



Contemporary Social Sculpture and the Field of Transformation

PART 1: THE FIELD OF TRANSFORMATION AND DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIAL SCULPTURE

TOWARDS NEW IMAGINARIES

The field of transformation is a social mycelium¹, a huge field of transformative activity across the planet that echoes the natural mycelium under the forest floor. This vital body of transformative ideas, initiatives big and small and transdisciplinary activity has as much to do with mobilizing the imagination toward developing new imaginaries² about non-destructive ways of living together on the planet, as with the confluence of longing, trauma, and decolonizing the mind.

Here inner and outer fields of engagement, individual and collective intention, system change and consciousness intersect. In this great delta of need, all these

- 1 The natural mycelium has a sense of the whole, enabling it to shift resources from one part of the forest to another.
- 2 The term ‘imaginaries’ is akin to Jürgen Habermas’ ‘lifeworlds’. See Habermas 1996. For John Thompson, the social imaginary is “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life”. See Thompson 1984, 6.

different perspectives, initiatives and sufferings meet, informing the impulse to shape visions of a viable world based on a greater interconnectedness. Flowing into this global stream of insights and commitment is Joseph Beuys' work toward 'a society as a total work of art', and his unswerving conviction about teaching as one of the most important artworks toward this society as a work of art. As Rudolf Steiner before him, he described this as field as 'social art'³ and added the phrase 'soziale Plastik' (in English 'social sculpture'). This term 'Plastik' highlights our role as 'artists' of our own lives and of social forms. It also emphasises that the forms of our lives and the structures in which we live are not fixed. It reminds us that we can reshape our own lives by working on habits and attitudes, whilst working toward structures that are supportive of all life forms. We do not have to continue to create 'the great suffering of nature'⁴ and feed an outmoded social-economic system that causes *all* beings to suffer.

In the midst of this field stands the human being: a being different to all the other beings – a creator, whose inventions both illuminate and disconnect. This is the only being that seems to get ontologically lost. All other beings unfold according to an inner plan and purpose. Beech trees, roses, blackbirds. They do not have to make a conscious effort to develop their qualities and capacities. And they do not invent things that destroy the world. This is the only being responsible for such destruction, for an era like no other, now described as the 'anthropocene'.

Recognising the mess this creature has made engenders different attitudes and responses. One response is to give up on the human being in disgust, and imagine a world where 'nature' reclaims the planet. Another response is to 'emigrate internally'⁵ as Hannah Arendt described it, to protect our selves from the questions, the horrors and the fear. Others envisage a not-too-distant future where robotics will enable engineered intelligence; where anything unwanted by the powers that be can be edited in or out of a digitally controlled world.

DEVELOPING THE HUMAN BEING

From the perspective of social sculpture there is another option: developing the human being! If we recognise that the human being is the only one of earth's creatures that does not simply unfold, and is therefore at the beginning of its develop-

3 'Social Art' and 'social architecture' were terms used by Rudolf Steiner in The Arts and their Mission lecture cycle, describing a field of social practice that went beyond painting, music, sculpture, architecture, poetry. Steiner 1923/1964.

4 A phrase Beuys often used when talking about the ecological crisis and the need to develop 'organs of perception' to perceive this suffering. My English translation was done for internal use in the South African branch of the Free International University in 1978. Discovered on a South African site 31.12.2016. Translation not referenced <http://www.luxlapis.co.za/nat/beuys.html>.

5 Arendt used this phrase in the Eichmann trial to refer to the disengagement of the Nazi murderers from their crimes. Coined by Frank Thiess in his response to Thomas Mann's BBC broadcast [July 1942] on the subject of German guilt, it was used to describe German writers who were opposed to Nazism yet chose to remain in Germany after the Nazis seized power in 1933.

ment, we might give greater priority to developing our latent qualities and capacities, which include empathy, generosity and the ability to care at a distance.

If commitment to developing such capacities were more widespread it would contribute to evolving a different kind of world: to increasing the development of social attitudes and values, which are the invisible substance of viable, future social structures. It would help us to move from the kinds of exploitation and oppression that affect all life forms, to a more connective mind-set. It would strengthen the shift from “colonialism, conquest and control to consciousness, cooperation and care”⁶.

Encircling the planet is a growing sphere of connective values, will and vision that constitutes the evolving social mycelium, sustained by an eco-social imaginary of interdependence. If we can perceive and better articulate the strengths and weakness in this huge body of initiatives and intention it will strengthen what is becoming a paradigm shift in practice. It will give us more know-how of an integrative kind, and increase our confidence that another world is possible. Amidst the horrors of self-interest, plunder and denial, it will help us develop appropriate new imaginaries and give direction to shaping a viable future and a just world.

So, how can we develop new forms of thinking and practice that support this? Of connective thinking that does not polarize subject and object, undermine individual or collective, separate body and mind? How can we develop ‘new organs of perception’ that can see that the whole as more than the sum of the parts; that would make us develop different economies of survival and care, and stop plundering peoples and the planet?

COMING TO OUR SENSES

Beuys and many others⁷ have highlighted the need for imaginal thought, in which experiential, synthetic thinking enables us to ‘come to our senses’ and connects thought and experience. A form of ‘ethical phenomenology’, enabling depth encounters in the inner and outer field, it has elements in common with contemplative traditions from across the world. Can greater focus on this imaginal mode make more widespread an experience of the needs of another and of the world as my own? Can working in the inner workplace⁸ or inner atelier, to see what and how we see, help us decolonize the mind and develop more integrative values and behaviours?

These are some of the questions driving the social sculpture enquiries – in theory and practice, with others and individually, in teaching and in projects – and they yield propositional practices and ideas for shaping a society in which the social structures are part of a supportive mycelium that values and respects life.

6 A leitmotiv in the contemporary social sculpture: “University of the Trees – Lab for New Knowledge and an Eco-Social Future”. www.universityofthetrees.org.

7 Paul Klee also used the term ‘bildhaftes Denken’. Parallels are Goethe’s ‘anschauende Urteilskraft’, Schiller’s ‘aesthetic state’, Herbert Marcuse’s ‘liberation through the aesthetic’, and James Hillman’s ‘imaginal thought’ and ‘thought of the heart’.

8 ‘Earth Forum’ is a good example of an integrative social field practice that depends on enhanced individual capacities. See Earth Forum p8 in this paper.

All these experiments provide the basis for on going exploration and reflection in a wider arena. The ideas and processes are explored on platforms and in social sculpture enquiry labs, conferences and workshops. The practices are shared with individuals, in groups, communities, and organizations. In terms of scale the practices are often insignificant, but once prototypes are developed and ‘tested’ – like Earth Forum – these can be scaled out and refined for maximum reach.

This on going reflective process is what makes contemporary social sculpture a field of research and enquiry. But this research is not confined to the universities. It includes citizen researchers and co-enquirers, mining their experience individually and together, to explore what takes place in the practices and what insights they offer for further engagement. In what sense is it of value, in what way and for whom? Questions deriving from re-engaging with ones experience enable one to draw out the value, instead of to judge. And so, part of the work of reflective practitioners is to re-enter their experience. From this, appropriate criteria of value can be established, helping to confirm what has been gained.

In these times of great challenge, we need to become more closely aligned with our creative resources and their significance. Key amongst these is the capacity for encounter and the capacity for reflective consciousness. The capacity for encounter enables us to come closer through different forms of phenomenological exploration to ourselves, the other, and the world, in all its glories and its sufferings. The capacity for reflective consciousness relates to the process of knowing, or of ‘making sense’. These two core capacities enable us to encounter ourselves, the interdependence of the world, and our mind-sets: to ‘see how we see’ and potentially, to ‘come to our senses’.

This encounter with our thinking, our attitudes and our values enables a subtle and yet direct experience of our agency. This in turn brings one closer to one of Beuys’ radical formulations that ‘thinking is already sculpture’. This phrase relates to the ‘plastic’ process in thinking, and what Beuys described as working with the ‘invisible materials’ of speech, discussion and thought.

BEUYS AND OTHER INFLUENCES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCULPTURE

The Social Sculpture Research Unit [SSRU] was launched in Oxford in 1998⁹ to explore the nature and role of imaginal thought in transformation, creative agency and interdisciplinary connective practices. Its purpose was also to engage in more depth with Beuys’ social sculpture proposals. How could they be understood in

9 In 1997, as new Head of Arts at Oxford Brookes University I was invited to develop a curriculum relevant for the 21st century. The Social Sculpture Research Unit [SSRU] was set up as part of this interdisciplinary arts enquiry exploring forms of connective practice. Undergraduate and Masters programmes were developed between 1998 and 1999 based on interdisciplinary methodologies and creative strategies that I had been developing since the 1980s. In 2002 we developed a doctoral programme with the option of practice-based research. Since then 6 people have completed, 10 are in progress and many are waiting to begin. The SSRU’s PhD Fora, Initiative Fora for alumni, and an annual Social Sculpture platform create a hub for transdisciplinary research processes and projects in many countries, with citizens, organisations and research communities. www.social-sculpture.org.

practice? Were they limited to the Direct Democracy¹⁰ and Basic Income initiatives that continued Beuys' work after his death? Were they still as significant and radical as in the early 1970s? If so, what could be drawn from these ideas not only for artists and arts educators interested in social engagement, but for change makers and activists working in the wider field of change?

Joseph Beuys' term 'social sculpture', developed in the early 1970s to denote a radically expanded conception of art, has many roots. One of these is the experimentalism in Europe and the Americas in movements from Dada and Fluxus to the Situationists, which highlighted a social-political interventionist role for art and culture.¹¹ Other sources include Schiller's 'aesthetic education of the human being' and Goethe's phenomenological methodologies for opening up 'new organs of perception' and developing 'exact sensorial imagination'. And although Beuys did not talk much about this, his expanded conception of art is deeply rooted in Rudolf Steiner's 'Philosophy of Freedom'¹² and an expanded view of the senses.

Whilst developing the SSRU's research methodologies and my own experimental practice, I not only explored Beuys's social sculpture proposals, Goethean phenomenology and Steiner's 'twelve senses', but connected them to many social movements, frameworks and radical thinkers. In the 30 years since Beuys' death, amidst the questions posed by trying to share the social sculpture ideas and scale out our practices, these roots have become rhizomes. Nourished now by many other cultural insights and perspectives, and no longer dependent on an individual visionary artist, these developments highlight the diversity that has given rise to the field of contemporary social sculpture. Central amongst these influences are Paulo Freire's thinking and practice that recognised the person as central to political process; the archetypal psychologist, James Hillman, on 'imaginal thought'; eco-feminists like Val Plumwood whose work linked patriarchy and ecocide; Black Elk's 'Crying for a Vision' and the 'Basic Call to Consciousness' of the First Nations' Confederacy that challenges the mechanistic paradigm; Vandana Shiva's 'Earth Democracy'; David Bohm's work on thought and 'dialogue'; philosophical studies in Vedanta, Sufism and Buddhism and their echoes in Bohm and other contemporary scientific theory; Hannah Arendt on the field of action; Henri Bortoft on different 'modes of thought'; Einstein's 'unified field' theory; Arthur Zajonc on 'love and knowledge'; considerations about 'collective intelligence', and Joanna Macy's 'Great Turning' processes, designed to contribute to paradigm shift in practice.¹³ Collaborations with cultural geographers, farmers, homeopaths, ecologists and

10 <http://www.omnibus.org>

11 For a useful overview of Beuys' relationship to the radical avant-garde see: A.W. Moore: (2013) '*A Brief Genealogy of Social Sculpture*', <http://www.joaap.org/webonly/moore.htm>.

12 Steiner, 1989.

13 Other significant influences include Trungpa's 'Meditation in Action'; Ngugi's 'Decolonizing the Mind'; conversations on 'thought' with the philosopher, Nisreyasanda; 'Achebe's 'restorying'; Cage's 'lecture/performances'; Ginsberg's dialogues with D.T. Suzuki on spontaneity and corporate managerialism, Sheldrake's 'morphogenetic fields'; Schwenk's 'memory of water'; Levinas on suffering; Thich Nhat Hahn on 'interbeing', the Dalai Lama on 'responsibility', and Rilke's poems and letters. See www.social-sculpture.org.

activists; facilitating cooperatives in South Africa; work with banana farmers in the Caribbean on the Exchange Values project; many experimental social sculpture processes¹⁴; and, interdisciplinary studies on colonialism, meaning making and the question of value, have all interfaced with Beuys's proposals to give rise to many insights and strategies. Such multidimensional and transdisciplinary explorations have also contributed to understanding the difference between 'toolkits' for problem solving and 'plastic' processes for shifts in consciousness.

RECLAIMING THE AESTHETIC AND RETHINKING RESPONSIBILITY

In 1998 I was invited to talk about 'social sculpture and democracy' at a UNESCO Summit for Culture and Development¹⁵. My attempt to illuminate what social sculpture has to do with shaping humane and viable social structures that might enable 'every human being to be an artist' included redefining both 'aesthetic' and 'responsibility'.

In this redefinition 'aesthetic' understood in contrast to the 'anaesthetic' or numbness, and, related more closely to its original sources, comes to mean 'enlivened being' and all that enlivens us. In overcoming numbness through aesthetic processes, I am able to encounter myself, another, and the world. The imaginal, aesthetic mode can, in this sense, help us to go beyond the forms of disconnected thinking and 'othering' that pervade our social landscape today. The inner field is activated. We are mobilized internally and begin to encounter the world in us and the world we are within as an interdependent living being.

But this aesthetic mode has a further significance. Being mobilized internally is what enables us to respond. Instead of responsibility as a moral imperative or duty, responsibility can be understood as the ability-to-respond. So, just as the 'aesthetic' is freed from the confines of its narrow art-world usage and returned to the life of the society, responsibility is also reclaimed and becomes part of an aesthetic process directly linked to imagination. Unlike duty, which is either accepted or enforced, the 'ability-to-respond' comes from being moved: to take care, to engage, to make whole. In this connected mode the judging 'I' with all its prejudices, no longer separates itself from the thing perceived. Instead, it is open to encounter what is, which encourages spontaneity and appropriateness of response.

When my response arises from such empathic knowing, the call to respond is lived in me. I choose to respond from a state of connectedness. It is a responsibility that does not take away my freedom but derives from freedom. Activated and moved to respond, responsibility becomes a 'connective practice'.

NEW STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING THE 'AESTHETIC' AND 'RESPONSIBILITY'

Redefining the 'aesthetic' and rethinking 'responsibility' in this way also contributed to developing new strategies of engagement. These strategies created prac-

¹⁴ Prior to and since the launch of the SSRU in 1998 my social sculpture enquiry has involved thousands of citizens and people from different disciplinary backgrounds in several continents, who have, in many ways, been my teachers and co-researchers.

¹⁵ Sacks 1998.

tices, dialogues and pedagogy with a strong phenomenological-aesthetic orientation, and the potential to promote active, engaged citizenship. And so a field of contemporary social sculpture developed that offered fairly unique opportunities for research, engagement and learning in connective thinking and connective practice.

One of these opportunities for exploring the aesthetic-responsibility relationship was the Exchange Values¹⁶ project that creates an interface between producers and consumers and an arena for exploring our relationship to the global economy. Here, especially through the work with the farmers, I was able to explore imaginal thought work in the dialogues and, from the effects it had, directly experience the aesthetic-to-response-ability process. Each time the Exchange Values arena is set up, the depth and mobilizing value of the imaginal dialogue is confirmed. Following an initial stage of interest and enthusiasm engendered by careful observation or ‘presencing’, participants ‘re-enter the observation’ in their inner workspace, and explore it with nonjudgmental eyes. The next phase involves actively listening to each other, without discussion, as each participant shares something of their experience. Remaining in the imaginal mode, a final phase explores this substance gathered, and here new insights for personal and group actions arise. Beuys, following on from Steiner’s phenomenology of the thought process, would describe this process as moving from ‘imagination’, through ‘inspiration’ to ‘intuition’. Through inhabiting the thing perceived, it discloses itself in us, opening up a ‘new organ of perception’¹⁷. This mobilises us internally. It inspires us. If the understanding that has arisen is then made conscious and perceived, the third capacity – ‘intuition’ – manifests as commitment and insights for action in the world. In other words, the aesthetic-to-responsibility process results in new ‘knowledge’ that activates the will and longs to be shared.

THE MISSING LINK

In much art practice and art pedagogy with a social focus insufficient consideration is given to the aesthetic mode and how aesthetic practices enable transformation. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the term ‘aesthetic’ is still largely clothed in the assumptions of style and taste. This ‘missing link’ makes it difficult to shift to an understanding of the aesthetic mode as enabling empathy and interconnect-edness; to understand how it contributes to envisioning the new imaginaries that inform personal change, social change and system change; and, in what way the problem solving mind-set differs from modes of experiential knowing that enable empathy and shifts in consciousness. In the field of contemporary social sculpture it is essential to understand this. Only then can we discover the missing link: the role of the aesthetic mode in enabling ‘paradigm shift in practice’.

16 The Exchange Values project will go to its 13th venue at the Frans Hals Museum, Holland in 2017. For the history of the project and responses to it see: www.exchange-values.org.

17 D. Seamon: http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/20chapters/goethe_intro.htm (‘Each phenom-enon in nature, rightly observed, wakens in us a new organ of perception’).

DIRECTIONAL FORCES

In his works on aesthetic education Schiller emphasizes the “remaking of civilization by virtue of the liberating force of the aesthetic function [because it contains] [...] a new reality principle”¹⁸. Contrasting Schiller’s concept of ‘aesthetic education’ to the Enlightenment emphasis on education towards art and education by art, Grossmann¹⁹ shows how Schiller “has made art an integral part of his idea of the evolution of mankind [which...] throws the responsibility on the agents”.

From a social sculpture perspective ‘agents’ derive their agency partly from relating to a situation in the aesthetic mode. They not only think about situations and calculate responses based on linear reasoning. They live the situation in themselves, in the inner space of their imagination, and are mobilized internally. This is ‘ethical phenomenology’ in practice. They ‘see the phenomenon’ and allow the situation to work in them, just as a more traditional image would work. Then new perceptions can arise. For Beuys and Paul Klee this is ‘bildhaftes Denken’: imaginal thought. It can also be described as contemplative thinking as opposed to calculative thinking. It is part of Steiner’s phenomenology of thinking mentioned above: a process that moves from imagination [taking the situation in through intense observation, and experiencing it again in the inner space], through inspiration [when new images and thoughts arise] to intuition [experiencing the relationship of these new images and thoughts to the needs in the outer field]. It is a process in which we discover and form our individual and collective ‘directional forces’.

For agents of change in the field of social sculpture, word-works such as “Rethinking responsibility as an ability-to-respond”; “The Sacrament of the Future is to Encounter”²⁰; “Art = Capital”²¹ and “Sustainability without the I-Sense is Nonsense”²² also function as ‘directional forces’.²³ They are imaginal distillations of core perceptions and ideas involved in working towards a just and viable future. To use a Beuys phrase, these word-works ‘scratch on the imagination’ and give substance to the evolving placenta-like, social mycelium²⁴.

18 Marcuse 1955, 180.

19 Grossmann 1968.

20 Rudolf Steiner: „[...] denn dann wird die Begegnung jedes Menschen mit jedem Menschen von vorneherein eine religiöse Handlung, ein Sakrament sein, [...]“ Aus: Was tut der Engel in unserem Astralleib. Vortrag. Zürich 9. Oktober 1918.

21 Art = Capital is one of many different multiples with this text. ‘Kunst = KAPITAL’ on Deutsche Mark banknote with handwritten text by Beuys. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. 1992.

22 This phrase is part of a social sculpture process ‘Nachhaltigkeit ohne Ich-sinn ist Unsinn’, developed for the Überlebenskunst-Festival, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2011.

23 In German, Beuys’ term for this is ‘Richtkräfte’. Many strategies and practices have been developed in the field of contemporary social sculpture to work with such directional forces.

24 What Suzi Gablik says about culture is akin to how I see the social mycelium: “In essence, culture is psychic nutrition, so when a culture’s dominant images are [...] evocations of the good made visible, they set into motion unconscious psychological processes and tend to direct social change. Images [...] function as conductors of psychic energy. They have an integrating

PART 2: MAKING THE SECRETS PRODUCTIVE

Beuys wrote this phrase ‘making the secrets productive’ on one of the 100 blackboards in his installation-action ‘Directional Forces’²⁵

UNCOVERING SECRETS FOR SOCIAL CO-EXISTENCE

A secret is something hidden or inaccessible, for a variety of reasons. One of these has to do with people in power holding onto such potent knowledge. For many centuries the focus has been on unlocking ‘the secrets of nature’ and ‘the secrets of the universe’. Now we have reached a time of great disconnection on earth when ‘the secrets of our individual and social capacities’ urgently need to be explored. And today this potent knowledge for enabling new, non-exploitative forms of social co-existence, must be made accessible to all. Without such capacities we will not be able to become social individuals that constitute a social organism based cooperation, interdependence and care. We will not be able to develop new imaginaries based on empathy and interdependence, in which planetary ecological citizenship is the goal.

The term ‘social sculpture’ itself is not a secret. Although it holds many secrets, it no longer perplexes people as it did for several decades after Joseph Beuys first used it to describe his expanded conception of art. In Beuys’s radically widened understanding of art, being an artist means becoming creative agents of our own lives and a collective future that is humane and ecologically viable. Beuys’s provocative shorthand for this is ‘every human being is an artist’²⁶. The phrase ‘social sculpture’, in German, ‘soziale Plastik’, is now widely used in many disciplines and spheres beyond art, from organizational development, leadership processes and activism to social development.

SOCIAL SCULPTURE AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART PRACTICE

In the art-world ‘social sculpture’ has become a synonym for socially engaged art. This conflation understands social sculpture and socially engaged art as different descriptors for the same thing. They are generally both thought of as artistic, imaginal practices that make social statements in visual, tactile, experiential ways, that involve participatory engagement with social issues and problems, that are often collectively engendered and that enhance problem solving. Art at the cutting edge is now socially engaged, contextual, and intersubjective: a relational field that explores a multitude of social purposes and functions. Here place-based residencies, interactive research processes and interdisciplinary conversations have long challenged the primacy of objects. Art as a social force connects many spheres of action and enquiry. This is also manifest in our language: we speak of an ‘educational turn’ in art and the ‘aesthetic turn’ in education and in ecological, social, and political activism. All around us, examples of relational approaches and

potential [...]. Gablik 1986.

25 ‘Richtkräfte’ (1974–1977), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

26 ‘Every human being is an artist’ is a sentiment many support, in Beuys’s time and more so now.

But because there was little sense of its implications for practice, it generated much cynicism.

interventions confirm that the binary opposition between ‘art for arts sake’ and socially focused art has largely been overcome. In certain respects the international artworld has become one of the most transdisciplinary fields of enquiry and practice. Nothing is excluded.

But this active engagement of art in the social sphere is not without shadows. They are cast where creative social engagement becomes synonymous with a problem-solving mind-set. This has led to a proliferation of ‘toolkits’ and one-dimensional solutions that support art and culture becoming the perfect instrument of a neoliberal agenda. Despite the widespread notion of a transdisciplinary and holistic arts practice, many well-intentioned arts projects and pedagogic processes strengthen the neoliberal emphasis on developing ‘social capital’ and art as a ‘creative industry’, with proven economic benefits through tourism and gentrification. This is something quite different from Beuys’s Art = Capital, which shifts both the notion of ‘art’ and of ‘capital’ to our capacities for envisioning and shaping appropriate social forms. In the sphere of the economy, Beuys’ legacy manifests in the work toward ‘unconditional basic income’; in the sphere of rights and responsibilities arenas are prioritized for exploring ‘deliberative, participatory democracy’; in the sphere of culture, processes, practices and pedagogies are developed that emphasize the nature and role of enlivened, imaginal thinking in envisioning a viable and just eco-social organism.

The conflation between social sculpture and other forms of socially engaged practice starts to unravel when one explores such priorities and the understandings informing them. A closer look at contemporary social sculpture reveals a focus on modes of consciousness and a view of the human being as a being in the state of becoming. And it is this that situates social sculpture in the terrain of systemic change, without being reduced to ‘problem solving’. But this requires an understanding of systemic change that foregrounds ‘superstructure’ - consciousness, mind-sets and paradigms, as much as ‘base’ - structures in the political and economic systems that affect and shape consciousness. Social sculpture practitioners working in the field of participatory democracy, unconditional basic income and developing new imaginaries engaging with the invisible materials of attitudes, values, and habits of thought²⁷ are concerned with both.

FROM INSTRUMENTALISM TO CONNECTIVE AESTHETICS AND ‘INVISIBLE MATERIALS’

Years back art theorist, Suzi Gablik, coined the phrase ‘connective aesthetics’²⁸. She related this phrase to the need for new approaches to art not divorced from the world’s needs in the way that many forms of modernist art and culture had become. It was a direct challenge and a call to overcome the paralyzing charges of instrumentalism, faced by artists trying to connect their practice to actions for positive change in the world. Gablik’s ‘connective aesthetics’ encouraged ex-

27 Beuys described the invisible materials of social sculpture as ‘speech, discussion and thought’.

In the 1990s I expanded this to ‘attitudes, questions, values, and habits of thought’.

28 Gablik 1992.

periments, particularly in the USA, toward an ‘aesthetics of connectedness’. But it did not offer substantial ways of understanding what this entailed. It also did not really reclaim the notion of the aesthetic from its 19th century meaning of style or taste.

Connective aesthetics was yet another style. Later Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’²⁹ emphasized another form of connectedness: a new open-endedness, which privileged process related to context, instead of product. This was part of a process begun with Dada, continuing through Fluxus into the present, which emphasizes the ‘dematerialisation of the art object’³⁰. Parallels between this ‘dematerialisation’ and Beuys’s ‘invisible materials’ seem obvious. However, in Beuys’s expanded conception of art the aim is not ‘dematerialisation’ per se. In it ‘materials’ and ‘form’ are still central categories, although now the materials include our individual and social capacities and the social process can be seen as the form. “Everything is a form question,” says Beuys. This understanding of form, together with invisible materials and the whole aesthetic-to-responsibility process, is one of the secrets that play a significant role in contemporary social sculpture practice and pedagogy. Its value for an expanded conception of art lies in reminding us that anything we wish to share with another must have a form, whether the materials are physical or invisible, like discussion, speech and thought. The criteria for ‘good’ form then shifts from older aesthetic conventions of taste, to appropriateness. Is the form appropriate for what it is attempting to share? This sounds like the modernist utilitarian dictum ‘form follows function’. However, in social sculpture ‘function’ is concerned with forms and criteria of enlivenment. These include:

- Developing new ‘organs of perception’ and other capacities for perceiving the social field
- Enabling a differentiated sense of ones agency
- Engendering a sense of collective responsibility and of ecological citizenship beyond nationalism
- Exploring an awakened ‘I’-sense, and how this differs from individualism and egocentrism
- Understanding thought as a plastic, transformative process and what this has to do with freedom
- Engendering respect, empathy and the capacity for care at a distance
- Creating opportunities for learning to think together and work socially with the ‘invisible materials’
- Understanding how to ‘direct our energies’ and ‘allow to emerge’ simultaneously
- Participating in the development of new imaginaries and action that is connective on ethical, political, spiritual and ecological levels.

29 Bourriaud 1998.

30 Lippard 1997.

CONNECTIVE PRACTICE IN THE SOCIAL FIELD AND 'INSTRUMENTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS'

'Instruments of consciousness' is a term I developed to distinguish contemporary social sculpture practices from art projects and 'objects of attention' and well as from 'tools' for problem solving. It describes practices, word-works, object scores and processes that are part of an approach to change in which the imaginal, aesthetic mode is central to new forms of perception and of thinking. And so we try to design instruments of consciousness that enable us to develop new capacities and new organs of perception with which we can imagine and develop ways of living with care for others and in tune with the interconnected web of being.

Dialogue with Oneself: Dialogue with the World³¹ is one of these instruments of consciousness. This imaginal thought-work process, also described as 'Journaling for Change', is, like all journaling, an individual process. Despite this focus on individual process it is a foundational social sculpture practice. This is because it offers a direct experience of the plastic process of working with ones perceptions, feelings and thoughts. This is also one of the things that distinguishes it from other forms of journaling. The double-dialogue process involves gathering material in an uncensored, stream of consciousness approach and then making a commitment to periodically re-enter it. Methods for perceiving emergent possibilities are offered in 'Journaling for Change' workshops and a small manual, which enable one to uncover connections, insights and patterns of thought: literally to make new thoughts. This reflection takes place in previously set aside margins. People who use this process regularly – as many social sculpture research students do – are astounded by it. As well as uncovering motivations, distilling insights through mining often ignored perceptions and questions, and developing new ideas, one experiences ones own inner plasticity and the capacity we have to shape our thinking: to 'make sense'. This process, used regularly, confirms the radical potential of imaginal thought and experiential knowing in the shaping of ones self and enabling shifts in consciousness. Through direct experience of such shifts in the inner field and the new commitments they give rise to we not only experience that thought and action are part of one continuum, but how the will is activated. In this 'dialogue with oneself' one can, above all, experience the significance of imaginal thinking for the human being as a freedom being, shaping itself in relation to the whole.

Earth Forum subtitled 'Listening to Each Other: Listening to the Future', is another. It is a mobile arena for connecting inner and outer work that takes place around an oiled ground cloth. This integrative, social field practice, for groups of 10-12 people, evolved from a multi-stakeholder process in a South African village in 2002, and was further developed for organizations and communities

31 I developed this process in the 1990s, trying to find a method of working with the material in my own notebooks. Since 1997 it has been an integral part of the social sculpture graduate research programmes at Oxford Brookes University. Initially developed in 2000, there have been several iterations. It continues to undergo refinements. The 'Journaling for Change' manual will be available through the University of the Trees: Lab in summer 2017.

in the run-up to the Climate Summit in South in 2011. It is an ‘aesthetic’ capacity building process that takes place around designed to enable groups of individuals, communities, organizations and decision-makers to perceive existing agendas and mind-sets about how we live on the planet. Capacities like active listening and imaginal work are introduced, giving all participants an opportunity to experience their own inner workspace, and how one can work with invisible materials like values, attitudes, and mind-sets. In this inner workspace each participant re-enters their experiences generated in different phases of the process, and shares aspects of this re-enlivened and distilled experience with others. In this way Earth Forum generates both individual and social substance. This substance becomes a valuable resource for reshaping our own agendas and actions and enabling new agendas to unfold. These new agendas carry a force because they have arisen from a creative engagement with our own perceptions and experiences. They have a definite reality. In the final phase of the Earth Forum process the individual streams of insight – having been shared and taken in by all – can then be worked on together to create ‘social honey’ that is more than the sum of the individual contributions. Like golden honey, which is not simply the sum of the nectar gathered by individual bees, this ‘social gold’ derives from the alchemy of social, thinking together.

In all this the aesthetic mode is central. Through all Earth Forum’s phases, working together around an oiled earth cloth, the way participants engage – gathering experiences in their inner workspace, ‘making sense’ and ‘seeing what one sees’; taking in the experience of others through active listening; and exploring together what is calling from the future – activates the inner field and replaces thinking about things with experiential knowing and dwelling in the phenomena. All this aesthetic, imaginal work depends on and engenders enlivened thinking, and enhances our capacities to work with the invisible materials that shape the outer visible field. The overall gesture of the Earth Forum process – of going out (onto the planet), to come in (to our own world of experience and ‘making sense’), to go out again (in sharing with others) – occurs throughout the Earth Forum. The integrative social process in Earth Forum is generated in this movement from the individual, to another, to the social. Earth Forum’s process ensures that the individual’s encounter with themselves and the world is not subsumed in the collective. Its subtle form nevertheless also enables the group to work with the social substance generated, explore the emergent bigger picture, and to experience what the collective intelligence movement describes as the ‘higher we’. An Earth Forum handbook³² accompanies the training of multipliers that we describe as ‘responsible participants’. In this way, this small group process, in which more than 120 people have already been trained, is being scaled out.

Agents of Change³³ is a climate crisis kit developed by James Reed with the SSRU, whilst studying social sculpture. It shares many of the principles and strat-

32 Sacks et al. 2013.

33 For the Agents of Change project see: <http://agentsofchangeproject.blogspot.co.uk> [31.12.2016]

egies in Earth Forum and Exchange Values for encountering inner and outer realities and 'coming to our senses'. Wearing orange lifejackets and using measuring poles indicating the predicted 3-meter water rise participants enter the present – which is often difficult and challenging – and explore their perceptions and feelings about the climate crisis, as well as possible responses. The insights from this encounter with oneself are then shared: the 'coming in' to oneself process creates the substance for the 'going out' phase. Depending on how the process is facilitated this provides the group with the material for generating social substance from what has been collectively heard, listened to and shared.

Re-centring the Movement is a process that engages with power relations, gender, racism and other forms of oppression within NGOs and activist communities. Developed by climate and anti-oppression activist Suzanne Dhaliwal, whilst doing her Masters in Social Sculpture, it offers an experiential starting point for 'decolonizing' the aims, agendas, working processes and relationships in such groups. Working together around a huge black cloth, which creates the arena for exploring ones perception of ones agency and position in relation to the powers that be, this process uses similar principles and strategies – entering ones experience in an imaginal mode (coming to oneself), sharing aspects of this if they choose to (going out), and then working together in the imaginal mode, to try and 'make sense' of what has been shared (coming back to the larger situation).

Although these 'instruments of consciousness' differ considerably, they all share an emphasis on the connection between inner and outer work: on inner mobilization; expanding our sense of agency through the aesthetic mode; the nature of the inner workspace; and, on thinking as a plastic process. This multidimensional experience gained through such 'instruments of consciousness' – which includes a lived understanding of the theory of knowledge in practice – can be seen as a 'Freiheitsweg', a path of freedom. The focus in all the 'instruments' on the Gestaltungs process not only enables us to see what we see, but to see how we see and how we think. This helps us to liberate ourselves from unrecognized and habitual patterns of thought and from getting drawn unawares into generalized assumptions and positions. This 'Freiheitsweg' is therefore also a road to the self, the other and to 'coming to our senses'.

PART 3 CONCLUSION

PROCESS AND GOAL

Social sculpture is both a process and a goal. Beuys's notion of the 'permanent conference' is a participatory, social workplace for exploring emergent and evolving goals, to which we can direct our energies. It is a picture of human beings coming together – at every level of society, from the family, schools and communities, think tanks and NGOs – to explore local and global scenarios, issues and questions, as well as new forms of exchange.

This emphasis on allowing goals and plans to emerge through an exploratory, imaginal process also has significant implications for art pedagogy and practice-based arts research. It translates into an approach in which we learn to follow images, half-formed thoughts, questions and ideas, unpacking them through doing. This allows both new questions and appropriate forms to emerge. It is another version of the ‘dialogue with myself, dialogue with the world’; with what is happening in here and out there. And so instead of predetermining the outcome – whether in art, by naming the type of end product or medium; in daily life or in our organizations – we go into the unknown. Instead of looking for answers, we embrace and follow the questions. By working this way, listening to ourselves, to the situation and being alert to what is emerging, we get a sense of a possible goal to which we can direct our energies. And the forms we develop become material to once again re-enter. Life and work becomes a creative enquiry because we have a process for listening into our questions, to ourselves, and to what is calling from the future, with confidence instead of fear. The Omnibus for Direct Democracy, the movement towards an Unconditional Basic Income and the University of the Trees: Lab are all instances of the ‘permanent conference’ that foreground the need for new ways of seeing and new modes of engagement. Like their forerunner, Beuys’s Free International University, these movements and frameworks regard the development of new forms of imaginal thinking and working together as essential capacities for both the process toward shaping a just and ecological future, and for this goal.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE FUTURE IS TO ENCOUNTER

In one of his lectures Rudolf Steiner proposed that the sacrament of the future is to encounter. I am consciously using the term sacrament to redefine an approach to engaging with the world and with learning that enables the development of the artist and the ecological citizen in us all. Using this idea that ‘the sacrament is to encounter’, highlights the underlying understandings and phenomenological root methodologies in the field of contemporary social sculpture where ‘imaginal thought’, warmth work, and the ‘aesthetic in contrast to the anaesthetic’ play a central role. All these methodologies have got to do with enabling encounter: encounter of oneself, another and the world. All are ways to develop new organs of perception that enable one to come to oneself, to ‘come to ones senses’ and to develop new forms of eco-social, planetary citizenship. They are based on an understanding of freedom that has to do with connectivity instead of duty, with enlivened responsibility or ‘an ability to respond’.

Driven by an inner necessity that connects me to the world, to others, to myself, I hear, see and feel what I can and need to do. Mobilized internally by such connective awareness, I increase my capacity as a social artist to work with others, developing appropriate ‘forms’, toward the shaping of a humane and viable future. This is the challenge and the potential contribution of an expanded art practice and art pedagogy: it suggests that the capacity to encounter, engage and shape appropriate form is a sacrament.

It is time to hear the voice of the world... and see what it tell us about how we see and think

- We need a manifesto of warmth and possibility
- There can be no empathy if we are anaesthetized
- There can be no care-at-a-distance without the imagination of one-self as another
- It is the aesthetic mode that enables us to live into the sufferings and distortions of all life forms, to encounter them in ones self and to imagine an interconnected world free of unnecessary suffering.
- It is the aesthetic mode that enables the enlivened 'I' to encounter the world out there: that enables one to 'come to ones senses' and, in so doing, makes paradigm shifts possible, in each person, in practice.

This is a manifesto for the epoch of untold human blindness, hubris and damage...

- Let us develop new organs of perception and enlivened thinking that extend human connective capacity!
- Let us develop 'connective thinking and connective practice' on every level and in every sphere, as the most beautiful artwork of all!

There are only two kinds of suffering: necessary suffering and unnecessary suffering. If we commit ourselves to overcoming unnecessary suffering and to becoming co-creators in an interdependent field we need enlivened, connective capacities and a new understanding of the imaginal, aesthetic mode. This is one of the significant missing links, the missing personal dimension of the sustainable development agenda!

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