

Local Food, Urban Gardening, and Art

Nina Dubois

This summer, for the first time, I will be teaching an intensive four-week course called Local Food, Urban Agriculture and Art at the University of New Mexico (UNM). As both a graduate student in the Art and Ecology MFA program and an instructor for the undergraduate Introduction to Art and Ecology course I have been working with curricula that incorporates the framework of ecological thinking within the context of contemporary art practices. In this program, we engage ecology both as a metaphorical model that emphasizes interrelationships and fosters collaboration, and as an entry point for investigating, questioning, and expanding upon real-world connections between cultural and natural systems.

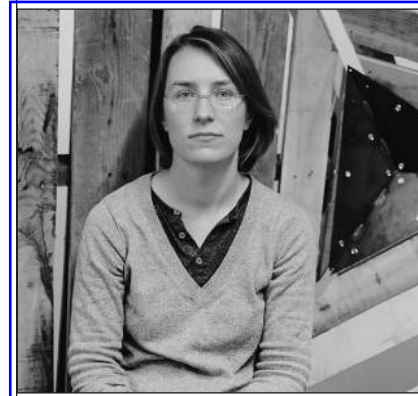
Throughout my studies and my teaching appointments, I have observed that sustainable food production, and the issues surrounding it, come up consistently as areas of interest and concern for students. In fact, this topic is being integrated into many departments at the university. In recent years, UNM has seen the emergence of new programs and courses that focus on local food: the Sustainability Studies program offers a variety of courses that focus on how to build and maintain a thriving food shed in the state of New Mexico; the Lobo Gardens course, an initiative of the Research Service Learning Program, has been providing students with direct, hands-on experience in establishing and maintaining edible gardens on campus; and the Architecture Department now offers studio courses looking at designing and prototyping infrastructure to support small-scale urban food production.

My aim with the Local Food, Urban Agriculture and Art course is to provide a context in which students can build on the collective knowledge and experience being developed within the university and local communities and to combine the pragmatic, ecological, and social dimensions of

creating urban food gardens with artistic invention and critical, expansive thinking. The specific questions that I hope to engage with the course are: How can we claim small-scale food production as an art initiative while embracing the unique challenges and opportunities that come with farming in an urban desert environment like Albuquerque? What strategies can we come up with for developing prototypes for urban farm systems that are ecologically mindful, aesthetically considered, and culturally significant? How can cross-disciplinary collaboration lead to more integrated and engaging designs and environments?

The course is being offered to intermediate and advanced students in studio art and other disciplines such as landscape architecture, environmental planning and design, and sustainability studies at both the undergraduate and graduate level. I am expecting that the course will attract both art students who are interested in applying their creative skills to addressing real-world issues as well as students in applied fields who wish to complement their pragmatic research and skills with expressive and imaginative approaches. Interdisciplinary exchange—sharing resources and methods for building collective knowledge—is at the core of this course. This interdisciplinary and interdepartmental collaboration will enable us to explore the intersections of artistic production and local food initiatives, acknowledging and embracing the need for exchange and cross-pollination across fields. Where the creative arts and sustainability curricula meet, we are presented with both the challenge and the opportunity to establish a different kind of context or frame of reference around our activities—to bridge the gap between the art world and the real world, between learning and doing.

One of our greatest allies for helping to bridge the existing gap between learning and doing is the Research Service Learning Program (RSLP). The RSLP offers research/learning projects that



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Cultured digest(e) made of steel, acrylic sheet, soil, clay, horse manure, drip irrigation line and connectors, grass seed, plants

Culture digest(e) is a site-specific art laboratory that explores the waste stream of the University of New Mexico campus and its potential to be creatively diverted and reimagined. Designed as an on-site passive solar greenhouse, the project functions as a repository where cultural artifacts such as office memos, newspapers, food waste, and landscape debris are collected and photographed. These documents are then transformed into digital still-life images that investigate the cultural meaning of waste and decay. The accumulated material is then composted within the greenhouse and made into a readily available form of soil nutrient, or organic compost. This, in turn, is used by the laboratory for planting and building as well as landscaping and community projects. As these processes take place, the project's regenerative designer will be present; managing the on-site laboratory as well as traveling throughout the university campus to facilitate the experience of cultural composting.

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emphasize community development, environmental sustainability, and economics. As part of their work to help UNM fulfill its civic responsibility, the RSLP offers programs that provide students with the opportunity to learn about issues surrounding sustainability by developing projects that help the university enact its sustainability plan. One of their initiatives, the Lobo Gardens course, is dedicated to developing and maintaining community food gardens on campus. The initiators of the Lobo Gardens curriculum have generously offered to share their resources with my course, allowing us to use existing campus garden sites for hands-on projects, and inviting us to contribute proposals and designs for new potential garden sites. Food politics as well as land use, community education, and waste processing are central issues that connect the Lobo Gardens

course with the Local Food, Urban Agriculture and Art course and provide points of intersection and collaboration between the two groups.

The structure that I envision for the Local Food, Urban Agriculture and Art course involves students developing and presenting individual and collective research and design approaches which will culminate in a design and implementation strategy for several new campus garden sites as well as proposals for urban gardening interventions for different sites throughout the city. Having access to land on campus will give us a chance to practice designing and building based on an understanding of site-specific conditions and micro-ecologies. The process of developing campus gardens necessarily involves procuring approval from many non-academic entities throughout campus, including the Physical Plant Department, the Campus Development Advisory Committee, and others. Navigating these logistical challenges will provide students with valuable practice in interacting with non-art professionals and with presenting their ideas before committees comprised of faculty and professionals in other fields.

In conjunction with these activities, I am also interested in having the students design modular and adaptive solutions that can be deployed and scaled up or down to adapt to various sites and conditions throughout the city—from raised beds and rainwater catchment systems to tool sheds,

greenhouses and other garden infrastructure. I hope that the exercise will challenge students to think not only of the various elements that make up a garden, but how they might work together as a synergistic whole.

This being a studio art course, I will expect students to develop physical manifestations of their ideas in the form of renderings, models, and/or full-scale prototypes. I hope to keep the work grounded in the realm of artistic inquiry by having students consider the experiential, aesthetic, poetic, and critical dynamics of their interventions as well as the practical considerations. I am also interested in exploring the potential for incorporating performance, events-based interventions, and publication, as ways of presenting and disseminating our ideas to the general public.

In order to develop a conceptual framework for our activities, we will examine the realities of our food system in an age of unprecedented urbanization. Through readings and class discussions, we will examine the ways in which urban food production is culturally relevant and how it relates to concerns about sustainability and the problems inherent to/embedded within the global industrialized food system. We will look at how innovations in sustainable agriculture, particularly urban farming, are becoming even more important, as we must find a way to feed a global population that is expected to reach nine billion by 2050.

We will then consider our unique role and leverage within this context, as artists and cultural agents. By studying and analyzing examples of urban farming as art, we will begin to identify and expand upon a repertoire of strategies for integrating art with issues of food politics, land use, and community education—from the pioneering ecological art of Helen and Newton Harrison (*Survival Farm*), Hans Haacke (*Directed Growth*), and Agnes Denes (*Wheatfield*), to the work of a young generation of artists working at the intersection of art, performance, DIY design, and urban farming. These include Fritz Haeg (*Edible Estates*), Amy Franceschini and Future Farmers (*Victory Gardens, Soil Kitchen*), Nils Norman (*Edible Park*), and many others. This study will also serve as a vantage point from which to discuss emerging practices in

the arts that call for working beyond the boundaries that typically separate contemporary art from the general public, and art from everyday life. Artists dealing with local and urban food open up environmental engagement and activism to metaphorical thinking and multiple layers of meaning. The groundswell of pedagogical initiatives surrounding sustainable local food production points to some exciting opportunities for developing arts curricula that moves beyond traditional media. As a topic of investigation, it provides a context for incorporating methods and tools from other disciplines as well as a tangible and accessible means of studying ecological systems while emphasizing new forms of public engagement and aesthetic experience. It also coincides nicely with my own path which, through a circuitous route, has led me to punctuate my fine-arts education with seasonal stints as an organic farm worker. Through my participation in the Art and Ecology MFA program, I have been working to combine the systemic, ecological understanding I have gained from my experiences in sustainable farming, with art's potential to embody and engage critical issues. As a burgeoning educator, I am thrilled at the opportunity to share these combined passions, which have been, and continue to be, at the heart of my personal trajectory and practice.

Nina Dubois integrates aspects of art, architecture, design, and ecological practices to generate spaces that allow for new understanding and experience of the environments we inhabit. Through this hybrid form of engagement, Nina Dubois explores the pragmatic, phenomenological, and symbolic aspects of the relationship between built space and nature. Paralleling her involvement in the visual arts, Nina Dubois has consistently investigated methods of sustainable living. She has worked on organic farms, has studied permaculture and ecological design, and she currently maintains a small, experimental urban farmstead in Albuquerque, NM. As an MFA candidate in the University of New Mexico's Art & Ecology program, Nina Dubois is weaving together her interests into a comprehensive, integrated praxis that combines research, teaching, and artistic production.

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