, no. 6* (1964): 3–26, and Corbin, "Towards a Chart of the Imaginal," in *Spiritual Body & Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (Princeton University Press, 1977).
12 Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Al-Arabī* (1969; repr., Princeton University Press, 1998).
13 Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). It is worth noting that the English word *park* originates from the Latin *parricus*, meaning an enclosure—a sense closely related to the Persian *pairidaeza*.
14 Jacques Rancière, *The Time of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).
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