

When Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) became politically active in the late 1960s, he positioned himself as a populist: concerned about issues many ordinary citizens believed political elites were neglecting, he proposed a vision for a democratic socialist society in which popular misgivings would be redressed. His efforts to build support for this initiative were fervent and untiring, but his esoteric worldview, the enigmatic nature of his art, and his unwillingness to temper his ideals hampered his attempts to convince voters he could realise the goals he espoused. He thus became a populist *manqué* whose projects were left largely unfulfilled.

Beuys inherited his vision for society from Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), whose writings he studied avidly.¹ Like Steiner, Beuys believed that Western life had become too rationalistic, a development embodied by the rise of science and the materialistic worldview it encouraged. Only through spiritual evolution, facilitated by what Steiner referred to as “hidden” or “esoteric” knowledge, could this imbalance be corrected and society continue to progress. The idea was not to turn away from science. It was, rather, to build on scientific achievements by accessing the spiritual dimension of existence using non-rational forms of experience like intuition, imagination, and inspiration. Recognising that these were instrumental to creativity, Beuys took the view that art could be a catalyst for spiritual and social development along the lines that Steiner had envisaged.²

At first, Beuys sought to foster this development with ritualistic *Kunstaktionen* (art performances) and sculptures fashioned from unusual materials like fat, felt, and honey. Replete with enigmatic allusions to alchemy, shamanism, and Rosicrucianism—to name just a handful of his references—these works were flagrantly esoteric. But their enigmas were sufficiently compelling to garner him acclaim throughout the art world. No sooner had he achieved this renown, however, than his work took a worldlier turn when (without consulting any students³) he co-founded the German Student

¹ For an overview of Beuys’s debts to Steiner, see Luke Smythe and Maja Wismer, “Rudolf Steiner”: <https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/glossary/?lang=en#https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/glossary/rudolf-steiner?lang=en>. More extensive accounts appear in: Verena Kuni, *Der Künstler als ‘Magier’ und ‘Alchemist’ im Spannungsfeld von Produktion und Rezeption Aspekte der Auseinandersetzung mit okkulten Traditionen in der europäischen Kunstgeschichte nach 1945. Eine vergleichende Fokusstudie – ausgehend von Joseph Beuys*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 2004, 185–196; H. P. Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2013), 100–110, 124–132 and passim; and Hans Peter Riegel, *Beuys: Verborgenes Reden. Die Biographie/Band 4* (Zürich: Riverside Publishing, 2021).

² As Tobia Bezzola has noted, Beuys gave art a far larger role in facilitating human evolution than Steiner did. (See Bezzola, “Steiner, Rudolf (1861–1925),” in ed. Harald Szeemann, *Beuysnobiscum* [Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008], 330.)

³ Phillip Ursprung, *Joseph Beuys: Kunst Kapital Revolution* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021), 11. Unless noted otherwise, all dates for events in Beuys’s life are taken from Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*.

Party in 1967. After a hard-fought battle lasting several years, the Party succeeded in its campaign to have enrolment limits scrapped at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Emboldened by this success, Beuys moved on to tackle larger concerns but on terms that remained steadfastly esoteric and thus constraining his influence beyond the art world.

The multiples in this exhibition encapsulate the tension and misalignment between Beuys's political objectives and his esoteric plans for achieving them. He described these affordable, editioned works as “vehicles” for spreading his ideas beyond museums and galleries.⁴ Partnering with dozens of publishers, he made multiples in all manner of formats, with prices ranging from a few dollars to several hundred. Some were autonomous objects; others were facsimiles and documents of his works in other media. Another group consists mainly of postcards and printed ephemera, promoted his political activities. As they dispersed into the world, he imagined they would function as “antennas,” extending his art’s reach and bolstering its impact.⁵ “I am a sender,” he once remarked, “I transmit!” (Ich bin ein Sender. Ich strahle aus!).⁶

Among his earliest transmissions was *Intuition* (1968), a shallow wooden box that evinced his faith in non-rational experience.⁷ The first of the two pencil lines with which it is inscribed represents the limits of rationality. Capped at either end, it is clear and determinate but at the same time also closed and constrained. The lower line, by contrast, is open to the left, its unboundedness evoking the more expansive scope of intuition.⁸ Like all geometric forms in Beuys’s work, the box embodies the so-called “crystalline” principle of his theory of sculpture, which he aligned with the strengths

⁴ On the “vehicle” character of the multiples, see: Jörg Schellmann and Bernd Klüser, “Questions to Joseph Beuys,” in Jörg Schellmann and Bernd Klüser, *Joseph Beuys, the multiples: catalogue raisonné of multiples and prints* (Cambridge, MA: Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; Munich/New York: Edition Schellmann, 1997), 9; and Beuys, “I put me on this train!, Interview with *Art Papier*, 1979,” in ed. Carin Kuoni, *Energy Plan for Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 44.

⁵ Schellmann and Klüser, *Joseph Beuys, the multiples*, 9.

⁶ Beuys intoned this phrase repeatedly during his 1972 performance *Vitex Agnus Castex*. (See Uwe Schneede, *Joseph Beuys. Die Aktionen* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz, 1994), 318.

⁷ 12,000 copies of *Intuition*, all signed and inscribed by Beuys, were eventually produced. For details, see Johannes Cladders, “Intuition, 1967” [sic], in *Joseph Beuys: Die Multiples. Beuys Stiftung Ulbricht im Kunstmuseum Bonn* (Bonn: Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1992), 51; and Peter Schmieder, *Unlimitiert: der VICE-Versand von Wolfgang Feelisch: unlimitierte Multiples in Deutschland* (Köln: Walther König, 1998), 86–87.

⁸ For indicative remarks by Beuys about the value of intuition, which he regarded as “a higher form of thought” and the basis for a “science of the soul,” see: Robert Filliou, *Lehren und Lernen als Aufführungskünste* (Köln: Walther König, 1970), 165; and Jörg Schellmann and Bernd Klüser, *Joseph Beuys, Multiples Werkverzeichnis Multiples und Druckgraphik, 1965–1985* (München/New York: Edition Schellmann, 1985), 558.

and limitations of rational experience.⁹ Much like the delimited line, it has the virtues of clarity. But its fixity and closure render it resistant to development.

Not so in the case of the soft materials Beuys worked with, which embodied the opposing “fluid” principle of the theory of sculpture. He regarded these as bearers of what Steiner had described as “warm” energy, a spiritual force that was the driver of human evolution.¹⁰ By strengthening the social flow of warmth using art, Beuys hoped to guide society toward a “sun state” of free democratic socialism.¹¹

The social and material dimensions of his thinking about warmth came together in the action *Celtic+~~~~* (1971), which was later documented as a multiple.¹² The event was staged in an air raid bunker in Basel in front of a bustling crowd of onlookers. Ahead of the performance, Beuys affixed small chunks of gelatine to the bunker wall. He later removed them one by one and placed them in the lid of the container in which they had been stored. When this process was complete, and the gelatine amassed into a towering and unsteady mound, he raised the lid above his head and in an act of ritual baptism upended its contents onto his body. As the gelatine engulfed him, he was infused with its spiritual energies. In an earlier sequence of the action, he had washed and dried the feet of seven onlookers. This gesture was a means of spreading warmth, in the guise of Christian love and humility, throughout the audience.

By the time that Beuys performed *Celtic+~~~~*, his ritualistic actions were taking a back seat to more expressly political activities. In a bid to expand the remit and appeal of the German Student Party, he had renamed it the Organisation for Direct Democracy Through Free Collective Referendum. Its aim was to replace representative democracy, which he saw as a party dictatorship, with a process of direct referendum in which every citizen could participate. But beyond printing flyers and persuading forty people to denounce the system by relinquishing their voter IDs, politically it accomplished very little.¹³

⁹ Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 20. Tisdall's writings provide the clearest overview in English of Beuys's theory of sculpture.

¹⁰ On the role of warmth in Steiner's philosophy, see Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 182. For remarks by Beuys on warmth on that closely echo Steiner, see Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, 239.

¹¹ See Beuys's comments on the sun state in relation to Christian love and socialism, in ed. Carin Kuoni, *Energy Plan for Western Man*, 53, 168–69.

¹² *Celtic+~~~~* (1971), published by Edition Schellmann in an edition of 100. For details in relation to the action, see Luke Smythe and Maja Wismer, “*Celtic +~~~~, for Footwashing*”: <https://pinakothek-beuys-multiples.de/product/celtic/?lang=en>.

¹³ Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 337.

Whether Beuys ever deemed its mission viable remains difficult to judge, as a multiple from 1972 makes apparent. Created in connection with a political bureau that he established at documenta 5, the work is printed on the letterhead of Karl Fastabend, a retired engineer for an agricultural machinery company, who served as the Organisation's secretary. Featuring the hand-written slogan "Take What You Can Get!," it suggests that Beuys would settle for small gains in his politics. Yet the *Hauptstrom* (mainstream) stamp that floats above the slogan is at odds with this sentiment. Harking back to his days as a Fluxus artist in the early 1960s, the stamp, with its clutch of graphic symbols relating to the ebb and flow of energy, points toward the larger goal of mainstreaming his social objectives.

The work also highlights tensions in the *Defense of Nature* project he had recently commenced in Abruzzo, Italy. Central to this initiative was a revival of traditional agriculture in the region, which was threatened by industrialisation along the lines Fastabend had supported.¹⁴ The combine thresher on his letterhead may have been a state-of-the-art machine, but its use was antithetical to the processes of hand cultivation that Beuys was seeking to revive.

Beuys may or may not have known that Fastabend had been a Nazi officer.¹⁵ Beuys too had served his country under National Socialism and, like Fastabend, had willingly enlisted.¹⁶ Do background matters such as this, along with issues like Beuys's wish to liberate "the people" [*das Volk*] from the constraints of representative democracy (a goal Steiner had shared), and his reunions with wartime comrades into the 1960s, suggest that contrary to his socialist and democratic rhetoric, Beuys's politics were somehow crypto-fascist? Despite an absence of clear evidence and indications to the contrary, like his Holocaust memorial design from 1956, several hardened critics of Beuys have insisted that this was the case.¹⁷ Yet as Philip Ursprung notes in response, Beuys's anthroposophical worldview, which he had formed in response to the trauma he had suffered in the war, took as its founding premise the conviction that humanity could radically evolve.¹⁸ He would thus have been unlikely to tie anyone irrevocably to their past, least of all his co-workers.

¹⁴ On Beuys's efforts to revive traditional agriculture, which drew on Steiner's approach to biodynamic farming, see "Diskussion von Joseph Beuys. Fondazione per la Rinascita dell'Agricoltura," in Lucrezia De Domizio Durini et al., *Beuys Voice* (Zurich: Kunsthau Zurich; Milan: Electa, 2011), 768–782.

¹⁵ Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 358.

¹⁶ The most complete account of Beuys's military service appears in Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 42–81.

¹⁷ The Beuys-as-fascist argument was first put forward by Benjamin Buchloh in the early 1980s. He has since moderated his position, but H. P. Riegel and Beat Wyss remain firm critics of Beuys's politics. (See, respectively: Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys," in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy* [Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001], 75–90; Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 42–81; and Beat Wyss, 'Der ewige Hitlerjunge,' in *Monopol*, 10, 2008. <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/der-ewige-hitlerjunge>.)

¹⁸ Ursprung, *Kunst Kapital Revolution*, 158.

Rose for Direct Democracy (1973) was conceived in this spirit of hope and optimism. On Beuys's desk at documenta 5 had stood a slender glass vase in which a new red rose was placed every morning. The flower's growth was a symbol of the kind of revolution he hoped to foster: "Bud and bloom are in fact green leaves transformed," he once explained, "So in relation to the leaves and the stem the bloom is a revolution, although it grows through organic transformation and evolution."¹⁹ Since social revolution presupposes change in individuals, Beuys surely harboured similar convictions concerning the capacity of those, like himself and Fastabend, to radically evolve in this fashion.

Beuys's office at documenta 5 was the first of several projects he would launch at the show in the decade that followed. Five years later, at documenta 6, he promoted the Free International University (FIU), which he had co-founded several years earlier. Named in echo of Steiner's Free School for Spiritual Science, the FIU aimed to help its students develop their creative potential.²⁰ By the mid-1970s, Beuys was sufficiently well-known that speakers he invited from many countries converged on documenta to discuss topics relating to social evolution beneath the FIU's banner. *Foundation for the Revival of Agriculture* (1978) recalls one subject of this programme of lectures and discussions. *Kunst = Kapital* (ca. 1977) (Art = Capital) recalls another.

1977 was a prodigious year for Beuys's speaking and political activities. Beyond arranging talks at documenta, he had appeared at a host of other venues to give lectures and engage in debates. Such was his renown in artistic circles that, as two multiples from this period confirm, his image alone was now sufficient to promote these activities. *Bonn Kunstverein* (1977) was a fundraiser for the gallery that had hosted a talk between Beuys and British artist John Latham. It reduces Beuys to the felt hat with which he had by now become synonymous and to his omnipresent signature. Featuring an image that could stand in for any of his appearances, *Yellow* (1977) is a Warhol-esque work that attests plainly to Beuys's celebrity. Its colour alludes to the warmth of honey and the radiance of the sun state. Like that celestial body, Beuys has here become a warmth-bearer in his own right—a sun on stage transmitting to his audience.

By 1982 and documenta 7, Beuys was at the peak of his popularity. *Kunst = Kapital* remained one of his rallying cries, and his ecological commitments were ramping up. The poster *Kunst = Kapital*

¹⁹ Beuys in Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, 274.

²⁰ See the FIU's original manifesto, co-written by Beuys and Heinrich Böll and published in 1973. (English translation: "Manifesto on the foundation of a 'Free International School for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research'," in ed. Kuoni, *Energy Plan for Western Man*, 149–153.)

(1982), which mentions his well-known tree-planting project *7,000 Oaks* (1982–1987), traverses these two areas of concern, as does a song that he released called *Sonne statt Reagan* (1982). Translating to “sun instead of Reagan” (who was then newly-elected), the title is also a homophone of “sun instead of rain” (*Sonne statt Regen*). The work wove together popular and esoteric references in typically Beuysian fashion: anti-nuclear, environmental politics, on one hand, and his vision of a sun state, on the other. Embracing the then-emerging format of the music video as a means of publicising the track, he continued to evolve in his attempts to bring his ideas to the masses. But beyond the world of creative practice, his impact politically was modest largely due to his reluctance to follow his own advice from a decade earlier and settle for small gains.

In 1984, the German Green Party would for the first time enter parliament, but Beuys, a founding member, was not among its candidates. His idealistic outlook had meshed poorly with the practical approach of the Party’s leaders, as had his gnomic style of communication. He had thus been exiled to the fringes of the movement, and he would eventually disown it.²¹ Yet as his erstwhile colleague Petra Kelly would eventually acknowledge, there might never have been a party in the first place were it not for Beuys's energy, conviction, and public presence in the 1970s.²² Does this mean that his esoteric zeal had been required to set the movement on its feet, before becoming a liability for those who would build its popular appeal and guide it to the centre of politics?

²¹ On Beuys’s break-up with the Greens, see Riegel, *Beuys. Die Biographie*, 479–494. A more tempered account of his conflicts with the Party’s leaders appears in Ursprung, *Kunst Kapital Revolution*, 287–289.

²² Petra Kelly, quoted in Ursprung, *Kunst Kapital Revolution*, 250–251.