**AFTER BARUCHELLO:**

**AGRICULTURAL ENCOUNTERS in CONTEMPORARY ART**

*‘Knowledge is changing today. The all-political is dying; the monarchy of sciences said to be hard, is coming to a close. The science of the things of the world will have to communicate just as much as the things of the world do, which do it much better than humans do, who don’t always want to do it.’* (Michel Serres)[[1]](#endnote-1)

Political ecology is possible thanks to (in)habitual experimentations with givens such as ‘nature’, ‘culture’, and what it means to be ‘human’. These necessarily elaborate tasks or consistent activations promote states of flux so that formations and dispersions might inform collectivity at the register of everyday life. Various art practices of the 1970s mark points for thinking rurality within visual culture, when critical engagement began to challenge the humanist perspective that creativity is indebted to the earth for *re*-sourcing and problematized the authorial/architectural mode for both private and public space. Our relationship to dwelling sites was scrutinized alongside the concepts of sustainability and permaculture. By taking Gianfranco Baruchello’s *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* (1973) as the primary case study that broke the boundaries of pre-established categories of art (or artifice) and nature (as a condition of labour and perseverance), this chapter explores how the formalism of the artwork that once inhibited the fluid experience of everyday life by isolating a disinterested aesthetic encounter has since been deconstructed to allow for slippages between art, design, and activism. It also considers selected projects by John Gerrard, Atelier van Lieshout, Futurefarmers and Fernando García-Dory in order to investigate the well-trodden dichotomy of nature and culture, thereby producing a ‘non-knowledge’ grounded by ‘ecomaterialism’ (or acknowledgement of a thing’s agential capacity when disconnected from human interference), ‘postmedievalism’ (or the postmodern/contemporary moment recalibrated through the pre-modern ), and ‘uncivilization’[[2]](#endnote-2) (or the wilful refusal of emancipatory logic regarding environmental crises). Not knowing suggests a clearing in which what were once the borders or limits of the everyday, the urban, and the rural might be revealed as potential lines of flight instead.

When thinking about rurality one usually tends to force a juxtaposition with its opposite, the urban. Both spatial categories are also temporal if different rates of routine or different ideas of labour and leisure are what determine the everyday experience of them. It is colloquially understood that to inhabit one is to envisage the other, to pit the energetic cityscape against the pastoral landscape: ‘the grass is always greener on the other side’ is the axiom that comes to mind. Indeed, the proverbial ‘good life’ not yet lived says something quite profound about human drives that resonate within visual art and its histories, traditionally fields of representation. With an aim to reclaim the ecological for the arts, John Burnside has suggested a renewed poetic intimacy with the world might effectively redefine scientific knowledge. He cites fellow poet Mark Doty, who has considered the creative impulse behind a seventeenth century still life painting by Jan Davidsz de Heem. Both writers not only conclude that it is impossible to ever scientifically ‘know’ the objects that are oysters and lemons in this mysterious image, but also that it is science *enough* to artistically approximate their ontology.[[3]](#endnote-3) Poetry (or art), therefore, could be construed as a ‘science of belonging’ or a ‘science of dwelling’ that aims to build eco-critical bridges between human subjects and their environments by retaining a sense of unfamiliarity encouraged by conscious attentiveness. Conversely, in the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-19), Arthur Schopenhauer writes:

So much is achieved simply and solely by the inner force of an artistic disposition; but that purely objective frame of mind is facilitated and favoured from without by accommodating objects, by the abundance of natural beauty that invites contemplation, and even presses itself on us. Whenever it presents itself to our gaze all at once, it almost always succeeds in snatching us, although only for a few moments, from subjectivity, from the thraldom of the will, and transferring us into the state of pure knowledge. This is why the man tormented by passions, want, or care, is so suddenly revived, cheered, and comforted by a single, free glance into nature. The storm of passions, the pressure of desire and fear, and all the miseries of willing are then at once calmed and appeased in a marvellous way. For at the moment when, torn from the will, we have given ourselves up to pure, will-less knowing, we have stepped into another world, so to speak, where everything that moves our will, and thus violently agitates us, no longer exists.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is telling that the philosopher also turns to Dutch still life and landscape painting to substantiate his claim; genres that, for him, provided a crystalline *knowledge* of the world due to their Platonic verisimilitude. That is, one’s ‘restless state of mind’ could be calmed by ‘insignificant’ rural objects (e.g. a windmill) thanks to the artist’s decision to anchor them as compositional focal points.[[5]](#endnote-5) It could be argued that the dichotomy of urban and rural, as more clearly opposed in the nineteenth century, informed Schopenhauer’s critique of psychosomatic or perceptive states. Yet, according to Timothy Morton’s contemporary reappraisal of the ‘ecological,’ any window into nature is necessarily artificial as it maintains an expansive rift between subject and object, while at the same time confuses the ‘principle of individuation’ – that is, the knowledge of the self (driven by desire) is reduced before the majesty of the world at a moment of recognition that *attunes* the viewer to his or her environment.[[6]](#endnote-6) Aesthetically, for Schopenhauer (departing from Kant), this momentary and ambient loss of subjectivity to objectivity can be defined as ‘knowledge’ obtained when phenomena signal noumena via the work of art.

Such an evacuation of the knowing individuated subject becomes problematic if one considers a selected range of contemporary practices that test the limits of proximity to authentic experience and living off the land. Rather than focus on knowledge as a transcendental moment of clarity or serenity amidst the plurality of everyday life that requires an economy of distance or a disinterested aesthetics, I would argue a more politicized model to counter that of Schopenhauer. Such a ‘non-knowledge’ might better connect the visual arts to the ‘readymade’ environment, specifically where the cultural meets the natural; an ecological connection demands a renewed sense of agency, or, an aesthetics of engagement, defined by Arnold Berleant as having ‘three pre-eminent features: the continuity between art and life, the dynamic character of art, and the *humanistic* *functionalism* of the aesthetic act [my emphasis].’[[7]](#endnote-7) It is this last point that reverberates with Bruno Latour’s more recent critique of indelible, monistic or naturalizing ‘Nature’ as that which must be recalibrated in terms of ‘multinaturalism,’ an emancipating *anti*-propensity that allows human and non-human entities to form a different sort of commons, perhaps most notably within a purview of ‘rurality’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Bill Mollison’s ‘permaculture’ movement took hold in 1974 and had an indirect influence on much of the cultural output of the decade. In the opening passages of John Berger’s 1979 novel *Pig Earth*, for example, a cow is slaughtered and the immediacy of the event underlined – this scene establishes an unavoidable and notably rural ground of give-and-take where machine-like efficiency on the part of a farming family is coupled with their sensorial awareness and intuition of the environment in which they work.[[9]](#endnote-9) Entitled ‘A Question of Place,’ the brief introductory chapter sets a tone for ‘peasant’ life that effectively interrogates any difference between natural and unnatural acts:

Her legs fold and her body collapses instantaneously. When a viaduct breaks, its masonry – seen from a distance – appears to fall slowly into the valley below. The same with the wall of a building, following an explosion. But the cow came down as fast as lightning. It was not cement which held her body together, but energy.[[10]](#endnote-10)

While this scene occurs within fiction, an enterprise that re-presents its subject matter in both prosaic and poetic sections, it succeeds at testing the limits for art’s capacity to communicate existential moments of exchange between the human and non-human. Moreover, Berger attempts to de-romanticize rural spaces and instead reveal them as volatile systems with many registers. Human geographer Doreen Massey has claimed that the scaled-up space we think of as *global* should not subsist as a pure abstraction, but instead be understood as comprising multitudinous aspects of the *local*.[[11]](#endnote-11) From a similar perspective, Berger’s rurality is proximate, visceral, and rarely idyllic or benignly atmospheric. In our new geological epoch of the Anthropocene, such an intense connection to natural cycles, if not heavily veiled, is certainly sterilized, resulting in a complacent sense of disavowal, or, the refusal to know what one already can claim as political awareness; this more literal definition of ‘non-knowledge’ equates to ignorance and has been alluded to by John Gerrard’s video installations, in which industrialized farming is coldly presented as a leading automaton in the twenty-first century. With *Growth Finish Unit (Eva, Oklahoma)* (2008), the artist stages an encounter between viewers and an uncannily symmetrical landscape featuring two identical sheds.

These almost militarized structures contain approximately 1,000 pigs that are systematically fed and reared by remote control. We understand this by never setting eyes on a farmer; instead, a lone truck mechanically marks the life-cycle of the pigs by arriving on screen and stopping at each shed in a six to eight-month timeframe. The animals are loaded onto the truck, also out of sight, and then driven away to be slaughtered and packaged.[[12]](#endnote-12) As consumers, urban dwellers are consistently shielded from the visceral poetics described in Berger’s novel; it is no longer a question of *place* or of ecological connection because abstract *space* has been prioritized. For Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda, who have scrutinized the mechanics of contemporary animal slaughter, this spatio-temporal shift disorientates and compartmentalizes, arguably resulting in a socio-economic (but also aesthetic) form of Schopenhauer’s non-agitated ‘will-less knowing’:

The material prehistory of ecological matter is elided along with the conditions of its production for exchange. Like the transformation of the animal that occurs in the slaughterhouse, the commodity’s appearance on the market signals a twofold metamorphosis, an absolute changing of form, which erases both its ecological sources and its human production.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Such a formulaic transformation creates a foundational but false scenario. We ‘know’ the commodity in question was animal but are also unconscious of its ecological origin. A wilful ignorance is therefore demanded akin to what Marx observed through the model of invisible labour, which now takes on additional social ramifications thanks to the overwhelming scale of industrial farming. The formula, as outlined above, gives us free access to ‘nature’ without any immediately recognizable ethical framework and begs the question of what might bring us back to earth, as it were. Gerrard’s potently mechanical documentation or record of this condition suggests that, in the twenty-first century, we have reached a ‘knowing’ that, due to its lack of antagonism or first-hand experience in the process, inaugurates a purely logical system. It suggests that what might be required to regain some form of eco-critical awareness are gestures that challenge totalities or absolutes – logics – whether they extol the transcendental in philosophy or deliver First World consumables like meat, every day.

Baruchello’s *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A* was a working farm outside of Rome that served as a pro-active laboratory to be theoretically tested through a Duchampian paradigm for imagining a slice of life as a readymade *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art; rural labour and the space-time in which it happens could be identified and intervened with just as the quotidian object could be selected for conceptualism. For my purposes, if Schopenhauer’s knowledge of the world involves a relinquishment of consciousness or subjective drive, then Baruchello’s project during its inaugural years was a call for an alternative phenomenology, namely, an ‘ecological non-knowledge.’ I will attempt to draw out instances in the artist’s own observations of his experiences as a cultural professional inhabiting the role of an amateur farmer. Firstly, it is important to address the question of the farm itself as a work of art and how this reassessment is even possible. Aiming to define an ‘everyday aesthetics,’ Michael A. Principe was also drawn to *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A*. He refers to it as a foil that disproves Arthur Danto’s argument for the end of art history. Where Danto laments a postmodern and ‘directionless pluralism’ for visual art practices after Duchamp, Principe shows how Baruchello’s direction is quite clear and symptomatic of an expansion of art’s jurisdiction, so to speak; the farm-as-art is an example of ‘art’s history continuing as part of the rest of history.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Such work leads to a specific socio-political engagement beyond the pedestal of culture. As a close friend of Baruchello, Jean-François Lyotard wrote an essay on his work that highlighted the ‘secret’ to be found within his visual montages at various thematic registers. One of these is ‘Avec’ or ‘With,’ the word indicative of ‘the most intelligible articulation between the one and the other.’ Lyotard begins re-thinking what it means to think architecturally, stating that a ‘symbol of a construction site would not be...appropriate [for characterizing the assemblages that resulted from such an environmentally engaged practice]. Since [fundamentally] it lacks what is necessary in a construction site, a finality, the paradigm of the object to be built.’[[15]](#endnote-15) To some degree, Lyotard is describing the result of an inhabitation that reveals anti-hegemonic cohabitations; an impression rather than a blueprint that might fix an environment as man-made [in this case, survival is as conceptual as it is corporeal]. Baruchello’s symbology and free association of forms and materials on paper or canvas have been derived from real-time rural exchanges and happenstance.

For example, a crop of beets that had been overgrown beyond a market quality might be used to concoct a sparkling wine instead – agricultural processes and regulations are introduced to the artistic mode of chance experimentation. Finely produced diagrammatic mappings decisively liberate the farm and agricultural ‘labour’ from the darkness of Plato’s cave and the suspension of Schopenhauer’s knowledgeable moment of recognition.

While I agree with Principe that a pathway to an everyday aesthetics has been opened by so many approaches to so many experiences, that Baruchello’s ‘farm is crucially both a context for generating works of art, and as such a context is itself a kind of artwork,’[[16]](#endnote-16) I would clarify that *how* this occurs equally expands a sense of the ecological. Moving beyond a unique form (e.g. Berger’s fiction or de Heem’s still life), *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* comprises the land itself, its produce and livestock, its labourers and designers, the local community in which the artist has planted himself, as well as the visual works that the farm inspires, and the cult text *How to Imagine*, a stream of consciousness narration by Baruchello to the journalist Henry Martin of the practical and theoretical challenges the project presented over time. So many experimental trajectories are intertwined by the space-time of rurality. Consequently, so many ‘knowledges,’ when added together, amount to a productively multiplicitous ‘non-knowledge.’

In the narrative text, Baruchello declares that his ambition had to do with the fact ‘that farm hands [in this period of Italy’s history were] no longer usually very intent upon much of anything.’[[17]](#endnote-17) That is, one key inspiration for the art farm was to return attentive perception to daily or monotonous routine to glean something more from it (i.e. an ‘everyday’ aesthetic experience). Returning to art historical discourse, the privileging of process and contingency within an agricultural remit was intended to combat not only the art market and its commodity culture, but also the rise of Land Art during this period – what Baruchello saw to be invasive and out of touch with the environment despite all claims for the opposite. Sustainability was a higher art form, as it were.[[18]](#endnote-18) Still, that same art world becomes an obstacle if the question of ‘readymade rurality’ denotes, in the end, just another working farm external to high culture. Duchamp had the advantage in that the urinal that became *Fountain* (1915) declared its own vulgarity *within* the institution. Conversely, Baruchello’s expanded ‘readymade’ is bound to the complexity of human survival and political economy.[[19]](#endnote-19) As rurality has been bound to agriculture, so agriculture has been bound to a measurement of national production; etymologically, ‘economics’ derives from the Greek for ‘home’ and ‘law.’ Here, Latour comes to aid as his writing explores how political economics has only served to maintain a modernist anthropocentrism. The alternative to perpetuating modernization has been an urgency to ‘ecologize,’ but one that has problematically maintained a model of ‘nature-as-other.’ Somewhere between these two poles falls the potential for a ‘political ecology,’ defined by Latour as ‘the conjunction of ecology and politics, things and people, nature and society;’[[20]](#endnote-20) a theory I believe and hope to demonstrate as even more legible thanks to the ethos of *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* and, later, the contemporary practices that have benefited from its legacy.

Baruchello describes the entire project at its genesis as a ‘meditation on the modes of an activity...assumed as an exemplary gesture.’[[21]](#endnote-21) The farm is never objectified as a vista over which the artist frames a landscape. Instead, it becomes an expansion of the studio where contingency and creativity are exponentially enhanced. The boundary between the world and its representation has been significantly blurred within this paradigm, to the point where the way the inventive and perceiving mind of the artist also transforms within the figure of the artist-farmer. The level of attention the farm requires simply because of Baruchello’s dilettantism enables variations within otherwise normative tasks. He explains that ‘the logic of the land is the [new] source of...ethic[s].’[[22]](#endnote-22) An ethics of ‘rurality’ is an irrational, instinctual and intuitive ethics based on events brought about by non-human forces that merge with human labour. Moreover, to *dwell* here as such reveals an ecological dynamic inherent to rural life, largely due to Baruchello’s insistence that it remain indistinct from critical analyses normally applied the territories of visual culture. This is not to say that the artist enjoys any economy of distance from environment. On the contrary, and as Hannah Arendt would put it, he finds himself to be ‘of the world’ rather than merely ‘in the world.’ The farm, conceived as a work of art, is no longer a ‘representation’ of rurality (in Schopenhauer’s sense), but introduces the phenomenological world of appearances to Baruchello’s own world of being, to his own subjectivity.[[23]](#endnote-23) In this way, the variety of ‘media’ available to the artist also increases. At a panel discussion at Art Basel (2013) amongst other ‘art farmers,’ Baruchello noted that time itself, the duration it takes for vegetables to grow, determines conditions within a chain of associations that result in drawings, text, culinary materials, and an idiosyncratic visual lexicon of signs. To farm, to live the rural life, thusly allows the artist to externalize his imagination to ecological effect. It is this externalization that approaches ‘non-knowledge,’ as it suggests a distinction between dream (or the internalization of imagination) and reality is no longer necessary. Baruchello states:

Instead of producing a dream relationship to reality, I’ve been creating an entirely objective relationship to a reality that contains a mythical dream rite within it, and I get to the dream rite by observing that reality. That reality is the earth and everything connected with the earth...the most intense level of participation possible...Myth grows out of reality and everything that’s simply fanciful is beside the point.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Interestingly, it seems there is an embedded claim here for a redefinition of imagination as involvement rather than detachment. To *intensively* participate in rural life is always already imaginative work, clarified by the criticality of art: ‘It was a question of pulling aesthetics into economy and of pulling the most rudimentary and fundamental forms of agricultural economy into aesthetics...’[[25]](#endnote-25) Such a symbiotic formula could be read in conjunction with political geographer Edward Soja’s 1989 translation of a citation from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974), where social space is contrasted to the limits of abstraction:

...the social relations of production have a social existence only insofar as they exist spatially; they project themselves into a space, they inscribe themselves in a space while producing it. Otherwise, they remain “pure” abstraction, that is, in representations and consequently in ideology...[[26]](#endnote-26)

If one takes ‘social relations of production’ to be an aspect of Baruchello’s definition of ‘art,’ then *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* becomes the essential canvas upon which they negotiate with one another and is also the product of those negotiations. Simply to talk of the farm as an artwork signals a scale effect that highlights the potential of exchange value (political ecology) even if a question mark remains over the use value of its products (political economy).[[27]](#endnote-27) Since its inception in the early 1970s, Baruchello’s farm has become a foundation that continues to explore a rural experience of art practice and exhibition. I want to clarify that it is in its earliest manifestation that I see ‘ecological non-knowledge’ to be theoretically *and* practically viable, mainly due to specific socio-economic conditions that promised anything could happen, but also might not.

Moving ahead to the 1990s, it is notable that the environmentalist movement began to culminate with the position that humanity’s project would be one of repair and maintenance – repair of ‘nature’ for the maintenance of the status quo. Though problematic from today’s more complex panorama of ecological camps, this binary outlook did inform a cultural interest in anthropocentrism at the time, specifically in the work of Atelier Van Lieshout, an art and design collective formed by Joep van Lieshout in the Netherlands. In 1999, AVL exhibited *Pioneer Set*, a pop-up farm conceived in the advent of the millennium that was to fulfill ‘a nostalgic, utopian, and even romantic idea of living: longing to go back to nature, to be independent or even not to be a part of this world.’[[28]](#endnote-28) The work scrutinizes our relationship to dwelling sites and problematizes the concept of sustainability or permaculture by providing a ‘readymade’ and *portable* rurality.

There is undoubtedly a sense of irony here not present in Baruchello’s farm-as-art, and I would like to briefly identify the reasons for such a shift by framing *Pioneer Set* optimistically at first. Early in the decade, *The Natural Contract* (1990) by Michel Serres appeared, calling for a new attunement to the environment at the level of cohabitation; his philosophy is one of contingencies and networks, ‘maps of relationships’ grounded by the instinct that anthropocentrism is a misguiding and isolating principle to be corrected by making a new contract with the earth.[[29]](#endnote-29) In order to explain our loss of instinct and appreciation for ‘rudimentary technologies,’ Serres refers to the classical analogy of the peasant and the sailor. Both encounter an object lying on the ground; one sees a shovel, the other sees an oar. For the ancients, this is how the two primeval occupations of farmer and fisherman came into being, dividing the world’s economy in two. Today, laments Serres, we ‘naively pollute what [we] do not know,’ that from which we have become far too distant.[[30]](#endnote-30) Accordingly, AVL’s pop-up farm provides viewer-participants with similar tools that question our knowledge of being *in* the world by suggesting a way to be part *of* it once again. Yet, this is very much within an art world context and comes very close to Schopenhauer’s argument for a loss of self in favour of world-knowledge; the representation of rurality, as with Dutch landscape painting, keeps us at that distance or suspended state so problematic for Serres and key figures of the ‘Deep Ecology movement’ like Arne Naess, who argued for an engaged and maturing sense of dwelling; a different kind of selflessness. For environmental historian Richard White, any ‘kit’ such as a representational model confuses the phenomenological argument. He writes: ‘...environmentalists have much to say about nature and play and little to say about humans and work.’[[31]](#endnote-31) There is a substitution of leisure for labour, of visitation for inhabitation; a misreading that objectifies environment as ‘other.’ Equally suspicious of such gestures is political scientist Timothy Luke who, also writing in the nineties, puts it well when he asserts that ‘the arts have been one of the main engines driving the wasteful ways of modern capitalism’ and that ‘[q]uestions of social ecology, then, are submerged almost from the beginning in the commericial assumptions of political economy.’[[32]](#endnote-32) Luke’s assessment essentially accuses many artists with ecological interests of pandering to commericialism at the expense of bioregional permacultures.[[33]](#endnote-33) The solution is for artists to begin making work using unexpected and interdisciplinary trajectories and methods. *Pioneer Set* is an early work by AVL, and it would be remiss of me not to mention a new series of mult-media works entitled *The New Tribal Labyrinth* (2011-ongoing) that more closely embraces ‘ecological non-knowledge’ as I have attempted to define it. The collective insist that this latest version of the farm-as-art ‘suggests a new world order, a society inhabited by imaginary tribes...a return to farming and industry...a re-establishment of our relationship with materials – which has now been lost.’[[34]](#endnote-34) Nevertheless, a fine line remains between a narrative construct using post-apocalyptic theatrical/sculptural props and a fully functional sustainable environment that has emancipated itself from pure spectacle. As AVL’s latest project develops, it will be important to gauge the result of the intention to tentatively explore a new ecomaterialism by allowing the fields of art and agriculture to envelop one another.

The work of Futurefarmers is more closely in tune with the reassessment of rural substance. Founded by Amy Franceschini in 1995, this San Francisco based group of ‘artists, researchers, designers, architects, scientists and farmers’ share ‘a common interest in creating frameworks for exchange that catalyze moments of “*not knowing*” [my emphasis].’[[35]](#endnote-35) Like Baruchello’s, this ‘non-knowledge’ is also grounded in ‘ecomaterialism,’ or an understanding of a thing’s activation when considered not from a distance, but immersively and without expectation. *Soil Kitchen* (2011) was temporarily installed as an urban farm-as-art in Philadelphia across from a monument to Don Quixote. The windmill on the roof of the formerly abandoned building does indeed suggest quixotic undertones for contemporary environmentalism but also had the practical purposes of ventilation and electricity generation and was symbolic of renewable energy. Coinciding with the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Brownsfields Conference, the goal of the project was to encourage local and surrounding communities to bring in soil samples for free pH and heavy metal testing that would then form an ecological archive. In exchange for their samples, participants were given soup and invited to join workshops in ‘wind turbine construction, urban agriculture, soil remediation, composting, lectures by soil scientists and cooking lessons.’ Overall, the artists claim, ‘*Soil Kitchen* provided sustenance, re-established value of natural resources through a trade economy, and tools to inform and respond to possible contaminants in the soil.’[[36]](#endnote-36) Futurefarmers’ interest in re-establishing the value of soil as a natural resource are all determined by spatial proximity between the human and the non-human. In stipulating a ‘dark ecology,’ it has been established that historical aesthetics, as a philosophical and therefore human domain, in fact obfuscates our being of the world in favour of achieving knowledge of the world. ‘Ecological or ecomaterial non-knowledge,’ therefore, pertains to what might be called a postmedievalist or pre-modern inclination towards ‘a strangely disanthropocentric [and uncivilized] place.’[[37]](#endnote-37)

At this stage, it is worth considering a rightfully panicked late twentieth century and the publication of *The Limits to Growth* (1972) as a report on the 1968 Club of Rome meetings where the ‘Project on the Predicament of Mankind’ was established. In this historical context it becomes clear that, fundamentally, a concept of ‘universalism’ had to be accepted. The authors point out that though mankind could understand climate change as a shared culmination of industrial abuse, it was near impossible to pinpoint any specific origin or cause for the loss of control. Hence, there could be no sustainable solutions to the universal (macrocosm) as the particular (microcosm) asserted numerable obstacles; consequently, they argued, it must be understood that ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts.’[[38]](#endnote-38) Interestingly, they then charted the possible range of human perspective using a graph of space vs. time.

Interiority projects towards exteriority through connections such as family to next week, nation to lifetime, and world to children’s lifetime. The point being that our greatest concerns remain immediate or particular and, those that might be categorized as universal, like climate change and the scale effects it has on agricultural sustainability, are too vast to comprehend. A graph that contrasts the local with the global in this way returns us to Berger’s premise for *Pig Earth*. He writes of both rural life and urban life as part of capitalism, but he also uses a diagram to show that the lower classes of rurality (‘cultures of survival’) have had a different view of time than the upper classes of urban spaces (‘cultures of progress’). For the latter, the future is a wide-open field of possibility. For the former, ‘the future [means] a sequence of repeated acts for survival. Each act pushes a thread through the eye of a needle and the thread is tradition;’ any open field of possibility remains in the past.[[39]](#endnote-39) These two economically opposed views of both past and future serve to clarify the ideology of emancipation shared by the historical Right and Left towards the problem of climate change over several decades. The Club of Rome’s painstaking hypotheses for ‘global equilibrium’ incited both right-wing cornucopianism and left-wing environmentalism as a human response to the challenge of maintaining a cyclical balance for industrial output and population growth. It is safe to say that Berger would agree with those members that capital was conceived as a ‘service’ for industry (urbanity) as well as for agriculture (rurality); both camps adhere to its *system* and are, therefore, unified. As such, gradual environmental changes are difficult to measure because they denote distinctions between First and Third World rates of change. Jason W. Moore’s timely contributions go further to connect capital to nature by echoing the thoughts of Richard White noted above. He asks,

…what happens if we…begin from the standpoint of the worker’s exhaustion, and the exhaustion of work-systems? Such an inversion [from attending to the exhaustion of natural resources] need not be anthropocentric; through it, we may illuminate the unifying relations exhausting human and extra-human natures in the capitalist world-ecology.[[40]](#endnote-40)

To suggest a reciprocity between the economic and the ecologic is indeed significant, not least because it balances an investment in the agential forces of human labour with an environmentalism that must not seek to disentangle itself from those forces and their products. Moreover, it departs from a cornucopianism that suggests an acceleration of foresting, fracking and atmospheric real estate as a futuristic solution to global turmoil. Rather, Moore’s point is to do with the inevitable human element regarding ecology. He continues: ‘Work is a co-production of the human and the rest of nature; it is indeed a metabolism, as Marx suggests.’[[41]](#endnote-41) As such, it arguably falls to cultural practitioners to explore this middle ground; to perform and critique the potential for restoring exhausted or depleted zones and relations beginning from particular circumstances and conditions. Within this context of experimentation and discovery, and following my brief study of Futurefarmers with whom the artist Fernando García-Dory has collaborated, it is now his localized collective actions that I turn to for their focus on the aesthetics and politics of rurality today, having inherited and extended the more singular efforts of Gianfranco Baruchello.

If capital is bound to ‘nature’ and not thought to be an impediment, or, the environment demands a reassessment of desire and creativity on the part of human subjects, it is telling that García-Dory identifies his worldview as a ‘neopastoralism’ that departs from the human society/material growth dynamic identified by the Club of Rome so many years ago.[[42]](#endnote-42) Appropriating the language and concerns found in that socio-scientific report, García-Dory’s art has considered an array of ecological questions, from land use and energy storage to bioprospecting and even the establishment of a shepherd’s school in northern Spain, which immerses participants in that same rural performativity examined by Berger. What unites these projects is a call for internalization, site-specificity and ground-level economics that demand transparency and facilitate a widespread engagement with ‘territories, geopolitics, culture and identity’ through deceptively basic, agricultural means.[[43]](#endnote-43) In 2010, García-Dory launched his *INLAND* project, or, *Campo Adentro: Arts, Agriculture and Countryside*. As an NGO, a primary aim has been to conceive of rurality and nationality by turning focus onto regional conditions for everyday life, productivity and well-being to reconsider the notion of European expansion or progress. Using site-specific materials and paradigms, what Berger refers to as ‘cultures of survival’ are shown to contain local knowledges that are then presented as ‘ecological non-knowledge’ to be thought on multiple scales. That is, *INLAND* employs the form of workshop or art-lab and the visual language of exhibition and display to raise awareness of real experience that then might suggest alternative future pathways for land, people and place; an investment in material gestures as constituents of a community departs from any normative ethnographic study.The best example of this would be what García-Dory calls ‘mobile methods,’ comprised of six modes or approaches: ‘Cartography; Editing and Reading; Mobile Museum; Portable Kitchen; Peasant Theatre and Extended Parliament.’ Significantly, the objective is ‘to forge a new identity for “the collective” and to uncover emancipating *alliances* between rural and urban environments [my emphasis].[[44]](#endnote-44)

Whereas Baruchello and Atelier van Lieshout emphasized the expanded field of what art could adopt as media, specifically the farm as an experimental, sculptural and conceptual conduit, García-Dory and those who work alongside him expand the field even further to include local gestures and sustainable systems, as well as wider socio-political issues. These have been articulated by the artist as belonging to three categories of a much needed ‘total art renovation.’[[45]](#endnote-45) Firstly, and in keeping with the purview of rurality, the practice and experience of visual art might amount to ‘a new critical social theory,’ augmented to some extent by the thought of Giorgio Agamben. In *The Coming Community* (1990), he questions the modern commitment to linear futurity in terms of correction or repair. Problematically, this posits human subjects against an object-world and foregoes a more symbiotic *irreparability* as productive and creative. Agamben writes:

The world is now and forever necessarily contingent or contingently necessary. Between the *not being able to not-be* that sanctions the decree of necessity and the *being able to not-be* that defines fluctuating contingency, the finite world suggests a contingency to the second power that does not found any freedom: It *is capable of not not-being*, it is capable of the irreparable.[[46]](#endnote-46)

While a somewhat esoteric observation on (im)possibility and progress, this statement does suggest a zone comparable to ‘non-knowledge’ in the sense that irreparability or contingency denotes a potential for multiple outcomes that do not become fixities or certainties. If applied to ecological matters, formerly static power relations (e.g. human subject to non-human object) might be reconsidered as equally full of potential and therefore approachable from a different register than that of top-down ‘repair;’ it is this kernel of opportunity that the *INLAND* project seeks to develop. Secondly, the practice and experience of visual art should engage with a ‘social/agro-ecology,’ the likes of which are championed by Murray Bookchin who, in 1992, revisited the themes addressed in *The Limits to Growth* and ‘the need to remake society,’ highlighting that ‘[h]uman-to-human domination is the reason for human-to-non-human/nature domination; domination (“grow or die”) is the enemy.’[[47]](#endnote-47) In opposition to such ideology, ecological efforts should be made directly with communities and their local environments as it is here where the commons are enacted rather than abstracted. Thirdly, the practice and experience of visual art should achieve a ‘true, direct, local and slow utility’ if, as Manuel De Landa argues, ‘reality is a *single-matter energy* undergoing phase transitions of various kinds…’[[48]](#endnote-48) In his book *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997), De Landa considers phases of being over stages of being by citing the physicist Arthur Iberall, whose work on elemental bifurcations or ontological shifts inspires a view of the social sphere as similarly nonlinear. Regarding rurality, hunter gatherers did not logically evolve into farmers due to technological discovery; instead, the world’s populations were subject to hegemonic shifts that rendered them consumers rather than self-sufficient producers. Hence, agriculture as we know it has developed from the exponential changes in the parameters of supply and demand.[[49]](#endnote-49)

García-Dory’s growing catalogue of social artworks begins to rethink the effects of human agency on the environment by concentrating on non-linear associations that continue to support and manifest a concept of ‘ecological non-knowledge’ as I have come to understand it. In essence, the three categories he has named as his ethos combine to form a welcome set of ‘actants’ and ‘propositions’ in the making and exhibiting of cultural works (to employ key terms from Latour’s theory of ‘political ecology’, as well as his critique of hegemonic ‘economics’ or the organizational tools by which we normativize ourselves).[[50]](#endnote-50) The principles of contemporary immediacy, interconnection, incorporation and experimentation all support the idea that another world is possible yet fundamentally *unknowable*, largely thanks to Baruchello’s teachings on ‘how to imagine.’ That is, by tempering the everydayness of rurality with the discursiveness of visual art and perception theory we can create networks and relations that continue to sow the seeds for an alternative conceptualization of sustainability in the wake of the Anthropocene.

1. Michel Serres, *Biogea*, trans. Randolph Burks, Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2012, p. 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See The Dark Mountain Project's Manifesto: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> [Accessed 14th July 2014] [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Burnside, ‘A Science of Belonging: Poetry as Ecology,’ in *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, ed. Robert Crawford, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, trans. E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover Publications, 1966, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, London: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 56, 61, 118. See also *The Ecological Thought*, London: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 72; while in the latter Morton briefly addresses Schopenhauer’s definition of ‘knowledge’ in relation to the limitations of art, I would assert that the agricultural cases examined in this chapter in fact do enable the contemporary artists I have assembled to operate within close range of his arguments for ‘the ecological thought.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, London: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. John Berger, ‘A Question of Place,’ in *Pig Earth*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979, pp. 1-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Doreen Massey, Human Geography Research Group, Sophie Bond and David Featherstone, ‘The Possibilities of a Politics of Place Beyond Place? A Conversation with Doreen Massey’, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 125 (2009): 3-4, 401-420; p. 412. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. John Gerrard, ‘*Grow Finish Unit (Eva, Oklahoma)* 2008,’ [www.johngerrard.net/grow-finish-unit-eva.html](http://www.johngerrard.net/grow-finish-unit-eva.html) [Accessed 05 October 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda, ‘Red,’ in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Michael A. Principe, ‘Danto and Baruchello: From Art to an Aesthetics of the Everyday,’ in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Swift, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Jean-François Lyotard (1984), ‘Essay on the Secret in Baruchello’s Work,’ *Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists*, trans. Vlad Ionescu, Erica Harris and Peter W. Milne, Brussels: Leuven University Press, 2012, p. 219. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, *How to Imagine: A Narrative in Art, Agriculture and Creativity*, London: Bantam Books, 1985, p. 37. By the 1970s, Italy’s land reform laws of 1950 had not resulted in the desired outcome to reinvigorate the agricultural economy. Instead, widespread corporatization had ensued leaving many local farmers apathetic and displaced when confronted with an accelerating post-war capitalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., pp. 28-29. Baruchello specifically targets the neo-avant-garde artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, famous for their large-scale wrappings of monuments and natural spaces. He accuses such projects of being deceptively grandiose but essentially market-driven. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bruno Latour, op. cit., pp. 136, 246-247, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, op. cit., pp. 35-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, pp. 19-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, op. cit., p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London: Verso, 1989, pp. 127-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, op. cit., p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Atelier van Lieshout, [www.ateliervanlieshout.com](http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com) [Accessed 02 April 2013]. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Richard White, ‘“Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”: Work and Nature,’ in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, London: W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 1996, p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Timothy W. Luke, ‘Art and the Environmental Crisis: From Commodity Aesthetics to Ecology Aesthetics,’ *Art Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 72-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Atelier van Lieshout, [www.ateliervanlieshout.com](http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com) [Accessed 02 April 2013]. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Futurefarmers, [www.futurefarmers.com](http://www.futurefarmers.com) [Accessed 15 July 2014]. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, ‘Howl,’ *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring, 2013), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. William W. Behrens III, Dennis L. Meadows, Donna H. Meadows and Jorgen Randers, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for The Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, London: Earth Island Limited, 1972, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. John Berger, ‘Introduction,’ op. cit., pp. xviii-xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, London: Verso, 2015, p. 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Fernando García-Dory, ‘Agroecology: A New Kind of Neopastoralism,’ *Arts Catalyst* – Notes from the Field: Commoning Practices in Art and Science, London, 18 February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Fernando Garcίa-Dory, ‘*INLAND* (2010-…)’, [www.fernandogarciadory.info/index.php?/projects/inland/](http://www.fernandogarciadory.info/index.php?/projects/inland/) [Accessed 19 February 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Fernando García-Dory, ‘mobile method’, [www.inland.org/production/mobilemethod](http://www.inland.org/production/mobilemethod) [Accessed 19 February 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. The three points are considered here alongside the work of related theorists who were said to have influenced the artist’s own philosophy and practice at ‘Agroecology’ cited above. Quoted passages by Agamben, Bookchin and De Landa have been independently selected by this author. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, eds. Debbie Bookchin and Blair Taylor, London: Verso, 2015, pp. 31-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997, p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., pp. 14-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Bruno Latour, op. cit., p. 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)