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# **MEANINGFUL LIFE**

## **Art, Digital, and Field-based Learning**

**POL 309**  
**Autumn 2023**

Instructors: Takeshi Ito & John Williams

Office: 10-530 & 2-921

Class meets: Friday, 10:55-12:35pm@2-415

Office hours: by appointment

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Course website: <https://www.kasasustainability.org/nanairo>

### **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 on this planet, including non-human beings? 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. 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 nature-human relations.

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, so

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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. 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 farming team, we will plant the seeds of some winter vegetables in October, 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 Farming:	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.

### **Cell Phones, Laptops, and Late Work Policies**

To create an effective learning environment, the use of the Internet with your cell phones and laptops is forbidden. 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.

**Cell 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. September 29

#### Introduction of the course

The goals of the class. Why are we running the class this way? Why art? Why farming? Why digital? 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.

#### 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)

Homework for Oct 6: Read a Chapter from "Stuff Matters"

### 2. October 6

#### 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 Oct 13: Monbiot Ch. 1 - *Regenesis*

### 3. October 13

#### 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. At the end of the class, we will spend a little time briefing you on what you need to bring to Sado.

Homework for Oct 20: after the class, students will FORAGE in their neighborhood. We will suggest some things that you can "forage" for, including plants, objects, leaves,

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stones, but also “human-made” materials. Pay attention to the foraged and its relationships with their surroundings.

#### **4. October 20-23**

##### Fieldwork in Sado

For the schedule and activities, see the field book.

Also look at Atsuko Nakamura’s Home Page - Atsuko is a visual artist, and architect, who will accompany us on our field trip to Sado. Spend some time looking at her work.

Homework for Oct 27: 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.

#### **5. October 27**

##### Discussion about Kitaushima and digital projects – 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. We will also talk about how we can make use of digital in mapping what we saw in Kitaushima and Yamanashi.

Homework for Nov 10: Forage art materials and food in your neighborhood! Also watch the film, *Le Quatro Volte* (we will discuss it from time to time.)

#### **6. November 10**

##### Discussing and learning about the foraged

In this class we will look closely at some of the materials and living things that you have foraged. Perhaps we will also discuss how we “forage” in supermarkets for our food too. How does our food come to us? How do things in the world come to us? This class is very much an experiment because neither John nor Takeshi trained as ecologists or biologists, but we want to learn more about plants, food, and other things in the world and think more about how foraging can help us notice things.

Homework for Nov. 17: Prepare some ideas for incorporating some art from Kitaushima in the space of campus.

#### **7. November 17**

##### 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?

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## **8. November 24**

Preparation and briefing of the Yamanashi Trip

*Sophia Sustainable Farm Visit when sunny*

Dress casually and comfortably for farming!

## **9. December 1**

2<sup>nd</sup> Fieldwork in TBA

For the schedule and activities, see the field book.

December 7<sup>th</sup> = Symposium (Artists and Villages – two UK artists and one Norwegian artist will present about their work in rural areas and villages – we strongly recommend you attend this event if you can.

## **10. December 8**

Short debriefing session on Yamanashi

We will talk about what we observed in Yamanashi—organic farming, people, soil, plants, bugs, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and interdependent relations between plants and bugs.

Guest speaker: Hazel Barron-Cooper

Hazel Barron-Cooper is a British artist who is working on an art project in a small village in the north-east of England. She will be presenting in person about her work on the 7<sup>th</sup>. She will present briefly about her work today too, but this is also a chance for you to present your art-work to her. You may still be at the “idea” stage right now, but please all take the time to tell us what you are planning to try to create or show us something.

Homework for Dec 15: Monbiot, Ch. 3

## **11. December 15**

Farming as building trust and weaving relations

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

Homework for Jan 5: Hathaway, Preface & Intro

## **12. January 5**

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 Jan 12: Hathaway, Ch. 1.

## **13. January 12**

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Concluding session

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

Hathaway, M. 2022. *What a Mushroom Lives for*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: Ch. 1 (28-49).

**14. January 19**

Exhibition of art works

Possibly a mini symposium on art and climate change organized by students. (Something informal and fun that can take place around the exhibition space.)