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Eco-House: Creating a Space for Eco-Arts Education

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Eco-House: Creating a Space for Eco-Arts Education

Part of the journal section “Forum: UNI’s Ecology”

Angela Waseskuk “Eco-House: Creating a Space for Eco-Arts Education”

1. The beginnings of Eco-House were formed through conversations I had with undergraduate students enrolled in Elizabeth Sutton’s art history course “Art, Ecology, and Empire” in the fall of 2015. The discussions always began with great enthusiasm for the content, and then turned towards the depressing reality of what that content meant for the future of our planet. Significantly, the students also understood the surprising closeness of issues presented in class—extractivism, water quality and availability, animal exploitation, and Native American displacement and colonialism—on their own lives and the local ecology of the Cedar Valley. I heard passion, anger, and frustration in these students’ voices. After speaking with Elizabeth, the idea of a studio extension of her course seemed a logical and proactive outgrowth for the students to address their frustrations through art.
2. To find meaning and purpose in one’s artistic practice—to deeply care about what one adds to the bottomless pit of contemporary culture—can haunt the most seasoned of artists. Creating timely and meaningful content is a challenging idea to pass on to our art students. There is no teaching what this is or how to find it; we can only build the framework in which they can realize it themselves.
3. The year before, I read Judy Chicago’s *Institutional Time* and was inspired by her collaborative, content-focused approach to teaching studio art. She wrote about *Woman House*, an installation created in the early 1970’s with artist and colleague Miriam Schapiro and their students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. They acquired an old house that they collaboratively altered for the purpose of a feminist art installation. The house was a physical structure and also a metaphorical frame for memory, social and familial structures, communities, and the ecology of place. Here is where the name *Eco-House* was born. *Eco-House* would be an interdisciplinary studio extension of “Art, Ecology, and Empire” with an emphasis on content-based research and making.
4. Many of the students enrolled in the class knowing that it would be an experimental exploration into eco-art and local environmental issues. However, because this course necessarily was taught under the heading of Advanced Performance Art, I had a couple of students who were quite resistant to the content frame. This was, in a way, a parallel to the significant hurdle faced by those of us pushing for climate change reform: How do we get people to care enough to engage? As the instructor, I emphasized the importance of acknowledging ideas that are new to us and encouraged these students to stick with the course in the spirit of

flexibility and adaptability. I asked them to consider the value of new ideas to their own artistic evolution. Throughout the semester, three methods were used to enhance student learning and encourage engagement: bringing in visiting experts, exploring the surrounding area, and providing a public platform for the students to share their work and research.

5. Early in the semester, Kamyar Enshayan spoke with the students about the importance of understanding and addressing local ecological issues. I witnessed an attitude shift in most of the class following his conversation with them. Those that were already on board with the subject matter came to realize that our local ecology is just as crucial as the melting of ice caps and dying coral reefs. My more reluctant students began to realize this as well, and see how their abilities as artists could contribute to larger conversations. Visiting artists also shared how their activism melded with their art practice. Waterloo eco-artist and activist Margaret Whiting demonstrated her knowledge and passion for eco-justice at the local level, and social engagement artist and Alfred University professor Michelle Illuminato facilitated student-community conversations to better understand civic impact. Hearing multiple perspectives provided students with multiple entry points to engage with the content and build their own artistic interpretations.

6. We also completed spatial exploration exercises. These exercises, traditional in a performance art class, became a way for students to gain awareness of the places they see regularly, but with which they rarely interact. In one exercise, students mapped walks for each other in order to share their appreciation of a particular area on or near campus with their peers. These walks also had to incorporate some kind of performative action, such as being blindfolded, or going through the motions of an action taken from a daily routine, but performed in an unexpected place. These actions heightened our sensory perceptions of each place.

7. I had asked the students early on to begin focusing on a local ecological issue. One of my most reluctant students at the beginning of the course (who later expressed deep connection to the work he had completed) shared his initial reaction to this question: he did not know why he should address a local issue in his work because he did not have any knowledge about the local ecology. As he explained to his peers at the end of the course, he now understood this was exactly why it was important for him to do so. He needed to learn the ecology to care about and for it. One of his last performances included a daily ritual of reading his favorite literature to individual trees on campus. This realization and newfound care came out of this time spent outdoors in class.

8. The semester concluded with a public exhibition of the students' eco-artworks in the UNI Museum space in Rod Library. The exhibition coincided with the UNI CARES event. Students participated in the showcase at Maucker Union by creating a large net from unsalable fabric collected from area second hand shops. At the close of the event, the students "cast" this large net to attendees and guided them over to the Eco-House exhibition at the museum. The installation, which included pieces from the UNI Museum's collection, was an important celebration of the work the students had done over the course of the semester.

9. Although students complained about the emphasis placed on research, this content is what provided students with the inspiration that drove their creation. Many students were surprised by

the depth of ideas they achieved and the powerful ways in which their work was able to communicate to an audience outside of the art department. Many left with a desire to be involved in sustainability efforts outside of the classroom. One student started a t-shirt drive for a local music event so people could up-cycle old shirts and have them printed at the event; another student applied to work for Green Iowa AmeriCorps; another became interested in the sustainability aspect of the tiny house movement; and another is leading a student Humane Society group on campus. Even though another *Eco-House* may not be in the near future, the students have taken the initiative to find their own outlets for the care they have for living things and the world in which we all live.



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