

# Soil Culture

Clive Adams, of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW), located in Haldon Forest Park outside Exeter, reports on this educational charity that explores new understandings of our place within nature through the arts

**T**he Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) is an innovative educational charity, focused on exploring new understandings of our place within Nature through the Arts. Our aim is to use the Arts to provide valuable insights into today's pressing environmental and social challenges. In particular, to help people appreciate the importance of their everyday surroundings and the resources that they often take for granted or otherwise abuse.

CCANW hopes to affect people by focusing not only on the Arts as object-led expressions of individual vision but as a new ideas-led process of creating interaction between people and disciplines, and as a means of raising eco-consciousness. Using the Arts in this way can kindle the imagination, open minds to new creative possibilities and encourage grassroots activism in ways that conventional advocacy often struggles to do.

CCANW's *Soil Culture* programme, now under development, is another of its projects which have, over the past six years, ranged from the promotion of sustainably grown local timber in architecture to environmentally and socially friendly practices in the fashion industry. Last year's programme *Games People Play* explored what games can tell us about human nature and how a deeper understanding of the advantages of co-operation over competition can help us all to address the needs of the planet.

Soil is not a particularly sexy topic and unfortunately captures little of the kind of public interest seen in, say, the conservation of 'charismatic megafauna' such as the giant panda or humpback



The Taste of Place project by Laura Parker

Photo: David Matheson

whale. However, the importance of healthy soil to feed a growing population and act as a carbon sink is crucial. The challenges, many related to climate change and loss of biodiversity, include forms of degradation including erosion, flooding, reliance on fertilisers, contamination and salination.

**T**he linking of the words 'soil' and 'culture' may seem strange, but it should be remembered that the word 'culture' was originally used in the 'agri-cultural' sense and it was only from the 16th Century that it increasingly came to be used figuratively; as the soil was improved by tillage, so the mind was improved by education and the arts. 'Artspeak' also affected the way we look at the land itself: for the aesthete in the 18th Century, rural scenery – which for many was both livelihood and home environment – only merited being called 'picturesque' or even

a 'landscape' when it conformed to a painterly sense of composition.

Having been based in the Haldon Forest just outside Exeter since 2006, CCANW will soon be moving to the campus of the University of Exeter where it will research new creative links between the arts and sciences. From this new base, a programme of *Soil Culture* artist residencies will be launched next year and a touring exhibition developed, showing work by the numerous established international artists who have created soil-related works over the years. The work will range from Mel Chin's art-science projects which use plants to draw heavy metals from polluted soil, to herman de vries' drawings which are made as rubbings from earth samples collected around the world.

*Soil Culture* has its origins in research I first conducted in 2002 in relation to the exhibition *Love, Labour and Loss*, which I curated in the aftermath of the Foot and Mouth disease epidemic. It has been developed with the support of CCANW staff, as well as Dr. Daro Montag from Falmouth University, landscape artist Charlotte Rathbone and artist Peter Ward, and with the help of many other individuals and organisations, notably the Soil Association.

Clive Adams began his career as a curator at Arnolfini, Bristol, in the 1970s. He established CCANW in 2006, where he is currently the Director. [ccanw.co.uk](http://ccanw.co.uk)



Earth pigments collected and processed in North Devon by artist Peter Ward