

Title: What is Social Sculpture Today? A Shift from Symbolic to Structural Change

Karema-Digital Fine Art MA 2024-26

Aims:

To critically examine contemporary social sculpture, exploring its key characteristics, its evolution within social practice, and the reasons why it has not become the dominant framework for socially engaged art.

Objectives:

1. Examine the evolution of social sculpture over time.
2. Examine social sculpture's current role and status in contemporary art and society.
3. Try to determine whether social sculpture remains relevant today.
4. Define social practice and its main principles.
5. Investigate the distinctions between social sculpture and social practice, noting where they overlap and diverge.

Context:

1. Social Sculptural Development:

Joseph Beuys' phrase "social sculpture" suggesting that everyone is an artist and that artistic action could help shape society. Beuys imagined a larger field where art shaped social systems, education, and political policies going beyond objects. But modern social practice has since expanded outside Beuys' purview to include activism, community involvement, urban renewal, and participatory approaches.

Projects by Beuys were sometimes symbolic gestures. Working towards real, material change is today's social practice artists aim. For example, Assemble's Granby Four Streets in Liverpool, where artistic intervention has directly helped with urban renewal and long-term community collaboration.

2. Participating as a Lived Experience:

Today, social sculpture transcends symbolic interaction to become a lived experience in actual environments. Contemporary social practice promotes co-creation, agency, and unpredictability rather than merely "activating" viewers.

- Al-Mayida (2024), my work, showed how food-sharing might be a social and artistic intervention where hospitality itself became the medium.

3. Participatory Power Dynamics:

Although involvement is sometimes presented as intrinsically democratic, critical viewpoints such as Claire Bishop's criticism of participatory art in *Artificial Hells* (2012) raise doubts about whether participation empowers audiences or hides already existing power systems.

- In Ai Weiwei's 2007 *Fairytale*, 1001 Chinese citizens received invitations to Kassel, Germany..how much of their work was shaped by their agency?!
- *The Moon Letters Book* (2025), my work, looked at related issues; although letter-writing advised equal involvement, who finally decided how those letters were shaped, read and understood?

4. Social Sculpture as Hospitality and Care:

Many social artists base their work mostly on hospitality and care. Care as resistance and a redial act in a world that prioritises productivity

- Al-Mayida positioned hospitality as both art and activism.
- *Moon Letters* as an act of care, also an act of vulnerability.

5. Social sculpture as a venue for uncertainty and failure:

Artists welcome uncertainty and failure as part of the creative process:

- *The Fakir Rest* (2003) by Stéphane Arglete tested endurance as social performance.
- In Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), an urban wheat field begs questions about ecology, capitalism, and land use, transforming failure—urban neglect—into a poetic intervention.
- *Moon Letters Book* (2025) showed how miscommunication and reinterpretation influenced the interactive process. Although their meaning changed depending on the reader's perspective, the letters were written in particular intentions. It also made clear how, as the artist, I turned into the spectator inside the work.

6. Criticism of Social Sculpture:

Despite its radical aims, Beuys's social sculpture failed to take front stage in social practice. Some important objections consist in:

- Idealism vs. Practical Impact: Beuys's vision stayed conceptual while modern social practice artists pursue observable outcomes.
- Ambiguity: Social sculpture is hard to define because of its vague and open-ended character.
- Mythologisation: Beuys's mythology—such as *The Felt Suit*, *I Like America and America Likes Me*—often eclipsed his theories of social practice, so restricting their wider relevance.

- Institutionalisation – Many social sculpture projects today are funded by institutions, leading to tensions between grassroots activism and state-sponsored participation. Example: Sandra Suubi, Samba Gown (2023) Liverpool Biennial.

Methodology:

My study is practice-led, giving great weight to action via cooperation, participation, and making. My strategy consists of the following:

- Maintaining ongoing development of participatory projects including Al-Mayida and The Moon Letters Book, investigating hospitality, language, and power in participatory settings.
- Testing several involvement approaches so that audience-led meaning-making and unpredictability are possible.
- Engaging with essential books and theoretical frameworks (e.g. Bishop, Bourriaud..etc) helps one develop critical reflection and theory.
- Examining modern practitioners and case studies including Agnes Denes, Assemble, WochenKlausur Medical Care for Homeless, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Pedro Reyes and Ai Weiwei.
- Engaging in tutorials and peer, artist, and academic group discussions helps one develop dialogues and feedback (MA peers, Creative Peers, Ghost Art School..etc).
- Getting comments from attendees of workshops to hone my approach (Colour of Pomegranates program, At The Library).
- Considering how involvement shapes and transforms creative meaning.
- Recording using photography, film, and writing helps with documentation and evaluation.
- Considering triumphs, mistakes, and surprising outcomes.

Outcome:

- Try to offer a clear definition of social sculpture together with its key characteristics.
- To critically evaluate why social sculpture failed as the leading framework for social practice.
- To look at how modern artists have reinterpreted failure, care, and participation inside social practice.
- To produce a body of participatory work examining the junction of social sculpture, care, language, and power.
- To add to the continuing conversation about authorship and participation in contemporary art.

Bibliography:

Books:

- Beuys, J. and Harlan, V. (2004). *What is Art?* CLAIRVIEW BOOKS.
- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Bourriaud, N. (1998). *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses Du Réel.
- Finkelppearl, T. (2001). *Dialogues in public art : interviews with Vito Acconci, John Ahearn ...* Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press.
- Gustaf Almenberg (2010). *Notes on Participatory Art*. AuthorHouse.
- Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for socially engaged art: materials and techniques handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, Cop.
- Lacy, S. (2010). *Leaving Art*. Duke University Press Books.
- Lowndes, S. (2010). *Social Sculpture*. Luath Press Ltd.
- Mesch, C. and Michely, V. (2007). *Joseph Beuys*. MIT Press.
- Thompson, N. (2012). *Living as form : socially engaged art from 1991-2011*. New York, N.Y.: Creative Time ; Cambridge, Mass. ; London.
- Van, K., Jordan, C.M. and Philipp Kleinmichel (2019). *The art of direct action : social sculpture and beyond*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Walead Beshty, Bovier, L. and Baker, G. (2015). *Walead Beshty : 33 texts : 93,614 words : 581,035 characters : selected writings (2003-2015)*. Zurich: Jrp Ringier.

Journals:

- Birchall, M. (2015). *Social Sculpture re-visited*. [online] Academia.edu. Available at: <https://academia.edu/resource/work/12773885> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].
-
- Erzen, J. (2014). *The city as social sculpture*. [online] SAJ. Serbian architectural journal. Available at: <https://academia.edu/resource/work/84883640> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].
- Hiltunen, M. and Huhmarnieme, M. (2022). *Art(s) as an Expanding Social Sculpture*. [online] Research in Arts and Education. Available at: <https://academia.edu/resource/work/91693257> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].
- Kirchgassner, I. (2020). *For the Love of Reality: Social Sculpture as Self-Experiment*. [online] Academia.edu. Available at: <https://academia.edu/resource/work/91558019> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].
- Munro, j A. (2014). *Munro, Beuys, Earth-art, Social Sculpture, and Inherent Energetics*. [online] Academia.edu. Available at: <https://academia.edu/resource/work/9876994> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].

Videos:

- Creative Time (2018). *Claire Bishop's 'Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?'* [online] Youtu.be. Available at: <https://youtu.be/CvXhgAmkvLs?si=JnOy4mpEt60iRr6s> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].
- Part, A. (2020). *Relational Aesthetics, Part I*. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://youtu.be/NrT5ITubwqc?si=pZ0vxG_iuBY5UlsA [Accessed 3 Feb. 2025].