LIKE A REALLY GOOD CARROT
Harrell Fletcher

The title of the exhibition I’ve curated for the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco is a poem by Issa, a Japanese Haiku poet who wrote in the early nineteenth century. The poem was originally used as a working title for the show, while I was figuring out what exactly the show was going to be about. Like Issa a lot, so I often use his poetry in my work. Once we figured out that the show would focus on the intersection of art and agriculture it was not clear if the title still made sense but the way that I interpret the poem is as a comment on the impossibility of trying to make “art” when “nature” does a much better job of art making. So we decided to keep the title since most of the people included in the show had connections to nature through agriculture of one sort or another. In a way, they all collaborate with aspects of the natural world rather than try to make work that is separate and more about their own individual cultures.

Two years after I received my MFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts, I went back to school to study organic farming. The program attended was at UC Santa Cruz and is called “The Apprenticeship in Ecological Horticulture, and Sustainable Food Systems.” I lived and worked with forty other apprentices on a farm on the campus of UCSC. It was a really interesting experience to learn about farming and localized food distribution systems after having spent most of my life learning about how to make art and how to function in the art world. Young artists and farmers looked similar, but ideologically they are complete opposites. Artists are trained to value originality, non-functionalism, individualism, and they generally all assume that if their art is shown and sold it will be the responsibility of a gallery to handle it. Small farmers share information and ideas and if there are positive results, it is expected that others will try doing the same thing or something similar.

The products that farmers produce have an obvious function (to be eaten)

I started to wonder about the possibility of applying some of the ways small-scale agriculture functions to my practice as an artist. Even when I was still in graduate school I had questioned the value of art making and said many times that I hoped my work could be accessible and appealing as “a really good carrot.” Needless to say most of my fellow art students didn’t seem to understand or relate to what I was talking about. Regardless, I have spent the last couple of decades attempting to make artwork that is locally meaningful and accessible although none of my projects so far has actually achieved the high value I place on really good vegetables.

It has been interesting to me to observe an ever-expanding set of agriculture related art projects developing over the last several years. By that I don’t just mean art that represents agriculture, (though in the exhibition we include a few examples of that sort of thing from the past, along with an amazing series of documentary photographs from the Delano grape boycott in the 1960s). Instead, I mean projects by artists, art related people, and organizations that are site and audience specific, participatory, and localized.

Let me lay out a little analogy that I think is useful to consider. I’d like to compare agriculture and the commercial art world to small farming and localized art projects. In agriculture vast tracts of land are used to produce a small number of crops (using chemicals, etc. though part doesn’t really fit in the analogy) that are then shipped to remote locations around the country or world so that people can buy produce that may not be able to be grown locally or is out of season. Due to the time and potential damage involved in shipping, crops that are under ripe and super hardy are preferred over ripe and delicate varieties that might rot or become damaged during the shipping process. In the traditional commercial version of the art world, artists make objects in studios that they hope will be shipped across the country or world to be shown and possibly sold in galleries. The art works that are produced tend to be easily transported, and “universally understood” so that they can go to any white cube space and function and be understood in the same way. By conditioning artists into making work for this system, they wind up gravitating towards making objects, developing marketable signature styles, and creating work that isn’t literal or specific to the site.
solidarity. The fast ended during a mass in Delano with Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who said he was there “out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time."

Cesar knew the farm workers couldn’t win with a strike alone. So for the first time in American history, Cesar and the United Farm Workers (the result of a 1966 merger between the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the National Farm Workers Association) turned to a boycott during a major labor dispute.

Hundreds of grape strikers traveled across the U.S. and Canada, telling their stories and organizing support. Thousands of supporters tirelessly helped organize the boycott. Millions stopped eating grapes. By 1970, table grape growers signed their first union contracts, granting workers better pay, benefits, and protections.

In the decades that followed, Cesar Chavez and the UFW continued using nonviolent strikes, boycotts, marches and fasts to help farm workers stand up for their rights and gather support from ordinary Americans to aid their struggles. Those efforts continue to this day through the efforts of the United Farm Workers of America and the Cesar Chavez Foundation. * * *

Cesar Chavez Foundation is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization founded under a different name by Cesar Chavez in 1966. It builds or renovates and operates thousands of units of high-quality affordable housing, runs a nine station educational Spanish-language radio network in four states reaching 500,000 daily listeners and provides educational tutoring programs for under-served children as well as service learning to preserve Cesar Chavez’s legacy. It also operates the National Chavez Center on 187 acres amid oaks and spectacular rock outcroppings in California’s Tehachapi Mountains at La Paz in Keene, where Cesar Chavez lived and worked during his last quarter century. It includes a 7,000 square foot Visitor Center with large galleries that now features the Delano Grape Strike exhibit plus Cesar’s carefully preserved office and library, and beautifully landscaped Memorial Gardens around his gravestone. On the north grounds is the recently renovated Villa La Paz, a sprawling world-class conference and educational center in the restored 17,000 square foot mission-style structure where Cesar held community gatherings and meetings. Villa La Paz now hosts space, resources and capacity building for civic, business, labor, community and other non-profit groups to meet and plan in the shadow of Cesar’s legacy.

For more on the Cesar Chavez Foundation, visit www.chavezfoundation.org.

PIE RANCH
Joyce Grimm

Our mission is to inspire and connect people to the source of their food, and to work together to bring greater health to the food system from seed to table.

In 2002, three founding partners—Nancy Vail, Jered Lawson, and Karen Heisler—purchased a triangular 14-acre property on California’s San Mateo coast to establish Pie Ranch. The shape of the land, and their shared vision to create a model center of sustainable farming and food system education, inspired the farm’s distinctly fitting name.

Since 2005, Pie Ranch has operated as a working farm, hosting youth from regional high schools to participate in farm-based programs and activities. Pie Ranch also works with educators and community collaborators in diverse urban, suburban and rural settings to help students apply what they’ve learned at Pie Ranch in their daily lives. In addition, Pie Ranch mentors aspiring farmers as resident apprentices who spend a full year immersed in all facets of farm operations and marketing.

What we do:

GROW

Our sustainable farming practices emphasize soil fertility, biological diversity, growing for local markets, and creating a relationship-based food system. Delicious, fresh, seasonal, humane; We grow food to sustain ourselves, our community, and our environment.

On our pie-slice shaped piece of land, we grow a variety of vegetables including wheat for breads, fruits for filling, raise chickens for eggs, goats and cows for milk and butter, and vegetables for healthy meals. We sell our crops at our farm stand, to local restaurants and bakeries—including Companion Bakeshop & Mission Pie—and have a Community Supported Agriculture program serving our Mission High School students.

EDUCATE

Youth Education & Leadership Development
An integral piece of Pie Ranch’s vision is to partner with youth around food and farming. The youth we work with are usually high school students from the Bay Area, Pacifi ca and Pescadero; however, we also serve other groups from all over the globe.

Our main focus is on providing the opportunity for repeat visits rather than one-time experiences on the farm. We believe that repeat visits build upon themselves; youth connect to the land, to the staff, and to each other. Trust and respect grow as youth experience the cycle of days, weeks, months, seasons, and years.

Farmer Apprenticeships
Pie Ranch is a unique sustainable food system education and advocacy organization. We seek to inspire and create a new generation of farmers, educators, entrepreneurs, and advocates with the knowledge and the skills to work together to build a healthy, sustainable, inclusive food system. Our work is based on the assumption that a sustainable food system can only emerge when both rural and urban communities understand and are accountable to each aspect of the system.

Emerging Farmer Program — Apprenticeships & Internships at Pie Ranch
Our Emerging Farmer Program includes our year-long Apprenticeship Program & Summer Internship Program

New in 2012:

HomeSlice: Mission High School Youth CSA
Pie Ranch’s HomeSlice internship is an employment program committed to youth development and leadership, with the goal to grow young farmers, food justice activists and educators. HomeSlice engages high school seniors in starting a CSA at their school with produce, grains, dry beans and eggs from Pie Ranch. This pilot program will be the first incarnation of HomeSlice and will run from March-June 2012.
Soil Kitchen was a temporary, windmill-powered architectural intervention and multi-use space where citizens enjoy free soup in exchange for soil samples from their neighborhood. Placed across the street from the Don Quijote monument at 2nd Street and Girard Avenue in North Philadelphia, Soil Kitchen inhabits an abandoned building and places a windmill atop to pay homage to the popular windmill scene in Cervantes’, Don Quijote. Rather than being “adversarial giants” as they were in the novel, the windmill at Soil Kitchen is a functioning symbol of self-reliance and literally breathing new life into a formerly abandoned building. The windmill also serves as a sculptural invitation to imagine a potential green energy future and to participate in the material exchange of soil for soup—literally taking matters into one’s own hands. This exchange provides an entry point for further dialogue and action available in the space through workshops, events and informal exchange. Soil Kitchen provides sustenance, re-established value of natural resources through a trade economy, and tools to inform and respond to possible contaminants in the soil.

Soil Kitchen was commissioned by Philadelphia’s Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy using a generous grant from the William Penn Foundation. Soil Kitchen offered free pH and heavy metal testing and produced a Philadelphia Brownfields Map and Soil Archive. In addition to serving soup and testing soil, the building is a hub for exchange and learning, free workshops including wind turbine construction, urban agriculture, soil remediation, composting, lectures by soil scientists and cooking lessons.
Only Birds Sing the Music of Heaven in this World

I lived briefly at The Farm in the mid-eighties and we had animals running through our studio while we worked. Located under the freeway at the corner of Army Street (currently Cesar Chavez) and Potrero Avenue in San Francisco, The Farm was a remarkable rural oasis and hands-on educational farm with vegetable gardens, chickens, geese, rabbits, and goats and a pre-school as well as a library, a gallery space and rehearsal and performance space for theater and punk rock bands. Buildings in the same complex housed Survival Research Laboratories, Subterranean Records, and Cloudkick. Later in the eighties it would become exclusively an artist live/work space.

Artist PK Steffen taught digital arts at the California College of the Arts from 1996–2004 while living at The Farm. PK currently lives in Tuscan, Arizona and is known for quoting Baldessari: “Hopeless desire—to make words and images interchangeable, yet it is the futility that engrosses me...” PK and I reminisced recently about The Farm life.

—Natasha Boas, MOCFA curator

PB: What do you mean by “home”?

PKS: It felt like home because of the great community of artists living there, the fact that there was a thriving community garden in the midst of the city and because Marilyn seemed like such an incredibly interesting, kind but very direct honest individual. It was like no other space in the city. Typically there are good workspaces, or good neighbors, but the combination at The Farm was unique. It felt like a challenging but inviting environment—one where an artist could be fully engaged in the community and in their work.

NB: Can you describe the community for me?

PKS: What an incredible and productive mix of talent. There were a number of performing artists such as Mark Pauline’s Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) and Chip’s People Eater. They would do mini shows in the back including one incredible performance for a BBC documentary. The window used to literally bow inwards and...
light up at night as they tested the jet engine or the flamethrower. There were teachers such as our next door neighbor who taught at the bilingual school up the street. There were artists using high tech production for video and installation. There were dancers. There were designers. There were crafts people. Everyone was busy producing something. We used to knock on each other’s doors to enlist support or expertise in what we were making or invite a neighbor to collaborate in a piece for a show.

NB: It sounds like a real laboratory situation. What about the whole technology, early Net and website activity at The Farm?

PKS: Yeah, some of my early net-based art developed there. That was the beginning of the Net as we know it. We used to project web pages up onto the walls of the spaces one knew what I was talking about when I described a web page or how I made one.

The Net became a central part of my process as an artist and my teaching at California College of Arts and Crafts. I taught many classes on net art, creating an artist portfolio and helped out other artists like Harrell to gain a presence on the web. I used to hand out portfolios on floppy disks with a copy of Netscape 0.96 beta because most people had no clue about modernism. I included printed instructions on how to install the app and locate the home page! We used to distribute Quicktime videos, images and text based pieces via online sites such as the Well and BMUG. Those were the early days of Net art at The Farm...

NB: The music scene was really important at the Farm in the seventies and eighties. A stabbing at one of the last shows. Due to police crackdowns and insurance reasons, the music came to an end. I believe that at that point Marilyn purchased the space since there was no longer enough income to run the space. I think the circus school may have been there for a while still but then they converted the whole thing into live/work in the late eighties.

NB: After speaking with one of the original founders, Bonnie Ora Sherk, I learned that The Farm was originally called Crossroads Community. The Farm because it was at the crossroads of four neighborhoods. How did the shift from community center to live/work space change the scene at The Farm?

PKS: It switched modes when it became a live/work space. It was no longer the open community space it had been in the past. People who lived there before such as the founders lamented the change. It became a community for the residents and their friends and collaborators. This was a totally different model and much smaller core group than the founders had envisioned. It wasn’t a collaborative work funded by what the group produced. We paid rent (covered by rent control yes so below market) and there was no communal indoor space except for the laundry room, hallways, front garden and community garden.

Even so, it still felt like a communal space to us. We were constantly surrounded by visitors. There was a constant stream of people coming to help out at SRL or Chip’s group for example or Sergio Bicerri’s print shop clients and skateboard filming crew. During the day the yard was full of kids from the Buena Vista school across the street or people who didn’t live there but came to hang out. It became a bit of an issue at times because of things getting stolen or new residents feeling uncomfortable when someone would climb the fence to gain entry.

NB: Tell me about SRL and Mark Pauline—the myth of Mark is huge around The Farm and beyond.

PKS: All those machines that were used in impromptu shows, tests and rehearsals and the BBC Documentary—those were done in the yard of The Farm. I have some really good Mark Pauline stories but it used to pass him off if I shared them with anyone. I saw firsthand how they tested stuff and risked life and limb. They are fearless. Mark always took that to mean I was saying he was reckless.

NB: Fearless might be an understatement. Did the farm school still function there?

PKS: Yes, it was still going while we were there. The kids who visited from city schools on field trips contributed greatly to the sense of a vibrant artistic community. The kids’ art projects hung on the walls of the building and some of the residents taught there and contributed to lessons at the school. The school was still there, the garden continued—part of which became the public De La Raza Park. There were no animals, but the artistic residency continued albeit in a different form. We still considered it to be “The Farm” but to the founders, I’m sure it wasn’t anything like it had been.

and share other artists’ work from China or Russia. Seems crazy now that I can access everything from my phone. Funny, I designed Harrell Fletcher’s first website at The Farm actually.

NB: Can you describe the “early Net days” in SF a bit more?

PKS: The video projection parties were done at a video collective that was based in a warehouse somewhere near Brannan and Third Streets. They had all the equipment that they also used in raves. I don’t remember the address anymore and their name changed every week according to the theme. The shows they did inspired me to share the web with every artist I knew. No
Project Grow is an art studio and urban farm in Portland, Oregon. In November of 2008, artist Natasha Wheat proposed Project Grow to the Port City Developmental Center, a sheltered work-shop in Portland, Oregon. It was initially an intervention in creating a new culture, economy, and labor option to what was exclusively factory-labor offered there at the time.

Sheltered workshops are places of employment that often use a "piece rate" of a penny per piece to compensate their developmentally disabled employees. They exist across the United States, as well as internationally. Customers of these factories are often military, commercial, mass transit and medical contractors such as Aramark, Haliburton and the Federal Reserve Bank.

Within nine months of its beginnings, Project Grow saw the launch of a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) from its thriving farm, and had several exhibitions of work from its artists. The artists and farmers of the program continue to earn paychecks from art sold, lessons taught, lectures given, commissioned projects, and as recognition of their efforts and contribution to the farm.

Project Grow now occupies two acres of land, on four lots within the inner city of Portland. It is home to four goats, thirty chickens, and is an ongoing collaboration between fifty artists and farmers. There is now an extensive fiber arts and woodworking program at the site of The Port City Development Center, in addition to a gallery, art studio and The North Portland Farm.

Natasha Wheat is an artist who is interested in sameness, institutional life, power structures, utopian attempts, and temporary emancipation. Her work often takes the form of situation constructions, making temporary spaces and objects that amplify or intervene in these dynamics.

Wheat has exhibited at Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles; Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, and numerous exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.
Farm Store @ MOCFA is an installation located within the museum shop. As a part of the show Only Birds Sing the Music of Heaven in This World, Farm Store @ MOCFA presents objects and books that represent artists, farmers, makers, chefs, growers, gardeners, and activists as they navigate agricultural production and use. The products and resources at Farm Store @ MOCFA are separated into several categories that each address a different aspect of agricultural production and use: farming and gardening, cooking and baking, preservation, and textiles. Farm Store @ MOCFA features books and other products produced by other participants in the show as well as products from local, regional, and national artists, writers, and makers. A bibliography for Farm Store @ MOCFA has been assembled with the help of participants in the show and will be available to the public. The goal of Farm Store @ MOCFA is to be a central resource for visitors who are interested in getting involved in agriculture and food activism at any level. Visitors will be able to purchase products and books and bring home free resources that relate to a full spectrum of thinking about art and agriculture.

Sadie Harmon is an Oakland-based interdisciplinary artist and educator. Her work looks at the interactions between education, community, craft, and the ineffable. Currently, she is pursuing an MFA in textiles and sculpture at California College of the Arts. She has done projects at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Esperanza Community Services and the National Institute of Art and Disabilities in Richmond. In Spring of 2012 she will be artist in residence at Mercy Retirement and Care Center.

Artist John Cerney grew up in Salinas, California and displays his work to the public alongside the highways of California and the Midwest. His giant plywood cut-outs tell a story, either honoring a field laborer or amusing the passing motorists with flights of fancy. For this exhibition, the Museum of Craft and Folk Art teamed up with Chris Bunn, a Salinas farmer who had worked with John Cerney to create a series of giant field workers back in the 1990s, to commission another mural-sized portrait to be installed in Yerba Buena Lane. John Cerney was asked to create a cut-out of a single field worker, in a typical pose. Chris Bunn invited field irrigator Jose Lepe Lepe, who has worked with him in Salinas for over 30 years, to be the subject of the painting. In the portrait, Jose oversees the irrigation of a just-planted field of lettuce.

Eliza Gregory is an artist based in San Francisco. Her work focuses on cultural anthropology, cultural identity, and community development. Eliza went to Salinas to meet Chris Bunn, Jose Lepe Lepe and John Cerney and see the process of this painting being made. Her interviews with the three men and her images from Salinas are available to see in Only Birds Sing the Music of Heaven in This World.
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content or context. If artists think about their audience at all, they think of it in general terms, not as local and unique to context, much less as actual people that they could meet and be influenced by.

In the case of localized forms of art, culture there are a few models that have been utilized by many different farms all over the world. In the case of farmers mar-

lerts, local farmers come to a central place on a regular basis to sell their produce to local people. The farmers or their direct representatives can communicate with their customers. Questions about farming conditions can be answered, suggestions can be made, the produce can be freshly harvested and riper, the transportation can be very limited. CSA’s or community supported agriculture projects work by having a group of consumers paying a farm upfront at the start of a season for a box of produce each week over several months. By paying at the start of the season the consumer invests in the farm and then receives whatever is grown and harvested by the farm. CSA’s tend to send out news-

letters with the shares of produce that give updates on the farm and suggest recipes and other ideas. The shareholders are gen-

erally invited to the farm for tours and workdays so that they can have even more direct relationships with the place where their food is grown and the people who grow it. Community gardens and farms are located in urban and suburban areas and allow local people to tend their own garden plots or work with others to grow produce that is shared by the group.

What would art related projects be like if they functioned more like localized agri-
culture instead of commercial art world art? I don’t think there is a hard and fast set of rules, but the general idea from my point of view is that there would be a relationship between the artists and the audience, which could either turn into collaborations, or at least involve audience participation, in situ projects that are specific to the place where they are made and shown would be a greater priority than making work that is general and could be exhibited anywhere and generically. The work might not take the form of an object that is easily transport-

able and saleable. Instead the work could be ephemeral, or very long term, it could change over time, it might be multifaceted involving objects, events, publications, etc… It might not take place in a gallery or art context at all.

Systems create feedback loops, commercial art and industrial agriculture create certain relationships and products, localized agri-
culture and art projects develop different ones. I think there is room in the world for all of these systems to exist, but the problem, as I see it, is that right now the two approaches are way out of balance, and because of that, the localized versions need more support so that they can develop further.

Obviously, not all localized art projects need to be farm related, but since that is the focus of the exhibition I have organized, let me describe the way I see one of the projects in Only Birds Sing the Music of Heaven in this World as an example. John Cerney makes large-scale paintings of farmers and farm workers and installs them in the farm fields where those people work. John does a lot of other kinds of public paintings as well, but I’m focusing on the farm ones for the show and this text. I’ve driven past John’s paintings along Hwy 101 in the Salinas area for years, and was always intrigued about who had made them and why. It turns out that John gets commissioned by local farmers to make and install his paintings at various local farms. In some cases they function partly as advertising for the farm, in other cases they are more like monuments.

I find John’s work really striking and effective. It is interesting to compare his practice to a more status quo painter. Both of them make their work in a studio context, but John’s work is based on local people who he has actually interacted with—talked to, eaten meals with, taken photos of, met families of etc… When the work is installed, he installs it in a location where the subjects as well as other local people can see and comment on it (along with millions of passersby). One project has lead to another (from word of mouth and public visibility) and John has created a substantial career that is artistically, financially, and socially fulfilling. In the case of a status quo painter they produce work in a studio that is located somewhere—NYC, or Oakland, or Portland or anywhere else—but the work they make is generally not intended for local consumption. Instead they are making work for the art world (this is the case even with the NYC artist who might be showing their work in NYC but they are generally making it for a generalized art world rather than their own neighborhood or community. If the work is sold it will be sold to any collector anywhere in the world as opposed to a localized one. Another point of difference is that John represents himself, whereas in the conventional art world artists are represented by galleries and a gallery system that includes publications, art fairs, museums, etc. Other localized projects take less traditional forms, but I think John’s career, as an unorthodox painter is inter-

esting to compare to the ways that painters typically attempt to work in the art world. This exhibition includes a variety of different projects and practitioners who have all found ways to work in significant, localized ways. Rather than go into detail about all of them, I have invited each participant to represent their ideas through texts they have written, documentation and artworks of various kinds, as well as a series of public events that have been created as part of Only Birds Sing the Music of Heaven in this World.

—Harrell Fletcher

Portland, Oregon

March 1st, 2012