

Beuys Legacy- Aviva Rahmani

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"...an enlarged understanding of art could work and could break through the borders of isolation which the present culture stands in..." -Joseph Beuys 1974 Nova Scotia

How does an artist infiltrate the culture and change it? Joseph Beuys is a “permitter” in art history: one who comes first. His ideas were forged in a period of psychological and political deconstruction that ushered in semiotics.



Denial and exclusion are virulent forms of the isolation Beuys refers to. When I brought the subject matter of rape into my practice in 1969¹, as Director and founder of the American Ritual Theatre, I was responding to international winds that blew Beuys center stage in the Art World. My response was to address the dark side of sexual power, as yet relatively unexplored in the art world. Beuys facilitated entree for my early work in experimental social performative modeling as part of my art practice. He was the great articulator of the artistic generation ahead of me, making the connection between art and contemporary politics. In that early work, I made the connection between creativity, mental illness and socio-politics.

Predeceased by Artaud and Grotowski in theatre, who inspired me at the beginning of my career, Beuys' shamanistic vision complimented the "mundane" focus of the father of Happenings, Allan Kaprow, who later became my mentor. Both saw roles for the world as witness and performative activator. A serious response to Beuys' work "locates" the trajectory of my own career. My departure, before encountering either artist, was in making the connection between feminist issues of abuse and environmental abuse.

While preparing this essay, I asked Allan Kaprow briefly about his own relationship to Beuys, which Kaprow described as socially distant. Superficially, there is a sharp distinction between Beuys' "shamanistic" vision and Kaprow's, who refers to his own work "as the art of everyday

¹ "The Meat Piece" was a series of films produced and presented by the artist, abstracting rape, used in performance work presented in the late sixties and early seventies about rape and domestic violence. It was further developed as a motif as part of "Ablutions", a collaborative performance with Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy and Sandi Orgel about rape in 1972. "The Meat Piece" was five minutes of tight framing of hands manipulating a beef heart on a sandy beach.

life”, deliberately choosing the word “Happenings”, in the fifties, to reject the language and conventions of other art forms. This contrast between Beuys and Kaprow actually reveals a shared implicit interest in the spiritual. The ritualisms in Kaprow’s work can be construed as religious invocations. Kaprow’s work influenced the internal context of my work but it was Beuys’s politicized articulation of context that determined my reception in the art world.

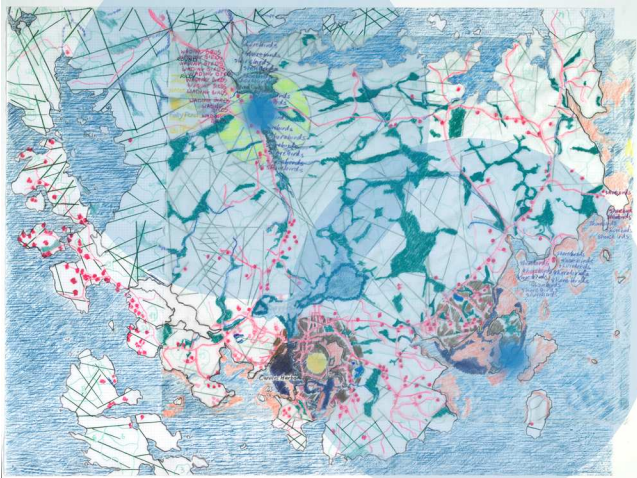
The spiritual in my own work is implicit in my interest in healing strategies. My pursuit of those strategies in my practice parallels their interest in the artist as catalyst.

Beuys' concern with the politics of change continues to inform the context of my work as an ecological artist concerned with transformation, grounded in scientific and intuitive research and collaboration. Those expressions in my work are multi-disciplinary, as in *Ghost Nets*, which restored a town dump into flourishing wetlands from 1990-2000².



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² The former Vinalhaven Island town dump had buried a small estuary in a Class A Migratory Bird Fly Zone. *Ghost Nets* restored the uplands riparian zone and daylighted the wetlands with bioengineering. This restoration re-connected seventy acres of fragmented open land. It existed as a metaphor for the artists own experience of healing from experiences of abuse and physical illness. www.ghostnets.com.



Working with teams to restore environmentally degraded areas³, I draw upon a range of creative skills, including vocalizing with found sound in the environment, painting and sculpture that envisions GIS (Geographical Information System) relationships and working with scientists on experimental designs for biological modeling. This is all in the service of a green agenda, as Beuys dedicated himself to creating the Green Party. Beuys was one of the first figures to make the action of declaration, as in the establishment of the Green Party, a performative audience activation.

Ghost Nets, took the found symbol of the miles long fishing drift nets, which once lost, continue to drift, stripmining sea life for seven years. I saw that metaphor mirrored in human behavior, making connections between experiences of abuse and environmental degradation. *The Cities and Oceans of If* project begun in 2000, built upon the “Ghost Nets” model. Works in progress in this series include restoration target locations in Germany, England and sites in the

³ Detail of 2002 interpretation of GIS work indicating points of landscape restoration and their cumulative wildlife impact from *Blue Rocks* and *Ghost Nets*. Colored pencil on tracing paper 18”x 24” 2002

United States. Each site is designed to trigger large landscape effects.



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Degradation and Transformation, in 2002, for the “Ecovention⁴” show at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio alludes to how global fishery crashes and loss of wetlands are similes for the “ultimate (raped) cunt”. The wetlands as “cunt” refers to the degradation of fertility in our present culture, reflected in both social and environmental policies. That reference invokes how Beuys saw the body politic as sculptural entity.

In St. Louis, for “Confluence”, designed in 2001, poetic text and romantic visuals mysteriously appear as part of the landscape restoration design. The proposed site is the train station for the University of Missouri at St Louis. Approaching and leaving the station by train,

⁴ In landlocked Cincinnati, the artist tracked the centuries old history of American fisheries, one of discovering, exploiting and ultimately sequentially destroying fish species. The data was overlaid upon a map that connected the waters of the Gulf of Maine, the St. Lawrence river to the Great Lakes and ultimately the third largest watershed in the world, where mid-Westerners consume those same fish. In a foregrounded iron bed, fishing nets are a metaphor for familiar habits that kill us: *Ghost Nets*.

viewers would not only see a color range created by indigenous vegetation but in the stations before and after that sight, they would pass 6'x4' duratrans poster installations of what the site may look like in thirty years. Each of those graphics includes only one of four words: "Stay", "Wait", "Look" or "Listen".



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In *Blue Rocks*, a site specific sculptural event for Vinalhaven Island, attention was brought to a

local problem with the slightest touch on the visual landscape.⁵ The eventual result was a major restoration of a degraded marsh, the second of two major restoration works on the island. The first being *Ghost Nets*, which restored a former dump site (www.ghostnets.com)⁶.

More than thirty years after Beuys' seminal writings I find myself even more concerned with the isolations that divide our global culture while that same culture dissolves legitimate separations. Art can uniquely discern and reveal subtle distinctions between isolation and separation. Beuys' "enlarged understanding of art" is a full blown reality in my practice, allowing me to stand amongst those artists striving to communicate across borders and challenge isolation.

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⁵ 80 Boulders, on either side of the road and along the banks of the water, were painted with a slurry of biodegradable ultramarine blue pigment and buttermilk to grow mosses. The color reflected the sky and the water. The action drew controversial attention to the degraded causeway in a keystone biological hot spot but resulted in a USDA investment of \$350,000. to restore 26 acres of wetlands. 2002

⁶ *Ghost Nets* site detail of restored estuary May 2008