

# Differens

magazine

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ancient myth to come close to the workings of what she calls the “instinctual psyche”. In one of these myths, she tells us of La Loba, a woman deemed crazy by society for her habit of gathering bones. The bone, according to Pinkola Estés, is a symbol of the core of our soul life, what remains even after our bodies wilt, the indestructible essence of our being. To gather bones, then, is to search for our essence. From these bones, we flesh out our bodies.

Just as Mehta seems to mean that carving out a place for oneself is essential to remain sane, so does Pinkola Estés claim that finding our sanity, putting the pieces of ourselves back together, is a matter of spatiality. The goal of finding the remnants of our essence is to assemble a body. For Pinkola Estés, the body is a symbol for wholeness, of one’s psyche and true self coming together. But what is the body, if not the very inner, sheltered space that allows us to exist? Interestingly, then, this coming together not only completes a form, but opens up a space.

Both Pinkola Estés’ and Mehta’s descriptions of home thus seem to be about sanity, a sense of mental, emotional and existential wholeness. The sanity maintained by Mehta’s home, as stated earlier, can be interpreted as being about maintaining coherence and resisting discontinuity and chaos; maintaining wholeness, within a controlled, inner space, and resisting the brokenness of being cast out in a chaotic world. According to Pinkola Estés, the breaking is not the end of us, but rather essential to our coming together and where most of us begin. The breaking has happened, however it happened, and we are only to go forward from here.

Our job, then, is not to search for *whole places*, nor to bound ourselves off in order to create a whole space within. Rather, we move toward chaos, toward the crowded, broken and incomprehensible. The places we are looking for in order to come home may not be the ones that make sense, or are coherent with an

inner stream of identity, but the ones where shards of truth lie hidden. From these shards, and from this scattering, we are given the opportunity to flesh out a body. From our scatteredness, and incoherence, connections can be made. Bodies can take shape.

One interpretation of Pinkola Estés’ myth is that the body is created by putting these broken bones back together, as pieces of a puzzle. A more interesting and fitting interpretation, I find, is that the scattering of our bones offers a playing field, where we are not meant to put the pieces back as we found them. Rather, it is how we move between these pieces of ourselves – these scattered niches of sanity – that become our body; the thing that we can live inside, our home.

Perhaps then, the chaotic and incomprehensible world that threatens the wholeness and coherence of our homeness and selfhood is what makes possible the experience of our full selves. The search for our bones is experimental and accidental: we make a move because we have to and necessarily find that something breaks and scatters, and make our next move from there. The way we keep scattering across our lives is a space within itself, a field within which

the fragments of sanity become nodes, between which there can be tensions, contradictory forces and a texture made of points of potential connection. In this way, our broken lives, the fragments of our lost and scattered points of navigation, become placeholders for a larger movement that allows us to experience ourselves fully.

Carving out a space for oneself in the world, then, might be a process made possible by the interplay between wholeness and brokenness. Whether we begin whole or not, the breaking is necessary for the coming together. This also entails an interplay between the dangers of the incomprehensible outside and the sheltered insides, spaces that – just as the earliest housing - can only be temporary. The finding of niches of wholeness and sanity, of bones, is part of this journey as much as the breaking anew. It guides us towards ever new slivers of recognition and hopes for a homecoming, and keeps expanding our body across the incomprehensible landscape we move through.

“Vessels”  
Eleni Jeremia  
2020



## The Social Sculpture of Chinatown: *Joseph Beuys and Artistic Agency in Everyday Gesamtkunstwerk*



Eleni Jeremia  
2021

by Nicole Miller

New York City’s Chinatown is a distinctly different neighborhood from other parts of Manhattan. However, it currently has no strict borders that delineate what exactly Chinatown is. It is a locale that, like much of Manhattan, offers a bombardment of sensory stimuli. In Chinatown, the visuality of the architecture, the signs in Cantonese and Mandarin, the ambient noises from cars, shops,

people, and restaurants, and the smells from a variety of foods come together to create a feeling of place. This feeling, the particularity of this place, is created in the coalescence of many small individual actions. Chinatown with its many elements coming together provides us with a totally immersive experience. As such, Chinatown could, in Joseph Beuys’ terms, be understood as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* was used by Richard Wagner in 1849 to designate an idea that eventually led to the 1876 construction of the Bayreuth festival space. This was intended to be a place for the performance of the operas of the Ring cycle, which he envisioned as all-encompassing experiences. The exact meaning behind Wagner’s use of the term was never clear, but attempts have been made to establish an appropriate translation from German. Examples of possible translations include the total work of art, the communal work of art, or collective work of art.<sup>1</sup> Though a precise meaning of Wagner’s use of the term is unclear, the context of his use of it points to performance as a critical element for an immersive aesthetic experience.

Conceptual artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) saw *Gesamtkunstwerk* as ‘social sculpture’, asserting that every person is an artist in that they constantly create the world around them through their social interactions.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Beuys is most famous for his ‘actions’; a kind of performance-oriented artworks that often challenged how space could be used as an artistic medium. As they posed new ways for ideas and objects to interact through space, they straddled the border between real and performance. Moreover, Beuys envisioned the actions to expand beyond the field of art. He recognized that every person had the ability to affect their environment and saw the possibility for every person to incorporate their political and social ideas into their everyday lives, making everyone an artist.<sup>3</sup> Much like Beuys’ actions is his idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*

1 M. W. Smith, *The Total Work Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p.8.

2 T. O’Leary, ‘Fat, Felt, and Fascism: The Case of Joseph Beuys’, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 6, 1996, p. 93.

3 O’Leary, ‘Fat, Felt, and Fascism’, 1996, p.96-97.

to be understood as rooted in this all encompassing notion of art. Art denotes in this sense the expression of big social and political ideas in the intimate small gestures of our everyday lives, that significantly influence how the spaces around us are shaped. What would be the outcome if we accepted and embraced this perspective in our everyday lives?

Integrating the ideas of Beuys on social sculpture, I am especially interested in communal work of art as a possible translation for *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its ability to be applied to an actual community, where *Gesamtkunstwerk* exists in the everyday experience of place as multiple actors and elements act together in social performance to create art. In this interpretation, the empowerment to create can be placed on individuals from the bottom-up. Both David Roberts and Matthew Wilson Smith have extensively speculated on what the exact characteristics of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* are, and using their interpretations, *places* of everyday life can be understood as artworks. Roberts interprets *Gesamtkunstwerk* as something capable of breaking dichotomies, such as that between the everyday and the performative, while expressing a utopian vision of the future.<sup>4</sup> While Smith claims a blurring of boundaries and working towards a utopia is intrinsic to the term, he adds that the realization of the utopia must be impossible and that exclusion in pursuit of utopia always occurs.<sup>5</sup>

Manhattan's Chinatown is a constructed community that straddles a line between a fantastical tourist attraction and an ordinary community that is the site for everyday activity. Chinatown as a constructed community shares some conceptual aspects with Disneyland, which Smith discusses as exemplary of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Examining the

similarities between the two can help us understand how Chinatown, a less stringently planned community, can also qualify as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Whereas the French theorist Jean Baudrillard discusses the 'hyperreality' of Disneyland in its blurring of fiction with the world to eliminate the real, I am focusing on a different perspective on Disneyland.<sup>6</sup> I'm interested in Smith's

**"Just as Wagner saw Bayreuth as a place to make a pilgrimage to, so today do tourists make journeys to see a specific place in an overtly commodified version of a pilgrimage, as is the case with Disneyland."**

assessment of Disneyland as *Gesamtkunstwerk* in relation to the performative actions highlighted by Joseph Beuys' interpretation of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. My aim is to observe the role of individual agency in the construction of place by comparing the top-down design of Disneyland with the bottom-up initiatives that shaped Chinatown. Therefore, when examining the agency of creators, Disneyland for Smith is a clear example of boundaries being blurred in an unrealized attempt at utopia by creating an all encompassing and exclusive infrastructure while challenging the notions of reality for the user through scripted performativity of mundane activity. After a brief dive into the design visions and plans present in the construction of Disneyworld, I am going to explore the emergence of Chinatown in relation to what a *Gesamtkunstwerk* could possibly

be. Through this, I hope to spark questions about artistic agency within the framework of Joseph Beuys's notion of art.

Disneyland opened in 1955 on a 160 acre plot of land with the intention to be a place where people could escape the impurities and imperfections of typical urban living in cities.<sup>7</sup> Walt Disney's notion of impurities and imperfections has been noted as likely born out of a xenophobic and racialized worldview which configures into his utopian (dystopian) vision.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the racial stereotypes of Native Americans and 'savages' were prevalent in the features of the park, and the first publicly visible African American employee was not hired until the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> While the historical context of Disneyland and intentions of Walt Disney are not highlighted by Smith, his aesthetic analysis of Disneyland also implies that exclusion is inherent in its carefully controlled planning.

In terms of aesthetics, Disney applied a militant-like level of rules and criteria for every detail of Disneyland, in that everything, from electric outlets to the external perimeter of the theme park, was considered in order to contribute towards a complete immersive total image.<sup>10</sup> Even employees with mundane jobs as well as actors were subjected to the same education at Disney University, which creates the bizarre condition where actors and janitors can alike be considered cast members in a performance.<sup>11</sup> The result of this is that Disneyland is like an immersive work of art in its aestheticization, careful creation, and performative aspects, but it also was very plainly a commodity. Admission is charged and once inside the total immersive world Disney created, opportunities abound to sell more things - food, souvenirs, photographs. Disneyland is si-

multaneously a corporate enterprise and someone's carefully considered artwork. Just as Wagner saw Bayreuth as a place to make a pilgrimage to, so today do tourists make journeys to see a specific place in an overtly commodified version of a pilgrimage, as is the case with Disneyland.<sup>12</sup> Although Wagner perhaps did not see it as such, it seems that the draw of a place to gaze upon something that has been created with a vision at once incorporates aspects of both commodity and art, blurring the boundary between the two. In its dichotomy-challenging experience and obsessively meticulous design of utopia, Disneyland is clearly a *Gesamtkunstwerk* using Smith's interpretation. But what about a lived community like Chinatown that is not so clearly directed?

As in the case of Disneyland, Chinatown was originally created through outside, top-down rules of exclusion. The difference is that one can observe how bottom-up agency in everyday action worked to create a new utopian vision within the original exclusionary framework. When Chinese immigrants came to the United States in the nineteenth century, they faced social exclusion and prejudice. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 lasted for 61 years where Chinese immigration became heavily restricted after large numbers of immigrants had already settled and the Chinese population of the United States were given no rights.<sup>13</sup> The result was that Chinatown was born out of oppression and was once restricted to eight blocks rather than having its current liminal borders.<sup>14</sup> The result of the restrictions perhaps enhanced the communal contribution to placemaking in Chinatown, as its residents worked to support each other and maintain Chinese cultural traditions.<sup>15</sup>



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2021

4 D. Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2011 p. 2.

5 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 2007, p. 8, 125.

6 J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 12-13.

7 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 2007, p. 121.

8 E. Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 132-139.

9 Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 2004, p. 133, 135.

10 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 2007, p. 122.

11 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 2007, p. 126-7.

12 Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 2007, p.25.

13 R. Sietsema, R., 'The Making of Manhattan's Chinatown', Museum of Food and Drink.

14 Sietsema, 'The Making of Manhattan's Chinatown'.

15 R. Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Boulder, University of Colorado Press, 1993.

Now existing without easily defined physical borders, Chinatown and its stimuli carry over to other streets. For Chinatown, it is precisely the liminality of its position between multiple aesthetic categories that make it an interesting example to examine what is or is not a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The polar categories of commodity/art, spectacle/festival, and the everyday/performative are those in which Chinatown exists within a flexible position, able to transition and often existing in a realm of two “extremes” simultaneously. For Beuys, the goal of art was to achieve a balance between two polar extremes.<sup>16</sup> This idea of blurring borders is a key element for considering Manhattan’s Chinatown as a communal work of art, and by extension, any lived place becomes an artwork as well.

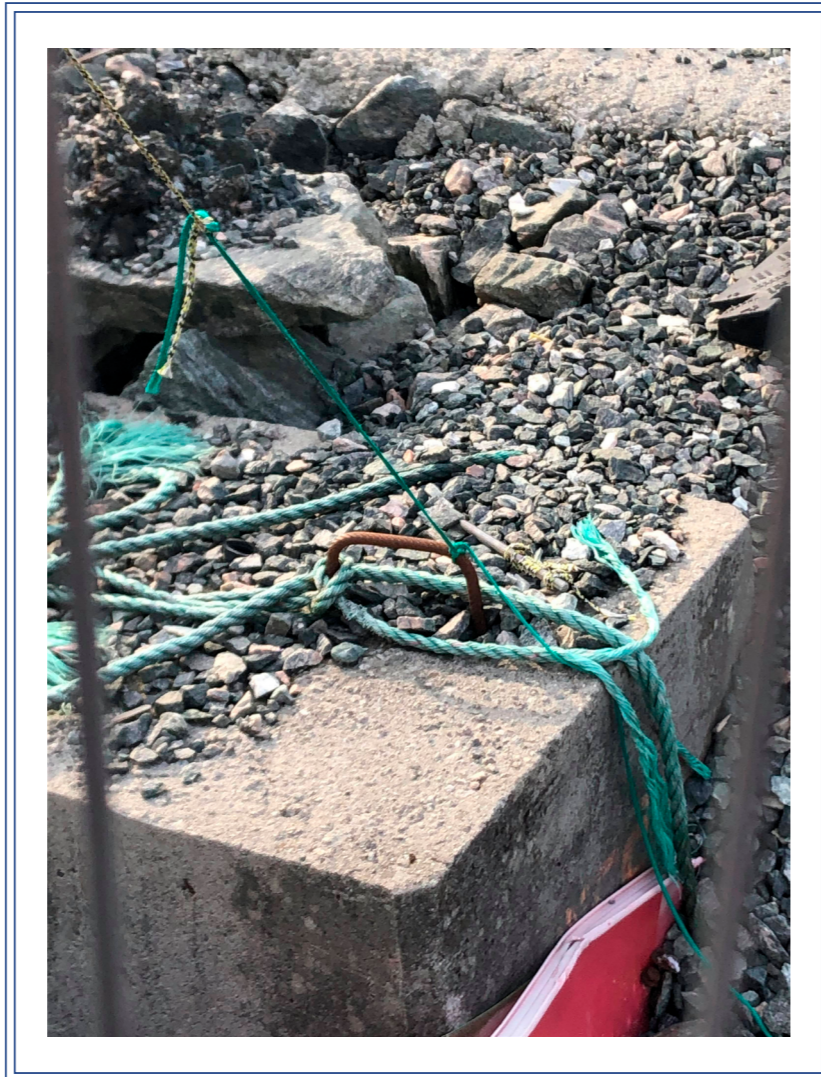
Although Chinatown was not constructed in the same meticulous and individual-centered way as Disneyland, it also is a highly constructed environment. Manhattan’s Chinatown is covered in non-English signs. Chinese merchandise and food products are in every market and shop. Most restaurants sell Chinese foods. Each of these parts of the environment is carefully created with a certain aesthetic in mind, but also used as a commodity to be sold directly or to contribute towards an atmosphere that beckons tourists. Roberts considers a main feature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as being able to renew the public function of art.<sup>17</sup> More than in Disneyland or Wagner’s Bayreuth, which were created according to one individual’s creative vision, Chinatown functions as purely public art, in that each person who is a part of Chinatown in any way is contributing to its always ongoing expression and confirms the myth of what Chinatown is. In this way, each individual who in the past, present, or future is a part of Chinatown, and thus has any impact on its environment, is an artist contributing to the place we know as Chinatown. Profits are made, tourists are drawn, and the commodification of Chinatown and

Chinese culture exists concurrently to and within the social sculpture of Chinatown.

The crossed divide between commodity and art coincides with another crossed divide within Chinatown, which is the divide between spectacle and festival. The question arises: who is a part of Chinatown and how much agency do they have? On special occasions such as the Chinese New Year, Chinatown is the site of celebration and festivals. Parades, dancing, special foods, larger crowds of people, and music are all central to the festival atmosphere. However, the

atmosphere and decorative component of Chinatown on a typical day can also be seen as festive compared to other neighborhoods of the city. The buildings, shops, and streets themselves do not change for a festival. The sounds and crowds during a festival are more intense experiences of the everyday experience with higher noise levels and higher density of people. It can be said, then, that the physical area of Chinatown functions like a stage, where both festival and spectacle occur with no clear distinction between the type of performance taking place.

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2021



<sup>16</sup> O’Leary, ‘Fat, Felt, and Fascism, 1996, p. 95  
<sup>17</sup> Roberts, The Total Work of Art in European Modernism, 2011, p. 1

If a person visits Chinatown during a festival but is unaware of the festival, are they a part of it? If a non-Chinese person lives in Chinatown, are they a part of Chinatown even if it is distinguished as a Chinese neighborhood? If Beuys’ ideas about social sculpture are considered, the answer to this would have to be yes. If we are all artists, what we choose to put our time and presence into is part of our creation. A visitor could at once be a part of Chinatown and simply a witness to Chinatown in that their visit and participation in the experience is confirming and adding to its existence. At the same time, Chinatown could feel like an unfamiliar place in which exclusion also occurs. For instance, reading a Cantonese sign would be an exclusive activity reserved only for those knowing the language. In this way the spectacle/festival, spectator/actor role is also blurred by the different levels of active and passive participation possible. People can exist in varied levels of immersive participation in Chinatown while being to some degree excluded and playing the role of an observer.

This blurring of the festival/spectacle line also makes clear the blurred boundary between the everyday and the performative. Considering the janitors educated in performance at Disneyland, are other people with ordinary jobs such as bus drivers, waiters or cashiers also to be considered as artistic actors? Sociologist Erving Goffmann wrote about social interaction as performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.<sup>18</sup> He describes areas that can be seen as ‘backstage’ areas where people are able to relax and present a different version of the self than what a job might demand in the ‘front stage’ area.<sup>19</sup> His research concludes that every social interaction is a performance where one convinces the other actors (who are also the audience) of one’s version of one’s self, one’s character.<sup>20</sup> The Bauhaus idea of tearing down the fourth wall is about eliminating the

separation between the audience from the performance and is what facilitates a totally immersive experience. Applying Goffman’s ideas on social interaction as always a performance means there is an ability to tear down the fourth wall in any common situation. This of course includes Chinatown, where a person doing an everyday activity such as shopping for vegetables and talking with the store owner can also be seen as a performer, acting out the role of their social self, the customer, as well as many other identity roles. Could not all communities be seen as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* if every interaction could be conceived as a performance and every community as a social sculpture? How are we performing our role in place and space to create the world around us?

Chinatown demonstrates that community in general can be thought to mirror the criteria one might need to identify a communal work of art. According to Roberts, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* must be critical of current society, have a utopian vision of a future society, and also be able to create change.<sup>21</sup> That meant that an originally utopian/dystopian vision of exclusion, where Chinese immigrants were unwanted in America, grew into an exercise in social sculpture where bottom-up actions shaped Chinatown into a distinct cultural place with a new utopian vision. The actions of the individual everyday artists directed a place to a new future vision. Many scales of creation exist in space: individual nuances in difference of creative input work within a collective movement towards the future works within imposed infrastructural and physical limitations.

If the concepts of social sculpture and *Gesamtkunstwerk* mean that everyone uses space to shape the places around them through actions and aesthetic decisions, how can we apply this insight? If the world is interconnected and every interaction affects our surroundings on

multiple layers, what kind of artwork are we creating every time we say hello to a neighbor or go into a shop? The difference between Disneyland and Chinatown is a difference between an infrastructural control of space and an organic and less controlled vision of a future that has the ability to be influenced by individual people in seemingly unextraordinary actions. If space is a medium for creating the kind of place we want to exist, we can orient ourselves to the future we would like to see as artists of the everyday, considering carefully the sculpture we are collaborating on in our everyday lives. Being conscious of our creative power is what enables bottom-up change. The small gestures of kindness, aesthetic appreciation, and micro-movements towards manifesting change are significant as they multiply. They are what eventually culminates into our world as sculpture.

<sup>18</sup> E. Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 1956.  
<sup>19</sup> Goffman, The Presentation of Self, 1956, p. 66-70.  
<sup>20</sup> Goffman, The Presentation of Self, 1956, p. 161-162.  
<sup>21</sup> Roberts, The Total Work of Art in European Modernism, 2011, p. 8.