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MEANINGFUL LIFE

Art, Digital, and Field-based Learning

POL 309
Spring 2025

Instructors: Takeshi Ito & John Williams

Office: 10-530 & 2-921

Class meets: Friday, Period 2

Office hours: by appointment

E-mail: takeshi.ito@sophia.ac.jp & john.100meterfilms@gmail.com

Moodle website: <https://moodle.cc.sophia.ac.jp/course/view.php?id=37570>

GENERAL GUIDELINE

Course Description

In this era of AI, robot technology, mass-consumption, mass urban dwelling, the rise of global corporations, and the increasing weakness of democratic politics, how can we create a meaningful life for ourselves and others in a more-than-human world? This course explores through multi-disciplinary perspectives the ways in which the meanings of life are created through the interactions between humans and nature. It takes a meaningful life to be diverse, interdependent, and reciprocal in human-nature relations. It is thus co-created through humanity-in-nature relations.

The premise of the course is that the state of environmental degradation is not caused by a lack of education; rather it is a result of standardized education that “emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience” (Orr 2004). It is thus important to develop innovative learning methods that trigger curiosity and creativity, transforming students’ perspectives on how leading a meaningful life is directly and indirectly linked to humanity-in-nature perspectives.

The course consists of classroom time, which we hope to use mainly for discussion, but also two field trips and then work outside of class on an art project– you have the whole term to complete this project, and it is very much up to you what you decide to make. You will be able to consult with us outside class about your project and how it is evolving. We plan to hold a small exhibition at the end of term, to show your work on the campus.

Course Requirements and Grading

1. Class Engagement: 10%

We don’t think of this as a conventional class, but as an ongoing workshop dealing with a real place, real-world issues and real problems that affect all of us. Needless to say though, being together at a certain time every week is crucial to carrying out the work we are doing,

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so everyone is expected to be there all the time and to participate all the time, except in the case of sickness.

2 Summaries: 20%

There will be some chapters to read every two weeks or so. Make sure you read the chapters in advance and write a short summary (between 300 and 325 words), which you should submit before the class. The summaries are to help us to have meaningful discussions. Plagiarism automatically results in a failing grade for the entire course (see Academic Conduct).

3. Discussion Leading Role: 10%

To create a lively discussion environment, designated students will be asked to take formal responsibility for organizing the discussion of the readings. You can begin by appreciating parts of the book and move to questions, present data, and/or quote interesting, powerful, thought-provoking sentences. Depending on the number of students we will either talk in one large group or in small groups. Everyone will be assigned a discussion leader role at least once during the term.

4. Sophia Sustainable Farm 20%

On our Yotsuya campus, KASA Sustainability has been growing vegetables in the garden adjacent to Building 10. Using only organic matters, our produce has been 100% natural. This everyday practice of farming is based on our belief that sustainability starts with building a sense of belonging to a community and care for the environment on which the community is depended. And farming is a great way to build a sense of community and therefore to promote sustainability on campus. Working with the KASA Sustainability gardening team, we will plant the seeds of some summer vegetables in May, take care of them throughout the semester, and harvest the fruits by the end of the semester. Students in small groups will participate in this life cycle of plants, and create three blog posts with photos about the farming activities. A few selected ones will be posted on the KASA website.

5. Final Work: 40%

There is no final exam for this class. You will be graded on the artwork that you make on participation. The artwork can be crafts, paintings, videos, music, poems, etc. The theme is about human-nature relationships. Please consult with the instructors for the format and theme of your final work. Since art is a very difficult thing to assess, one or more professional artists will give their evaluations and the two instructors will also give an evaluation.

Grade Distributions

Class Engagement:	10%
Summaries:	20%
Discussion Leading role:	10%
Sustainable Farm:	20%
Final Work:	40%

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Grade cutoff points are as follows: A = 91-100%; B = 81-90%; C = 71-80%; D = 61-70%; NC = < 62%.

Expectations and Responsibilities

We assume that you enrolled for this class because you are interested in the topics and issues and that you want to try something “new.” We assume that you are not focused on getting a grade, but more on stretching your own horizons a bit.

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism and cheating of any kind are strictly forbidden. Plagiarism entails borrowing ideas from others without attributing sources. Using AI and copying from the Internet and pasting on your summaries is the most primitive form of plagiarism. We have zero tolerance for plagiarism and cheating. Any misconduct will automatically result in no credit.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability and require accommodations for this course, please speak with me as soon as possible so that your needs may be appropriately met.

Smart Phones, Laptops, and Late Work Policies

To create an effective learning environment, the use of the Internet with your smart phones and laptops is forbidden. If you want to use your laptops to take notes, you need to disconnect your laptops from the Internet. **If the instructor or the TA finds students using smart phones and laptops, we will dock 5 points from your final grade (100 points) for each time you use cell phones and laptops.** We will not warn you or call your name in class. To avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding, please put away your cell phones and laptops in your bag. Late works will not be accepted under any circumstances. I will dock your grade third a letter grade (e.g., an B- to a C or from a C to a C-) for each day. Special Arrangements will only be made in the case of sickness (requiring a doctor’s note) or family emergency (requiring a Chair’s note).

Important Etiquettes

In order to create a pleasant study environment for everyone, please follow these etiquettes. **Smart phones must be put away at any time during the class. You must not use your phone to read the required reading.** *Please come to the class on time.* Please note that *voluntary late arrivals and early departures do not count as one class attendance.* These are just a few things that distract our attention. For other issues, please use your common sense, and treat one another with respect and courtesy. If problems continue to disturb the proper procedures of class, I will ask disruptive students to leave the class.

Appointments with the Instructor

Meeting with professors could be challenging for students. Although we know exactly how you feel, we encourage you to TALK to me in person on any subjects related to the class materials. If you cannot make it during my office hours, please email me for an appointment. In principle, I use my email to make appointments rather than consultations.

COURSE OUTLINE

1. April 12 (Dates are not yet updated for 2025)

Introduction of the course

The goals of the class. Why are we running the class this way? Why art? Why farming? Why fields? Personal introductions of teachers and students. Who are we? What are our values? What do we believe in? What kind of food do we eat? What are we dissatisfied about in the world today? What are we dissatisfied about in education? This introductory class is a way for us to get to know you and for you to get to know us. We don't think of ourselves as "teachers" in this class. Everyone in the class is a teacher and a learner. We are doing this together and hopefully we will learn as much as you do. This class is an experiment, so be prepared for surprises and please surprise us. We may also do some warm-up brainstorming exercises.

2. April 19

A basic introduction to "art-practice"

We will introduce some of basic things that we think about when we think about art and making art. Today we will talk about "materials." Thinking about Materials, Thinking about the Material World – the purpose of this is to shift our thinking a bit more "out of her heads" and into a kind of embodied thinking. Later we will also talk more about senses, colors, and art forms.

Homework for April 26: Monbiot Ch. 1 – *Regenesis*
Questions about Monbiot's Chapter 1

3. April 26

Arts of noticing

Monbiot, G. 2022. *Regenesis*. London: Penguin: Ch. 1.

The Chapter from George Monbiot's book is also about the material world and about a world we don't often notice or think about – the soil beneath our feet. We will talk about his very passionate discovery of soil in this chapter and try to link it to some of the bigger themes we want to explore.

Homework for May 10 Watch *The Squid and the Pine* directed by John Williams
Prepare initial thoughts about the village and about an artwork that expresses something about the village and the environment. For our final project we will all make a piece of art to exhibit on the campus, that expresses something about our encounter with Kitaushima and the people who live there. We may also leave some art works in the village that we have made there.

4. May 10

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Discussion of the Squid and the Pine

Discussion of the film
Thinking about art works in Kitaushima

Homework for May 17 Chapter 3 of Monbiot

5. May 17

Understanding the Global Food System

Monbiot, G. 2022. *Regenesis*. London: Penguin: Ch. 3.

Suggested:

Hoang, N.T. et al. 2023. "Mapping Potential Conflicts between Global Agriculture and Terrestrial Conservation." *PNAS* 120(23), pp. 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2208376120>

6. May 24

Social Grouping for Sustainable Agriculture and Land Management

Pretty, J. et al. 2020. "Assessment of the Growth in Social Groups for Sustainable Agriculture and Land Management." *Global Sustainability* 3, e23, 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.19>

Homework for May 31: Steve Gliessman (2016)

7. May 31

Agroecology

Gliessman, S. 2016. "Transforming food systems with agroecology." *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 40:3, 187-189, DOI:
10.1080/21683565.2015.1130765

8. June 7

First presentation of ideas

9. June 14

Space and spaces – modes and genres of art

We will talk about how we can transform the spaces we inhabit through art and what these transformations imply. If we can change the spaces we inhabit, maybe we can also change our cities and our environments, the campus itself, our future world?

10. June 21 (Kameoka, June 21-24)

Sophia Sustainable Farm Visit when sunny

A tour of the Sophia Sustainable Farm. We will work a bit on the farm. Dress casually and comfortably for farming!

- Create groups (4 people/group)

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Fieldwork in Kameoka, Kyoto

For the schedule and activities, see the field book.

What we will observe in Kameoka—Agroecology as a social movement: We explore how communities are coping with social-ecological issues including population decline, aging farmers, degraded environments through innovative approaches that emphasize humanity-in-nature perspectives.

11. June 28

Discussion about Kameoka—Debriefing Session

Homework for July 2: Tsing, *Mushroom*.

12. July 2 (Virtual Friday)

Humanity-in-Nature Perspectives

Tsing, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: Chapters 13-14 (179-202)—Comparing Japan’s satoyama and Oregon’s forest regimes.

13. July 12

Finalizing art works for Sado

Final discussion of the art works and our learning so far and where we could go from here.

14. July 19

TBD

Sado, August 3-7

Discussion about Kitaushima—Debriefing session

We will discuss your impressions and thoughts about Kitaushima. We will also try to begin to use our more critical and reasoning skills to think about some of the social and political issues facing rural villages.

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Other topics

Decentered Perspectives on Nature

Hathaway, M. 2022. *What a Mushroom Lives for*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: Preface (xiii-xxii) and Introduction (1-27).

Homework for July 12: Hathaway, Ch. 1.

Regenerative Agriculture

Cusworth G and Garnett, T. (2023). [What is regenerative agriculture?](#) TABLE Explainer. TABLE, University of Oxford, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Wageningen University and Research.