



A detail of
Metaphysical Handcart

Beth Krensky: Art, Animals and Artnauts

By Ellen Premack



Artist Beth Krensky

What is the *Artnauts*? It's an artist collective founded in 1996 by George Rivera, PhD, professor of art in the department of Art & Art History at the University of Colorado Boulder. The collective uses the arts as a tool for addressing global issues while connecting artists from around the world. The group has exhibited their work in museum, university, gallery and public spaces on four continents and has captured the attention of art critics around the world. These artists have worked at the intersection of consciousness and contemporary artistic practice to impact change for the better for 20 years.

Artnauts founding member Beth Krensky is an associate professor of art education and the area head of art teaching at the University of Utah. She is an artist, an activist and an educator.

Krensky received her formal art training from the Boston Museum School, a master's degree with a focus on critical pedagogy and art education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a PhD in education from the University of Colorado Boulder.

Krensky is a scholar in the area of youth-created art and social change. She co-founded and spent a decade as Artistic Director for the award-winning youth arts/service/action organization, Project YES (Youth Envisioning Social Change) and is co-author of *Engaging Classrooms and Communities through Art: A Guide to Designing and Implementing Community-Based Art Education* (AltaMira Press).

Krensky has exhibited widely throughout the US and internationally. I first became acquainted with her when the Mizel Museum held the exhibition *We Make The Road By Walking* in 2007. The exhibition content examined the relationships between American Jewish and American Muslim women—needless to say, it was ahead of its time. Beth's work continues to have great influence from her Jewish beingness and has grown to be inclusive of Jewish people worldwide.

Work-In-Progress

Her work is intended to provoke reflection about what is happening in our world as well as create a vision of what is possible. Beth's current project is *Keys For Houses That Are No More*. It is an international collaborative piece in which people participate by e-mailing her their stories, or their families' stories, and she creates a key based on the reality or metaphor of their lost homes. Seventy stories are being selected and, for each, a key made with the intention of translating the story of that home, which for whatever reason—destruction, desolation, the need for its inhabitants to shift suddenly across borders—no longer exists. The bronze and gold leaf keys are meant to be held; oftentimes,



Portable Sanctuary #3, linen, embroidery thread, china and dried bread

the key forms reference the natural world—sticks, leaves, a bird, a fern-like coil. This series is participatory as each person whose story Beth selects becomes a collaborator in the piece. In future exhibitions, these keys, which are seen to unlock healing, will be exhibited next to the written narrative that inspired them; later, they will be presented as a gift to the collaborators whose story brought them into being.

Recent Works & Exhibitions

Krensky was recently included in the exhibition *Amulets, Nazars & Evil Eyes: Artists Looking Forward* at the Queens College Art Center in Flushing, NY, *The Ecological Imperative* at the Museo Contemporáneo in Valdivia, Chile and *Three Walls On Wednesdays*, a public, interactive performance project in Athens, Greece, featuring her work, *Portable Sanctuary #3*.

Portable Sanctuaries got its beginnings from a project that Beth was working on in an old New Haven, Connecticut synagogue. Asked to interpret “what sanctifies this place and what sanctifies other spaces,” Beth chose to use her love of the environment and nature. “We have lost our connection with nature and action needs to take place. We need to have a sense of hope, and our hope is that the land and animal life will be healed,” she explains.

Many of her *Portable Sanctuaries* are performed in parks or along waterfronts, out in nature where her gestures, practicing spiritual acts, wish the world and nature well. *Portable Sanctuary #3* is made of three linen panels with embroidered verbiage, China plates and pieces of dried bread. Birds come to eat in a place they can feel safe and also symbolize that humans have taken them out of their natural spaces—here, we offer them something back, to try to make up for what we have eliminated. The performative gesture of the piece—the bird picnic—happens in the interaction between the animals, who are the performers, and the heirloom plates and linens, which act as stand-ins for generations of humans who have made spaces uninhabitable for the very animals being served.

The *Metaphysical Handcart* is a work that needs to be “walked” slowly, down barren streets—that said, Beth has performed with it on the Salt Flats of Utah, a wide expanse of whiteness and nothingness near the Great Salt Lake. As the *Cart* makes its way through a landscape, everything it holds jiggles and moves. There are bronze and brass bells representative of various ethnic temples, bells meant to awaken us for something larger than ourselves or ring as a warning or that “something will take place,” a bowl lined with a Hebrew blessing and filled with olive leaves



Bronze and gold leaf keys from *Keys For Houses That Are No More*

***Metaphysical Handcart*, bronze, olive wood from the Middle East, bells and aluminum**



and four dead birds cast in bronze, symbolizing that birds in Judaism might well fly between the spaces of heaven and earth. As these pieces make their jingling and gentle bumping sounds, the intention is to create the sense of a narrow liminality, that the division between heaven and earth becomes somehow aroused. Modeled after the handcarts that Mormon pioneers used when they traveled across the country, the *Cart* opens up a new frontier, an “other” space.

The work *Portable Altar* is meant to be participatory, much in the way that young children pull wheeled toys behind them. This altar is meant to follow participants on their sojourns. It is made from bronze and topped with a taxidermied bird, which, in turn, is pinned with copper wires. Copper is a material valued for its conductivity; birds fly, transiting between the sky and land and fulfilling a similar conduit-like role. Children, however, walk close to the ground. With their innocence and youth, Beth suggests that children, in essence, are closer than adults to the source of life. Often, they will find a hurt animal and want to bring it home in a caring nature, without judgment. These poetic gestures happen to us all in the face of terrible times, but Beth wishes us to see the childlike beauty we once felt.

Need To Know: *Keys For Houses that Are No More* will be exhibited in 2013 in various museum and gallery spaces; for details, go to <http://bethkrensky.com/keysproject.html>

For more information on Beth including past and future exhibitions, go to www.bethkrensky.com

Ellen Premack is the Executive Director of the Mizel Museum in Denver.