

## U-topos: Beuys's Social Sculpture as a Real-Utopia and Its Relation to Social Practice Today

Wolfgang Zumdick

Two major tendencies, which are somewhat at odds with each other, can be clearly identified in considering Joseph Beuys's oeuvre. One is the great significance of Beuys's more traditional forms of artwork whose complexity and artistic quality over the years metamorphosed, demonstrating his capacity to develop new forms. The uniqueness of this continuous stream of new forms is apparent if one looks at his work as a whole, starting with the earliest drawings and sculptures from the 1940s and leading up to his environments in the 1980s. In fact, it was not only the extraordinary aesthetic and imaginative quality of Beuys's artwork from the 1960s on that so impressed many leading German art historians and art dealers, it was also his unconventional, timely, precise, and unpredictable responses to specific aspects and instances of German society that made his work so fascinating to the artistic avant-garde. His work was the embodiment of a genuine new vanguard.

Many people in the art world, however, could neither appreciate nor accept Beuys's social and political ideas, questioning their artistic significance, even though Beuys himself regarded this social and political dimension as a central aspect of his work. Beuys's idea of Social Sculpture, which he saw as his *most important work of art*, was especially undervalued by connoisseurs who nonetheless increasingly deemed Beuys one of the leading artists of the



Joseph Beuys's lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1974. Photo © 2012 Klaus Staeck and Gerhard Steidl.

figures such as Herder and Goethe, who in turn initiated a period of thinking and writing in Germany later known as German Idealism and Romanticism. Beuys's expanded concept of art needs to be seen as part of this ongoing stream of "romantic" thinking and practice that sees the project of a more just and humane society not as a failure but a continuing challenge.

### Why a blackboard?

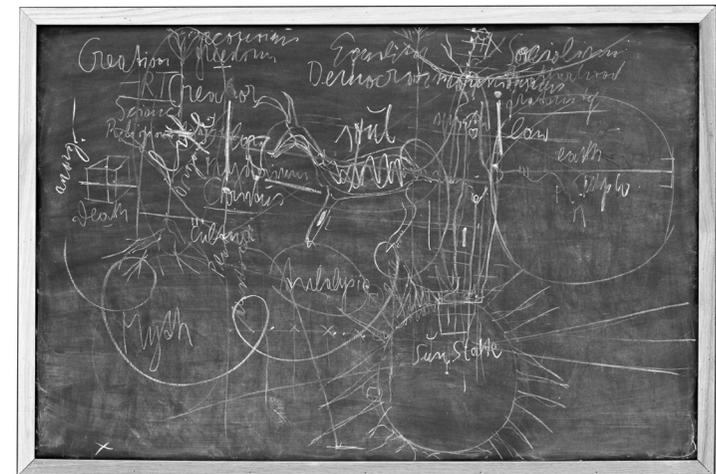
For hundreds of years, the blackboard was a simple tool that could be used in a very sustainable way.<sup>1</sup> It allowed one to introduce and develop ideas while others witnessed the process of how these ideas came into form and how drawings came into being. The blackboard captures the power of our imagination; it is about *us*. Humans have the ability to create things in their minds. They are able to make images and to think. They do not only always have to look at something that is in front of them; they have an inner space in which to navigate, to feel, and think, to make decisions and at the same time to reflect. Human beings have the unique ability to form and create images in themselves that are able to shape life and reality in a conscious way.

A salient feature of a blackboard is that it is a *black* board. When one looks at it, one looks into a *black* space. Not all blackboards are black; green ones especially have been introduced in schools and universities and Beuys used green boards as well. Still, the archetypal blackboard remains black. Its

twentieth century. This division between "the political Beuys" and "Beuys as artist," which existed from early on in his career, endures today.

Reconstructing Beuys's blackboard *Sun State*, created in 1974 during a lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, might offer some insight as to how these two streams of his work—artwork in a more traditional sense and his expanded concept of art—are connected. It might also clarify how any separation between Beuys as artist and as political-philosophical thinker and activist is far too limited. Only when both aspects are seen and understood together can one understand something of the revolutionary quality of Beuys's contribution.

This integrated view also introduces a dimension that concerned Beuys throughout his life: what we might term a *new humanism*, to emphasize the difference between the idea of *posthumanism* and *new materialism*—concepts much discussed today and not only in the context of art. In contrast to new materialism, I want to relate Beuys to one of the European streams of non-materialist thinking, which started in the Renaissance and continued in the work of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Jacob Boehme. These two thinkers and visionaries were of great importance for the development of German literary



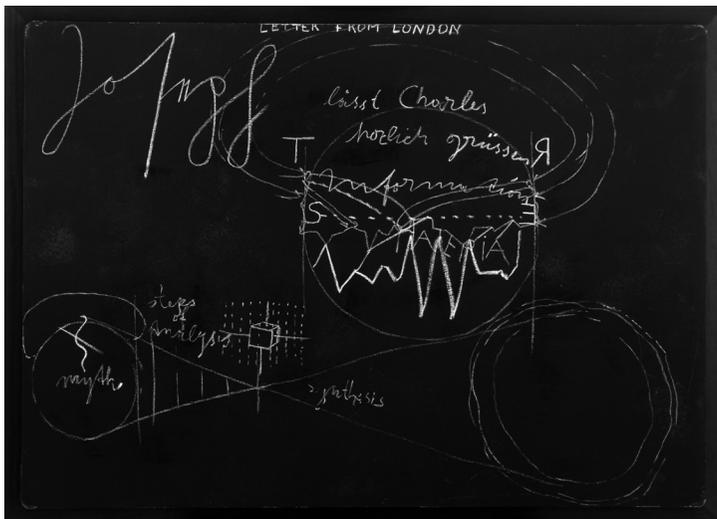
Joseph Beuys, *Untitled (Sun State)*, 1974. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



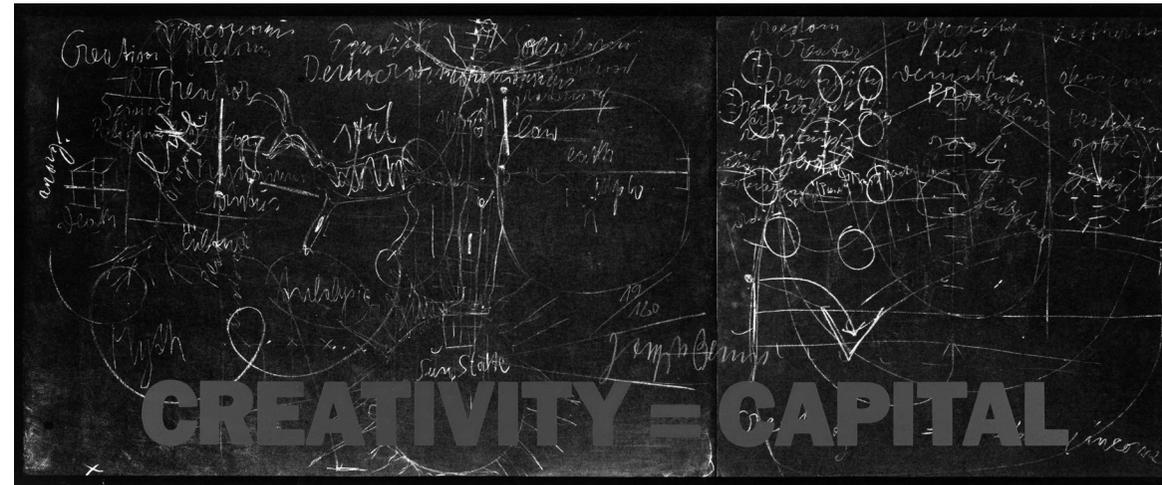
one of the most complex drawings of this series. Another version, with the title *Letter from London*, originally drawn in 1974 on the occasion of the three-week permanent action *Art into Society–Society into Art* in London, was reproduced in a revised form in 1977 in an edition of 130.<sup>4</sup> Another transformation of the image that is very close to *Sun State* was reproduced in 1983 in an edition of 132 as a poster for the New York Subway. Part of the New York art program *Subculture*, it was installed above the windows in the city’s subway cars. Clearly, the ideas embodied in the *Sun State* drawing must have been extremely important to Beuys as a means of conveying his expanded concept of art for him to have used it in these various contexts. Consequently, a close look at the structure and content of this drawing can yield a detailed overview of Joseph Beuys’s social, political, philosophical, and artistic ideas.

### *Sun State*

The title *Sun State* derives from the Italian Dominican philosopher Tommaso Campanella’s text “The City of the Sun,” in which he described a kind of early communist society.<sup>5</sup> However, the idea of *Sun State* is less a direct reference to Campanella’s writing than a metaphor for Beuys’s idea of Social Sculpture. The word “Jupiter” that appears on the right side of the drawing is based on the Austro-German philosopher Rudolf Steiner’s thoughts about the evolution of human consciousness and the overall development of humanity.



Joseph Beuys, *Schultafel*, 1974. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Joseph Beuys, New York Subway poster, 1983. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Both terms, *Sun State* and *Jupiter* (in other contexts Beuys also uses the terms *warmth-ferry* and *Social Sculpture*) are synonyms for Beuys’s idea of a future society of humans who are able to experience and shape nature and society in a free, democratic, responsible, and creative way.

With this work Beuys was diagramming the development of the human mind and consciousness in a chronological and anthropological way. So while the lower part, which suggests a lemniscate or figure eight-shaped curve, reflects the evolution of mind and consciousness, the upper part characterizes the human being as closely related to the natural and supernatural world.

The best way to decipher Beuys’s blackboard is to start on the left where, in the lower portion, Beuys drew a circle marked *myth*, to stand for mythology. Around this circle, he drew what he called a *placenta*. He joined circle and placenta with a line named the *umbilical cord*. Here, Beuys was talking about the very early stage of human consciousness and mind. He stated that as one goes further back in history, one realizes that tribes, early communities, social groups, and states were not organized by political systems, but by religious rules; religion takes primacy. Especially in his early drawings, Beuys often referred to cultures of eastern shamanic traditions or Greek mythology. Like Steiner, he generally called early human cultures *inspiration cultures*, because they were primarily inspired through an imaginative engagement with the world. Mythology in this view is imaginative, dreamlike thinking. Beuys, like Steiner<sup>6</sup> and the German ethnologist Wolfgang Schadewaldt<sup>7</sup>, described how the evolution of the human mind and consciousness derive from this imaginative mode of being.<sup>8</sup>

Beuys might have known Schadewaldt’s Tübingen lectures in which he showed how conceptual, philosophical thought grows out of mythology—

how analytical philosophical thinking in ancient Greece emerged from imagination. To highlight this threshold between image and concept, Beuys also went back to ancient Egyptian society:

This inspirational source can be discovered in Egyptian art for example as a dictate of the priesthood. The priesthood as mediator, as mediators with their own deities, purport to transport the information from the extrasensory world and pass it on to the artists as dictate. In other words, the world has to conform to the prescriptions of the transcendental authorities. This is why there was a very strict canon, transmitted by the higher priesthood and regarded as dictate by the artists. Thus, art in ancient Egypt was to a large extent not yet an art of man but had its source in the extrasensory realm.<sup>9</sup>

From this perspective, early cultures are seen to have a very strong link to the world of imagination, and the “pre-rational mind” is embedded in a holistic system in which every element plays a role. Every phenomenon in nature as well as those of the human psyche such as fear, joy, anger, and greed are therefore part of this holistic image that is usually described as myth or mythology.

When Beuys talks about *inspiration cultures* he generally means that the early human mind was an imaginative one that could think only in images, not a rational mind that conceptualized in the way contemporary human beings do. Conceptual thinking gradually evolved from this early imaginative mind, though humans today still have access to the imaginative world. They are able to think imaginatively—in images, forms, and colors—as well as conceptually. Beuys once put it this way: we can nourish our concepts through the image, “because imagination reaches much deeper in the evolutionary roots (of consciousness)”<sup>10</sup> and can enliven thinking and language much better than pure rational concept or argument is able to do.

### The Inverted Plant

To decipher the upper part of the drawing and its relation to the lower part, it is important to understand that Beuys’s thinking was very strongly inspired by Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Movement, which he founded. Steiner’s philosophy can be seen in many ways as an attempt to develop an alternative to the natural science of the late nineteenth century, which evolved into a more or less materialistic view of the human being and of nature in general. But Steiner was thinking about the human being not just as subject to material processes, but also as a thinking being with feeling and will, which are transcendental substances in the world.<sup>11</sup> He went

on to describe how the world of matter that surrounds us is linked to these different invisible parts of ourselves.

The upper part of Beuys’s drawing depicts the interrelation of matter and soul, of thinking and being of body and mind. Beuys starts by drawing a crystal form in the upper left of the drawing. It could be seen as representing a basalt stone as he used later in *7000 Oaks* at documenta 7 in 1982 in Kassel. For Beuys, the basalt stone stands for the first form of matter; as such, it symbolizes death.<sup>12</sup> Basalt represents the inorganic substance of the earth not yet enlivened with plants, animals, or the human being. Basalt erupted from the hot, fluid, inner parts of the earth. Filled with heat and energy, it encountered the coldness of the outer mantle of the earth and suddenly went dead.<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is interesting that *7000 Oaks* consists of two parts: the basalt stone and the oak.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Beuys brought together the “first” form of matter with a “first” form of life.<sup>15</sup>

The same thing happens in the blackboard drawing as Beuys relates the stone to a plant. For Beuys—as for Steiner—the plant is a symbol for the first life form on earth. Meditation on the metamorphosis of a plant plays an important role in Steiner’s esoteric teachings. In different contexts, he suggested carefully imagining and studying Goethe’s poem *The Metamorphosis of Plants* in order to come closer to what Steiner called the imaginative world or the world of imagination. For Steiner, the plant shows how a living form is created. It also symbolizes imagination and, in some respects, even a materialized thought. Steiner called these imaginative forces or archetypes (*Urbilder*) that create the plant and other life forms, its *etheric body*. He strongly linked these etheric forces to thinking and thought.

By placing a deer in the middle of the drawing, Beuys was characterizing the next life form, the animal that not only has a physical body and grows like the plant, but is also able to move. The plant lacks the senses of the animal. Animals have eyes. They have scent and taste. They can listen and they have a voice. They have instincts that can be seen as rudimentary forms of will. They have intuition. Animals have longings, needs, desires—and a strong instinct to fulfill them. Animals can be angry, aggressive, frightened, lonesome, hurt, or playful. Steiner called these senses, instincts, and basic psychic forces the *astral body*, which in general is related to the animal’s ability to feel. To characterize this ability in his drawing, Beuys connected the deer to the word *soul*.

In the upper right of Beuys’s drawing is a human being, which he regarded as unique among all other beings because of its ability to think. The human being has imagination. It integrates and unites on one hand the three basic elements and forces of nature, or, in Steiner’s language, the physical body, etheric body, and astral body. On the other hand, the human being also uniquely is able to see itself as the persistent “I” in all

its different perceptions.<sup>16</sup> With I-consciousness, the human being is able to realize that one remains the same person in all our different modes of perception: in the various forms of thinking and reflecting, of memory, of conscious inner and outer sensory perceptions, and other forms of human consciousness.

In the *Evolution* drawing, the human being integrates all the different forms mentioned from the left to the right side of the drawing. Its body is made out of inorganic material.<sup>17</sup> There is life energy, and it finds its origin in archetypal forms. While the state of a body of a one-year-old is different from that of an eighty-year-old, there is a continuous stream of growth and decay throughout life. In Steiner's terms, it is the etheric or thought body that holds fast our physical being in its metamorphosis.

Driven by feelings, thoughts, and volition, the psychic forces of the astral body determine human lives. The ability to reflect, rethink, and imagine distinguishes the human being from all other beings in nature. Thinking allows looking back: one can see oneself in the different ages and stages of one's life or, if one looks at someone else, an object, or a situation, one can have a vivid image of this perception in one's mind. The human being has this unique ability to shape and reshape, to conceptualize and create things purely in our mind, and thus, to create inner landscapes.

This is the phenomenon Beuys sought to point out when he drew the human being with roots growing above in space. For him, the human being was "the inverted plant." While the plant gets its life energy from the soil and blossoms into the air, the human being is rooted in its thinking and imagination, in the "cosmos" of thoughts. Its blossoms and fruits can be seen in the artistic, religious, cultural, social, and political forms created in human history. The human being is able to bring to the earth forms of being that do not derive from nature.

## Evolution

Returning to the lower left part of the drawing, to the circle called "myth," Beuys drew a vertical line to the right with three names: Christ, Plato, and Aristotle. He uses this simplified referencing to suggest the paradigm shift in the development of human consciousness from belief to knowledge. For Beuys, Plato was one of the last philosophical representatives of mythological thinking. In the Cave Allegory or the myth of Phaedrus, Plato described how if human beings are too dependent on the senses, their souls can easily get lost in this domain. However, he still used the mythological mode of thinking to articulate his ideas about the forces and entities that shape the physical world. By contrast, Aristotle turned from this tradi-

tion toward a scientific mode, which laid the foundations for the scientific approach. For Beuys, he was the first scientist in a modern sense, the first representative of the new scientific thinking.

Beuys believed that in Aristotle and Christ, a completely new understanding of the role of the human came into being, freeing human thinking from myth and from being imprisoned by old belief systems. Aristotle did this through introducing analytic methodology and categorization that opened up a form of science still current today; Christ through his persistence in love as the true means to free the human soul:

In fact I said that Christ is the promoter of new human qualities in thought, and therefore also the inventor of materialism and of the division of consciousness. And more could be said: Christ is the inventor of schizophrenia, the inventor of the steam engine, the analytical method, materialism, Marxism, Kantianism. All this needs to be said. So everything that occurred in the development of occidental philosophy, from its extreme inner tensions to the technical application of analytical terms, all of this can be traced back to the effect of Christianity as emancipatory principle, as a principle of liberation, however this principle of liberation does not take place inside the churches.<sup>18</sup>

The next names that appear in this very rough outline of the evolution of European thinking are Newton, Kant, and Marx. For Beuys, they represent how this complex stream of liberation in Europe occurred. For example, in the development of Kant's philosophy, it is significant to know that he was reacting in opposition to thinkers like Emanuel Swedenborg, who saw himself as clairvoyant and claimed to have insight into the life of the soul after death. By contrast, Kant wanted to show precisely what one is able to know and where the borders of knowledge are. He wanted to define knowledge and distinguish it from belief. Consequently, he tried to research critically how one perceives, how one thinks, and how thinking categorizes perceptions. In a hitherto unknown way, he separated knowledge and belief. He divided the world into something that can be researched and into dimensions and realities that cannot—such as the idea of God—in which one can only believe. Both Kant's concept of nature and his concept of knowledge are, in fact, built mainly on Newton's theories, which created the basis for an overarching, mechanistic view of the world. For Beuys, in this sense, Aristotle, Kant, and Newton are representatives of the development of the scientific approach in Europe that began with the ancient Greeks.

Beuys viewed Karl Marx in a similar way. Marx's critical analysis of modern capitalist societies in terms of the production and distribution of goods and of the accumulation of capital was part of the same critical stream of enlight-

enment that for Beuys characterized post-Christian European thinking. Marx meant for the development of modern sociology and political economy what Newton meant for modern physics and Kant meant for modern epistemology. They are all part of the scientific stream that brought clarity to the question of how human thinking and acting relate to the world in which human beings live.

Just as Adorno and Horkheimer argued in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Enlightenment understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth radiates under the sign of disaster triumphant.<sup>19</sup>

So Beuys sees it too. The whole development of the critical, analytical mode is for him a necessary “run-in with death.”

The Age of Enlightenment enabled thinking to free itself from old authorities, thoughts, beliefs, and habits. But this ongoing stream of de-mystification also led to the most destructive forms of civilization that human culture had ever seen.

### Threatened Europe, Threatened World

It is helpful to have a closer look at the historical panorama of the times during which Beuys developed his ideas. His characterization of his time as a “death situation” has a very clear historical background: Beuys was part of a traumatized postwar generation; German cities were reduced to ashes, nearly every family had victims to mourn. Survivors of the war looked upon a complete human, social, and political disaster. The nation was marked by feelings of guilt and despair. And then, not long after the truce in 1945, the next threat cast its shadows: the Cold War and the Iron Curtain that divided not only Eastern and Western Europe but also Germany in two.

Young German soldiers returning from the battlefields tried to understand the situation. Now, for young men like Beuys—only twenty-four when he came back from the war, with almost thirteen years of that time filled with Nazi propaganda—the very notion and idea of “Germany,” the German nation, of German culture, was dubious. Many German intellectuals and artists tried to make sense of what had happened. What was all this destruction, cruelty, and unnecessary suffering about? Why did so many play such an active role in the death machinery that made possible the worst crimes humanity had ever seen?

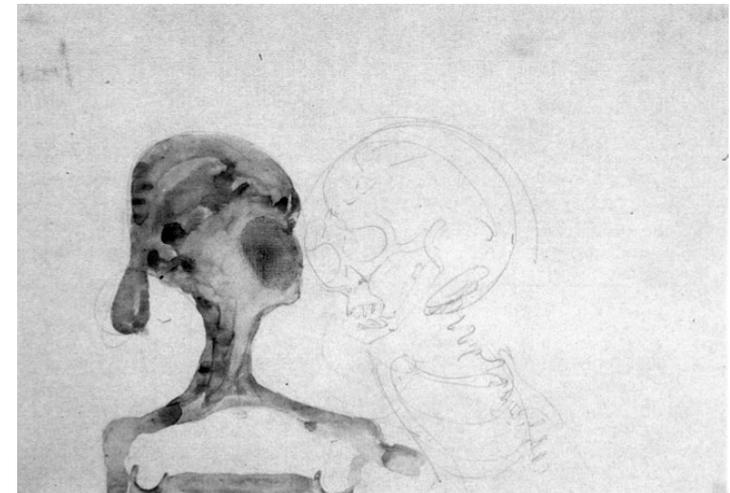
It is interesting in this context to note that a real rehabilitation of what had happened in the Third Reich did not take place until twenty years later by

the generation of children of those who had been involved. Instead, for nearly forty years, from April 1945 when the weapons were silenced, the common experience of Europe, including Germany, was a zone of separation and death. An Iron Curtain was erected that affected all of Europe and the atomic threat was palpable at every moment. Today we know how close the world was to a nuclear war that could have wiped out all life and human civilization.

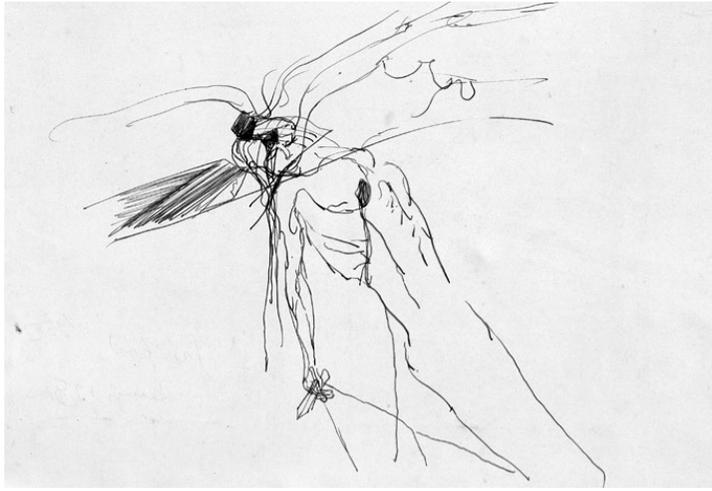
Beuys characterized this death situation as a “threshold” that human beings at *The End of the Twentieth Century*<sup>20</sup> need to overcome. During his later life, he worked on the question: Is there a possibility to look beyond this wall, to look beyond the threshold of death? Are there strategies by means of which humanity might be able to shape and develop healthy forms of society? Are there strategies to develop new forms of social communities and social communication that do not destroy minds or souls but nourish them? His answer is well known: The only possibility to overcome all of this is if we recognize that we are “artists.”

### Traces in Beuys’s Work

If we look at the development of Beuys’s biography after coming back from the war, we would today attribute some of his behavior to post-traumatic experiences. The postwar generation had gone through a collective traumatic situation, but they had no psychological resources. People were left alone with their hurt and their pain.



Joseph Beuys, *Death and the Maiden*, 1957. Courtesy of the Foundation Museum Schloss Moyland. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Joseph Beuys, *Suicide*, 1957. Courtesy of the Foundation Museum Schloss Moyland.  
© 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Beuys's drawings from the 1940s and 1950s reflect his war experiences in a very personal way. Drawings from the mid-1950s such as a variation of the theme *Death and the Maiden* of 1957 underscore his psychological state. That year, Beuys suffered a complete physical and mental breakdown. Descriptions of friends and witnesses indicate how close he came to suicide. He was placed in a psychiatric hospital for nearly three months.

On his release, he spent several weeks slowly recovering on the farm of close friends where he helped with the daily tasks. Beuys himself described the complete personality change he underwent, which is strongly reflected in the development of his later art. In a way, Beuys's art can be divided into two parts—before and after 1957. The Beuys we know today is mainly associated with our view of the provocative, political Beuys since the 1960s. An ongoing metamorphosis can be seen in his art from the early 1960s when he was a participant in the Fluxus movement and was also creating unconventional, provocative artworks like the *Fat Chair*, up to the 1970s when he was creating spaces for political discussion and engagement like the *Office for Direct Democracy* or the *Honeypump in the Workplace*. In later years, Beuys was increasingly dedicated to the idea of the transformation of the social body and working out strategies to introduce his Social Sculpture ideas.

### The Permanent Conference

One such strategy was called the *permanent conference*. Beuys developed this approach in the early 1970s, emphasizing the central role of discussion

and exchange in working toward a sustainable and socially viable society. Discourse and discussion increasingly became integral parts of his work. Beuys felt that everyone needed to be part of the discussion about developing new forms of cooperation. His commitment to this conversation is evident not only in his *Office for Direct Democracy* at the 1972 documenta and in his participation as a founding member of the German Green party, but in his blackboard-actions such as *Directional Forces (of a New Society)* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1974 and the lecture tour through the United States that same year.

Interestingly, Beuys combined his extended concept of art with a perspective on the future that he sometimes called a *real-utopia*, or Social Sculpture. This is depicted on the right side of the diagram. If one looks at his political activities over the years, one can see the determination with which he sought to anchor—and realize—his social ideas. The ideals of the French Revolution—freedom, equality, brotherhood—which were universally valid for Beuys, were incorporated into his notion of Social Sculpture. This conception was therefore rooted in the assumption that the human being in terms of his humanity is in reality a viable being. And so, for Beuys, the future was mainly a question of creation, or of “art”!

He repeatedly asked himself through all his work: What are our real human needs and what state, cultural, and other social institutions can enable human aspiration to be realized? How should the state be organized to further humanity and not hinder it through competition? Which fields and levels of human creativity are undervalued, and how can human beings unfold and develop to further knowledge and improve the well-being of all?

### A New Muse

Beuys believed these endeavors should be the task of a new art or, as he once put it, a new muse. This art should be understood not only as modes of expression such as painting, sculpting, video, and performance art, but also involve the shaping of public, economic, and social institutions. One of the most important fields of focus for Beuys's new social art was education, which to him was the equivalent of freedom. Individuals who are enabled to discover their creative potential in different contexts of work and life will be able to pass it down to others as life energy and motivation. At the same time, Beuys hoped that developing individual potential would also increase responsibility and the capacity to work together in groups. Free and self-governing schools should work with this new concept to further the potential for creativity that slumbers in every individual.

The Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU) that Beuys tried to establish together with Heinrich Boell, Klaus Staeck, and others, first in Düsseldorf and later in Northern Ireland, was an attempt to put these pedagogic ideas into practice. This interdisciplinary impulse with the social sculpture ideas were taken up and further developed in the late 1990s by the South African artist and student of Beuys, Shelley Sacks. They are taught today at the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University.

In addition to the free, self-governed school and higher education system, Beuys sought to develop a more participatory democracy in which citizens would be able to make decisions about collective questions concerning shaping a society in the broadest sense. His critique of representative democracy and his demand for greater democracy have meanwhile become an issue of nearly every party in Germany and a referendum at federal level seems only a matter of time.

An often overlooked aspect of Beuys's direct democracy is self-reflection, which is essential for the conscious self-regulation of communities. In a truly democratic process, we are all involved in and concerned with the future of society and what influence our actions will have on others now and in years to come. Democracy in this sense is both a model and a practice in which communities not only decide the shape of their community, but recognize that responsibility means engaging with the complex political, social and cultural issues that structure our lives.

The most controversial proposal that Beuys made in this context was his response to the two forms of economy that determined the world during the Cold War period: the planned economy of the socialist state and a more or less cushioned social market economy. Beuys criticized—as did the intellectual left—the devastating effects of unrestrained capitalism, which, enforced by military means and dictatorial regimes, were so evident in the economic policies of the United States in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Beuys attempted to develop a socially just system of exchange, which he described as the ecological circulation system of money. This, he claimed, would reduce the accumulation of capital and consequently the accumulation of power. Although to some this might have seemed naïve, it nonetheless highlighted the necessity of regulating an unmitigated capitalism and returning “money” to its original task: the equitable control of the processes of production and the successful exchange in the flow of goods.

Beuys promoted his formula ART = CAPITAL to locate the actual capital of a society within creative, self-organized work and to make the values created by the capacities of human beings and their commitment to their work part of a theoretical discussion in the academic and wider socio-economic context. This seminal interest seems viable today. How can we position an

economy that puts the advancement of human creativity in the widest sense—collective as well as individual—in the foreground? How can we overcome the profit principle, which still takes priority over environmental and social criteria, without causing forms of bureaucratization or planned economic management? Beuys offered an impulse for further exploration in the sphere of political economy and micro- and macroeconomics. His understandings and proposals might serve as an impetus if not a direct model.

### New Forms of Encounter

The radicalism with which Beuys developed his art over time was mainly a result of the experience of failed human interaction. The inability to resolve conflicts in a constructive way has led to the problems modernity has faced ever since. For Beuys, these crises indicate a basic disruption in the process of human individuation: the “modern human being” longs to develop and experience his free individuality, which also always includes social responsibility, but is hindered in this basic need by inflexible social and political organizations and institutions. For Beuys, such an all encompassing social transformation involves more participation and the scope to develop creative individual capacities that could shift these aberrations into a productive direction.

The ART = CAPITAL formula encapsulates his line of thought: the belief that the real capital of human societies consists in the creativity of their members and the capital they contribute and produce together as *social organisms*—as Beuys put it according to Rudolf Steiner. In this context, Beuys's concept of creativity and his statement that every human being is an artist does not chiefly mean that each individual should only develop his creative capacities, but that these capacities should be developed in the context of the wider field of social responsibility. How can people work together so that they can create a social sculpture in which every individual is represented and no one's substance and quality gets lost? Beuys wanted to rethink competition in healthy ways. In today's world we see this played out at the level of social exclusion in which, in a neoliberal capitalist framework, whole societies are winners or losers and the economy poses an enormously destructive force.

To educate individuals as creative beings does not mean building elite schools or universities where individuals learn to reproduce traditional forms of governance, economy, science, or social behavior. It means creating *free* schools and universities in which students learn, above all, how to work together, how to think together, how to respect each other. The German Nobel Prize laureate Heinrich Böll, one of the founding members

of the FIU, therefore wanted to establish a faculty of social behavior within the envisioned “new” interdisciplinary university. In a paper outlining the FIU charter, he wrote:

There is a potential for creativity that is lost with competition and aggression for success. To discover, explore, and develop this potential should be the task of the school.... If creativity, imagination, and intelligence is not able to be expressed, the human being will become harmful and resentful, and corrupted creativity will result in crime. Crime can result from boredom and suppressed creativity, reducing one’s productivity and disregarding our democratic potential and discarding or rejecting democratic creativity.<sup>21</sup>

But Beuys’s expanded concept of art does not mean only that every member of a society must have the right to develop his or her individual creativity. It also means that creativity is just as central to all our social forms and social processes. How can we learn to work together with our creativity so that the products we produce are of the best quality and become, so to speak, “good sculptures?” This does not necessarily mean the product is “beautiful.” Rather, there are a whole set of framing conditions that have to be considered at the same time: Is the product that is made and the materials that are used sustainable? Where do the raw materials derive from? Under what conditions were they generated? What are the conditions of the workplace? Do workers have rights? How is the work situation organized? Are the wages fair? Is there social care? What are the living conditions? For Beuys, these are all questions that can only arise out of participatory conditions. To develop creativity, therefore, also means to develop the democratic processes and forms that enable every person to develop their capacities in both the workplace and their lives.

Many of Beuys’s initiatives in this field remain unfulfilled. After his death, for those interested in his ideas, it was unclear as to how to work with his concepts and strategies. In this context, it is worthwhile mentioning the *Omnibus for Direct Democracy in Germany*, which was the first initiative following Beuys’s death. It has now been more than twenty-five years since this “art” omnibus began its travels through Germany, and more recently through other European countries, generating important impulses for the development of democratic culture. Through the work of the *Omnibus* and related initiatives, referenda now exist in most of the local parliaments and many German states.

Another initiative was developed by Shelley Sacks who employed the social sculpture ideas in the South African anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s, developing a branch of the FIU and forms of social sculpture that



*The Omnibus for Direct Democracy in Germany, LOCATION, YEAR. Courtesy of Omnibus for Direct Democracy in Germany.*

focused on production and credit cooperatives, and exploring alternative forms of work. After coming to Great Britain in 1990, she engaged with these ideas through many different projects and forums, which continue to be explored through projects such as University of the Trees and the Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU)—the institute at Oxford Brookes University previously mentioned where I am affiliated.<sup>22</sup>

### New Forms of Interaction

If Beuys was right that the crises of modern societies are crises of identity, then the task would be to transform the existing worlds of pedagogy, labor, and politics into forms that allow for individual self-expression and self-development, while at the same time enabling new forms of community. To do so, we need new forms of encounters and ways of being together that foster freedom, responsibility, and genuine communication.

While every communication, simply stated, depends on two components—the speaker and the listener—the SSRU, like many other social groupings and practitioners during recent decades, has, as one aspect of its work, advanced the notion of *active listening*. This capacity requires inner presence, clarity of thought, and conscious withholding of judgment or prejudice. It is a practice that derives from a phenomenological tradition closely linked to Beuys through Goethe, Rudolf Steiner, and Steiner’s teacher, Franz Brentano, and shares certain principles with spiritual traditions such as Buddhism. In the SSRU, this emphasis on phenomenological engagement manifests in numerous different ways. One form that it takes in our pedagogy within the art

context has to do with a transformation of the traditional critique into a phenomenological feedback process. Students learn to engage with what is and to understand “evaluation” as perceiving *the value* in things instead of judging. Likewise, participants in *Frametalks*—one of our contemporary social sculpture projects—are invited to employ “active listening” in a mobile pavement seminar, enabling new ways of “listening to each, and listening to the world.”<sup>23</sup> This, like many of the other processes we have developed, foregrounds forms of communication that are real alternatives to what we are used to in traditional political and academic exchanges. Through this “active listening” and phenomenological approach to encountering others and ideas, the participatory process becomes more active, connective, and insightful.

In all of these cases, what is common is a holding fast to the subject, staying with the thoughts of the other, and learning not to slip into one’s own world. In this atmosphere of recognition and paying attention (in German: *Aufmerksamkeit schenken* which means to gift attention), trust and empathy

*Frametalks* schedule, LOCATION, YEAR. Courtesy of *Frametalks*. Photo: Wolfgang Zumdick and Shelley Sacks.



are explored. In these projects, new “communities of understanding” grow, and groups carry the process of active listening into different situations, integrating these new forms of encountering into their social actions and their everyday lives.<sup>24</sup>

Another focus in all our contemporary social sculpture work has to do with recognizing one’s motivation for doing things as well as what causes such inner movement to occur. This awareness of what mobilizes us internally is as relevant to the work we do with students as it is with initiatives in the social sphere.<sup>25</sup> Whether reentering one’s personal agenda as a student, or doing this as a group of citizens, exploring one’s aims and reasons for engagement in a phenomenological, imaginal mode connects our thinking, feeling, and will.

Social capacities created through these forms of phenomenology, active listening, and empathy are among the many “connective practices” we have developed to make tangible Beuys’s expanded understanding of art. Only understanding gained through true encounter with the “other,” including nature in all its different dimensions, will allow us to shape a more connective kind of world. It is the lack of perception, empathy, and understanding that causes so much exploitation, alienation, and isolation.

#### “A Source of Valuable Substance”

Joseph Beuys called this whole sphere of a failed interactions “suffering.” He was referring not only to affliction, brutalization, or death, but also to the suffering of nature, which is not only a negative state but offers “a source of renewal”:

It is a source of valuable substance; which the suffering offers to the world. One sees it as an invisible sacramental substance. And it is less people who notice that today than the trees themselves. For that reason I plant trees. I am no gardener who plants trees because trees are beautiful. No, I say today the trees are indeed more intelligent than people. At the same time the wind blows through the tree tops, the very substance that the suffering people carry on the earth moves through the tree tops. This means that the trees have perceived that for a long time and that they also share the condition of suffering. They are deprived. They know exactly that they are deprived. Animals and trees are deprived, and everything is deprived. I would like to give trees and animals legal rights. Quite sure, that is a duty of man. If he accepts his tasks here in the world in the form of real Christianity, of the real Christian

substance that is of the sacrament living in the tree tops then he must behave accordingly. Having started with the trees, he must once again slowly set up his intelligence.<sup>26</sup>

Building on Goethe, Beuys emphasized the need for “new organs of perception” that human beings must develop to “set up this intelligence.” Listening, seeing, and experiencing should be re-enlivened and include the ability to experience silence and inner space. Empathetically considering other human beings is part of this. We need to seek out other systems and establish ways of life that can make us experience things in a new way and that can make us more conscious beings in the world.

Recently, Shelley Sacks and I tried to grasp the tension between estrangement, solipsism, and autism, and the idea of encounter and inner understanding. In *Atlas of the Poetic Continent—Pathways to Ecological Citizenship*,<sup>27</sup> we stated that perceiving in a poetic mode means first and foremost to listen actively. The listener must be able to “enter the other side”—to intuit and live with the other without losing one’s own self. Such poetic perception means to live within things.

Perhaps there is no other way to come closer to the world we are living in than to intuit it through the poetic mode: through active seeing and active listening, through empathy and compassion. This ability to see through the eyes of others, which implies “living with,” recognizing with, suffering with, and feeling with, can be an inner drive to turn to and take part in new ways into life. This inner participation gives us the capacity to step into new levels of perception with internal rigor, vitality, and courage, gaining the ability to approach problems and develop strategies of transition and recovery.

## Prospect

The interest in social sculpture worldwide that is connected to Beuys’s original ideas and questions is astounding to see. His ideas, largely rooted in the philosophy and literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and revisited through his twentieth-century experiences, are still influential in dealing with the questions of the twenty-first century. Our task is not to increase but to deepen our knowledge about the life-organism that is the human being.

We must see and acknowledge the state that we are in, with all its light and all its shadows. Change is only possible with an honest and thoughtful evaluation of what exists. We should perceive this without anger, hatred, and especially without hasty judgments. If there is one thing

we can learn from Beuys’s expanded concept of art, it is that negativity and hatred are not creative forces. The violence and aggression, the traumatic genocides we are witnessing all around the world, are a cry for a new kind of freedom that allows every human being to develop his own imagination, inspiration, and intuition, and to develop new ways of understanding and behaving.

There is an urgent need for new schools where these new forms of freedom and responsibility for oneself and for the world can be explored and taught. Civilization is in a state of transition. Everybody senses that today. The old ways no longer work. New methodologies are required. The organism that is the world and the organism that is the human being need to be realigned.

---

This lecture was delivered on November 8, 2014 as part of the SAIC symposium *A Lived Practice*, and is published here with revisions by the author.

**1** Johann Amos Comenius’s *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* from 1653 shows a classroom with blackboard marked with chalk.

**2** Beuys used blackboards already in the 1960s for actions (*Sibirische Symphonie*, Düsseldorf 1963; *Eurasia*, Copenhagen 1966; *Infiltration Homogen für Konzertflügel, der größte Komponist der Gegenwart ist das Contergankind*, Düsseldorf 1966; *Celtic*, Edinburgh 1970), but they were erased and not saved. Beuys also used them in the context as teacher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy (see Johannes Stüttgen, *Der Ganze Riemen* (Cologne: König, 2008), 674 ff.) The first Beuys blackboards sold as artworks go back to 1971-1972 when Beuys sold the blackboards from his *Office for Direct Democracy* in Düsseldorf and later at documenta 5 in 1972 to finance his *Organization for Direct Democracy*. Beginning in 1972, blackboard drawings became a more important part of Beuys’s oeuvre. See Mario Kramer, “Interview with Joseph Beuys, December 9, 1984,” in Mario Kramer, *Joseph Beuys, das Kapital Raum 1970-1977* (Heidelberg, 1991), 29.

**3** According to Volker Harlan, the title did not originate from Beuys but from Hartwig Wilken, who first published the drawing under this title in the journal *Beiträge zur Dreigliederung*. According to Harlan, Beuys agreed with this decision.

**4** Beuys gave the original blackboard to Charles Wilp.

**5** This is a utopian story inspired by Plato’s *Republic* and his description of Atlantis in the dialogue *Timaeus*.

**6** Rudolf Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy Presented in an Outline of its History* (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1973).

**7** Wolfgang Schädewaldt, *Die Anfänge der Philosophie bei den Griechen: Die Vorsokratiker und ihre Voraussetzungen. Tübinger Vorlesungen, Band 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978).

**8** This topic is described in full in Wolfgang Zumdick, *Death Keeps Me Awake. Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner, Foundations of Their Thought* (Baunach: Spurbuch, 2013), 100 ff.

**9** Joseph Beuys, “Multiplizierte Kunst 1965 – 1980,” in *Joseph Beuys im Gespräch mit Willi Bongard* (Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1980). Translation by Shelley Sacks.

**10** Joseph Beuys, in Frans Haks, *Das Museum. Ein Gespräch über seine Aufgaben, Möglichkeiten, Dimensionen* (Wangen: FIU Verlag, 1993), 31.

**11** The human being as spiritual being is not only part of this spiritual world, it also derives from this world and, in a way, creates it. For the larger context of this thought, see Zumdick, *Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner*, 66-82.

**12** Beuys’s early drawing included self-portraits depicted as a man in stone. The hardened form of the basalt also represents the inner life of the artist. Stones and rocks are, therefore, not only symbols for the inorganic parts of the earth from which life derives, but also show an inner condition. Beuys often mentioned this in his so-called plastic theory in which form represents thinking and, as such, an inner state of mind.

**13** In Beuys’s theory of sculpture—which he constructed in the lowest part of the drawing at the left—he explained that mind and matter, soul and body, oscillate between three forms of existence: chaos, movement, and form. Basalt is also a symbol for this process: through coldness, this fluid, energetic substance becomes form.

**14** In addition to oaks, the seven thousand trees planted in Kassel include linden trees, plane trees, chestnut trees, ash trees, robinias, maples, elms, and tulip trees.

**15** Although the plant is not the first form of life but a much-elaborated form, I call it “the first life form” because it is a symbol for life as a self-developing organism.

**16** Which Kant called in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) “the continuous I that can accompany all its different perceptions.”

**17** It consists of twenty-six necessary and eleven unnecessary elements, including oxygen, carbonate, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphor, sulfur, potassium, sodium, and others.

**18** Joseph Beuys, *Der Tod hält mich wach. Joseph Beuys im Gespräch mit Achile Bonito Oliva* (1973). Quoted from: Zumdick, 116.

**19** Lambert Zuidervaart, “Theodor W. Adorno,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2011).

**20** *The End of the Twentieth Century (Das Ende des Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts)* is a key installation of Joseph Beuys, realized in 1982 at the Haus der Kunst, Munich. It consists of forty-four basalt stones that were processed by the artist. It suggests the deep crisis of the different parts of life at the end of the century and that have to be overcome.

**21** Heinrich Böll and Joseph Beuys, “Manifesto for the Foundation of a ‘Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research,’” trans. Wolfgang Zumdick (Cologne: Heinrich Böll Archive, 1973).

**22** See [www.social-sculpture.org](http://www.social-sculpture.org).

**23** This is the slogan of *Earth Forum*, one of the social sculpture practices in the *University of the Trees*. See [www.universityofthetrees.org](http://www.universityofthetrees.org).

**24** See Shelley Sack, “Geben und Ökologisches Bürgerschaft: Aus innerer Bewegung zur passenden,” in *Da Hilft nur Schenken* (Frankfurt: Info3-Verlag, 2011), 38-42.

**25** See theories of Bertolt Brecht and teaching philosophies of Shelley Sacks.

**26** Friedhelm Mennekes, *Beuys zu Christus: Eine position im Gespräch/Beuys on Christ: A Position in Dialogue* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 47.

**27** Shelley Sacks and Wolfgang Zumdick, *Atlas of the Poetic Continent- Pathways to Ecological Citizenship* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge Publishing, 2013).