

Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys, the veteran performance artist who became a politician, co-founder of Germany's Green Party, has been lately turning his attentions toward Britain. As well he might. An unusually listened-to voice of sanity in Europe today, he arrived this month, lecturing across the country, with a major retrospective at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In anticipation of this, Performance Magazine spoke to him recently at his Dusseldorf home.

Lynn MacRitchie: *I first saw your work in 1970 in Edinburgh.*
Joseph Beuys: Strategy Get Arts . . .

Since then it seems as if the kinds of performances you were doing have changed. Have those live performances, very long, complex events, been superseded by your lecturing and your political involvement now, ten years later?

I think those actions I did from the beginning of the 60s until 1975 had, from their own nature, to change. Their own principles contained concepts of action. They had to come into contact with some real undertakings to bring about the consequences. If I had continued with such actions nobody would have understood them. After such actions in the 60s there were always long discussions, very controversial dialogue. This had to change into real undertakings. In the late 60s I founded the German Students Party and the Organisation for Direct Democracy evolved. In 1971 I founded the Free International University, and one of the consequences of this was becoming a co-founder of the Green Party. So now the character of the action has completely changed. The meaning of the action becomes the reality that complex enterprises are built up and that communities work towards such ideas. It has become a vital element of the discussion in West Germany. We have discussions on the next level of social order, on anthropology, on the spirit, on freedom, on democratic problems and most important on the economic order in highly developed societies: this is all the result of the actions I started at the beginning of the 60s which ended in actions of the character of those you saw in Edinburgh in '75. These have radically changed. Now the enterprise is working practically, being involved in ecological work like planting trees—the 7000 oaks in Kassel—and the other action I started last week in Hamburg, which could be one of the biggest ecological enterprises. So one of the things is 'doing things in the moment', with no long discussion because the ecological situation needs direct activity and on the other hand such actions carry the forms of the next stage of social order. One side is a compressed theoretical formulation, a dialogue on the economy and what is traditionally called the culture; and on the other side is real practical work in which a lot of people are involved and employed.

What is your project in Hamburg? Hamburg is a very big port and the River Elb comes to the sea there. There is an agglomeration of heavy industry and the eco-system is so polluted that every day they have to dredge slime out of the river. This lies like big fields of heavily polluted earth, with heavy metals like cadmium: they have asked us to start a pilot programme on this big problem. They've called in the Free International University which may mean that they trust us more than all the official scientific discussion. Millions invested in research, people talking and analysing but nothing being done. The other side of the action is developing the constellation of ideas of the social order.

What about the involvement of the Green Party with the Parliamentary system? What effect do you think that's going to have?

Yes, there is a danger and difficulty for the Green Party in the

Party system. Some of the Greens never wanted to become part of an official party and now they are on the way to becoming an official political party. I myself follow radically another line of development from the group which is sitting in Parliament. But, we will see. If they become a real official political party then another movement will appear because a lot of people are no longer content with a political party system. The ecological movement in West Germany is relatively far developed in comparison to England for example where there is nothing. From our point of view that is absurd.

One of the problems we all have when we are concerned with politics, with ideas and thinking about the future is the problem of language. For example, Margaret Thatcher in her political speeches talks again and again about freedom and individual rights which of course are the same things that you talk about and that I would talk about when discussing politics. But what she means is entirely different. We are using the same words but the things we mean are very different.

The thing is, we have movements such as the Green political party which we have had since the 60s. It was already clear then that the real goal of traditional Conservative Parties was freedom for free enterprise. Freedom to maintain the capitalistic system. They don't mean the freedom of the people. It is clear that all this speaking *ex cathedra* is a lie. A lie in comparison with the idea of freedom. The free market exploits humankind's labour. It's a kind of trick. Everybody knows this. They support the rich to make more investment and make the rich richer. That's what they understand by the freedom—free enterprise.

When Thatcher talks about freedom of course she never mentions things like free enterprise. She talks in a much more global way for example, thinking about the Falklands War. Those were the words she used to get people to support her in that. It was shocking to be in England and to see that there was no way that the people on the Left could oppose her.

People on the Left are as weak as the people on the Right—they belong to the same system, so we have no hope in people on the Left. This was already clear when the Green Party started its activities but now they're in danger of splitting their power into a Leftist thinking organ. Some members of the Green Party are now hoping to go over to the Left. I am proposing to my opposing stream in the Green Party in our daily discussions that there is no reason to despair about its potential.

Is your hope then (since you have mentioned despair) that society can be changed through the actions of individuals in the sort of ecological work you've been doing? Do you think that if enough people see that as important and join in that alone can affect the political body as it is constituted now?

It can only be done by single people but the single people have to be millions. It is impossible to develop from one point. There is also distrust of people who are developing their influence too highly—there is an anti-authoritarian element in the Greens and in the progressive movements—but only the changing of individuals can change the social structure. That is the only possibility. And as soon as enough single people have changed their understanding then the change will come, it has to come.

Everybody knows, even the rulers know it deep inside, that the systems are completely bankrupt. They only rule through tricks. Reagan, for example, serves American interests at the cost of all the people in the world. Now he tries to revitalise the US economy at the cost of every European country. It's all tricks, all power tricks.

I think a lot of people already realise that but I think they also feel quite helpless in the face of the weaponry that Reagan and Thatcher control. The Green Party wants to move towards a position of disarmament. In England recently we've had the Greenham Common Women, but despite an enormous amount of popular support they have not influenced Government policy at all.

It will grow. The influence will be there. Again it is a process—everything depends on the consciousness of a single people. Political systems which are basically bankrupt, but still flood the world with nonsense, depend on people's egotistical behaviour. It's very easy to get this with a little bit of a promise of money, for instance. If we speak of the most stupid class in the world, that is, the peasants, if you promise them a little bit of money they will betray anything. They will eradicate forests, rivers, lakes as soon as they see money. They will support everyone who is promising them money. They are no longer interested in ecology. This is why political parties like the Conservatives have success. They do the most simple thing. They appeal on the egotistic level. So as long as people are egotistical there will be no possibility of ever overcoming the system. We will see what opposition there will be to the nuclear installations we are facing in Germany in the near future and then we will see what will happen in the Netherlands and in Belgium where these things are also planned to be installed. As long as people are not free they connect the problem of nuclear weapons with their monetary interests and they are told that there is a big danger to freedom from the Soviet Union and it is all a lie. It is all not real. We have to face the almost hopeless situation of the people.

But people are understandably concerned about money and work because they have nothing else. If you're poor there's no other way of getting food. And it's hard to think about higher things when you're worrying about feeding your baby.

But they must understand that in such a system the poor get

From the action *Titus/Iphigenia*, Experimenta 3, 1969.



Demonstration of students against the dismissal of Beuys, Dusseldorf, 1973.

poorer and the rich get richer. The idea of politics is completely wrong. Politics is the play of power and money therefore I never use the idea of politics. I use only the idea of the new form of social order. I speak about form and Gestalt. We don't need political parties to shape the social form of the future. The more that people move away from primitive materialism they will see that the true quality of their living standards grows in the transformation of society but the majority of people still pin their hope on more money.

Some of the people who saw most quickly the problems you are describing with the Left were women because most of the women who were the initiators of the Women's Movement had been in left groupings of one kind or another. Do you see the Women's Movement as important to the change that we're discussing?

Yes. The women's problem is a very important problem. But it must develop one step further. The problem of the woman will only change with change in the social order. It is of no value just to be a woman, just as it is of no value just to be a man. Sex description is not a human evaluation, only a reality. We need the liberation of women, but justice for women goes together with emancipation from the old social system.

One of the problems is time. If you're involved in politics and the Women's Movement you're involved in it because you think things are wrong, you want things to change. People work very hard and commit themselves and change doesn't come and then you have the problem of despair, don't you?

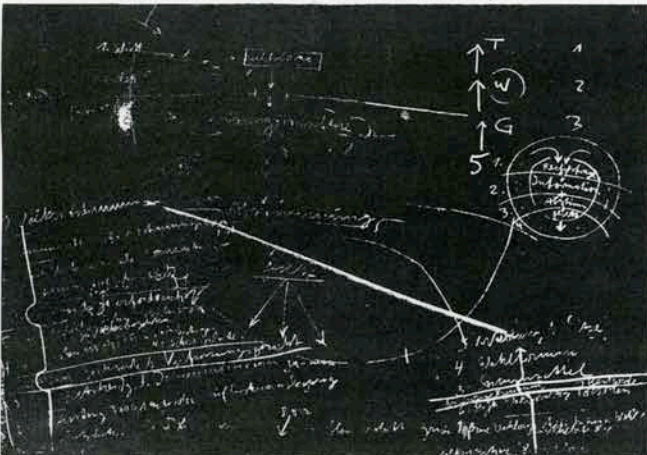
Never. I never have a problem with despair because I try to work on the logic of the thing itself, moving radically away from the idea of politics. Then you can see every day a kind of success. If I were to have told people in 1970 when I was doing performances like you saw in Edinburgh and I founded the organisation for Direct Democracy that this grouping would in ten years be in Government they would have laughed at me and called me an idiot. To say that from this kind of action a social change could come, they would have called me irrational and an optimist. But since I work radically and logically on the truth of psychological change, working on people's self determination first towards changing the social body, I can at least give the proof that there has been some success. To the point that there is now a controlling group sitting in the Federal Parliament of Berlin. Now I want to get together all the people who are in government in a free forum in Europe, a kind of academy outside of the daily realities of politics, a kind of university to discuss the next social stage in Europe and Asia. We have to use a lot of different strategies to bring this thing into reality because it has to be reality within the next 20 years or that's it. If it isn't there's going to be a fantastic crisis.

It seems to me that you're most unusual as a person because you have followed through the implications of what you do. The art work you did led you to see that it was necessary to change the actions you were taking. Most people don't do that. Politicians, for example, are politicians and they follow their party line. It's similarly so with a lot of artists. They don't see their artwork as having any social function. This is obviously going to be a problem when you meet Thatcher

In your lecture in Cambridge you were talking about 'old art' and by old art I assume you mean traditional art, bourgeois art from the 16th to the 19th century.

So what's the difference between the art of the past and 'anthropological art'?

Blackboard in his office in the Andrastrasse, 1971



Even nowadays there are places where pockets of older forms of societies still exist. Can you think of an example amongst them which has a more just or free social order?

The notion of anthropology then is a very complex one because what you're actually saying is that the cohesion of old societies is something that we would now have to relearn. Our system has been so dynamic it has destroyed the older systems with which it has come in contact. What you were talking about was trying to rediscover those older values in a conscious way.

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One of the problems within our society is the gap between the economy and culture. In a more simple society the gap between the productive group, the people who produce food, and what is done in terms of dancing and singing is much closer. One of the problems in our society is that people don't know how to get food. That connection has completely gone.

But it will not lead to success if you go back to the kind of culture like the aborigines where the women are looking for plants in the ground and in the evening the men have a corroboree. This makes no sense for us, for our lives. Our people want to have their own lives, to produce something. In tribal behaviour, the people seemingly care for others. They care for the continuity of their tribe. But one tribe will attack another tribe. So in the older culture this becomes an extension of the egotistical personality into a group egotism. This is also used now of family behaviour. This is my family but my neighbour is my enemy. The tribe looks as though it cares for others but they care only for their own blood. It is their blood culture. They fear others and remain unfree but in our social constellation no one is able to take care of all his needs. I would have no biography to speak of if I'd had to make my own shoes and plant potatoes and make my shirts and make this watch. We all take of the ability of other people. We are all takers receiving of the dignity of other people and therefore we have the duty to give our ability to others. Everyone is dependent on the care of others—this giving and taking is the elementary social structure, but the power of money and the state is destroying the elementary social context of taking and giving, of co-operation. Some ecologists mistakenly try to go back to self-sufficiency systems—they go far away to somewhere like Norway and try to make their own farms then they switch on the light and they are dependent on people who are working in Hamburg. They play records and they are using things which are produced in Japan. It is impossible to go out of this world. To try to do so is again a kind of egotistical behaviour.

At the moment any kind of challenge to the overall political system is going to be full of contradictions and its also going to be experimental. Do you see art as it's practised now as having a useful role to play in this experimental testing process?

Yes. Art is a very important thing. It is around art that the discussion has to start about changing the social order because no other principle exists any more. It's no longer possible, for instance, to develop the discussion from the idea of democracy. As soon as people try to discuss the social order from the idea of democracy, they work against the idea of freedom. The idea and understanding of art is the clearest symbol for the idea of freedom. The element of art is the only point in the social discussion which still has a lot of revolutionary elements. It no longer makes sense to start the problem from economics or from law and democracy. The only organic point from which to consider the possibility of change and evolutionary developments and finally a revolution of the social order is from art. When I speak of art I mean the possibilities still embedded in this field, sleeping, dreaming undetected. If I look for art on the culture pages of the daily newspapers I find it completely anti-progressive, completely traditional and belonging to the capitalistic and communistic repression of the world. My idea of art is anthropological art. Not modern art. Some modern artists have asked for change, like Mondrian and Picasso—they were pushing towards change, they were pacifists opposed to war. Many important artists have guided the consciousness of the world with their visions of the future but they didn't develop a methodology. My understanding of anthropological art is where everyone is seen as an artist. We have to look for an artist in every human being. The idea of art is the most comprehensive one for the spiritual understanding which must be developed in all human production. The idea of art is the science of freedom in the world and contains the problem of creativity. No other idea is available any more. No other entrance is possible.

You think that art still has a certain amount of credibility for people?

No. We have to bring back its credibility. The majority of people have enough reason not to believe in art because traditional art didn't care for contact with people in other working conditions and artists have become too much like



Honey Pump at the Work Place 1977

private persons who thought of themselves as special, who slightly tended to divide humankind into able people and unable people. He himself was always able!

But art also played a specific social role, didn't it... at least since the 19th century. Artists are perceived as being slightly outside. They do these strange things that other people don't have the opportunity to do, thus taking away the creative principle that you were talking about. Because if everyone was doing these things then the social order would break down.

The systems of work which came down from the French Revolution and through the Industrial Revolution divided the people into privileged and non privileged and the artist was one of the most privileged. The artist was so completely outside most people's view that they didn't take any interest in him. Our culture is not carried by the idea of art, it's carried by the idea of the economy. Art is outside, just like it was in Egypt and when the economy is regulated then we will have another high culture. But for this we have to change the economic system. Politics is already completely dependent on the economy, politicians are slaves of the economic powers. We say in Germany 'Straw Men'—they are brought to power by the interests of high finance, not their own merit. We have to change this economy from a money economy to a people economy. If we don't succeed there will be an explosion.

What you're asking people to do is become responsible, to behave like decent human beings. But there are going to be people prepared to stop them doing that.

If there is opposition from the state then support for the movement grows. And if it continues to grow then Governments will have great difficulty in opposing it. The beginning of success of the Greens' election campaign was when the police were too brutal with people protesting against the installation of nuclear plant. It doesn't have to be a complete philosophy, there are many methods available and many abilities. It's a kind of network. This is what I think but I don't believe it. Believing means nothing. Believing is a kind of hope and when I look round there is no hope. When you see the situation there is no hope. If you're hoping you are making a metaphysical point. I don't believe in hope. I see possibilities: you have to be active, and then you see everyday a possibility. □