Nature Morte

„Martwa natura” (“Nature Morte”) spectacle. Premiere: 7 November 2020, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw

Introduction

In their book, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway predict that decades will need to pass before we are able to assess the significance and accuracy of artistic diagnoses of climate catastrophe – by which time it will be too late to change anything. And that's a shame because, alongside scientists, it is artists who are likely to be the most far-sighted "alarmists", even if their arguments are at risk of being suppressed and marginalized. With that in mind, we have decided to ask three artists participating in THE PENUMBRAL AGE exhibition – Alice Creischer, Susanne Kriemann, and Antje Majewski – about another "alarmist" and pioneer of thinking about climate in art, namely, Joseph Beuys.

While Beuys is an important name for the Polish art world, his ideas concerning politics, activism, the economy, and the need for systemic change have never reached a wider audience here. His diagnoses weren't always accurate, of course, and he wasn't always able to avoid difficult issues related to his position as a shaman-artist, but engaging with his art can still teach us much about what Susanne Kriemann calls the "crazy conflict" we are involved in as witnesses to an unfolding catastrophe.

In these three interviews we have tried to bring together the ecological reflection of the 1970s which, thanks largely to the engagement and radicalism of Beuys, has been a key point of reference for several generations of artists in Germany, with a contemporary perspective that has verified the effectiveness of certain gestures and is helping find new contexts for practices that had been prematurely abandoned. The resulting conversations aren't about Beuys, but rather outline the artistic strategies linking the respective practices of Susanne Kriemann, Antje Majewski, and Alice Creischer and "Nature Morte", the performance we are staging at Teatr Powszechny. Or, to put it even more broadly: they document a certain moment when artists working in different contexts are asking themselves how to live and make art with the awareness that we need radical change now.

Interview with Alice Creischer

AGNIESZKA JAKIMIAK: If you were to describe Joseph Beuys and his art to someone who has never heard of him, what would you say?

ALICE CREISCHER: Hmm… That's difficult! Firstly, Joseph Beuys was deeply connected with the anthroposophical movement, with the Rudolf Steiner movement, the Waldorf school. He was connected with it very early; this is something that really nurtured his art very much. The second thing is that he was a student of Ewald Mataré, a sculptor from the 50s – and that also nurtured his art. In addition to this was his experience in the Second World War. He was a pilot and his plane crashed in Crimea. He was taken in by Siberian nomads who nursed him back to health and treated him very well. All of the materials he worked with came from there, those three experiences: the Second World War, anthroposophy and the Nomads were very important to him. This is what I can say about him when I think of him as an artist.

But then you have the whole artistic movement around him, and this is something else. After the war, he was a prominent figure in the West German and American art scenes, at a time when a deep connection between Germany and USA was developing, a time of re-education, with the rise of 'artist-gods' like Andy Warhol. Joseph Beuys was also a kind of god. I think it's good to make a distinction between how he worked and the dynamics of post-war modern art. Beuys played a very important social role in the art world, especially for students and young artists and many other people. When he said that everybody is an artist, it made a lot of people feel empowered. He was a professor at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, and I remember him from that time. He said: "Anybody can come to my class. I don't make selections" – and because of that he was thrown out. Afterwards, he founded an institution which was called the Free International University and a lot of people came there. He created a really interesting melting pot for a lot of people and artists.

AJ: When you wrote to me, you mentioned that when you were a student, Beuys was a professor in Düsseldorf. Many people claim that one of his greatest achievements was opening the university, making artistic education available to everybody and reshaping the idea of being an artist. Did you feel at that time that his artistic signature somehow limited the students? In Poland, Beuys is often compared to Kantor – and one of the consequences of following an artist with such a strong name is that many of his students cannot establish themselves without being compared to the mentor. They sometimes end up rehashing the patterns of former masters. As much as many people relate to the art of Joseph Beuys, there is always a risk of becoming his epigone.

AC: I think that's unavoidable. I think that's a problem in every student-teacher relationship. In the case of Joseph Beuys I think it was less intense than, for example, in the class of Gerhard Richter. I think that among Joseph Beuys's students there were and are many different voices. You are right that it's a general problem between teachers and students and maybe artists need to go through this dependency on the teacher. After going through this stage, they often break out of it.

AJ: Do you think anything has changed in this regard over the last years? When we analyze the figure and legacy of Joseph Beuys, it turns out so many elements from his artistic career were based on him performing the role of an authority or shaman, or an artistic master – despite his claim of creating an egalitarian artistic platform. For me, what was extremely interesting in his practice is connected precisely with the question of his art's accessibility and establishing equality within the artistic realm – which is contradicted by his fame and success, largely built on promoting a singular artistic persona. On the other hand, his art's impact was connected with Beuys being perceive as a guru and master, which provided him with money for certain actions and activism. Do you think that artistic institutions still rely on praise and recognition of one leading artistic figure? Or maybe the idea of collectiveness, collaboration and somehow flattening the hierarchy is taking over the institutional discourse?

AC: That's a difficult question. I think that on the one hand, there is the authority of Joseph Beuys and that also entails his authoritarian gestures. He was really authoritarian, it's a very typical dialectic for post-war culture and the post-war psychology of many people. These gurus are also very characteristic of a certain period but this way of thinking often persists. Everywhere you could find people who really wanted democracy, they were preaching democracy, advocating for non-hierarchy, but at the same time they were really authoritarian. I think that comes from the experience of the Second World War and the Nazi era, which was profoundly traumatizing. That was always a weak spot. The dialectic of these people, these post-war gurus, relied on a yearning for democracy that did not go together with being completely traumatized by the war and National Socialism.

The other thing you mentioned concerns art and its institutions. Yes, I think a lot has changed, because post-war modernity has appropriated all the art movements of the 20s and 30s, of the avantgarde. The state appropriated that and then the state made the avantgarde a kind of state religion – a religion of free opinion, free expression of mind. That was deeply inscribed in democratic states in the Western world. Also, the connection between Germany and the USA was very, very deep. There is a wonderful book about how New York stole the idea of modern art and it describes how the re-education connection was also very much sponsored by the CIA. This also shows how important art's role was in the construction of democratic states.

At that time in the USA or in West Germany, artists achieved the status of gods or goddesses. Not only artists – look at literature; you have Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll. They were gods. If you read them – they suffered a lot by being put in this role. Herbert Marcuse talked about repressive tolerance – I think that's a good term to describe where artists were in those times; when, on the one hand, they were icons of freedom of speech and democratic freedom but they were completely fetishized. I think it's a dialectic problem too and Beuys is very typical of it. And you have to see it in the context of post-war modernism.

You are right that this has changed a lot now, which is good. I think we don't have these hierarchies in art any more, in the way it was until the 80s, like I personally experienced it at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, when you had big independent curators like Kasper König or Jan Roth and they were the ones to select the artists. This kind of hierarchy is gone and that's very good. Now you have a much more level field, but on the other hand it's losing its central meaning, its central importance to society.

AJ: I also wanted to ask you about your work, especially with regard to irony. You often use irony and figures that somehow undermine the state of things, somehow question the framework we have been operating in. This question is connected with artistic activism and political art, which very often relies on the presumption that one can achieve similar goals to those who are in politics or that one operates within the same realm of influence, whereas art's accessibility is much more limited. In the context of your practice, how do you think art can reshape certain political tools? Do you consider irony to be a helpful mechanism in this process?

AC: I consider irony to be a kind of lifeline. And for me it is absolutely necessary to use irony.

If you don't have irony you are lost. It's a kind of lifeline to have irony in the artwork. When talking about accessibility to art, we think about that a lot now in corona-time. When I say "we," I'm referring to the deep discussions I've had with a lot of colleagues and artists. I guess that institutions are somehow at their limits or they are in a very precarious situation. Now, institutions are more controlled. They are restricted somehow, and so is the discourse concerning them. I have the impression that new art which is accessible doesn't come from institutions – it comes from the artists themselves. It comes from how the artists connect with other people and from a social praxis which cannot be fully institutionalized. This is how I see it now. It's important that artists are organizing themselves and talking and communicating among themselves to create another mode of artistic practice. It's not that art has to go to the streets to convince people to be political. People on the streets are much more political than artists. It's the other way around. Artists have to go to the streets to learn from reality, to learn from the people. Maybe then to infuse what they've learned into their art and way of working. This is about reflection, not appropriation. Artists are not anybody's teachers any more. They have to learn a lot now.

AJ: One issue that concerns Beuys is cultural appropriation. His most famous actions, such as "I like America and America likes me," are described nowadays as inappropriate in certain ways, for example his depiction of the connection between native Americans and the coyote or his stealing certain symbols from other cultures. From what I know, you are extremely conscious in exploring, discovering and archiving cultures that are somehow "not yours." When you look back at Joseph Beuys's works, do they strike you as cultural appropriation? Do you think they might have been interpreted as such in the 80s or the 70s?

AC: I think they were not interpreted as such at all. When I think about the "Coyote" action, what was so impressive for the art world was that Beuys didn't want to touch American soil. He didn't want to be in the USA, and for us, that was "WOW." It was an anti-imperialist gesture. To us, the materials he used – like felt – were a connection to the Siberian experience.

I think that the question of appropriation, which is now very much discussed, was not possible in the time of Joseph Beuys. Firstly, artists were much more provincial. They did not have the knowledge about the world that we have today. They didn't have access to the knowledge we have now. Therefore, I would be careful – if he did that, he did it as a gesture of empathy and I think the question of representation was not on the table at that time. It was not discussed like it is now and we have to take that into account when we judge artists from that time. There are many artists for whom this accusation is valid, but in the case of Joseph Beuys I would be careful. Nowadays, as an artist, I'm in a different position, I can have access to so much more knowledge than artists in those days.

AJ: There is only one more question I wanted to ask you, which is also a silly one. If you could say one thing to Joseph Beuys, what would it be?

AC: Oh, god… (laughs) That is difficult, because I have so much… what would I say…? There is a record he did and it says: *"Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, ne, ne, ne, ne, ne…"* (laughs) "Yes, yes, yes, yes, no, no, no, no" (laughs). He also used a lot of irony and that is something I like very much in him and his work. I hope that this irony will survive and that you could read his work from the point of view of irony. That would be really good.

AJ: That's wonderful because I also have the impression especially when reading contemporary texts about Joseph Beuys that the humour aspect is disappearing in the analysis. Obviously, recordings of performances are always difficult to follow and they don't give the real picture. But when I read about the actions themselves, I can easily detect the fact that they were based on humour and that the undermining of certain power structures was often done in a very funny and ironic way. I also miss this in texts that are somehow concerned with Joseph Beuys.

AC: It is very difficult because he is very revered. There he is, in these huge museums, like tombs. If you go to Hamburger Bahnhof – it's "OMG!"; or to the Stuttgart Stadt Gallery – "UGH!" (laughs) – you see a Joseph Beuys that you don't want anything to do with (laughs). And then you have to remember that he was part of the Fluxus movement, which was deeply ironic, and I think that as much as it takes an effort to think about him in this way, it is worth trying.

Interview with Susanne Kriemann

AGNIESZKA JAKIMIAK: To start off, I wanted to ask you a very simple question: When you think of Joseph Beuys, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

SUSANNE KRIEMANN: I have some interesting experience with Joseph Beuys's work exhibited at the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart – quite a big environment made of fat, felt and tubes. While I was studying at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart, we went to see the work with my fellow students. Back then I was reading a lot by Beuys and how he wanted people to experience his work – and then we were confronted with the restrictions imposed by the museum, there was no way to touch the felt or fat, or to even enter the environment. This situation is something I always see in my mind's eye when I hear the name Beuys… it was obviously traumatic – for me.

The other thing that comes to my mind is his radical approach to accepting everyone to the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf – I thought it was a cool thing to do. A gesture of breaking with the old hierarchical system. It obviously exploded the system. And still does resonate in many people's mind, when you hear someone saying 'everyone is an artist.'

AJ: In Poland, Joseph Beuys is not a household name. People involved in visual arts are obviously familiar with his work, but the general public – even people working in theatre – are often not acquainted with his art. If you were to introduce Beuys to someone who had never heard of him, what would you say?

SK: There is this film "Beuys" by Anders Veiel, shot in 2017. It seems there is a new consciousness regarding Beuys these days… he is definitely an icon in Germany. But his ideas are not easy to talk about… and also his masculinity, his very serious approach, the way his works appear in almost every collection in German museums… A colleague and I were talking recently about the way we travelled before the pandemic and the way we think about flying in relation to climate change. And all of a sudden, Beuys came up. He had visited the Havana Biennial in the 80s together with Saginar Pollke and Blinky Palermo, there was a picture where we see Beuys enjoying life in Cuba, staying in a luxurious hotel, etc. We were talking about how we would seemingly have less of a problem seeing Polke or Palermo staying in luxury in Havana, but when Beuys comes into the picture it immediately raises mistrust: this man with his high ideals, etc… This conflict is very relevant now, many artists are working with environmental themes. Beuys insisted on high morals and ethics and this rendered him vulnerable, and sympathetic. At that very moment he was living this crazy conflict that we are all in now. We realize that we cannot continue like this — but when it comes to the details of daily life, it is extremely difficult to say: "I will never fly again." Can I really make such a claim as an artist today? Can I say that, if I am invited to a biennial in a place faraway from where I live, I won't go? What does this imply for our international and transworldly community? Since the 1970s, Beuys had embodied this conflict: he stood in for radical ideas concerning nature and culture, and used organic materials for making his works. That said, of course we cannot overlook the fact that he was in a privileged position as a professor, he was selling his works. So, it is really important today to look at the details of how he "lived with the trouble." We can learn from these details when we look at his ideas, his way of working. I am not saying that this is to be copied today, but his example should be studied very well.

AJ: These conflicting elements are extremely fascinating. We were also trying to analyze the issue you have just brought up — of Beuys being a star in the visual arts. He was in a very privileged position and at the same time he was advocating for radical change. It also opens the door to the question of giving access to art and democratizing it, as these issues are linked — Beuys's status enabled him to broaden his impact. The task of non-hierarchical thinking is also a challenge when it comes to Beuys because he represented the idea of strong artistic leadership while at the same time proposing actions that promoted equality without fixed hierarchies. At the end of the day, he was the only one recognized and praised for gestures that were designed to be communitarian. These paradoxes are very important to our research.

SK: Let's talk about the work "7.000 Oaks," for example. It's a work that brings forth the extreme complexity of our time. First of all, it's a beautiful piece, a powerful idea – a living sculpture, for the people, there is no admission fee, it is accessible at any time, it is extremely symbolic. When you look at it closer, though, it also becomes complicated. Planting 7000 oak trees also communicates monoculture; it opposes bio-diversity. It is a complex amount of labor and care that is handed over to others, too. Beuys worked with oak trees because of a system of coordinates, power structures and hierarchies, and on the basis of environmental reflection rooted in abstraction. If he had asked botanists, perhaps he would have chosen a variety of trees native to the Kassel area— but then the image wouldn't have been as strong in the context of the art world. Look at German landscape paintings of the 16th and 17th century, for example, oak trees everywhere.

One year ago, we were invited to a dinner — as part of the project "Tempelhofer Wald," at the former airport of Tempelhof. This building was designed by Albert Speer — it represents the National Socialist style of architecture. A group of cultural activists planned to plant a forest on top of the former airport's main hangar. They invited 1000 people for a discursive dinner, and each of us received a tree to take home and plant somewhere. We got four trees and we took them home and planted two in our block's yard and two in a park. My friend, a landscape architect, told me: "You cannot simply plant a tree in the garden or in the park here." Every tree in Berlin has a number and any unregistered tree therefore can be cut down. I felt rather alienated by this message: the gesture was beautiful, to take a tree home and to plant it there, to reorganize our neighborhood. But even in our neighborhood trees that grew naturally some 50 years ago have been cut down. In Berlin you are not allowed to cut down a tree without going through legal procedure — but unregistered trees can be taken down without any legal consequences.

That is also why it is important to look into the details of Beuys's work — because he had worked with all these paradoxes and contradictions.

AJ: Together with the director of the Powszechny Theatre, we also had an idea to give a small oak tree to every member of the audience. It sounded appealing, but from the beginning we felt there might be something wrong with this idea — planting trees in November may not work out. We quickly confirmed our hunch — it would be a waste of trees and human energy to plant these trees randomly in late autumn. As much as we wanted to connect with Beuys's action, we had to understand that following first impulses and associations may not work in this case.

SK: Thinking in metaphors is complicated here. Donna Haraway writes on metaphors — she problematizes our way of talking in metaphors when it comes to the environment. Metaphorically, it is a great idea to give trees to everyone, but in reality nature does not work that way.

AJ: I also wanted to ask about an issue you already mentioned in the context of Beuys — that is, the performativity of his work. How do you understand and approach the idea of performativity in your own work? You very often problematize the perspective that combines the artistic dimension, the physical object and the spectator. How do you scrutinize this relationship?

SK: Firstly, there are pragmatic decisions that I make in my studio concerning the way of working with photography. Using a camera activates a whole story of colonial and often racist perspectives — taking a picture of someone is wrapped up in a history of defining, supervising and categorizing people. "Giving a true image of somebody" is also historically affected. All these narratives open up a realm that I find very interesting and I really appreciate this medium because it enables all of these discussions.

When you look at a photograph, you have to think about the square, what is behind and around the square, what was the sound on site, what kind of camera was used, did the other person also have a camera to "shoot" the photographer? These questions play an important role in my work. In the work "Rag," which is now in the exhibition in Warsaw, I used a lot of archival photos taken approximately 100 years ago and I used radioactive elements to inscribe their unstable activity onto film sheets. I put a stone on photosensitive paper and the stone would "take" the picture — as if collaborating with me.

There are also many things to consider when it comes to producing a work — transportation, packaging, framing, printing, etc. I usually try to use as much as possible. And I want to know how things are produced, where, by whom…

AJ: Let's talk about the ecological — and empathetic — aspects of your work. I have the impression that through very profound archaeological research, through working with archives and exploring the origins of certain materials, objects and stories, you are somehow reshaping the idea of being a witness to climate and anthropogenic change in the world. Do you perceive your work as a form of giving testimony?

SK: Yes, I think witnessing what is going on is important for me as an artist. The landscapes surrounding my home and my studio document our present time substantially. If you go to a park and look at the ground around you, at the trees and plants, at the underbrush, you will find a lot of waste; some things like plastics are more visible than others. It shows our distant relation to land, to land use, and to ourselves.

In "Rag," the protagonists are two Rare Earth Elements: Gadolinium and Yttrium. These materials are used in the production of smartphones — they are the reason why our screens are so soft and touchable, they are also used in other photography equipment. For this piece I conducted research in Texas Hill Country — at the end of the 19th century there was a famous mine there, the Barringer Hill Mine, where the REE's Yttrium and Gadolinium were extracted. That was around the time when the electric light bulb was invented. Today we are back to using Yttrium and Gadolinium, in LED lightning, in smartphone technology… I visited the archives of Harry Ransom Centre for Photography to search for pictures of the mine during work. And I also photographed the area around the former mine, which is flooded by Lake Buchanan. Since some time ago, parts of the old mining grounds have been revealed again due to drought. So, it was interesting to mingle these two time-lines, when early light bulbs used Yttrium as an igniter, and when LED lightbulbs came on the market just in recent years… it was important for me to witness the interconnectivity between the production of electric light and climate change, observing the water level rising through archival images and then disappearing.

AJ: I have the impression that interconnectivity is one of the crucial ideas in your work. Obviously, when choosing subjects that become a tool to analyze the relationship between natural resources and technology, you are also problematizing your own position as an artmaker. I think of your work as a kind of time-machine — it enables us to grasp a wider horizon of events and to recognize our position within it, but this time-machine also problematizes its own decay. It is fascinating how you approach non-human elements — such as mountains, landscapes, natural materials. We usually do not perceive them as objects that are alive — and you change this perspective.

SK: The research that I am doing at the moment concerns the site near the former women's concentration camp Ravensbrück. Today, there is a documentation center and a memorial on the former camp grounds. On its periphery there is a larger area with seven single-family houses. These houses were used by the families of the SS officers until 1945. Afterwards, the Soviet army used the houses, and since 1985 they are abandoned. These houses form an astonishing view — they are partly decayed, partly overgrown by wild nature. These houses occupy a disintegration zone between the memorial grounds and the village nearby. For this work in progress, titled "Dachziegel, Backstein, Wasserrohr (dedicated to the Red Wood Ant)," I am collaborating with a forest ranger who is specialized in ants. We were tracing out the whole area as a habitat for the ants — some of them can only be seen through a microscope or a lens, so seeing them is combined with using an optical tool. We are reading this area through a historical perspective and also from the point of view of the ants. The pictures documenting this process assume a different angle in viewing the houses as well as the ground they are situated on.

For printing these pictures, I prepared special pigments made from bricks, ceramic pipes and tiles of the abandoned houses. The main purpose of this work is to tackle the way we orient ourselves in the historical grounds, in view of the history inscribed there and considering climate change as constitutive to our life on earth. The photos are just one detail in a series of activities. If you introduce or discover certain protected ant species, this ground is rendered protected and it cannot become a territory for real estate speculation, for example. In that way, ants and I try to back the current economic system.

AJ: Coming back to Beuys, I wanted to ask you one more question concerning cultural appropriation. Do you think this was a claim that might have been made against Beuys's art already in the 70s and 80s? In my research I got a bit confused — I read that "I like America and America likes me" was perceived as misuse but through conversations with some artists I learned that the whole case was much more complex. Do you think that the action with the coyote was recognized as cultural appropriation already when it happened?

SK: I think these voices have always been around — now we are again welcoming them into the art discourse. It does not change the fact that people of the First Nations did not feel comfortable with this work. Now we are witnessing more and more voices from indigenous communities and it is no longer acceptable to instrumentalize these voices or to appropriate them for someone's own purpose. I think we are in a time when the only way to live together is to acknowledge the wisdom and experience indigenous people have with the land and life on earth.

I was listening to a podcast on German radio which quoted a book by the Siberian indigenous writer Anna Nerkagi of the Nentes people. In her book, she writes about literacy. In our milieu, we have learned that knowing how to read and write is the only way to survive. In the podcast, Nerkagi was talking about Northern-Siberian people learning to read the snow because if they don't know how to do that, they can fall into a snowhole and die. Learning to read snow takes long and you have to learn it from childbirth, it has to become intuitive. Bringing a school-system as we know it to these territories provides certain opportunities — children can learn and write, but at the same time it complicates their learning how to read the snow.

Simply naming this as a problem resonated with the complex commotion we are facing right now and it may enable us to understand more about how the 20th or 21st century has defined us.

Interview with Antje Majewski

AGNIESZKA JARZIMIAK: What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of Joseph Beuys?

ANTJE MAJEWSKI: First of all that he taught in Düsseldorf. I wanted to become an artist from a young age. In school, I read his book *Soziale Plastik* (Social Sculpture), and I found his ideas fascinating. I thought of studying with him in Düsseldorf – but he died before I could do that. So I never met him in person but I think some of my practice is really influenced by those ideas I came across when I was very young.

AJ: When we started working on the "Nature Morte" performance inspired by work of Joseph Beuys, we realised that Beuys isn't very well known in Poland. People in the visual arts are obviously familiar with his work, but people working in theatre or film often have no clue about Beuys. How would you introduce Beuys to someone who has never heard of him?

AM: I would say that Beuys was a very radical artist in the 1960s and '70s. His idea was that art should be something more than just objects to be put on a wall: art should be concerned with the fabric of the society and every citizen should participate in the creation of that society, which would then become an artwork of sorts. This is the main idea behind his social sculpture: in a society that is truly alive there is no distinction between consumers and creators, and everyone can participate in the creation of that society by mobilizing what Beuys described as "the real capital" – not money but creative power. This is exemplified in two of the large projects that he did for documenta – I would say that the documenta projects are probably his most important work. One was The Honeypump – he worked a lot with metaphors drawn from the natural world, such as fat or honey, which exemplify energy not just symbolically but in a real sense: as energy that can be transformed into something else. Animals don't just produce energy to feed their own offspring. Look at bees – the whole beehive works together to survive. Beuys imagined that all of society should be fed by this creative energy.

Another very radical project was the Organisation für direkte Demokratie. As a participant in documenta, he organized Büro für direkte Demokratie and spent 100 days talking to visitors about the possibilities of direct democracy in which citizens would have a lot more to say in the process of decision-making.

Probably his best-known project is 7000 Oaks, in Kassel, for which he planted 7000 oak trees, each accompanied by a huge basalt stone to form a sculpture, so that the whole city became an interactive art installation.

One more thing I find very important is that Beuys was also a wonderful draftsman. He made beautiful water colors, and he was a real sculptor. He studied with Mataré, who was mainly a sculptor of animals. When you look at Beuys's installations you can see that he had very specific ideas on how to present an artwork. So there's his social sculpture and, on the other hand, you have quite intimate water colors and these installations.

AJ: What you just said further confirms my view that Beuys's work and your practice have lot in common on many levels. One of these is obviously nature and the natural environment but there's also the idea of relating to a wider context – not only in the practice of social sculpture but by returning to the roots of certain artistic practices, such as painting. I wanted to ask you about the way your work builds on some of Beuys's ideas: you underline the need to involve non-human beings in artistic work and treat materials and objects as being equally important as the human presence. To quote Ewa Majewska: in your work, the famous phrase "Everyone is an artist" applies not only to people but to other beings as well. How and when did you come to the conclusion that your art requires the presence of non-human beings?

AM: I think I learned a lot from two other teachers, whom I also found on my own. The first of these was Senegalese artist Issa Samb and the traditional philosophy of the Lebu people, an ethnic group who have traditionally lived on the ocean coast near Dakar and who are very close to other natural beings. I very much tend to follow my own intuition rather than books or theory. I really learned most of what I know from Issa Samb. He taught me how to reconcile very contemporary ways of artmaking, that in his case had to do with the Situationists, the radical movements that historically originated in 1970s Paris, with the collaborative artmaking practiced in the "Laboratoire AgitArt" of which Samb was a member. The name means "A Laboratory of Moving Art" – art that moves you and which you set in motion together with others. They made collaborative pieces that were somewhere between performance art, theatre pieces and street theatre, and also paintings that they hung on trees. They worked in an open courtyard planted with huge trees, where Issa also lived, in central Dakar. Basically, their artmaking was connected to the city: people were always coming and going, they would sit down and chat for a few hours and then move on. But it also involved healing because Issa treated people with different disabilities and problems. He taught me that, in real time, in the real-life artistic processes that never stop – because Issa never took time off, he was inside his art all the time and drew all the people around him inside it as well – artmaking is inseparable from normal life. As he put it, being an artist is a bourgeois profession – being an artist is something small. But Art – making art – is a creative process that goes on all the time and can involve everyone, every human being, but also the trees, the birds, the wind, and even cats, because they too were active participants in what was going on in that courtyard. The birds made noise, the leaves fell from the trees and settled in heaps or were swept away. There was constant interaction with everything in the courtyard – it was a great learning process for me, and I feel very honoured that I could experience it.

AJ: You mentioned the healing, or therapeutic, potential of Issa Samb's art. How do you see that in your own practice? Is it more about creating a community between you and the people who are somehow involved in the process or who are observers of the process? Or do you understand it in a more literal way – as a practice that can heal certain traumas?

AM: The approach of Issa Samb was unique, he was a very special person. I don't see myself as a shaman like Beuys. But I do believe that art isn't something I make alone, it's not just my creation. You could say that art has shifting forms: it can take the form of interactive social activities but it can also be a painting or a sculpture. I wouldn't say that there is a contradiction here. Art can be a carrier of something that flows through you. If you can involve others in this flow, make it possible for them to join in and become participants of this flow, it becomes a healing process that connects you to other beings, who do not necessarily have to be human. I believe that this is not a theory, it is a reality that I often experience. Such interactive moments of sharing joy, not only among human beings, do have healing potential. But I would not say I can heal the wounds of society or a specific person with their specific needs.

AJ: I also wanted to talk a little about that part of your work that relies on collaboration and collectivity. It's an approach that's been around for some time now; in some contexts it is welcomed, while elsewhere it is still greeted with distrust. What is your own experience with this way of working? How do institutions react when there is no single person responsible for the outcome but a collective that shares responsibilities and tasks? Is it easier, in institutional terms, to function as a collective, or a group?

AM: If was an exceptional case: we were completely self-organised and we didn't have any funding or help from anywhere. There were never more than 16 of us working together at any given moment; and it's not active anymore. We had a wonderful time together and I made a lot of wonderful friendships – with Ewa Majewska, for one. We organised a really great event in Warsaw and I got to know many people in the process. As a feminist collective, we would go to different cities and get in touch with the local feminist artists. My job was to facilitate discussions and ask them what they would like to do. I tried to bring together people who had similar ideas or interests and encourage them to work together, which often led them to do things they hadn't tried before. New groups and new alliances were formed; it was an international feminist network that transcended borders. We did a lot of good things, such as the Temporary Autonomous Zones when we imagined how to make art free of any institutional restraints – though there were budgetary restraints, of course. We did the whole event in Warsaw for more or less 4000 euros, and there were forty artists and twenty projects. You pay for that with your own health, though. You can't work non-stop until midnight so that you don't have a private life anymore. There was a moment when I had to say: OK, I need to stop this, because I need some time for myself. I am a bit sad about that because I wish it could have lasted longer, but maybe these self-organised processes have certain temporal limitations. You burn up so much energy, so much positive energy – it is very demanding and difficult to keep that up when you have other things to do.

What works best for me now is when an institution asks me: "Antje, do you want to make a new show?" Then I say "Yes, but can I bring in one or two other people?" But lately institutions have been asking: "Antje, we would like you to do something that involves other people." They already know my practice: they already know that I very rarely do solo exhibitions and that I very often bring in other people – and some institutions are actively looking for that. At the Hamburger Bahnhof, I was given the opportunity to invite other artists from the very beginning. In such a case it is very easy – because it is expected by the institution.

AJ: Have you ever come across a situation when curators opposed such practices because they felt that it jeopardized their position?

AM: Only once, at the Ausstererin in Frankfurt. I wanted to bring in a lot of people but I was limited to only two and their names were not listed. I don't want for my collaborators to be unnamed. But now curators are aware of my practice and actively seek it out – they know me and they appreciate me precisely because of that. I am presently working on a piece for the Biennale in the Dolomite Alps, the Biennale Cardenina. It's curated by Adam Budak, who's known me since 2010 when we did a big show together. He's asked me to propose a project that would be political and would involve the community, and I am free to invite other artists. It's called "Forest Sculpture Sanctuary" – we will put up a small sculpture installation inside a forest, which will then become a sanctuary that will be off limits to humans. These won't be original sculptures but copies in wood, and they will be left in the forest to eventually decompose there. The copies are made from scans prepared by people who study wood sculpture in the Dolomite Alps. Using the most advanced technology they can scan the sculpture and, with the help of a huge machine, make an exact copy in a woodblock. My collaborators are Paweł Althamer, Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Alioune Diouf, Cecilia Edefalk, Paweł Freisler and Gregor Prugger. I initiated the project, but Paweł and Cecilia had very similar ideas for a long time so I would say we are really equal in this project. Next time it could be Paweł who makes it happen in Poland and then we'll bring the sculptures there.

An approach that works well for me is to bring a group of people together for a specific project rather than working with a group that stays together all the time as was the case with ff. This new form: a group of friends gathering to jointly create something we are all interested in – that is an ideal situation for me. The ideal situation is to have a curator like Adam who totally understands the importance of these processes and facilitates them. Another such curator is Aleksandra Jach. I invited her to be my co-curator at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. Aleksandra is very interested in ecology, too, and it would be crazy for her to be driven by a curatorial or artistic ego – it is always about what we are creating together.

AJ: I must admit that I find your practice unique, progressive, and very valuable in so far as it confronts and questions the hierarchies of art institutions. At the same time, you aim to create a realm of equality and call for an egalitarian approach within the arts field. Do you think a lot has changed in the last decades in terms of dismantling institutional hierarchies? One of the problems I see when reading Beuys and texts about him is that he claimed to want everyone to be involved in the artistic process on the same level, but the art he produced very much depended on his position as a shaman or an authority figure who leads other people. Even according to his students, his influence was too overwhelming to escape. Certainly, there are still places where the idea of outstanding male artists who generate profit for an institution are very prominent, though I have the impression that things are changing.

AM: I hope they are. When speaking of Beuys, one of the criticisms that has been made here in Germany lately had to do with his alleged links to National Socialism. I didn't read the book in question but I can imagine he must have had some contacts when he was a soldier. I'm not an expert in this field, so I can only give a very personal opinion. My feeling is that some of his ideas about "the living body of the people" (der lebendige Volkskörper) are very close to the vocabulary of the Nazis. Maybe one should dig a little further and say that Beuys was also a great admirer of Rudolf Steiner who, as a theosophist, believed in hierarchies that can also be found in Beuys's work: a hierarchy going from the material all the way up to the spiritual where the initiated people at the top are closest to the spiritual dimension and thus most worthy. Rudolf Steiner developed his theories at the same time as the precursors of Nazi ideology.

In those times, you can also find the first vegetarians, the first nudists – some of whom were theosophists – as well as people calling for racial purity and advocating vegetarianism at the same time, like Hitler. If you look at the history of those ideas you'll find they had very uncanny connections in 1900-1910 when all those theories were babbling up. I would say that the Nazis adopted some of those ideas in a very distorted way, close to populist misinterpretation or to conspiracy theories.

Beuys created his own theories: he claimed he'd been nursed back to health by nomads, as if in line with the principle that 'Wisdom always comes from the East.' I reread some of his texts last year because we were considering including some of his works in the Hamburger Bahnhof exhibition, but I ultimately decided against doing so. I found many things that were wonderful; when you read him closely you see he was an ardent advocate of direct democracy and early Green activism, and I would agree on so many issues with him. But then you turn the page and find certain words that stand out as if warning you that "this word has a history."

Beuys was obviously part of the intellectual history of Europe and not only Germany, so I think it would be more interesting for me to deconstruct where this entanglement of ideas came from than to attack him personally. Such personal attacks come from a wish to tear down an idol, to throw him from his pedestal; what I find more interesting is how we can turn his good ideas into something better and how we can identify their dangerous affinities with theories that the Nazis actually put into practice. To truly understand this, in a precise, historical way – so that we don't fall into the same trap.

Introduction
Interview with Alice Creischer
Interview with Susanne Kriemann
Interview with Antje Majewski

Colophone

Interviews with Alice Creischer, Susanne Kriemann, and Antje Majewski – artists taking part in
"THE PENUMBRAL AGE. Art in the Time of Planetary Change" (5.06.-13.09.2020) at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw
were conducted by Agnieszka Jakimiak

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a play directed by Agnieszka Jakimiak in Teatr Powszechny im. Zygmunta Hübnera in Warsaw.

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"Martwa natura" ("Nature Morte") spectacle
premiere: 7 November 2020, Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw

Director:
Agnieszka Jakimiak

Script:
Mateusz Atman and Agnieszka Jakimiak

Set design and dramaturgy:
Mateusz Atman

Choreography:
Katarzyna Wolińska

Music:
Antonina Nowacka

Translations:
Iwona Nowacka

Curatorial collaboration:
Marta Keil

Cast:
Karolina Adamczyk, Grzegorz Artman, Aleksandra Bożek, Michał Czachor, Oskar Stoczyński

Stage manager:
Barbara Sadowska

Spectacle's description:
"Nature Morte" is a collection of elegies that allow us not so much as to work through loss, but to become aware of what is brought with the awareness of non-existence and absence. Perhaps the world we know is beginning to fall into oblivion, but the creation of a new order – social, institutional, artistic – will be difficult to achieve if we do not know who and what to say goodbye to.

During the pandemic times, many ideas and beliefs about art get destroyed. However, some of them may become stronger – like the conviction that art is used by us to create bonds and alliances, networks of understanding and support. Joseph Beuys - an activist and a rebellious artist, a relentless spokesperson for the concern of the natural environment - is a starting point for a journey through these areas of art, that are suspected to have therapeutical properties. Perhaps, a time has come, to try to disrupt the old divisions between art and society, art and not-art, art and nature. Perhaps art can help us to replace our past habits with a lack thereof, as well as, an openness to change.

*

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