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BEANFIELD GROWING OUTSIDE THE WEXNER CENTER

ORGANIC PUBLIC ART PROJECT RESULT OF UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIP AMONG THREE DEPARTMENTS

In a literally “groundbreaking” collaboration among multiple departments at The Ohio State University, artist and OSU professor Michael Mercil has created *The Beanfield*, a plot of organic public art just outside the Wexner Center near College Road. *The Beanfield* underscores the agricultural heritage of Ohio State, the university’s function as a producer of culture and agriculture, and its commitment to provocative public and social art. This two-year project is the result of a partnership among the Wexner Center, the Living Culture Initiative in Ohio State’s Department of Art, and the Social Responsibility Initiative of Ohio State’s College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (FAES). It’s also a nod to Henry David’s Thoreau’s own “Bean-field” that he planted and wrote about in *Walden* in the mid-19th century, as well as Ohio State’s role as a land-grant institution.



“Once again, the center finds itself in partnership with unexpected colleagues across campus as a result of an artist-based initiative that draws upon the expertise of a non-arts discipline—in this case, agricultural sciences,” says Wexner Center Director Sherri Geldin. “As a cultural institution dedicated to research and experimentation in multiple fields, *The Beanfield* is a natural (and organic) fit with the Wexner Center, and we are delighted to be collaborating with a highly respected artist and Ohio State faculty member, Michael Mercil, to realize his ambition. This project also complements a program initiated by the Center three years ago entitled *Art and the Environment*, which explores the often surprising intersections between the two.”

Bill Flinn, director of the university’s Social Responsibility Initiative, said the project is leading to a greater understanding and collaboration among very different members of the campus and Columbus community. “The project isn’t just raising beans—it’s raising social discussion and awareness about culture and agriculture,” he says. Flinn and other colleagues from FAES began meeting with Mercil and his partner, Ann Hamilton, at their studio in early 2005 to talk about how the cultural and agricultural parts of the university overlap in ways not often recognized. The *Beanfield* is one result of those conversations, Flinn said.

The 650-square-foot *Beanfield* is visible from College Road, just across from the Oval, outside on the western edge of the Wexner Center. "It's important that we're here, overlooking the symbolic center of campus," Mercil says. "It places this project in relationship with the life of the campus as it passes by every day."

Beans by the numbers

Planted over the July 4 weekend with the help of art students and colleagues from FAES, the four varieties of beans (Kentucky wonder brown, rattlesnake, white half-runner, and blue lake stringless) spread around 49 sets of poles have begun to grow up the natural wood poles (borrowed and recycled from a Franklin Park Conservatory exhibition). In all, 1,176 seeds were planted by Mercil and his students. The 650 *liriope* plants (similar to the daylily, often called "lilyturf" or "border grass") that previously occupied the space have been transferred to the Sherman Art Studios on OSU's West Campus (the *liriope* will be nurtured and returned to the Wexner Center at the conclusion of the project). In addition, nutrients are being added to the soil, making it a healthier plot than it was before.

After the beans are harvested in the fall, the plot will be rejuvenated with winter plantings until the following spring, when the cycle begins again.

The Thoreau connection—and other inspirations

In July 1845, Henry David Thoreau left his home in Concord, Massachusetts to spend two years, two months, and two days at Walden Pond. Earlier that spring, he had planted 2 ½ acres of beans in a public clearing between his lakeside cabin and the main road. In *Walden*, his account of his sojourn, "The Bean-Field" marks a central chapter where Thoreau articulates the relationship between nature, self, and society. This chapter inspired Mercil's own beanfield. Mercil adds that Thoreau planted his beanfield "as much to cultivate conversation as to cultivate a crop. He used it as a measure of his relationship to others in the community, and to himself."



Michael Mercil at *The Beanfield*, August 2006

In addition, notes Mercil, "*The Beanfield* evokes the practice of 'lifelike art' by Allan Kaprow or the 'social sculpture' of Joseph Beuys, to creatively shape and engage our ecological encounter with the world." Mercil believes his own beanfield will accomplish much the same thing. "Without the beanfield, we're having a conversation. With the beanfield, our conversation has consequence. The wish of all artists is to generate a conversation of consequence." Mercil plans to dry the beans after they are harvested to make seed packets to be distributed as part of the Living Culture Initiative, and to make bean soup, the centerpiece of a meal planned to celebrate the project.

The Living Culture Initiative

The Living Culture Initiative will be an ongoing series of projects coming out of the Department of Art that reflects the founding of OSU as a land-grant college with a curriculum of the “agricultural, mechanical, and liberal arts.” Mercil and his partner Ann Hamilton (also on the faculty of Ohio State) launched this initiative to highlight the university’s role as a producer of culture (as well as agriculture). “We asked, ‘How might the Department of Art generate a more grounded awareness of the university as a model of and for culture at large?’,” Mercil says. *The Beanfield* is the first concrete project coming out of this initiative.

The Social Responsibility Initiative

The Social Responsibility Initiative started in early 2005 in Ohio State’s College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences to forge new ways of thinking about socially responsible food production, land use, and environmental practices. The interdisciplinary effort has brought together non-traditional collaborators from across campus, re-establishing connections among food consumers, food producers, and the broader community.

About Michael Mercil

An associate professor in the Department of Art at Ohio State, Mercil has also been a visiting artist or lecturer at, among other institutions, Virginia Commonwealth University, the Minneapolis College of Art & Design Institute for Public Art, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and Antioch College. Mercil’s artwork has been included in both solo and group exhibitions around the country, including the Fabric Work and Museum in Philadelphia, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Grinnell College in Iowa (an exhibition reflecting that state’s farming heritage), and, earlier this year, the Columbus Museum of Art. He recently completed a piece for the newly renovated Ohio Stadium recruiting lounge, and he has an exhibition forthcoming at the Aronoff Center in Cincinnati this November through January—stone sculptures that will also be on view at the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City. Currently, Mercil is working with artist (and partner) Ann Hamilton and landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh on projects for Battery Park City in New York City. They also worked together on the award-winning design for the Fort Duquesne Boulevard Park in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Mercil was an NEA Artist Design Fellow in the Department of Public Works in the City of Saint Paul.

For more on the partnering departments, visit wexarts.org, arts.osu.edu, and sri.osu.edu.

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