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The Ends of Art according to Beuys

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translated by ROSALIND KRAUSS

*As strange as this might seem, my path has
been traced by language; it did not spring
from what one calls an artistic gift.*

—Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys wanted to make art the instrument of resurrection, for the unification of man. The proposal is simple. It enlisted the enthusiastic adherence of his disciples and the mockery of his detractors, but never the indifference of the Germans. In his own country his death was hailed as the disappearance of a “German phenomenon”; he had been compared to Dürer. The desire to spread Christianity’s faith in the possibility of each human being’s rebirth excited this apostle of “the expanded concept of art” just as it had once stirred the master of the German Renaissance.

Dürer’s response to Saint Augustine’s *creatura non potest creare* (a creature has no power to create) had been to reestablish the original identity between God and man through the use of man’s God-given creative power. And such, once again, was Beuys’s message to the Germans and to the contemporary world. “Each man is an artist” does not mean that everyone is a good painter. It means, says Beuys, man’s possibility of self-determination: “For this time, it is man as aided by no god, as in the mystery of Golgotha. This time, it is man himself who must accomplish the resurrection.”¹

The disturbing element in Beuys’s work is not to be found in his drawings, which have their place in public and private collections throughout the world, nor his “performances,” which have their place within the Fluxus movement and within a general investigation of the limits of art. It lies rather, I believe, in the flood of pronouncements testifying to the privilege that he gave, throughout his lifetime, to spoken over plastic language. It is this constant inundation of his

1. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Friedhelm Mennekes, in F. J. van der Grinter and F. Mennekes, *Menschenbild—Christusbild*, Stuttgart, 1984, p. 103.

Joseph Beuys. Stanhope Hotel. 1974 (Galerie Alfred Schmela, Düsseldorf, 1978).



“works” by words—both his own and those of others—this frantic proselytizing in which he exhausted himself up to the time of his death. But it is also—and in the very same impulse that led him to repeat what he thought was Christ’s teaching—this constant wish to “clarify the task that the Germans have to accomplish in the world,” this insistence on the “duty of the German people,” *above all* to deploy this “resurrective force” that was to lead to the transformation of the social body by man-turned-artist.²

This flood of words had a function: to fill up the silence of Marcel Duchamp: he who hadn’t dared follow the consequences of his own acts; he who hadn’t understood his own import. The piece called *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Over-Rated* was, thus, a work of criticism:

I criticize him because just when he could have developed a theory on the basis of the work he’d achieved, he contented himself with silence; and the theory that he could have developed—it is I who develop it today.³

That object [the urinal]: he brought it into the museum so as to establish that it is the transferral from one place to another that makes it into art. But establishing this did not lead him to the conclusion—simple and obvious—that all men are artists. On the contrary. He hoisted himself onto a pedestal saying, look how I have shocked the bourgeoisie!⁴

In opposition to this, Beuys says, “The most important thing, for someone looking at my objects, is my fundamental thesis: EACH MAN IS AN ARTIST. There is *my* contribution to ‘the history of art.’”⁵ Or again, “The most important aspect of my work is the part that concerns ideas.”⁶ Beuys’s objects or performances should not, then, be taken for works having their ends in themselves. They are conceived to be read as so many repetitions of the message: you who are looking, you, also, are an artist.

Before even reflecting on this “fundamental thesis,” it must, therefore, be said that, because they are the representations of an end that is external to them, these objects or performances are dependent upon an *instrumental* and entirely classical conception of art in which the “form” is nothing but the unbetrayed *vehicle* of the “idea”: “I said, sculpture begins in thought and if the thought is not

2. Joseph Beuys, “Discours sur mon pays: l’Allemagne,” in *Pour la mort de Joseph Beuys: nécrologies, essais, discours*, Bonn, Inter Nationes, 1986, p. 31.

3. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, in *Canal*, nos. 58–59 (Winter 1984–85), p. 7.

4. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Irmeline Lebeer, in *Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, no. 4 (1980), p. 176.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

6. *Canal*, nos. 58–59, p. 8.

true, the ideas are bad and so is the sculpture. The sculpture's idea and form are identical."⁷

It is on this naive certainty of an absolute transparency between form and matter and the "idea" that Beuys's system is constructed. It offers the immense advantage of allowing the artist to create as if in flashes of lightning in which the opacity of (the) work in process is eluded, in which form is always adequate to the idea:

Fat, for example, was a great discovery for me. . . . I was able to influence it with heat or cold. . . . In this way I could transform the character of this fat from a chaotic and unsettled state to a very solid condition of form. In this way the fat underwent a movement from a very chaotic condition to a geometrical context as its end. I thus had three fields of power and, there, that was the idea of sculpture. It was power over a condition of chaos, over a condition of movement, and over a condition of form. In these three elements—form, movement, and chaos—was the indeterminate energy from which I derived my complete theory of sculpture, of the psychology of humanity as the power of will, the power of thought, and the power of feeling; and there I found it—the schema adequate to understanding all the problems of society.⁸

It is thus that fat in all its states became the most adequate representation of the *Gestaltung*—the putting into form—as an end. A schematic representation to be sure, but one which, as such, would best convey the idea of the general process of thought, of man, and of human society: the passage from an indeterminate or "chaotic" state of energy to a state that is determinate, or "crystalline."

Obviously, this idea of *Gestaltung*, central to Beuys's thought, is the *resurrection of meaning* that Duchamp's silence had buried. This silence, which was spread and reproduced "like a sickness" up to Mario Merz or Kounellis, up to the practitioners of the return to expressionism or those of Bad Painting, this immense silence of Duchamp within which all these artists "languish," has led them to produce nothing but "objects with no consequences": "Their representations are devoid of meaning, and it's this absence of meaning that allows art historians to patch together trivial significations."⁹ What these artists haven't understood "is that above all you have to make something that relates to thought and to the development of an idea, so that it later becomes a practical idea within society."¹⁰

7. *Ibid.*

8. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, August 1979, in Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, *Joseph Beuys, Is It about a Bicycle?*, Paris, Verona, 1985, pp. 91–93.

9. *Canal*, nos. 58–59, p. 9.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 8.



Joseph Beuys. Fat Chair. 1982.

The works and performances of Beuys, on the contrary, as process and as *theorized* passage (this is the difference, he says) from nondetermined to determined, work toward the exhibition of the process of *Gestaltung*, the point of which is *Gestaltung*. The “expanded concept of art” is, thus, this resurrection of meaning as *total* in-forming: “the idea of *Gestaltung* . . . extends to all the problems of society.”¹¹ “The issue is the capacity of each person in his place of work; what matters is the capacity of a nurse or a farmer to become a creative force, and to recognize it as part of an artistic duty that is to be accomplished.”¹²

The *Gestaltung* of the world is thus a duty—the duty of everyone, at his place of work—to reform a sick world. But if the *Gestaltung displaying itself* is the resurrection of meaning, it is by the same token, for Beuys, the resurrection of Christ displaying himself in his work (“the human-being-as-artist is the creator”):

I take possession of a concept of God and I give this concept to man, but I don't need to do it: I am much too weak. The act that will make man free, the act that represents Christ in human beings, this act has already been committed. But there's a conspiracy of silence about it.¹³

This is why the monstrosity of the *Gestaltung* engenders the *Gestaltung*: it had to be brought back from oblivion, torn from its place of retreat, so that when presented to men they might recognize themselves in it, recognizing it as their most profound essence: freedom and “self-sovereignty.” And this is why its very monstrosity breaks the silence that shrouds it, this very silence with which we still shroud the act through which Christ will free man-as-creator. For the *Gestaltung*, when exposed, quickly finds its Assumption in speech: Beuys's, first of all (his own exposition of the theory of work as a process of exposition, as he says), but also that of others. Their commentary is this new and incessant resurrection of meaning, its active propagation through which it becomes apparent that “everyman is an artist,” since in any case, speech is “sculpture”:

Consequently, everything that concerns creativity is invisible, is a purely spiritual substance. And this work, with this invisible substance, this is what I call “social sculpture.” This work with invisible substance is my domain. At first, there is nothing to see. Subsequently, when it becomes corporeal, it appears initially in the form of language.¹⁴

Then there awakens “in each human being a sharpened consciousness of the ego, a will to affirm the self.”¹⁵

One can be thankful to Beuys for having reinvented the mystery of the

11. *Cahiers*, no. 4, p. 176.

12. Beuys, “Discours sur mon pays: l'Allemagne,” p. 47.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

14. *Cahiers*, no. 4, p. 176.

15. Beuys, “Discours sur mon pays: l'Allemagne,” p. 42.

Incarnation. Its rehearsal, however, presents all the signs of a pedagogy that is both banal and disquieting. But it is not its banality, or the banalization of all the grand thoughts with which it decks itself out, that makes it troubling. On the one hand Beuys's social sculpture or social in-forming presents itself as a healing of the social body by way of speech: "I am interested much more," he says, "in the type of theory that releases energy in people, leading them to a general discussion of actual problems. It is thus more a therapeutic method."¹⁶ On the other hand it also claims to be a physical cure, but now no longer by speech, but through *language*.

His 1985 oration in Munich, "Talking about One's Own Country: Germany," should engage our attention: Beuys imagines himself collapsed, dead and buried, but coming back to life within the German language. Once again, it is best to quote him (it is from his tomb that he addresses himself to the Germans):

By using the German language, we would succeed in conversing with one another, and we would discover that in speaking this way it is possible to find a physical healing, but also to experience, too, a deep, elemental feeling of what is taking place on the soil where we live, of what is dead in the fields, in the forests, on the prairies, in the mountains. Our own reanimation will allow us, through language, to recapture this soil. And this means that we will accomplish, thanks to this soil on which we are born, a process of salvation.¹⁷

The *Gestaltung* is thus a continual resurrection: it dies only incessantly to be reborn, spontaneously generating itself within the circularity of the soil and revealing itself alternatively as the soil of the German language and as the language of the German soil, each finding in the other the force necessary to this continuous self-engendering, whereby they purify themselves ever more highly.

One can see how Beuys's ecology is one of *Gestaltung* as soil and as language, that is, as a *people* ("the idea of a people is fundamentally tied to its language").¹⁸ And it is because his path was not determined by "what is called an 'artistic gift,'" but instead "traced through language" that Beuys decided one day (or was told), "Perhaps your vocation is to give a whole forward thrust to the people's task."¹⁹

I thus set myself off on a search, in my thoughts about language, and I found some connections that look like this: in the German people — as I've already said — you find the force of resurrection. You also find it, of course, in other peoples; but our strength will unfold within a

16. Lamarche-Vadel, *Beuys*, p. 93.

17. Beuys, "Discours sur mon pays: l'Allemagne," p. 37.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

19. *Ibid.*

radically renewed social fabric. It must unfold in this way, since it would be our duty first of all and, secondly, that of other peoples.²⁰

For Beuys is certain that there is “something that they expect from us,” “something to be hoped for from the Germans, and thus from the nation, something that flows from the unique genius of this language that we speak,” and that “allows us to understand . . . how, through this language, consciousness—consciousness of self—is formed, how it offers man the possibility of self-determination.”²¹

There, then, is this “task the people would have,” this “task that the Germans have to accomplish in the world”: to realize the essence of the spirit of their language, which is the *Gestaltung* of consciousness, that is, the affirmation of the self through self-determination and as self-determination. For the *Gestaltung* is this duty of the German people to heed the call of their essence. Such is the law of this people. To evade it would mean failing in its duty to itself: to affirm the *Gestaltung* which is, in its affirmative display, the self-affirmation of the German people itself, that is, its “self-*Gestaltung*” and its purification according to its essence, by language and by the soil. For this reason, ecology is also the duty of this people: it is the *Gestaltung* of the soil and the “environment,” that is to say, at one and the same time the response of Germany to the call of its essence *and* the preservation of this essence—necessary to the eternal resurrection of the *Gestaltung*. Beuys’s social in-forming is thus this generalized and purifying “putting into form,” that is, the very task of the German people displaying itself *in its work* by means of “a good sculpture, an admirable image, a car that doesn’t violate the environment, a good and healthy potato, a pure fish that the fisherman takes from the sea next to another which is poisoned.”²²

Such an ecology, as we see, doesn’t differentiate between what is given to man and what man produces: the fish, the potato, the car, and the image are all thought of as the product of human labor, the product of a *culture* put into good form from which the *Gestaltung* will be able to regenerate and expand: “We need this soil on which man experiences himself and recognizes himself as a creative creature, acting on the world.”²³

“The expanded concept of art,” this “social in-forming,” or generalized *Gestaltung* can thus be called “the same thing” as politics (as Beuys confided about it in front of the camera of Laure Ball). Or rather—and better still—it renders “useless” the concept of politics:

I, personally, am involved only with representation, with form, which is to say, when I make a statement to the effect that I have nothing to

20. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

do with politics, that means that I am involved with the formation of the world, the formation of the world seen as sculpture, thus as evolution, transformation of this form into a new form.²⁴

Since, in effect, the essence of the German people inheres in the spirit of its language, since this language “gives man the possibility of self-determination, and consequently of administration over all spaces of production itself . . . , this concept of self-administration renders the concept of politics void.”²⁵

In this way, Beuys says, politics should stand aside before language; or rather, politics finds its master in language, since in it the people have the instrument of their self-determination and self-administration made available to them. Which means that self-affirmation of the “sovereign in man,” through language and through the soil, is the goal or end of “politics.” But it is also the beginning of “social art”: “A social art would mean the cultivation of relations between men, almost an act of life.”²⁶ Isn’t a social art the very activity that Beuys deploys in displaying himself, liberating “what is sovereign in the human being” through his exhibition, repeating tirelessly “the act that represents Christ within the human being”? Social art is thus the new resurrection of Christ, and it is in Germany that Christ must be again reborn since:

One cannot understand the meaning of Christianity if one doesn’t understand German myth. Why was Christianity essentially developed in the very place where this mythology was vital? Isn’t it obvious that this mythology was *the vessel* specifically prepared to welcome Christianity in order to accomplish — with both vessel and its content — the development of *Western* human thought, the consciousness of what is transformative [*das Umgestaltende*], to its limit? In order to modify, by means of philosophic methods and the scientific concepts derived from them, the *nature of man* to its most extreme material form, to the point where it becomes *anti-nature*.²⁷

He, whose own *Gestaltung* was the work of Nazi instruction and the Hitler Youth, regretted no longer finding in textbooks, as in the days of Nazism, “all sorts of things about the *Edda*,” this grand Germano-Scandinavian epic that had provided the source for the *Nibelungen*.²⁸

24. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Achille Bonito Oliva, June 1984, in Lamarche-Vadel, *Beuys*, p. 126.

25. Beuys, “Discours sur mon pays: l’Allemagne,” p. 49.

26. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Elizabeth Rona, October 1981, in Lamarche-Vadel, *Beuys*, p. 115.

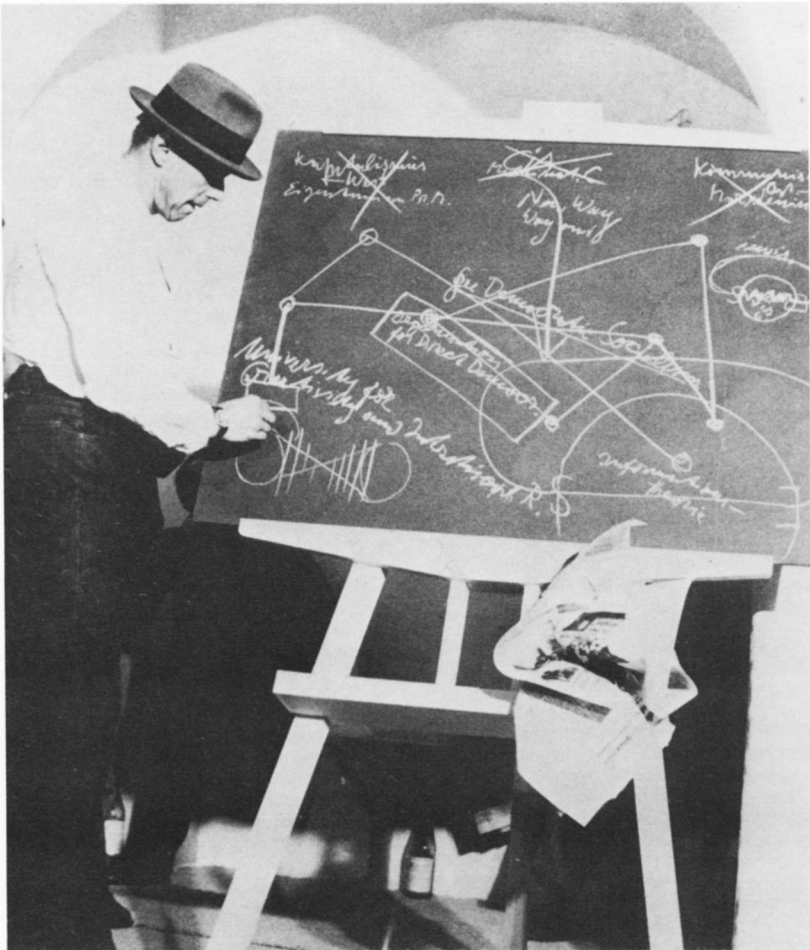
27. Interview with Joseph Beuys by Hagen Lieberknecht, in *Catalogue des dessins de Joseph Beuys*, vol. I, Cologne, Schirner, 1972, p. 16.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 15. For the relationship of Beuys to Nazism, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,” *Artforum*, XVII (January 1980), pp. 35–43.

For German mythology is for him the redemption of this forgetting with which men had shrouded the liberating act of Christ, just as today social art or the generalized *Gestaltung* is the new redeeming of the silence of which Marcel Duchamp, the Pharisee, was one of the last accomplices:

This must be established: the first stage of the parcelling out of Christ's substance (obviously given by Christ Himself), took place on

Joseph Beuys. Political Lecture. Galerie Lucrezia de Domizio, Pescara, 1980.



the site where Germans and Celts stood. It's there that the best soil for what Christ must have wanted was to be found: the transformation (the total transubstantiation) of human nature. And today we must pursue this and lead it toward the next stage.²⁹

Beuys was surely of a time when art was experienced less as what Blanchot called "the presence of a produced object" than as the *productive activity* itself. His "expanded concept of art" is the affirmation of man's productive and transformative energy as his highest essence: it is a conception "that descends," he says, "from a deep historical past" and which "returns as future, as a total future, that of man become conscious"³⁰—free and autonomous in the achievement of his destiny as producer self-producing at last.

But what is this *Gestaltung*, this productive and transformative energy, if not this power that, in its affirmation and its exhibition, makes of every object in the world the simple instrument or means of its activity—to the point of making itself the instrument of its own perpetuation? What is it if not artistic activity itself? Beuys identified his artistic activity with human labor in general: in so doing, he made of it the law to be adopted by man so as to attain the highest freedom, or absolute autonomy. But his "social sculpture" can, I believe, mean only the subjugation of the real world and real men, which it reduces to the mere instruments of its free exercise. In identifying itself with human labor in its generality, the "expanded concept of art" makes of activity both means and ends: thus, there is no way for it "to render the concept of politics void" or to blend with it without at the same time identifying itself with this self-propaganda and this self-propagation that was, more than all else, the emblem of the Nazi regime—identifying its political action with artistic activity.³¹

The Greeks, Hannah Arendt remarked, if they admired the products of art, maintained as well the greatest suspicion with regard to fabrication in all its forms: because the spirit of the *βάνανσος* or of the fabricator is a philistinism that "determines and organizes everything that plays a role in the process—the materials, the tools, the activity itself, including the persons who participate in it; all become simple means to the end and are justified as such."³² There, where the mechanical or fabricative spirit prevails, every being sees itself degraded into means. This is why it matters that artistic *activity* maintain its reserve.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

30. Beuys, "Discours sur mon pays: l'Allemagne," p. 47.

31. "An internal and unailing connection exists between the artistic works of the Führer and his political Great Work. The artistic is also at the root of his development as politician and statesman. His artistic activity is not simply an occupation of his youth due to chance, a detour that the political genius of the man was able to take; it was the postulate of his creative idea in its totality" (article from the *Völkischer Beobachter* [April 24, 1936], cited by Lionel Richard, *Le nazisme et la culture*, Paris, Maspéro, 1978, p. 188–189).

32. Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 276.