

# LAST SEED LOCAL PRACTICE

An agri/cultural consideration

By Michael Mercil

“Where do we find ourselves?”

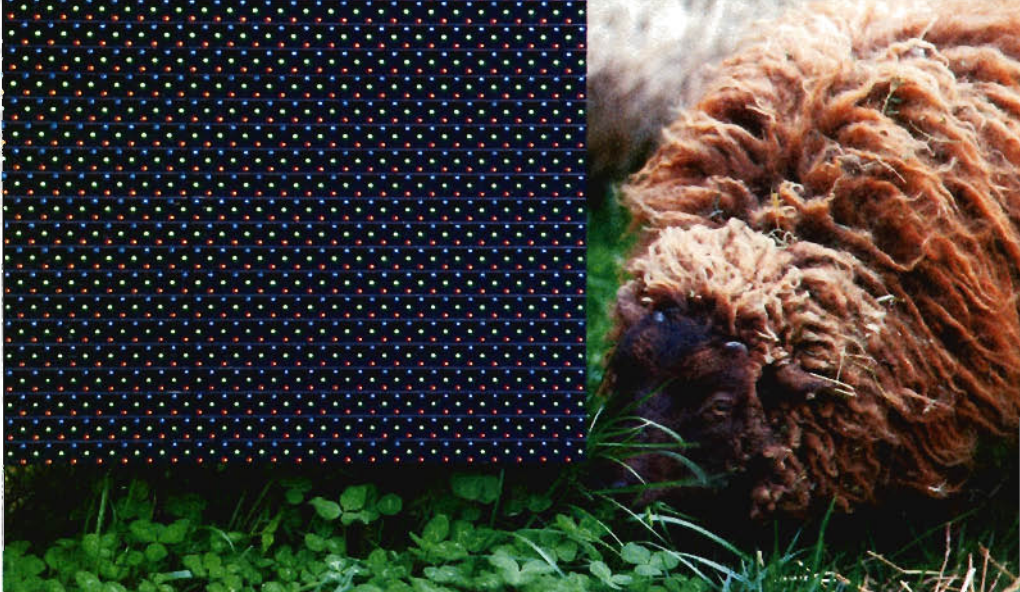
—Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Experience*, 1844

“Where do we find ourselves?” As a question it seems simple enough. Yet, because the question of finding implies a question of grounding (where, or how, do we ground ourselves?) its answer is not easy.

Most days I find myself on campus at Ohio State University, where I teach in the Department of Art. But that only describes my location. OSU is also a mission. As founded in 1870, it is a public land grant college dedicated to the research and teaching of “the agricultural, mechanical and liberal arts.” So, if this university is not only a place for the *study* of culture but is also a place for cultural *production*, then what is the nature of the culture produced here? Where do we find ourselves? And why is it so hard to find something good to eat on campus?

My attempts to address such questions began several years ago through the Living Culture Initiative and a series of “agri/cultural” experiments in partnership with the Department of Art; the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences; and the Wexner Center for the Arts. Using the OSU campus as my studio, I find myself localizing my art practice, and trying to plant the notion of “local artist” as a term of value—much as the terms “local grower” or “local foods” have acquired recently.

In 2006, I started by planting beans. *The Beanfield* was inspired, in part, by the 2½ acres cultivated by Henry Thoreau at Walden Pond. Located outside the Wexner Center and overlooking the central campus Oval, this 500-square-foot demonstration plot included 49 sets of poles, planted with four varieties of beans—Kentucky Wonder Brown, Rattlesnake, White Half-Runners and Blue Lake Stringless. Whether or not



Mercil's *Virtual Pasture* features sheep grazing on a bounty of fresh grass and clover. Right in the middle of the pasture sits a large monitor with a live feed of sheep from his remote pasture at Stratford. Here, one of the resident sheep nuzzles up against the digital monitor for some fresh bites (Photo by Matthew Keida).

it was viewed as a work of art, over two growing seasons *The Beanfield* stood as a fact to be encountered, considered and argued. From it, we gave away more than 150 pounds of fresh beans to neighborhood food pantries, and distributed across campus 1,500 free packets of seeds labeled as “food for thought” with an invitation to “grow your own.”

Because good farmers rotate crops, in 2008 we converted *The Beanfield* into grazing meadow, known now as *The Virtual Pasture*. First, I fenced and planted the site with two apple trees along with a mix of Orchard grass, Tall Fescue, Bluegrass and White Clover. Later, with assistance from the Stratford Ecological Center in rural Delaware, Ohio, I began raising a starter flock of three Shetland sheep, whose grazing is monitored publicly by a live video feed from the remote pastures at the Stratford Center to an LED monitor located outside the Wexner Center in Columbus.

Sheep and cows once grazed the OSU campus grounds. Horses pulled delivery wagons to classrooms, auditoriums and dormitories. Now—except for pigeons, squirrels, rats, cats, raccoons and dogs—animals are mostly absent here. As it unfolds over time and through space, *The Virtual Pasture* reanimates the central campus landscape to entertain such questions as “Where, when and how do we encounter farm animals now?” And, “How might we reestablish contact with those living creatures with which we still share deep, mutual dependence, but which we have made

invisible in our daily life?”

*The Beanfield* and *The Virtual Pasture* are “agri/cultural” artworks grounded in specific relation to an actual place (Columbus, Ohio) through a given time (now) and to my particular community (OSU). As part of the Living Culture Initiative in the Department of Art they become community in-reach projects as much as they are also community outreach projects. By stimulating a sequence of aesthetic, social, environmental and educational exchanges, these projects work to reinvigorate our public land-grant university as an “agri/cultural” commons.

Slowly, it's growing easier to find something good to eat on campus (there is now a weekly farmers market on the Wexner Center plaza). Meanwhile, if you happen upon a sheep grazing the Oval, please feel free to touch the art.

The *Virtual Pasture* is located adjacent to the Wexner Center for the Arts along College Avenue, facing the OSU Oval. It is scheduled to continue through June 2011. On the first Monday of each month, the flock of Shetland sheep is transported from the Stratford Center to graze at the Wexner Center site. For more information visit [wexarts.org/get\\_involved//osu?eventid+4203](http://wexarts.org/get_involved//osu?eventid+4203), [stratfordecologicalcenter.org](http://stratfordecologicalcenter.org) and [michaelmercil.com](http://michaelmercil.com).

Michael Mercil is an artist who lives in Columbus and teaches in the Department of Art at Ohio State University. Among other projects, he is filming a documentary (working title: *Covenant*) about human and farm animal relations.