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**Title: Perma-Arts – Why link Arts and Agriculture on the Path to a Sustainable Future?**

**What this paper is about**

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

What follows does not primarily comply with 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. Moreover, the paper aims to stimulate dialogue between disciplines, theories, and practices that can all contribute to shifting how we approach the world, today’s and tomorrow’s, and its challenges.

My attempt to bring together contemporary ecological, participatory, and activist art forms with alternative agriculture and sustainable land use, in order to raise awareness of the pressing need to develop a sustainable future, is based on my multi-perspectivist professional background as an art and landscape historian, researcher, lecturer, curator, author, ethno-botanist, and urban gardener. It is perhaps worth mentioning 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 considered two contradictory strategies. Being a farmer or an artist was mutually exclusive in the Western context. Today, this is no longer true. A growing number of case studies shows that the arts and alternative lifestyles are generating considerable synergies.

These transdisciplinary initiatives, with their explicit guzzling over the disciplinary fence, hands-on experiences, learning by doing, and practice-led research, bear strong witness to 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, which includes global warming, food shortages, pests, land conflicts, the extinction of species, and much more. This crisis not only raises fundamental questions about how the current state of the environment is assessed and evaluated. It is also related to action plans for better survival. Behind such considerations — and fears — stands a particular prediction: the endangered future of humankind – and thus the approaching end of the Anthropocene!

The relationship between humans and nature has always been reflected in the arts and cultures. A profound shift in reflections on the consumption of nature in Western cultures first became evident in the second half of the 20th century. Numerous environmental disasters, including oil and chemical spills, nuclear accidents, poisoned soils and water have shaken us and have created new narratives about the environment and nature. The unfolding narratives, about ozone holes, deforestation, polluted seas, the extinction of living species, and mountains of toxic waste, depicted the imminent collapse of the earth. A number of new scientific insights, including ‘Silent Spring’ (Rachel Carsons, 1962), the ’Limit to Growth’ (Club of Rome, 1972), or the Gaia Hypothesis (James Lovelock, Lynn Margulies) inscribed themselves in collective memory. Associated with these narratives was the rapidly growing need for plans, strategies, and skills to survive these impending disaster scenarios. But the narrative of looming extinction has been stoked further in the 21st century, by more disasters and by increasing scientific evidence for humanity’s formative power in shaping the earth. This explains why the Anthropocene has been approved as the new socially constructed and scientifically substantiated narrative.

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

On the one hand stands the rejection of the claim that an environmental crisis exists at all, in particular of the fact that human activity is its primary driver. The adherents of this line of thinking insist on human superiority in the system of nature. On the other hand, there is growing acceptance of the inescapable impending collapse. Yet considering a collapse likely requires us to contemplate coping strategies. The proposed responses range from mainly technical solutions to preventing or escaping the collapse to considering and preparing for a completely different life beyond the Anthropocene.

Profound reflections in various fields have engendered new ideas and efforts in the search for alternative ways of life and for leaving the comfort zone of consolidated claims and privileges. Such approaches have long been tested and debated. Various communities (e.g., the hippies in the 1960s and the punk movement in the 1980s) and extraordinary individuals (e.g., WALULISO in Vienna) have lived a different lifestyle and, in doing so, deeply impressed the cultural perception of nature. Ever since, deep ecology, nature gardening, eco-system restoration, degrowth, barefoot economy, and ecotopia are have become unmissable key concepts. Rethinking and reshaping the human relation to the environment on a basic level was and still is plainly evident in particular in the arts and in scientific disciplines studying land use and agriculture. The next two sections deal briefly with the specific findings of these two fields and with their effects on disciplinary nature cultures and lifestyles.

**The role of the arts in shaping the human relation to nature**

In the wake of various environmental crises, the arts have played a formative role in shaping our thinking about nature and the future. By either depicting or narrating environmental realities, the arts assume a primarily communicative role, in the sense that they long represented a discourse shaped by religions, economics, politics, or other factors. This changed in the course of the global environmental crisis in the 1970s. Under different designations, for instance, land art, eco-art, environmental art, sustainable art, and nature art, environmental concerns have gained increasing significance in artistic production beyond the sheer communication and representation of positions shaped outside the arts. Thus, for instance, land art, with its monumental and ephemeral interventions in remote natural landscapes, boosted the re-evaluation of the environment for art for the first time in art history. Nevertheless, it remained an art form in an exclusive art world. Over time, though, promoting the use of natural materials, working with natural processes, and following the principles of sustainability artistic production started to expand its means and methods towards nature and towards building its own environmental discourse.

As the following examples show, the works of many renowned artists touch on fundamental questions of ecology, environmental politics, and nature. Agnes Denes, for instance, deals with land reclamation and nature restoration through art-led agriculture and forestry. When she installed a temporary wheat field in Manhattan in 1982, and another in Milan (Italy) in 2015, she enabled both a functional and an aesthetic approach to these places.Mel Chin’s “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 for treating poisoned soil, but it is also recognized as a performative sculptural art work.

The artist couple Helen and Newton Meyer Harrison occupies an outstanding position in efforts to bring 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. In particular their “survival pieces,” in which the artists installed an orchard and a pig on a meadow in a museum for public appreciation, are intended to create empathy for the environment.

The activist and participatory turns in the arts in the 1990s aimed not only to conceptualize new narratives but also to support direct participation in ongoing change processes. Thus, artists working in real-life situations and taking active roles in civic empowerment and transformation processes have been shifting artistic practice for quite some time (see Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action,* 2016 and *Artists Working Reality*, 2016). The term “Art in Action” describes a new form of artistic activity, one in which the artists no longer claim a unique status in an exclusive art world but instead seek direct involvement with their social and natural environment.

A powerful narrative about raising awareness of a sustainable lifestyle has grown from the merging of art, agriculture, and gardening. In the 1970s, guerilla gardeners entered the urban terrain for the first time with what were largely illegal horticultural activities at that time. Meanwhile, a new generation of urban farmers and gardeners around the world has begun transforming metropolitan areas both structurally and visibly: They are turning rooftops, abandoned lots, and other neglected sites into edible landscapes, and are improving human and ecological health as well as creating beautiful places. Slogans such as “eat the city” or “green the grey” are circulating in many places. Moreover, concepts of sustainable lifestyles, self-sufficiency, and local impact are spearheading efforts to raise awareness of current environmental issues. In turning the condensed urban fabric into a productive green space, Hong Kong’s urban farmers are playing a leading role.

Apart from the urban focus, rural traditional agriculture is under increasing pressure from the global economy. Exemplary efforts by the arts are seeking to revitalize local rural farming. One case in point is “Paririmbon Investasi,” an art-led alternative agricultural project dedicated to counteracting the global industrial investment eradicating rural environments and their manifold local traditions. Set in Jatisura (West Java), the Paririmbon Investasi initiative is linked to the various activities of the Jatiwangi art Factory, which is endeavoring to revitalize the local cultural landscape through art-led initiatives (https://www.facebook.com/jatiwangiartfactory/). It is furthermore linked to local farming practices and related rituals that accompany those agricultural activities. The project aims to produce a companion to the official investment guidelines published by governmental institutions and to offer an investment package that takes account of local structures. While the project favors local investment, and sharing profits among locals, adding some sort of “supernatural burden” for foreign investors, extending the investment process to diverse ethical practices linked to cultural aspects from around the investment area, enriches the investment perspective with sustainable knowledge. It is not only about investing money it is also about investing time to understand what already exists.

Linking the art world to sustainable farming seems not only to change employment opportunities in agriculture but also to raise awareness of sustainable production. One example is the pioneering project “Hof Blum,” based on a small-holder farm in Samstagern (Switzerland). Since 2009, artists have been invited at regular intervals to display their works in a temporary exhibition on the farm. These exhibitions involve visitors directly with peasant concerns. Instead of perpetuating the exclusion of farming communities from the art world, this experiment attempts to merge otherwise separate spheres.

In view of the complex entanglement of contemporary art practices with different realities, I suggest distinguishing three functions of art in relation to sustainable development:

1. Art as a means of research into and communication about environmental issues.
2. Art as a means of raising awareness of sustainable development and of 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 and engaging with vulnerability and resilience.

**Alternative land uses: permaculture**

Industrial agriculture has played a leading role among the manifold “fall guys” routinely invoked for driving the environmental collapse. Modern agricultural and land use systems prove to be highly harmful for the natural environment and have prompted a general rethinking of agricultural land use and food production.

In the search for alternative means of agricultural production, permaculture has attracted worldwide attention. Permaculture is a portmanteau for permanent agriculture. The term was first introduced in the 1970s by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren as a sustainable approach to environmental design that stressed the harmonious interrelationship between humans, plants, animals, and the earth.

Permaculture promotes an understanding of the earth as a living, breathing entity, which needs care rather than the exploitation and abusive use of its intrinsic abundant resources. Therefore, it is based on the concept that actions within and upon a system should benefit the system as a whole.

Permaculture, as a flexible set of design principles centered on holistic, systemic thinking, first and foremost focuses on local traditions and on the actual conditions of agriculture and gardening. Key to sustainably efficient design and land use are the 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 involves farming diverse crops, using and accelerating natural plant succession, careful zoning, efficient energy planning, and local production for local consumption.

As a further consequence, permaculture is aimed at a deeper transformation process, one which extends far beyond productive land use. Its way of thinking about and acting on agricultural and gardening systems can also be applied to human communities and social groups. It also impacts urban planning and community planning.

Permaculture rests on and applies a set of stringent ethical principles. These are based on people taking responsibility for each other and for the earth. The ethics of permaculture encompasses three dimensions:

1. Caring for the earth includes the environmental dimension and thus embraces all living and non-living creatures (i.e., plants, animals, land, water, and air). It also focuses on the reservation and restoration of destroyed natural ecosystems.
2. Caring for people touches on societal issues. It promotes self-reliance and community responsibility and claims access to the resources needed to ensure human existence: housing, health, civil rights, community, education, etc.
3. Fair share concerns the economic dimension (livelihood, income, meaningful work, production, business) and focuses on limiting consumption and on redistributing surplus time, money, energy, information, etc.

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

Through its ethical guidelines, permaculture is not simply altering the methods of farming but is also changing cultural rules about farming. Thus, permaculture actions aim to establish a larger, more broad-based network that includes the decisions and behaviors of farmers, consumers, and other involved stakeholders.

Furthermore, the representatives and followers of permaculture attach great importance to education. Skills building and knowledge sharing are key concerns. Knowledge creation and access takes place on all levels and across diverse media: books, workshops, websites, and so forth. Simple behavioral rules such as “rethink, reduce, reuse, repair” are passed on as cool slogans.

From the outset, permaculture formulated a sustainable approach not only to growing food and to protecting nature. It also suggested how social systems could be organized to be more equal, less wasteful, and less damaging to natural ecosystems. This explains why permaculture has not only established itself as a practical method on many farms but has also shaped community building on an ideological basis (e.g. the “Findhorn Community” or the “Hof Narr” farming collective in Switzerland).

**Combined efforts to create an environmentally and socially sustainable future**

Sustainability is on everyone’s lips. What, however, does the term exactly encompass? Sustainable development in its current meaning was first coined by Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1985 (see The Brundtland Report). She emphasized the need to not compromise the development of futuregenerations.

When the 1992 Rio Earth Summit popularized sustainable development, a definition with three pillars — economic, social, and environmental sustainability — gained increasing support. This framework was based on the idea that sustainable development can only be achieved through the simultaneous and equal implementation of environmental, economic, and social goals, due to 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. However, this triple bottom line has since turned out to be too restrictive 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 about nature and future are constructed and communicated. Artistic and cultural values as well as social concerns appear on an equal footing alongside science, technology, and economics.

The combined efforts of community arts with agricultural and horticultural production successfully promote a sustainable lifestyle, as the case studies mentioned above show. What started with illegal guerilla gardeners reclaiming the urban public space and continued with the apologetic revitalization of rural areas through alternative agriculture has become an extensive, worldwide extensive network that has percolated into and spread across real-life contexts in manifold ways. A network of small-sized sustainable environments and communities has started to convert the urban fabric as well as monotonous agricultural landscapes. How might we name and describe this commingling of these once-contradictory strategies? Perma-Arts, a term that blends two already existing terms, might help to occupy the linguistic terrain for now and to create space for as yet undetermined action. The term is not a concept, but it can serve as a tool for promoting multilayered efforts to raise awareness of a sustainable lifestyle.