

The University of the Trees

A social sculpture for Haldon Forest, Exeter and the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World

"The sound of the trees suffering is audible. But we need to develop new organs of perception so that we can hear this sound in the world, recognise what it means and shape new social forms that do not continue this great suffering of all nature." (From a discussion with Beuys in 1980). Beuys says something very similar in his conversation with Friedhelm Menekes in 'Beuys on Christ'.

"At the heart of today's ecological crisis lies a terrible failure to understand the essence of our relationship with the natural world. One can of course address that failure rationally and empirically; but the arts (particularly the visual arts) offer different insights into that relationship, and touch people in ways that conventional education and advocacy can rarely do." Jonathon Porritt, Director, Forum for the Future, UK.

"If the aesthetic is seen in contrast to the anaesthetic – or numbness, it can be understood more correctly as 'enlivened being'. Reclaiming the aesthetic in this way enables us to understand the link between the aesthetic and responsibility: response-ability not as a moral imperative, but as the ability to respond." (Shelley Sacks, Summit on Culture and Development, Stockholm 1998)

Summary

Individuals from the Exeter region and beyond are invited to collaborate in the development of a 'university of the trees'.

This entails making a long-term commitment to a tree in Haldon Forest, and to a range of 'connective', social sculpture processes that bring to the fore questions, agendas and new perceptions about how we live in the world. Standing on a golden felted mat that encircles their chosen tree, participants 'listen closely' to the tree on at least one day a year, and then *explore together* the implications of what has been 'heard' and learnt from the trees. This forest university -where every tree carries both questions and answers- is a 'workspace' for redefining our relationship to the world. By listening closely to the trees, we may better understand what it means to inhabit the world in an eco-centred, joined-up way.

In this 'university', the trees are the teachers, and the human beings develop new ways to listen to and understand the other-than-human world.

Shaping an ecologically sustainable future is not just about managing things better on a material, environmental level. New understandings and new thinking needs shifts in consciousness. Connecting more deeply with the world that sustains us, will help us develop new, sustainable ideas of 'progress' and allow us to contribute to the shifts in consciousness that support an ecologically sustainable world.

Shelley Sacks - Oxford, November 2005

Intention

The proposed *University of the Trees* in Haldon Forest, Exeter aims to *create space for new vision* concerning our relationship to the world – with the trees as our teachers. It is a form of collaboration between human beings and trees.

This place for new vision will ‘grow’ from the meeting between human beings and trees. It explores the idea that we need to develop ‘new organs of perception’ as an important part of enabling us to connect with the world ‘out there’. It builds on an approach to science that recognises alternatives to the onlooker mode of consciousness. In this ‘university’, perceptual and intuitive modes of consciousness complement the rationalist approach, linking imaginal thought to the process of becoming more response-able in our work to shape a sustainable future.

This long-term project, that emphasises the role of imagination in working toward an ecologically sustainable world, begins in 2006. It will involve a wide spectrum of people from the region and beyond, who commit themselves to participating in individual and collective imagining processes, dialogues and potential actions that grow out of listening to the trees and to each other.

The project also will take forward the social sculpture strategies and commitments embedded in Joseph Beuys’ ‘expanded conception of art’, especially the awakened relationship to nature and the emphasis on ecological consciousness initiated with the 7000 Oaks.¹

The need for a university of the trees is based on the view that such new vision can lead us to sustainable new forms of personal and social action and transformation, in which the forest becomes a place of connecting and not of escape.

¹**1. Background and context: Not just another version of the 7000 Oaks!** Since Beuys’ death in 1986, many arts organisations have sought to plant ‘Beuys Oaks’, as a tangible example of his expanded conception of art, whilst artists inspired by Beuys’ ecological and participatory practices - and in response to his call to keep on planting trees - have done oak planting projects, quite similar to the 7000 Oaks. This project is different. It connects the ‘permanent conference’, warmth work process (central to the social sculpture ideas) with the work to ‘shape new organs of perception’, creating a *participatory arena for holistic vision and action* that builds on creative strategies and methods of engagement embedded in Beuys’ work. As such, it is an opportunity for a wider, contemporary public to actively participate in imaginal thought processes and creative strategies that have been drawn from Beuys, as well as from others, like Goethe and Rudolf Steiner, whose work is significant in this expanded conception of art.

Description of Project

People from the region will be invited to commit themselves to a tree² and to visit this tree at least once a year on an agreed day, when everyone can be present together. Part of this day would be spent 'listening' to the trees, and then during the second half of the day, coming together to discuss what the humans have 'understood' or learnt from the trees. This 'conferring process' might need to continue on one or more days, if the implications of what has been heard are to be explored.

The project will begin by involving a small group of (seven) committed people – who each commit themselves to a long-term involvement with a tree in Haldon Forest. The idea is then to progressively involve many more people – at least several hundred.

As far as possible, participants should eventually represent a cross section of all stakeholders in the region, including decision and policy makers, scientists, teachers, crafts people, farmers, office, agricultural, crafts and industrial workers, as well as people of different ages.

The Image

Golden, felted wool 'mantles'³ are placed flat on the ground, encircling selected trees in the forest. These portable 'instruments'⁴ create places for humans to receive teachings from the trees and for transactions between people about what they have understood and learned from the trees.

The Ongoing Process

The golden felted circles will be used at least once a year on the agreed and common 'listening' day⁵ –by a group of individuals⁶ who have each made a long term commitment to a tree and to the social sculpture processes involved in developing the 'university of the trees'.⁷

Dialogues that take place under the trees, or in the forums that follow the 'listening' days in the forest – may be recorded and archived in the CCANW centre. These archived dialogues offer access to others who may want to become involved, or simply to listen to what is being discussed.

After the first 'forum' day in April 2006, I envisage working with the initial group of seven people, as well as the CCANW outreach worker, local NGOs, other groups and selected media, to set processes in motion through which more people commit themselves to a tree, as part of the ongoing social sculpture process of establishing this 'university of the trees'.

The CCANW space and infrastructure

The CCANW centre in the forest, is ideally suited for this purpose (both the refurbished 'shed' and the proposed new building). The centre will be able to house the golden 'spaces for new vision' mats that can be taken out on request, as well as recording equipment. It will also be the base for an archive of the discussions and deliberations that occur each tree after the listening processes in the forest and the collective imagining processes that follow them in the CCANW centre. The deliberations from these 'conferring processes' could possibly be made more public, either through media like the internet, radio, or a local newspaper.

The CCANW centre is therefore integral to the project – as an archive, documentation and meeting space as well as a place to house and loan out the golden mats.

² For the duration of their life, or to pass this commitment on

³ The radius of each felted golden circle is approx. one meter (extending beyond the circumference of the tree)

⁴ Housed in the CCANW space

⁵3 Possibly each spring on 'Earth Day'

⁶ Seven in the first year –and increasing annually

⁷ It is envisaged that the initial group of seven will expand annually through various means. An additional golden mantle will be created for each new person making an ongoing commitment to a tree, to the listening process and to the annual dialogue process that follows.

The CCANW infrastructure is also important. The expansion of this project – enabling the participation of increasing numbers of people from the region - will depend on outreach processes supported or enabled by CCANW.

Participation and Partnership

There are many levels of participation and partnership involved in this project. In addition to working with CCANW and Haldon Forest, there are the people from the region who each make a long-term commitment to a tree, visit it at least once a year on an agreed day and share with others what they have learned. Then there are other visitors to the forest – who may have been in the forest when the golden felted mats were in use, and simply carry the memory of these golden circles and the idea of the *university of the trees* with them when they return. In time they may choose to become more involved by participating in a forum, listening to archived discussions or making a commitment to a tree themselves. Other visitors may discover the project through documentation in the centre, leaflets, regional radio or the internet. An outreach process in the region will invite further participation on all levels. When the CCANW building is open, members of the public, who have heard or read about the project and want to get involved, will be linked up with someone already involved. It needs to be decided whether there should be one or more spare golden mats available for people who would like to take a golden mat into the forest and try out the process for themselves. Wool producers and crafts people from the region will be involved in making the golden felted wool circles.

Communicating about the Project

People who want to know more about the project will be able to read about it in the CCANW building (and possibly in the forest somewhere); through leaflets distributed at relevant venues in the region, and via local radio announcements and programmes. These channels will also inform them about meetings at the CCANW space for people who would like to consider becoming fully involved.

Relationship to the forest

There are two different possibilities for developing this university of the trees. The one makes use of existing trees (these could be conifer or mixed forest); the other approach involves planting new trees (again these could be mixed trees – not only conifers or oaks).

The number of trees that will ultimately be involved and the area that the project covers depends on the number of people who wish to participate and /or the limits to what forest area is available. (As this is an ecological 'transformation of consciousness' project and not simply a physical, environmental project, it could even work in a small area, with a limited number of trees / people, if this was deemed to be most appropriate.)

My role

I will be involved in facilitating all these processes in the first few years, with a view to the university of the trees becoming cared for and developed by those actively participating in it.

Support needed

CCANW support is needed for the kind of outreach work that is essential to the participatory, evolving nature of this social sculpture project. There also needs to be a commitment from CCANW to house the golden felted mats, the documentation and the archive, as well as providing a nearby venue for the ongoing meetings.

Other support: If the project involved planting new trees, they would require some physical care and attention for three years, until they are well established. People who link themselves to a tree might need to take responsibility for the process of tramping the undergrowth down during this period.

Longer term support: What kind of support this *university of the trees* may need in the longer term, and who will offer this, needs to be considered and decided.

Objects that connect

In many cultures trees are understood to be the intermediaries between above and below, and in a concrete sense, as conduits of energies from above and below. An object (made, for example, of two pieces of wood crossing over and bound together) for each person to keep,

could serve as a symbol of this vertical being and the meeting of human being and tree, but also to connect the growing group of people to one another.

The Archive

Holding the substance of past events to share with and inspire others

The Physical Form

Golden circles on the ground – echoing the light of the sun –transposed into the tree – become arenas for human light to be brought into the world. Although the golden circles are not always there, for those who have seen them they might leave traces, creating a longing for these pools of warmth and light where humans can connect with other life forms.

The Social Sculpture Process

This is a collaborative shaping process that builds a community. It involves:

Creating space for new vision, for seeing holistically – *developing new organs of perception*

Exploring the implications of these perceptions together – *the ‘permanent conference’ dialogue process*

Coming to decisions together about how things could be different – *a direct democracy process*

Taking action together – *shaping new eco-social forms toward a democratic, sustainable society*

The annual forums of this *university of the trees* may lead to further public actions and dialogue about what needs to be done toward shaping a sustainable future.

All these various processes of engagement constitute the University of the Trees.

Sequence of Events

(Phase 1 – December 2005 to June 2006)

- Finalise whether existing trees will be used or new trees planted (December 2005).
- Design of golden circle, felted mats (December 2005)
- Agree final proposal and budget –phase 1– (early January 2006)
- Identify felters in the area (December 2005/January 2006)
- Hold meeting(s) with potential participants identified through personal contact, internet, leaflets, NGOs and agree first seven participants (by mid February 2006)
- Design archive for CCANW space and ‘holders’ for golden mats (mid February 2006)
- Clarify and advertise Earth Day event (early March 2006)
- Completion of golden mats (late March 2006)
- Seven participants to trial use of golden mats two weeks prior to the Earth Day event [document visually] (Early April)
- Seven participants meet to discuss & record what they have heard and learnt from the trees [document visually] (mid April)
- Golden mats used again on Earth Day. Seven participants each linked to a golden mat in forest – may invite passers-by to join them in the ‘listening process’ [document visually] (22 April)
- Forum in CCANW space towards the end of Earth Day to discuss what has been learnt from the trees with members of the public [document visually and audio for archive](22 April)
- Discussion between CCANW, first seven participants and myself about the way forward [document visually and audio](April or early May)
- Ideas and decisions about facilitating the involvement of others (April or early May)
- Seven new, felted circles to be produced for use by mid June (order by late April)

(End of Phase 1)

Precisely how Phase 2 develops will depend on the experience of Phase 1. If the project is to continue, a process will then be agreed, through which increasing numbers of people commit themselves to a tree, as part of the long-term process of establishing this ‘university of the trees’.

Budget

Travel – for Shelley to Phase 1 project development meetings and events	
10 visits in Phase 1	£320
Outreach assistance – 6 days @ £75 per day	£450
Publicity – general (coordination; printing –invites, information leaflets, posters for phase 2)	£250
Communicating project processes (coordination - internet, radio interviews: printing)	£250
Accommodation –Shelley – 10 x 2 to 5 day visits @ £100 per visit	£1000
14 felted mats - £120 pounds each (?)	£1680
Recording equipment	
2 mini disc recorders available in centre (CCANW?), blank mini discs	£25
Other documentation – taking photographs (CCANW to cover?)	£150
Creating information panel in CCANW space (CCANW to cover?)	£200
Construction of audio archive	£100
Materials for additional prototypes – phase 1	£1500
Total required for Phase 1 and six months of phase two	£5925

Other notes

Trees as epiphanies

Trees are epiphanies of this wondrous world. Joseph Beuys and James Joyce saw all manifest things as epiphanies. Beuys describes trees as ‘exhibitions’ of the glory of being. This university of the trees is a listening place, to hear the soul of the world speak. It is a place of new vision, opening up and intensifying the energies and understandings needed to contribute to the shifts in consciousness that are beginning to take place all over the world. It is a university where the trees are our teachers and new ways of being in the world can be formed, debated and shared. The place for new vision will develop, over time, as the trees

grow. In this time of great crisis, destruction and world suffering, the university of the trees will offer human beings a chance to connect more deeply with the world we inhabit. By listening to the trees and participating in the epiphany made manifest, our consciousness will grow as the trees grow.

Internal mobilisation and becoming imaginatively active

Just as the Exchange Values project captured thousands of people's imagination, *taking them into an experience* of producing for another, of consuming what another has produced, and of the corporate control of our lives through bodies like the WTO, so this trees project should open a space for new understanding, dialogue and shifts in consciousness about how we perceive our relationship to the world.

Beuys emphasised that art, including expanded art practice, needed to 'scratch on the imagination'. He described social sculpture as a vehicle, or instrument for perceptual thought, but emphasised that this was not to be confused with the illustrating of ideas. This is similar to the importance that James Hillman places on the image as 'metaphoric insight'. For both Hillman and Bertold Brecht, literalness is the blinding force. Literalness is what binds us to our taken for granted attitudes and disables us from inhabiting the world in a different way. Bertold Brecht's strategy of 'Verfremdung' – to make strange – centres round the importance of disrupting our normal taken for granted way of seeing things in order to mobilise us internally.

Beuys, Goethe, Steiner and Hillman emphasise the importance of perceptual or imaginal thought so that we can 'hear the soul of the world speaking', so that the invisible is made visible through the body of things, so that we can become imaginatively active.

A literal restatement of how things are and an emphasis on external action alone are will not help us to end the great suffering of nature, or the dangerous contradictions inherent in our view of progress. It will also not help us develop more reverential perspectives toward other living beings, or deal with the complex questions of our supposed stewardship. The way we inhabit the world will not be transformed simply by information. As the coordinator of a UK climate change organisation has said: "We have enough information to have caused us to change our lifestyle decades ago. What is holding us back?" Deeper levels of connectedness are vital if we are to find the energy and commitment needed to make such enormous changes.