

Lauren Kennedy
S4493703

Artists as Agents for Change: Joseph Beuys

"It is necessary to establish a new kind of art, able to show the problems of the whole society, of every living being – and how this new discipline – which I call social sculpture – can realize the future of mankind"
- Joseph Beuys 1974

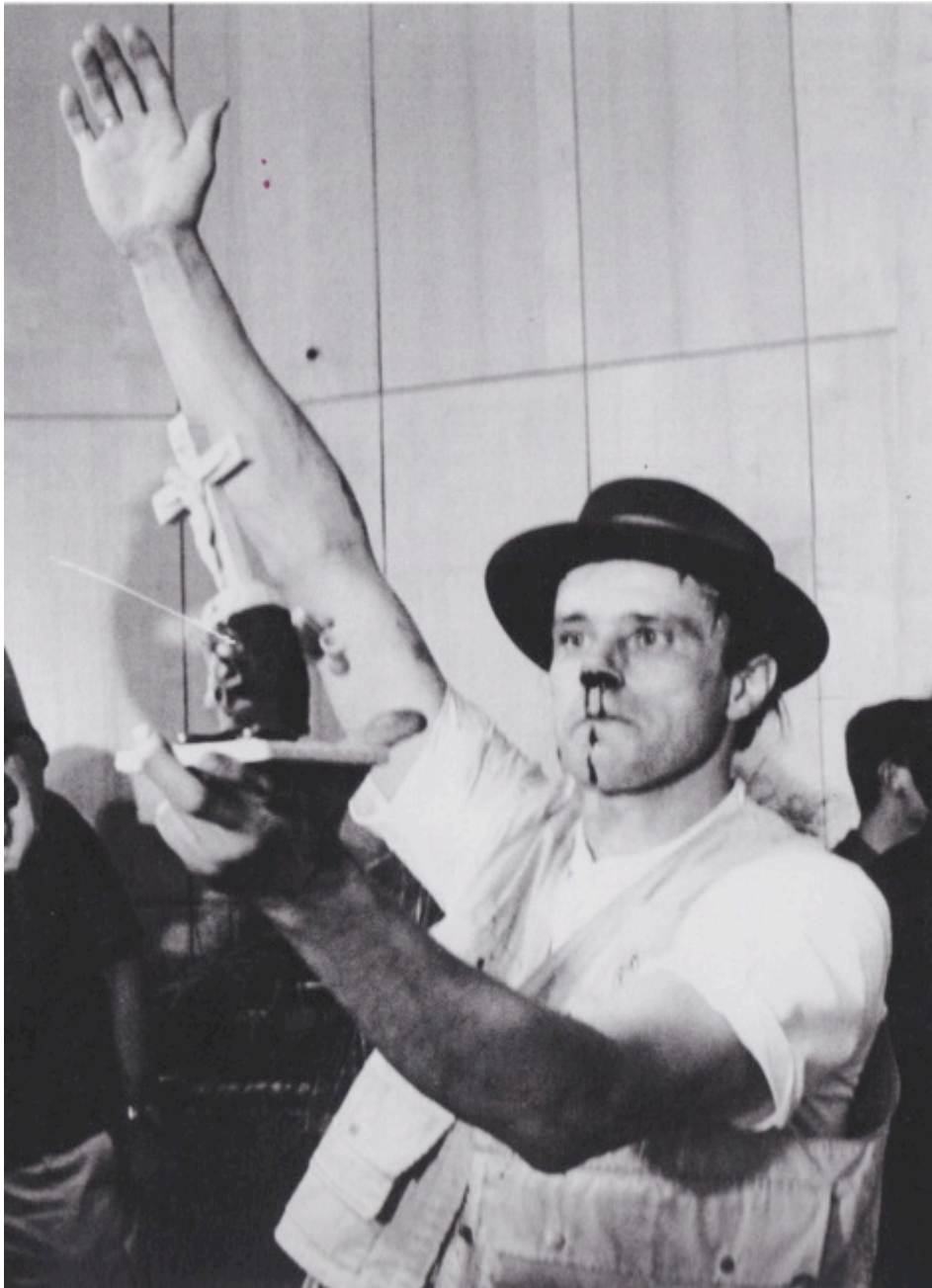


Figure 1:
Joseph Beuys with
crucifix during
Kukei/Akoopee-
nein/Brown Cross/Fat
Corners/Model Fat
Corner, Festival of New
Art, Aachen, 20 July
1964
(Antliff 2014, p.44)

Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) is arguably the most influential artist of his generation, utilizing creative practice as a vehicle to promote political change within society. His works span across various mediums and media ranging from drawing, sculpture, painting, performative art and draughtsman. He was a teacher, shaman (mystical healer), theorist and political activist. His political activism was and still is regarded as radical, unconventional and in turn effectively powerful as Beuys' ideology that art can serve as a catalyst for social change continues to ring true among many artists and activists today.

Beuys was born in Krefeld, Germany in 1921 and much of his work has been influenced by the aftermath of the Nazi regime established in 1933. Beuys like many others had no choice but to accept this, thus Beuys childhood had been shaped and impressed upon from the age of eleven by the Nazi regime. After being stationed, Beuys decided to study art where resources were hard to come by, as many students and teachers were living and working in an occupied city, regarded as degenerates of society.

Throughout Beuys career he has explored the war and its aftermath, political regimes and social structure both visually and academically. We can see how his political and ecological activism is his creative practice as *"his mission was to develop forms of engagement with the world rather than to add more things to it."* (Kalb 2013, p.29).

This quote highlights how Beuys was not concerned with visual aesthetics and the capitalist nature of art as a commodity rather he used creativity as a way of communication, in attempts to change the social structure of the time. He famously stated in 1985 *"Art that can not shape society and therefore also can not penetrate the heart questions of society, [and] in the end influence the question of capital, is no art."* (Brenner, 2015).

Here Beuys is arguing that art can have a powerful role in activating social change, when we change the role of art in society by formulating new ways of exchanging ideas. Beuys therefore regards art that serves the economy, commodity is not art.

Figure 2 demonstrates this ideology as his felt suits bring the viewer to question power, contemporary society, urban living, creation and the natural world which in turn question the relationship between social structures, capitalism and the environment. Beuys promotes creation as a tool to promote and exchange ideas in hope to change the status quo of excessive materialism, permanent inflation and unfair distribution of wealth.



Figure 2:
Joseph Beuys, Felt Suit,
1970. Edition of 100. Two
lifesize felt suits. Courtesy
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,
New York.
(Kalb 2013, p.29)

Beuys materials are important within his work which are either materials of determinacy (tin, wood and iron) and he often features materials of indeterminacy such as felt (figure 2), fat, honey, gelatin, watercolour and blood. These materials *"communicate first through their physical properties"* (Kalb 2013, p.29) bringing to mind familiar associations with nature, organic forms, decomposition and the materiality of the elements. He works with alive and dead animals transcending beyond *"rational materialism"* (Kalb 2013, p.29)

Beuys strived for the melding of creation and life, as he believed art could transform society. His performance *Ausfegen* (*sweeping up*) 1972 involved Beuys and two students cleaning Karl-Marx Platz in West Berlin with a red broom (Figure 3) after a Labour Day demonstration. They swept up the left over rubbish that he then went on to exhibit (Figure 4). He utilized different forms of creativity such as performance (Figure 3), Installation (Figure 4), Lectures and Actions to exhaust and propagate his political ideology.

Art was for Beuys an agent for change and we can see how his performance *Ausfegen* (*Sweeping up*) was “*directed as much at the soviet controlled east as the capitalist West*” (Utley 2015). His performances make a loud statement, from cleaning the streets of the West to holding a red broom and then collecting the rubbish left over from mayday as he believed the freedom of society was needed.



Figure 3:
Sweeping Up (*Ausfegen*), Karl
Marx Platz, Berlin, 1 May
1972
(Antliff 2014, p.86)



Figure 4:
 Sweeping Up (Ausfegen), 1972/85
 Vitrine containing sand, stone, paper,
 rubbish and broom with red bristles, with
 Beuys pamphlets printed on plastic bags
 200 x 200 x 65 cm
 Rene Block Collection in deposit of Neues
 Museum in Nuremberg
 (Antliff 2014, p.87)

"In 1967, Beuys started a political party for animals, stating that their 'elemental energy' might well achieve more in the way of political innovation than any human." (Archer 1997, p.106)

Beuys as an agent for change is clear here with his radical activism to make a bold statement about the current political climate. It also conveys his shamanistic persona and his relationship with the natural world, going back to his childhood roots.

Shortly after starting a political party for animals Beuys went on to do his performance I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974 (Figure 5,6,7 & 8) that is hyper conscious of the socio-political climates of Germany and the U.S after the war and the implementation of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Beuys stated in his writings that art & specifically performative art *"is the only activist medium capable of truly stimulating social "evolution-revolution"* (Choi 2010) which is clear in I Like America and America Likes me (Figure 5) as it carries heavy symbolic notions that draws together Beuys roots of activism such as being stationed in the war, its aftermath, the anti-red sentiment of America, the Berlin wall and his childhood amongst the woods.

Beuys arrived in New York City covered in felt at JFK international airport where he was transported strapped down to the Rene Block Gallery via an ambulance (Figure 6). His performative I Like America and America Likes Me which ran for 3 days as he shared a small, contained space with a wild coyote. The room held nothing but straw, his robe of felt & 50 copies of the Wall Street Journal (Figure 8). Again at the end of the performance he was strapped down in an ambulance to return to Germany (the point being he would not see anything of America apart from the gallery space and coyote).

At a glance the work could appear on the surface as a performance concerned only with ritualism as a mystical healer. Beuys performance runs deeper than that though, as it has its roots in political activism and hope to transform society and structure through art.

"The coyote is an embodiment of the persecution of ethnic or cultural minorities by the Western man. The coyote is a small and slight predatory creature, revered by the Native Americans of the North and Central American plains as a powerful being, but relegated by the white man to the role of cunning and low trickster. The animal is transformed by the hatred of the beholder into a detestable character, slinking and dishonest" (Choi 2010) and therefore is an *"example of man's tendency to project his own sense of inferiority onto the object of hat or a minority"*. (Choi 2010)

We can see now how Beuys changes the relationship dynamic by situating himself (a white European male) and the coyote in a confined space as he serenades it, engages and finds peace with the wild creature at the end of their captivity. The coyote urinates on the Wall Street Journals which is a statement in itself of power and society; the coyote is the minority and the Wall Street Journal is the capitalist which governs and dictates the economy and in turn society.

The fact that Beuys chooses to arrive and depart America without having seen anything is undeniably politically assertive as he spends his time interacting with the thing that white man detests (coyote) and in turn rejecting the super power that is America.

Beuys refusal brings together his mysticism, shaman like persona and the dramatic confrontation that is symbolic for the relationship between man and foe. Thus Beuys moves past his shaman persona and becomes an everyday radical activist, an artist, and philosopher for change of personal freedom through creative expression.



Figure 5: Beuys and the coyote during I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974 (Antliff 2014, p.121)



Figure 6:
Beuys arrives at the Rene
Block Gallery, New York, for I
Like America and America
Likes Me, 1974
(Antliff 2014, p.112)



Figure 7:
Beuys and the coyote
during I Like America and
America Likes Me, 1974
(Antliff 2014, p.114)



Figure 8:
Copies of the Wall Street Journal
used in I Like America and America
Likes Me, 1974
(Antliff 2014, p.113)

Beuys works such as Figure 9: Queen Bee 3 (Bienenkonigin 3) demonstrates Beuys art as a creative process of nature. The importance of Bees plays a key role, their cooperative nature and the interrelationships inside the hive and how other forces of nature such as the sun affect the bees. Steiner, whose studies and teaching had a powerful impact on Beuys, equates the human body to that of a hive structure: *"energized by living cells, it encapsulates the warm energy that animates us and, when we die, it evolves into a rigid state before disintegrating and returning its residual energy to the earth"*. (Antliff 2014) Beuys sculpted with beeswax and fat, emulating the processes of life and creation as he was using creativity for the expansion of self-knowledge and cooperative potential.



Figure 9:
Queen Bee 3 (Bienenkonigin 3), 1952
Beeswax on wood
7.5 x 36.3 x 30 cm
Stroher Collection, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt
(Antliff 2014, p.21)

“Sculpture must always obstinately question the basic premises of the prevailing culture. This is the function of all art, which society is always trying to suppress. . . Art alone makes life possible – this is how radically I should like to formulate it.” (Archer 1997) We can see here how throughout Beuys career he utilized Sculpture to interact with his audience and serve as a catalyst in order to promote change. He is symbolically using the bee to activate ideas and knowledge for the viewer in regards to the social climate.

Beuys was an activist for political change and we can see how his art was a vehicle for him to drive his voice by utilizing sculpture, installation and performative art to create awareness and a catalytic force to be reckoned with. His artistic practice was and still is an agent for political and social change as he remains one of the most influential artists to date.

Bibliography:

Antliff, Allan 2014, *Joseph Beuys*, Phaidon Press Limited, London.

Kalb, Peter R 2013, *Art Since 1980: Charting the Contemporary*, Laurence King Publishing, London.

Brenner, Regina 2015, *Political Activism*. [Online]

Available at:

<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/F/9C4309B0B50D8AA36167.htm>

[Accessed on 5th of October 2015].

Utley, Gertje 2015, *Europe Post-War, Art and Politics*. [Online]

Available at:

http://disturbis.esteticuab.org/DisturbisII/Utley_4.html

[Accessed on 5th of October 2015].

Archer, Michael 1997, *Art Since 1960*, Thames & Hudson, London

Choi, Sinnae 2010, *Joseph Beuys in America: Performance as Radical Activism*. [Online]

Available at:

<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52fc5761e4b081b6c1c28e31/t/535ac1f4e4b0958b4693c343/1398456820961/beuys-spring2010.pdf>

[Accessed on 2nd of October 2015].