

also demonstrates the marriage of her aesthetic interests with her political concerns, a practice that is deeply connected to the concept of social sculpture.

While Beuys may not have been the immediate inspiration for Ukeles's project—nor for Labowitz, Lacy, or Cypis—her work nonetheless resonates with the concept of social sculpture in several key ways, demonstrating the pervasiveness of Beuys's legacy in socially engaged practice in the United States. Despite the initial widespread resistance to his persona in the 1970s, Beuys echoed the core belief of many second-wave feminist artists in the revolutionary potential of art. Therefore, it is unsurprising that some later returned to social sculpture as they conceptualized their own multilayered practice, particularly as they sought ways to combine their feminist ideals with other causes, such as environmentalism and homelessness, and more public outlets for their artwork. Beuys not only provided a genus for such work with the term "social sculpture," but alongside other central figures in the United States, gave them tools for engaging diverse publics about a range of issues. And although his own projects of social sculpture only scratched the surface of feminist concerns, a comparison between his work and US feminist art practice nonetheless permits us to understand the ways artists have attempted to enact social change by connecting personal experience to larger social issues.

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Attraction and Repulsion: An American Perception of Beuys

Daniel Joseph Martinez
Interviewed by Cara Jordan

Cara Jordan: You and I have talked a lot about Beuys's legacy in the United States. You're one of the few people that I've encountered in the US who can speak about him accurately. I was wondering, as an American artist, how did you first hear about Beuys?

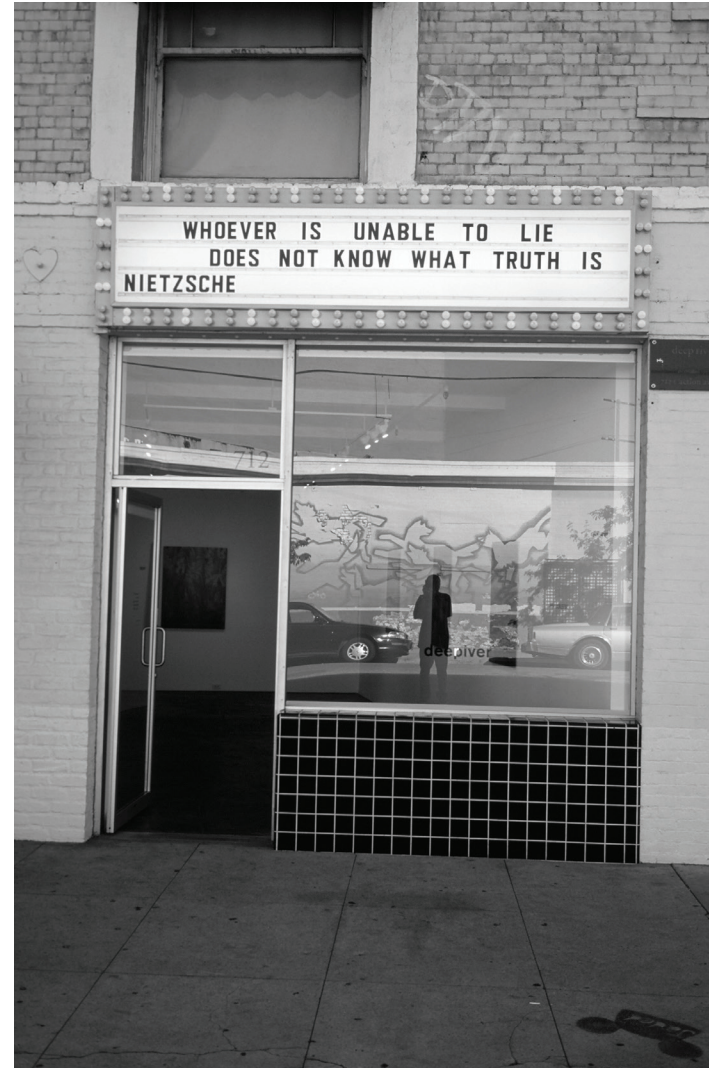
Daniel Joseph Martinez: My relationship to Beuys is different from most other American artists because I didn't learn about Beuys through a book. I learned about Beuys through timing and the world, you might say. I finished school at [Cal Arts](#) in 1979. The next year I ended up being an assistant for Klaus Rinke, who was one of Beuys's proteges. Rinke taught me for two years. He taught me directly what Beuys had taught him, albeit his own interpretation of it. Rinke was an adaption of Beuys, because Beuys was of the war generation and Rinke was the postwar generation. He was trying to come out from underneath what had happened in Germany during the war. That wore heavily on the next generation, who, I

would argue, rightfully put up a wall between themselves and the war that came before them. They had nothing to do with it, right? My processing of Beuys comes from that line of thinking and then later comes through books, like *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man*. Mine is a completely different method of absorption and intellectual process in actually thinking through what it might mean here in the United States, in particular in Los Angeles.

CJ: Beuys is so often cited within the social practice community these days. There are now a number of artists who claim him as a precedent in their work, like for example Rick Lowe or Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Do you think Beuys had an impact here at all?

DJM: As far as I'm aware, which could be wrong, there's no evidence that there's a legacy of Beuys in the United States. I guess I would disagree with your idea that he has a real presence here. But I guess in context, I would say that a project like Deep River [an exhibition space DJM cofounded in downtown Los Angeles in 1997] had the tenets of Beuys in it. Or I would say that my model of teaching is inherited from Beuys. I know more about Beuys in that respect because my relationship to Beuys is direct. I've never met anyone in this country, ever, that can talk about Beuys. They've read it in a book and then they've tried to imagine what it means.

CJ: The only other artist I know of who can claim a direct relationship with him is Leslie Labowitz, who studied at the Düsseldorf Academy in the early 1970s. But I agree with you that for the most part artists here only know him from texts—which is



Deep River, 1998. Photo courtesy Daniel Joseph Martinez.

a presence, but in a different way. Rick Lowe is a good example of that. He was inspired by reading Beuys's lectures in *Energy Plan for the Western Man*.

Do you see any connection between what Beuys did and social practice in a broader sense?

DJM: I think they're completely different phenomena. Social practice in this country is, "I'm going to bake some cookies on the street corner," or "My toe got ran over and I had to get an operation and I want everyone to think about my toe." I'm somewhat trivializing ~~the subjects that that~~ people want to talk about, but the point is that I just don't care about them. The subject is so small and so irrelevant most of the time, and even if they are larger subjects, they don't dig deep enough to make a difference. There is no single subject in Beuys's work in the sense that they're not small topics, they're meta-topics.

CJ: You make an interesting point. These projects are hyper-localized. Beuys's work was never localized in the way that social practice projects are today. His ideas were universal. That's a big difference between what Beuys did in Germany and US social practice.

DJM: That's right. He was looking at the human species. He was looking at evolutionary and intellectual development. He was looking at the problems of the political structure and how the entire thing could be augmented. He was looking at shifts in thinking, culturally, politically, socially, economically. These were the biggest topics of the twentieth century, and he decided to address them head-on. It's not about the specificity of individuals in social practice, which tends to be championed by academics like Grant Kester. For social practice artists, it's about the individual as opposed to the species or the globe.

When Beuys talked about the environment, he was talking about the earth as an organism. He was talking

about the planet. He was *not* talking about what happened on your street corner or in your garden.

CJ: The other distinction between Beuys and social practice in the US revolves around the question of how an artist addresses social problems. There have been some writers—like Ben Davis, for example—who have written off social practice because it merely makes people feel better about the negative aspects of society without really changing them. How do you think this differs from what Beuys did?

DJM: Beuys was not about helping people. He was not about building community. Beuys was only thinking about dismantling the existing structures and systems that he saw that were completely destroying the world around him and he was then trying to rethink how those structures could fix it, or else he tried to build new ones for an imagined world that we don't yet live in. His entire life was dedicated to doing just that through very complicated artworks. Most artworks in social practice are not exercises in thinking.

CJ: It's also interesting to think about how Beuys related to the therapeutic versus today's social practice artists. Because he was concerned with healing, but only when it was directed at society at large—the social organism.

DJM: Today, everybody wants to go out and help somebody, especially the disenfranchised. It's almost insulting that this is seen as being political. The thing is that you can't have politics without risk.

You have to be willing to risk something. So let's return that to Beuys.

Beuys was very clever. He took essentially a very conservative institution, the Düsseldorf Art Academy, which had a model of teaching that supported what was inherited and what already existed. Beuys goes in there and flips the power position. He says, "I'm going to disempower my own position and empower the students' position." He levels out the exchange. As he changes the calculus of that, he then starts inputting ideas that have to do with both cultural and social awareness, not only for those individuals inside of Germany but the awareness that Germany existed within Europe and Europe exists within Western civilization, and what those relationships mean on a larger level. So he immediately gets them to think locally but also teaches them to counter the local with something that is global. And he puts the theory down in such a way, through performance and the artworks, that the students start to see the imminent possibility in that kind of shift. And that's why people were attracted to him and that's why they followed him around.

So Beuys starts an educational institution because it's the smartest place to start. He uses students to create a student movement, similar to what happened in Paris at the Sorbonne. You go inside the educational institution and you get students to see the potential in ideas that are active, where they see that there's a need to intervene, to change something. But that required a risk. So when the institution figured out what Beuys was doing, they fired him. When, in May '68, students all over the world saw what was happening, they had to risk their lives and start riots, get put in jail, killed, and everything else that happened as a consequence of their politics. We live in a country where there's no

consequences for people who claim they have politics. They can just claim it without repercussion.

That's why Beuys started pedagogically, and also why he was very clairvoyant in understanding that there was no difference between his activism in empowering students and his activism in very complex artworks. That's why there's no wall between him as a teacher and him as an artist; they're the same thing. Just different modes of representation.

CJ: At least in art historical writing, his political activism and his artwork are seen as separate. Obviously, you know that he thought about these things as one and the same. Art equals politics. Art equals capital. And I think that's also a big difference between Beuys and American artists—his concept of politics is a lot different from that of American artists in the '60s and '70s. American artists used art as a means to support one political idea, like feminism or civil rights. And Beuys encompassed all of those ideas within his project of art. The total of work of art.

DJM: That's right. Here in the United States, we love labeling. Here, we are fractionalized and tribalized. But you can't have fifty different movements happening simultaneously and expect that to evoke change. The mass of political capital doesn't move forward like that. If you're going to invoke change here, there's going to be a consequence. That's why Beuys never focused on any one topic, and instead he used grand themes. He encompassed everything in every work. Whether he was drawing on a chalkboard, painting himself gold with a rabbit, making the honey sculpture, or planting oak trees. They all did the same thing but with

different amounts of ingredients. Sometimes the educational component was the major component, other times a political component or an aesthetic component was the major component. They are triangulated.

Beuys also never put designations on himself. He was an artist. He was a primary source. Everything else is secondary. Beuys would have said, "If I'm the primary source, then you need to become a primary source also." He didn't say, "I'm a social practice artist. I'm making social sculpture." The labels are what kill people. Why not just be an artist and make stuff and see how that gets translated or see what the efforts result in?

CJ: In November 2017, I saw you give a talk on Beuys at the Dia Art Foundation, which is one of the biggest repositories of Beuys's work in the US. They have several of his installations in their space in Beacon, New York, and have maintained a few dozen of his trees and stone columns from *7,000 Oaks* in New York City since the late 1980s. I find it interesting that you're the first artist to speak about Beuys there in a very long time, and that you spoke for so long (three hours). It was almost a performance in itself.

DJM: With that talk, I didn't intend to make a commentary about Beuys, as some people were expecting. Instead, I wanted to overwhelm them with the size of his project. I wanted them to realize the immensity of all he did in his lifetime. He produced more in one artist's lifetime than one hundred artists can do, which is why I tried to make it be overwhelming so that they could understand. The question that everybody should have left with was how could one person have done all that?

I was talking to a woman there about the *7,000 Oaks* trees in Chelsea. And she says, "It's so great, I get to live with Beuys every day." And I thought to myself, "You're just joking, right? Those little chunks of stone running up and down the street? That's your relationship to Beuys?" I didn't want to insult her by saying that that has nothing to do with Beuys. That's just an object that Dia parked outside.

CJ: I also find it interesting that you dealt with the Nazi aspect head on. Right now, it's all over the news again in Germany. Was he or wasn't he? Many people still find it hard to get past this question.

DJM: Well, you have to deal with the Nazi thing. There's no way around it. But I'm less worried about him being a Nazi than I am about the fact that he is dismissed. He's just dismissed because of it.

CJ: He has been looked over for a long time in the US because of that. But I think there are other reasons, as well. For example, there are a number of artists—many feminists, for example—who objected to his persona.

But I see a lot of similarities between what feminist artists have been trying to do in this country for decades—revolutionize society through art. I also see Beuys becoming more and more relevant to our situation today, especially with the polarization of politics. A lot of the issues that come up today among the liberals are encompassed by the term "social sculpture," or his theory on art. I wonder what might be the best tactic to take to make that relevance known or more widely accepted for artists and activists.

DJM: I actually think it's not necessary to make his ideas more widely known. It's like philosophy. Beuys and Socrates have more in common than most people might recognize. Socrates was considered so dangerous, his ideas were so volatile, that the Greeks murdered him. But if you ask somebody about Socrates today, they don't know what you're talking about. They don't read Socrates. Only a rare few people will be interested in the relationship of Socrates and Plato, and that gets them to the relationship between Plato and Diogenes, and so on. There's a constellation of thinking.

Let's imagine that Beuys is very similar. Beuys was so dangerous that people were afraid of him. So maybe we should really be interested in the constellation instead of the man. My constellation for Beuys includes Duchamp, Beuys, and Warhol. In my opinion, those are the three most important artists in the twentieth century. And all three of them support each other in the manifestation of different kinds of ideas. Duchamp ushers in conceptualism. Beuys offers an idea of a social practice that is something unique that is tethered to the object itself. And Warhol then predicts the idea of populism in art. But Duchamp and Warhol offer something that Beuys doesn't: they frame well as a commodity. All the other precedents in our history frame well as a commodity. So, therefore, the discourse that gets wrapped around it is always tethered to the auction house, the market, and secondary sales. And at least in those areas, Beuys doesn't do so well.

Curating Social Practice and the Influence of John Dewey

Mary Jane Jacob
Interviewed by Cara Jordan

Cara Jordan: As a curator whose work experience spans from established institutions like the MCA in Chicago and in Los Angeles to city-wide exhibitions of site-specific public art—perhaps most famously the pioneering exhibition of socially engaged art *Culture in Action* in Chicago in 1991–94—you have worked with numerous artists to expand the boundaries of art practice to include direct social engagement with audiences and to challenge social structures. The term “social sculpture” has often been used to describe the works that have come from such interactions. What is your understanding of this term?

Mary Jane Jacob: In my experience, this term remains the province of Beuys. While it was floated in the late twentieth century as a defining genre for the burgeoning activity of artists seeking to affect social conditions and work outside the institutions of art—thus in life and with citizens or communities—it