

# NEWSLETTER

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Array of splash cups and throughfall collectors under four year old trees in an experimental forest in Xinganshan, Jiangxi Province, south-east China. Photo taken 14 June 2012 by Philipp Goebes (Tübingen, Germany).

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The Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) is a 'not-for-profit' organisation which explores new understandings of our place within Nature through the Arts. Our aim is to use the arts to provide insights into today's pressing environmental and social challenges. Just as landscapes were painted on the walls of Roman villas in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC at a time of over-cultivation and deforestation, so can new art forms provide us with valuable tools to raise eco-consciousness: to help people appreciate the importance of their everyday surroundings and the resources they might take for granted or otherwise abuse. They can touch people in ways that science and conventional advocacy frequently fail us.

'Soil Culture' is a programme that CCANW has developed over the past two years with Falmouth University (Cornwall, UK), which uses the arts to inspire a deeper public understanding of the importance of soil; a topic that, sadly, has never captured the level of attention devoted to the conservation of 'charismatic megafauna' such as the giant panda or humpback whale. Thankfully, it is increasingly being recognised that not only are healthy soils essential for the production of food for a growing world population, but they are also a vital part of our global ecosystem, acting as a carbon sink to reduce the impact of climate change. As we know, soils filter our water and protect us from flooding, and provide fibres for our clothing and timber for construction and fuel. Even so, we are all increasingly becoming aware that soils around the world are being threatened today by poor management and short-termism, resulting in compaction, contamination, erosion and salinization, together with loss of fertility, organic matter and biodiversity. In surveys conducted between 2002 and 2011 in south-west England alone (where our programme is largely based), 38% of soils were found to be significantly degraded, leading to increased run-off and serious consequences for the wider environment.

The 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 16<sup>th</sup> century that it increasingly came to be used figuratively; as the soil was improved by good husbandry, so the mind was improved by education and the arts. Perhaps it is now time for the arts and education to help put culture back into the soil?

Graham Harvey noted in his 1997 book *The Killing of the Countryside*: "*it remains the sobering fact that even in the age of global communications and the Internet, civilisation continues to depend on a few inches of topsoil for its very existence.*" Indeed, the Soil Culture programme has its origins in conversations over a decade ago with Graham, when I was curating an art exhibition on the history of British livestock farming, in the aftermath of the last foot-and-mouth epidemic, in particular on the damaging effects of insecticides and nitrogen fertilizers

on the environment which were increasingly being noticed in the 1960s.

The programme developed in earnest when, in early 2013, we entered into a partnership with Falmouth University, which secured support for a period of research from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Coincidentally, the United Nations proclaimed 2015 to be 'the International Year of Soils'. The research phase culminated in a forum in Falmouth, in July 2014, which brought together over 90 artists, writers and environmentalists.

The second phase of Soil Culture, from August 2014 to August 2015, was funded through partnership working and grants from Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the British Society of Soil Science and South West Water. It involved us supporting 12 artist residencies across the south-west of England and at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Plate 1), together with a commission for a roof garden for a new Primary School in Bristol. Nine of the residencies were selected from an open submission, attracting 655 applications from 39 different countries; a strong indication of the increasing number of artists becoming engaged with environmental issues.



Plate 1: 'Something and Son' artist residency at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London.

The residencies were held in a wide range of organisations from the Eden Project in mid-Cornwall and the University of Exeter's Environment and Sustainability Institute in Penryn (Plate 2), to the new Hauser & Wirth Arts Centre in Somerset and Daylesford Organic Farm in Gloucestershire. Each host sets a different brief for the artist, but all offered dedicated time for experimentation and the development of new work, and unparalleled access to facilities and expertise. The briefs were distinct and wide-ranging. They involved invitations to explore the role of soil in carbon sequestration, peat in national parks in the region, soil formation, and soil from holistic and ecological perspectives.



Plate 2: Field investigations at the Environment and Sustainability Institute, Penryn, Cornwall, UK

The outcomes of the residencies/commission were brought together in an exhibition 'Young Shoots,' which was launched over the summer of 2015 at 'Create,' Bristol's flagship environmental centre, during the City's year as European Green Capital. This exhibition tours around South West England until June 2016. We also exhibited 'Dirt Dialogues,' curated by Dr Alexandra Toland and first shown at the World Soil Congress in Korea in 2014. Another arts/environment organisation, 'Touchstone Collaborations,' co-ordinated a series of soil-inspired activities over eight 'Soil Saturdays,' which successfully engaged visitors with soil scientists, local allotment holders, organic and biodynamic farmers, market gardeners and community food-growing projects. Touchstone also organised a World Soil Day event at Hawkwood College in Stroud on 5 December 2015.

'Deep Roots,' a second exhibition of work by several established international artists, whose work has engaged with soils, sometimes over several decades, was shown at Falmouth Art Gallery in the autumn of 2015 and will be shown again at Peninsula Arts, Plymouth University from 16 January to 19 March 2016. This will include work by Mel Chin, whose artwork uses special hyper-accumulator plants to extract heavy metals from contaminated land (Plate 3), and Claire Pentecost, whose work includes refashioning soil into the shapes of gold ingots, a reflection of its true worth (Plate 4). Claire says: "my soil ingots propose a new system of value based on living soil, a form of currency that anyone can create by composting."

Both exhibitions continue to be accompanied by a range of other participatory activities. During the Dartington Food Fair in Devon in May 2015, landscape architect Charlotte Rathbone ran a 'Tasting the Place' workshop inspired by the work of Californian artist Laura Parker, connecting the 'taste' of local soils with local wines and cheeses. Artist Peter Ward ran a workshop using earth pigments. He explains: "the adoption of earth pigments in my work has allowed me to celebrate that which inspires my existence - Nature itself."



**Plate 3:** Mel Chin, *Revival Field* 1991-93, Pig's Eye Landfill, St Paul, Minnesota (MN), USA.



**Plate 4:** Claire Pentecost, *Soil-erg*, in *Deep Roots* at Falmouth Art Gallery, Cornwall, UK.

Of course, we are all aware that 2015 was the International Year of Soils (IYS), and we are delighted that *Soil Culture* was accepted as part of the official programme. The downside is that, against the expectation of the UN that governments of participating countries will support IYS contributions, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) refused to provide any funding that would have supported the *Soil Culture* programme and the raising of public awareness of the plight of our soils. We find this surprising because, as early as 2005, DEFRA's audit of soils-related education and awareness found that existing

provision was hard to find and interpret. Although it indicated that exhibitions provided an excellent form of learning, it noted that no UK museum had produced one on the subject since 1984. What perhaps we should find less surprising is that DEFRA's lack of support was consistent with the role that the UK coalition government and farming unions played in 2014 over wrecking the European Soil Framework Directive, an initiative that aimed to give our soils the same protection as air and water.

As the International Year of Soils drew to a close, I could not fail to be somewhat disappointed by its achievements in the UK. The United Nations itself never seems to have had the resources to support IYS, and the UK's Environment Agency and Natural England both seem to have largely ignored the opportunities it might have given. Given more adequate resources, IYS and *Soil Culture* might have attracted far greater media attention than they have which, in turn, would have boosted public awareness to a far greater extent.

Perhaps it was too much to ask, too soon? We can now start to plan for the opportunities that the next 'World Soil Congress' in Glasgow in 2022 might offer: but let's hope we do not have to wait that long!

### Footnote

Dr Clive Adams is the founding Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, which in December 2015 moved from the University of Exeter Campus to Schumacher College at Dartington Hall in Devon. Schumacher will soon launch a new MA course in Arts and Ecology. A version of this article first appeared in 'Resurgence & Ecologist' in March/April 2015.

'Soil Culture,' a 120 page full colour book which encompasses all aspects of the three-year long programme, and was published on 16 January 2016 to coincide with the start of the 'Deep Roots' exhibition at Peninsula Arts, Plymouth University, at a special exhibition price of £13. It includes a foreword by Patrick Holden, essays by Bruce Lascelles and Daro Montag, together with a full catalogue of exhibitions and documentation of research and activities.

Further details can be found at: [www.ccanw.co.uk](http://www.ccanw.co.uk)

### References

G. Harvey (1997). *The Killing of the Countryside*. Jonathan Cape, London. 240 pp.  
Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (2016). *Soil Culture, Bringing the Arts down to Earth*. Schumacher College, Totnes (UK). 120 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-9932192-1-4).

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