

“Curating the Convivial” for Soil Culture at Create

Miche Fabre Lewin, Flora Gathorne-Hardy & Clive Adams

To cite this article: Miche Fabre Lewin, Flora Gathorne-Hardy & Clive Adams (2015): “Curating the Convivial” for Soil Culture at Create, *GeoHumanities*, DOI: [10.1080/2373566X.2015.1109470](https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2015.1109470)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2015.1109470>



Published online: 21 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rgeo20>

PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

“Curating the Convivial” for Soil Culture at Create

Miche Fabre Lewin and Flora Gathorne-Hardy

*Touchstone collaborations: Ecology Arts Research
Coventry University*

Clive Adams

Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World



Hands In Soil, Touchstone collaborations with Kofifi Theatre Company for *Rebirth* residency at NIROX, Cradle of Humankind, South Africa (2012). (Color figure available online.)

'Curating the convivial' for Soil Culture at Create

by Miche Fabre Lewin and Flora Gathorne-Hardy

Exhibitions, Soil Saturdays and Food Happenings to celebrate UN International Year of Soils 2015

An innovative partnership between the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) and our arts and research practice Touchstone collaborations gave rise to Soil Culture at Create in Bristol during July and August 2015. This summer celebration of soil took place in the Create Centre, the City Council's environmental centre, during Bristol's year as European Green Capital. Soil Culture at Create featured two international exhibitions - *Young Shoots* artists residencies curated by CCANW and the poster exhibition *Dirt Dialogues* organised by Alexandra Toland of Soilarts. It also hosted a final residency between the Blue Finger Alliance, a Bristol-based campaign to safeguard high-grade agricultural land, and ourselves.

We were engaged by CCANW to co-ordinate soil-inspired activities to animate the exhibitions. Our response was the concept of Soil Saturdays, an improvised and diverse programme that spanned the eight consecutive Saturdays of the Soil Culture exhibitions. The matter of living soil and food was present throughout this programme - within the gallery, on the Soil Shrine, as part of activities and exchanges, and nourishingly and colourfully manifest through freshly prepared dishes of food sourced from Bristol and its hinterland.

'Curating the convivial' defines an emergent and embodied approach to curating that builds on a recognition of, and deep engagement with, the ecology of a place and its diverse communities through food citizenship. With limited public funding, our working mantra 'trust and exchange' inspired a dynamic atmosphere of enthusiasm, goodwill, faith in the power of imagination, and the sharing of skills and resources, thus strengthening existing networks and promoting resilience. This respect for 'genius loci' and the inhabiting of the ecological self cultivates a dedication to everyday actions and policymaking, which restore and protect healthy soils.

The arc of Soil Culture at Create within International Year of Soils 2015

December 2014

World Soil Day celebration with Touchstone collaborations at Hawkwood, UK

March 2015

Collaboration with CCANW begins

May 2015

Blue Soil Shrine Residency with Blue Finger Alliance begins

4 July 2015

Launch of Soil Saturdays at Create Centre

18 July 2015

Bristol city-region Declaration for Soil



A sequence of images from the Soil Saturdays illustrating the unfolding themes and the diversity of interactions that encouraged citizen-led initiatives to safeguard living soils

Soil Saturdays: collaborative practices for cultivating soil guardianship

SOIL INTERDEPENDENCE DAY 4th July - Celebrate our interdependence with soil
WHAT IS SOIL? 11th July - Discover the living matter of soil through food, art and science
SOILS OF BRISTOL 18th July - Walk and Talk for Soil leading to a Declaration for Soil
LIVING SOIL LIVING FOOD 25th July - Vital soil feeds living foods for body, mind and soul
GROWING SOIL 1st August - Share skills and experiences to care for and restore living soils
WHOSE SOIL? 8th August - Soil and social justice - artful dialogue between local and global
FALLOW FIELD 15th August - Emergent day for reflections on actions, research and legacy
ART OF SOIL 22nd August - Ecological and cultural diversity through soil, art and food



Art, soil, food and ritual for an ecology of living cultures



Soil Saturdays encouraged conversations and encounters through the senses that bridged the arts and sciences. The sequence of activities ranged across composting workshops, culinary skills-sharing, soil biology demonstrations, farm walks, forums, films and music-making, all interwoven with an ecological gastronomy of food happenings curated by the culinary collaboration Soil Sisters. We all shared seasonal brunches, vibrant feasts and food rituals prepared from organic, biodynamic and foraged harvests from the healthy soils of Bristol and its hinterland. These diverse and embodied encounters with soil deepened our understanding of what living soil is and how to care for it. They also illuminated how conviviality is a medium of exchange which nurtures and supports resilient communities. From Soil Saturdays arose many new initiatives, including a citizen-led Declaration for Soil, which is contributing to Bristol's food sovereignty and policy-making to protect its living soils.

22 August 2015
Art of Soil
Final Soil Saturday

September 2015
Documentation
and legacy

October 2015
Food and Land Forum
with Blue Finger Alliance

November 2015
Representations at UK and
European Parliaments

December 2015
World Soil Saturday
at Hawkwood



Image credits: Ruth Davey, Chloe Scholefield and Touchstone collaborations

INTRODUCTION

Clive Adams

Soil Culture at Create emerged from Soil Culture, a three-year program initiated by the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW)¹ that focused on how we care for our soils and how to share that responsibility with each other. Its starting point is that an awareness of soil health is as important as our need for clean air and water. A principal partner throughout Soil Culture has been Falmouth University, which led an initial research phase between 2013 and 2014.² This gave rise to the Soil Culture Forum in 2014 attended by more than ninety artists, writers, and environmentalists. It was at this time that the United Nations declared 2015 to be the International Year of Soils.³

The next phase was coordinating twelve artist residencies across the southwest of England and at Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, and supporting a landscape design commission in Bristol. Eight residencies advertised by open submission attracted 655 applications from thirty-nine different countries, a strong indication of the increasing number of artists becoming engaged with environmental issues. These residencies provided dedicated time for the development of new work, experimentation, and research in such different contexts as gardens, science laboratories, organic farms, gallery venues, and environmental visitor centers.⁴ The resulting exhibition, *Young Shoots*, was launched at the Create Centre in Bristol in July 2015.⁵ This was accompanied by an exhibition, *Dirt Dialogues*, curated by Dr. Alexandra Toland of Soilarts.⁶ During the summer celebration of soil, CCANW commissioned the final residency between Touchstone collaborations and Maddy Longhurst of the Blue Finger Alliance.⁷

Soil Culture reflects a new way of working that responds to the challenge of limited public resources with wide-ranging creativity and generosity of spirit. For myself, I have discovered a deeper understanding of the huge rewards of collaboration with its emphasis on our connections within nature and the rest of humanity. It was from this ethos that Soil Culture at Create evolved as an exciting new partnership between CCANW and Touchstone collaborations.

“CURATING THE CONVIVIAL”

Miche Fabre Lewin and Flora Gathorne-Hardy

At the heart of our ecological arts and research practice, Touchstone collaborations, is a dedication to coevolving and choreographing convivial spaces where food and soil become agents of change. Being responsive to the matter of food and soil can generate new knowledge and insights to reenliven our capacities to live in balance with the natural world. As Carolyn Steel has written, “Food emerges as something with phenomenal power to transform not just landscapes, but political structures, public spaces, social relationships, cities” (2008). Within this field of engagement, we invite thanksgiving food rituals as threshold spaces for transformative exchange.⁸ This socially engaged ritual work is the focus of Miche’s doctoral research,

Preceding pages: Color figure available online.

“Rituals for Resilience: Art, Food and Ritual Practices for Socio-Ecological Restoration” with the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University.

As food is a familiar and accessible way to bring an awareness of the relationship between our health and the health of the soil—in the words of Wendell Berry, “eating is an agricultural act” (1991)—our primary curatorial intention was to animate the Soil Culture exhibitions through food and thanksgiving rituals. Integral to the three-month planning phase was a commitment to building relationships to the soils and the growers that help to feed the city of Bristol and discovering the source of local and seasonal produce. This took us on journeys to meet with local allotment holders, organic and biodynamic farmers, market gardeners, and the people leading community food-growing projects. Alongside these grounded exchanges we met with people from organizations, including Triodos Bank, Bristol Food Network, Bristol Food Policy Council, Bristol City Council, the British Society of Soil Science, the Soil Association, the UK Biodynamic Association, the Sustainable Food Trust, and CAWR.

Guided by the passions, aspirations, and proposals from these diverse encounters, the vision and content of a festival of eight Soil Saturdays emerged. The program was dedicated to discovering, exploring, and deepening our relationships to soil through interweaving themes, opening with a celebration of Soil Interdependence Day on Saturday 4 July. This was followed by: What is Soil?, Soils of Bristol, Living Soil Living Food, Growing Soil, Whose Soil?, Fallow Field, and finally, Art of Soil, enlivened by contributions from Young Shoots residency artists. Each of the Soil Saturdays offered a rich variety of opportunities to gather around food, thus bringing the matter of soil into our direct and daily experience, every day and every mouthful. Seasonal brunches, thanksgiving rituals, high teas, botanical cocktails, an allotment banquet, and harvest feasts were all freshly prepared by Soil Sisters from the bounty of local, organic, and biodynamic harvests grown on the nearby city farms, allotments and community gardens.⁹

Every Soil Saturday began by inviting contributors to set intentions for the day by gathering around the Soil Shrine and lighting a candle. From this hearth of welcome and ritual unfolded a lively sequence of activities, all offered for free, including the two exhibitions; the Blue Soil residency; hands-on explorations of soil biology, composting, and soil restoration; forums on soil justice, food citizenship, citizen-led policymaking, intuitive farming, and food traditions for nutritional health; a commissioned film on community-based farming; music inspired by land and soil folksongs; a preview of the book *Living Food: Feast for Soil and Soul* (Lambert 2016); and the launch of the report *Living Soils: A Call to Action* by the Soil Association (2015).

The arc of Soil Saturdays provided the fertile ground for pioneering, citizen-led action around soil. Here, too, food and soil—the matter, the metaphor, and the meta-picture—invited philosophical reflections on the interconnected relationships between ourselves and the environment (Curtin and Hedlke 1992). Through hands-on experiences with soil, and thanksgiving food rituals, each Soil Saturday awakened a “politics of consciousness” that engaged with the body, soul, and spirit of the whole human being (Roszak 1979).

*The Future Is in Our Hands the Future Is in the Soil*¹⁰

Alongside the curating of Soil Saturdays, we embarked on the Blue Soil residency with Maddy Longhurst of the Blue Finger Alliance, a campaign to safeguard a stretch of Grade 1

agricultural land extending from North Bristol into South Gloucestershire. The Blue Soil Shrine evolved as a collaborative installation between us over the two months, connecting the urban-based Create Centre with Feed Bristol, a food-growing project on Blue Finger soil at the edge of the city.¹¹ The display within the Blue Soil Shrine of national and local soil maps, earth-rooted vegetables, and artworks created during the Soil Saturdays together raised awareness of the fundamental role of soil health for nutrition, food sovereignty, and planetary balance.

From this collaboration we helped to midwife a city-region Declaration for Soil during the Soils of Bristol Soil Saturday on 18 July 2015.¹² This day began with a Walk and Talk for Soil from the city harbor to a picnic lunch at the Create Centre. From this followed a City-Region Policy Forum, which began with tea made from herbs picked in the Create Centre garden and cake baked with local flours and fruit. The Forum was facilitated by the Bristol Food Policy Council, who guided participants—including senior city planners, sustainability officers, food and land campaigners, a member of Parliament, farmers, allotment holders, and others—in sharing their beliefs, views, and desired actions around soil. These were cocrafted into a citizen-led Declaration for Soil, which, once drafted, was celebrated with a bespoke botanical cocktail and thanksgiving ceremony. The day ended with the sharing of an allotment banquet made from fresh vegetables donated by local allotment holders.

Soil Culture at Create offers a model of how an emergent, collaborative, and responsive cultural event can move toward the restoration of the ecological self and the cultivation of diverse forms of citizen-led soil guardianship. The Declaration for Soil has since been embedded within the legacy of Bristol as Europe's Green Capital in 2015. It will be incorporated into the Bristol Good Food Plan, before being presented at the House of Commons and then shared at the European Parliament Green Party Conference on soil. The visibility of soil and the sharing of food placed conviviality at the heart of Soil Culture at Create, encouraging us all to become food citizens for soil guardianship—a form of ecological curating where the matter of soil is also a metaphor for cultivating the soil of community.

NOTES

1. CCANW aims to explore new understandings of our place within nature through the arts. To that end, arts activity can encourage imaginative change in conversation with scientific argument and conventional advocacy. In particular, the arts can help people appreciate the importance of their everyday surroundings and relationships, and of the resources and abilities we share.
2. This research phase was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
3. On 24 April 2013 at the 146 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations Council, FAO member countries endorsed the request from the Kingdom of Thailand in the framework of the GSP for the proclamation of the International Year of Soils (IYS) 2015. The IYS served as a platform for raising awareness on the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fiber production, essential ecosystem functions, and better adaptation to climate change for present and future generations.
4. These residencies were funded through partnerships with thirteen different host organizations, together with grants from Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund, and the British Society of Soil Science. Soil Culture at Create benefitted from funding from the UK Biodynamic Association, the British Society of Soil Science, Dolf Mootham, Hyder Cresswell and Triodos Bank.
5. After Soil Culture at Create, *Young Shoots* toured five other venues in the region. The next stage of Soil Culture was an exhibition, *Deep Roots*, Falmouth Art Gallery 19 September–21 November 2015 and at Peninsula Arts in the New Year 2016. This brought together groups of work by six important international artists who have

engaged with soils over many years, supported by individual works by seven British artists. CCANW is also producing a publication that will bring together all strands of the Soil Culture program.

6. Dr. Alexandra Toland is a visual artist and landscape planner based in Berlin and co-chair of the German Soil Science Society’s Commission on Soils in Education and Society. *Dirt Dialogues* was first presented at the 2014 World Congress of Soil Science in 2014.
7. The term *Blue Finger* was coined by Richard Spalding to describe the long, narrow strip of high-quality agricultural land coming out of the north fringe of the city of Bristol, which is color-coded blue on the UK Land Classification Map to indicate its Grade 1 status. For further information, please visit www.bluefingeralliance.org.uk.
8. Soil Saturdays emerged within the wider context of Touchstone collaborations’ Soil as Source Integral Life (SOIL) residency for the Earth. This journey has its origins in the Renaturing the City residency in Johannesburg (2012), moved through the trajectory of Living Soil Shrine at the Living Soil Forum in Sweden (2013), to Soil Culture at Create (2015), returns to South Africa for a three-month residency between Coventry University Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience and Stellenbosch University (2016), and heads on to Glasgow with the World Congress of Soil Science in 2022.
9. Soil Sisters is a culinary collaboration between Miche Fabre Lewin and Flora Gathorne-Hardy of Touchstone collaborations and Daphne Lambert of the Greencuisine Trust.
10. This phrase emerged during Touchstone collaborations’ Re-Naturing the City residency in Johannesburg (2012).
11. Feed Bristol is the Avon Wildlife Trust community food-growing project located on the fringe of Bristol on Blue Finger soil.
12. Soils of Bristol Soil Saturday had emerged through exchanges with Richard Spalding, geographer at University of West England; Maddy Longhurst; and other food campaigners, local growers, and artists within Bristol.

REFERENCES

- Berry, W. 1991. *Standing on Earth*. Ipswich, UK: Golgonooza.
- Curtin, D., and L. Hedlke, eds. 1992. *Cooking, eating, thinking*. Bloomington: Indiana Press.
- Lambert, D. 2016. *Living food: Feast for soil and soul*. London: Unbound.
- Roszak, T. 1979. *Person/planet*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Soil Association. 2015. *Living soils: A call to action*. Bristol, UK: Soil Association.
- Steel, C. 2008. *Hungry city: How food shapes our lives*. London: Random House.

MICHE FABRE LEWIN is a full-time PhD student and also a Research Associate with the Coventry University Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom; and an artist-researcher with Touchstone collaborations: Ecology Arts Research. E-mail: miche@touchstonecollaborations.com. Her doctoral research is entitled “Rituals for Resilience: Art, Food and Ritual Practices for Socio-Ecological Restoration.”

FLORA GATHORNE-HARDY is a Research Associate at Coventry University Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom; and an artist-geographer with Touchstone collaborations: Ecology Arts Research. E-mail: flora@touchstonecollaborations.com. Her current research engages with the concept of “Farm as Power Place.”

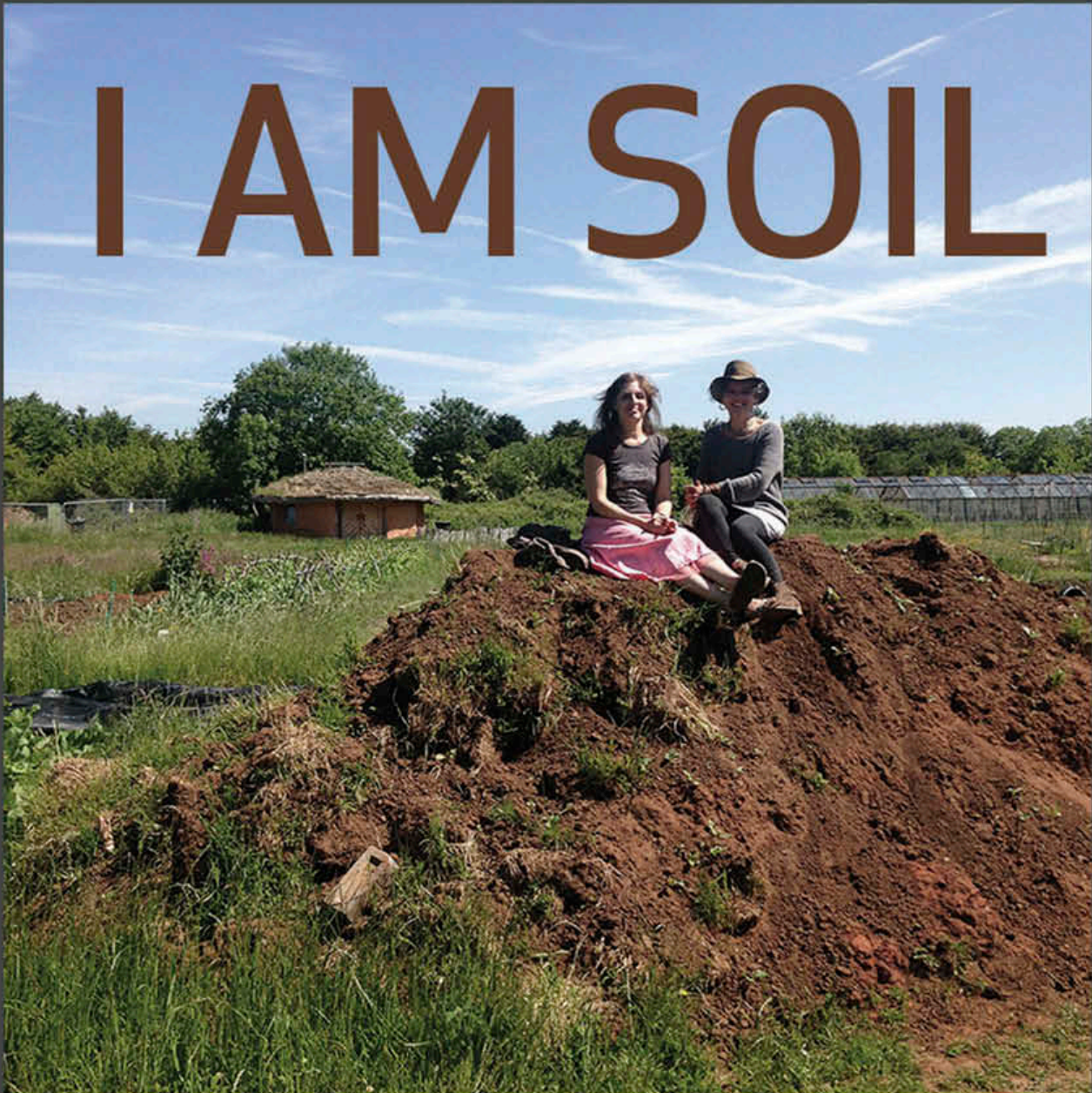
CLIVE ADAMS is Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) based at Innovation Centre, University of Exeter, Exeter, Devon, EX4 4RN, United Kingdom. E-mail: adams@ccanw.co.uk. CCANW has recently relocated to Schumacher College at Dartington, where a new MA Arts and Ecology course will start in 2017.

Following pages: Color figure available online.

Reflections

"Bristol's city-region Declaration for Soil is one of the significant initiatives that arose from Soil Culture at Create and the Blue Soil Shrine residency. It was drafted on 18th July 2015 as part of Soils of Bristol Soil Saturday and was an unprecedented opportunity to encourage and enlighten Bristol and the UK into taking pioneering action to safeguard its soils. During Soils of Bristol, living soil and living food inspired the inter-weaving of: the sensory, the political and the personal; the practical, visionary and reflective; the collaborative, purposeful and convivial; the challenging, connecting and honouring."

Maddy Longhurst, Blue Finger Alliance



Maddy Longhurst and Miche Fabre Lewin sitting on Blue Finger Soil at the Feed Bristol site north of Bristol as part of the Blue Soil Shrine residency with Touchstone collaborations

Image: Touchstone collaborations

"The combination of exquisite and locally sourced food, exhibitions, ritual, poetics, warm welcome and instant sense of a community is pre-figurative in every way, by which I mean doing the work in the manner of the world we want to live in".

Jane Trowell, Platform London, and contributor to Whose Soil? Saturday

Inspirations

"I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realised in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value". Ivan Illich

"There is a need for new forms emphasising our essential inter-connectedness rather than separateness, forms evoking the feeling of belonging to a larger whole". Suzi Gablik

"...it is the body, the feeling, instincts, that connect us to the soil". Carl Jung



*Silver bowls with a tea-spoon of Blue Finger soil
'Coming Home to Soil' ritual by Miche Fabre Lewin on Art of Soil Saturday*

Evolution of 'Curating the Convivial'

threshold rituals power of imagination food as an agent of change embracing the unknown
cultivate the senses courage to risk playfulness improvising with the unexpected
a space for co-inquiry acceptance of disruption matter and presence of food and soil
trust and exchange continuity of engagement respecting spirit of place
momentum of communication responsive and responsible connecting aesthetics with ethics
tables of transformation emergent processes cycles of thinking, practice and reflection
deep listening thinkingdrawings sharing gratitude healing space