

Chapter 56

The Collective Aestheticization of Farming as Participatory Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a case study that traces the life of a young artist farmer who developed a community-based educational farm. The case study illuminates networked connections between small-scale farming, a revitalized interest in handmade production, and a burgeoning desire for a living ethics rooted in direct engagements. This chapter reveals the breadth of the handmade revolution, tracing a singular example to investigate the desire to become a small-scale farmer; the network of apprenticing makers, farmers, and artists; the necessary participatory aestheticization of the farm as a marketing strategy and mode of cultural consumption; and the ethical complexity of sustaining the life of a young farmer in the current organic and locally-grown marketplace.

I drove up the path to Amanda's new house. Typically, there were volunteers, friends, or the other farm staff there. Today, she was home alone. I went into the kitchen, and she was warming butternut squash soup and cornbread that she made the day before. We took our bowls outside and sat on a park bench in the lawn. We talked about what was happening in our lives, and she explained how different she felt now that she owned her own home.

She told me she needed to move some greenhouses that had been donated from a church nearby, so I offered to help. We drove to a field, where five large greenhouse frames stood. They were composed of rows of steel beam arches fixed into pegs in the ground. I had never been in a greenhouse, much less a constructed one. Amanda needed help dismantling two of them, and her farm apprentice would be out soon. My job was to remove a series of rusted bolts from a bar that ran down the center and connected all of the arched poles. It was relatively dangerous. I had to stand atop a ten-foot ladder and repeatedly use my left hand to hold a nut in place, while unscrewing a rusted bolt from the bar with my right hand.

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Up to that point, I had developed a relationship with Amanda through her role as a research participant in the work that led to this paper. Over the year that we had been working together, I had joined her CSA and my son had attended her Young Farmers classes. Our friendship always felt mediated by her as research participant or me as researcher, customer or client. The research seemed to structure the relationship, but the work on the greenhouses—outside in a field, as a friend—that was different. It was how I had wanted to be involved. I think I wanted her to see that I was not some bullshit academic, buried in books and theory.

Construction and manual labor were common weekend activities for my family when I was growing up. We often came together to help whomever was moving or improving their house. Work was compensated with chicken and beer for the adults, and the kids would help if they were old enough. I had not lived near my family for over a decade and had forgotten about those experiences until I started this research on DIY practices and artists' homes. This day with Amanda reminded me how much I learned through those experiences with my family.

I got all the bolts out, and the next step was dismantling the whole thing. I was there for four hours. It was a big task. I felt strong and proud. I had almost passed on the chance to help her that day because I felt overwhelmed with the stress of work, school, and family. All of that swirling in my mind from the morning had stopped. This felt like doing something that mattered.

INTRODUCTION

Amanda developed a working and educational farm in 2010 called, Cardo's Farm Project (CFP). My work with her was one of a group of case studies that focused on the homes of artists and makers to consider how their current art practice was shaped, in part, by histories of formal and/or informal arts education. Amanda was a young artist, who had recently graduated with a degree in painting and drawing. The site of CFP was a working farm, residence, and educational center. Through the farm, she offered educational programming, which "uses sustainable agriculture to engage the community, empowering youth adults to learn the source of our food, connect with the land, and to take responsibility for positive change" (Cardo's Farm Project, 2014). Amanda was interested in the educational and community-building potential of environmentally conscious agricultural work. As the quote suggests, she is focused on individuals' potential to realize their role in affecting "positive change."

CFP is one example of an increasing interest in localized agricultural work, urban farming, and hands-on production in response to factory farming, increasing globalization of food systems, and genetic modification. Post-Fordism¹ and our globalized economy have exacerbated physical and cognitive disconnects from agricultural and textile production that was born from industrialization (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Jeppesen, 2011; Thrift, 2012) – facilitating the often-overlooked exploitation of many life forms. This chapter explores one example of a renewed and expanding interest from artists in local farming and agriculture as an ecological expression of their art practices. By tracing Amanda's early influences, her choices during art school, internship at a social justice farm, work with contemporary artists in New York, and finally developing her own educational farm, this paper illuminates farming as one offshoot of participatory aesthetics (Bishop, 2012b) in response to neoliberal globalized capitalism.

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