



*Almost There (An Action)*, 1999 (photograph Brian D. Williams)

## Toward an Art of Being

*Our first act of creation is the creation of ourselves.*

*All other work is born of this primary act.*

**Charles Hutson Trapolin**

*The alchemist and the artist share the same ambition: to make in order to know, and to know in order to transform both themselves and the world. Alchemy and art aspire to become a system of knowledge and an instrument of transmutation.*<sup>1</sup>

Arturo Schwarz

The journey of the self in relationship to the external world is for me a spiritual journey. A journey framed by the cyclical experience of birth (creation) and death (destruction). This journey is grounded in an experience of meaning as an aspect of Being (as opposed to doing). Being is a quality of presence that is experienced through awareness and relationship with both myself and the external world. Ultimately my art is a tool that is used to clear my awareness and shape an experience of life that has meaning.

The vessel for this journey is my body. The body functions as container of Spirit, transmitter of phenomena and active participant in the world. Questions of time (permanence), place and identity are woven into the experience of being embodied. This experience of the relationship between Spirit and Matter are played out on the stage of the body. But this relationship extends beyond the body into its field of existence.

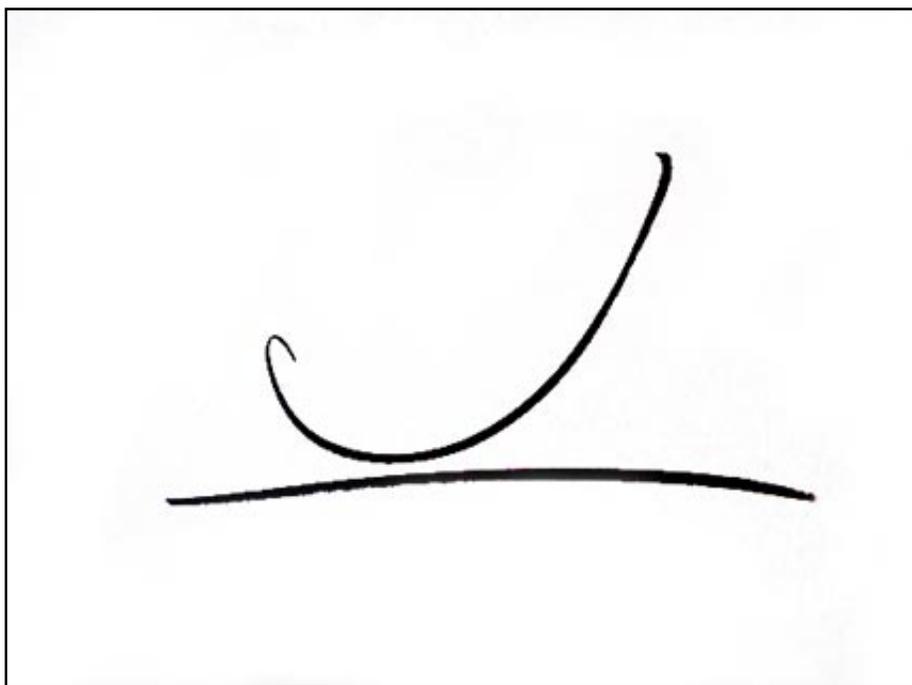
Through my work I engage with myself and the field of existence in which I find myself. Placing my finger on the spiritual pulse of the earth and engaging with others through action and dialogue are essential to my quest for a life of meaning and value. This engaged presence comes from recognizing that I am a co-creator with the world. I am created by the world and am creator of the world. Through my work I recognize and celebrate this experience of being integral to the earth and society.

## The Body as Experience

*I found through...my work with Suzuki, that what we are doing is living, and that we are not moving toward a goal, but are, so to speak, at the goal constantly and changing with it, and that art, if it is going to do anything useful, should open our eyes to this fact.<sup>2</sup>*

John Cage

Through our bodies we experience our lives in a myriad of ways. Much of my work is an exploration of experience with the body acting as an instrument and conduit of consciousness. I do not see the flow of experience as happening in a singular direction (i.e. the flow from the environment through the body to consciousness). But experience the body as both receiver and creator of experience.



*Phenomena Drawing*, charcoal on paper, 30" x 22", 1998

In my Phenomena Drawings I used a process of tracking various phenomena using charcoal on paper. During the process of drawing, I would sit in front of the

paper and take the time to focus my awareness on the various phenomena occurring in my body and in the environment. I would start to track these phenomena using marks on paper. Sounds, body sensations and visual information were tracked creating a map of the phenomenal experience of the moment. I continued this process and started to notice that I was moving from a process of tracking to a process of creating marks. The experience was that through tracking the various phenomena I started to experience myself as part of this phenomenal field. My life force through marking merged with the other phenomena.

This exploration of the body as experience has also touched on the continual change inherent in the body, whether this be through the growth and decaying process leading to death or in the aspect of the journey the body takes through life.



*Nest, mixed media, 29" x 7.5" x 29", 1999*

The change the body goes through and my attempt to be present in this process has translated to an interest in process in my work. This temporal and transitory aspect of life is reflected in my creation of work that has a life of its own. In

my sculpture "Boat" and in my series of nests the work itself goes through stages of creation and decay. The work has no end point, no static place, but continues to change in time. Leaves dry and change color, clay cracks and new forms are created through weathering. This process of weathering and decay and the experience of death as an inherent part of life are all woven into the fabric of my work. Through this process I recognize and embrace the experience of birth and death as both simultaneous and mutual in the experience of life.

The body as a means of experiencing life is grounded in the present. The body experiences what is in the moment while the mind may refer to past, present and future. Titles for some of my work ("Stalking the Moment" and "Almost There") refer to this quest for an embodied presence.



*Almost There (An Action)*, 1999 (photograph Brian D. Williams)

## The Body and Earth

*Even the dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.*<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Beuys



*Man*, mixed media, 6' x 12" x 12' (variable dimensions), 1999

The work itself seems to walk an edge between the natural and the constructed. Has this been created by human hands or is this a result of a natural process in the environment? Many of the pieces could exist in the natural environment in complete harmony. There would be no dissonance between the land and the work because in an essential way the land is co-creator of the work. Whether the work consists of mounds of earth, twigs and vines, clay shaped into nests, a boat, or a man all of this work holds a fundamental question of whether the pieces are in the process of creation or destruction. Are they being born of the earth or decaying back into the earth?



*Man (detail), 1999*

My work “Man”, a large figure composed of natural materials (vines, rocks, earth, etc.), is related to the Biblical telling of the creation of humans from the earth by God. Much of my work is centered on this knowledge that our bodies are of the earth and will return to the earth. This has led me to a deep exploration of this relationship. The main avenue for this exploration has been the gathering and utilization of natural materials in my work.

I go to the Pacific Ocean and gather clay, rocks and wood; pigments and herbs from Mt. Tamalpais; and Norfolk pine, Passion Flower and Wisteria vines from my garden. In the process of gathering these materials I am reconnecting with the earth as a living entity. In doing so, my focus is on a sense of place and the spirit of the land.

Numen

*The presiding divinity or spirit (of a place) <sup>4</sup>*

*...the mysterious inner power existing in some personage or thing; that  
which inspires the feeling of awe.... <sup>5</sup>*

It is this spirit of place and feeling of awe that I am drawn to and that empowers my work. This aspect of the experience of the earth has been shaped through my studies of shamanism. When I am gathering materials I connect with the spiritual essence of the land and feel as if the land gifts me with materials for my work. My experience in gathering materials for “Man” was that the earth was supplying me with the necessary components needed to create him.

The head rock came from an all night ritual performed on a beach at Point Reyes. I had meditated throughout the evening. After the break of day a wave rushed up to the shore and in retreating parted revealing the rock. The material used for the lungs came in a similar fashion. I was doing a ritual at my home and the wind started to blow in an intense fashion. I went outside and there resting on the top of a totem in my garden was the branch. At that moment I knew they were the lungs.



*Stalking the Moment (An Action)*, 1999 (photograph Tom White)

The process used in my action “Stalking the Moment” at the Oakland Museum was another form of this exploration of the relationship between my self and the earth. The concept of stalking presence again comes from my studies of shamanism. In this

work (a larger scale version of my drawings from phenomena) my intent was to be present with the various phenomena experienced in the space. These included: sounds, shifting shadows, paths of birds and planes, etc. The attention to place and presence in part is an exercise in clearing my own perceptions of internal dialogue and distractions. This clearing the mind and being attentive to the surroundings is essential to the experience of the numinous quality of the earth.



*The First Step (An Action)*, photograph, 4" x 6", 1998

Exploring this sacred quality of the earth is also found in my process piece "The First Step". In this piece I performed the following task.

"As an ordinary human being, walk one mile and with each step recognize you are walking on Holy Ground."

I performed this task daily from January 1<sup>st</sup> through the 31<sup>st</sup> in 1998 in San Francisco from Sutter and Market Street to the United Nations Plaza. In this process, I wanted to expand on the sense of the sacredness of place to include the urban environment.

I documented this piece with 219 photographs and a journal which I later compiled into an interactive CD-ROM format. The photographs acted as a record of the external experience and the journal acted as a record of the internal experience.

## The Body as Container of Spirit

*To embody the transcendent is why we are here.* <sup>6</sup>

Sogyal Rinpoche



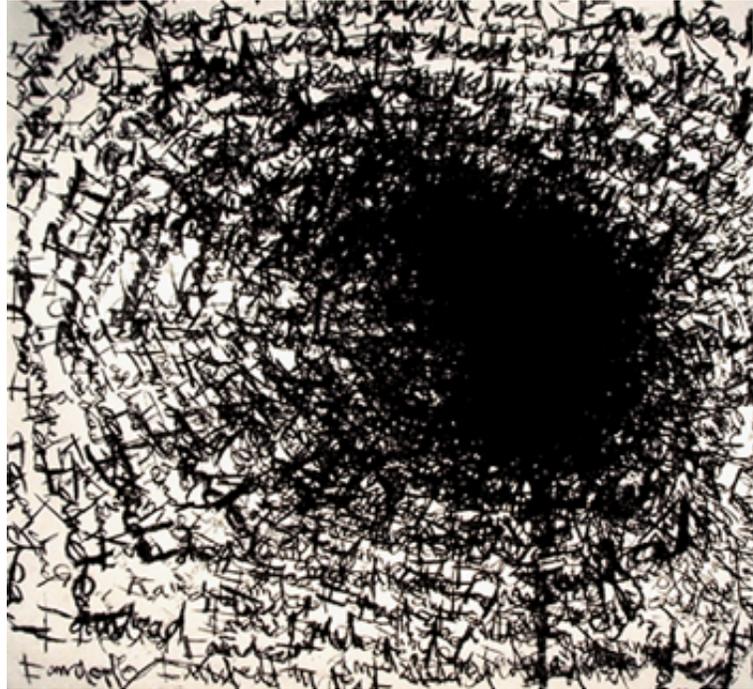
*Boat, mixed media, 26" x 8" x 15", 2000*

In the sculpture “Man” mentioned earlier and in my nest, boat, cave and mummy sculptures the body is seen as a container for the spirit. While the constructions may seem unrelated to the body, for me each of these forms represent the body.

In Celtic Shamanism the body is seen as the “soul shrine”<sup>7</sup>, the shrine for the spirit. In the Sufi statement “Love the pitcher less and the water more”<sup>8</sup> a similar view is expressed with the pitcher representing the body and the water the spirit. Both the boat and the nest (as well as other vessel forms) represent the body as vessel.

In my boat sculptures the body is represented as the vessel that carries the spirit through the journey of life. In the nest sculptures the body is represented as a home for the spirit. Throughout my work these vessels are presented as empty. This symbolic representation relates to issues of absence. This theme of absence or the leaving of the spirit from the body has been shaped through my experience of being

HIV+ and witnessing many friends, lovers and colleagues die from this disease. This separation of the spirit from the body is more directly addressed in my works “I Am Dead” and “Alchemical Cross”.



*I Am Dead*, charcoal on paper, 9' x 9', 1999

“I Am Dead” is a 9' x 9' charcoal drawing I created on the Thursday before Easter in 1999. In making this piece, I repeatedly wrote on the paper the statement “I Am Dead” writing down to one location which became a large black hole. Each time I wrote the statement I spoke the words. What resulted could be seen as a cave but most importantly it represents the spirit’s departure from the body (death). Besides this visual representation of the cave, I also created cave constructions made of natural materials. In exploring the symbol of the cave I found it to represent both a tomb and a womb.

When viewing the body as a container of spirit themes of internal/external and absence/presence emerge. The relationship between the internal and external are

explored throughout my work. In “The First Step”, the journal represented the internal and the photographs represented the external. In my phenomena drawings, I focused on tracking the external and internal phenomena with the intent of clearing my perception of internal/external. This work as well as other tasks are a means for me to fulfill a personal quest for transparency allowing for a direct relationship between my self and the natural and social world. Again the work returns to a question of being engaged with myself and the world.

## The Body as Creator

*All around us the fundamentals of life are crying out to be shaped or created.*<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Beuys



*Untitled, clay and string, 10" x 9" x 4", 1999*

The Biblical telling of the creation (as mentioned earlier) refers to the animation of matter by spirit. Spirit infuses matter and brings life to the earth. As an artist I am in the same process of creation. In my art this creative force is represented in symbolic form as a Lingum/phallus (masculine) or Yoni/bowl (feminine).

The inclusion of the creative force is essential in the overall scope of my work. While the work repeatedly refers to the cycle of life leading to death, the creative aspect of living is equally important in my work because the work is a celebration of life and the creative process in the face of death.

The creative force in the body is manifest through the sexual act. Through the

union of the masculine and feminine a third form is created. As a gay man working with my inner symbolic landscape this union of the feminine and masculine has been of great interest. The issues raised through homophobia around gay men being feminine or lacking the masculine have played a key role in my interest in this theme. The celebration of the phallus as the embodiment of the earth's masculine creative force has been a way for me to reclaim the spiritual nature of my sexuality.

This theme of sexuality is just one aspect of creation. More importantly is the overall sense of our creation of our lives and the world around us. This experience is central to my work as an artist and as a human. When I shape clay I am shaping the earth. I am creating the world through my actions and in each moment I have a choice as to what I create.

## The Body and Meaning

*...we may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly - from being an end to being a means, from holding out perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one.*<sup>10</sup>

Alan Kaprow



*Flowers*, digital print, 42" x 30", 2000

My work as an artist has led me on a quest for a holistic paradigm in which to create. This search has led me into a deep inquiry into the way I work, what is created and how the work functions in the world.

To understand where I am as an artist, I need to understand the current cultural discourse around art. The advent of post-modernism reflected the end of any master narrative in art. The Western tradition in art was understood for hundreds of years as a linear development from one style to the next, each movement taking the step beyond that of its predecessor. With the seeming collapse of meaning and the disruption of this linear narrative, artists today are unhindered by any historical

precedents and are free to borrow from any movement in the history of art.<sup>11</sup> But at the same time this collapse has engendered a dialogue in post-modern art centered on the lack of any true meaning.<sup>12</sup> This deconstruction of meaning based on linguistics and thought is in some ways the impetus for my work.

The quest for a sense of meaning is inherent to my existence as a human. If meaning is no longer found in the realm of culture and thought then I must turn elsewhere to find meaning. As mentioned earlier, for me this shift has been to body and experience as the foundation of meaning. This shift questions the common assumption that meaning and knowledge are found in thought. Through my work I find meaning and knowledge through embodied experience.

This experience is grounded in an engaged presence, a centering in place and time. In this engagement I am open to the various internal and external phenomena as elements of the dance of being and as essential to the creation of my artwork.

If I shift my focus to creating art, I immediately shift out of the experience into the idea of the work. I become the active participant and the tools, media, emotions, etc. become passive. This is a move to a stance of dominion over matter. If I am in the process of creating and experience myself as a part of a larger field of phenomena, I become an equal partner with this field in the creation of the universe. This is an experience of the dance and unification (relationship) of spirit and matter. At this point there is no creator or created, there is creation. I believe that out of this experience what is created no longer exists in the realm of objects. At that point there are no objects only experiences.

How I enter this space is through awareness of myself in time and place and through working with the elements of my immediate experience and environment. Themes are gathered from a phenomenological experience of being. In each moment there is a death and birth. This shift to phenomenology unifies place, time and being.

## How the Work Works

*"I cannot simply declare that you must believe in what I have done...All I can do is to make use of the possibility – or to accept the duty – of showing people what I have done, and then I have to ask them whether or not it's useful."*<sup>13</sup>

Joseph Beuys



*Alchemical Cross*, mixed media, 5" x 14" x 5", 1999

I am questioning on a fundamental level how art (and my art in particular) functions in the world. The engagement of the self with the world in a process-oriented act of creation on a personal level creates meaning, but it does not address how that work can share its meaning with others. It is essential to address how the work works if I am to round out a holistic paradigm of the arts.

The artist Joseph Beuys saw his art as means to heal various wounds, a “wholing” process. Through his work *7,000 Oaks*, he focused on healing the decimated forests of Germany through the replanting of 7,000 oaks as an art project in

Kassel, Germany. In his work *I like America and America Likes Me* in which he lived with a coyote for several days, he focused on healing the split between people and nature, and the decimation of indigenous Americans and their knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Other ways in which he worked included the creation of installations that demonstrated principles of systems theory and energy transference. An essential part of all the work was dialogue and teaching. He would even say, "...an idea of permanent discussion is essential".<sup>15</sup> While some people believe that visual artwork should stand alone without need of elucidation, I agree with Beuys on the need for discussion as part of an artists work.

So in essence we come down to three essential ways Joseph Beuys' art works in the world: as an active agent removing barriers to an experience of wholeness, transferring energy and as a carrier of communication, whether it be through the objects themselves or through discourse.

I also utilize these methods in my work. Artwork acts as a transmitter of energy. The energy infused into the work through the process of creation is transmitted through the artwork. Working with the spiritual nature of the earth the work is infused with this energy. Whether the energy is transmitted through the visual form, the symbolic form, the written and spoken word, or through the numinous quality of the work my aim is for the work to transmit something to the viewer.

In addition, through my actions I would like to demonstrate or model the potential to engage with our lives and the earth in a more meaningful way. Through my work I hope to show that art can be a means of engaging more fully with the earth and society, rather than separating from it.

## Conclusion

*And we saw art emptied of everything except ourselves –  
who became the art by default.*<sup>16</sup>

Alan Kaprow

I see the dance of being as my primary work. Not only in the direct experience of being but also in the understanding and co-creation of my self and the world. Understanding comes from a questioning mind. My research into the nature of being has led me to the contradictory and dualistic edge of existence. Existence/non-existence, created/creator, creation/destruction, male/female, etc.

Culturally we are taught that meaning and value are derived from what we have, what we create and what we do. In contrast to this, underlying all of my work is the belief that meaning and value come from being fully present in the moment. I do not see presence as a solitary solid existence but as an ever changing system of relationships.

A significant aspect of my work at this time revolves around the knowledge that we are creating the future through our thoughts and actions. This idea of creation, whether it be related to the Biblical (the creation of the first human), the Scientific (the creation of the universe), the artistic process or the way we shape our lives, is my current area of research. What is it we create? How do we create? How are we created? Who am I creating? Who am I creating for? I am interested in these questions because I see as my primary work the creation of the world and myself. And through my work I mean to invest this experience of life with meaning and value. While my artwork is a tool I use to clarify my experience, communicate and transfer energy, it is secondary to my real quest, a quest for a full rich and meaningful life. If I succeed as an artist and fail in this endeavor, then I will feel that my work has also failed.

## A Dream

*I had my hand on a table and I said, "This is filled with Meaning. (Indicating the table.) All these things are filled with Meaning. (Indicating everything around.) And I want to dissolve into that Meaning or draw it out of these things."*



*Stalking the Moment (An Action), 1999 (photograph Tom White)*

## Endnotes

1. Arturo Schwarz, "Art and Alchemy" in *XLII Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte La Biennale Di Venezia General Catalog 1986* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1986), 77
2. Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage" in Mariellen R. Sandford, ed., *Happenings and Other Acts* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 59-60
3. Joseph Beuys cited in Mark Levy, *The Shaman is a Gifted Artist* (Santa Monica: High Performance, 1988), 58
4. The American Heritage Dictionary, New College Edition, s.v. "numen"
5. Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, s.v. "numen"
6. Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 81
7. Caitlin and John Matthews, *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom* (Rockport: Element, Inc., 1994), 313
8. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 258
9. Joseph Beuys, *The Joseph Beuys Lectures* (<http://www.ruskin-sch.milohedge.com/lab/14.html>, Athena: 1979), 1
10. Alan Kaprow, "The Real Experiment" in Jeff Kelley, ed., *The Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 218
11. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 48
12. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (JFKU Reader: Ballantine Books, 1993), 31
13. Joseph Beuys, cited in Lucrezia De Domizio, *The Felt Hat: Joseph Beuys: A Life Told* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1991), 26
14. Lucrezia De Domizio, *The Felt Hat: Joseph Beuys: A Life Told*, 42
15. Joseph Beuys, cited in Lucrezia De Domizio, *The Felt Hat: Joseph Beuys: A Life Told*, 40
16. Alan Kaprow, in Jeff Kelley, ed., *The Blurring of Art and Life*, 205

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