

Reality times 3

4 Epistles on the Working Methods of Joseph Beuys

Henning Christiansen 1968

also a false interpretation (I) that nevertheless is neither incorrect nor, particularly, irrelevant

With Beuys, everything revolves around reality and poetry.

Reality reaches out to unvarnished roughness, poetry to the soft spirit. The former's existence can be demonstrated so as to leave no doubt, the latter demands sensitive thought and insight.

Beuys likes to speak of "ANTISPACE" and "ANTITIME". He opposes mathematics and antimathematics, chemistry and antichemistry, physics and antiphysics and, in order to unite them under the same heading, nature and antinature. What he means by this ANTI is actually himself. It is the notion of ANTI and the OPPOSITE that turns space into experiential space. Time as experiential time: matter as psyche (the supersensory).

This aspect of opposition to reality can be found in all types of poetry, as soon as we wish to understand reality-as-thought as one side of the coin and reality-as-material as the other side of the coin. Poetry is really the most extreme and most intense way of making this happen. Poetry tends towards a point where space and antispace – to stay inside Beuys' conceptual world – space and antispace – seem identical, and it forces one to face the certainly not superfluous question of where the real world actually resides.

Beuys' poetry takes this narrow boundary between the world of poetry and the world of material reality as its theme. The two sides of the coin are basically his theme. It is also here that one finds the reason why it is so hard to grasp what he is driving at. He brings the poetic and the material world together, or at least they seem at first glance to coincide perfectly. Basically, he approaches the available material via his psychic nonexistence, and this makes itself felt as a poetical existence.

Here, one can turn to a significant example: in a long series of works, Beuys has used chocolate as material. Brown chocolate that he has covered with exactly the same colour paint. The difference between the chocolate as a given and the painted chocolate is only visible upon close inspection. Material and method practically hide themselves from sight. Nevertheless, there is a gap between the two: here chocolate to be eaten as usual – one side of the coin – there paint, the traditional medium of art. All of his earliest works make use of similar methods to reach out to both realities. They also hint at the right way to look at his continuous creation.

also a false interpretation (II) that nevertheless is neither incorrect nor, particularly, irrelevant

Beuys became known as a graphic artist and a sculptor... later as a "material poet" and an action artist (happenings – demonstrations). In his sculptures, which are made of wood, slate, stone, bronze, steel or iron, one recognises, in retrospect, something very significant, namely, the fact that he lets his material keep its characteristics. Their design follows the laws that the material is subject to.

This is remarkable because the artistic treatment presupposes this as part of a conscious or unconscious attitude. What is added is more or less visible and corresponds to the artistic aspect and the material. The expression "truth to material" is tainted and points in the wrong direction as far as Beuys is concerned. Beuys does not work with wood for the sake of its splintered nature, but uses wood for a splintered expression. Just as he uses slate for something stacked, stone for compact volumes, bronze for something skin-like, steel for the polished surface. This connection is not purely artisanal, but is related to the abstract theme's content. For he sacrificed Christ on the cross (amongst Beuys' early works are many sculpted crucifixes) he uses the splintered substance of wood.

As I said before, all that is written here is my interpretation, but I cannot believe that it is entirely wrong, seen in the light of the earliest works and Beuys' later developed. But it is not all. These remarks consider his work from certain aspects alone, but without a doubt some of the most important and ubiquitous ones.

Although he has not left drawing and sculpture behind entirely, most people regard him as a “material poet” and an action artist. This harmonises with his intentions, exactly because his “idea” of working with the outer poles of reality manifests itself most clearly in these media. Beuys has created hundreds of “objects”. The word “object” is not really apposite, because their material character is a significant part of what he wants to express. Beuys does not focus on the objective side of his work with the material, but on its transformation, its new existential form. What he stresses most is the flipping of the coin so that the side of poetic reality turns upwards.

also a false interpretation (III) that nevertheless is neither incorrect nor, particularly, irrelevant

Beuys walks the narrow path between reality and reality with artistic confidence and a continuous, finely honed consistency. Above all else, his “objects” have the character of images as well. What is added or changed still features relatively prominently. Let me name the clay “snow-covered rider” from 1958 as an example. The figure can be understood, even though it is not directly visible to the viewer. A memory of a figure presents itself and tries to introduce us to the creative process in the sculptural work, thus leading us towards a well-known discipline. This we can easily accept. As a discipline, sculpture is an existing poetic reality, a well-known possibility to understand mental existence via the material aspect. As long as it is possible to fit Beuys’ images and sculptures into a traditional pattern of viewing, it remains possible to misinterpret Beuys’ works.

In the above example, it is easy to draw the wrong conclusions. Either one ignores the gauze that is wrapped around it, which means that one does not know how to deal with it, or one regards it as the essence of the work, but then one ends up with a view close to that of the chocolate, which was mentioned before as an example of the two realities that move close to each other, and which reflect the basic tendency in Beuys’ creative work.

Beuys’ development has not taken place as quickly as we have here jumped from one example to the next. He had much to do away with that can be regarded as artistic convention, which could get in the way of an understanding of his work, and before he reached what no other German artist of today can manage, namely, mastery of the ACTION.

also a false interpretation (IV) that nevertheless is neither incorrect nor, particularly, irrelevant

The DEMONSTRATION – Beuys’ preferred expression for his own happening-like activities – consists of “objects” and elements of movement, time and sound. Of course they can be incorporated into a kinetic work as well, but man himself has no place in such a work. Man, as stated in the introduction, is seen by Beuys as mental space, the most important side of the coin, anti, the oppositional. Therefore it is a consistent line for Beuys to follow to make use of man in order to reach this mental reality and thus to accomplish the unnoticed unity of the two realities in the strongest possible way, because both are present in man, in him they are identical. The demonstration is not a particular kind of theatre, the performance of something by means of man. It is the theme of poetry itself, produced by the poet himself.

It is apparent, by the way, if one looks at the latest stage in Beuys’ development, that he also tries to overcome the demonstration. When asked, after the founding of the [German Students’] party, what this has to do with his artistic work, he said that it was a misunderstanding not to regard the party as a work of art. It can be understood as a work of art, just as his work as a professor at the art academy and every other type of activity he engages in. (He has consciously written his biography on the basis of exactly that attitude (also art)), here we find ourselves at a point that can be compared to the white cross that Malevich 5 decennia ago painted on a white field and therewith took painting to its ultimate possibility...

The struggle between the material and mental conception of man ties Joseph Beuys and Ignacio de Loyola in terms of will, the path that peaceful, dynamic men have to clear.

The half-cross – man’s two realities – and element 3! – Unto you I ascend MANRESA –