

Perma-Arts – Why to Link Arts and Agriculture on the Way to a Sustainable Future?

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What this paper is about

This paper describes a multi-layered theoretical and practical reflection referring to different contexts and disciplines such as arts, agriculture, environmental history, sustainable livelihood. It summarizes previous research and action moments from my activities at FOA-FLUX (foa-flux.net) and the development of a webinar (<http://artandsociety.net>).

At this point the paper does not primarily follow the disciplinary rules and analytical forms of academic research. Instead it refers to various forms of knowledge production that are embedded in iterative, intuitive, improvisational, tacit and experiential means of inquiry. And it rather aims at a dialogue between disciplines, theories and practices, that can contribute to shift the way we might proceed in the world.

My attempt to bring together contemporary ecological, participatory and activist art forms with alternative agriculture and sustainable land use with the aim to raise awareness for developing a sustainable future is based on my multi-perspective professional background as an art and landscape historian, researcher, lecturer, curator, author, ethno-botanist, urban gardener, not to mention that I grew up on a small-holder farm in Switzerland.

For a long time, productive land use (agriculture) and aesthetic land use (art and gardens) were supposed to be two contradictory strategies. To be a farmer or to be an artist was mutually exclusive in western context. Today this is not true anymore. A growing number of case studies manifests that arts and alternative lifestyles generate considerable synergies.

These transdisciplinary initiatives with their explicit guzzling over the disciplinary fence, hands-on experiences, learning by doing, practice-led research, indicate the emergence of a new understanding. They nurture the hope that combined efforts in searching for sustainable development are meaningful.

The global environmental crisis as a catalyst for change

The call for sustainable development is based on current perceptions of the global environmental crisis, including global warming, food shortages, pests, land conflicts, extinction of species and more.

This crisis not only raises fundamental questions about how the current state of the environment is assessed and evaluated, but it is also related to action plans of how to better survive. Behind is the prediction of an endangered future for mankind – the near end of the Anthropocene!

The relationship between man and nature has always been reflected in cultures and arts. A profound change in the reflection on nature consumption in western cultures has been noted in the second half of the 20th century. Numerous environmental disasters, including oil spills, chemical spills, nuclear accidents, poisoned soils and water have startled up the earthlings in the western hemisphere and have created new narratives about environment and nature. Narratives of the ozone holes, deforestation, polluted seas, extinction of living species, mountains of toxic waste assumed a near collapse of the earth. A number of new scientific insight, including 'Silent Spring' (Rachel Carsons, 1963), the 'Limit to Growth' (Club of Rome, 1972), or the Gaia Hypothesis (James Lovelock, Lynn Margulies) inscribed themselves in the collective memory. Related hereto was the rapidly growing

need for plans, strategies and skills to survive these scenarios. But the threatening fire was piled up in the 21st century with progressing disasters and even more scientific evidence for the formative power of mankind in shaping the earth. That is why the Anthropocene has been approved to be the new socially constructed and scientifically substantiated narrative.

In the meantime, the public awareness of how environmental changes have affected cultures and lives has increased and provoked controversial reactions.

On one hand there is a rejection of the existence of an environmental crisis in particular of the fact that human activity is the primary driver of it. Followers of this way of thinking insist on human's superior position in the system of nature. On the other hand, there is a growing acceptance of the inescapable impending collapse. Once we think of a collapse as a likely phenomenon, we also have to think of how to cope with it. The spectrum of responses ranges from striving for mainly technical solutions to prevent or escape the collapse to the considering a and preparing for a completely different life beyond the Anthropocene.

Profound reflections in various fields have engendered new ideas and efforts to search for alternative ways of living and to leave the comfort zone of consolidated claims and privileges. This has been tested and debated. Communities such as the hippies in the 1960ies and the punk movement in the 1980ies but also extraordinary individuals such as WALULISO in Vienna have lived a different lifestyle and in doing so left profound traces in the cultural perception of nature.

Deep ecology, nature gardening, eco-system restoration, degrowth, barefoot economy, ecotopia are the key words we can't get rid of since then. Rethinking and reshaping the human relation to the environment on a basic level was and still is especially visible in the arts and in scientific disciplines dealing with land use and agriculture. The next two chapters deal briefly with the specific findings and effects on disciplinary nature cultures and lifestyles.

The role of arts in shaping the human relation to nature

In the wake of various environmental crises, the arts have played a formative role. By either depicting or narrating environmental realities, the arts take on a mainly communicative role, in the sense that they represented a discourse shaped by religions, economies, politics or elsewhere. This changed in the course of the global environmental crisis in the 1970s. Under different denominations such as land art, eco-art, environmental art, sustainable art, nature art, environmental concerns have gained weight in artistic production beyond pure communication and representation of positions shaped outside the arts.

With its monumental and ephemeral interventions in remote natural landscapes land art gave a first boost to the re-evaluation of the environment for art, but still remained as an art form in an exclusive art world. Promoting the use of natural materials, working with natural processes and following the principles of sustainability artistic production started to expand its means towards nature and to build its own environmental discourse.

The works of many renown artists touch fundamental questions of ecology, environmental politics and nature, as the following examples briefly may expose. The work of the artist Agnes Denes deals with land reclamation and nature restoration through art-led agriculture and forestry. When she installed a temporary wheat field in Manhattan in 1982, another one in Milano/Italy in 2015 she enabled both a functional and an aesthetic approach to these places. Mel Chins revival field is an ongoing planting action on a hazardous waste landfill. What began as a conceptual art work in 1991 has also turned out to be an exemplary environmental restoration project. The green remediation on site is not only a low-tech method to treat poisoned soil, but it is also recognized as a performative sculptural art work.

The artist couple Helen and Newton Meyer Harrison takes an outstanding position in bringing together art and ecological concerns. Their work encompasses basic environmental research such as an inventory of the vanishing alkaline grasslands in Europe or a grounded research on lagoons, with a series of artist's books and built models. The 'survival pieces' in which the artists installed an orchard and a pig on a meadow in a museum to be appreciated by the public, serve in particular to create empathy for the environment.

The activist and participatory turns in the arts in the 1990ies embrace the claim not only for conceptualizing new narratives but also supporting direct participation in ongoing change processes. Artists working in real life situation and taking active roles in civic empowerment and transformation processes has shifted artistic practice for quite some time (Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action*, and *Artists Working Reality*, 2016). 'Art in Action' describes a new form of artistic activity in which the artists no more claim for a unique status in an exclusive art world. Instead they involve themselves directly with their social and natural environment.

A strong narrative with regard to raise awareness for a sustainable lifestyle results from the merging of art and agriculture and gardening. In the 1970ies Guerilla gardeners have entered the urban terrain for the first time with at that time largely illegal horticultural activities. Meanwhile a new generation of urban farmers and gardeners around the world transform the metropolitan areas structurally and visibly: They turn rooftops, abandoned lots and other disregarded places into edible landscapes, improving human and ecological health as well as creating beautiful places. Slogans, such as 'eat the city', 'green the grey' and alike are circulating in many places. And concepts of sustainable lifestyles, self-sufficiency and local impact are at the forefront when raising awareness for the current environmental issues. In turning the condensed urban fabric into a productive green space, Hong Kong's urban farmers have a leading role.

Apart from the urban focus rural traditional agriculture is under pressure from global economy. Exemplary efforts by the arts try to revitalize local rural farming. 'Parimbon Investasi' is the name of an art-led alternative agricultural project that counteracts global industrial investment eradicating rural environments with their manifold local traditions. This initiative takes place in Jatisura West Java and is linked to the various activities to revitalize the local cultural landscape of Jatiwangi art Factory (<https://www.facebook.com/jatiwangiartfactory/>) through art-led initiatives. The goal of the project is to found a companion to official investment guide lines published by governmental institutions and to offer an investment package that takes account to the local structures. While local investing together and sharing the profit for locals is favored, the addition of a supernatural burden to foreign investors, extending the investment process with a variety of ethical practices linked to various cultural aspects from around the area of investment enriches the investment perspective with sustainable knowledge.

Linking the art world with sustainable farming seems not only to change the employment opportunities in agriculture but also to raise awareness for sustainable production. On a small-holder farm in Samstagern/Switzerland the pioneering project 'Hof Blum' takes place. Since 2009 at regular intervals artists are invited to install their works in a temporary exhibition on the farm. While visiting an art exhibition the beholder gets involved with peasant concerns. Instead continuing the exclusion of farming communities from the artworld this experiment tries to merge it.

In view of the complex entanglement of contemporary art practices with different realities, the following function of art in relation to sustainable development can be distinguished:

1. Art as a means for research and communication about environmental issues.
2. Creating empathy for sustainable development and affecting values and beliefs about nature and the environment.

3. Engaging art in a transdisciplinary change process: Working with art-led strategies for sustainable environments, dealing with vulnerability and resilience.

Alternative ways of land use: permaculture

Among the manifold fall guys to boost the environmental collapse industrial agriculture played a leading role. Modern agricultural and land use systems prove to be highly harmful to the natural environment and generate a general rethinking of agricultural land use and food production.

In the course of searching for alternative agricultural production permaculture has attracted worldwide attention.

Permaculture is a port-manteau of permanent agriculture. It was introduced in the 1970ies by the Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren as a sustainable environmental design approach, stressing a harmonious interrelationship of humans, plants, animals and the earth.

Permaculture promotes an understanding of the earth as a living, breathing entity, that needs care and not exploitation and abusive use of its intrinsic abundant resources. Therefore, it is based on the concept that actions within and upon a system should bring benefit to the system as a whole.

As a flexible set of design principles centered around whole systems thinking permaculture is first and foremost focusing on local traditions and conditions of agriculture and gardening. The key to sustainably efficient design and land use is observation and replication of natural ecosystems. Simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and resilient features observed in natural ecosystems helps to create more sustainable productive patterns. Concerning agricultural production this embraces among other things diversity of crops, using and accelerating natural plant succession, careful zoning of the terrain, efficient energy planning, local production for local consumption.

In the further consequence permaculture aims at a deeper transformation process that goes far beyond productive land use. Its way of thinking and acting about agricultural and gardening systems can also be applied to human communities and social groups and have impacts an urban planning and community planning.

Permaculture works with a set of ethical principles that claim for responsibility in relation to each other and the earth.

The ethics of permaculture encompasses three dimensions:

1. Care for the earth includes the environmental dimension with all living and non-living things—plants, animals, land, water and air. It also focusses on reservation and restoration of destroyed natural ecosystems.
2. Care for people touches upon societal issues. It promotes self-reliance and community responsibility and claims for access to resources necessary for existence: housing, health, rights, community, education etc.
3. Fair share concerns the economic dimension (livelihood, income, meaningful work, production, business) and focusses on setting limits to consumption and to redistribute surplus of time, money, energy, information etc.

These ethical principles are meant to support the restructuring and regulation of human relation to and evaluation of the environment. They do not claim to be innovative at all. In fact, they are distilled from research on community ethics and traditional cultures living in a relative balance with their environment. It is to say that similar guidelines and behaviors are found in many traditional societies.

With its ethical guidelines, permaculture is not just altering the methods of farming at first hand, it is also changing the cultural rules regarding farming. That means permaculture actions aim at constructing a greater network that includes decisions and behaviors of farmers as well as consumers and other involved stakeholders.

Furthermore, representatives and followers of permaculture places value on education. Building skills and sharing knowledge is a key concern. Knowledge creation and access to it takes place on all levels and media: Books, workshops, websites and more. Simple behavioral rules such as 'rethink, reduce, reuse, repair' are passed on as cool slogans.

From the very start permaculture approached a sustainable way not only to grow food and protect nature but also to suggest how social systems could be organized to be more equal, less wasteful, and less damaging to the natural ecosystems. This is why permaculture has not only established itself as a practical method on many farms but also shaped the building of communities on an ideological basis, as the 'Findhorn Community' or the farming collective 'Hof Narr' in Switzerland represent.

Combined efforts to create an environmentally and socially sustainable future

Sustainability is on everyone's lips. What does it exactly encompass? Sustainable development in the current understanding was first coined by Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1985 (see The Brundtland Report). It emphasizes the concept of not compromising the development of future generations.

When the 1992 Rio Earth Summit popularized sustainable development, a definition with three pillars, including economic, social and environmental sustainability was supported. This framework is based on the idea that sustainable development can only be achieved through the simultaneous and equal implementation of environmental, economic, and social goals, because of their interdependency. Astonishingly other dimensions like culture or art that form equally enduring systems that define humanity, were not mentioned. They were not considered to have a major impact on sustainable development. In the meantime, this triple bottom line turned out to be too tight and to exclude other relevant development potentials.

The call for change has long since reached the sphere of culture and art, where the guiding narratives on nature and future are constructed and communicated. Artistic and cultural values as well as social concerns are featuring on equal footing alongside with affairs of science, technology, and economy.

Combined efforts of community arts with agricultural and horticultural production are successful in promoting a sustainable lifestyle, as the case studies mentioned above show. What started with illegal guerilla gardening to reclaim the urban public space and with apologetic revitalization of rural areas through alternative agriculture and has become a worldwide extensive network that has infiltrated real life contexts manifold. A network of small sized sustainable environments and communities has started to convert the urban fabric as well as monotone agricultural landscapes. How to name and describe this commingling of these once contradictory strategies? Perma-Arts as a linguistic blend of two already existing terms might help to occupy the linguistic terrain for now and create space for not yet determined action. The term is not a concept, but it can function as a tool to promote multilayered efforts to raise awareness for a sustainable lifestyle.