

1. What is your understanding of the term "social sculpture"?
2. What do you see as the difference between activism and socially engaged art?
3. What role does the term social sculpture play in your teaching program?

Answers by Greg Sholette submitted October 5, 2018

Let me preface my answers with a bit of personal background history that I think has relevance first to Joseph Beuys the cultural figure, and secondly to the notion of social sculpture.

My art education in NYC brought me into contact almost exclusively with Joseph Beuys detractors who populated the intellectual circles that I sought to ally myself with in the early 1980s. Arriving in 1977 onto the rough streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side, the art world I encountered confronted me –a culturally unsophisticated white kid from the grassy suburbs of Philadelphia– with a number of unforeseeable challenges and contradictions. On the one hand, I was situated in the heart of the metropolis that had incubated Jackson Pollock and Eva Hesse, two of my artistic heroes at the time. On the other hand, studying with German artist Hans Haacke at The Cooper Union put me in direct contact with people, movements, and ideas deeply critical of art as both an institution, and the practice of the artist as a romantic vocation or calling. Needless to say, these concerns have since gone on to play a central role within the narrative of contemporary art including especially institutional critique, a practice associated with Haacke in particular, but also notably a concept that appears exactly opposite Beuys practice including the concept of social sculpture. For me, both of these terms – institutional critique and social sculpture– generate a definite that can only be made sense of if situated within the context of a given time and place.

All that said, Beuys was never especially important in any direct way to me, nor was the term social sculpture useful at the time because it always seemed incredibly vague (and still does: I find it curious that in all of my readings no one has ever found a specific citation or particular moment when Beuys actually first articulates this idea, instead we

only read it was developed in 'the 60s and 70s'). But what I did come to appreciate about a decade later was just how important Beuys had been for a younger generation of socially engaged artists in Europe. This was driven home to me in Austria when I met Wolfgang Zinggl and the group *Wochenklausur* in 1998. I suspect that it was Beuys' activism and pedagogy, more than his theories or objects/artifacts that generated this strong inter-generational influence on other artists (and activists) especially in the German and certain English dominant countries in Europe (here I am thinking of Ireland). Which is why I think it is so easy to excavate his impact in the US context. Here his actions were limited in number and scope, and often they appeared enigmatic, mystifying, and even perhaps somewhat belligerent towards the US cultural context (I am thinking of *American Likes Me*, or his protest song looking over the Atlantic at us, *Sonne statt Regan*). That of course is hard to disentangle from the severe and in retrospect not entirely accurate Octoberist critique of Beuys. But for me and many artists in my circle in the 1980s, Beuys emerged into importance when he took time to support The Real Estate Show in early January of 1980, by essentially doing the kind of embodied social action that I later came to understand was so central to his practice in Europe.

1. What is your understanding of the term "social sculpture"?

First, allow me some additional context for this question. I graduated from The Cooper Union in 1979 and was working as a messenger (though with out a bike this soon proved unprofitable). This was the same year Joseph Bueys had his major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum on 5th Avenue, but also the same year that art historian Rosalind Krauss published her influential thesis "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in the eighth volume of the relatively new October magazine, a journal that she had established just three years prior along with film theorist Annette Michelson. Looking back on it one could describe the Expanded Field essay as an attempt to establish structuralism as the dominant hermeneutic for interpreting art after modernism.

The desire to bring rigor to the field of art criticism is clear from this quote “as is true of any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change.” Her language, focus and agenda was categorically opposite Beuys’ notion of social sculpture, and the two ideas seem to fall out along the classic lines of logical Anglo-American thinking (Kraus and October) vs. the more literary approach of continental philosophy (Beuys). Though I am not familiar with any analysis comparing these two prominent figures and their impact on the New York contemporary art scene post-1980, it feels like a vein of investigation that is waiting for further exploration.

Returning to the New York context in which I encountered Beuys and social sculpture, given the specificity of Kraus’s essay, and one might even say its ambition to serve as a disciplinary authority over the field of sculpture, one can only imagine what the author of *Expanded Field* thought when confronting a major retrospective at the Guggenheim museum by the man from the North Rhine region of Germany dressed in felt clothes and felt hat who talked to dead rabbits wearing layers of gold foil on his naked head. This same peculiar man even professed to be inspired by shamanism and such Romantic idealists such as Friedrich Schiller and the decidedly mystical writings of Rudolf Steiner, rather than the analytical logic of Ferdinand de Saussure.

2. What do you see as the difference between activism and socially engaged art?

Beuys’ term social sculpture –and I am not entirely clear it is his term, but rather a phrase linked directly with Rudolf Steiner’s metaphysical theory of anthroposophy– has since of course been taken up by the emerging field of socially engaged art, or social practice art. And yet to date I have not encountered or read any deep analysis of social sculpture in relationship to this new art tendency, at least nothing that seeks to provide either a credible genealogy or theory relating one to the other (and so perhaps this is another spot on the map crying out for more excavation?). But this link between the two concepts is apparent from the very start of Beuys’ public practice “on the street.”

In fact the term social sculpture seems to me most clearly illustrated by a 1972 public performance the artist carried out with a couple of students on May Day in Karl Marx Platz in Berlin. With red-handled brooms the three performers swept the streets clean, thus presumably expanding the field of sculpture well beyond that of Krauss's formulation, pushing into the realm of society itself as a plastic medium. Looked at this way, the notion of social sculpture effortlessly grew to include such real-world social activities as Bueys co-founding of the German Student Party (1967), the German Green Party (1980) and the Free University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (1974).

All of these activities dovetail with the forms of social practice that we now find in almost every corner of the contemporary art world including its biennials, museums, educational institutions and even art fairs. Nevertheless, the political and activist component of Bueys practice is not always present with much social practice art today, a phenomenon that is in danger of being codified into a manageable form of dissent easily supported by and programmed by the mainstream art industry. I have little room here to expand on this other than to cite my own comments on the paradoxes of this situation:

In just a few short years the emerging field of social practice has gained a considerable following thanks to the way it successfully links an ever-expanding definition of visual art to a broad array of disciplines and procedures, including sustainable design, urban studies, environmental research, performance art, and community advocacy, but also such commonplace activities as walking, talking and even cooking.[3] Not just another cultural field or artistic genre, social practice is evolving into a comprehensive sphere of life encompassing over a half dozen academic programs, concentrations, or minors at the graduate and undergraduate levels already dedicated to turning out engaged artists, and still more programs in the pipeline (and full disclosure I am part of this pedagogical trend evolving at the City University of New York). Today, social practice artists are busy planting herb gardens, mending clothes, repairing bicycles, and giving out assorted life-coaching advice free of charge. Groups of professional designers

are improving the “quality and function of the built environment,” in run-down inner-city corridors, categorizing what they do with the avant-gardish rubric.

And yet all of this ferment is also taking place at a moment when basic human rights are considered a state security risk, when sweeping economic restructuring converts the global majority into a precarious surplus, and when a widespread hostility to the very notion of society has become commonplace rhetoric within mainstream politics. In truth, the public sphere, as both concept and reality, lies in tatters. It is as much a casualty of unchecked economic privatization, as it is of anti-government sentiments and failed states. Socially engaged art practice is becoming such an attractive and paradigmatic model for younger artists that it seems to fulfill Fredric Jameson’s proposition that particular historical art forms express a social narrative that paradoxically, “brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction.”[28] Still, by working with human affect and experience as an artistic medium social practice draws directly upon the state of society that we actually find ourselves in today: fragmented and alienated by decades of privatization, monetization, and ultra-deregulation. In the absence of any truly democratic governance, works of socially engaged art seem to be filling in a lost social by enacting community participation and horizontal collaboration, and by seeking to create micro-collectives and intentional communities.

Once upon a time art mobilized its resources to resist becoming kitsch. Now it must avoid becoming a vector for data mining and social asset management. Delirium and resistance prevail today, forming an increasingly indissoluble unit, two cogent responses to current circumstances. But it is this same fever that drives us onwards: a persistent low-grade fever for social justice. What remains paramount is recognizing the actuality of our plight, including its paradoxes, while asking how we can be more than what the market says we are. The terrain thereafter is a delirious terra incognita. It is waiting to be mapped. We must get there first. *

3. What role does the term social sculpture play in your teaching program?

The more I read about and investigate the concept of social sculpture and of Joseph Beuys I intend to bring these ideas deeper into our classroom conversations, while recognizing that Beuys artistic patrimony above all provides the legitimizing groundwork for the growing appeal of socially engaged art and its educational role in the academy, bringing with it just as many new resources as complications. **

* Excerpted from *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, London: Pluto Press, 2017.

** For more on the relationship of Beuys to socially engaged art education see my essay “Dewey, Beuys, Cage and the vulnerable, yet utterly unremarkable heresy of Socially Engaged Art Education (SEAE),” in the book *Art as Social Action. An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art*, edited by Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass and Social Practice Queens, Allworth Press, 2018.