

Art Education in My Backyard: Creative Place-Making on an Urban Farm

By: Jodi Kushins

More than a decade ago I moved to Ohio to study art education at The Ohio State University (OSU). I never planned to stay here after graduation. As a fourth-generation New Yorker, I couldn't imagine life in the Midwest beyond my dissertation. For my first few years in town, I was a resident of OSU more so than Columbus. This was easy to do considering the university is so big it has its own zip code. Towards the end of my studies, I met a local man with a deep connection to the patch of land he lived on; the land we live on together today. Over time, our yard and the city that surrounds it, have become the context for some of the most authentic and profound experiences I have had as an artist and art educator to date.



Figure 1: Move-in day, August 22, 1949

The paper that follows explores how my knowledge and experience with art education intersects with and influences my work as an urban community farmer, managing a collective of friends and neighbors. It is organized around the major steps one takes in planting and maintaining a garden: siting a location, amending the soil, seeding crops, tending plants, and harvesting produce. Throughout, I weave personal narrative and original photographs with references to artists, educators, and researchers in related fields who serve as sustenance for my work.

Siting the Garden, Excavating History

My husband's grand-parents bought our house in 1949 as part of a post-war building boom (Figure 1). Frank, a postman by day, kept a large kitchen garden out back and gathered apples from a bygone tree while Lenore ran the indoor operation, preserving the fruits of Frank's labor for winter.

Over the years, Dan and I revived that tradition with our own kitchen garden; tending a few raised beds, building a cold frame, and experimenting with rain harvesting, composting, and landscaping with native and edible plants.



Figure 2: Our view over the fence before the sod was lifted.

As our interests in gardening and other forms of self-sufficiency continued to expand, it became clear that we needed more space. Our elderly neighbor's flat, south-facing, totally empty and unused yard caught our attention and we began to imagine all that we could grow there (Figure 2). In 2013 we annexed her yard, cleared the sod, and established *Over the Fence Urban Farm*.

Over the Fence is an experimental urban microfarm, a place to practice small-scale organic agriculture, creative placemaking, and participatory environmental art education. Friends and family operate as a loose-knit cooperative providing financial support through a community supported agriculture (CSA)¹ arrangement and volunteering their time to help with farm chores. I continue to learn and to share techniques for growing produce that promote self-reliance and sustainability, both in the field and through a blog (overthefenceurbanfarm.com). Together we've created and maintain a peaceful and vibrant space in our community. It is work deeply rooted in my interests in socially-engaged and relational art that actively engages audience members and educational initiatives which address real-world issues in the world we share.



Figure 3: The transformation begins; compost tilled into bare earth.

Amending the Soil, Nourishing the Intellect

“Organic gardeners live by the principle: feed the soil, and let the soil feed the plants,” (Bradley, Ellis, and Phillips, 2009). Maintaining healthy soil is a long-term process that demands constant attention and amendments of organic material and nutrients (Figure 3). Like my work as a professor of art education, *Over the Fence Urban Farm* is grounded in

¹ The CSA model was first developed in the U.S. and Europe in the 1980s and is now fairly common on mid-scale farms in many regions. Members provide farmers with funds at the beginning of a season to help cover the costs of seed, fertilizer, other supplies, and labor and in exchange they receive part of the harvest, usually in the form of a weekly share.

intellectual soil that I have been cultivating throughout my lifetime. The books I have read, courses I have taken and taught, exhibitions I have seen and artists I have followed, places I have been, and people I have encountered cumulatively enriched the person I have come to be and continue to become. The following passages introduce scholarly perspective for positioning and understanding parallels between my urban farm work, contemporary art making practices, and art education. Like plants sprouting out of healthy soil, these influences blossom in the context of subsequent sections of the paper.

Connecting Art and Environment

Several interdisciplinary courses I took as an undergraduate at Clark University (1993-1997) organized around themes including *Architecture and Democracy* and *Sacred Space* and co-taught by professors of studio art, art history, philosophy, and cultural geography have remained central to my thinking as an artist and educator. The architecture course paired field trips to old farmhouses and newly-built gated communities with primary source materials from colonial U.S. history and socio-economic critiques by contemporary observers. Later, we analyzed the spaces we occupied on a daily basis, like the university library and student union, according to what we'd seen and read about how the spaces we create both reflect our values and influence our behaviors (Townsend, 1997).

The first week of *Sacred Space*, we washed the classroom floors, windows, and walls and thereafter left our shoes outside its threshold. Throughout the course, we took turns adorning that passageway to reflect archetypes and cultures we were studying – mountains, labyrinths, caves, and trees among other natural and manmade forms like Indian *kolam* and the masonry work of Machu Pichu (Buie and Wright, 1996). As with the architecture course, we learned first hand the meaning of Churchill's suggestion that the shape of spaces we create and inhabit shape us in return (UK Parliament, 1943).

These courses helped me connect my interests in environmental and cultural awareness and conservation with my interests in art. They introduced me to fundamental aspects of visual culture studies. And they prepared me to engage with contemporary conceptual art that is about ideas and processes more than products; works that demand interpretation, and inspire participation.

The Roots of Conceptual Art

An exhibition on view at the Wexner Center for the Arts while I was in graduate school explored the origins of this type of artmaking. *Work Ethic* (2003), curated by Helen Molesworth, began with a collection of works by pioneering conceptual artists from the 1960s including Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Eleanor Antin. Molesworth identified several non-traditional roles these artists adopted to guide and position their artmaking as work, not merely self-expression – *worker, manager, and creator of experiences*. These designations gave names to patterns I had previously observed and admired in the practices of artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Christo and Jean-Claude, and On Kawara.

Ukeles is perhaps best known for "Touch Sanitation" (1977-1980). Through this project she celebrated the work of the New York City department of sanitation by shaking the hand of every member of the force and thanking them for keeping residents of the city alive. In so doing, she recognized each of these people whom society rarely acknowledges and would prefer to ignore lest they remind us of the messy trail we leave behind as we go through our lives.

In order to complete epic installations like *Running Fence* (1972-1976) and *The Gates* (2005), Christo and Jeanne-Claude engaged in various types of community outreach and education.

First they had to convince the communities where they hoped to work to let them use the space, be it public or private land or some combination of the two. Later, they had to train volunteers to help them alter these places into special spaces visitors traveled across the globe to encounter, engage with, and explore. These interactions, and the artists' documentation thereof, were all part of their work.

On Kawara's catalogue consists largely of works he created in response to assignments he made for himself. The work often required repetitive tasks like sending a postcard to a friend reporting what time Kawara woke up in the morning - "I Got Up" (1968-1979) - or marking his day's journey on a map - "I Went" (1968-1979). It is work that might be compared with contemporary artists using blogs and other digital recording tools to document their lives as art. The length of these projects speaks to the artist's commitment to these processes as artistic practice.

In the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, post-studio artists challenged traditional definitions of what counts as art. They "no longer needed to content themselves with the production of visually aesthetic objects. Art became a realm of ideas," (Molesworth, 2003, p. 28). They simultaneously tested the limits of what objects could be defined as art and new definitions of artistic labor. As Goodman (cited in Dewhurst, 2012) suggested, they challenged not only *what is art* but *when is art*. Similarly, my work on the farm, is an attempt to broaden and deepen what it means to work as an art educator and to challenge when and where that work begins and where it ends.

Leading a Culture of Participation

Doug Blandy has dedicated much of his career to explorations of art education in the borderlands, spaces outside of formal educational settings. In an invited lecture at the 2011 NAEA convention, he predicted that sustainability, participatory culture, and performing democracy would be three catalysts for innovation in art education in the 21st century. These terms might be used to describe recent movements in our culture-at-large as we've witnessed an increase of support for local economies and as smartphones have turned everyday citizens into potential news reporters and potential lobbyists. Blandy provides a framework for understanding my farm work as art education. Working alongside friends and neighbors at *Over the Fence Urban Farm*, I embrace his challenge for art educators to push aside our past roles as arbiters of aesthetic judgment and explore roles as "facilitators of participatory culture" (Blandy, 2011, p. 250).

In their work as policy advisors, economist Ann Markusen and arts consultant Anne Gadwa (2010) offer observations and analysis on ways the arts and culture contribute to the creation of more livable, economically sustainable, and more entrepreneurially vibrant communities. "We find that creative places are cultural industry crucibles where people, ideas, and organizations come together, generating new products, industries, jobs, and American exports" (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010, p. 5). Their work parallels Richard Florida's popular report on *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). In both cases, the authors argue that in order to thrive, culturally and economically in the 21st century, cities must support creative individuals as they envision new possibilities for living and working.

While Markusen, Gadwa, and Florida are primarily interested in how artists and other culture workers contribute economically to their communities over time, educator Henry Giroux (1992) suggests ways culture workers, including educators, might transform their communities ideologically. Channeling the work of Paulo Freire, Giroux calls for *radical education*, characterized by a language of possibility. Giroux advocates action-based critique over academic criticism sequestered to printed pages; work that "goes beyond critique to elaborate a positive language of human empowerment" (Giroux, 1992, p. 11). In other words,

we ought to show the world the changes we wish to see, not just write about them. In positioning my farm work as part of my art education practice, I hope to encourage others to put their creative leadership skills to work outside school walls.

As art educators, we are primed to serve as culture workers in our communities. We are trained to lead individuals in creative action, drawing on a broad range of sources for inspiration as we do so. Such work may be understood as an extension of activist art from the 1970s, a substantial portion of which was conceptual in nature. Felshin (1995) described activist art as a hybrid practice “characterized by the innovative use of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance, and to encourage community or public participation as a means of effecting social change” (p. 9).

In much the same way, the urban farming movement can be understood as an example of activist art and creative placemaking. In the following sections, I relate this project to artmaking and art education, focusing on creative processes and leadership strategies grounded in my training as an artist and art educator.

Gardening Like an Artist

Composing a Place

As an undergraduate studio art major, I loved developing photographs in the darkroom. Watching an image appear on a seemingly blank sheet of paper was magical. Planting seeds and watching them sprout conjures a similar sense of wonder. But, as a photographer must learn to compose a captivating image not just get her camera adjusted to the light

Seeing seeds sprout and grow into productive plants first requires commitment and hard work such as keeping the soil constantly moist so germination can occur and subsequently monitoring plants for insect invasions. Such work is necessarily repetitive, not unlike Ukeles shaking hands with thousands of sanitation workers or Kawara noting the hour and minute he woke up each morning, Creating a garden that is visually well-balanced as well as healthy and productive, requires knowledge of the plants themselves and how to fit them together biologically and aesthetically based on soil chemistry, available space and supporting structures, and elements of art and principles of design like the plants relative sizes, textures, and colors.

I sow seeds directly in the garden and start seedlings under lights in my basement and in a cold frame outside; a year-round, all-over process. The seedlings that come up in the cold frame serve as my palette from which I pull materials to interplant among others as they come up in situ or are removed. It is similar to composing a collage – mixing and matching, establishing comparisons and contrasts, moving and gluing (Figure 4). While I do much of my farm work with family and friends, determining where and when to move plants around is something I do on my own. It is a responsive exercise that requires me to observe the present and imagine the future.



Figure 4: Interplanting kale and arugula.

Cultivating Creative Risk

Though I majored in studio art in college, I never maintained a serious studio practice post-graduation. I have, however, integrated a practice of thinking like an artist into other aspects of my life. Roland (1996) developed a list of characteristics about artistic approaches and thinking to help art educators develop authentic objectives for teaching creativity. I see many reflected in my community farming practice.

Using my (sub)urban backyard for something other than growing grass, for example, I strive to “go beyond ordinary ways of thinking and doing things” (Roland, 1996). Promising to provide food to others, I am “taking risks and exposing [my]self to possible failure” (Roland, 1996). Like creating any new work of art, gardening requires some comfort with the unknown, an acceptance of the stubborn truth that we don’t always know how the work will end up when we begin the enterprise. Bearing this in mind relieves one of pressure to create some *thing*, and instead invites us to focus on the process of making.



Figure 5: Pulling root vegetables offers an element of surprise.

Young children seem naturally inclined to make art this way (Kohl, 1994). Oftentimes, they set unspoken goals for themselves like using all the crayons in their box in one drawing or tearing a single sheet of paper into as many tiny bits as they can. Their ideas for working with materials are not weighed down by notions of how things are supposed to be, they are just playing with the materials they find at hand and experimenting to see what they can do with them.

Friedrich Froebel recognized this quality in children 150 years ago and named his education program for young children *Kindergarten*, the garden of children, in response. The name was at once poetic and metaphoric – the classroom and activities were designed to serve as an environment to support children’s *natural* creative and mental development. But, it was also a direct outgrowth of his love and respect for the natural world as a significant site and inspiration for teaching and learning about the individual in society (Straunch-Nelson, 2012).

Kindergarten taught children to plant seeds and to water them, to observe the unfolding of the immature parts when they sprouted, and to care for the seedlings as they grew to maturity, all as a means to reveal the power to aid in bringing forth life and to symbolize the inherent responsibility of people to one another and to society (Brosterman, 1997, p. 34).

Many of our farm supporters have children and we invite them to work alongside of us in the garden as often as possible. One of their favorite activities, be it the pre-schoolers or teens, is pulling root vegetables. I believe this is due to the act of discovery that occurs during this process; a chance to encounter the unknown. The unpredictability of the natural world is the antithesis of the world of artificially controlled realities 21st century children spend so much of their lives within. Journalist and environmental education advocate Richard Louv (2005), suggests our children need more direct sensory experiences as an antidote to the inordinate time they now spend indoors staring at screens. When one pulls a carrot, radish, or beet from the ground (Figure 5), one can never be sure what will be on the other end. Will it be small and spindly or long, fat, and juicy? It's hard to predict just what will emerge. This is the root of wonder and magic.

Facilitating Creative Placemaking

Providing Opportunities for Participation

Transformative creative endeavors require continued and conscientious effort on the part of participants in combination with various forms of support from others (Borup, 2011). While I steer the project, the success of *Over the Fence Urban Farm* thus far has relied on financial support through our community supported agriculture (CSA) subscriptions and the labor of our members. While not required, many CSA subscribers volunteer their time on the farm. They come because I ask them to, and because they enjoy the time outdoors and in communion with others working to maintain a beautiful space and to build a more sustainable local food system.



Figure 6: Harvesting garlic.

Sunday afternoons, for example, we gather for one hour of intense labor - turning soil, weeding, pruning and training climbing plants - followed by another hour attending to smaller details, organizing supplies, harvesting, and packaging produce (Figure 6). We call this “Happy Hour on the Farm” and sometimes share a beer as we sort and celebrate the week’s harvest.

For my part, getting ready for these sessions is a lot like preparing to teach an art class. I start by creating a task list of the day’s objectives and work backward to determine what tasks need to be accomplished and what tools are required. I consider who is the best fit for each job – some people are great at finite physical challenges like digging ditches and building trellises while others are better at work that requires slow and consistent attention to small detail like thinning radish sprouts or pruning tomato vines. I have all the tools we need ready so volunteers can begin work upon arrival (Figure 7). This advanced planning not only ensures that all tools needed for the days objectives are clean, sharp, and readily at hand, it reflects my respect for participants time and appreciation for their work.



**Gardening
is equal
parts
science
and art,
diligence
and craft.**

This time is important to our project, not just for the practical reasons of getting tasks accomplished, but socially as well. While I knew most of my subscribers personally before this project, some I knew only in specific contexts, and many didn’t know one another. The time we spend together working the land offers another layer of meaning to our work. It affords us a common experience and a chance to share ideas and interests. Given the personal and professional backgrounds of members of our group, the conversations are often intercultural, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary (Figure 8). I see this as an example of how creative projects can animate communities (Markusen and Gadwa, 2003).

As suggested above, in addition to getting work done and socializing, members report that the time on the farm nourishes them personally. They send me text messages throughout the week and share reflections on our Facebook page like this:

E.B.: I woke up this morning feeling crummy, grumpy and anxious. I just got home from two hours at Over the Fence Urban Farm for a CSA work day and now I'm feeling energized, peaceful, and content. I just needed a little garden therapy!

M. F.: Oh my goodness I brought the same feeling home with me! I came with one unhappy tummy and a whiney little girl in tow. We both left happy and feeling well. (Personal communication, July 21, 2014)

Community Farming in the Digital Age

I share our work on the farm on our blog, Facebook, and Instagram. Being online after being in the field not only allows me to connect with our CSA members as I show them how things are growing in their absence, it serves in my role as an action-based teacher-researcher. I value it as space to reflect in the moment, and over time. As I prepare for various farming activities, I find myself returning to archived blog posts to recall what we did in similar situations last year. The sites provide a forum for my farm photography, which has been

creatively rewarding (Figures 9 and 10), and is a space to share extended, deep thoughts about the process of farming with friends.



Figure 7: (Top) Tools and task lists prepared in advance of a CSA work session.
Figure 8: (Bottom) Sharing life lessons while trimming and sorting the garlic.





Figure 9: Dahlias and depth of field.

Our social media campaign also helps to extend the goals of the project beyond our CSA community **by raising** awareness about organic farming methods, sharing details about the production of our crops, and offering practical advice for others interested in such endeavors. We attract followers across the globe. It has also helped me connect with others in Columbus doing similar work. As a result, I have become part of a network of urban farmers in Columbus who provide opportunities for others to grow and distribute fresh produce—all within a few square miles of my home. We are delivering hyper-local produce infused with compelling and meaningful narratives.

Joseph Swain, for example, left his job as a union-backed construction worker in 2007 to start growing mushrooms and micro-greens on his land a mile down the road. Today, Swainway Urban Farm products are included, by name, on menus throughout Columbus and the surrounding area. The presence of locally sourced restaurants is growing in creative communities across the country (National Restaurant Association, 2014). At the farmer's market, Joseph stands proudly behind his booth like a master craftsman presenting oyster mushrooms as intricate as coral and baby ginger the color of a sunset.

Rachel Tayse Balilleul is a local food advocate, educator, and blogger. Rachel has made keeping chickens in urban yards a popular pastime in our neighborhood, in part by documenting and sharing her experiences with animal husbandry processes on her website



Figure 10: Highlights from the Over the Fence Urban Farm 2014 tomato collection.

Harmonious Homestead. Making this process visible has inspired others, including myself, to imagine backyard chickens as part of our own lives. A few years ago Rachel and her family moved to a larger plot of land in a part of town with less restrictive zoning regulations. There she and an increasing number of new neighbors are creating an urban homesteading corridor in our community.

Recently, Joseph and Rachel combined their energies to start the Columbus Agrarian Society (CAS), dedicated to “assist organic farmers and intensive home gardeners by sharing knowledge and expertise while providing the resources, supplies, and social support to thrive” (CAS, 2015). This is just one way Columbus is building on its agricultural history to remake itself in the 21st century.

Final Harvest: People-Powered Produce

Over the Fence Urban Farm is an example of participatory environmental art education and has proved to be my greatest harvest as an art educator. Aside from outstanding fresh produce (Figure 11), the endeavor has provided me with an opportunity to be a cultural leader in my community. It has enabled me to form deeper connections with people whom I care about and admire, based on our common visions, challenges, and accomplishments.

The farm provides a space where people come together to connect with the land, with one another, and ultimately with themselves. Together, we’ve collaborated to make a living

sculpture that continues to evolve. And, like art galleries I've visited around the world, it is a "special" place (Dissanyake, 1990), a sacred space.



Figure 11: Prize-winning sweet potato.

This project is the culmination of a lifetime of exposure to and involvement with socially-engaged art and culturally-relevant education created in particular times and places. I hope others find my reflections engaging and that this essay encourages them to share their visions for creative communities. Putting artistic thinking and leadership out into the world beyond our schools and classrooms is work we ought to be proud to identify as art education.

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