A RESEARCH PROJECT IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL SCULPTURE

4 years ago, Axel Ewald embarked on a PhD research project in the field of Social Sculpture at Oxford Brookes University. This research project enabled him to amalgamate and further develop his experiences as an environmental sculptor and as a workshop facilitator of Goethean nature studies. In this article he shares some of his insights from his literary and practical research.

THE EXTINCTION OF EXPERIENCE - GOETHE, BEUYS AND SOCIAL SCULPTURE

"Natural life is the nourishing soil of the soul"
C.G Jung[1]

Retrieving the memories of our childhood, we can retrace how our own soul has been nourished by participating in the life of natural landscapes. But as many of us have experienced, the magic landscapes of our childhood have disappeared. And as has happened to our private childhood paradise, all over today's world natural landscapes, and with them whole ecosystems with thousands of species have become extinct. They have been replaced by industry, housing developments, roads or the ecological wastelands of agro-industry.

But not only landscapes and species have become extinct. Naturalist Robert M. Pyle coined the phrase 'extinction of experience'. Pyle believed *"that one of the greatest causes of the ecological crisis is the state of personal alienation from nature … We lack a widespread sense of intimacy with the living world … this breeds apathy toward environmental concerns and, inevitably, further degradation of the common habitat"* [2]. Human beings have lost touch with the living fabric of places and landscapes as the "nourishing soil" of the inner landscape of their souls. Natural landscape, which once was animated with Gods and nature beings, has become 'soulless' and the intimate parallel relationship between the inner landscape of the soul and the outer landscape of nature, has been renegaded to the realm of mere poetic fantasy.

A growing number of authors has come to the conclusion that at the roots of this alienation lies the reductionist, atomizing paradigm of mechanistic Newtonian science. Living organisms are explained as being

[1] Jung, C. G. and Sabini, M. (2002) *The earth has a soul: the nature writings of C.G. Jung.* Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books.

[2] Pyle, R. M. (2011) *Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland.* Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.

made up of ever smaller and smaller units, which are thought of as isolated, independent, interchangeable and related to each other by a set of mere mechanistic laws. Physicist David Bohm points to the implications of this paradigm of fragmentation: *"…our fragmentary form of thought is leading to … a widespread range of crises, social, political, economic, ecological, psychological, etc., in the individual and in society as a whole."* [3]
As a result, the life forms that make up the fabric of natural landscapes have been turned into exploitable 'natural resources', fallen victim to the greed, apathy and lack of understanding of human beings, who have lost any sense of wonder, respect, enchantment or awe in front of natural phenomena. Trees and landscapes have become pawns in political dispute, as has frequently happened in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
But important discoveries in the realm of science in the course of the twentieth century have suggested an alternative conception of reality: a dynamic web of interrelated events from which human consciousness can no longer be meaningfully detached. David Bohm points out that *"relativity and quantum theory agree, in that they both imply the need to look on the world as an undivided whole, in which all parts of the universe, including the observer and his instruments, merge and unite in one totality".* [4]
Just when analytical Newtonian science was about to conquer western scientific consciousness, German poet and nature researcher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduced a new approach to the study of nature, the significance of which does not lie in any of his particular findings or discoveries but rather in the methodology, in his particular way of looking at nature. Goethe's methodology is based on a phenomenological approach with an emphasis on deepened direct, first-hand, sensory experience. With this, Goethe is a direct precursor to the modern phenomenological movement, with which he shares the aim of gaining access "to the things themselves"[5] The following quotation by Maurice Merlau-Ponty, one of the leading exponents of modern phenomenology, eloquently epitomizes this approach:

> *"As I contemplate the blue of the sky … I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me', I am the sky itself …"* [6]

The phenomenological method avoids the detachment created by isolated experiments, scientific apparatuses, intellectual models and hypotheses thought out 'about the thing' and brings us 'back to our senses', thus makes scientific knowing accessible to every human being. Instead of relying on an intellectual assessment of measurable data, Goethean phenomenology involves a person's entire spectrum of sensory and inner faculties, including "*the depth of intuitive feeling … mobile and yearning imagination, affectionate*

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[3] Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and the implicate order.* London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983.

[4] ibid

[5] as stated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of modern phenomenology. Husserl influenced, among others, the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961)

[6] Merleau-Ponty, M. and Landes, D. A. (2012) *Phenomenology of perception.* London: Routledge.

pleasure of the sensuous …." [7]. Goethe was not interested in causality. He realized that what holds together a living organism is a complicated web of relationships, a macroscopic wholeness. He claimed that if we remain within the phenomenal domain, abstain from speculative causal explanations and describe in profound detail this web of relationships, the phenomena will speak and reveal themselves to us as interrelated embodiments of the overriding whole - 'the idea'.

The influential German artist and social activist Joseph Beuys (1924 – 1986) as a young man immersed himself into the writings of German Idealism, among them the scientific writings of Goethe. During the 70ies he inaugurated several ecological protest actions and projects and in 1980 he was instrumental in the creation of the 'Green Party' in Germany, standing as their candidate for the European Parliament. But beyond his outer social and ecological activism he understood that one of the causes for our society's lack of comprehension of living nature lies in what he considered as the 'dead' nature of abstract, analytical thinking and the narrow specialization of conventional science. He promoted an enlivened and more intuitive mode of thinking, which would nevertheless be based on the sound phenomenological basis of 'seeing things as they are'. With this, Beuys explicitly subscribed to Goethe's phenomenological method, which attributes utmost importance to the active, inner participation of the observer and stresses the vital interdependence between the interior world of human beings and the processes in outer nature. *"Environmental pollution advances parallel with a pollution of the world within us",* Beuys, together with German writer Heinrich Böll, wrote in 1972 [8]. The development of a new, enlivened thinking was to be combined with what he often referred to as the 'scratching of the imagination'. To further these objectives, he expanded the conventional concept of art to include 'Social Sculpture', which compasses the whole range of creative human activities, including thinking. Far from being reserved for a few privileged and gifted individuals, creativity, in Beuys's vision, is a core faculty of the free and self-conscious human being. This is the meaning of his claim that *"every human being is an artist."* 'Social Sculpture', as a participatory form-giving activity, including the

fig.1 - Beuys working on his last project '7000 Oaks', at the 1982 'Documenta 7' exhibition, which included the planting of 7000 oak trees, each accompanied by a basalt stone, throughout the city of Kassel. The project was realized with the help of thousands of volunteers and completed in 1987, a year after Beuys's death

[7] Goethe, J. W. v. (1995) *Scientific Studies.* (12 vols). Princeton: Princeton University Press. Goethe's Collected Works.

[8] Beuys, J. and Böll, H. (1972): Manifesto for the Foundation of the Free International School for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research

shaping of 'invisible materials', would provide all citizens with an arena for the creation of an *'ecological total work of art',* transforming old social and economic structures into *a 'social organism as a work of art'.*

Professsor Shelley Sacks, who is the mentor of my PhD project, studied with Joseph Beuys in the 1970ies. Having been born into a Jewish family in South Africa, she became very active in the anti-apartheid movement. In the 90ies she moved to the UK and eventually founded the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University. In her teaching and in her artistic practice, she has further developed Beuys' vision of Social Sculpture, both conceptually and practically, including impulses from a variety of other sources, including Goethean phenomenology, Anthroposophy, experiential and meditative practices, deep ecology and social activism, to name just a few. In her work, she has increasingly emphasised the possible and necessary application of social sculpture principles for educational, activist and community-based imaginative creation work with the aim of fostering 'ecological citizenship'.

'RECLAIMING THE SOUL OF LANDSCAPE AND RECLAIMING LANDSCAPE FOR THE SOUL'

My PhD research project, entitled 'Reclaiming the soul of landscape and reclaiming landscape for the soul', is based on the assumption that our current ecological crisis offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the way we look at the natural resources of our planet. Changing the paradigms that govern our relationship to nature requires fundamental transformations of our inner attitudes and mind-sets. The intention of my research project is to develop arenas for an imaginative and connective engagement with the natural landscape, in which participants are encouraged to use their 'whole human being' in order to experience the 'wholeness' of landscape. The research focuses on the creation and probing of workshop processes that are designed to help participants to develop a new sensitivity for the life and the soul of landscape and to nurture an empathic relationship with the life forms of nature. In the course of the current academic year I am testing three workshop processes, with participants in Israel, England and Germany. Each of the three processes has a slightly different emphasis. Each workshop is made up of a number of practices, which include deepened observation, techniques of embodiment, movement, imagination and memory work, drawing, map-making, creation of sculptural interventions, sharing and other participatory practices.

The research methodology is based on Goethean phenomenology, which is modified and extended by including a social sculpture perspective. While traditional Goethean practice has its main focus on **content**, for instant learning about 'plant development', my workshop processes focus on an **exploration of our relationship to nature** and the unravelling of the intimate parallel relationship between the outer landscape and the inner landscape of the soul. Therefore, instead of disqualifying participants' previous experiences

with nature as merely subjective and precluding any objective, unprejudiced approach to landscape, my workshop practices acknowledge the importance of memories, especially those from our childhood, as a precious source for the study of our relationship to landscapes and places. Participants are invited to share such memories as part of the workshop process.

Traditionally, Goethean practice as well as conventional science have heavily relied on the visual sense as their prime access to the world of natural phenomena. Many years of experience as a teacher of the art of sculpture have granted me some insights into the limitations of our visual sense, including its superficial seductiveness, its inherent detachment of what is observed and its inclination to judgmental discernment. My workshop practices therefore are designed to encourage a widened and deepened use of **all our senses**, including the use of our whole body as a sense organ. For example, lying prostate on the ground and exposing ourselves, with senses wide open, to the textures, smells and sounds of the earth, can grant us profound insights about the mysterious life world under my unknowing feet.

fig.2 - full exposure to the earth

Looking at a group of trees in the landscape from a safe distance, our sense of sight presents us with a picture of objects in space. We can draw these inert objects as two-dimensional shapes, clearly separated from the surrounding space. Slowly walking towards one of these trees, we begin to experience the tree as a complex and highly differentiated three-dimensional organism. We can gradually overcome our initial detachment, enter the tree's 'inner space', follow with our 'sense of movement' the path from the roots through the trunk into one of its branches and until the outermost periphery and inwardly rebuild the way it has grown into space. We can get 'in touch' with the tree by exploring its bark and other parts through our sense of touch and express our growing affinity with the tree by embracing its trunk. And, eventually, we can stand in the shadow of its mighty crown and try to 'identify ourselves' with the tree, 'become' the tree, look at the world 'through the eyes of the tree'. If we then venture to make another drawing, not any more looking at

fig. 3 - 'getting into touch' with a tree

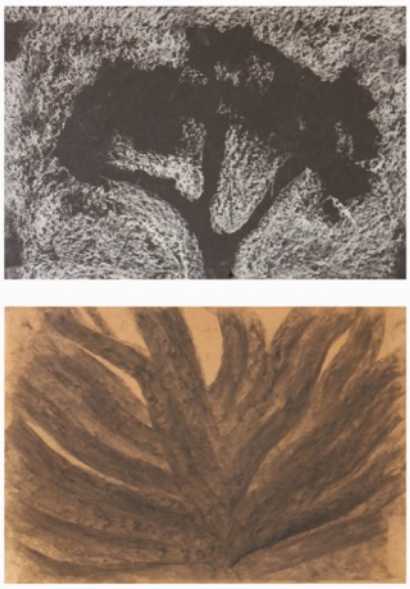

fig.4 - drawing a tree from outside-in and from inside-out

the tree from the outside as a detached observer, but rather by looking at what the tree has become in our soul, this drawing will be of a very different nature compared to the first one; it will have been drawn 'from inside out' rather than 'from outside in'; and it will bear evidence of our growing kinship with the tree.

Further practices include the exploration of life processes and 'social relationships' in nature. At close examination, the branch tip of a tree can surprise us with its co-existence of dying and coming into life, the simultaneity of past, present and future. Digging with our bare hands into the layers of rotting leaves under the same tree exposes an unexpected world, alive with tiny creatures and bearing further evidence of the regenerative life cycles of nature. Looking at the way a tree relates to its surroundings can reveal a whole web of subtle mutual relationships and betray trees as 'social beings' - quite in contrast to the accepted Darwinist paradigm of the 'survival of the strongest'. Interestingly, this observation has been supported by recent scientific findings concerning the ability of trees to communicate with each other via their inter-connected root systems and with the help of extensive systems of fungi (the 'wood-wide web') and their efforts to support weaker members of their community.[9] Such first-hand experiences of what Goethe called the 'open secrets' of nature can arouse in the unsuspecting participant feelings of wonder and awe - feelings that can become gateposts on the path towards a deeper appreciation of life in nature.

As part of the workshop processes, participants are given the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with an individually chosen tree or place in the landscape. As a conclusion of this process of familiarization and as a gesture of acknowledgment of their non-human partner, participants are encouraged to create an artistic gesture. This can be in the form of a drawing, a poem, a choreographed movement or a sculptural installation, made of the materials of the place.

In the sharing sessions, which form important part of the workshop processes, participants raise wider questions concerning their place in nature, their affinity and inter-connectedness with landscape and its life forms, but also about what differentiates our lives

fig.5 - conversation with a tree

[9] Wohlleben, P. (2016). The Secret Life of Trees, Greystone Books, Vancouver, BC

and biographies from that of nature's beings. In addition to the growing sensitivity for and appreciation of nature, faculties of empathic identification can be developed. It is envisaged that the development of these faculties can nurture participants' responsiveness and sense of 'response-ability' in their relationship to nature. I am here following Prof. Shelley Sacks, who points out that the word 'responsibility' in the English language emphasizes our **ability to respond** – rather than defining responsibility as an outer moral imperative. Sometimes participants also relate how the setup of the workshop enabled them to experience landscape and places through the eyes of all the other participants. This provided them with fascinating and varied insights about the objects of the exploration as well as about the individual perspectives, the special gifts and sensitivities of each of the people involved. My research attempts to probe the whole widths of such responses, questions and insights of participants in relation to the workshops objective – creating an arena for transformative change in participants' relationship to nature, to the earth and her resources, to themselves and to each other.

> *"Two men were arguing over a piece of land. Each of them claimed it as his property. Eventually the two men turned to Nasreddin, who was known for his wisdom. Nasreddin listened attentively to the arguments of the two. He then kneeled down and put his ear to the earth. 'What are you doing?" inquired the two. 'I am listening to the earth. She says that the earth does not belong to either of you; rather that you belong to her.'* [10]

[10] This is one of the many stories attributed to Nasreddin Hodja, the legendary Turkish Sufi trickster. This story was related to me by my storytelling wife, Ephrat.