

Project Analysis of Arfisti

Ásta Þórisdóttir



Image 1

Master of Design
Department of Design and Architecture
Iceland University of the Arts
Advisor: Marteinn Sindri Jónsson
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The Arfist

Local Food Sources and How to Use Them

The Arfist is a one woman search and rescue team, promoting self-sufficient food production – using weeds. She is a specialist in finding, identifying, harvesting and utilising plants commonly considered undesirable. The Arfist visits people in their home gardens and neighbourhoods, facilitating weeding sessions and explaining how to embrace the undesired.



Image 2 The embroidered tapestry with the ten most hated plants

1 Research & Process

Growing up in the rural area of Strandir in the Westfjords I inherited a tradition of utilitarianism that kept the inhabitants alive through ages of primitive but self-sufficient life. My mom grew a lot of vegetables and flowers while my dad caught fish and I still do both as I was taught. Nothing was wasted, everything was used in one way or another. Lack of material and supplies for creative use and craftsmanship forced one into looking at what you had around.

During my two-year studies at the MA Design Programme, I have realised that I engage very much with my local context and immediate surroundings in my design, perhaps as a result of my upbringing. Some of the things that have focused my attention are my own organised activities in the garden, such as keeping bees and geese, but I have also become fascinated by things I have no control over, like what washes up on the shore from day to day.



Image 3

My garden in Hólmavík

For my design projects I have searched for hidden values in those different things; small pieces of plastic on the shore turned into interesting materials for preserving biological specimens and modest soil became a nutritional source for humans. This has gradually become the way I conduct my research as a designer.



image 4 Burning plastic for preserving biological specimens

While working in my garden lately I have noticed that there are several plants that live amongst my vegetables that I didn't put there. After spending hours weeding horsetail from my potato patch, I found out that this generally undesired plant was actually quite more interesting than my potatoes. In fact, horsetail is suitable as a food supplement, for medicine, as food and for cosmetics and I had simply been ripping it away from the soil. This revelation sparked my interest in other similar plants. I began to harvest weeds and after a summer of eating all kinds of plants, generally considered undesired or invasive, I started to form a notion of what my final project would be.

I started to think about why we do not know how to use the plants that grow all around us. Why is it not common knowledge to forage and eat wild plants? I felt that I wanted to change people's minds, to introduce them to these plants and to try to become some kind of a mediator between people and plants.

I was curious to know which plants were the most unwanted in general, so I made a poll in a popular Facebook group about gardening.¹ I ended up with a list of the ten most hated plants in Iceland. In many cases it was a conflict over control. The gardeners wanted to decide for themselves what is growing in their gardens, regardless of what plants are there naturally, and if they are useful or not. Other people just 'know' that some plants are bad, and become really aggressive about their opinion, not always based on any specific reason. All of this made me curious about the relationship between people and plants.

1.1 Translation 1: The Weed Tapestry

Such conversations led me to make some kind of beautiful and decent exposure of the plants. Thinking about the hierarchy of plants, I wanted to increase people's respect for 'my' weeds. I found my media in textile, embroidering the plants in a tapestry. My interpretation is in relation to my value for time and by giving the tapestry all that time it takes to embroider it, I felt it became more valuable. I had no experience doing embroidery but wanted to learn the technique so I asked my mother to teach me. Lilja Sigrún Jónsdóttir, my mother learned classical embroidery in homemaking school around 1960. She taught me the stitches that are usually used for embroidered tapestry of the

¹ Vilmundur Hansen, "Ræktaðu garðinn þinn."

kind I was going to make. We started to work on it together, using the traditional stitches but after a while I just made my own stitches that I felt would suit each plant. My mother ended up doing the same, just playing with the needle and the yarn and we never unraveled, because it didn't have to be perfect. It was a relief to work it like that, unattached but still based on the handwork tradition. Collaboration with my mother gave it an extra value for me and there was something beautiful about passing knowledge between generations like that.



Image 5

Needlework for the tapestry

1.2 Translation 2: The Ornamental Garden

Another idea is to make an ornamental garden just with weeds, to show that these plants are also qualified for that. The garden is an experiment to give these disregarded plants a higher position. This idea is in process and the garden will be strictly planned in geometric

forms like old English ornamental gardens. Every bed will have a designated plant and be in super order. At the same time I want to point out how unhelpful and sometimes ridiculous it is to plan and try to control the nature, I also want to try to control myself and see what happens. I picture an organised garden that might look nice for a while but with no way to predict what will happen. I speculate if the plan will keep up or if all these sturdy and some aggressive plants will fight each other. I call it the “Punk Garden”. This experiment makes me a partaker in this manipulation I am criticising but gives me a chance to prove or disprove if it is doable. It also brings up lot of questions about hierarchy of plants and which plants deserve to be in a garden like that. It also questions humans ability to control the nature and whether we should do it just because we can?

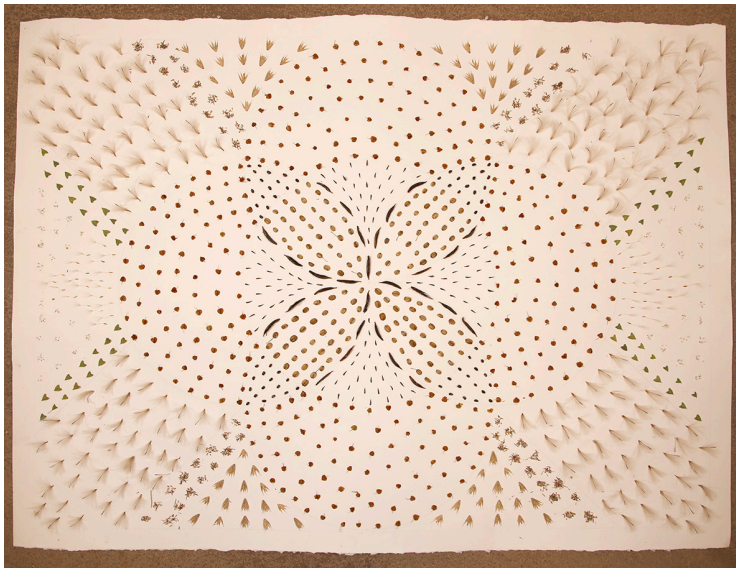


Image 6

Garden plan out of weedseeds

I made garden plans out of seeds from plants I wanted to use for the Punk Garden, but due to the season I was unable to actually make that garden in the wintertime.

The garden is still in progress and will be in relation to my final project and exhibited in the summer in a greenhouse at Korpa.

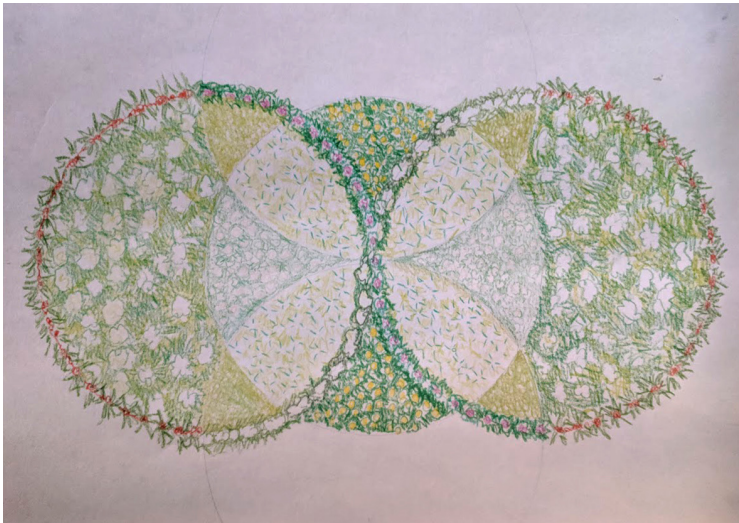


Image 7

Punk garden plan for Korpa

1.3 Translation 3: Weeds on the Menu / Cooking Weeds / Eating Weeds

I have been focusing on roots particularly for food and find it very exciting to make more experiments with them. The roots of Cow Parsley were analysed for nutritional value at Matís² and the result showed that they are very rich in carbon and minerals compared with

² Ólafur Reykdal. Unpublished paper.

other roots vegetable.³ It can be used for food or as food supplement, but is also a potential source for medicine to fight cancer.⁴

	Energy	Energy	Fat	Carbo- hydrate	Pro- tein	Ash	Water	Total
	kJ	kkal	g	g	g	g	g	g
Cow parsley roots	446	105	0,1	23,3	2,7	1,3	72,6	100
Carrots	166	39	0,4	8,2	0,7	0,7	90	100
Rutabagas	179	42	0,1	8,7	1,6	0,7	88,9	100
Celery roots	183	43	0,3	8,3	1,8	1	88,6	100
Potatoes	324	76	0,3	16,2	2,2	0,9	80,4	100

Image 8 Comparison of Icelandic root vegetables

Through the years I have been cooking and making experiments with many of these plants out of curiosity. I wanted to know if they could be beneficial in any way. Whether it would be as food, tea, for healing purposes or simply just as balms. Starting to look at weeds with renewed interest I started to document it more, took photos and wrote some recipes from successful experiments. Usually I just cook for my family, and they like the idea even though I am not succeeding every time. Others around me are really curious and want to taste and learn but are not ready for own experiments and ask for recipes.

I have been using weeds in several dishes, both cooked and fried for paella (image 10) soups and as a snack (image 9) and it is surprising each time, because it develops a different taste according to the cooking method. The roots from sweet cicely have strong flavour and aroma of anise and are delicious in Indian dishes, but can also be used as a flavour in beverages. (Image 12)

3 Matís, „Næringarefnatöflur.“
4 Olaru, o.fl., „Ethnomedicinal.“



Image 9

Roots from Cow Parsley



Image 10 Fried Cow Parsley



Image 11 Cow Parsley Paella



Image 12 Horsetail salad



Image 13 Juice from sweet cicely

The early spring sprouts of horsetail are edible and can be used and eaten like asparagus. I have fried them and boiled, and they have a strong bitter taste, but really resemble asparagus in texture. The green part of the plant that grows later is excellent for skin treatment, and in tonics for treating fungal infection.

It is difficult to focus on the plants solely as a food source because more often than not they have multiple utility and it seems to me that there is more information available in books and online for utilising plants for something else than food. It is more abstract to look into the plants potential as medicine or cosmetic but everyone relates to food and it is also a bigger challenge for me to find out how I can use the plants as a part of my daily diet. I do want people to like the taste and texture of the plants and I do love the reaction when people are genuinely surprised that it can actually taste good.

I started to think about what method I could use to get people to the point of giving weeds a chance – how I could translate my point of view. Through my experience, it is the moment when I start to describe the plant, show photos of my cooking with wild plants and tell people how it is possible to use the plants, that I usually get the right attention. Many become interested – maybe not so much that they would go and pick some plants and actually cook them – but interested enough to want to see more and hear more. They are also usually ready to taste something. Through these translations of my ideas about changing the hierarchy of the plants with making them look beautiful on a tapestry and in an ornamental garden and delicious in food I had to find a way to change people's minds about weeds. Maybe not me, but a person with that role. The process was about characterisation. Who was that person, what would she do and say and how would she appear? How could I make her interesting and for whom? Combining

my interest and work experience as a teacher, amateur actress, forager, amateur improvising chef, stage designer and a bit of this and that, I decided to make this figure or second self: The Arfist.

2 The Arfist – Final Translation

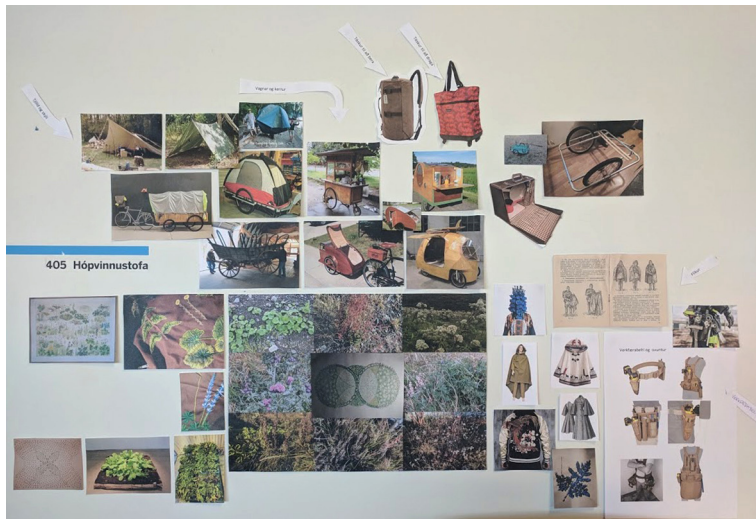


Image 14

Moodboard for the Arfist's kit

Based on my process, I carried on to translate my design approaches in a performative way that would allow myself to engage with audiences in different ways. A platform where I could be a teacher, a mentor, a chef or a nature observer that could both give and get knowledge to and from the audience about utilisation of weeds in broad context. And it was not only about the hierarchy of the plants but also about them as food. The critical point about what we eat and how we get our food is the core notion of my final translation.

I want people to think about where our food could be coming from. Not the food we eat today, but prospective sources of food that are just beneath our feet. I want to point out ways for people to engage practically with their local natural environment.



Image 15 Sketch of the Arfist's kitchenette

An Arfist is a person that goes around and forages for wild plants and uses them to make foods or beverages. The Arfist travels around, meets people in their own local neighbourhood and teaches them to identify plants, how to forage them, prepare, store, cook and eat.

The Arfist's kit is a coat and a trolley that has a built-in compact kitchenette. The kitchenette is made of marine plywood that is strong,

durable and water resistant. The kitchenette is equipped with small boxes with various tools, different components as well as running water, a small sink, a hotplate, kitchenware and cutlery. The kit should be usable in different places, in all weather and for different ends; cleaning, cutting, sieving, pulping, mashing, crushing, boiling, frying, or baking food. It is an educational tool that is used to show people how to do something useful, cook a meal, make a tea or a simple balm from the closest plant around you.



Image 16

The kitchenette

The kitchenette can be used as whole but can also be taken apart and every drawer is also a box with a handle that you can grab with you, for simpler tasks. The kitchenette makes it possible to do everything on the same spot, identify, forage, cook and eat, instead of bringing the plants home. It is a different approach to cook and eat where the ingredients grow, from bringing food from somewhere to the kitchen.

I believe it is important for strengthening our connection to nature, to actually stay and dwell in the nature, and often you need a reason to do that. Through my experiments cooking weeds I enjoy making instant experiments and having the kitchen with you out in the field seemed to me to be a good idea. Preparing and eating food together has brought people together for centuries and still is a good platform to unite people.

Using some kind of a kit for this project speaks to the contemporary need of ready-made solutions, even when we talk about establishing a connection between man and nature and to learn how to wander in the wild.



Image 17

The Arfist's coat

From the beginning of this project it was clear that there should be equipment and an outfit for both cooking and foraging. The operation of foraging is a very important part of the process, when the *Arfist* is identifying and choosing which plant to pick, for what and how, and then carefully bringing plants from the ground and changing it to food ingredient. I felt that the *Arfist* needed a well designed garment that would make her comfortable to stay outside in different weathers. It should be practical, be water- and wind resistant, be protecting to sit in the heath without getting wet. It should be made of quality textile to show that weeding requires quality and standard, it should look good and be tailor made for the *Arfist*.

The coat was made to meet these standards. The design is made in terms of four patterns. The bodice is from the national costume “upphlutur” and decorated with pattern of chick weed. The hood is similar to many anoraks, the pattern of the sleeves is from a coat from 1969, and the lower part is a pattern from a knitted jacket. The barbour textile fits the purpose well, it is durable, strong and weather resistant and looks good while also fitting the kitchenette in colour and style. Many pockets are part of the coat, but it is optional if or how many you use, because they are attached with magnets and can easily been removed or reattached. The idea is that you can fill the pockets and remove them from the coat to the kitchenette for food preparation.

2.1 Etymology

The Icelandic word *Arfisti* is a wordplay, denoting someone enthusiastic for weeds; a weeder. But I like the acoustic association with other words like *arborist*, *activist*, *artist* and even *anarchist* and the definitions of all those words bring meaning to the *Arfist*.

An *arborist* is a specialist in the cultivation and care of trees and shrubs, including tree surgery, the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of tree diseases, and the control of pests.⁵ The function of the *Arfist* is similar. An *Arfist* takes care of the plants/weeds, both to diagnose them and treat them in one way or another. Possibly the *Arfist* just harvests part of the plant but leaves the rest so the plant can re-grow, for later use or just to sustain the plant, but in other cases it will be harvested and nothing left if the plant is invasive or grows in conflict with other plants or against somebody's wishes. An *Arfist* is also considerate towards nature and spares plants that are in nobody's way and are not going to be used.

An *activist* is an especially active, vigorous advocate of a cause, especially a political cause.⁶ The *Arfist* takes a stand in the political cause against monoculture, relentless food import from far away, no policy in food security, food waste, and uses participation education to bring knowledge to common people how to use plants in their neighbourhood for food. In the *Arfist*'s sessions an atmosphere is created for peer tutoring.

An *artist* is a person who produces any artwork. The *Arfist* endeavours to point out the value and beauty of the plants, bringing them literally to the table to be seen and tasted like worthy food. It is brought to light and put on a pedestal, used as a pattern in the *Arfist*'s coat and as a decoration on the boxes in the kitchenette. A handmade tapestry with all ten unpopular weeds is part of calling attention to these plants as an aesthetic subject.

An *anarchist* is a person who promotes disorder or excites revolt against any established rule, law, or custom.⁷ The *Arfist* goes against

⁵ "Dictionary."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

the tradition of establishing a hierarchy of plants where some are better than others. The rule that you should throw the weed away is broken and instead it is embraced. Things are put upside down. The anarchy is also in the treatment of material. Materials that are considered as “masculine” are used to make symbols one might define as feminine and handmade tradition is turned into machinery. The process of my work has been through different experiments with materials and media. I have mostly been embroidering weeds with old and traditional stitches and materials. Choosing material for my *Arfist*’s kit, coat and kitchenette is as important as the thing itself. The material speaks one story at the same time as another story is told, some kind of an independent material storytelling. It is important for me that the costume and the kit are functional and I can really use them as a class kit.

The *Arfist* is not a static person with props, but a mobile activist, performing some kinds of happenings that lead to changes. She is also concerned about her environment and deals with what she finds around her each time. She plans events where she appears in neighborhoods, meets the inhabitants and runs a workshop with the locals about the weeds that grow there. These events can be in the form of a class where people can either be the audience or participate in harvesting and processing the plants. The intention is to change the participants opinions towards weeds. The *Arfist* can engage in other events connected with different concerns, like food usage, local flora, environmental awakening, permaculture and more. The *Arfist*’s activity is a response to consumption and waste and will appear in different media. The *Arfist* will run her own podcast or a YouTube channel showing sessions from field activity with people or on her own making experiments.

The *Arfist* can also use her experience from collective work on

the tapestry and it might be a good idea to offer people to make peace with its enemy weed and make a nice piece of embroidery. A person that hates plants for some reason or even no reason, could come and meet others that also hate some particular plants. They can gather together around a workspace for embroidery, exchange stories and try to reach a reasonable compromise with the plant. Of course it is a simplified idea but still it could make people really think about their feelings towards plants and give them a change to reconsider their values and opinions.



Image 18

Machine stitching for the coat

2.2 Value and Vision

I want to work on issues that matter to society. I am criticizing the current state of the consumer society, but at the same time I am putting forward a suggestion to look at new ways to supply food. I want to work on useful projects that turn people's eyes towards bet-

ter methods in some way, it can be new or already established methods, as the *Arfist* touches upon.

The *Arfist* is utilizing wild crops as nations have done for centuries, but puts it forward as an option in the western consumer society, not just in response to a possible catastrophe, but as the enlightened person's choice to make use of their immediate surroundings in the cause of reduced environmental impact.

I want to employ whichever medium best suited to this idea on a case by case basis. Mediums are ever changing and what's trending today is dead tomorrow. The *Arfist* now uses a combination of theatrical interpretation with a nod to the primitive and uncomplicated with her cart and rudimentary equipment, but also seeks to be visible in the digital realm.

The *Arfist* is an experiment to speak to the public about some actual problems we face in the near future. The performance addresses urgent issues, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Target 2.A, the goal to reach zero hunger in the world reads:

By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disaster and that progressively improve land and soil quality.⁸

Many plants that are considered as weeds are strong and sturdy. They are often seen as invasive because they are equipped to grow in harsh conditions and adapt to fast changing environments. I believe such plants might play a role for the future of food production in a world of climate change and environmental stress.

8 UN General Assembly, *Transforming our world*

Some weeds also serve to improve soil quality, such as the lupine (*Lupinus nootkatensis*), a plant many people here in Iceland despise.⁹ Some weeds even belong to the same families as well-known vegetables. Carrots and fennel are in the same family of Apiaceae just like cow parsley, angelica and sweet cicely but only some of them are introduced to consumers as food by the food industry for some reason or another.¹⁰



Image 19

Weeds in the urban landscape

Weeds are all around us, not least in urban environments. Many demand that city councils keep the city clean, which often includes removing all plants that are not in designed green places or gardens.¹¹ But could we possibly reap benefits from those plants if they are

9 Náttúrufræðistofnun, Alaskalúpína og skógarkerfill á Íslandi.

10 Hafsteinn, „Hin misvinsæla Sveipjurtaett.

11 Reykjavíkurborg, Umhverfis- og skipulagssvið.

allowed to grow and people use them? Or could there be green and public spaces where people could forage plants for their own consumption?

The *Arfist* will develop over time. The goal is to reach out to people and make them think about values, food, sustainability and local surroundings. The topic can vary from food to cosmetics or medicine, or something totally different. But utilising local material in times of overflowing goods from the other side of the planet is a pretty simple and naive ideal, but essential for the environment and our future life on earth.

In my dreams the *Arfist* will build a subculture of activists that share the same tenet about consumption and local utilisation. The group would identify themselves in “*Arfist's coat*”, go around and share their vision and knowledge for the purpose of making changes in the society.

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7 Images

Image 1: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Graduation exhibition Ásmundasalur 2019

Image 2: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Tapestry 2019

Image 3: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Garden 2018

Image 4: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Burning plastic 2017

Image 5: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Needlework 2019

Image 6: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Seeds garden plan 2018

Image 7: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Punk garden plan 2019

Image 8: Matís, Root vegetable 2018

Image 9: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Cow parsley roots 2018

Image 10: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Fried cow parsley 2018

Image 11: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Cow parsley paella 2018

Image 12: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Horsetail salad 2019

Image 13: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Sweet cicily juice 2018

Image 14: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Moodboard 2019

Image 15: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Sketch 2019

Image 16: Ásta Þórisdóttir, The kitchenette 019

Image 17: Ásta Þórisdóttir, The coat 2019

Image 18: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Machine stitching 2019

Image 19: Ásta Þórisdóttir, Urban weeds 2018

