



# ***NATURAL DYEING AGAINST THE ANTHROPOCENE: SASHA DUERR'S PARTICIPATORY CLASSROOM WITHIN THE POSSIBLE***

by Laurin C. Guthrie

**IN** my first natural dyeing lesson with **Sasha Duerr**, my classmates and I looked at a map of dye plants around the **California College of the Arts' (CCA)** Oakland campus and surrounding urban neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> It was September 2012, and Duerr was explaining best practices for foraging as we prepared to go out and collect materials from our urban environment to dye small fabric swatches. Back in the studio, the class clustered around gently simmering pots full of English ivy, redwood cones,

oxalis, eucalyptus bark and sweetgum leaves. We added our small swatches of fabric and watched as they started to take on the colors teased out of the plant materials. Like strange teas, the material released color into the water, and the fabrics dropped into the pots began to soak it up almost immediately. Vivid, deep browns in shades of dark woody red or steely gray; bright, neon yellow; and reds and grays that appeared almost purple. There is a magic to the first natural dyeing experience

that captures the imagination and makes the world seem full of promise and mystery. Beyond that initial wonder lies the potential for a lifetime of study and experimentation, and it is that moment of wonder and delight that Duerr uses to draw students in and to encourage them to learn and to look more closely at the natural world around them.

Duerr's natural dyeing practice relies heavily on experimentation with whatever plants are immediately available, using the basic formula of water, dye material and fiber to create color. The emphasis for Duerr is on drawing connections between

Left page: Dye Studio vignette of dyed fabric samples, dye materials and flyers for the Creative Growth Runway Show printed on risograph printers in the Print Studio, 2014. Photo: The Possible.

Bottom: Solar dyed natural materials and fabric in jars in the Dye Studio, 2014. Photo: The Possible.

the dyer, the constituent parts of the dye and the process, all of which are specific to the location in which the dyeing occurs. To Duerr, "working with plant color is one of the easiest and most accessible ways of connecting with the cycle of our ecologies..."<sup>2</sup> Natural dyeing for Duerr is about drawing connections, engaging with the living world around us and seeing the potential for color, which one can only get to know through experimentation and the experience gained by practice and close-looking.

In her 2016 book, *Natural Color*, Duerr writes: "Dyeing with plants means more than simply replacing synthetic materials with natural ones—it means changing the way we care for and interact with our natural environment."<sup>3</sup> Care and interaction are at the core of Duerr's practice and she brings them into her teaching and dye work. During her MFA at CCA,<sup>4</sup> Duerr made that connection more explicit within her practice, combining her textile and fiber work with techniques and strategies from social



practice, an emerging field at that time and in that space.<sup>5</sup> The classroom for her CCA-based “Soil to Studio” course was ever-changing and often outdoors or off-campus, most notably as part of the interactive and experimental exhibition *The Possible*, which took place at the **Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive** (BAMPFA) in January through May of 2014.

*The Possible* was a hugely ambitious curatorial project that blurred the boundaries between curatorial practice and social practice, challenged what the museum space could be, and involved a huge number of artists, performers and participants.<sup>6</sup> For the exhibition, four studio spaces were set up on the ground floor of the former BAMPFA space: a natural dye studio, a print studio, a ceramics studio and a children’s studio. Alongside artists such as **Fritz Haeg, Travis Meinolf, Angela Hennessey** and **Binta Ayofemi**, Duerr created dyed works in the public space of the museum and taught her CCA class in the dye studio, where her students both learned and demonstrated natural dyeing, as well as collaborated with other participating artists.<sup>7</sup> The upper floors of the museum’s gallery spaces housed plinths and displays, many of which were sculptural artworks unto themselves, almost all of which

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began the exhibition empty. The concept behind curator **David Wilson’s** vision was to put the process of creation on display, inviting more than 80 artists to create work in the museum, filling the upper galleries with work as it was completed in the studios. Workshops open to the public were held every Sunday during the exhibition, and as the show progressed more artists were welcomed into the fold as collaborators.



Sasha Duerr and her Soil to Studio class meeting in the Dye Studio of *The Possible*, 2014. Photo: The Possible.



Installation view of *The Possible* on the main floor of BAMPFA, 2014. Photo: The Possible.

The shift in setting from college campus to studios within a museum exhibition enhanced the more experimental features of Duerr's class. The formally matriculated students of CCA learned and made work alongside visitors and members of the public, while the visiting lecturers and artists either came from within the body of participating artists in *The Possible* or came to teach both CCA students and the general public alike. These types of blended pedagogic experiences—learning while simultaneously teaching others, working with and learning from artists beyond the course instructor, making work that was entirely of their own practices while having that production process become part of the work—were typical of the way that Duerr taught, but embedding the class within *The Possible* amplified the uniqueness of the project. This did not mean that every student enjoyed being embedded within an artwork while they learned.<sup>8</sup> By scholar and critic **Claire Bishop's** standards, however, this

would seem to underscore the success of the project itself: by not attempting to please all involved, Duerr was able to produce a project that remained true to her own vision as an artist, allowing participants and viewers to disagree or walk away with varying impressions of the work, but without compromising the integrity of the project.<sup>9</sup>

Duerr emphasizes care and a shifting attention that foregrounds the environmental relationship and parallels the methods and strategies deployed in both social practice art and environmental art activism identified by scholar **T.J. Demos**. In his 2022 essay "The Great Transition: The Arts and Radical System Change," Demos argues that the current era of climate change demands a cultural shift, and the world of art and media must abandon outdated modernist ideas of art and visual spectacle to embrace a formulation of media and culture which includes activism and



**Sasha Duerr**, *Plant Palette: Seaweed*, 2020. Natural dyed silk and wool with seaweed used as dye material. Photo by the artist.



**Shannon Colleen Ryan**, *Medicinal Dye Garments*, 2024. Natural dyed silk and organic cotton, Installation view with artist during Soil to Studio class critique in the main atrium of BAMPFA. Photo: Sasha Duerr.

experiments in new ways of living.<sup>10</sup> Demos expands the field of social practice art to encompass projects which engage in environmental activism, present models for new ways of living, exist on a range of scales, and occur within traditional art spaces like museums and galleries, as well as encampments, blockades and autonomous zones.

Demos proposes a new set of parameters for assessing the success of social practice art which departs sharply from Bishop's proposed critical framework, articulated in her 2006 article, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents."<sup>11</sup> Where Bishop asks us to take questions of aesthetics seriously in relational aesthetics and to judge the work on the basis of its aesthetic and conceptual content, Demos asks art criticism to take seriously social and cultural events typically considered activism and judge them as artistic projects. Bishop revisited this subject in her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Writing at the end of the first chapter, a reworking of her original 2006 essay, Bishop writes, "Instead of extracting art from the 'useless' domain of the aesthetic to relocate it in praxis, the better examples of participatory art occupy an ambiguous territory between 'art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art.'"<sup>12</sup>

To Demos, other art forms and the art establishment are in danger of becoming not just irrelevant, but culpable in the cultural, social and ecological crises of the Anthropocene.<sup>13</sup> For Duerr, education as practice is central to her natural dyeing work, and the cultural moment of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century calls for exactly this kind of socially and environmentally engaged participatory art. Her work in *The Possible* pushed the boundaries of social practice art, making the entire public attending the museum into learner-participants, and simultaneously pushing her students into the role of learner-teachers. At the same time, Duerr was able to use the space of the museum, and the semi-fluid and permeable body of her classroom to strengthen ties both between people, and between people and place, staying true to her own artistic vision as a dyer and teacher working in the space of social practice. This is a new function of natural dyeing education in institutional settings: not just passing on technical knowledge but modeling a participatory and implicated way of being using social practice and participatory art methodologies to engage questions whose answers ripple beyond the museum setting.

<sup>1</sup> The map was the result of a project undertaken by Sasha Duerr and Susanne Cockerell's students in 2011 and was inspired by David Allen Burns and Austin Young's Fallen Fruit project. <https://fallenfruit.org/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sasha Duerr, *Natural Color: Vibrant Plant Dye Projects for Your Home and Wardrobe* (New York: Watson-Guption)

Publications, 2016), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Then California College of Arts and Crafts. CCA dropped “craft” from their name in 2007.

<sup>5</sup> CCA was the first art college to create a standalone Social Practice program in 2005, three years after Duerr finished her MFA studies. Robin Cembalest, “How to Speak Artspeak (Properly),” ARTnews.com, October 31, 2013, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/how-to-speak-artspeak-properly-2328/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more about *The Possible*, including a complete list of participants, see David Wilson, “An Index of Possibilities: Participating Artists Acknowledgements & Contributors,” <https://www.the-possible.org/participants.html>.

<sup>7</sup> I was fortunate to have been Duerr’s teaching assistant while she taught in the space and was welcomed by the other dyers onsite to participate and collaborate with them throughout the project’s duration.

<sup>8</sup> A student lamented not having standard class time in the college’s studios and classrooms and also claimed others felt the same. Anonymous student in conversation with the author, April 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso), 2012.

<sup>10</sup> T.J. Demos, “The Great Transition: The Arts and Radical System Change,” in *Accumulation: The Art, Architecture and Media of Climate Change*, ed. by Nick Axel, Daniel A. Barber, Nikolaus Hirsch, Anton Vidokle (Minneapolis, MN: e-flux Architecture, 2022), 37-52.

<sup>11</sup> Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *ArtForum International* 44, no. 6 (2006), 178-183.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Demos, “The Great Transition,” 42.

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—Sasha Duerr (she/her) is an artist, designer and educator who works with plant-based color and natural palettes. Sasha centers her practice and research on the collaborative color potential of weeds, food and floral waste, and local and seasonal ingredients. Sasha is the author of *The Handbook of Natural Plant Dyes* (Timber Press/Workman 2011) *Natural Color* (Watson-Guptill/Ten Speed Press 2016) and *Natural Palettes* (Princeton Architectural Press 2020).

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Opening Ceremony event flyer held by indigo dyer Tessa Watson, 2014. Photo: The Possible.



Sasha Duerr portrait, 2014. Photo: Terri Loewenthal.