

**ART and the QUEST for MEANING**  
presentation by Arthur Skinner / November 2011

*INTRO: The functions of art are many. Art can engage us in mystery / inspire us in worship / tell us stories and lessons / give a face to our emotions / embody our ideals / enliven our existence / illuminate our cultural memory / broaden our vision / and give vision to order.  
Art can intimidate us / and shape our desires. But it can also challenge us to see things differently / give vision to the future / and call us to action. music by Brian Ransom*

**I. The Call**

Bezalel: *Exodus*, selected verses from ch. 31, 35, & 36. Art and community, and those who teach

**II. Three photographers at the threshold**

**Lewis Hine:** a geography teacher is given a new tool, and is inspired to effect real change in American society

**Aaron Siskind:** an English teacher is given a wedding present. He finds a new love, and inspired to find (and to share with us) beauty in unexpected places

**Sebastiao Salgado:** an economist turns to photography as a means to better inform the first world of the reality of the third

**III. Transformed, and transforming**

A legacy of artists and designers seeking to create new societies:

**William Morris, Futurism, Constructivism, the Bauhaus**

A western legacy of democratization and empowerment:

from "Every man a priest.." / (Martin Luther and the priesthood of all believers)

and "Every man a king..." / (Huey Long and his radical call to "Share Our Wealth")

to "Everyone an artist" / Joseph Beuys and his vision of a new social order.

**Joseph Beuys**, in the Luftwaffe, shot down, saved, and reborn as an artist-shaman-teacher;

Art as healing, as reconciliation, as reformation, as political activism, as "the science of freedom"

*Social Sculpture*: the words we shape, the relationships we form, the things we do: life as art.

*7000 Oak Trees*

**IV. Art as a mirror, a lens, a rostrum, a forum / Artists as prophets, critics, and activists**

*Artists and Society:*

Since the 18th century, a social consciousness: Goya and others

**Walker Evans:** in Bethlehem, an image with meaning and impact

**Barbara Kruger:** "Your body is a battleground" and "I shop, therefore I am."

**Cindy Sherman:** probing the stereotype of woman

**David Wojnarowicz:** stigmatized and angry

**Martin Puryear:** an African American artist, an empty cornucopia, an impossible ladder

**Andres Serrano:** from the man who gave us the *Piss Christ*, portraits of the homeless

**Cornelia Parker:** here today, blown up tomorrow

*Art and the Transcendent:*

A heritage of iconography

**Anna Mendieta:** the earth goddess revisited in a most elemental way

**Shirin Neshat:** Islam and feminism - "between two worlds"

**Dinh Q. Le:** an autobiographical photo-weaving, joining east and west in spirit

*A Global Perspective:*

**Marina Abramovic:** pushing audiences to the limit, cleansing and catharsis

**Claudia Bernardi:** coping with totalitarianism in South and Central America

**Yasumasa Morimura:** a global and artful parody

**Superflex:** connecting the world

*Art and Science:*

A relationship that goes way back: Daguerre, Vesalius, Leonardo and beyond  
**Salvador Dali** and his various fascinations  
**Steve Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble:** suspects in the war on terror?  
Science collaborating with art in new media, new languages

*Artists and the Environment:*

from a legacy of Romantic paintings of the 19th century  
**Mierle Ukeles:** the urban legacy of refuse, and landfill as social sculpture  
**Gavin Turk:** are we defined by what we discard?  
**Mel Chin:** revitalizing the wasteland  
**Hans Haake:** cleaning up the Rhine, showing us what is possible  
**Superflex** again: the biogas project  
Sustainable architecture / necessity creating new aesthetic opportunities. (but at a price?)  
The Eckerd campus master plan: the future in our backyard?

**V. A personal digression: responsibilities to one's self**

Images and experience, and their lasting impact: Dali, Magritte  
My father, the architect: his call, his education, his profession, a watercolor, and a revelation  
The Plaza Theatre and shopping center in Atlanta, credited to George Harwell Bond

**VI. The responsibilities of the artist**

- Ethics / and the problem of aestheticizing suffering:  
Kristin Harrison ('01): *The Examination* (Uganda, 2004)
- Not all art carries with it a statement or social commentary, *nor should all art necessarily be so*.  
But for many the most vital arts today are those that challenge us to change the way we see and think (e.g. Morris / Hine / Duchamp / Siskind / Beuys), and globally broaden our awareness and understanding.

**VII. Our collective responsibility**

....not only to see and raise our level of awareness globally, but to be involved in the process of designing and building our local community (as a social sculpture, and as the Israelites all worked together in the building of the tabernacle.)  
*The Clouds*; music & lyrics by Stu Hyatt ('97); a community project in Sumter County, Alabama.  
For more about this and other community art projects by Stu Hyatt: <http://www.teamrecords.org>

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**A FEW QUESTIONS:**

1. Choose an artist (or artist collective) from each of the sections above (Art Transforming / Artists & Society / Art and the Transcendent/ Art & the Global / Art and Science / Art & the Environment), investigate them further, and be prepared to present and discuss: Which examples shown in the presentation were the most moving, or provocative, or inspiring, or challenging (and why/how)? Which were the most perplexing or disturbing? (and why/how)? Did anything you see today change your perspective on art itself? If so, how?
2. Investigate Joseph Beuys further online. Discuss his notion that everyone is an artist. Does his concept of "social sculpture" make any sense to you? What sorts of things might you do to contribute to social sculpture? How can art serve as an agent of healing and reconciliation? Cite examples.
3. Lewis Hine and Aaron Siskind were each given cameras long after they had completed their formal education; the gift changed their lives, and they in turn changed the lives of others with their art. In your own personal quest for meaning, has anyone ever given or said anything to you that changed you, and opened up doors for you that you had not previously considered? How can you pass such a gift on to others?
4. What is the message in Salgado's photography, and why is it important that we in the First World pay attention? Cite examples of particularly powerful imagery and discuss. *Then* reflect on what Susan Sontag has to say about images of suffering. (see attached quotations)
5. Explain and discuss: "Your body is a battleground" and "I Shop Therefore I Am."
6. Are we in some way defined by what we discard? Is Turks' bronze bin bag really any different from Duchamp's famous urinal of 1917? If so, how? Is it any less shocking? Also: discuss Ukeles *Fresh Kills* as a social sculpture.
7. What might you envision for the Eckerd campus if we are to be successful in achieving a sustainable design for the future? How can we each contribute to the social sculpture that is this campus?

**Martin Luther on the priesthood of all believers:**

- “Thus we are all consecrated as priests by baptism....  
..since we are all priests alike, no man may put himself forward or take upon himself without our consent and election, to do that which we have all alike power to do. For if a thing is common to all, no man may take it to himself without the wish of the community...”

Martin Luther, from *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520)

**Huey Long, regarding his *Share Our Wealth* proposal:**

- “Every man a king, so there would be no such thing as a man or woman who did not have the necessities of life, who would not be dependent upon the whims and caprices and *ipsi dixit* of the financial martyrs for a living. What do we propose by this society? We propose to limit the wealth of big men in the country.....”
- “God told you what the trouble was. The philosophers told you what the trouble was; and when you have a country where one man owns more than 100,000 people, or a million people, and when you have a country where there are four men, as in America that have got more control over things than all the 120 million people together, you know what the trouble is.....”
- “Every man a king. Every man to eat when there is something to eat; all to wear something when there is something to wear. That makes us all sovereign.” Huey Long, from an address delivered in February of 1934

**Joseph Beuys on art and creativity:**

- “Wir sind alle Künstler.” (“Everyone is an artist.”)
- “To make people free is the aim of art, therefore art for me is the science of freedom.”
- “Creativity isn't the monopoly of artists. This is the crucial fact I've come to realize, and this broader concept of creativity is my concept of art. When I say everybody is an artist, I mean everybody can determine the content of life in his particular sphere, whether in painting, music, engineering, caring for the sick, the economy or whatever. All around us the fundamentals of life are crying out to be shaped or created. But our idea of culture is severely restricted because we've always applied it to art. The dilemma of museums and other cultural institutions stems from the fact that culture is such an isolated field, and that art is even more isolated: an ivory tower in the field of culture surrounded first by the whole complex of culture and education, and then by the media which are also part of culture. We have a restricted idea of culture which debases everything; and it is the debased concept of art that has forced museums into their present weak and isolated position.” Joseph Beuys, from an interview with Frans Hak, 1979

- “Only on condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system to build a SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.” ...This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/Social Architecture – will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism...” Joseph Beuys from “*I am searching for field character*,” 1973

**Susan Sontag, on Salgado:**

“...Sebastiao Salgado has become the principal target of the new campaign against the inauthenticity of the beautiful....Salgado has come under steady attack for producing spectacular, beautifully composed big pictures that are said to be ‘cinematic.’”

- “The sanctimonious Family of Man-Style rhetoric that feathers Salgado’s exhibitions and books has worked to the detriment of the pictures, however unfair this may be...”
- “Taken in thirty-nine countries, Salgado’s migration pictures group together, under this single heading, a host of different causes and kinds of distress. Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to “care” more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder - and make abstract...”

Susan Sontag, from *Regarding the Pain of Others*

**Susan Sontag, on photography and images of suffering:**

“It has become a cliché of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect, and that there is something innately cynical about their diffusion. As important as the people now believe images of war to be, this does not dispel the suspicion that lingers about the interest in these images, and the intentions of those who produce them. Such a reaction comes from two extremes of the

spectrum: from cynics who have never been near a war, and from the war-weary who are enduring the miseries being photographed.”

- “...many critics have suggested that the excruciations of war - thanks to television - have devolved into a nightly banality. Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb. So runs the familiar diagnosis. But what is really being asked for here? That images of carnage be cutback to, say, once a week? More generally that we work towards... an “ecology of images?” There isn’t going to be an ecology of images. No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate.”

- “It is felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract of reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power; that we pay too high a human (or moral) price for those hitherto admired qualities of vision - the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention. But this is only to describe the function of the mind itself....There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: “Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time.”

three excerpts from Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 2003

#### **Mierle Ukeles, on how to regard the debris from the WTC at the Fresh Kills Landfill:**

“...To me, what’s wrong with creating a general, un-individuated memorial for some particular place within Fresh Kills is this: To call something “garbage” means that the possessor of the object has lost desire for it. Desire has passed, and with it goes value. The value of the object evaporates. We are quite expert at this; in consumerist society, we’re trained to lose desire as fast as possible and to buy again, more and more. To call something “garbage” means stripping the materials of their inherent characteristics. So that even though differences are obvious, hard becomes the same as soft, wet as dry, heavy as light, moldy old sour cream as a shoe, wet leaves as old barbells— they become the same things. The entire culture colludes in this un-naming. Then we can call it all “garbage”—of no value whatsoever. To put it away, actually paying to put it away, as soon as possible. Thus forgotten. And then paying tremendously to remediate its effects on the land, the air, and the water.”

- “So that’s why, in this 50-year-old social sculpture we have all produced, of four mountains made from 150 million cubic yards of the un-differentiated, un-named, no-value *garbage*, whose every iota of material identity has been banished, the memorial, graveyard—or whatever it is—needs to be created out of an utterly opposite kind of social contract. The shattered taboo that enabled this unholy shotgun marriage needs to be restored; a chasm-change in attitude is required, one of very deliberate differentiating, of naming, of attentive reverence for each mote of dust from each lost individual. Thus remembered. This must become a place that returns identity to, not strips identity from, each perished person.”

- “Hasn’t it been art that can transform the meaning of material, re-invent identity, and re-name the lost? This part of the overall Fresh Kills site must become a double place: the unnamed healed and the named re-named. Otherwise the doubling being done here tumbles necessity into obscenity...”

three excerpts from an article in *“World Changing”* on Freshkills citing Mierle Ukeles’s Cabinet essay issue 6, Spring 2002

#### **Kristin Harrison (‘01) about her photograph:**

“Dr. Scott Kellermann left his lucrative medical practice in California to move to southwestern Uganda with his wife Carol four years ago. Now in “retirement”, the Kellermanns work seven days a week to provide healthcare to the Batwa Pygmies, an indigenous group of people with an average life expectancy of 27 years. Treating malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis, elephantiasis, and a long list of medical diseases no longer seen in the United States, the Kellermanns struggle to raise the quality of life for these poverty-stricken people. Dr. Scott, as he is known locally, treats malaria as often as he used to treat the common cold. In the photograph “The Examination,” Scott listens to the heartbeat of an unconscious boy suffering from cerebral malaria. The boy’s mother and younger brother, shown in the image, also have malaria. Scott says of his work, “Life here is very raw. It’s really on the edges of survival.”

I found my time in Uganda heartbreaking and took many pictures through tear-filled eyes. As a photojournalist, I hope that my work can bring attention to this forgotten corner of the world.”

*Kristin was working for National Geographic at the time the photograph was taken, in early 2004. While continuing to freelance for National Geographic and the Washington Post she also now works for Camfed, a non-profit organization dedicated to the education of young women in Africa. [www.camfed.org](http://www.camfed.org)*