

Teaching as a Way to Care for the Earth

Katie Bachler,
Scott Berzofsky
& Hugh Pocock

Katie Bachler, Scott Berzofsky, and Hugh Pocock are all artists and teachers living in Baltimore. Since 2006, Hugh has been teaching classes on climate change and sustainability at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). These have focused on urban farming, local food systems, water, waste, and energy. Katie and Scott are teaching a studio-based Social Practice class on principles of care and cooperation. This conversation took place at Hugh's home in Baltimore on Tuesday 23 September 2014.

Scott Berzofsky

What were some of the things that initially motivated you to bring these issues of climate change and sustainability into an art school context?

Hugh Pocock

Well, my background was teaching in the sculpture area and I was hired to teach New Genres, Performance and Video, focusing on new forms of art making in a three-dimensional, time-based manner. My own studio practice started to drift more and more to become concerned with and focused on ecological impact, and then climate change started to look me square in

the eyes, and as I became more aware of it, I began wondering where my point of engagement could best be. With climate change the frustration is around what can we possibly do, and how can it have an effect? So I started to see that where I had contact with the most people was in my city and my occupation. I had this opportunity to transform my job as an educator into something of a tool.

I also started to realise that the form of art making I was teaching was from another time, and while I really adored the language of art that I was inspired by, I questioned whether it was still transferable to a younger generation. I started to realise all of the slides I was showing, that were the inspirational slides in the canon of mid-1960s through 70s conceptual work which was the basis of so much, were all done on NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants, through public funding, and that these artists were pre-market-driven art world, so the world had really changed since then. It made me want to be preparing students for what was to come rather than for a framework that seemed to have been eradicated.

Katie Bachler

Who were some of those inspirations, who were some of those artists you were talking about?

HP

They would have been people like Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy and then people like Joseph Beuys, David Ireland, people who came out of minimalism and Art Povera, and talking about content-driven work, not so much that was aesthetically-driven, but work that was primarily made from the position of a political post-Marxist critique of the art world, so it was intentionally attempting to be free of market forces.

KB

And it wasn't being funded by the market. It was being funded by grants.

SB

I think that one thing that motivates us in the social practice class that we teach at MICA is preparing younger artists to enter this economically precarious life, where there isn't really state support for the arts, and the market is extremely competitive. So what we're trying to cultivate are social skills of care, cooperation and mutual aid that can actually help us develop sustainable life practices as artists.

KB

Right, we are creating a safe space with our class to be able to talk about some of the issues that come up when thinking about social practice: working in a city that has a history of segregation and disinvestment and pollution. Creating a pocket of care within MICA. How does your Urban Farming class connect to the context of Baltimore city?

HP

Climate change is so hard to touch, and I noticed also that the despair level was really high if you started revealing the base line science to young students in their early 20s and exposing them to this proposed future that's very, very dire. It seems that the methods of doing something about it are out of our personal control and often removed from our space and location. So the inspiration I found was from urban farming, this idea of seeking anchors in the city, and this idea of the art then being really anchored and rooted where they lived. Being a migrant my whole life and a migrant to Baltimore, there was a certain decision that I wanted to become part of Baltimore. Also, Baltimore being a city where it's really hard to

actually get access and get in touch and get out of the car and walk around and have good reasons to do it. With urban farming and food production one can talk about all the different levels at once. You can talk about place, you can talk about economic disparity, you can talk about race, you can talk about food, you can talk about the built environment, and you can talk about homes – why do people live where they live? And then in an art language you can talk about context and responding to context with the work, so there's all these different dialogues.

In some ways for me urban farming is a really perfect vehicle to talk about contemporary art practice because it holds all these different issues inside of it. And the students get to do this great thing which is to hang out and grow food, and then they learn skills. It used to be that we'd teach steel sculpture and then say the derivative of this is that you get to learn how to weld, so maybe you can get a job as a welder. So I think that this is a truly post-industrial parallel: we're talking about a type of art practice and art language, but then students are also learning a way of producing food for themselves. So it's a really good vehicle for that, and then the energy and climate component really fit in really nicely with it.

SB

And then this past year you taught a class on water? What are some of the ways you've got students to care for and think critically about water?

HP

That one also comes more directly out of my own studio concerns; a lot of my own work has revolved around water. Water is this simultaneously sublime and functional material, which I've always felt was the perfect art material. So in an art school, how do we

talk about art and aesthetics, and also ecological functionality and urgency? How do we get those things mixed together, and water is a pretty good subject for this. It's presence in art is really, really old and from the beginning people have been making images of water and using water as different types of psychological, spiritual and political metaphor. And then there's all this information about the ecological crisis, and water is a really dominant language there. We can teach all of this at once, and you get to go on all these cool field trips.

KB

So these field trips in the world, again these multiple contexts for art, where do you go and why do you think it's important to go to these sites to learn about water and farms and such?

HP

Why is it important? One reason is I'm a little lazy and I think a real place does the teaching way better than I could. I think to go to a place and let it exist is way better than me trying to explain it. For me to try to explain what a coal fired electric plant is... best to go there.

SB

It's experiential.

HP

It's experiential. I dig it. I've always liked to go places with students, and I feel like sometimes that makes a lot of the impact. And then it is also, it's like, okay, this is real stuff. This is for real. What we're talking about here is: how do artists feel like what they're doing matters, and is connected to a real thing? So, going to a place and going to places with groups – and also, when it's about food and water – we went and harvested

pears. The act of taking a pear off the tree is a real thing. And then tomorrow we're going to press them and give the juice away. So the students, they get to see themselves as conduits, spreading some type of capital.

KB

And they're producing. Yesterday we started our class off by going to talk to plants at Hidden Harvest urban farm so they got a sense of wow, this is how my body feels in a garden. This is what I smell, and this is what I hear, and this is what health looks like. They picked vegetables, which we ended up using in our cooking, so there is this idea of them being producers, too. Your students are producing cider, and producing knowledge in that way versus consuming a Power-Point presentation about gardens and art. And I think that's a really important shift.

HP

Yeah, it's like we still need intellectual mediation, but it's still a problem. Especially for artists, there's this idea of the art practice being this tool of connectivity, either to community, to a social group – or maybe building a social group amongst themselves, or doing something that enables them to feel more connected to something. Something that I've found is true with making art is that it's a way to be more present, or more knowledgeable – it's a medium of that type of connectivity. And the field trip lets it happen. Some of it comes out of the idea of site-specificity. Probably there was some kind of plein air painting before site-specificity, this idea of being in a place and being a creative person in it – we're working through these different ways of doing that, and I think now, this idea of being personally engaged and being in an activist position is different than being an observer.

SB

It's modeling a kind of research-based practice. Can you give us a few more examples of places you've visited on field trips?

HP

Going to prison, to places that are examples of unsustainable worlds. A coal plant, to see them burning all the coal; pretty intense places. Domino Sugar, to see the big sugar factory.

The places we go to with the water class: we start at a spring, and we go to the city filtration plant. And then we end the class with wastewater treatment, at the sewage plant. So we follow water from its natural sources, to its mechanical processing and then through the city through all these different means that we use it for, including shitting and pissing in it, and then to where it gets processed. The water is used as a conveyance. And then there's another digester at the other end that separates all that out, and then returns some of the water to the bay, and then the solids are used for fertiliser, or burned. Yeah, crazy. So this idea of the art field trip as engagement with places as a type of metaphor: we can engage with things as both information and metaphorically. And somehow, students then transfer that to their own work in some form.

KB

Is there a way to structure time differently doing these site-specific socially engaged projects? It seems like year or even two year long class sessions would deepen this practice of sustainability...

SB

Didn't you do a trash project, where the class made a documentary and that was longer than...

HP

That was a year, and that was the Baltimore Food Ecology documentary.¹ We made a documentary on the ecology of food in Baltimore – that was awesome, that was a year and we got in there!

SB

So you managed to work with the same group of students...

HP

They signed on for a year.

SB

I remember when Michael Rakowitz taught a class called Super Pride Studio at MICA, he also structured it as a year-long course.

HP

It's harder to do, students' time is valuable. Time is valuable real estate. They need to feel it's interesting enough – and it's unknown, it's a gamble.

SB

So in this case, all the field trips and interviews the students were conducting were part of the process of producing a documentary film, that was the outcome.

HP

We went to a ton of places to learn how food flows through the city. And all the places from distribution to corner stores to school cafeterias, and talked to all the people engaged with that in one way or another. We got a tour from the manager of a supermarket, about how the food comes in the back and how they

¹ *BFED: Baltimore Food Ecology Documentary* (2010), produced by the Centre for a Liveable Future and MICA students, can be viewed on YouTube.

stock the shelves and what they are concerned with and what the shelves look like – and suddenly it's like entering the wrong way from the museum or the restaurant, coming in through the kitchen and everything looks different, that was great.

SB

Somehow the class creates a framework that allows you to do all these things and visit all these places and make connections between them.

KB

How can we as teachers cultivate artist-citizens who care about the future of the planet, artists who are concerned with the greater 'we'?

HP

I think that is the crux of some of what is going on, the idea of students wanting to turn their individual practice into a 'we' practice. These are the students that are attracted, they enter into these classes with some pre-existing tendency. So then how do we work with that tendency and expand it and challenge it and cultivate it and in some way enable it, and move into a new territory as well?

KB

And art school is this utopian place for dreaming, for experimenting. Maybe this can be a place to test ideas of hope and nurture a sense of urgency.

HP

I feel like it's all very experimental and it's somewhat unproven because it isn't like teaching a pre-existing vocation that is from a hegemonic system. It's teaching an experimental practice that is in some ways preparing them to have difficulty. It's similar to teaching 20th-century art, it's the same way of teaching

art, but the students come in with that sense of risk-taking already. I think then also about the classroom being this kind of conduit of larger information that has been masked by society and the media, so it's a place where you realise – oh, climate change is a lot worse than you thought it was. It also might not be as bad as some of the apocalyptic predictions. And in some ways that's worse, because the world isn't going to end in ten years, and it might not end at all, but what's worse is if we're still alive and actually going to have to deal with it, and that's harder information than fantastical enormous tidal waves or post-utopian drama struggles. That's a media-generated reality. Then there's the idea, oh, you're actually going to be living in this world. So what kind of decisions do you want to make as a creative person, about living in that world and how to make it a better place, as an artist and a person? Art school isn't necessarily about teaching people to be artists, it's about teaching them this other thing as well.

KB

I think this is an important point to think about: how do we make safe spaces to develop a sense of agency as people, and a sense of empathy and vulnerability – to be compassionate individuals in the world. It is about making safe spaces to be open, safe spaces to talk about this, because you are right, I can't process the apocalypse, no one can. It's like these little moments that incrementally add up.

HP

What's great about being in art school is this realisation that it is important. I remember when I was in undergraduate and we would talk about art in a certain way and everyone would get passionate and be like 'Wow this is important!' And then you would talk to someone who wasn't that into it and suddenly

it didn't seem that important. But the thing with this issue [of climate change] is that it's as important as people make it out to be. Art school is a place to say we're living with the results of a world that has not put a compassionate future first. So how do we give affirmation to large and small acts, how do we start to practise that?

The idea of social practice is reinvigorating lost practices that allow for that kind of affirmation of social cohesiveness, like cooking or the making of things or transferring knowledge or listening. It's almost like an art practice now to make pickles, which is kind of nuts, or know to cook, because we're so distanced from it. I remember when my kids were not yet born, going to a birthing class at a hospital. I was like, this is crazy, the oldest thing that this species has done and I have to go back to a refresher class; we're wanting to relearn our connectivity but it's so broken that the re-establishment is a type of art making.

SB

Through gardening and cooking I think many people find that connection to the natural world that we've become so separated from. Just planting a seed and watching it grow can be a revelation. I remember it was for me at age 25 or something, in a kind of embarrassing way because I never grew up gardening or really spending that much time in nature. Can you share some examples of projects that have come out of these classes?

HP

What I do at MICA has a very wide net, the course I made in 2006-07 was called Climate Change and Sustainability for Artists and Designers. So there's this space there for responses that are abstract and responses that are functional. And in some ways I

cast that wider net because all these kinds of students need to know about climate change and there weren't any courses in place to educate them. They needed to have deep information, a non-mediated perspective on what climate change is. They're going to get out of school and they'll be illustrators, graphic designers, ceramists, painters, photographers, performance artists. They'll all have a good general understanding of what climate change is, and what it looks like it's going to be. How it came about. That was my goal, it was kind of like an emergency.

A graphic design student made a poster teaching the impact of a hamburger, creating an information graphic of where that meat comes from, engaging with the skills of teaching food literacy. I think that's something that's really strong with graphic design. And then in fine arts, just an example of the opposite kind, I remember I had a student do a final piece which was not to make anything and just to help their friends with their projects. Then there was a student that did sort of a mix, and separated a couch and took apart all of the pieces, they took a couch that they found on the street, and then remade new objects from all of the pieces. With Urban Farming, I find that what students want to do is really very practical things to assist the farms. Students aren't really doing idea-driven work on the farms.

SB

They're doing more utilitarian design?

HP

Yeah, helping them do signage. Build a shed, help them do layouts for the gardens. Get images on their website, make logos, really functional things. I don't have students really doing more idea-driven work, I don't know why. I show students idea-driven work

and time, after time after time... I've given up, in a way now trying to get that to be the direction. I have it from time to time, a student made a really nice monument to a red beet where they cast a red beet, made it out of bronze.

KB

Right, once you leave the institution and enter a farm in the world, the urgency of the work changes. There are suddenly these real world needs to respond to, and artists are people, and art matters in a different way because audience and site shift radically.

HP

They respond to working in this context, and it is a longer term commitment.

SB

For some of these students it might be the first time they're working [making art] in the public sphere, outside of the more autonomous space of the studio or art school. Out in the world, sometimes the more ethical, pragmatic response is to do something useful.

KB

Do you stay in touch with your students after they graduate? What happens in the world?

HP

It's nice, I do stay in touch with some, and lots of different things happen and things change over time as well. Some students continue to be engaged with agriculture as well, and then also do some creative work with agriculture, gravitate to farms that have some art focus as well. I had a student who became a farm manager and ran a public ceramics teaching facility at the farm, in Michigan. Students go WOOF [Workers On Organic Farms] a lot. Some students stay

in Baltimore and become more deeply engaged with agriculture here. I've only had a few students who I know of continue with work around climate, and of course lots of people graduate and I don't know anything about what they do. I've had students go and work for architecture firms and do work around sustainable architecture and public planning. So there's a big wide variety.

I like to ask MICA students back in to talk about how do you take this information forward and how do you make sense of it? How do you create a meaningful life and also be an engaged artist at the same time? Which is that old recipe of: how do you be an artist? And now there's another layer of: how do you be an ecologically and socially responsible and engaged artist and survive?

I think that artists are going to be very good at inventing and adapting and learning how to be adaptive because we're progressive. We're always asking questions, we want to adapt to things before they actually occur. We're adapting to a food crisis while the kitchen is still pretty full. But we also need to become more politically demanding and maybe a bit more radical.