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Natural Assumptions: The Living Culture Initiative at The Ohio State University

by NANCY ZASTUDIL on Dec 13, 2012 • 4:05 PM

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During my undergraduate years in the Department of Art at [The Ohio State University](#), I was invited to participate in a graduate seminar with renowned artists [Michael Mercil](#) and [Ann Hamilton](#) in their off-campus studio. What follows is an overview of some of Mercil's recent projects at OSU that I find to be exemplary of the productive ways in which an artist can be both generous with and critical of his environments.

The first line of The Ohio State University [Wikipedia](#) entry states, "Founded in 1870, as a land-grant university and ninth university in Ohio with the Morrill Act of 1862, the university was originally known as the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College." The school was originally situated within a farming community located on the northern edge of Columbus. In 1878, the first class (six men) graduated.

Today, OSU is a highly respected research institution that boasts approximately 65,000 students. The main campus is located in the heart of Columbus, bordering downtown and the historical Short North and German Village neighborhoods. Even though I attended classes on this campus for four years, I was clueless about its agricultural history. In my experience, OSU was beautiful manicured lawns, nice large old scholarly-looking brick or

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stone buildings, several gigantic paved parking lots and football—not exactly your farmer’s idea of a hoedown. And having been born and raised in the suburbs of Columbus, the city for me had always been simply a college town—a relatively affordable place to buy a house and raise a family, especially if you are a teacher, banker, or insurance agent. This may lead artists to assume there aren’t many opportunities or support networks for creative pursuits. But they would be wrong.

Michael Mercil is an artist and professor in the OSU Department of Art. He and his partner, artist Ann Hamilton, have committed themselves to playing an active role at the University. Confronted by the fact that an hour of teaching is a hour away from his studio, he decided to take advantage of the campus and assume it as his studio, and in doing so asks, “What is the nature of the culture we produce here?”

This question was largely informed by the original mission of OSU as a public land-grant college dedicated to “a curriculum of the agricultural, mechanical and the liberal arts” and led Mercil to create various projects from time-gifting gift cards to 365 readings of the daily news to *The Living Culture Initiative*. Described as “a locally focused forum for integrating the fine arts disciplines into the broader university mission and resources, *The Living Culture Initiative* takes on what Mercil terms “agri/cultural” research around the paradox of the University: now home to the humanities and the liberal arts, its linguistic culture (reading, writing, speaking) is ironically at odds with the artist’s culture (materialization and demonstration). Honoring the agricultural history of OSU, Mercil recognizes that the artist and the farmer share basic means of cultural production and communication: they both require information that is contained in the hand and/or the body.

The Living Culture Initiative involves partnerships with and support from several entities on and off campus including (but not limited to) the Social Responsibility Initiative in the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, and the Wexner Center for the Arts. For example *The Beanfield*, a project in which Mercil, from 2006 and 2008, converted a flowerbed outside the Wexner Center for the Arts into an artwork evoking the roots of OSU as a public land-grant college. *The Beanfield* was inspired in part by the two-and-a-half acres of beans that Henry Thoreau cultivated at Walden Pond. (According to Mercil, Thoreau went to Walden to not only naturalize himself but also to socialize himself. For example, Walden disliked beans but he planted them because it provided an opportunity to trade, and therefore socialize, with his neighbors who grew rice, a crop more to his liking.)

In 2008, Mercil converted *The Beanfield* into *The Virtual Pasture*, again informed by agri/cultural research. The focus this time was to reintroduce farm animals as an aspect of everyday campus experience—to make them once again visible and relevant to the educational process. To do this, Mercil raised a flock of Shetland sheep on the remote pastures at the Stratford Ecological Center in Delaware, Ohio. Here he placed cameras on fenceposts so that the sheep’s grazing could be monitored and sent as a live video feed to a publicly visible LED monitor placed outdoors (in the flowerbed/beanfield) at the Wexner Center. Once a month he would bring the sheep to campus, and to the Wexner Center, and let them graze. *The Virtual Pasture* closed in December 2011 and Mercil dispersed the flock in the summer of 2012.

Mercil further considers the project in the Edible Columbus article below:

**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



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.”

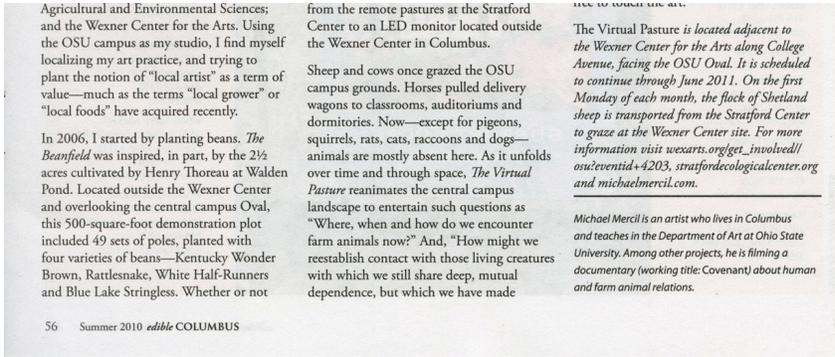
Because good farmers rotate crops, in 2008 we converted *The Beanfield* into grazing meadow, known now as *The Virtual Pasture*. First, I fenced and planted the site with two apple trees along with a mix of Orchard grass, Tall Fescue, Bluegrass and White Clover. Later, with assistance from the Stratford 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.

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 a 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



Mercil extends elements of *The Virtual Pasture* and other of his agri/cultural efforts in *Covenant*, a video that examines the language of touch, or handling, between animals and their tending farmers. In February 2013, the full-length version of *Covenant* premieres as a featured event at the Wexner Center's annual [Field & Screen film series](#).

"As both an artist and a teacher, I am especially interested in types of knowledge gained and communicated by means other than words. And so, because animals do not speak, Covenant is narrated mostly with images rather than talk," says Mercil.

Mercil's most recently proposed project is *WindFarm*, a 500 square foot energy park that includes a 60-foot tall, gold gilt wind turbine that generates electricity for the display of new video works on view in the galleries of the Wexner Center for the Arts. Fittingly, the site for *WindFarm* assumes the same flowerbed plot outside the Wexner Center as was used for *The Beanfield* and *The Virtual Pasture*. In his proposal he explains, "In completing the rotation of the site from flowerbed, to working garden, to orchard and livestock pasture, to carbon storage bank, *WindFarm* culminates my *Living Culture Initiative* projects made in partnership with several entities at Ohio State."

I can't begin to imagine what Mercil will do next at OSU, but its safe to assume that it will again be a natural fit.

Images courtesy of the artist. Photos by Michael Mercil unless otherwise noted.



Nancy Zastudil (New Mexico: regional editor) emphasizes an expanded notion of curating, organized under the title of The Necessarian. She is co-founder of [PLAND](#) (Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation); the Taos Coordinator for [ISEA2012 Albuquerque: Machine Wilderness](#); and a visual arts contributor to [A+C Magazine Houston](#). www.thenecessarian.com

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