

Learning from nature through art

by Cornelia Steinhäuser

Translation from the German original (<https://nach-haltig-gedacht.de/2023/06/15/von-der-kunst-von-der-natur-zu-lernen/>) by Olivia Leggatt



In my research, I examine various initiatives that aim to question and change the prevailing agri-food system. This includes numerous approaches that avoid pesticides, create diversity in and around the fields, protect the soil, create food sovereignty and much more. Among others they are classified as organic, biodynamic or regenerative agriculture and can be summarized as agroecological approaches in connection with achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (HLPE 2019). Due to the richness of nuances these categories cannot be clearly distinguished from one another, nor can their practices.

Numerous initiatives are currently taking place in Münster, such as the nutrition council (Ernährungsrat), the Compost Festival and the designation as an organic city (Bio-Stadt).

Some of these approaches focus on healthy, sufficient food production. Others also describe themselves as holistic and take greater account of the aesthetic, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human-nature relationships when dealing with the soil or the seasonality of life (see also Steinhäuser 2020). Ultimately, a being-in-the-world can develop here, a network of all living things, in which the distinction between humans and nature disappears in perception. Permaculture is such a holistic approach that was launched in the 1970s, inspired by indigenous knowledge (see Mollison 2017, Holmgreen 2016).

It is based on a post-growth understanding of sustainability. The so-called social permaculture, in turn, transfers the relationships of a garden and gardening to human communities without separating people from nature (Macnamara 2012). A fundamental idea of permaculture is to learn from nature (for example, to imitate ecological cycles).

Facing this perspective, the question arises as to whether this transfer from nature to society is a simplified representation of a naive human view towards humans self (and nature) that does not do justice to their complexity.

We focused on these questions in more detail in a case study with the community of the artists residency “Künstlerdorf Schöppingen” (Steinhäuser 2022). As part of the fair and sustainable

transformation of this residency program for artists, the project for 2022 was currently underway: “Lebensraum Künstlerdorf- Von der Natur lernen” (“Ecosystem Künstlerdorf – Learning from Nature!”) Various activities took place, such as creating a garden together, guided by an artist, or seminars on the application of permaculture principles to art institutions.

I accompanied this transformation process from a scientific perspective. We reflected on different perceptions of nature: From nature as a lovely, tangible place to nature as an outdated construction or even ideas that can take on discriminatory traits - for example against 'invasive' plant species. At the same time, we discussed to what extent permaculture (and gardening) can provide inspiration to learn from nature or to transfer this learning to society. As expected, the observations were very different from creative to affirmative to skeptical. In any case, the discussion invited people to come to terms with themselves and the world around them, and in some cases these conversations and activities have had a lasting impact on their own webs of relationships as well as the community. What was the real goal, beyond all intellectual debates: To slow down and think about what is important in life.

We also invited landscape ecology students to gardening and exchange ideas with the artists (see photo).

The project is not yet completed. The exchange with the community in the “Künstlerdorf” and the artists` perspectives helped me significantly in reflecting my ethnographic and landscape-ecological understanding of human-nature relationships (in gardening or in alternative agricultural food systems). Thus, it became deeper and more sensitive on the diversity of the phenomenon.

I am motivated to explore in which spaces we can think together about the challenges of our time and help to shape them.

About the author:

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