

# Exchange Values

## Shelley Sacks

*Eleven Years On*

Exchange Values' first venue was in the UK in 1996, although this social sculpture project started way back: collecting banana skins, in the early seventies in South Africa, and then in a series of pavement actions in Germany in 1974: "Reading the World Economy" through the banana skins, for passersby.

When I began working actively on this project in the UK in 1992, I had no idea that it would inspire and engage so many people from so many different worlds and disciplines. The World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 was the project's ninth venue. Now, in Switzerland at the Goetheanum, eleven years since the first venue in 1996, it has developed a significantly new form. After Switzerland it will hopefully go on to St. Lucia in the Windward Islands.

From the outset I have claimed that the work is not simply a catalyst for discussion, an instrument for promoting an issue. Instead I have spoken about the whole project - including the process with the farmers - as a social sculpture and an imaginative space where inner and outer work coincide.

Working actively with it in all these different contexts, over such a long period, has borne this out and provided the opportunity to further explore the social sculpture ideas, in particular, connections between the aesthetic and eco-social responsibility.

Many people, including farmers' representatives, activists, artists, academics, citizenship educators and of course, consumers, have engaged with the project at each venue, and participated in discussions about the economic, social and ecological issues involved; about our notion of progress; about agriculture and our relationship to food; about the way the project works; how one assesses its 'effectiveness'; and the value of forms of engagement that do not depend on discursive information alone.

These discussions and responses have confirmed that the aesthetic - as the opposite of numbness, of the anesthetic - is closely linked to our ability to respond. In this space -beyond the linear, the literal, the discursive- where the creative imagination weaves and moves, we are moved inwardly and become internally active. Responsibility then has less to do with moral duty, and becomes rather an ability to respond. This kind of response-ability enables us to care at a distance, and to develop the will to act in accord with what we now understand and see.

In this sense this is also a project about different modes of consciousness: about the significance of embodied knowing; about the need to live into the world around us with new eyes, ears and heart; about developing new organs of perception, within the reach of all.

So, although the individual consumer standing in front of a sheet of skin, listening to the voice of the invisible producer who grew that specific box of bananas, is not, in that moment, changing the status quo in any obvious or concrete way, responses suggest other kinds of shifts. For example, the experience of absence is so tangible – of a producer whose 'skin' is stretched before us, whose voice is inside us – that it stirs one imaginatively, provoking an inward movement that we carry outwards into the world. People also describe how the experience has given them a sense of their power to see things differently, and to explore ways of getting involved in shaping a democratic, non-exploitative and ecologically sustainable society.

At the opening of the project in London in 1998, Renwick Rose, one of the farmers representatives, when asked about the significance of this project, said that it had opened up new perspectives, brought people together, connected consumers with producers more deeply than one can through information, but, above all, it had given producers a sense of themselves as artists with the imagination to change their situation and shape a different kind of world.

The forums that take place within the Exchange Values project are similar to the social sculpture 're-envisioning' processes that took place with the farmers in the Windward Islands. Through these processes, new insights, experiences and ideas for action arise. Sometimes these insights and ideas relate more personally to each participant, sometimes they extend quite easily into the wider field. This all depends on who participates. Recently, a cultural geographer, Ian Cook, who has worked closely with Exchange Values for some years, bringing the project into schools and the new citizenship curriculum, has had his masters students go shopping whilst listening to the voice recordings of the farmers on MP3s. Most people struggled to buy anything more than was absolutely necessary.

So, alongside the many organisations and policy makers developing legislation to ensure and enforce sustainable practices, this work takes us into the issues, opening up a space for discussion in a different frame of mind – or is it of heart? Joseph Beuys, James Hillman, Bertold Brecht, David Abram, all emphasise the non-literal in the process of redefining value, progress and reshaping our way of life. This work is part of that ongoing exploration towards a society based on interdependence and deep respect.

In the past 11 years Exchange Values has been in many different contexts, with different groupings of people and somewhat different agendas.

Each of the previous 10 venues has offered unique possibilities.

In London in 1998, as part of the UK Presidency of the EU, Exchange Values became a forum for organizations and consumers to meet with farmers, who were on their way to Maastricht to challenge the WTO special preference regulations. The farmers' representatives highlighted the empowering role that the whole idea of social sculpture – embodied in this project – had played over the previous two years.

In 1999 Exchange Values was part of an international women's studies conference on globalization and gender at Warwick University. The organizers made the radical step of presenting it as a non-text based, keynote presentation. This opened up new dialogues and processes with activists and academics from other disciplines about social sculpture and connective practices. Arising from this, Exchange Values became the focus of a 'Connective Aesthetics' exploration at the International Geographers' Conference in Belfast in 2001.

At the World Summit in 2002 it provided a framework for discussion about all the unseen processes that we take for granted, and about which, we believe, we have little control.

At the International Project Space in Birmingham in 2004, alongside 'citizenship' workshops and a public forum, a two-day 'Think Tank' was convened. Cultural geographers, artists, art and sustainability writers, activists and farmers representatives compared the strategies and methodologies in Exchange Values to forms of action-based social research. Other issues discussed were criteria for effectiveness and Paul Cloke's paper on how the project promotes care at a distance. Farmer's representative, Renwick Rose, describing how Exchange Values overcomes abstractions and reconnects economic issues with human worth, explained why he would like to use Exchange Values as the context for their meetings with the WTO.

And now, in 2007, Exchange Values is at the Goetheanum in Switzerland, as part of Ursache Zukunft/Origin Future: a conference, exhibition and social sculpture process concerned with human dignity and ways of working towards a humane and sustainable world.

Since September 2006, a group of people have been meeting at the Goetheanum, brought together by Vera Koppehel of the Rudolf Steiner Archiv, to explore her proposals for these events. It has been a period of incredibly rich exchanges, right from the start, when I was asked to talk to the organizing group about Exchange Values and the work of the Social Sculpture Research Unit, in Oxford. Members of the Goetheanum Vorstand, Paul Mackay and Bodo von Plato were present. I was especially inspired by our shared sense of the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic, and by the openness and commitment to exploring social sculpture through the Ursache Zukunft/Origin Future processes and events.

In this generous and responsive space a number of exploratory processes have come to life. One of these processes, the "Substanzgruppe", is working with the invisible materials of social sculpture –that is, of thought and speech - to explore what we understand by human dignity and how this manifests in our work, whilst enabling new social sculpture initiatives to be formed.

But there are other inspiring connections. Presenting Exchange Values at the Goetheanum is a wonderful opportunity to have people like Walter Kugler and Ulrich Roesch bring in their perspectives too. They were both exploring alternative social-economic models in groups connected to Beuys and the Free International University that have informed my work as well.

By highlighting significant influences, this text hopes to give a sense of the life and evolution of this project from its early days in Germany, when I was working with Beuys, to this presentation at the Goetheanum in 2007. In his text, Wolfgang Zumdick, curator of the *Ursache Zukunft: Social Sculpture Today* exhibition, describes how Exchange Values has been redeveloped for the Goetheanum; and how dialogue processes are now a formal and integral part of the work.

This new development of Exchange Values also has much to do with being in the Goetheanum. It was not only the physical, spatial factors in the Goetheanum that necessitated changes, but the whole intention of the congress, the ethos of the group and the spirit of the place that have brought the dialogue processes onto center stage; one could say, onto the table!

The large, global assembly-like table is a permanent embodiment of the 'permanent conference' (a phrase used by Beuys to emphasise the centrality of participatory democracy and of the need for negotiating visions and ideas; ideas for a 'dignified' eco-social future "whose origin lie in the future"! ) Exchange Values is a permanent conference opportunity - for new vision, exchange and negotiation. It has to do with imagination, intuition and thinking as artists. It is about rethinking ourselves and our social order, and negotiating all this with each other.

Now, you are all invited to the table as artists: entering deeply into what is problematic; picturing alternative and healthy forms of human life on the planet, and exploring ways to work together, to bring some of these perceptions and insights into form. A Goethean process in the Goetheanum: of coming closer to the dynamic being of an economic system worthy of human beings!

I have always regarded Exchange Values as an instrument that connects the aesthetic and the ethical and involves different modes of consciousness. This is not to be confused with crude forms of instrumentalism... where the processes and objects are simply a means to an end. Here the means is an integral part of the social sculpture, because social sculpture is both inner and outer work, process and goal.

Recently I have begun to describe works that connect the aesthetic and the ethical as 'instruments of consciousness' instead of 'objects of attention'. Such aesthetic/ethical 'instruments of consciousness' are significant in our work towards a humane and viable future, if we see not only the outer work that needs to be done, but that the economic, social and ecological crisis, like any other crisis, is also essentially an opportunity for consciousness.

Exchange Values is privileged to be in this space. I thank everyone who has made it possible.

Shelley Sacks – April 2007

Since 1996 Exchange Values has been presented in the following contexts and venues:

- The Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, Oct. 1996
- The Brixton Gallery, London in conjunction with The UK Presidency Project, May 1998
- The Arena, Oxford Brookes University, November 1998 for the launch of the Social Sculpture Research Unit
- The Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, Warwick University, July 1999 - alongside the conference Women and the Millennium: Gender, Culture and Globalisation

- At three venues in the East of England from February to July 2000, including the Peterborough City Art Gallery, linked to the NGO Banana Link and funded by the Arts Council of England
- The South African National Gallery, Cape Town, April to August 2001 –with support from the British Council
- The Johannesburg Art Gallery: August to December 2002 - to coincide with the 2002 Earth Summit
- International Project Space - Birmingham, UK in collaboration with cultural geographers from the University of Birmingham; Creative Partnerships, Banana Link and WINFA. April to June 2004

Over the years many people have lectured, researched and written about the project including: Dr. Hildegard Kurt, in her book for Agenda 21; Dutch sociologist, Prof. Hans Dieleman –exploring Art and Sustainability; Linda Weintraub in Avant-Guardians; Prof. Jane Rendell in Art and Architecture: A Place Between and Dr. Wallace Heim, in 'Performing Nature', exploring the role of dialogue and conversation in Exchange Values.