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Which Public? Audiences of Soil Communication from an Arts Perspective

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Raising soil awareness typically refers to the dissemination of soil information to various target groups by science and policy experts. While outreach efforts initiated by scientific institutions are crucial for the education of particular stakeholder groups, the success of raising soil awareness in the general public requires more than a transfer of scientific knowledge. Sensory, emotional, embodied, aesthetic, indigenous, and other forms of knowledge are also needed to communicate the urgency of soil protection goals and to create lasting bonds between members of society and the environments they inhabit. Artists offer alternative forms of knowledge and knowledge transfer methods, providing much insight to the discourse on raising soil awareness. Specifically, artists “are in the business” of communicating with the general public, or in the words of art theorist Claire Bishop (2012), “one of the central requirements of art is that it is made to be seen and reflected upon by a spectator”. How, where, and in what contexts do artists communicate with their audiences, and what can be learned for raising soil awareness? In this paper, I will address these questions by examining data from a mixed-methods study of 107 soil artworks I conducted from 2012 to 2015. Using arguments from audience studies and relational aesthetics, I argue that some of the most interesting and successful soil artworks are those “which take being together as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning” (Bourriaud, 1998). In addition to the ability of art to illustrate the beauty, complexity, and functionality of soil, art can also engage viewers in what art critic Nicolas Bourriaud describes as “relational” experience, including instances of participatory learning, collective social reflection, civic engagement and political activism.

Keywords: Raising soil awareness; soil art; audience studies; relationality; mixed-methods research.

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