Slow & steady
Christin Boggs

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Slow & Steady

by

Christin Boggs

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
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Slow & Steady
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**Food producers and organizations in the Greater Rochester Region:**
Slow & Steady

By Christin Boggs

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Abstract

Slow & Steady explores the contemporary movement away from mass-produced food and towards creative alternatives that offer vitality and potency to participants and their surroundings. Within the Greater Rochester Region, individuals have rejected convenience food to responsibly grow, prepare and share sustenance in cooperative groups. The photographs in this thesis depict scenes from community gardens, community supported agriculture (CSA) farms, farmers markets, and other organizations associated with local food production. Here exists a community of resourceful people, coming together in pursuit of good food. Slow & Steady points to one of the ways in which art can effect social change through the representation of healthy and sustainable food practices.
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A Young McDonald’s Lover, ca. 1990
Introduction

*A Young McDonald’s Lover* is a portrait of myself as a child, in a state of McDonald’s bliss. The photograph was most likely taken minutes after finishing a meal of French fries, soda and Chicken McNuggets, with lots of sweet and sour sauce – one of my favorite flavors as a child. This portrait demonstrates my early years as a fast food lover. Though I grew up eating fast food, I began to show interest in nutrition at a young age. I have vivid memories of elementary school health classes in which I learned how to read nutrition labels and how to recognize and avoid harmful ingredients like Monosodium Glutamate and Aspartame. It has taken me a longer time to figure out how to eat in ways that are alternative to the mass-production grocery store mentality. While studying photography as an undergraduate, I began to experiment with ways in which to address food issues in my artwork. Since then, my knowledge of food politics has progressed alongside my pursuit of art. Earlier food-related artwork culminates in this thesis project.

During my first year of graduate school, I read Barbara Kingsolver’s book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, which transformed the way I think about food by introducing me to the gastronomic movements of Slow Food and local food.¹ I began making small lifestyle changes, like baking my own bread and shopping at farmers markets. *Slow & Steady* grew out of a desire to build relationships with people in the Rochester area who share similar food interests, to document their actions through photography, to continue learning how to eat closer to the source, and to share the resulting images and information in a way that encourages community growth.

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¹ Slow Food International was established in 1986 when Carlo Petrini protested the opening of a McDonalds in Rome. Locavore, a term coined in 2005, denotes a person who has made a commitment to eat foods produced within a 100-250 mile radius.
Slow & Steady: Investigating Food & Art

Food and art are two fundamental aspects of the human condition. The two are interconnected when a meal is elevated to an art form or when art portrays food. However, within industrial food production, physical preparatory experiences and gustatory consumption have been discarded for efficiency and financial achievement. As an artist, I work to reclaim the pleasures and aesthetics of food production and consumption. My photographs from Slow & Steady illustrate the continuing unification of food and art through small-scale food production.

Slow & Steady explores the contemporary movement away from mass-produced food and towards creative alternatives that offer vitality and potency to participants and their surroundings. This study is performed through documentary realism, a contemporary trend in photography. Influenced by such writers as Allan Sekula and Carol Becker, my objective as an artist is to use photography as a tool to present visual imagery that promotes a dialogue involving political issues, particularly about the present-day status of food. The images, which evidence the actions of individuals and communities within the greater Rochester region, function as an example of the larger slow foods movement. This thesis points to one of the ways in which art can effect social change through the representation of healthy and sustainable food practices.

Labor is an extensive topic represented within the works of Sekula, paired with a discourse on capitalism and the working class. This theme begins with Aerospace Folktales, Sekula’s portrayal of his family under the event of his father’s job loss. According to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Sekula’s use of labor as a subject matter culminates in his film Tsukiji, which documents the world’s largest fish market.
in Tokyo. Sekula states in an interview with Buchloh, “labor is always shadowed by
the absence of labor, by labor in the negative, by the nightmare of unemployment on
one side, and by the utopian dream of genuine freedom from work on the other.”

2 In contrast, my work focuses on individuals who are choosing to situate their lives
outside mainstream capitalism. Writer Shannon Hayes refers to these people as
“radical homemakers” in her book of the same title. Describing a couple (Ruth and
Sanford) living in Upstate New York, Hayes writes,

“Mainstream American culture views the household as a unit of consumption. By this conventional standard, the household consumes food, clothing, household technologies, repair and debt services, electricity, entertainment, health-care services, and environmental resources. In order to be a ‘successful’ unit of consumption, the household must have money. Ruth’s and Sanford’s household was not a unit of consumption. By growing their own food, living within their means, providing much of their own health care, and relying on community, family and barter for meeting their remaining needs, their household was essentially a unit of production.”

3 Contemporary photographers Lucas Foglia and Keliy Anderson-Staley capture the
lives of such people who have made a full commitment to a life of production, in their
respective projects *Re-Wilding* and *Off the Grid*. With *Slow & Steady*, I photograph
people whose households fall in between consumption and production. Because I
grew up in a household of ‘consumption’, I am interested in the steps one takes
towards production and the contradictions that inevitably occur.

Within the greater Rochester area, a high concentration of individuals and
small communities have rejected convenience foods to responsibly grow, prepare
and share sustenance in cooperative groups. Here exists a community of people
coming together in pursuit of food beyond Wonderbread and Kraft American Cheese

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slices. People in the twenty-first century are finding beauty and satisfaction by returning to traditions of gardening, baking, and preserving food on a small scale.

In addition to the current demand for budget cuts placed on the public by the global economic crisis, word is spreading that there is something very wrong with the American food industry. Grocers carry foods that have traveled halfway around the globe. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and pesticides like Monsanto’s Roundup are polluting and destroying otherwise healthy soil and water. Corn monoculture has resulted in force-feeding the world (animals included) over processed corn byproducts such as high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). As a result, health and wellness on a global scale are in serious decline.

Awareness of food problems has been widely spread by the recent emergence of food writers and film producers. In the summer of 2009, producer/director Robert Kenner released *Food, Inc.*, co-produced by Eric Schlosser and featuring Michael Pollan, authors of *Fast Food Nation* and *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, respectively. The documentary sheds light on a money-hungry system of food production that checks moral responsibility at the door. In response, individuals have sought out a solution that, economically and ethically, is a return to ancestral traditions of growing, preparing, and sharing food within small communities. The movement towards slow food and local eating is catching on quickly. Grassroots projects such as city or school gardens have become a trend across America in recent years. In the summer of 2009, a number of food banks launched community garden projects as a way to provide fresh, nutritious foods to the hungry.

I am working under the assumption that after the novelty of post-war processed and packaged foods wore off, it became standard for many Americans to passively accept the food placed systematically before them in new, all-
encompassing supermarkets. There was a trust in science, government and factory production, along with a fascination for novel food items, without concern for food origin and content. Today, with the launch of food journalism, information about the American food industry is now available, prompting individuals and communities across the nation to take responsibility for their roles in the food chain.

In addition to the contributions of authors and documentary films, artists have also taken up a role as informant to their audiences about food and environmental issues. Contemporary photographer Susana Raab reveals the absurdity of the American diet by creating a documentary-style body of work centered on fast food restaurants and county fairs. Her vibrant images are filled with fast food industry paraphernalia, junk food, plastic waste, costumes and an excess of Ronald McDonald imagery. Raab photographs events like a hot dog eating contest, a McDonald’s 50th anniversary celebration, and a general display of people stuffing their faces (mostly with fries). This work functions in a similar way to Pollan and Schlosser’s books, which expose problems of the food industry.

*Slow & Steady* comes along behind this research, to show possible alternatives to fast food, ranging in scale from minor lifestyle changes to extensive commitments. With a rising interest in local food production, community garden permits in the city of Rochester have grown from 60 in 2006 to 300 in 2008. In New York’s Monroe County alone, there are currently twenty different farmers markets that meet throughout the week during the summer, and twenty-five CSA farms in

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The abbreviation “CSA” stands for Community Supported Agriculture. It is a type of farm that gathers members who pay a fee at the beginning of the season, then pick up a weekly share of vegetables and possibly meat, cheese, eggs or bread. Through this system, the farmer and the customer work together to ensure that the farmer has an adequate income and that the customer has food provisions for the season.

The types of people joining the local food movement and the level of commitment vary greatly. Young people raised in suburbia, such as Mud Creek Farm owner Erin Bullock, are choosing a future in farming by pursuing such fields in college as landscape architecture. Experienced farmers, such as Ammie Chickering and Greg Palmer of the Genesee Valley Organic CSA, offer apprenticeships for beginners. Others are becoming certified Master Gardeners. In addition, individuals like Chuck Winship of Sugarbush Hollow are committing to small-scale food production later in life, and as such, have made career changes, from office work to organic farming. In other situations, urban dwellers new to the local food movement are making small adjustments, such as joining a CSA or community garden, shopping at a farmers market, or simply growing vegetable plants on the porch and composting food waste.

I am drawn to photograph subject matter that shows lifestyles conflicted by twenty-first century mass-produced technologies and moral responsibilities in regard to food and the environment, because I am experiencing this on a personal level. Some images appear almost timeless, except for a few subtle hints to the era in which they are made. The image iPod & Kale is one of many images that show

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iPod & Kale, Mud Creek Farm, 2009
the convergence of age-old traditions and twenty-first century technology. These contradictions in lifestyle are indicative of the current movement. The images presented in *Slow & Steady* reject “uncharitably bleak or impossibly romantic” views of farm life. Instead they fall somewhere in between the two stereotypes, projecting an outlook that is both cautious and hopeful. As Youngna Park writes on the *Hey! Hot Shot* blog, “The scenes [from *Slow and Steady*] are pastoral, but also portray a hard scrabble and unglamorous life: high fashion and clean fingernails have no place here.”

The political and cultural issues surrounding this thesis are complicated and there is not always a right answer to the countless arguments in regard to food politics and global warming. I am not attempting to answer any of these difficult questions, but rather to present the reality of peoples’ choices and actions. One such confusing question is whether to choose organic food, shipped across the country, or food grown conventionally next-door. In an article from *Edible Finger Lakes Magazine* entitled “Local or Organic? A False Choice,” journalist Samuel Fromartz argues in favor of both options, reporting that many organic farmers rely both on a local customer-base through farmers markets and a national customer-base through sales to grocery store chains like Whole Foods. Fromartz explains that “what really [matters is] thinking about the choice—to be aware, to stay informed, and to be conscious of our role as consumers.” The photographs in *Slow & Steady* illustrate options available to consumers, outside the mainstream food industry and

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emphasize the aesthetic beauty and virtue present in small-scale farming, gardening, and cooking.

Farmers Markets and gardens have a deep history within the Rochester region. According to Nancy Rosin’s book *The Hands that Feed Us*, when the town of “Rochesterville” was founded in 1817, “most early residents of the village were largely self-sufficient with their own small garden plots, cows or other animals. But several small market gardens already dotted the village landscape or lay just outside its limits.”10 However, this food independence was short-lived, when an Erie Canal route to New York City was completed in 1822. This opened a new customer base, causing the Genesee Valley to become one of the “great grain growing regions of the world.”11 Locals were now able to rely on big companies for food. Just a few years later, in 1827, the Rochester Public Market was established, allowing a compatible economic relationship between neighboring farmers and consumers. The year-round Public Market continues running to this day, making it one of the oldest continually running markets in the United States, and currently the most popular farmers market in the country, as was determined in the summer of 2010, through a vote run by American Farmland Trust.12

During WWI, when meat and canned goods were required for the war effort, self-sufficiency became fashionable again. Shopping at the Public Market and growing backyard victory gardens were highly regarded as both patriotic and economical acts. Across the nation, $875 million worth of food was produced

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11 Ibid.
through the establishment of over 5 million gardens between the years 1917-1918.\textsuperscript{13} The end of World War II brought the end of the movement for independent food production. After so many years of rationing food, Americans eagerly bought into a lifestyle that offered innovative convenience foods.

The birth of photography occurred just twelve years after the Public Market opened. And of course, at the turn of the century, George Eastman turned Rochester into a photography boomtown. Industrial jobs at such companies as Kodak and Bausch & Lomb meant career possibilities outside of farming. Known as “Kodak farmers,” some had fulltime industry jobs, while farming on the side.\textsuperscript{14} The expansion of the suburbs meant that fulltime farmers could make a larger profit by selling their land to builders, rather than continuing to work the land. After a century of success, perhaps Rochester is now coming full-circle, as industries struggle for survival and residents desire a return to self-sufficiency. People are choosing small farming over big industry.

Sixty-five years after the end of WWII, the victory garden is making a comeback, in response both to the global economic crisis and a raised awareness of food and environmental issues. In this case, the term “victory” relates to freedom from the mainstream food industry and from a reliance on motor vehicles for sustenance.\textsuperscript{15} In the summer of 2007, artist Amy Franceschini founded the organization San Francisco Victory Gardens 2008+, which “began as a utopian proposal and has now become a pilot project that supports the transition of backyard, front yard, window boxes, rooftops and unused land into food production

\textsuperscript{14} Nancy Rosin, \textit{The Hands That Feed Us} (Rochester: The City, 2005), 64.
areas.” The project began in conjunction with an exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, but quickly spread out into the city. A year later, in May 2009, first Lady Michelle Obama contributed to the gardening movement by initiating the establishment of an edible garden on the White House lawn. Her support has aided in raising awareness about healthy and sustainable eating habits.

*Slow & Steady*, a work that exists in the realm of political and activist art, provides a contribution not only to the Rochester community, but also to an international audience that exists both in the present and for future generations. As Carol Becker suggests in her essay *The Artist in Society*, “It is time for artists to challenge that with which they cannot live, and to bring into view that which they refuse to live without.”

In her essay entitled *Ecopolitics/Ecopoetry*, Eleanor Heartney discusses Helen and Newton Harrison’s artistic approaches to environmental problems. In her introductory section of the essay, Heartney writes, “the artist's habits of metaphor, cross-reference, inclusiveness, and holistic thinking may help unclog a discourse that often finds itself mired in the narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking.” Particular art has the ability to make difficult subject matter approachable and comprehensible. Through art, problems can be solved in innovative ways. Heartney describes the Harrisons’ approach to ecological art as “beneficent.” This word works in the context of *Slow & Steady* as well. Through my project, I am doing more than creating photographs – I am developing relationships. I bake bread and cookies for potluck meals in the farming community or for classes and meetings.

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within the RIT SPAS community. I visit farmers markets to catch up with my farmer friends and to take digital pictures of events, so that the market community has documentation for promotion. I was a work-trade member at Mud Creek Farm during the 2010 growing season. I worked 4.5 hours a week in exchange for vegetables. My participation with farm work is depicted in Farmer Erin Bullock’s photograph *Onion Planting Party*. (I am the subject wearing the red and white baseball cap).

I am working from a sincere desire to be affected both by my experiences and by the resulting images, a position that Leo Tolstoy argues is vital to art.19 For such projects as *Fish Story*, *Freeway to China*, and *TITANIC’s Wake*, Sekula has worked in a similarly sincere way, immersing himself within the subject. In the introduction to the book *Performance Under Working Conditions*, Sabine Breitwieser writes, “Sekula sees photography not as a product, but as a labor process and a social practice.”20 Similarly, my photographs are the result of time invested at gardens, farms and farmers markets, developing relationships and collaborating with food producers.

Rirkrit Tiravanija is another artist interested in relationships. He uses food to create an experience rather than an object.21 He sets up gallery installations that include the arrangements of commonly used three-dimensional objects, such as tables, stools, food and cooking utensils. Then viewers are allowed to interact freely within the space. Tiravanija’s art is about generosity, which can be extended and received anywhere, by anyone.

Erin Bullock, *Onion Planting Party*, Mud Creek Farm, 2010
The images from *Slow & Steady* contain attributes from seventeenth century still life paintings and modernism. The still life paintings served a didactic purpose, as a warning against gluttony and a reminder of human mortality. My photographs similarly communicate a didactic message. American culture overlooks the importance of food and the question from where it comes. The images from *Slow & Steady* reveal the raw source of food, from dirt, and the difficult, but virtuous and rewarding work entailed. Whenever observing scenes and considering possible subject matter, I am thinking about symbols present in Dutch still life paintings. Evident in *Jonell* and *Earthbox*, I notice objects like clocks and dying plants, which painters utilized to represent mortality. Independent food growth carries the idea of transience, instilled in traditional *vanitas* paintings that contain symbols such as wilting flowers, skulls and timepieces. The consumer’s act of buying beef in a grocery store or in between a sesame bun is completely removed from the slaughtering process. It is easy to forget that a life was sacrificed for a meal. On the contrary, a farmer is completely aware of life cycles.

In response to Clement Greenberg’s essay *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, documentation is considered the essence of the photographic medium. Since its origins in 1839, the photograph has always served the purpose of representing a moment in time. The photograph acts as a trace to a story of something that existed within history. Of course, therein lies the question as to whether a photograph is truthful. In response to which, I reference Geoffrey Batchen’s essay *Ectoplasm: Photography in the Digital Age*, to argue that every photograph has a certain level of manipulation, from the framing to the exposure to the tonal adjustments in a final

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Jonell, GVOCSA Peacework Farm, 2009
Earthbox, South Wedge Community Garden, 2010
print. And the camera transforms a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional plane, furthering the distortion of authenticity. But every photograph holds some level of representation. In the words of Sekula, “the medium’s paramount attraction was, for me, its unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing – albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive and often superficial terms – a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships.” Similarly, I am drawn to the camera as a tool that allows me both to experience moments in real time, and to capture them on film so that a larger audience may also witness what I see and perhaps learn something new.

The title, Slow & Steady, derived from Aesop’s Fable The Tortoise and the Hare, was chosen for this project as a metaphor for the two competing forces of the slow foods movement (the tortoise) and the American food industry (the hare). The word slow is a relatively new buzzword for food descriptions, due to the slow foods movement. The word steady references the constant time and attention required for farms and gardens. Steady also refers to the fact that the actions of locavores are not new and revolutionary, but age-old.

In Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary, Sekula discusses the need to reassess the spaces in which artists show their work, through the evaluation of the relationship between the artist and their audience. He writes that “‘marginal’ spaces have to be discovered and utilized, spaces where issues can be discussed collectively: union halls, churches, high schools, community colleges, community centers, and perhaps only reluctantly, public museums. Still photographers ought to

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consider ‘vulgar’ and ‘impure’ formats, such as slide show."\(^\text{24}\) Sekula himself employed the slideshow format in his projects, combining image and text in a controlled way that enhanced the viewer’s connection to the work. Sekula’s ideas fall in line with Carol Becker’s urge for artists to take a social responsibility. By working within the context of daily life, artists can challenge the accepted norm and find creative solutions to problems.

Images from \textit{Slow & Steady} have been shown both in ‘marginal’ spaces and in ‘impure’ formats. I participated in Slideluck Potshow DC IV in May 2010. Begun in 2000, when Casey Kelbaugh "invited some friends to his backyard in Seattle for a potluck dinner and art slideshow,\(^\text{25}\) Slideluck Potshow has become an international phenomenon, which brings artists and their surrounding communities together for a night of food and art. Images for the slideshow are collected through a call-for-entry and jury selection process and range from emerging to well-established artists. I attended Slideluck Potshow at Rochester Contemporary last December, then submitted work to the DC event. Images from \textit{Slow & Steady} have also appeared on farmers’ Facebook pages, websites and newsletters. \textit{Slow & Steady at Brighton Farmers Market} illustrates my participation at the Brighton Farmers Market on the last Sunday in September 2010. I also displayed photographs from \textit{Slow & Steady} at the South Wedge Farmers Market during the month of October. Images will be on display at the Brighton Town Hall in November 2010.

\textit{Slow & Steady} as a complete thesis exhibition was shown in October and November 2010, at the Design Gallery at the Rochester Regional Community

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 70.
}
Slow & Steady at Brighton Farmers Market, 2010
(top) Slow & Steady Installation View I, 2010

(bottom) Slow & Steady Installation View II, 2010
Design Center (RRCDC). It was important to exhibit the project in Rochester, so that the depicted individuals and communities come together with other Rochester residents within the gallery space. The show at The Design Gallery functioned as a resource for Rochester residents looking to get connected with local farmers, small-scale food producers and community gardens. The Design Gallery was chosen as the venue because the organization’s mission is “to be a resource, assisting municipalities and citizens of the Greater Rochester Region in defining, understanding, promoting and implementing concepts of design excellence and sustainability for the built environment and public realm.”26 Slow & Steady unites two existing groups advocating for sustainability in food and the built environment.

Slow & Steady was photographed over the course of a year, from September 2009 – 2010. Selection was a significant aspect of the thesis project, as the possibilities were endless. Early in the project, I had to accept the obvious fact that I cannot be everywhere all the time, and thus had to place certain limits on the project. Of the photographs that were taken, selections were made from each roll of film, based on both technical and aesthetic merit. The first batch of images were scanned, edited and printed digitally on eco-friendly Hahnemuhle Sugar Cane photo paper, at 20”x20.” From there, images were narrowed to a final selection to hang on the wall. This process was guided by research, scheduling availability, artistic intuition and a certain amount of happenstance. The final edit of images was motivated by photographs that represented fundamental themes from the project, including sustainable food practices, community, small scale commerce,

transportation, life cycles, plants, animals, and juxtapositions. The final sequencing was based on visual elements of color and subject matter. Green House Framing, a small, sustainable frame company, made the frames. According to their website, “Each frame is designed…from locally sourced reclaimed woods. All of the materials and processes have been chosen for their low impact on the environment.”

In addition to images on the wall, the show highlights the RRCDC’s reading area, providing attendees with the opportunity for further research related to local food issues. Through the RRCDC website, I have posted several web pages that contain information about the thesis event itself, in addition to a list of community gardens, farms and farmers markets in the Rochester region. As stated previously, Slow & Steady lives beyond photographs, in the surrounding experiences. By setting out reading materials, I provide the audience with the opportunity to find their own ways of connecting to the kinds of experiences I had while making the photographs.

The food at the opening reception was significant to the thesis, as it provided a three-dimensional experience to similar objects presented on a two-dimensional picture plane. A potluck is an experience that holds symbolic importance, as individuals come together to give and receive food in the context of a larger group. The potluck is a significant element within the local foods community. In keeping with this tradition, multiple producers of local foods brought their specialty dishes to the reception. This not only referenced the potluck meal, but also the smorgasbord of food present at a farmers market. Biscotti for Everybotti, Joe Bean Coffee Roasters, and Rochester Roots set up displays in which they offered products to sample and

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(top) Slow & Steady Opening Reception I, 2010

(bottom) Slow & Steady Opening Reception II, 2010
purchase. Again, this provided the audience with specific ways in which to obtain local, sustainable, delicious food.

*Slow & Steady* has been an unbelievably enjoyable experience. Rochester is full of creative, kind, generous individuals who allowed my camera and I into their lives. I have had all kinds of new experiences and adventures, like riding on a snowmobile to the top of a forest of maple trees, harvesting vegetables in the rain, and photographing the Brighton Farmers Market from the top of a fire truck ladder. I have eaten very well and have made many friends. And I have continued to raise interest in alternative food practices, while promoting community development. As individuals living in the twenty-first century, we have a task set before us, to relearn the actions of our ancestors. In so doing, we will participate with art in our everyday lives.
Selected Bibliography


Hey! Hot Shot. http://heyhotshot.com/blog/


