

# Foodscapes

bankbakegroweatalk share

**FOODSCAPES** was an AHRC Connected Communities project in 2013 that explored the use of art as a way of opening up discussion about food, food poverty and local food production and distribution. Participants in the project included Knowle West Media Centre, The Matthew Tree Project (TMTP), the Edible Landscapes Movement (ELM), UWE Bristol, University of Southampton, the James Hutton Institute and Paul Hurley (artist-in-residence). Together, we explored how arts intervention and cultural engagement can help address social and economic exclusion, food poverty, and sustainability. As co-designed action research, the project also examined how arts intervention can enhance interchange between community organisations and research institutions.

## OUR APPROACH

We examined the idea of ‘sustainable futures’ in concert with individuals who suffer from food insecurity. We held a series of group meetings and focus group workshops, volunteered at a local food charity, and engaged directly in the activities of our project partners as part of a mixture of participative arts practice and qualitative research methodologies. Working with staff, volunteers and clients at TMTP and ELM, we focused on food practices (e.g. accessing, eating, cooking and sharing food) and how they relate to challenges surrounding food security.



## OUR EVENT

Foodscapes centered on a 10-day interactive and performative exhibition – visited by over 900 people – in Bristol’s city centre. During the event, participants were invited to share and exchange knowledge and experiences about food and to participate in activities already being undertaken by members of the project team. We purposefully avoided didactic methods of exchange and relied on the juxtaposition of various food practices and materials to create non-linear experiences to solicit conversation and draw out meaning.

**Juxtaposition:** within the art space, visitors were confronted with a contrasting set of food-related practices such as growing, baking, eating, preparing meals, and shopping. This included two ‘green walls’ loaded with edible plants (courgettes, aubergines, tomatoes, strawberries and many others), planting workshops, a food bank parcel, photographs of meals cooked by individuals suffering from food insecurity, a chicken plucking demonstration, and daily bread baking sessions. The juxtaposition of these food materials and practices helped to bring people together from different backgrounds and disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions about consumption, food security, and boundaries between art and the everyday.

**Non-linear experience:** The exhibition was designed to allow for an open-ended interaction with the artists, works of art, and food through both ‘doing’ and witnessing. Through these activities and experiences knowledge was co-produced by a dynamic and productive blurring of the relations between artist-researcher-participant-material.



Planning and development of the programme was informed by KWMC's creative approach to evaluation, so that the research questions were embedded into creative exchanges, rather than being separate, or bolted onto the creative experience. Creative processes – such as 'what did you eat?' word clouds populated by participants – were the basis of exchanges through which different perspectives and experiences were shared and documented. The work prompted people to think about food experiences and to consider the concepts we were exploring.



## KEY OUTCOMES

**Enacting ecological citizenship:** participants were invited to respond not as ethical consumers but as ecological citizens. There was nothing to buy, nor information about 'improved' ethical supply chains, the emphasis wasn't on giving attention to local, fair trade, organic or animal welfare-friendly products, nor was advice available about 'how to food shop': if we had done this, we would have been enacting the ethical consumer. Instead we encouraged people to attend to different lived experiences with food preparation and eating.



**Material and performative engagement:** The exhibition brought together experiences, materiality and aesthetics of our diverse project partners (the foodbank, ELM's polytunnel, the bakery, the kitchen) into a performative and multisensory space. This offered visitors a direct bodily engagement – kneading bread, smell of tomato plants, weight of the foodbank shopping basket – with some of the research material we were working with. As bread was a central feature of our exhibition, the qualities and characteristics of ingredients such as flour, water, and yeast structured particular experiences. Involvement in bread-baking meant sticky hands, a slow repetitive pace of kneading, attention to the texture of dough and a more precise awareness of time and intensities such as heat and air. During these sessions, we found that it was the slowness of the process – even soda bread takes over an hour to bake – which helped to forge dialogue, communication and exchange.



**Exhibition space as temporary autonomous zone (TAZ):** The event facilitated experiences that challenged assumptions about the daily practice of (food) consumption. This underlined our efforts to engage visitors not as ethical consumers, but as ecological citizens. It also contested consumptive attitudes towards the art experience - visitors were often not sure whether the exhibition or its components were 'art', and so engaged with it more actively and directly than they would have in a conventional gallery setting.

## Contact

email: Michael.Buser@uwe.ac.uk  
 telephone: 0117 32 83075  
 email: E.J.Roe@soton.ac.uk  
 telephone: (023) 8059 9222

## Websites

<http://foodscapesbristol.wordpress.com>  
<http://kwmc.org.uk/projects/foodscapes/>  
[www.paulhurley.org](http://www.paulhurley.org)

