



Frontispiece: Joseph Beuys speaking in front of the basalt stones for his action *7000 Oaks* at Documenta 7, Kassel, 1982.

**From Land Art to Eco Art: An exploration of Joseph Beuys' pivotal social sculpture, *7000 Oaks – City Forestation* instead of *City Administration* as a bridge between the two to inform the author's developing practice.**

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January 2020

*“One does not need to be a great seer to predict that the relationship between humans and nature will, in all probability, be the most important question of the present century”*

Philippe Descola, *The Ecology of Others* (2013)

**Contents:**

	Page
<b>1 Introduction</b>	3
<b>2 Land Art: Origins and development</b>	5
<b>3 Eco Art: Origins and development</b>	10
<b>4 Joseph Beuys: Social Sculpture and 7,000 Oaks</b>	
Beuys' social sculpture	15
Beuys' growing environmental concern	17
<i>7,000 Oaks – City Forestation instead of City Administration</i>	19
Legacy	22
Critiques of Beuys and his work	24
Discussion	27
<b>5 Positioning the author's practice</b>	29
<b>6 Conclusions</b>	34
<b>7 Bibliography</b>	38
<b>8 List of Illustrations</b>	44
<b>9 Appendix: Remember Nature Manifesto, Phil Barton (2017 -19)</b>	47

(6,179 words – excluding footnotes and sections 7 - 9)

# 1. Introduction

Mark Cheetham's recent book *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature since the '60s* (2018) provides a helpful overview of the developments in representation of Nature by artists in the western cannon. In the first chapter of his book, he traces 'Landscape Art' (broadly 18<sup>th</sup> Century until 1914) as an industrial and imperialistic manifestation, 'Land Art' in the 1960's which emerged as part of a wider post-modernist rejection of galleries, the art market and art as art-object (see Lippard 1997 for example) alongside a growing environmental and political activism and 'Eco Art', the art of the Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>, which draws on both previous traditions and works across boundaries inside/outside, nature/artificial, aesthetics/science, object/concept, nature/politics, *embracing 'a range of contemporary practices that investigate the environmental, aesthetic, social and political relationships between human and nonhuman animals as well as inanimate material through the visual arts* (p1)'.

German artist, Joseph Beuys announced his important work *7,000 Oaks – City Forestation instead of City Administration*<sup>2</sup> at Documenta 7 in 1982. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst the concept is now almost universally accepted (see Anthropocene Working Group of Subcommission of Quaternary Stratigraphy (2019), a part of the international Union of Geological Sciences, for example), there is a growing and contested body of art practice and criticism in relation to the term 'Anthropocene'. Acknowledged by Cheetham: *'...now variously called the 'Anthropocene'..., the 'Capitalocene' (Jason W Moore) and the Chthulocene' (Donna Haraway)...Jussi Parikka's memorable neologism 'Anthrobscene'...' (2018 p 4), 'Gynecene' (Pirici and Voinea) and the splendid 'Plasticene' (Davies) (Demos, 2017), criticism of the term has been turned into something of an academic art-form in its own right by T J Demos in *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (2017). There is not space here to consider this in depth, and this is not an essay about the, increasingly less contested, climate and ecological emergency for which there is almost universal scientific recognition (Meadows et al, 2005; Ceballos et al, 2017; IPCC, 2018; ISPPBES, 2019). It is important, however, to acknowledge the unjust, dominant and culturally and ecologically destructive nature of Western capitalism, values and arrogance and a reaction to this is central to the emergence of Eco Art practice since the 1970s (Weintroub, 2012; Demos 2016, 2017; Cheetham 2018).*

<sup>2</sup> The work's full title is important, referring to Beuys' intention that it be created as a social sculpture, but it is hereafter referred to as *'7000 Oaks'* for reasons of brevity.

‘completed’, in the sense that all the trees had been planted, a year after his death in 1986. In this essay we will test the hypothesis that this work, a culmination of Beuys’ social sculpture and ecological work in the 1970s and 80s, was an important and pivotal work in the artistic shift from Land Art to Eco Art identified by Cheetham.

This paper is based on research carried out by the author over the summer of 2019 and prior research into Land Art, together with his career experience and learning over 35 years in local environmental regeneration <sup>3</sup>. It aims to establish a locus for the author’s artistic practice and ecological concern within contemporary art and society which has been developing since the 1990s. This subject is returned to at the end of the paper.

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<sup>3</sup> A paper, submitted to *Voluntary Sector Review*, Policy Press co-authored with four colleagues (Barton et al, 2019). It describes and reflects on this environmental work in North West England between 1980 and 2010. Copies are available on request from the author.

## 2. Land art: Origins and development



Figure 1: Claus Oldenberg  
*Placid Civil Monument* (1967)  
in Central Park, New York

The New York Earth Works (October 1968) and Earth Art (February 1969) exhibitions are generally recognised as the first expression<sup>4</sup> of what commentators agree was never a movement, but rather a common theme which emerged for a number of artists at around the same time (Beardsley, 2006; Malpas, 2012; Kastner & Wallis, 1998).

Oldenberg's ground-breaking (sic) *Placid Civic Monument* (1967) in Central Park was a response to the Sculpture in Environment exhibition of that year. A grave-like hole dug one morning and filled in after lunch, it attracted media notoriety, including a cartoon captioned: '*A conceptual work of art is as valid as something you can actually see*' (Boettger, 2002, p1).

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<sup>4</sup> Although there were earlier precursors, including Marcel Duchamp's 1949 *50cc Air de Paris*, Canadian Vaillancourt's social public performance sculpture series *The Tree of Durocher St.* (1953-55) and Herman de Vries' *Zero Work* (1962) (Grande, 2009).



Figure 2: (Left to right) Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty* (1970) Utah; Michael Heizer *Double Negative* (1969) Nevada; Dennis Oppenheim *Cancelled Crop* (1969) Holland

The five American exhibitors in Earth Art rapidly built a substantial body of work which involved physical alterations to (often) wilderness environment on a substantial scale (Figure 2).

*'Pretty little watercolours these are not. Made by bulldozers and dynamite instead of a paintbrush and easel, the works – often sited on baking sandscapes – fuse minimalism and modern industrial aesthetics...'* (Needham, 2016)

This original group of artists were soon criticised by the ecological movement for their physical interventions in wilderness – much to Smithson's frustration, complaining that *'"the ecology thing" had become "like the official religion now", and he insisted that he was "totally concerned with making art".'* (quoted in Bourden, 1995 p 223) - and by feminists who, during the 1970's, introduced a less invasive approach which connected their bodies with nature and the cycles of both (Tufnell 2006). For example, Ana Mendieta's series made between 1973 and 1980 which included her





Figure 3: Ana Manidieta (1976)  
*Tree of Life*

body or the outline of her body transformed by natural materials: *“Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body”* (Manidieta, in Palechickstudio, 2013).

In contrast, artists working in the UK have tended to produce *“pretty little watercolours”* see themselves working *‘...in nature, with intimate hands, an approach, less about domination than detail in the land’* (Grande, 2009 p47).

Richard Long, who also took part in Earth Art, denies being part of the Land Art tradition which he sees as *“...a term coined by American curators or critics to define an American movement...”* (op. cit. p44). Long started the ball rolling with *Line Made By Walking* (1967) and was quickly joined by Hamish Fulton, David Nash, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Chris Drury and Andy Goldsworthy, whose first work was made in 1976 who took their practice in a very different directions to either the American Land/Earth artists or the pioneering Eco artists:

*‘Goldsworthy, Fulton, Drury, Nash et al, are part of the Romantic tradition<sup>5</sup>, as expressed in British landscape art.’* (Malpass, 2005, p103).

Except for Finlay who has died, they are all still making similar artworks today.

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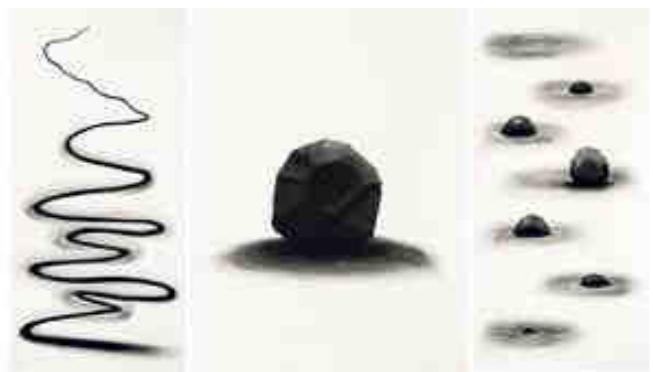
<sup>5</sup> Romanticism is defined by The Tate (no date) as: *‘Term in use by the early nineteenth century to describe the movement in art and literature distinguished by a new interest in human psychology, expression of personal feeling and interest in the natural world’*. The Romantic Era is generally considered to encompass the late



Figure 4: (Left to right above) Richard Long (1967) *A Line Made By Walking Bristol*; Andy Goldsworthy (1976) *Stones Sinking In Sand* Morecambe Bay; David Nash (1977) *Wooden Boulder* Snowdonia



(Left to right below) Andy Goldsworthy *Passage* (2014-15); Richard Long *Red Ring* (2017); David Nash *Wooden boulder triptych* (2016);




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Eighteenth and first half of the Nineteenth Century as a reaction against classicism, rationalism and the industrial revolution in western Europe.

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Figure 5: Allan Kaprow (1975) *Echo-Logy*

As early as 1975 Kaprow was carrying out a *'collective social action with nature'* in a series of performances called *Echo-Logy* in New Jersey. By the early 1980s, Agnes Denes declared that the *"new role of the artist is to create an art that is more than decoration, commodity or political tool...Ecological or Environmental art"* (in Tufnell, 2006). By 2010 Boetzkes stated that *'It is impossible to ignore the fact that environmental crisis has become a central concern in contemporary art...'* (p23) Tufnell's (op.cit., pp15-16) characterisation of Land art as *'an immediate and visceral interaction with landscape, nature and the environment...'* seems thin.

*'Eco-art was supplanting land art as a movement. Artists had begun to consider the ecology of human and natural relationships within their practice'* (Grande, 2009 p 47).

### 3. Eco Art: Origins and development

Regenerative work by, for example, Hans Haacke, Agnes Deanes, Betty Beaumont and Robert Morris, had already tackled pollution and ground degradation in artworks including *Rhine Water Purification Plant*, *Wheatfield*, *Ocean Landmark Project* (1980) & *Johnson Pit #30* (1979) by the time of the Landmarks exhibition in



Figure 6: Agnes Deans (1982) *Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan, New York*; Hans Haacke (1972) *Rhine River Purification Plant* Krefeld, Germany

1984. when Grande reports that ‘...*the borders between land art, environmental art, and earth art had blurred...Concept was ceding to an endless dialogue with nature*’ (2009, p48).

Cheetham’s review of Eco Art begins by pointing out that ‘*responses to perceived planetary crisis are as numerous as the disquiet around climate change is extensive*’ (2018). This has resulted in works which ‘*are embroiled in cultural and scientific ideas*’ and ‘*transcend conventional borders of inquiry*’ (op cit p 3). He identifies three tendencies – direct action, aesthetic separation and withdrawal, and articulation (p 9). Sanders (1992) proposes a trilogy of ways in which eco artists affect

audiences: through shock and humour, education and political activism or actions, all of which are needed to *'reach a diverse audience'* (p77).

The four examples above are early remedial direct actions, and incorporate aspects of Saunders' education (Hacke, Beaumont), shock and humour (Deans) and political activism (all four). The latter has since widened to incorporate direct political protest into artworks – *No Third Runway* (2008) Kennard & Phillips commissioned by Greenpeace or *'Red Rebel Brigade'* (2019) created by Doug Francis of Invisible Circus for Extinction Rebellion, for example – which raise important questions as to the boundaries between art and protest.

Weintraub (2012) analyses Eco Artwork against four parameters – Art Genres, Art Strategies, Eco Issues and Eco Approaches. In all its variety she asserts its underlying principle as being *'that humans are not more important than other entities on Earth'* (p7). Anything else is anthropocentrism.



Figure 7: (left) *No Third Runway* (2008) Kennard & Phillips for Greenpeace  
(above) *'Red Rebel Brigade'* (2019) created by Doug Francis of Invisible Circus for Extinction Rebellion  
Humour and poetry for political protest respectively

Cheetham seeks to draw distinction *'between aesthetic and artistic dimensions of eco-art and more overtly political pursuits'* through a process of articulation. This author is not convinced however and prefers to side with Miles' claim that Eco Art crosses boundaries to such an extent that it does not matter *'whether it is art or something else'* as long as has the *'aim to shift the balance of humanity's relationship with the earth from exploitation to sustenance'* (2018, p 202) and with Sanders' *'constructive postmodernism'* with diverse methods to *'restore ecological sanity'* (1992, p77). Cheetham relies on an argument that human naming and categorising practices are more important than intent, an argument this author finds unconvincing.

Given the 'ecocide' currently wrought on the natural world by humankind, and particularly western societies, one must consider an appropriate response to Aldorno's *'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'* (1997). We must ask whether art can justifiably be produced where it uses the very anthropomorphic methods, technologies, and (capitalist) culture which has brought about ecocide and climate change? Metzger believed so, producing Auto-Destructive artwork which challenged capitalist culture and establishing the anti-nuclear Committee of 100 during the 1960s. He took direct action and defended himself in court thus: *"there can be absolute [nuclear] obliteration at any moment. I have no other choice than to assert my right to live"* (quoted by Wilson in Cole (Ed) 1999, p74). It seems to the author that, despite all the odds, we must ultimately agree with Mezger (2015) and it is clear that many Eco artists also agree:

*"The art, architecture and design world needs to take a stand against the ongoing erasure of species – even where there is little chance of ultimate success. It is our privilege and our duty to be at the forefront of the struggle.*

*There is no choice but to follow the path of ethics into aesthetics. We live in societies suffocating in waste.”*

One response has been for artists to withdraw and Boetzkes argues that many Eco Art projects offer a medium which makes the earth newly visible and thus ‘asserts its irreducibility to human signification’ and making the art respectful of nature’s otherness (2010, quoted in Cheetham 2018 p13). The question of ‘site’ (in the field) and ‘non-site’ (the gallery) goes back to Robert Smithson and is exploited by Haake, in recreating a stylised water purification system in a gallery just downstream from the real thing or by Roni Horn’s *Vatnasafn/ Library of Water* (2007) which presents a ‘library’ of Icelandic melted glacier ice in a former library of books.



Figure 8: Roni Horn *Water, Sampled from Vatnasafn / Library of Water* 2007



Surely it is the boundaries between things; at the intersections – between humans and nature, art and politics, inside and outside, entropy and chaos and across systems, disciplines, professions, cultures to name a few – as in so much of life, that the most interesting ideas and work occurs. Boundary articulations are at the heart of Eco Art in both senses of the word; exploring and expressing them and bringing things together across boundaries to join them up or to separate them again. Cheetham's book accepts the premise that Eco Art *'maintains this plasticity [In that that culture will always be changing and contested], this proximity to and aesthetic distance from the earth'* can be *'both political and aesthetic'* and that this is made possible by *'playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between art and non-art'* (op. cit. pp 17-18).

Which brings us to Joseph Beuys who, in the eyes of Haxthausen, saw no distinction between thought and art and *'expanded the concept of art to encompass all human creativity. Sculpture for him was synonymous with articulation, articulation in any medium, from pure thought to the social structure'* (1992, p258-259) and it is to him that we now turn.

## 4. Joseph Beuys: Social Sculpture and 7,000 Oaks

### Beuys' Social Sculpture

Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) witnessed a Nazi book burning in 1933, enlisted in the German air force and was interred as a prisoner of war. In 1946 he began a forty-year career as an artist, deciding not to formally train as a scientist (Ackerman et al, 2010, p16). In many ways his life, like that of his compatriot, Gustav Metzger (Wilson, 2017), was shaped by his war-time experiences.

Gene Ray identifies two key artistic projects throughout Joseph Beuys' career: '*...a project of mourning [the Holocaust] in parallel to the declared project of social sculpture. Or the "expanded concept of art"*' (2001, p 3).

Over a long, complex and contested career, many important ideas, representations and engagements were present. Before considering his environmental work, it is important to briefly consider two of his linked central concerns - social sculpture and, as a key element, education/activism. Krauss reports Beuys' drive towards a total system in which everything is incorporated into '*social structure*' and his belief that everyone can be assimilated into this structure – "*every man<sup>6</sup> is an artist; every speech act is a sculpture*" (in Mesch & Michely, 2007, p170).

Beuys' concept of 'social sculpture' originates in the anarchist wing of the Socialist International arising from the work of Kropotkin and Reclus, is influenced by Steiner's "*threefold social order*" (Adams, 1992, p26)) and results in Beuys' definition of art as

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<sup>6</sup> Where contemporaneous quotations are used, the gender usage of the speaker or writer at the time is not altered, even where, as here, it is likely that the speaker or writer would have used a gender-neutral form of words today.

an ethical model that opens upon the freedom of co-operative action within society. In 1973 he stated:

*“EVERYTHING HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who...learns to determine the other positions in THE TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. Self-determination and the participation in the sculptural sphere (freedom); in the structuring of laws (democracy); and in the sphere of economics (socialism). Self-administration and decentralisation (threefold structure) occurs...”* (Beuys, 1973 quoted in Bellman, (1995) pp 190/1)



Figure 9: *Honey Pump at the Workplace*, Documenta 6, 1977  
Beuys (back to camera) at a session of the Free International University in Kassel

Central to social sculpture was his educational, ecological and political activism. He taught monumental sculpture at the Dusseldorf Academy of Fine Art from 1961 until dismissed for refusing to countenance entry qualifications and Beuys went on

to establish the Free International University (FIU) with Heinrich Böll in 1972. He held a hundred-day session of the FIU at 1977 Documenta 6 in Kassel's Meuseum Fridericianum surrounded by a *Honey Pump at the Workplace* which forced two tonnes of honey around the Museum. The artist 'accounted for his ideas about *how art and society had necessarily got to change*' supported by extensive use of blackboards' (Steidl and Staeck, 1997).

Bellman says that:

*'As a practicing artist, Beuys worked, forcefully, in futuro; with conviction. ...from the perspective of a forward-looking, optimistic, generous, uninhibited, courageous, resolved and visionary position that are first achievedachieved, independently, 'on a human scale' and then regenerated...for the wider, collective use of contemporary society'* (op cit, p186).

### Beuys' Growing Environmental concern

Turning to Beuys' response to Nature, Adams argues that he was '*not only a radical ecologist, but also a pioneer instigator of the role of art in forging radical ecological paradigms for the relationships between humankind and the natural environment*' (1992, p26). During the 1970s, Beuys led several ecological protest actions beginning with *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now* protecting woodland in Dusseldorf and *Bog Action*, in threatened wetlands on the Zuider Zee, both in 1971. The following year he set up his *Office for the Organisation of Direct Democracy by Plebiscite* at Documenta 5 (Körner & Bellin Harder, 2009, p6)



Figure 10: Social sculpture; *Bog Action* (left) and *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now*, Two early ecological actions led by Joseph Beuys in 1971, shortly after the New York advent of Land Art

and gave a series of lectures over 100 days *‘which gave expression to his vision of a union of movements: the environmental, peace, ethnic, women’s, civil rights and spiritual, and included many subjects of ecological interest, such as nuclear energy and its alternatives, and urban decay’* (op cit, p 27).

Over the same decade, Beuys also tackled ecological issues through establishing, or helping to establish, political organisations, from the German Student Party (1967) to the German Green Party, for which he stood unsuccessfully for the Bundestag in 1976 and the European Parliament in 1979.



## 7,000 Oaks – City Forestation instead of City Administration

Perhaps his most substantial ecological sculpture was 7,000 Oaks which he initiated at Documenta 7 (1982) and which was 'completed', in the sense that all the trees had been planted, after his death in 1986, at Documenta 8.

At Documenta 7 he exhibited a triangular pile of 7,000 basalt stones pointing towards an oak tree outside Kassel's Fredericiunum and planted the first oak tree himself (figure 11). Organisations and individuals were encouraged to buy the stones in order to finance the completion of the work. This sculpture was intended to disappear over time and be replaced by a 'social sculpture' as citizens actively engaged in planting the work in their communities around Kassel (North 1990, p862).

From the outset Beuys intended it incorporate "*the effects of time*" in the '*life of humanity with the social body of the future*' (p6) and Körner & Bellin-Harder (2009) go on to report Beuys' intention thus:

*"Working with trees is a new step. ... I want to go outside more and more to be the interface between questions of nature and the questions of people at their workplaces. It will be a self-renewing activity; it will be a healing process for all the questions that confront us ... That is my main aim"*

(Beuys, 1982 cited op. cit., p 7).



Figure 11: 7,000 Oaks at the time the sculpture was initiated in Kassel in 1982

The triangular pile of basalt steles ready to be purchased and ‘planted’ with the oak trees around the city (left) and Joseph Beuys planting the first of the 7,000 oaks

Each tree planted was accompanied by a basalt stele and Körner & Bellin-Harder<sup>7</sup> report that initially Beuys intended the stone to represent antiquity, steadfastness and security and the young tree for youth and vulnerability and that, as the tree grew, it would appear larger and increasingly powerful. He chose 7,000 because it was Documenta 7, he related to the names of Sevenoaks in Kent and Seven Oaks in the USA and “*seven trees do not make a forest, and neither do seventy, but seven thousand are a bit closer*” (p 8). He chose the oak for its Celtic and druidic connections. He chose Kassel because he wanted to plant in the city, at the time a controversial step as to whether it was appropriate at all and, if it was, how it should be done (p 6).

Urban re-forestation of cities was a new concept and was not initially popular with either the city leaders and managers, or with the general public. Beuys worked with the University to organise the planting and subsequent maintenance but was abandoned by his patrons ‘*because they were unable to*

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<sup>7</sup> Their reporting on Beuys’ artistic intention for the work relies heavily on Groener & Kandler (1987), editors of a near contemporary text in German not available to the current author.

*classify his trees as a work for art collection’ and he had major difficulties raising the money to pay for the project (op cit, pp. 8-9). Indeed, during a visit to Japan in 1984 Beuys appeared in a television advertisement for Nikka Whiskey and ‘...was repeatedly confronted about the perceived hypocrisy of collaborating with the industrial and retail conglomerate Seibu, which in exchange for his agreement to do the exhibition contributed 500 trees to his 7,000 Oaks project’ (Maerkele, 2010).*



Figure 12: *7,000 Oaks*, Kassel (detail) at the time of the author’s visit to Documenta 14 in September 2017.

In terms of Beuys’ intention, Rosenthal and Rainbird cite it as a *‘total work of art’* (2005, p 136), Schermer sees it as *‘expanded art’* (1996, p 29) and Adams as *‘an ecological sign’* and quotes Beuys as saying:

*“I found it necessary to go on...with a political movement related to every field of society. Not only towards ecological problems in democracy, but also to the freedom problem in creativity and then later in economics also...until we perform the intellectual action which extends [from ecology] to the fields of culture, economy and democratic rights”* (Adams 1992, pp 7-8; author’s emphasis).

## The Legacy of 7000 Oaks

Today *7000 Oaks* is managed by the City of Kassel with volunteer input and supported by charitable organisation, The 7000 Oaks Foundation, and has been recognised as a historical landmark. Körner & Bellin-Harder identify some challenges and defects in the trees' management regime, but also highlight the works' adoption by local people and its designation as a national monument (2009).

Its legacy is clear - in the fabric and culture of Kassel itself and in the impact it had *'as a symbol of the urban greening movement of the 1970s and 1980s'* (op cit, p 17). When the current author was starting his career in urban regeneration with Manchester City Council he was inspired to advocate an 'ecological approach' to urban landscape regeneration. Urban Nature and ecological landscapes are now mainstream (although still insufficiently widespread) in towns and cities throughout the developed world and Beuys' work in Kassel was undoubtedly one of the strands in this development.

In his review of the history of environmental art, Grande, reporting on a 1980's *'ecological revolution'* state that 7,000 Oaks *'brought social sculpture to the forefront of the art world and made tree-planting social sculpture'* (2009, p48). Blandy et al confirm his legacy *'through the work of artists who are self-consciously ecological'* (1998, p233) whilst Weintraub (2012) includes Beuys as a *'Twentieth-century Eco Art Pioneer'*.

*7000 Oaks* is still being cited as an important and influential work. Cheetham includes it and cites the work as having influenced other artists including Areen, quoted as saying the work: *'helped lay the foundation for the radical manifesto of art*



*for the twenty first century'* (p203), Dion for whom it was an inspiration (p56) and Huygh whom it similarly influenced (p46) (all in Cheetham, 2018).

And there are a number of direct imitations, for example: Ackroyd & Harvey (2019) *Beuys' Acorns* and projects in New York City (DIA Art Foundation, 2019), Scotland (Devorian Projects, 2015) and Baltimore (UMBC, 2019).



Figure 13: 7,000 Oaks legacy projects in London (left) and Chelsea, New York (right).



Figure 14: One of the Ackroyd & Harvey oaks was located in The Street at Central Saint Martins on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019 as part of the author's artwork *Day of Action to Remember Nature* at which he proclaimed his *Remember Nature Manifesto* (see Appendix) on the 4<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Gustav Metzger's original call to action issued at the same location in 2015 (Wilkes & Monsuto, 2019).



## Critiques of Beuys and his work

Joseph Beuys was not without his critics! Despite his widespread influence, many have questioned his philosophy, his politics, his artistic capability and his claims. We will briefly examine some of the principle criticisms here.

Beuys was a complex and contradictory personality. de Duve identifies a whole range of *bi-cephalic avatars* demonstrating his 'indefatigable evangelism', 'revolutionary & evolutionary optimism' and 'political combativeness' and include: leader and victim, shaman and sham, the king and his fool<sup>8</sup>. He expands one example – whereas Beuys 'claimed a forward-looking, emancipatory theory of social sculpture, he often gave his work and archaic, purportedly timeless look. In fact both theory and look are dated' and quotes Michelson as pointing out that his fascination with electrical energy refers to theories and electrical 'contraptions' that became obsolete around 1830, 'just after Faraday' (1988, pp 49 – 51). And the result is, on the one hand an inspiring approach for some and for others contradictory and shallow.

Thus Peter Fuller calls him 'that low charlatan', not a competent sculptor or maker of marks and compositions, the author of 'mixed media prank[s]' and the 'nasty by-product of a cynically contrived personality cult.' Hilton is reported as saying 'Beuys's description of his work is simultaneously grand and meaningless...but as an impresario of nothingness he had a successful career...' (both quoted in Lamb, 1995, p58). Lamb goes on to emphasise that 'science, art, nature and society were not just co-extensive, but interactive, working on one another like mutually energising force-

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<sup>8</sup> The full list is impressive and also includes: 'victim and redeemer...chief and child, priest and scapegoat, shepherd and coyote, stag and hare, composed and thalidomide baby, social reformer and rebel, legislator and outlaw, statesman and prisoner, mediator and recluse, orator and deaf-mute, prophet and buffoon, professor and student, utopianist of the future and embalmer of the past.' Clearly Beuys was truly articulating the boundaries!

*fields'* (op cit p 60). This view is one which particularly resonates with the current author, but also with contemporary systems thinking of Timothy Morton's ecological "*mesh*" (2007) or the more accessible Donut Economics (Raworth, 2017).

Another major critique, this time of Beuys' politics, is his presumed acceptance of capitalism<sup>9</sup>. We have already seen the disquiet evident in Japan regarding his whisky advertising, but Germer (1988) gives a lengthy account of Broodthaers' challenge to Beuys for continuing to exhibit in the Guggenheim despite its refusal to show Hans Haake's documentations of Manhattan real estate holdings. Beuys '*avoids the issue of social relevance of his activity by...the aestheticization of the political...thus making state and society into artistic creations*' (p68) and turning them into works of sculpture. Germer shows that, combining elements of Steiner's thought, Fluxus concepts of '*extended creativity*' and the slogans of German extra-parliamentary opposition '*formed less a coherent political programme than a monumental apology for the artist*' (op cit p70). North adds to the critique, pointing out that Beuys also called his work '*social architecture*', a term perilously close to the '*human architecture*' of the Nazis and queries the ambiguous relationship between the avant-garde and power (1990, p868).

Germer goes on to argue that belief in the power of creativity as proposed by Beuys is both utopian, because it gives labour power back to individuals and thus undermines capitalist division of labour, and reactionary, because it denies the social preconditions which prevent individuals from choosing to re-appropriate their labour power. Beuys fell victim to the resultant denial of the social constraints on production

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting, however, that subsequently influential environmentalists Paul Hawken (Hawken et al, 1999) and Jonathan Porritt (2006) identified capitalism as the only show in town, which needed fundamental reformation rather than rejection.

by side-stepping the commodity status of the art object (a unit of production) by *'regressing to a pre-societal state, archaically defining his work through the presence of the artist'* (p73). This in turn enabled him to acknowledge the particularity of his art objects whilst still claiming his practice to be universal.

de Duve too explores Beuys work in relation to the means of production. Creating an aura as a bohemian, in fact Beuys – and other artists - is a proletarian, forced as s/he is to sell their labour through the medium of art objects (commodities) they make (1988, pp 51 – 52). Beuys, he suggests, wears two faces of modernity: the *'public, revolutionary, pedagogical face...convinced that adequate teaching will liberate [proletarian] creativity; and the secret, insane, rebellious face ...that claims that creativity...lies fallow and in waiting, crude and savage...'* (op. cit, p56). For de Duve, it is time that will tell whether the objects (sculpture, drawings) *'fetishised by the negrophilic art market'* will survive *'the ruin of social sculpture'* (p62) whilst North queries whether artistic autonomy and freedom of the individual viewer is possible in public places and, if not, asserts that artists *'are merely decorating it with mass ornaments'* (1990, p879).

## Discussion:

So where does this leave Joseph Beuys, 7,000 Oaks and the transition from Land to Eco Art? There is no doubt that Beuys has been highly influential on a whole generation of younger artists. Indeed, de Duve (1988) concludes that only Warhol equals Beuys in legend-value over the twenty years prior to his paper: '*Beuys is a hero and Warhol is a star*'. Beuys '*wanted to incarnate the proletariat*', Warhol '*wanted to be a machine*'.

As we have seen, it is true that Beuys' politics and philosophy were partial, confused and open to justified criticism. He looked to the past, to (German) mythology, to outdated science, to an outdated political philosophy and his work encompassed logical tensions, some slight of thought and personal charisma. In 2019 western democracies his optimism looks misplaced and his belief in direct democracy and social sculpture a distant pipe dream, despite the efforts of many campaigners and activists

And yet, many of his ideas and approaches are today as relevant as ever. From his conviction that society, nature, art and science are inter-dependent and interacting to his commitment to teaching and engagement through actions.

Arguably, his overtly ecological social sculptures - *Bog Action*, *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now* and *7,000 Oaks* - are works which sidestep some of the heaviest critiques of his work. In none of them is there an art object which can be commodified and, indeed, in the case of the latter, it is reported that his patrons rejected the work precisely because of this. They were at least partly successful as social sculptures in so far that the works were democratised through direct action in

opposition to state resistance and addressed aspects of each of the three dimensions discussed above – freedom, democracy and economics. Each work challenged market capitalism, sought to exercise democratic rights and encourage self-determination and participation in the sculpture whether through protest or ecological remediation. And, of course, this social sculpture has survived any “ruin” and is clearly more than “*decoration with mass ornaments*”.



Figure 15: The basalt steles in a disordered pile at Documenta 7 (1982). It took five years for the sculpture to be fully disassembled and re-assembled throughout Kassel at the feet of 7000 trees, transforming a material sculpture into a social sculpture in the process.



## 5. Positioning the author's practice



Figure 16: Phil Barton (1995 – 2015) *Nature Rearranged*  
Photographic project. Three images from an extensive photographic project conducted over twenty years and involving site specific ephemeral works made with materials found at each site.

At the outset we stated our objective to use the research process set out here to help “*establish a locus for [the current author’s] artistic practice and ecological concern within contemporary art and society*”.

From the mid 1990’s, the author began a twenty-year project, *Nature Rearranged*, inspired by the land artists, and particularly Andy Goldsworthy, following a visit to an exhibition by him in Wigan. The project involved moving, initially natural, but later also artificial, materials found in situ.



Figure 17: Phil Barton [Re]Cycling Tree (May/June 2017)  
Installation view, All Saints Park, Manchester

The work demonstrates the value of urban trees, with the coloured balls representing atoms of Oxygen, Hydrogen, Carbon and Nitrogen involved in photosynthesis – carbon capture and storage and atmospheric oxygen are bi-products – and the absorption of toxic oxides of Nitrogen.

More recently, and particularly following resignation from Keep Britain Tidy in 2015, his artworks have taken on a more engaged and political aspect, sitting alongside, and complementary to, his work in the community, often with his civil partner Helena Kettleborough (Kettleborough, 2019; Barton and Bishop, 2019; Kettleborough et al in Dunn et al, 2019). Recent projects include *Oxford Road Murders*, a postal work protesting the loss of mature trees to development in Manchester (2015 – 18), *[Re]Cycling Tree* (2017) which sought to make visible the value of urban trees as life support and *Maw Macaws, No Maw Saws* (2019, with

Catherine Herbert), a participative work installed at Tate Exchange and St James Piccadilly last year.

Research conducted by the author in 2017 led him to be critical of UK Land Art and artists, in that they ignored the damage and threats to the landscapes and nature in which they worked, but his further 2019 research has located his work in the realm of Eco Art as explored above. *7000 Oaks*, admired by the author since its inception and influential on his thinking in relation to urban design and Nature in cities has come to have inspiration for him as an artist as well as an environmental regeneration practitioner.



Figure 18: Phil Barton *The Oxford Road Murders* (Detail, 15<sup>th</sup> March & 10<sup>th</sup> October 2018)  
 A series of 19 postcards recording the death of trees along Manchester's Oxford Road Corridor,  
 Manchester between April 2015 and November 2017  
 posted to 96 recipients between 6<sup>th</sup> November 2017 and 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018





Figure 19: Barton & Herbert (January 2019) Maw Macaws (Tate Exchange, exhibition view)

As a result of this awareness, the author has developed the model for his practice (Figure 18) first articulated in 2017 whilst undertaking a Foundation Art course at Manchester School of Art in response the twin calls by German-born artists Joseph Beuys and Gustav Metzger who challenged artists to lead the way in building a “*sick world*” into a “*healthy world*” (Beuys 1982) <sup>10</sup> and in taking action to “*Remember Nature*” (Metzger, 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> “Art is, then, a genuinely human medium for revolutionary change in the sense of completing the transformation from a sick world to a healthy one. In my opinion only art is capable of doing it.” This quotation is regularly reported on websites (for example *Art Quotes* and *Quotepark.com*), but I have yet to find a reliable source for it. It is, however, exactly the sort of thing one would have expected him to say!

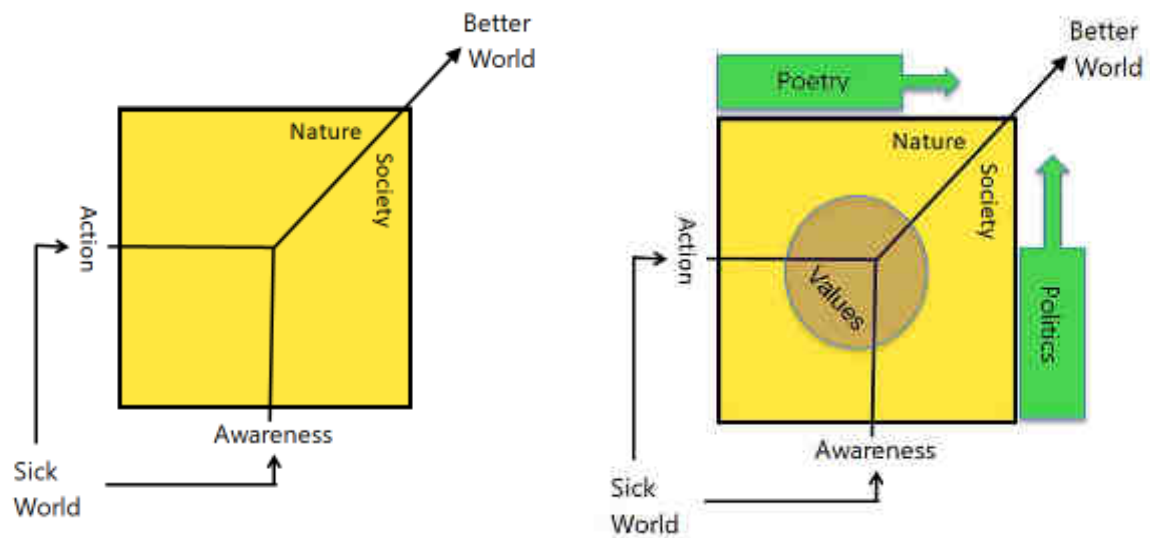


Figure 20: The author's models for developing his practice; As articulated in March 2017 in the context of his reading on Land Art (left) and as adapted in October 2019 following additional research into the development of Eco Art (right).

The origins of this research paper were the author's dissatisfaction with Land art as the basis for his practice. The research undertaken has made clear that he is firmly working in the Eco art tradition, with which he feels much more comfortable. As a result, he has adapted the model for his practice as shown in Figure 20 above. In the light of further reflection since the autumn, the author is inclined to include aesthetics as well as poetry in the top green box in the model, widening the idea of beauty in his work to include visual as well as emotional dimensions <sup>11</sup>. He might also usefully add a symbol to indicate that 'nature' and 'society' are equal, indicating that his practice is not anthropocentric (Wientraub, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January 2020) defines aesthetics as: "*the formal study of art, especially in relation to the idea of beauty*" and poetry as "*a very beautiful or emotional quality*".



## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we have explored the genesis and development of Land Art and its successor, Eco Art from the late 1960s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. We have briefly and critically examined Joseph Beuys' social sculpture and environmental art works which developed during the last twenty years of his life from about 1970 to 1986. In doing so we have focused particularly on *7,000 Oaks - City Forestation instead of City Administration* (1982 – 1987), examining its legacy and discussing its importance in the development of Eco Art during the same period. Finally, we have briefly considered the significance of these development for the authors professional and artistic practice.

It is clear from this review that Beuys had an important role in the move to politicise environmental art in the 1970s and 80s. Writers as varied as Bellman (1988), Adams (1992), Scharmer (1996), Blandy et al (1998), Rosenthal and Rainbird (2005), Grande (2008), Weintraub (2012) and Cheetham (2018) are unanimous on this.

That is not to say that his work, including his 'social sculpture' have not, as we have seen, been heavily criticised, sometimes vituperatively. It is clear that, amongst critics (Peter Fuller, Hilton both in Lamb, 1995), academics (de Duve, 1988, Gormer, 1988, North, 1990, artists (Broodthaers) and the public (Maerkle, 2010). Indeed, he appears to have had a real ability to divide opinion, with those listed in the previous paragraph, together with Lamb (1995) and Körner & Bellin-Harder (2009) holding much more positive views.

Beuys' environmental sculptures, of which *7,000 Oaks* is the culmination, in the author's opinion avoid many of the criticisms levelled against him. They are perhaps

his closest approximation to his own definition of 'social sculpture', demonstrating three of the key aspects he identified as central - "*Self-determination and participation in the sculptural sphere...; in the structuring of laws; and in the sphere of economics...*" (in Bellman, 1995) and they rely less on Beuys' political theory, mythologizing and his particular 'brand' of science. They are responding to direct challenges and socio-economic conflicts in the 'real' world of land development and city fabric. And insights into the development of 7000 Oaks is charming and practical – stone for maturity and steadfastness to protect a vulnerable sapling, his play on 7 and its powers of 10 until "*seven thousand are a bit closer*" to making up a forest and his attraction to the names of settlements Sevenoaks and Seven Oaks (Korner and Bellin-Harder, 2009)

We have examined the origin and development of Land Art as part of the revolt against modernism, the (white cube) gallery and the art market (Lippard 1997), but already by the early 1970s, Beuys, Manidieta, Haake, Kaprow and others were making political work challenging humanity's relationship to the land and nature. By the Millennium, this process had accelerated, with both Weintraub (2012) and Cheetham (2018) identifying a raft of Eco artists working in different ways to re-balance the anthropocentric approach to nature of western culture, capitalism and imperialism and presenting Joseph Beuys' important contribution to this development and his influence on the artists who followed.

The research embodied in this paper has helped the author to place his own developing practice within the Eco art spectrum and he has briefly presented his emerging work in this context, seeking to ensure that nature and humans are treated equally and as valuable parts of the same system and looking to balance poetry and aesthetics with political imperatives (of climate and ecological breakdown) in his work (Figure 20).

As these breakdowns loom, Eco Art has become an important element of the art world's response<sup>12</sup>. And, outside the gallery, many Eco artists, heirs to Beuys and the other pioneers, are making work in protest, for campaigns and by facilitating participation and learning<sup>13</sup>.

*7,000 Oaks* remains one of the largest sculptures in the world<sup>14</sup> and, as we have established, it has been hugely influential on a whole generation of (eco-) artists including the current author, for whom Joseph Beuys (and Gustav Metzger<sup>15</sup>) will remain major influences for his future work.

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<sup>12</sup> Suddenly, and belatedly, exhibitions responding to this are appearing at mainstream UK public galleries – four almost overlapping - The Baltic, Gateshead (*Animalesque / Art Across Species and Beings*, 2019), The Royal Academy of Arts (*Eco-Visionaries* 2019/20), The Hayward Gallery (*Among the Trees*, 2020) and Tate Modern (*Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life*, 2019) and beyond - Fondation Cartier (*Nous les Arbres*, 2019), Storm King Arts Centre, New York (*Indicators: Artists On Climate Change*, 2018), El Paso Museum of Art, Texas (*Ethics, Excess, Extinction*, 2018)...

<sup>13</sup> In the UK, the author believes the heirs to *Bog Action* are Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion and to *7,000 Oaks* London National Park City and the Transition Towns Movement all of whom, and others, see a politicised art practice as a part of their work. We have already referenced the Red Rebels. Greenpeace has a long and accelerating history of bringing artists into their campaigning (see for example Carrington, 2010; Gliencke, 2018; Greenpeace International, 2018). Neal (2015) gives a full account of the role of artists in supporting and enabling local action through the Transition Towns movement, whilst London National Parks City lays great emphasis on creativity as a part of its campaigning and development work.

<sup>14</sup> I was about to say the biggest but then remembered the Nazca Lines, the Sphinx, the Terracotta Warriors or, indeed, Wangari Maathai's *Green Belt Movement* (Michaelson, 1994) – and in any case, it is not a competition!

<sup>15</sup> Gustav Metzger has also been a major influence on the current author and his work could only be touched on in this paper. The author's Manifesto (Appendix) is, in part, a homage to Metzger, a contemporary and compatriot of Joseph Beuys.

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*“I believe that planting these oaks is necessary not only in biospheric terms, that is to say in the context of matter and ecology, but that it will raise ecological consciousness – raise it increasingly, in the course of the years to come, because we shall never stop planting”*

(Beuys 1982 quoted in Cooke 2005)

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## 8. List of Illustrations

Frontispiece: Beuys, J. (1982) *7000 Oaks* [Photograph] Documenta 7, Kassel, Germany

At: <https://www.akg-images.de/archive/-2UMDHUKDWHMR.html> (accessed 24<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

Figure 1: Oldenbreg, C (1967) *Placid Civil Monument* [Earthwork] Central Park, New York

At: <http://www.noshowmuseum.com/en/1st-b/claes-oldenburg> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2017)

Figure 2: (Left to right) a) Smithson, R (1970) *Spiral Jetty*; Utah; b) Heizer, M (1969) *Double Negative*; Nevada; c) Oppenheim, D (1969) *Cancelled Crop*; Holland [Earthworks]

At: a) <http://errorists.weebly.com/2-gates-and-a-spiral-jetty.html>

b) [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Michael-Heizers-Double-Negative-1969-1970-earth-and-air-The-Museum-of-Contemporary-art-fig2\\_264044191](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Michael-Heizers-Double-Negative-1969-1970-earth-and-air-The-Museum-of-Contemporary-art-fig2_264044191)

c) <http://sculptureoverview.blogspot.com/2011/11/16-earthworks.html>

(All accessed 9<sup>th</sup> January 2020)

Figure 3: Manidieta, A. (1976) *Tree of Life*; Iowa [Photograph – performance view]

At: <https://transpersonalspirit.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/visionary-works-of-ana-mendieta/> (Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020)

Figure 4: (Top, left to right) a) Long, R. (1967) *A Line Made By Walking*; [Photograph – installation view]; Bristol; b) Goldsworthy, A. (1976) *Stones Sinking in Sand, Morecambe Bay*; [Photograph – installation view]; Morecambe Bay, Lancashire; c) Nash, D. (1977) *Wooden Boulder*; [Photographs]; Snowdonia; (Bottom, left to right) d) Goldsworthy, A. (2014-15) *Passage*; [Photograph – installation view]; e) Location unknown; Long, R. (2017) *Red Ring*; [Photograph]; Installation view; f) Nash, D. (2016) *Wooden Boulder Triptych*; [Photograph]; Christea Roberts Gallery;

At: a) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Long\\_-\\_A\\_Line\\_Made\\_By\\_Walking\\_%281967%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Long_-_A_Line_Made_By_Walking_%281967%29.jpg)

b) <https://26hoursaday.wordpress.com/2011/01/30/andy-goldsworthy/>

c) [https://www.christies.com/features/David-Nash-on-his-free-range-sculpture-Wooden-Boulder-7525-1.aspx?PID=newsviews\\_landing\\_morefeatures4](https://www.christies.com/features/David-Nash-on-his-free-range-sculpture-Wooden-Boulder-7525-1.aspx?PID=newsviews_landing_morefeatures4)

d) <http://www.galerieelong.com/artists/andy-goldsworthy/slideshow?view=slider#3>

e) <https://www.jamescohan.com/exhibitions/sculpture2?view=slider#5>

f) <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/david-nash-wooden-boulder-triptych>

(All accessed 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020)

Figure 5: Kaprow, A. (1975) *Echo-Logy*; [Photograph- performance view]; New Jersey  
In: *Public Art Review* 20 (2) Spring/Summer 2009 p47

Figure 6: a) Deans, A. (1982) *Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan*, New York; [Photograph – installation view]; b) Haacke, H. (1972) *Rhine River Purification Plant* Krefeld, Germany [Photograph – installation view]

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b) [http://www.imediata.com/sambaqui/Bill\\_Lundberg/dialogospossiveis\\_engl.html](http://www.imediata.com/sambaqui/Bill_Lundberg/dialogospossiveis_engl.html)  
(Both accessed 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020)

Figure 7: a) Kennard & Phillips (2008) *No Third Runway* for Greenpeace; [Photograph]; b) Francis, D. (2019) *Red Rebel Brigade*; [Photograph]; created by of Invisible Circus for Extinction Rebellion

At: a) <https://www.kennardphillipps.com/category/commissions/page/2/>  
b) <https://metro.co.uk/2019/10/07/red-brigade-silently-appear-extinction-rebellion-protests-10875730/>  
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Figure 8: Horn, R. (2007) *Water, Sampled from Vatnasafn / Library of Water*; [Photograph – installation view]; Iceland

At: <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/roni-horn-entering-the-flow-world/>  
(Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019)

Figure 9: Beuys, J. (1977) *Honey Pump at the Workplace*; [Photograph – installation view]; Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany

At: <http://www.martin-heine.com/thehonigpumpeiskaputt/>

Figure 10: Beuys, J.(1971) a) *Bog Action*, Zuider Zee; b) *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now*, Dusseldorf; [Photographs of Social Sculpture Actions]

At: a) <http://www.artwiki.fr/cours/technoromantisme/beuys.html>  
b) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-overcome-party-dictatorship-now-ar00721>  
(Both Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> July 2019)

Figure 11: Beuys, J. (1982) *7000 Oaks*; [Photograph – Social Sculpture Installation,; Kassel, Germany

At: a) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-7000-oak-trees-ar00745>  
b) <https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/10-things-you-should-know-about-joseph-beuys/>  
(Both Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> July 2019)

Figure 12: Barton, P. (2017) *7000 Oaks*; [Photographs – installation views]; Kassel, Germany

Figure 13: a) Ackroyd and Harvey (2019) *Beuy's Acorns*; [Photograph – installation view]; Bloomberg Arcade, London; b) DIA Foundation (1996) *Joseph Beuys, 7000 Oaks*; [Photograph – installation view]; West 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues, New York City

At: a) <http://madeinshoreditch.co.uk/2019/07/18/living-artwork-beuys-acorns-opens-in-london-to-inspire-climate-action/>  
b) <https://diaart.org/visit/visit/joseph-beuys-7000-oaks>

Figure 14: Barton, P. (2019) *Day of Action to Remember Nature*; [Photographs – Performance views]; The Street, Central Saint Martins, Kings Cross

Figure 15: Beuys, J. (1982) *7000 Oaks* [Photograph] Documenta 7, Kassel, Germany  
At: <https://monumentalisms.wordpress.com/2012/06/18/7000-oaks/> (Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> December 2019)

Figure 16: Barton, P. (1995 – 2015) *Nature Rearranged*; [Photographs – Installation views]; (left to right) Durness, Scotland; Valentia Harbour, County Kerry, Ireland; Duckpool, North Devon, England

Figure 17: Barton, P. (2017) *[Re]Cycling Tree*; [Photograph – Installation view]; All Saints Park, MMU Campus, Manchester

Figure 18: Barton, P. (2017 -2018) *The Oxford Road Murders*; [Postcards]; Manchester

Figure 19: Barton, P. and Herbert, C. (2019) *Maw Macaws, No Maw Saws*; [Photographs – Installation views]; Tate Exchange, London

Figure 20: Barton P. a) (2017) *Model for my Practice*; [Figure]; Manchester School of Art; b) (2019) *Revised Model for my Practice*; [Figure], Central Saint Martins, London

## 9. Appendix:

### Remember Nature Manifesto Phil Barton (after Gustav Metzger)

#### REMEMBER NATURE MANIFESTO

Nature no longer exists separate from humankind – humans have altered every part of Nature throughout the Earth.

Humankind cannot exist without Nature.

In this post-industrial, post-truth global society we have forgotten this. We have embarked on our own auto-destructive process. When the disintegrative process is complete, humankind will have been removed from the planet and scrapped. Nature will re-assert herself and set about countering the human driven sixth great extinction and, over millennia, the Anthropocene age will be superseded in the geological record by new eras.

Remember Nature.

Humankind can choose instead to adopt an auto-creative, ecological approach to Nature. One where we work alongside the other than human world; where we value all life on this planet and not just our own; where our reason, technologies and behaviours align with Nature and do not seek to dominate.

The artists have a responsibility to lead the way. Auto-creative art is the art of change, movement, growth – the art of Nature. Our 'Pale Blue Dot' – a speck of dust in the vastness of the cosmos – becomes the focus of our art, our society, our economy, our science. We create with Nature. We do not ignore, dominate, extinguish Nature.

Auto-creative art honours and respects Nature.

It challenges dominant political, religious, economic, media and academic paradigms which ignore, override or devalue Nature.

Auto-creative ecological art Remembers Nature.

Central Saint Martins  
London 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019

Islington Mill  
Manchester /Salford 4<sup>th</sup> November 2017

