

Beyond Sensationalism: Social Sculpture - An Expanded Concept of Art

Prof. Richard Demarco OBE

For more than forty years Richard Demarco has been a central force in the international art world, bringing experimental artists and thinkers together and opening their work up to new audiences across countries and cultures. Joseph Beuys was one of the artists that Demarco worked with closely and introduced to the English speaking world. Richard Demarco is Emeritus Professor of European Cultural Studies, Kingston University, UK

Shelley Sacks has added a new dimension to the visual arts in Britain, both through her own social sculpture projects, like Exchange Values, and, as Head of Art at Oxford Brookes University, in establishing the first ever centre for the research and study of 'social sculpture' - the [Social Sculpture Research Unit](#). In this she has honoured the life and work of Joseph Beuys, which was focused on his concept of 'social sculpture' in its many and varied manifestations, and in which his roles as teacher and artist were also intertwined.

Joseph Beuys regarded 'social sculpture' as a way to reshape and restructure society, according to the understanding that 'every human being is an artist' and by utilizing the healing and transformative powers of art in the lives of individuals and in the lives of communities, large and small. In the particular case of the sculpture that Joseph Beuys entitled 7000 Oaks, he embodied this concept on a gigantic scale, incorporating a life-cycle of 700 years (the life time of an oak tree), that would be bound to affect the lives of many generations, especially in the city of Kassel (the German city associated with the Documenta, the world's most important exhibition of contemporary art), where the majority of the oaks were planted.

Shelley Sacks is like Joseph Beuys in that her work as a teacher is fused with her work as an artist. Proof positive is found in her extraordinary project, Exchange Values: Images of Invisible Lives.

This work is the result of exhaustive research and intensive engagement with West Indian banana producers and the World Trade rules and restrictions that regulate their lives. Equally profound is the slow and complex process impregnating this work with the stuff and substance of bananas, and the way the human voices fill the space - representing not only the threatened small producers of the Windward Islands, but the millions of humans beings who, though invisible and powerless, are nevertheless involved in producing for one another.

The installation also makes a telling aesthetic impact. It is in every sense exquisitely beautiful and at the same time utterly dramatic without having recourse to the current fashion for sensationalism. The dark toned organic carpet of skin evokes the use that Joseph Beuys made of materials, most especially of plant forms in his work.

The whole project is an excellent example of social sculpture - combining transformative social process (her re-envisioning work with the producers in the Windward Islands), connective aesthetics (reconnecting us with the world around us through the aesthetic form of the installation), and a 'permanent conference' (discussions about our role as creative beings and positive forms of globalization, through the social sculpture forums that take place alongside the installation).

Exchange Values reveals the deep compassionate nature of a remarkable artistic endeavor. Shelley Sacks has created a work that deserves to be toured the world over, not only for the inspirational contribution it has to make, but as a rebuttal to the heresy of a great deal of contemporary art practice that furthers our disconnection with the world around us.