

Art for Eat's Sake

Artists are exploring the sustainability of our food systems with hands-on, interventionist projects

Last summer, residents of Vancouver's Southeast False Creek neighborhood were drawn into an unusual artistic experiment. On a vacant lot littered with the rusty remnants of the neighborhood's industrial past, artist Holly Schmidt led volunteers in designing, building, planting, and harvesting a thriving container garden.

BY JOSEPH HART

"I'm not a great gardener; I'm just average," says Schmidt. "So it wasn't so much me being an 'expert.'" Instead, she invited passers-by to join in the work of creating the garden. The idea, she explained, was that folks "would come in and help out and learn from each other."

A wide variety of people got their hands dirty. Master gardeners and designers collaborated on the site plan. Artists contributed their own projects. Meaghen Buckley, for instance, wove handmade nets onto an



old industrial structure to serve as a creative climbing gym for runner beans.

Other volunteers just happened onto the project while strolling nearby walking paths. One curious elderly resident dropped by to offer a flat of tomato plants. “She ended up helping out throughout the whole project,” Schmidt says. And her tomatoes thrived.

A Critique—and Solutions

Schmidt’s project, *Grow*, is one of an increasing number of innovative, artist-led experiments that explore urban farming or attempt—in a practical way—to clarify and decode the notion of *sustainability*, especially as it relates to our food.

In large part, projects like Schmidt’s reflect recent changes in our relationship to what we eat. In the past 20 years, our food system has come under increasing scrutiny. Books like Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* and Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* have advanced a critique of industrial agriculture that is becoming embraced by the American mainstream.

In short, this critique focuses on the “green” (read: chemical) revolution of the 1960s. Since then, farms have become larger and less diverse, with severe consequences for farmers, our environment, and our health. Today, just 12 percent of the nation’s farms produce 84 percent of our food (and receive billions in federal subsidies), according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The other 88 percent rely on off-farm income. Not surprisingly, few young people are interested in farming; the fastest-growing age group in farming is people over 65. Mono-cropping wears out soil, with petrochemicals making up for the depletion. Centralized food systems also require vast carbon-dioxide-spewing transportation networks. Meanwhile, processed foods are linked to a range of conditions, from obesity and diabetes to pesticide-related cancer.

Responses to this critique represent a range of efforts, including calls for better food labeling and food security, attempts to maintain and improve the USDA’s organic standards, and lobbying to reform the political landscape that currently favors industrial farming.

More recently—and most interestingly—come the efforts of food activists: farmers, enlightened consumers, and artists like Schmidt who encourage us to attend to our personal relationship to our food and its production. The rapid growth of farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture, as well as the locavore movement, which encourages us to eat seasonally and locally, all come under this umbrella.

“Art farmers” whose projects and practices focus on food issues range far and wide. They include, to name just a few, artists like Matthew Moore, a fourth-generation farmer who has transformed his family farm in Arizona into an artistic commentary on encroaching suburbia, and who constructs practical farming interventions like hanging portable vegetable boxes. The Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrc has facilitated several large-scale projects including water collection developments; a rooftop rice field in Anyang, South Korea; and a seed and plant bank in Paris. Fritz Haeg focuses on front-yard gardens with his *Edible Estates* project.

Not only do these artists and projects advance a critique of our industrialized food system, but they are also actively engaged in the search for solutions. Whether by demonstrating more holistic techniques and sources of food production or by exploring new, collaborative forms of community interaction, they’re helping to define a new day for agriculture.



Projects from the 2009 *Down to Earth* exhibition included Joan Bankemper’s *Willa*, a medicinal garden with seven chakras (above), and *Deer Fencing* by Stacy Levy (opposite).

The Art of Growing

As a curator and cofounder of ecoartspace NYC, Amy Lipton has worked with a number of artists who are advancing practical solutions to the problems associated with industrialized agriculture.

In one 2009 project, Lipton gathered a group at Philadelphia’s Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, which also runs a working farm. Each participant in the exhibition *Down to Earth: Artists Create Edible Landscapes* built unique, living gardens with inventive structures that ranged from a rainwater collection system to a sculptural fence designed to keep deer in check.

Lipton’s interest is tied closely to her passion for environmental justice. She ran a traditional New York gallery in the 1980s where, among others, she worked with artist Mel Chin. In 1990, Chin collaborated with a USDA researcher on *Revival Field*, an artwork that used heavy metal-absorbing plants to clean up a brownfield in St. Paul, Minnesota.

“This work is in a new territory where it’s hard to put labels on it,” Lipton says. “Even among the artists, no one is super comfortable with terms like ‘eco-art’ or ‘land art.’ It’s not like minimalism or cubism that sum up very easily.”

For Chin, this ambiguity had a concrete consequence: a grant he’d received from the National Endowment for the Arts was rescinded. “They were questioning whether it was an artwork at all,” says Lipton. Chin fought the decision and the grant was eventually reinstated.

Amy Franceschini’s Victory Garden project in San Francisco provides a striking contrast. Launched in 2006 at the city’s Museum of Modern Art, the program enlisted residents to plant back- and front-yard edible landscapes and provided



workshops and tours of participating gardens. Franceschini, a founder of the collaborative group Futurefarmers, also created a demonstration Victory Garden in front of City Hall. The highly successful program has since become an ongoing, city-funded initiative and a model for other urban agriculture projects around the country.

The idea, Franceschini told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2009, was to declare “a victory of self-reliance, independence from the industrial food system, and community involvement.”

Today, she describes the impact of the project in even broader terms. “It addresses the disconnection we have with everything we consume,” she explains. “It’s a point of initiation to a deeper connection with food. As soon as people started farming and realizing how difficult it was, a lot of other questions unfolded.” Ultimately, these questions included the pressing environmental issues of the day, including climate change, transportation, and the challenges of population increases.

More recently, Futurefarmers took up the issue of soil health in *Soil Kitchen*. Timed to coincide with the 2011 Environmental Protection Agency’s National Brownfields Conference in Philadelphia, the project took over an abandoned building, outfitted it with a giant windmill, and turned it into a community gathering space.

The heart of *Soil Kitchen* was a testing project: Neighbors traded soil samples from their yards for a bowl of soup. Like the Victory Garden program and Schmidt’s *Grow*, the project included workshops and hands-on demonstrations on topics like sustainability, composting, grassroots community financing, and alternative energy. The soil samples were tested by EPA conferees, and the results were posted online. Residents with high contamination worked with the EPA to gain more knowledge of remediation. The initial project is over, but local residents plan to carry the program forward for another year with the blessings of the city.

ABOVE: Time-lapse film footage from Matthew Moore (top) and other farmers in the Digital Farm Collective debuted at a Park City, Utah, grocery store (middle) and will become part of an online database. BELOW: Serving soup at *Soil Kitchen* (left) and planting day at San Francisco’s City Hall in 2008, part of the Victory Garden project (right).



The Social Dynamics of Food

Like Schmidt's *Grow*, projects launched by Futurefarmers raise awareness of local, homegrown alternatives to the industrial food system. But they do a lot more than that. By creating collaborative, informal, grassroots interaction, they model an alternative social structure as well.

For Schmidt, this interaction is a key component of her work. "Instead of being didactic and telling people 'This is how it should be,' I'm always looking at how we can come together and start building something interesting. How can we come together, ask questions, and create a new practice?"

In other words, such artists are challenging the social implications of outsourcing our food production to multinational corporations and gigantic, centralized, and largely invisible farms. They're questioning why the intricate, complex, sometimes maddening, but entirely defining experience of cultivating, harvesting, cooking, and enjoying a meal is reduced to a series of impersonal financial transactions at the drive-through window and checkout aisle.

When Franceschini planted her Victory Garden at San Francisco's City Hall, an unanticipated result was that as city workers and elected officials came out to eat lunch in the garden, they came into contact with gardeners and citizens in a new and different way. "They would talk to people, and a lot of issues came out. People became connected to the city," she explains. "Breaking these sorts of barriers has become an important aspect of our work. We *should* think of the city as 'ours,' and we *should* know what's in the soil around our homes, and we *should* be able to test it ourselves."

In this context, and against the backdrop of our increasingly troubled world ecology, projects like Franceschini's are challenging not only the assumptions of the participants in their works, but the role of the artist. "It's even hard for me to say I'm an artist sometimes," she says. "I've often called myself an educator or facilitator or pollinator. Basically I think it's whatever title you need to have to make happen what you want to happen."

In other words, one of the vital offerings that artists—especially public artists versed in the dynamics of community collaboration—can contribute to the food movement is a new social dynamic that transcends economic relationships. Just as farmers learn to cultivate fertile, biodiverse farms, and food consumers learn to embrace a broader range of Earth's edible offerings, artists like Franceschini can teach us to self-organize around our pressing, common interest in sustaining ourselves with a healthy diet.

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Speculative Art

Sarah Kavage's *Industrial Harvest* compared actual wheat to a "wheat future."

Behind every box of Wheaties stands a largely invisible system of international finance, a marketplace of buying, selling, and risk that makes Wall Street seem transparent. At its simplest level, the Chicago Board of Trade and the Chicago Mercantile give investors the opportunity to speculate on the future cost of food, transferring risk from farmers to investors.

But the commodities market also turns tangible, life-giving crops into an abstraction, and it's this process that fascinates artist and urban planner Sarah Kavage. "I'm interested in big systems like wastewater treatment facilities, stuff that's around you but you don't really think about how it works," Kavage explains. "That was my initial interest in commodities trading. These guys are working behind the scenes and most people aren't really aware of their profound influence on the food system."

In order to make that influence apparent, Kavage conceived of *Industrial Harvest*, a massive public art project that she took to Chicago. The piece had two parts. She purchased a grain future on 1,000 bushels of wheat—an investment gamble that nonfarmers use to speculate on the future price of a commodity. At the same time, she bought 1,000 bushels of real wheat from a grain elevator, and had it milled into 20 tons of flour and shipped to Chicago where she gave it away to food banks and other organizations.

"I was trying to educate people not just about where their food comes from, but to make the connection between those fields of corn and the Board of Trade and what people are eating and paying at the grocery store,"

she says. "Wheat is a good example of monocultural agriculture—humongous fields and destructive farm practices. And what you have is a commodity system that encourages those destructive practices."

Kavage's distribution of the flour she purchased stands in stark contrast to these abstract financial transactions. She tracked where the flour went, partly through an interactive website. "When I started the project, I wondered if anyone would even want flour. Is someone going to a food bank going to want to bake?" What she found was that food banks are under enormous pressure to feed the growing number of people in need. Getting rid of her flour was no problem. "The outcome was that it fed a lot of people." —J.H.

