

Episode 2: “Documenting Climate Resilience Through Art”

Ruth Rabinowitz

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian M. Cook:

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook, and The EcoTheatre Lab. Welcome to today's conversation with farmer, landowner, and artist Ruth Rabinowitz.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

As an artist primarily trained in photography and also ceramics and even drawing and some painting, when I inherited these farms, and even when my father was alive, I realized that as a gardener for years, that it was like a landscape installation. I was starting to see it as the trees are an aspect, the farm ground's an aspect, the water feature's an aspect. How do I beautify it and put my Ruth touch on the land as a landowner who had the privilege to do that?

I don't know. I'd been to so many gardens in England and studied formal garden coffee table books and visited Rococo Gardens and loved Italian gardens and been to Versailles, and how is that completely different than owning a farm and seeing farm ground as a beautiful landscape or a canvas that could be beautified? So, they think that all that background I had was just transferrable into this business and onto these lands that I have the privilege of stewarding.

Vivian M. Cook:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community-engaged researchers and community organizers and activists who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. I'm Vivian, and I invite you to explore the Art of Climate Dialogue with me.

As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture and community-engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today. Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ianktonwan, and Santee.

Because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here. The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. As a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities.

My thanks to podcast interviewees Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe; Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska; and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

Ruth Rabinowitz was born in Michigan, raised in Arizona, and has lived for over 30 years in the Bay Area of California. Ruth designed a farmhouse and is now living on her land in Southern Iowa. She holds a BA

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in art from University of California Santa Cruz, an early childhood education site supervisor degree, and permaculture design certificate.

When Ruth was a young girl, her father David began purchasing farmland in the Midwest with an aim to pass these farms to his two daughters. Without being raised on a farm, aside from the urban one-acre Arizona garden her family owned, Ruth stepped into the role as farm manager at the family land in Iowa and South Dakota in 2012. She learned the farm business and caring for farmland from soup to nuts, primarily through studying the web, engaging with NRCS and FSA offices, and attending farm conferences and field days.

She is a member of Practical Farmers of Iowa; Women, Food and Agriculture Network; Climate Land Leaders; Xerces Society; Pheasants Forever; Iowa Farmers Union, and Environmental Defense Fund. Her art includes travel photography, portraiture, wheel and handbuilt ceramics, interior design, and landscape design and installation. Ruth's newest art form is wood farm signs embellished with names of farm locations and carvings of the plants and animals that live on the farms.

I had the opportunity to visit Ruth at one of her Iowa farms, and I'm excited to share our conversation with y'all today.

Thank you for inviting me to your farm today.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

You're welcome.

Vivian M. Cook:

It's really wonderful to be here, and it is really beautiful. You've described the work you're doing on your farm as an artistic installation. In your view, how does this artistry of your farm work connect to climate resiliency?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

I think they're intertwined because as you listen to the land, connect with the land, understand and educate yourself about no-till practices and cover crops and retention of water, this amazing resource that comes from the sky that we just can't push a button and get, we need to grab it and get it with rain barrels and swells and rain gardens and percolation into the soil, that it's all connected and it's not separate. The land wants us to be able to resolve climate change. It wants to help us. We know that planting trees to sequester carbon is one of the number one things we can do to turn it around. We know that in Brazil, in the Amazon, the lungs of the planet are being slashed and burned and used for crop ground. We understand that. So, as we, in the Midwest or other places in the States, plant trees and shrubs, we're really helping climate change, and we're beautifying the land, and we're creating habitat for birds and everything else and food, and it's all together. It's not separate items. They're all together.

Vivian M. Cook:

It sounds like you have approached that work as a design process, as fundamentally a work of design and artistry as to figure out how do we bring these elements into the landscape and diversify it in conversation with the land?

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Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes. It really goes to the background of my father was kind of this visionary man who was raised in the Great Depression and was brought up pretty darn poor in Camden area of New Jersey. One of his first jobs was a gardener, or helping a gardener on a truck or something. So, we always had these landscapes in my life with chickens and an orchard and all these things growing up, even in a residential area where the neighbors weren't happy about roosters crowing next door. So, being brought up that way, and then understanding that he didn't have the time as a doctor to drill down into what no-till was and planting trees and all these things that he was doing, it was an investment. He had a passion for it.

As it transferred to me, the next generation, I got to put my flair, my stamp, my woman's touch, my artistic touch, me, all the passion that I had had for all the gardens in my life and all the landscapes in my life. It was like, "Here's this canvas that it's a fixer-upper." Actually, all the farms were fixer-uppers. They came in rough, like a hunk of clay out of a bag. "Here you go. What are you going to do with it?" And that's really how I thought about it, was like, geez, well, I can't really mess this up too much because it's already pretty messed up.

Vivian M. Cook:

Oh, no.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

I mean, it was really like, well, I'm not too scared of this because I know there's big problems and I know that I can steward this to solve these problems. While I'm at it, let's make it pretty. While I'm at it, let's think about putting in trees. Let's think about putting in prairie. Let's think about cleaning up the water. How can the government help me? What grants are available? How can the nonprofits I'm involved with help me? It was really just this opportunity of a lifetime, of a vocation and an avocation all at once, altogether. It's wherever I wanted to take it. Really, the sky was the limit, and it was overwhelming, absolutely overwhelming to not just have a backyard of a house that you just bought with a fenced yard; this is what you have. This was large-scale, complicated landscapes with deep erosion, ponds that hadn't been cleaned out ever or 30 years silted in, 40 years. No records of the building process.

I mean, it's just been unearthing delayed maintenance and what previous owners were doing, and then it kind of went to the wayside, and then picking up the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle and going, "How do I listen to the land, put my artistic stamp on it, and move this forward to help with climate change? Let's reverse climate change on these particular lands that I get to have a say about," because aren't a lot of people that get to have say about large landscapes. It's a very amazing opportunity, and it comes with a deep responsibility, and I think a land ethic that Aldo Leopold pulled talked about.

Knowing that I wasn't like 20 years old when I got them; I was a little bit older, and that this is really for the future. I'm going to realize and see some of these trees in my lifetime get fairly large, but not like they're going to be in 100 years. That's the age of some of these trees that are going to be that I've planted. They will be able to be here that long. It's the biggest thing I've ever done in my life. This is it.

Vivian M. Cook:

Can you tell us more about how your farms have been transformed in the past several years? You talked about all these problems and how, in a way, there was freedom in knowing that you couldn't mess it up too much more. But what progress have you made with planting these trees and prairies?

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Ruth Rabinowitz:

When I started off in 2012, I was managing all 12 farms. My sister has six and I have six, and I've sold one to build this house here. So, I have five. While I was taking care of my sister's farms, which was a partnership, dad was alive and we were all together in this together, I was able to get grants and create two one-acre ponds, clean up the terraces with trees growing in them. I think there's about 25 conservation grass waterways that were put in on various farms. Some farms got three; some farms got one; some farms got seven. They were all lacking. There was hardly any grass waterways anywhere.

I doubled the amount of conservation ground. So, I ringed each farm in almost a frame of a 30-foot buffer...

Vivian M. Cook:

Wow.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

... quail buffer or pollinator buffer, basically a flower and grass buffer that encircles the farms either on three or four sides, depending, but at least three sides. That adds corridors for all the quail and pheasant and deer to be able to nest and have their broods and lay eggs and eat, and then it's habitat for all the bees and butterflies. It's a place for the landowner to walk. So we went from, I don't know, maybe less than 200 acres to close to, I don't know, I think 300 or 400 acres of conservation ground, really taking the steepest farm ground out of production, anything around water, anything that was next to creeks, ponds, all that went into conservation for the filtration of the water.

There was really absolutely no thought about the various small and larger forests. Some forests are two acres in size; some forests are 40 acres in size, and every bit in between. And no one had done any 10% improvements. No one had told my dad about, "You have to manage your forests; they're overcrowded. You need to do a crop tree releases for the black walnut or the hackberry." We hadn't walked in the forests. We didn't know what the understory was. We didn't understand about prescribed fire. We didn't understand about multi-floor rose or honeysuckle and the invasive species and how they were competing with the natives, and they needed to be removed.

So, I mean, you name it. It's just been really a complete overhaul and, look, a deep dive, acre by acre, as much as I could, can, am doing, am currently. It's in process. What's going on? What do I own? What does it need from me? Is it absolutely fine exactly as it is, or does it need some help? So, I feel like the land is alive for me because it is. There's trees everywhere. I feel like it's a spiritual connection with the land.

So, the artistry comes out with listening to the land, finding out what conservation programs are out there, how that can help with climate change, and then pushing the ball forward: applications, contractors, patience, the back-burner simmer for years, then it's in the front burner finally; patience, pursuit, emails, follow-up. You name it. Yeah, there's a lot going on.

Vivian M. Cook:

And how have these kind of large transformations in just a few years, how have they been received by your neighbors, who can see it?

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Ruth Rabinowitz:

Really well. I think that I had a few crosses to bear: woman from California, not native to Iowa, ding, ding, ding, all the way around. I had to really prove with actually doing the work myself: watering 300 trees, shoveling mulch into a little red wagon, the radio flyer, and mulching around each tree to capture the water, retain the moisture, add biology, the mycorrhizae, just all that needed to happen because this is very mined soil here. This was conventional corn and soybeans for probably 30 years, at least. So, it's now resting. It's retired crop ground around this house that's gone back to prairie and restored prairie. It's singing and it's happy, and the animals are coming back. So, the neighbors see that. They see stacks of firewood; they see the compost pile; they see the rain barrels off of the gutters capturing water; they see the mowing; they see the watering; they see the fencing. I mean, we are out there and they're driving by, and we're waving.

It's not like I've hired a bunch of kids. It'd be nice to have woofers in here and say, "Hey, you do that." But I just never took the time to figure that out. So yeah, we're doing the work ourselves. I think with the boots on the ground, the skin in the game, that's when you get credibility. They know that we're a little bit older. It's not easy, and they see it. I think there's a respect for that. I'm grateful for that. I'm having a neighbor party here tomorrow with 10 neighbors, like I told you earlier, and a potluck. It's like a celebration of connection to have them here and to welcome them inside this place that they got to see being built without me here. All the time I was in California, it was being built without my presence.

Vivian M. Cook:

That's really wonderful. It sounds like, too, from an artist's perspective, when you're talking about credibility with the work you're doing on the farm, as an artist, too, there's a sense of credibility and not only designing what the landscape could look like and could feel like, and listening to the land and responding to the land, but really doing the work hands-on, too, that as artists, I think, those are often two different steps of the process that become circular, of designing what we want to do and then making it happen and learning and making mistakes by doing it and being out in the field.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

It's never going to be perfect. That's not the goal. And it is learning. I am a kinesthetic learner, and so working with clay, hunks of clay on a wheel, hand-building, that's one of the art forms I've done for 10 years. Then, how different is that than digging in clay soil and planting garlic or putting in a tree, whatever it is? I just planted, I think, my first eight peonies, which has been a lifelong dream, to actually live in a climate that could grow these gorgeous flowers, putting those in, and putting in daffodils, digging.

Prior to this, I would just fly in from California or Arizona with my father. We didn't have a pair of gloves. We didn't have a spade. We didn't have a shovel. We had all this land here. We didn't have a pair of clippers. We had no way to maintain it, and we literally just drove around in our city clothes and looked at the crop when the corn was super tall in August and we were locked out of the field, you can't walk in there. So, this is a totally different experience than how I was raised to look at these farms because I'm in here now in all the seasons, and I'm actually digging holes and adding soil amendments and fertilizing with rain barrel water, with fish emulsion and seaweed in a watering can. I mean, it's just the opposite of how I was raised.

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Vivian M. Cook:

It sounds like you're describing, understanding, and kind of reckoning with the responsibility that you might have as a landowner to engage in the actual work of farming and what does that mean, not only to be in conversation with the land and what's on the farm itself, but to be in conversation with your neighbors who may also be farmers or with the farmers that you work with. I mean, can you talk about how these transformations on your farms have been received by the farmers you're working with, the tenants on your land?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes. I have never been completely afraid of changing farmers if it wasn't working out. I like to retain the continuity on the land as much as I can, but I found that last year, it just needed to be changed. So, I did interview new farmers. My top goals were I wanted to flex lease, which is not really an artistic pursuit, but it's a monetary lease that follows the commodity market. I wanted no-till and cover crops. I was getting pushback with my current tenants on that for various reasons. It was just out of the question or just sky-high prices or whatever it was. These farms now all have no-till and cover crops.

To be able to drive around and see this green blanket of oats and rye armoring the soil, creating a whole different biological activity than the corn and soybean that they've had for 30 years, is really a high moment for me because I know it's the right thing to do. I just am too educated not to know that in my heart of hearts. So, the tenants and I are really on the same page. I think that it's a total win-win. They're excited to be on land with hopefully a landowner that's excited. I text them. I email them. We talk, not too much. I don't bug them too much.

Vivian M. Cook:

But it's a conversation.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

But it's a conversation. They can talk farmer talk to me. I can talk the language now. They don't have to dumb anything down for me. And I order my own seed. I order my own fly-on. They don't have to do much but germinate the cover crop unless it's automatically a winter-kill cover crop. That's climate change right there. I mean, just the fact that they're not doing passes with more tillage, more gasoline, more ethanol, that saves a lot. And then to sequester the carbon with the cover crop and improve the soil and keep that topsoil in place and not running off and just bleeding out in all these water areas, it's a really big change because some of this land is like, I have one farm that's like 114 acres that never had cover crops, just that, plus all the other ones, and I'm really proud of that.

Vivian M. Cook:

So, we're talking about how a lot of these practices you're trying to implement, and you're in conversation with the land and with your tenants about how to make this work mostly as a way to combat climate change and to give back to the land. What do you think the barriers are to talking about climate change and what we need to do to address it in Iowa agricultural communities?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Well, I think there's less barriers now because literally, I'll turn on the news on the radio, and I hear climate crisis or climate change almost every day now. So, it's not in the periphery anymore. It's front

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and center. Now, we have these swings of climate, like to go from 70 degrees to 30 degrees, these three-and-a-half inch rains that we're getting, the droughts that are talked about, the level of Lake Mead, Lake Powell. Is it the Mississippi River that is so low and they can't transport the barges? I mean, it's everywhere. So, it seems like there's less and less barriers. I think people want to work for solutions now. I don't think people are fooled into thinking, "Everything's okay, and this is just a blip." How many hurricanes have we seen in Florida right now? I mean, it's just all over the place.

Maybe if you'd asked me that question five years ago. But I think right now people want solutions. I feel like if a farmer knew how good no-till and cover crops were, if that data reached them and if a grant reached them, they'd probably go for it, to know that you're going to retain more water when those rains come; you're going to get to keep your water on your farm with a percolation going through healthy soil that can take on that water versus just running off the top because it's so compacted and so dead, it can't go in there. So, there's so many economic incentives for this.

Vivian M. Cook:

And you've talked to me a little bit about how you've tried to play a role in making sure, one, you take advantage on your land and with your tenants of those economic incentives and of those opportunities, and that you make sure other people know about them. So, how has the artistry of your own landscape led to conversations about climate action and policy, particularly with the farmers who rent from you, from contractors who come out to visit and help you implement some of these practices?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Mm-hmm. I think people are drawn to beauty, whether it's a home and garden magazine, home and garden TV show on flipping houses. We know the magazines, the glossy covers. We want beauty in our lives. We are drawn to beauty. We're drawn to fashion. We're drawn to color, texture, form. So, by photographing prolifically the land before, during, after, in process, putting that on Instagram, Facebook, I'm putting it out there of the before and afters, that's making a change. That's creating conversation on those social media sites. That happens more than people calling me on the phone or texting me. I'm getting more Facebook messages or Facebook comments from all kinds of farmers that I respect and love all around me in Iowa. And they put their two cents in: "Oh, why don't you try this thing or that thing?" "I have tried that, or thank you so much for that."

It's actually facilitating all kinds of dialogue back and forth through the photography, which is my art form, and the poetry that I either do my own blog and my own kind of brain dump on stuff, or I am looking up quotes from Vandana Shiva or Benjamin Franklin or Pema Chödrön or all the people that I love to listen to, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rumi, whatever the case is, about land, landscape, the heart, spirituality, kind of communicating with trees or whatever it is. Put that out there with the photographs that make sense, and then people are commenting and people are looking at it and saying things about it. Yeah. It's happening.

Vivian M. Cook:

Yeah. You've talked about this work that you do on social media of sharing your photography and then sharing the changes in your landscape and what you're doing with climate action. You've talked about that work as a public journal that you share with people, which I think is a really lovely way to think about it. Can you talk more about how these journals help facilitate climate dialogue?

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Ruth Rabinowitz:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I really try to capture daily or every few days, while I'm in Iowa, what's going on, how I'm trying to move things forward with the climate change, with how I'm planting trees, watering trees, adding buffers, widening the CRP or state cost shared grass waterway back, receding areas. It's like I'm doing it. The actions speak louder than words. And so it's like, here's the action; here's the successful action this particular woman on this farm is doing, and I'm trying to put that out there. A little bit of modeling, right? Because I would've loved 10 years ago to follow someone like me when I was completely overwhelmed and didn't know a darn thing about farm management. "Oh, that's what she's doing. Okay, let me think about that. How does that apply in my business?"

So, there's multiple reasons why I do this. I'm doing this for my own particular journaling. I do it because I enjoy it, because it's combining art, photography, with poetry and my thought process and documentation. Then I'm also doing it for my nieces and nephew, my sisters, my family, my friends, and then the general public because I think it's kind of up there indefinitely on Facebook, that here it is; here is this one woman's process of coming into land ownership, how she went soup to nuts of really not having an ag background, taking some horticulture classes at the local college, having a little postage stamp backyard with a little raised bed and some food gardening, getting a permaculture design certificate along the way, and then, boom, she's managing large tracks of land and moving the ball forward with no-till cover crops, getting farmers to buy-in, getting new farmers, planting trees, and on and on and on. So, I just think, why not document it? Why not put it out there? I think the climate change part of it, the climate crisis, turning it around for the climate, is just automatically there by what I'm doing.

Vivian M. Cook:

And that this documentation is not just documentation, but it's a story, that it's not just what you are doing, but why you are doing it and how you are doing it and what the effects of it are and what you're already seeing, not only in the land itself, but in connections that you're making with people through these platforms, by sharing these photographs and by sharing these stories, and then also in the landscape itself, that it's beautifying and you feel like you're talking to it.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yeah. I try to just make my world as attractive as possible, and what can I say? You think about the view corridors out your window, the design of this house for the view corridors, and then you get to see wildlife or bees and butterflies or the landscape comes alive as you create the habitat and as you put out the perennials, the grasses and forests of the native habitat that was here when the bison were here, the native prairie and all the grasses of Iowa. That's when you get the pheasant coming in. That's when you get the deer coming in and the bunny rabbits running around, and they make the landscape really cool and really alive and really beautiful where you just feel like, "Geez, I thought this was conventional crop ground around here. But look, I just do a few magic things, and it's back to prairie," and it just wants to go back to itself and be connected with the web of life.

Vivian M. Cook:

And that's, I think, a good way to think about it, too. I mean, you're using the word magic, but obviously you've put a lot of work into this and the farmers you work with have put a lot of work into it. But this idea that the prairie wants to go back to itself, or that once you start engaging with the land, even though it is really challenging, it will respond because it wants to be able to thrive in a way that it hasn't

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been able to, and that has effects on not only the land itself, but all of the life that it supports, including humans.

Also, you've told me in this journaling how important it is for you to be honest about not only how attractive it is to make all of these changes and how it really is beautiful, but also the struggles of this transformation and the struggles that come with trying to address climate change. So, why do you think it's important to share stories not only about beauty, but about the challenges of moving toward climate resiliency?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yeah. I like to live in the real world, and so I like to share all the positive and let people know all the wins, all the champion moments here, the apex moments of conquering tillage and all these things. But then the reality is that it's hard and I do face obstacles, and I thought strip till was this sort of gentle, small, little tillage practice. And I went and actually looked at a farm recently, and it was deep and wide and chunked up. I wrote about it on Facebook, and I was up at 5:00 in the morning. I couldn't sleep. It was very upsetting to me. I'm not completely blaming that farmer because I kind of just wasn't around on that particular farm that was a little bit further away. No fault of his. We need to have some deeper conversations. How do we adjust this implement? Can it be more narrow? Can it be less deep? Whatever the situation is. I was upset.

I think that I want to make sure people know that, too, that if you aren't showing up for your land, things are happening that you may not even know about. And then you show up a little late to the party and it's been going on for a few years, and it's a bit of a shell shock. So, I don't know how people do it anymore now that I'm here on the land near all these farms. I did it from California for 10 years of tearing my hair out. And it's just not for me. I need to be near the farms. I need to see what's happening, to be able to feel like I'm really doing the best job I can. I just cannot do this from a scanner, from text messaging, from a computer, living on the Pacific Ocean in California. You're just never going to get there.

You're going to get there when you really show up for the land because that's what the land needs. It needs an ally; it needs a spokesperson; it needs an advocate; it needs someone to say, "No, you're not going to do that." Or, "I want that turkey manure over here. Yes, I want to be on the list for the chicken litter and get me in the queue. I want those government cover crops on my land. I want help. I've never had cover crops in my life. I'm here now. Come over, help me." So, it's really the way to go, from anybody that owns land from far away, get to your land and monitor your land multiple times a year.

Vivian M. Cook:

And then how do you think specifically photography and journaling help communicate these really complex experiences of trying to do so much, but also realizing that there are systems that have been in place for a long time that are working against the land and that sometimes cause things to happen that you don't want to happen, but it's complex. So, how does photography and journaling kind of help communicate that?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

I think that I get some empowerment from it because being so far away for so long, having things just happening out of my control, when you start to journal: documentation, document, document, document, time date stamp, really put it together; it almost feels like a legal thing at that point, where you're really documenting what the heck's going on in your land. You can make it pretty in whatever

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way, whatever angle you're going to make it. But really, it's a living, breathing journal of documentation for you to understand, this is the baseline and this is where I want to go, and I am not happy with the baseline, and I want to move it in the right direction.

So, it gives me kind of a muscle of knowing where I am in time and space because when you have large swaths of land, large-scale land, it's super overwhelming. But if you're just photographing a two-acre forest and you're just really drilling down into that, that's more digestible, that you can just document that smaller area and see it move. "Okay, now I'm doing a 10% improvement." Okay. Document that. "Now we've cut a little path through there and I've moved some wood aside, and I can walk in here now." Document that. "Now I have a prescribed fire done with a grant on a savannah restoration." Document that. "Now the ephemerals, all these beautiful purple violets and white flowers I don't know the name of, they're coming up in the spring, and it's like fairy world out there." Document that. Then it becomes like in your mind, you can get it.

Vivian M. Cook:

And it becomes digestible not only for you to track progress when it can feel so overwhelming and challenging, but by sharing it on social media or with neighbors, friends, whoever it may be, then what you're doing or taking small steps toward climate resiliency also becomes more digestible for other people who might want to follow in your footsteps because you said you're modeling.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

That's my goal. I really don't want anyone else to invent the wheel. If I can help one person by saving an hour of their time, get them guidance, then that's great. That's what I want because I was really alone in the beginning until I got connected to those groups I mentioned earlier, Practical Farmers of Iowa; Women, Food, and Agriculture Network, the Climate Land Leaders; the Xerces Society; Pheasants Forever; Trees Forever; Ducks Unlimited. All these places that have helped me, all the biologists, all their plans, all their expertise, seed selection, tree selection, shrubs. You name it, I needed them. And so if I can help somebody else, even with this podcast and name all these names and they're going to look it up, that's great. That's super important because we got to get there faster. We are under the clock here with climate change. There's no sitting back and going, "You know, maybe next year I might do something." We got to move now.

Vivian M. Cook:

And how do you feel like art can help connect farmers to one another and those resources?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Well, I think I'm drawing people together on my Facebook. I've got kind of a myriad of some leaders in the field, and they're conversing on the platform through seeing my questions, my struggles, what's going on, the recent survey, the this, the that.

Vivian M. Cook:

The beauty...

Ruth Rabinowitz:

The beauty.

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Vivian M. Cook:

... of what's happening on your landscapes.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yeah. And it's like, we're not going to all sit down and have coffee because everyone's really busy and we're all spread out. But we do have this moment of helping Ruth or commenting on what Ruth's stuff going on there. Then they see each other's comments. So, there's kind of like our own little world there kind of happening on that platform of Facebook, Oxbow Farms Iowa Facebook page, and the same handle on Instagram. Although I think with Facebook, because I can narrate under each picture, people are using that more than the Instagram, I've been finding, even though younger, I don't know who. I don't know the difference. It's all owned by Meta. It's all whatever. But yeah, it's really fun.

Vivian M. Cook:

We've talked a little bit about how social media helps connect people who are further away to have these conversations and share resources and share in the beauty of what could be if we move toward climate resilience. We've also talked about experiences you've had by being on your farms and talking with farmers that you're working with, and/or you told me a story about contractors that have come and see the beauty of what's going on when you're restoring prairie, when you're restoring forests, and they ask about it. Can you tell us about what those conversations have looked like? Like, the conversation with contractors who have come and said, "What is that? How do I do it?"

Ruth Rabinowitz:

My dirt contractor, who I'm really pretty crazy about, he's going to be doing more waterways. He put in my driveway here. We were on the back deck looking at the pond that he might be helping me clean out a little bit of the silt silting in there, too. And he says, "How do you get this prairie back? I'm thinking about not having grass in my front yard anymore and cutting grass all the time. Are you getting wildlife back here? What's going on? How did you pick the seed and all these things?" I just said, "Oh, yes. Pheasants Forever can help you. The USDA, the Natural Resources Conservation Service can help you. They can select seed for you. I love Allen Dan's seed. They're local and winter set." And he really wanted some guidance on it. I love not mowing a lawn all the time.

Vivian M. Cook:

Definitely.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

And I love that there's actually habitat out there right now. We're like in freezing cold weather right now, and there's tall grasses for all kinds of animals: mice, small snakes, all kinds of things. We have pheasant out there; we have owls; we have turtles in the pond; we have all kinds of stuff. And he saw that and he's like, "I want that too on my property that's just down the road here in Iowa." So, I think if you build it, they will come. If you build rain barrels, you will get questions about them. I don't know. I don't see any other houses here that have a special gutter for the rain barrels, but this one has four and they face a pretty busy road. So, everyone is seeing these rain barrels. Then I get questions about the rain barrels. "What do you use that for? All this..."

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Vivian M. Cook:

It's hard to know what's possible until you see it sometimes, especially when we're in a system economically and socially for many years about how farming is done or how it's possible to farm. Sometimes I think it can be really hard to see what's possible and what resources are there to help change how we're doing things.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

I think that the things I thought were my dings or disadvantages, being from California or whatever that was, whatever that angle was, are the strengths because as I lived across the street from the University of California Santa Cruz, that's a huge organic farm that I have worked on with children in Life Lab. That's my normal, seeing that, having lots and lots of farmer's markets that sell organic produce is my normal. So coming here was like, how do I get that here? How do I implement permaculture practices with my permaculture design certificate, this organic background, all these values of farming with nature and healing with nature? How do I do that in Iowa? I already drank the Kool-Aid. It was like already in my brain. No one had to convince me of anything. That's just how I came to be. But figuring out how to get that going here, it hasn't been that hard.

Vivian M. Cook:

Mm-hmm. Can you tell us more about the conversations with the farmers you work with? What have those conversations looked like? What have been some of the challenges?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Well, we're just getting started because I have five new farmers. One of them is going to graze cattle with a solar cattle watering station in South Dakota. He does a diverse crop rotation of five different crops, including sunflowers. NRCS, we have a cocktail mix of cover crops going in for the cows to eat. Electric fence will go up and all this stuff.

So, talking to him about his current operation as he was interviewed, that's kind of what he was already doing. And so bringing him on board was he already understood diversification: diversification in crops, cover crops, bringing in the livestock, the value that livestock bring to the land, the manure, the urine, the saliva, the hoofs, the biology of the missing bison that have been eradicated.

Those conversations, the conversations in Southern Iowa, was looking at the resumes and then meeting with the farmers at their home or operation and saying, "My bottom line is no-till cover crops. Are you good with that? If so, you kind of got the job." And then, "Yes, I have experience. It's not my first time. I believe in them. I see the benefit." "Oh, what benefits do you see?" And hearing, "Oh, weed suppression. I think it's great. I have less weeds with cover crops and I see more infiltration of water and less wet spots in the field, and I can get in there earlier because there's been some roots there," and letting them show me that they understand about cover crops and no-till as well.

Vivian M. Cook:

And even from all that you're explaining about being here in Iowa, engaging with the land, engaging with the people who are working with you on the land, that there is kind of this progression from the artistry and beauty that could be, that leading into conversations about how do we get there? And then figuring out resources because it sounds like you've kind of made that progression yourself that leads to, "Okay, where can I get money to help with this?" Because that's a huge challenge. But through all these

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organizations and through your own research and then through conversations with your tenants, it sounds like you've identified real economic resources that can help make this happen, that can help make it possible.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes. I've tried to set my rents on the lower side, the flex lease, so that there isn't big hardship on the tenant to come up with top, top rent with their banker. And so, they are more willing to do cover crops and do the investment of the germination of cover crops or the drilling in of cover crops, that give and take, back and forth. Yeah, that's been a big deal.

I think when you are starting out, it's really nice to have the government backup or the PFI backup on some cover crops because there are a lot of programs out there. If you've never done cover crops, it's really important to tap into that.

Vivian M. Cook:

Right. It sounds like it's been about how do you build respect and trust and identify values and if values seem to differ, figuring out why and always coming back to what is the conversation with the land and how can we approach that from an artistic perspective that also values trust and conversation and beauty in a way that's replenishing.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes. I do want beautiful landscapes at the end of the day. Cover crops are beautiful and it's all coming together. It really is. I'm very grateful for it. Just reflecting with you today, I really see the transformation and the relationships with these farmers are huge because I want to feel good in this business, and I am feeling good at this business, with the relationships that I'm having.

Vivian M. Cook:

You've told me that you think people have a hunger and thirst to understand how to help the land. Then you've also talked about your work as both an artist, and as a farmer and landowner, as replenishing. So, how can connecting with the land in artistic ways replenish us?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes. There's a lot of things in life that deplete us: the evening news, staying abreast of those things in Washington. You get to the land and you go, "I'm going to put a bird bath there with daffodils all around it, and I'm going to see blue birds in there and bees and butterflies, and it's just going to be this sunny, beautiful, art installation." It has a sculptural quality to it. It was never there before. It's right out the door. I can enjoy it. I mean, these are small things, but they start to add up. Then the neighbors see it, and they come to the party and they see it, and they see the interior of the house and they see the Moroccan rug, where I traveled to Morocco and that's there, and my art's up on the wall, or we're using the pottery that I made.

Or they're walking around the property and they see signs like Cattail Corner that's all hand carved, and places on the farm are being named. These are not just commodified farms anymore. There's Elf Land and Fairytale Forest and Snowball Sanctuary and the Secret Garden, Cattail Corner, Hammock Haven, Two-Acre Woods and Shady Grove. All these places are named. So, when we talk about them, we know exactly where they are. It's not just pointing down there. It's named. It has a sign. It has an artistic sign.

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I'll be painting these signs, carving them with a Dremel, a wood burning tool, adding animals and flowers on them, and then painting them with a shellac over the top on a tea post. It just brings it into a beautified, artistic, art installation.

Vivian M. Cook:

They become a part of your story when they're named, and you have a connection with different parts of your land in very specific ways.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Right.

Vivian M. Cook:

I know we're about wrapping up on time, so I did want to ask, what are the three key ideas that you want people to understand about the work you do as an artist, farmer, and climate advocate?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

You can teach yourself farming. Between YouTube, all the resources online, the books, the conferences, you don't have to go to ag school. It's nice if you can. But I am self-taught, and if you have a passion for something, you can do it. It doesn't matter what your age is, doesn't matter what your sex is; it doesn't matter what your educational background is. If you want to get after this and you have a piece of land or you're getting a piece of land, you can do it. And I would encourage you to do that.

You want to make sure and have work-life balance. So for me, it's been a little off kilter, but I spent 10 years off and on doing ceramics. I spent 17 years photographing weddings and events in photography. It's really important, if you're an artist, to make sure you don't get too carried away with the spreadsheets and the QuickBooks online, and that you make time to do your artistic endeavors, to do that replenishment. It's refilling your cup, just like a yoga class would be, or meditation. It really brings you back to your center, and then you can proceed forward.

And just really taking care of your health: good sleep, good eating habits, good nutrition. Body's a temple. Really understanding when you're on land, you've got to be in top shape as best as you can. There is so much physical walking, and a lot of these areas are steep, uneven, ditchy, holes. I use walking sticks at times. Taking care of your health is really important with farming.

Vivian M. Cook:

It sounds like that your entire conversation with farming is about health, about the health of the land; the health of the people who are working the land, whether that's your own physical health or social health between people having conversations about this; and your health as a creative person who wants to be able to be in conversation with people through artistic and creative and storytelling avenues.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

That's what I love. Putting the fun back in farming is one of my logos. That's what these signs do around the property. That's what the bird bath and the peonies do, is that it's like I've had enough drudgery. I've had enough pushing the rock uphill. I've had enough drama with surveys and boundary lines and all these things. I really am going for peace. I'm going for what the land needs. I'm going for my

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interpersonal relationships with my farmers. I just want it to be good. I know we'll have our times, but it is getting good. It is. I'm getting to the juicy, good stuff now.

Vivian M. Cook:

I can see it sitting in your living room looking out of these huge windows. I can see your beautiful farm from here. I can see it.

Then lastly, you have a professional background in the arts, but it seems like some of the work you're doing, focusing on beauty and design as a way to connect us to the land can be adopted by many farmers or many people working towards climate action. So, what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use artistic strategies to talk about climate change in agricultural communities?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

I do think that photographing your land, what it's looking like right now, what you're doing with the land and how it's evolving, and putting that on social media. I think that's really good. If you want to put up art in your landscape, sculpture, paintings, I've seen that as well. Have that on the roadside. Go for it. Being involved with media, getting interviewed, having your artistic endeavors put forward in a newspaper, a magazine, that's great. Getting it out there. It doesn't just belong in your house with just your family looking at it. It's really good if you put it out there to the public.

Vivian M. Cook:

And that creates connections, right?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yes.

Vivian M. Cook:

And that everything you're doing is about connections. The only way for us to move forward with climate action that's going to make a difference is if we connect with each other and share resources and share photographs of what's happening and how we can make it better for all of us as a community and for our broader community that includes the land and everything that lives on it.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yeah. I'm all about connections. I'm all about wanting community. And actually, the social media, Facebook brought one of the neighbors here to my house.

Vivian M. Cook:

Oh, wonderful.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

And then introduced me to five more neighbors.

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Vivian M. Cook:

Wonderful.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Because they were following Oxbow Farms Iowa on Facebook, and finally just said, "I'm going to come over." And I'm like, "Great." I was braiding a challah; I was braiding some bread. We sat and talked and it was like, "You need to meet all these neighbors down here. Come to the football party." It opened up my world. And they're coming over tomorrow night. I am all about connection.

Vivian M. Cook:

Speaking of which, before we leave today, how can people connect with you in your work? Can you repeat again your platforms and how people can connect with you?

Ruth Rabinowitz:

Yeah. I'm on LinkedIn as Ruth Rabinowitz with Oxbow Farms Iowa. And then on Facebook, it's Oxbow Farms Iowa. Instagram is Oxbow Farms Iowa. Those are the best ways.

Vivian M. Cook:

Wonderful.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

And then I can get messages that in those platforms.

Vivian M. Cook:

Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, and then, again, inviting me to your beautiful home and farm. Thank you for sharing about the work that you do.

Ruth Rabinowitz:

It was my total pleasure. Thank you.

Vivian M. Cook:

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue, and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at ecotheatrelab.com. We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback form in our show notes, and checking out The EcoTheatre Lab's website.

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And I'm Vivian M. Cook, community engagement director for The EcoTheatre Lab and The Art of Climate Dialogue podcast producer and host. Take care.