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Andrew Bieler
McMaster University, Canada

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Contemporary Art Exhibitions as Places of Learning About Reflexive Food System Localization

Andrew Bieler

McMaster University, Canada

Introduction

This paper describes the role of socially engaged art practices in opening up our pedagogical imaginations to foster reflexive and creative approaches to building the local food movement. These contemporary artistic engagements with local food or ‘food system localization’ are in the genre of what has been called social practice artwork or, in other words, art practices that focus less on the production of a singular aesthetic object and more on the relational and experiential aspects of participatory interaction in a creative process (e.g., Kester; Finklerpearl). In this context, I examine social practice artworks that create experimental communities built around shared practices of growing and eating locally grown food in cities; such as *FARM:shop* in Dalston, UK, or *Edible Estates*, on suburban front lawns around the world. In particular, the paper focuses on a self-reflexive examination of a project called *The Farm*, which was part of a multi-sectoral public art exhibition called *Land|Slide: Possible Futures* (2013) in the City of Markham, Canada.

These socially engaged food art practices build on traditions of artistic collaboration with alternative food and farming movements, and create novel places of learning about foodsheds or the geographic region from which a population derives its

food supply. These visions of foodshed sustainability are not only constructed in relation to aesthetic and site-specific contexts but, also, variously engage with the need for alternative food initiatives to undertake processes of reflexive localization or, in other words, making local food an open, inclusive and democratic movement. They contribute to such reflexive food system localization by facilitating informal places of learning (e.g., Ellsworth) that engage participants in the sensual, relational, and material practices of urban agriculture – from planting a seed to growing an installation of climbing pole beans.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the role of art and storytelling in socio-ecological learning (e.g., Barndt; Bigger & Webb; Coutts & Jokela; McKenzie; Payne; Song; Wason-Ellam) by offering an in-depth analysis of critical pedagogical engagements with local food at a public art exhibition. It begins with a consideration of arts-based food education, reviews recent forms of artistic experimentation with food and farming, and then discusses pertinent methodological considerations. The core of the paper is a reflexive examination of my own collaborative involvement in an art project called *The Farm*, which is analyzed as a place of learning about food system localization in the city of Markham, in the province of Ontario, Canada.

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Art, Agriculture & Experimental Communities of Food System Localization

Arts-based food education

Art-based methods of food education have been studied in the context of natural resource management and agricultural extension in Australia, where there are strong possibilities for collaboration between extension workers and community artists (Curtis),

and in the context of community arts and popular education approaches to food justice (Barndt). Deborah Barndt argues, “art as a way of life or creative living grounded in ecological contexts could incorporate food itself – its growing and preparation, presentation and eating – as art” (5). While we are still struggling to create ecologically grounded ways of eating and growing, the twentieth century avant-garde has explored the incorporation of food into art in a variety of contexts. *Eat Art*, wherein the art object is ingested by the spectator, and explorations of cooking in *relational aesthetics* have posed significant challenges to western notions of ‘taste’ and the sensual hierarchy of knowledge production (Fisher; Novero). Food practices sometimes challenge aesthetic conventions, but art can also help us think differently about the crisis of the existing industrial food system (Barndt). In this process, it is important to consider the relational and epistemological aspects of contemporary art practice. As sociologist of art Nikos Papastergiadis observes, “art begins in curiosity, the sensuous attraction towards difference and connection, and proceeds through a relational mode of thinking that serves simultaneously as an instrument for suspending the existing order of things and as a platform for imagining alternatives” (13). This curious, sensuous and relational way of knowing is exactly what is called for in terms of re-educating ourselves about food and farming. We need to suspend our thinking about the conventional, industrial food system that is caught in an endless series of crises – from migrant labor injustices to urban food deserts – and move towards critical and reflexive forms of food system transformation (Levkoe; Stock et al.).

Reflexive food system localization

The food movement resists the corporate global food system by triumphing closer relationships between producers and consumers, reclaiming our ability to feed ourselves by growing and cooking our own food, and, consuming organic, local food. Historically, this movement has focused on ecological sustainability and has triumphed a return to 'local food' with universalizing gestures that have excluded racialized groups with the least access to healthy food (Alkon and Agyeman). In opposition to the exclusivity of traditional food movement frames, Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi show how food justice is emerging as a powerful new movement frame, connecting migrant farm labour struggles to food access amelioration, by calling for "justice for all in the food system" (223). Arguably, structural transformation of the global food system will require collaboration across local and food justice movements (Alkon and Agyeman), as well as moving towards a transformative food politics (Levkoe), in order to foster just sustainability. Following Julian Agyeman, I understand 'just sustainability' as "the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (qtd in Monani 2011, 120). We need to envision just and sustainable geographies of growing, distributing and eating - resilient foodsheds built upon reflexive and democratic politics of 'local food'.

The foodshed concept describes the geographic area from which a population derives its food supply (Peters et al. 2). Peters et al. explain, "analogous to a watershed, the concept of a foodshed has been presented both as a tool for understanding the flow of food in the food system and as a framework for envisioning alternative food systems" (1-2). I draw upon the latter use of the term to inquire into the ways in which art practices

may help us in the urgent task of re-conceptualizing and building justly sustainable foodsheds in diverse socio-ecological contexts, and across scales.

The food movement continues to valorize ‘local food’ in an unreflexive manner that fails to address the labor involved in producing such food, and basically reduces the complexity of just sustainability to a scalar transformation of the food system to enable socio-ecologically ethical relations at the local level (DuPuis and Goodman). DuPuis and Goodman show how “an “unreflexive” localism could threaten a similar romantic move to the “saving nature” rhetoric of environmental social movements,” in the sense of foreclosing the politics of the local and being vulnerable to corporate cooptation (360). They argue, “an inclusive and reflexive politics in place would understand local food systems not as local “resistance” against a global capitalist “logic” but as a mutually constitutive, imperfect, political process in which the local and the global make each other on an everyday basis” (369). Similarly, Charles Zalman Levkoe argues, “a transformative food politics involves making localism an open, ongoing and processed-based vision as opposed to a fixed set of standards or an end in and of itself – a process of reflexive localisation” (698). In other words, progressive food politics needs to work towards an open, democratic and inclusive sense of place (e.g., Massey) – place as the coming together of multiple rather than singular food stories.

We are in need of novel and imaginative food stories – stories that move beyond the reproduction of an unreflexive or parochial sense of local food, to be sure, but also more hopeful stories about food sustainability. On this note, the need for more productive and imaginative forms of critique in food scholarship has inspired a turn to the notion of ‘food utopias’ (Stock et al.). The notion of “food utopias helps us open up an

ontological space to think in terms of alternatives, not a singular alternative, that remain not just as necessary challenges to the status quo, but as important exercises in expanding what we even think might be possible.” (Stock et al. 7). As an open-ended space for thinking about hopeful directions for food system transformation, this notion can be a kind of tool for thinking through the necessity not only for critique but also for an orientation to process and experimentation (Stock et al.). The ethos of experimentation foregrounded by the notion of food utopias is perhaps exemplified in traditions of intentional or experimental communities, which often involve an aesthetic dimension.

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Experimental Communities of Creative Food Practice

Intentional or experimental communities have often focused on alternative food practices, like vegetarianism, and may offer clues as to how to practice food utopias - growing and eating in ways that diverge from the dominant narrative of the industrial food system while loosening up the boundaries of “whose ideas matter around food” (Stock et al. 4). Inspired by such experimental communities, a range of contemporary artists like Fritz Haeg, Nils Norman, Something and Son, Bonnie Ora Sherk and others have variously used alternative farming practices, from biodynamic to aquaponic farming, to loosen up our thinking about growing, eating and the social relations organized around food.

Feeding off the explosion of intentional communities and experimentation with new forms of collaboration at the heyday of the American counterculture (e.g., Turner), Bonnie Ora Sherk created ‘The Farm’ under a freeway in San Francisco in 1974. Lasting till 1980, when it was turned into a park, this was “a 7 acre eco garden/art space, replete

with animals, on the traffic meridians and underused spaces under a freeway overpass” (“Bonnie Ora Sherk”). The curriculum of this public art project focused on introducing children to plants and animals in the garden, but also included internships and performance art events (Bonnie Ora Sherk). According to a newspaper report at the time, “on most days you would be likely to encounter such scenes as: people of all ages and races tending vegetables, flowers and small fruit trees; ducks and geese and chickens performing in the Raw Egg Animal Theatre... young children getting acquainted with the animals...” (Bradley). The commitment to place and long duration approaches to public art exemplified in Bonnie Ora Sherk’s *The Farm* is at odds with the ephemeral character of much contemporary site-specific art practice (e.g., Kester) while resonating with a recent interest in longer duration forms of public art (e.g., O’Neill & Doherty).

A number of contemporary art projects have engaged with food and farming in processes of experimentation that might be understood as ‘experimental communities’ or what art theorists Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga describe as: “durable associations of individuals who explore anomalous forms of being together while addressing a problem in a certain locality, producing objects, texts, films, and images that can circulate in the art world as aesthetic manifestations of the social knowledge that emerges in the process” (22).

Furthermore, numerous artists are experimenting with alternative ways of being and growing food together in urban or suburban places: Fritz Haeg’s *Edible Estates* project transforms the space of the domestic front yards around the world into creative vegetable gardens, and Nils Norman’s *Edible Park* draws on utopian traditions and biodynamic approaches to create a gathering place and a farm in the Hague. Another

notable example of long duration public art with an agricultural focus is Something & Son's *FARM:shop* project in Dalston, London (UK). This project is ongoing and ultimately aims to strengthen existing urban agriculture movements by creating a network of farms in shops and by creating stronger links between rural and urban communities of food practice. As a hub for the project, they experimentally redesigned an East London storefront, an old shop, to integrate urban farming systems and to demonstrate how edible materialities, from seeds to sprouts, might play a more active role in the design of our everyday dwelling and working places (Bieler). While projects like *FARM:shop* experiment with new ways of being together in the context of addressing shared problems pertaining to urban agriculture (i.e., space, and energy challenges), they also continue to exist as art and design projects with aesthetic manifestations circulating in the public sphere (Bieler).

What is the potential of such experimental communities as places of learning about food system localization? Can they help us critically imagine food utopias? To address this query properly, it is first necessary to consider the methodological challenges involved in the study of experimental and socially engaged art practices.

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Socially engaged art practice: methodological considerations

How do we go about studying the pedagogical potential of long-duration, socially and environmentally engaged art projects? The recent turn to social participation and collaboration in contemporary art has given rise to a wide-range of new vocabularies and terminologies for socially engaged art practices, such as dialogical aesthetics, relational aesthetics, social practice and collaborative art. The latter term collaboration, which I

understand as “to work together” (Kester 1), is useful for analyzing the spectrum of contemporary socially engaged art practice. On the one end of the spectrum, there are projects designed by artists and subsequently opened up to fairly prescriptive forms of participation with particular audiences and, on the other end, there are works that emerge almost entirely through dialogue or experimentation with participants in a workshop or a series of workshops (Finkerpearl 4). As a kind of experimental community, *The Farm at Land|Slide* exists mostly on the workshop end of this spectrum of collaboration.

One of the most famous examples of this workshop-based form of collaborative art is Mark Dion’s Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, which was a series of art and science workshops with youth that took place during the Culture in Action art exhibition (1992-1993) in Chicago. Projects like this are notoriously difficult to evaluate (Finkerpaerl) and pose challenges for conventional forms of textual analysis that still pervade contemporary art theory and criticism (Kester). In particular, what is called social practice or collaborative art demands more ethnographic methodologies and, at a minimum, demands witnessing the lived experience of the collaborative process rather than simply performing a textual analysis of any singular aesthetic object that emerges from a collaboration (Papastergiadis 191). As a participant in the experience of the collective art project *The Farm*, I have had the benefit of observing the day-to-day social experience of workshops, events, and activities in this experimental community. I have also documented my own creative participation in the artwork via photography, research journal reflections, emails, and other correspondence with participants, as well as via a range of materials (writing, exhibition catalog, etc) produced as part of the larger *Land|Slide* exhibition. Drawing on these materials, I now turn to a discussion of this

particular experimental community organized around art and agriculture in Markham, Canada.

Land|Slide: Possible Futures

Land|Slide: Possible Futures was a long duration (three year) public art project that dug into the history of land in Markham, Ontario, which is one of North America's fastest growing cities, in order to imagine possible futures for urban sustainability (Marchessault et al. 2015). As curator Janine Marchessault explains, "the exhibition asked how we can address some of the most pressing tensions facing us today: the balance between ecology and economy, agriculture and development, and diversity and history" (13). The curatorial focus on agriculture and development was partially in response to the recent history of the local food movement in Markham, a city with 95% class one farmland in its rural areas but unfortunately losing this farmland faster (43% from 2001-2006) than any other municipality in the greater Toronto area (Burke and Shapero).

The local food movement had been fighting for one of Canada's first "food belts," which is a way of improving the sustainability of a foodshed by conserving farmland that would otherwise be slated for low-density suburban development. Led by two Municipal Councilors, Valerie Burke and Erin Shapero, the "food belt" aimed to conserve 2,000 hectares of Canada's prime agricultural land situated between the city of Markham and the Ontario Greenbelt, which is a 1.8 million acre land reserve in Southern Ontario. The specific conservation goals included protecting and enhancing Markham's northern farmscape, promoting public responsibility and understanding of this land, encouraging a new generation of farmers, and ensuring food security (Burke & Shapero). The plan gained the popular support of an international community of urban planners and

environmentalists, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, and many local food organizations including the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council. Unfortunately, in May 2010, the food belt proposal was defeated by a narrow margin of one vote (Marchessault).

The *Land|Slide: Possible Futures* exhibition was conceived as a response to the failure of the food belt proposal and the larger questions of urban sustainability that it foregrounded in public discourse at the time (Marchessault). Curator Janine Marchessault worked with urban planner Jennifer Foster, education activist Chloë Brushwood Rose and a larger research team to probe the history of land in Markham and to imagine possible futures through wide ranging art interventions, including over thirty participating artists, public events, and education programming (Marchessault et al.). Over thirty local, national, and international artists were invited to propose site-specific art projects at the 25 acre Markham Museum site. The heritage site was chosen for its role as a gathering place in the community and because of its nascent struggle to redefine its identity in response to the disappearance of farming communities, rapid development, and a more diverse population. Subtly intervening into this open air gathering place, the exhibition developed a unique public pedagogy that foregrounded learning rather than didactic explanation and group sociality rather than the role of the expert in probing urgent urban sustainability issues (Brushwood Rose 86). The show's public engagement with sustainability was built on "an understanding of pedagogy as offering "possibilities for engaging ideas differently" and as made through the temporary formation of "experimental communities" in the space and time of the exhibition" (Brushwood Rose 86).

The experimental communities of the *Land|Slide* exhibition created spaces for reflecting on the colonial history of land in Markham, as well as for convivial debate about its possible futures. Whereas some of the thirty odd participating artists chose to dig into the history of the land, others worked with citizens, youth, and exhibition audiences to imagine the kind of city they would like to live in via “future-oriented relational endeavours” (Marchessault 16). An example of the former is Philip Hoffman’s *Slaughterhouse*. A site-specific film project situated in a humble, cedar plank slaughterhouse, visitors were asked to peer through peepholes to view a series of intertwined narratives - personal stories of growing up in the midst of a family owned pork processing plant in Southern Ontario, industrial farming narratives, and stories about the Indigenous land rights activist Nahnebahwequa (1824-1865). The multiple projections play off a metal hook hanging from the interior of the slaughterhouse, gesturing to the impacts of “capital-intensive industrial farming on people’s lives” (Foster 121).

Some projects engaged with the future of food and farming in Markham. Angel Chen’s *Dim Sum City* was a social practice artwork that used the social form of ordering food from a dim sum restaurant to create a dialogical space for participants to imagine future food utopias. By conflating urban planning with the process of ordering from a dim sum restaurant (i.e., with urban planning options listed instead of dim sum), Chen’s project creates an aesthetic and performative space that stands apart from the everyday intensity of urban politics while allowing for some levity and imagination to seep into urgent conversations about planning for urban agriculture and sustainability in Markham. As Chloe Brushwood Rose observes, “the communal qualities of this particular social

form, unlike the ordering of individual entrees at another kind of restaurant, produced an encounter for patrons in which the social practices associated with dim sum required them to negotiate their own desires and fantasies of future city dwelling – offered via the menu – with group members at the table” (89-90). In this manner, *Dim Sum City* highlighted the intersection of intimate desire and sociality in the imagining of future urban and food utopias. This theme was similarly explored in Richard Fung and Lisa Myers harvest dinner, called *The Gathering*, which explored diasporic food cultures with many ingredients from *The Farm*.

The Farm

Situated on a quarter acre vegetable plot, *The Farm* committed to working collaboratively with youth, other artists, young farmers and a variety of food policy actors to explore the future of food and farming in Markham. In particular, it involved close collaboration with the Markham Museum youth mentors and volunteers, York Region Food Network, Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, Red Pocket Farm (i.e., a local urban farm), Young Urban Farmers and Seeds for Change (i.e., local food movement organizations). Working with a wide range of food movement actors, the project was critically oriented towards an interrogation of the tensions between agriculture and development in Markham. In the wake of the failed food belt, the project inquired: how can we continue a commitment to generational renewal within this community of food practice? What is the role of artistic collaboration in energizing a reflexive, inclusive and transformative food movement? *The Farm* created a space for a collaborative, hands-on exploration of these kinds of questions throughout the 2013 farming season.

Visitors encountered *The Farm* on the east side of the apple orchard at the open air museum, where a winding landscape of orange and yellow nasturtiums, a muse sculpture made of climbing beans, cherry tomatoes, planterventions, and a mural envisioning a food policy for Markham were brought together in nutrient dense, clay-heavy soil. Participants envisioned a future food policy for Markham in collaboration with diverse food policy groups, such as the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council (TYFPC), and created this vision with artist Angel Chen in a workshop called *Let the Dry Goods Speak*. In the mural that came out of this workshop, youth participants (13-19 years of age) connected childhood memories of cooking and growing beans, lentils and other dry goods to a food policy vision of protecting farmland, reflexively localizing agricultural production and providing healthy veggies for everyone in Markham. The aesthetic of the mural and surrounding landscape of *The Farm* emerged as an expression of the everyday gardening, workshop programming and experimentation at the plot.

The experimental community of *The Farm* brought together Markham Museum youth volunteers, who were typically between 13-19 years of age, with slightly older youth engaged in food policy activism (early—mid 20s), artists participating in the *Land|Slide* exhibition, and, later in the process, members of the general public. Experimentation with creative and alternative agricultural practices, such as aquaponics or organic pest control, took place during workshops throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2013.¹

The curriculum of *The Farm* was inspired by both ecologically engaged public art projects, as discussed, and by garden-based learning, which is based in experiential education and uses the garden as a kind of living laboratory (Gaylie). Workshops varied

in length from a couple hours to a day, and variously integrated food policy, gardening and urban farming with environmental art subjects. In this manner, the project was very much aligned with the interdisciplinary quality of garden-based learning while remaining firmly grounded in the prompts of the garden – “at every step, the garden guided what we learned and how and where we learned it” (Gaylie 4).

In this spirit, the experiential and interdisciplinary curriculum included workshops with the following kinds of foci: growing, which focused on the nuances of growing organic vegetables, weeding, pest control, watering and other basic skills involved in small scale urban farming; making, which focused on wide-ranging creative and artistic practices that variously use food or farming as a theme or as a medium; politics, which focused on the social and policy dimensions of food and farming in Markham. These themes were integrated within a typical day or session at *The Farm* and there was a focus on sparking collaboration between workshop leaders with a farming background and workshop leaders with an artistic background. For instance, artist Heather Rigby collaborated with Young Urban Farmers educator Christopher Wong in teaching a workshop called *Planting the Muse*. Mixing land and environmental art with seeding and watering skills, the workshop engaged participants in planting climbing pole beans around a sculptural mold which eventually resulted in the artwork *Garden Muse- temple of beans*. “As the Garden Muse gazes through a circle into the night sky’s endless space, the figure remains grounded in the earth’s web of agricultural abundance and regenerative possibility” (Bieler and Rigby 26).

Food policy activists from the Toronto Youth Food Policy Council led a workshop on food policy that led into the composition of a youth written food policy for

Markham which artist Angel Chen worked with participants to create as a mural called *Let the Dry Goods Speak*. In the process of grappling with where and how food should be grown in Markham and in dialogue with both Angel Chen and food policy activists, participants envisioned a food policy manifesto written in beans: protect farmland, localize food and farming in Markham and provide healthy veggies for the citizens of Markham.

We also explored the interconnections between growing and making. In a workshop called *Growing Books*, artist Aron Louis Cohen worked with participants to plant a long line of flax at the west end of the site. This line expresses the materiality of flax, since the etymology of the word line gives us lint or flax as a common meaning (Ingold, *Lines* 61). Leading up to the planting of this line of flax, the workshop focused on ways of growing your own art materials, such as flax, which can be used for papermaking. In this and other ways, *The Farm* emphasized a materialist understanding of creativity or, in other words, the entanglement of human and non-human materialities in the flows and processes of the creative process, rather than creativity as involving some kind of external agency that acts upon the material world. As Ingold explains, this approach involves reading “creativity ‘forwards,’ as an improvisatory joining in with formative processes, rather than ‘backwards,’ as an abduction from a finished object to an interaction in the mind of an agent” (“Bringing Things to Life” 3). At *The Farm*, creative pedagogy involved a careful joining in with the formative processes of soil, rain, sun, shade, and seeds, amongst other materialities. Care for the land is pedagogically central to the creative process at each step of the way, which reminds us that both growing (e.g., growing vegetables) and making (e.g., making art) involve establishing and caring for the

conditions (right amount of water, sun) that allow for growth, whether of things or plants (Ingold, “Making Things” 87-88).

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Conclusion

The experimental community of *The Farm* brought together youth from across Markham to collectively explore the future of farming in both the fastest growing and one of the most agriculturally rich cities in North America. Working with artists participating in the larger *Land|Slide* exhibition and a range of food policy activists, youth participants engaged with an experiential and interdisciplinary curriculum of growing and making, and began imagining the kind of future ‘food utopias’ that might be appropriate for Markham. These kinds of experimental pedagogies are urgently needed to foster the creative, reflexive and collective food subjectivities that are needed for food system transformation. Partly, as Charles Levkoe argues with the notion of ‘collective food subjectivities,’ this involves moving away from “acting strictly as a consumer, to having agency - and responsibility - beyond purchasing power” (692). Developing some agency and responsibility for food system transformation will involve, as the term collective food subjectivities suggests, the ability to work creatively with others and wide ranging materialities towards projects of food system transformation. Working creatively with others and on the land, *The Farm* and the larger experimental community of the *Land|Slide* exhibition perhaps opens up some breathing space for us to experiment with other ways of growing and eating food in Markham, Ontario.

Notes

1. During the spring/summer art and agriculture workshops, participants included a mix of largely newcomer and settler youth, with some of the newcomer participants having arrived in Markham from China and parts of Southeast Asia within the past year. The range of participants expanded during the exhibition run in the fall, with a wider range of ages involved alongside youth participants.

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