

**Esoteric Foundations of Joseph Beuys' Art
in the
Teachings of Rudolf Steiner**

by
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For many people familiar with the Art of Joseph Beuys, even those who acknowledge the validity and importance of his accomplishments in the evolution of contemporary art, his work remains enigmatic and inaccessible. When I first became familiar with his work, which may well have been while he was still alive back in the early 1980's, when I was an undergraduate art student, the objects and representative photo documentation alone seemed often alienating and decrepit. There was a natural inclination in me towards aversion though not absolute antipathy. In 1986 while living in a hut high on a mountain in northern New Mexico I came across a moldering box of books abandoned there by some previous tenant. The one book that I singled out at the time and the only one I remember now, was a book by Rudolf Steiner entitled Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment(1). Though I was intensely eager to read it, having heard Steiner mentioned by my brother-in-law in reference to biodynamic agriculture, I made my way down the mountain and gave it to him first. Both of our lives were changed by that initial book and many subsequent books by Steiner that we read afterwards. I have always balanced my reading habits with a broad selection of literature but Steiner's books have been a staple, though nothing by Steiner is an easy read. In order to gain further insight and perspective, I have sought out information about, or works by others influenced by Steiner to see how they have dealt with the weight of what he brings to any given subject, and to assess ^{whether} any have come close to achieving a first hand experience of what for him was the course of his life: the direct and cognitively rational perception of spiritual reality. Joseph Beuys was one among them that I began to look at more closely. In this paper I would like to look at the ideas implicit in Steiner's world view and the influence these had on Beuys' art.

There is no question that Beuys was greatly influenced and inspired by Steiner. It is however debated to what extent Beuys was a follower of Steiner: whether he was a true disciple, a kind of Steinerian artist/evangelist or, whether he simply appropriated Steiner's ideas for his artistic if not egoistic purposes. John F. Moffit in his book Occultism in Avant-Garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys(2), one of the few books to deal with this connection in any depth, goes so far as to discount Steiner as a charlatan but praise Beuys artistic appropriation of his ideas as

genius. There are plenty of intelligent writers who cannot accept Steiner's ideas *carte blanche* that still admit to his insightfulness. Moffit, though incredibly astute in his referencing one to the other, is blatantly and distastefully biased against Steiner, cloaking his venom in a cool apparently reasoned approach and erudition. I contend that Beuys was not only a disciple of Steiner but that in more than simply willful ways, his life has incredible parallels to Steiner's. My own artistic development has been influenced by Steiner though my original instruction followed a modernist approach to artistic discipline and esthetics. The truth is that any inclination I have had to break from modernist traditions has been tempered by my own timidity and the apparent lack of any appropriate venue. Be that as it may, my 20 or so years of Studying and incorporating Rudolf Steiner's ideas plus my sometimes uncomfortable relationship with the society that he founded afford me some perspective to also make an assessment of the relationship between Steiner and Beuys.

Both Steiner and Beuys were born to working class Catholic parents in middle Europe though approximately 60 years apart.. Both had great interest in the natural world. In early childhood they interacted with the natural world in imaginative ways, though in academic life they were scientifically trained. Both recall profoundly spiritual experiences from a very young age. Beuys at the age of four was repeatedly approached by what he perceived to be an angel which spoke to him calling him "the prince of the roof"(3). This was a recurrent waking dream from the time he was four for about two years. He finally understood, even at such a young age, that by roof, the angel being meant head. Steiner was so emersed in the spirit world as a child that it was harder for him to see the physical world as others see it in its corporeality. It was not until he discovered Geometry that he found some relief and justification for his isolating inward reveries. At 15 when he devoured Kant's: Critique of Pure Reason , he found the lever against which he would throw the weight of his entire life' work to disprove that there are limits to knowledge. Both were voracious readers. Beuys at this age was reading Kierkegard, Knut Hansen, Goethe, Shiller, Novolis and Holderlin among others.

One major contrasting difference occurs in their formative early adult years. Steiner immediately embarked upon a rigorous and thorough higher education. Having early on begun to tackle complex philosophical ideas he continued on to the development of his own unique authoritative voice and embarked upon his professional career. If it were simply a matter of continuing as an academician then he would have settled into the routine of his life's work by the age of 25. Beuys' education by contrast was interrupted and perhaps determined by war. Almost as a matter of course, Beuys followed the path of least resistance, participated in the Hitler Youth, chose to train as a radio operator, but succeeded to combat pilot in the luftwaffe and suffered the lifelong consequences. In 1943 he was shot down over Russia, and severely injured, including life threatening burns. His recollection of being rescued by nomadic Tartars, covered with fat, and wrapped in felt while in a semi-conscious state provided the mythological material from which much of his later art work is made. Steiner on the other hand, by about this age, was writing his first book: Theory of knowledge in Light of Goethe's World View(4). In 1945 after suffering incarceration in an English POW camp, Beuys returned to civilian life, but he had changed the concentration of his education from science and medicine to art. It was also around this time that he took up seriously the writings and work of Rudolf Steiner. In 1938 Beuys had encountered the work of expressionist artist Wilhelm Lehmbruck in a book he plucked from a book burning at his high school. Lehmbruck's sculpture strongly portrayed social problems. The gestalt of Beuys' later work in social sculpture is intrinsically tied to this encounter according to his own account : " ...in the picture there was a torch, I saw a flame, and I heard: 'Protect the flame!'"(5). Beuys also explains how he was given a sign for how to proceed from Lehmbruck's indications to "social sculpture". He found a copy of Steiner's Appeal to the German People and the Civilized World. In 1919 Steiner had called "...for the social organism to be rebuilt on a completely new foundation. ...Among the founding committee members he (Beuys) saw the name of Wilhelm Lehmbruck."(6) This is one of the first examples of Steiner's indications for the ideas for the threefold social order.

The formal exposition of Steiner's ideas on the world stage began with the publication of several works on Goethe while editing his scientific writings in Weimar. He then wrote a book called Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom(7), and his dissertation at 30 entitled: The Philosophy of Freedom(8). He once said that this last book would remain when all of his other works were forgotten. Its basic premise can be viewed as a challenge to the idea that there are limits to knowledge and subsequent materialistic conclusions. He was a tutor and educator and later edited and wrote for several magazines. He also began his lecturing career by lecturing to various workers groups on history, science and philosophy. Just before the turn of the 19th to the 20th century Rudolf Steiner had an experience that determined much of his focus for the rest of his life. According to his own account, he encountered the Christ Spirit and thus found the strength to openly speak of spiritual perceptions. It was around this time, in his late 30's, that he began to lecture and write about his own spiritual investigations, ideas, and experiences, what he called spiritual Science and later Anthroposophy. Beginning around 1900 he affiliated himself with the Theosophical Society, originally formed around the personality of Helena Blavatsky, a Russian born seer and mystic. Steiner was the leading light of the German chapter of the Theosophical Society for over 10 years. He was dismissed from their society when he refused to accept Krishnamurti as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. With the majority of the German section he formed his own organization called the Anthroposophical Society.

The corresponding period in Beuys life included a period of artistic education, development, and work outside of the mainstream of the art world. There is some indication from Beuys that he experienced a period of debilitating depression. In one of his many interviews he says that he emerged from this period as though he were reborn. His description of this experience is obviously informed by Steiner's explanations of Karma.(9) Like Steiner, around his 39th year, his life took a new direction. He was hired as a professor at the Dusseldorf academy of Art and simultaneously became a major European force in the Fluxus movement. The Dusseldorf Academy like the Theosophical Society after a comparable period of affiliation, dismissed Beuys. He also, subsequently, formed his own organization: The Free International

University. These seemingly superficial parallels in Steiner's and Beuys' lives continue on into their last decades of life and their untimely deaths at approximately the same ages. I have not seen these parallels mentioned anywhere. There are others that are harder to explain and not so obvious.

If there is any one predecessor to Steiner it is Goethe. Goethe, a literary idol in German culture, was also a scientist as well as a skilled draftsman. He is one of the first to postulate an evolutionary view of nature citing the morphology of bones. His color theory though neglected, contains among other things a corrective assessment of the particulate theory of light. It is in his Morphology of Plants(10) that the relationship to Steiner is the most obvious. Goethe claimed that in every plant it was possible to perceive the original plant from which all plants arose. It is in The Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lilly and Faust that Steiner saw the spiritual archetypes of modern man. This direct seeing into nature provides both a key to Steiner's approach to teaching in his esoteric school, his western and Rosicrucian path to spiritual perception and the intensified direct intuitive presentations in Beuys' art.

Beuys presented his first major action on the world Art scene with "Siberian Symphony". This arose out of his association with the Fluxus movement. Like Steiner's association with the theosophists, Beuys was not entirely in sync with those that catapulted him to prominence. This can be most succinctly explained by pointing out the differences between Beuys' views and two that had a major influence on the Fluxus movement: Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. Duchamp, as early as his involvement with the cubists, took several rejections to heart, shunned movements in art as a whole, and turned to anti art until in his own mind, he essentially played this out as well. Then, to all outward appearances, he retired from art to play chess. Beuys seems to have had a one sided feud with Duchamp. Beuys, an Anthroposophist, believed there were ultimately no limits to knowledge; Duchamp, fascinated by physical phenomenon, was drawn to philosophers like Poincare' who postulated limits to knowledge.(11) Beuys countered Duchamp's ready-mades with his own. His chosen objects were imbued with personal, symbolic, and intuitive meanings beyond the irony and intellectualism attached to Duchamp's originals.

Beuys' action in 1964 entitled: "The silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated", could be viewed as a battle cry in the world of art against entropy and apathy. It is perhaps a reaction against what Duchamp represented to Beuys and not Duchamp himself. Duchamp is often credited with saying: "The Neo-dada which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc...is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered the ready-mades I sought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I Threw the bottle rack and the urinal in their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." This was not in fact said by Duchamp but written to him in a letter by fellow Dadist, Hans Richter, in the second person not the first.(12)

The other major influence on Fluxus, John cage, taught many of the original Fluxus members in the late 50's. Beuys does not appear to have acted in direct opposition to Cage but there are important differences in their artistic intentions however their methods may appear similar. It is often cited that Cage was influenced by eastern religion and especially the I-Ching or Book of Changes and Zen Buddhism. Chance, and a type of mystical relativism pervade Cages work. He seems to evoke a bemused transcendence out of the ordinary and random everyday world. Beuys work is anything but bemused and chance is only one component among many. His works contain still the implicit western spiritual principle of redemption and sacrifice in contrast to the eastern spiritual principle of transcendence.

The main thrust of Fluxus as seen in its leader George Maciunas' "Manifesto" from 1963 is completely in line with Joseph Beuys intentions in allying himself with Fluxus. Even after almost 10 years, in typical but significant Fluxus and Beuysian style, Beuys could submit the very same manifesto as his own perhaps reminding Fluxus of its own intentions to revolt against the status quo in art and culture. Yet Beuys was more intentional than his fellow Fluxus members even more so than his pre-Fluxus European predecessors Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni who both died just as he came on the scene. He not only wanted to revolt but also heal and perhaps most important, he had some idea of what he thought should replace the capitalist, Bourgeois

malaise: a reborn, spiritualized consciousness and a culture based on Steiner's "Threefold Social Order".

Between 1900 and 1925, Steiner "...delivered over 6,000 lectures- an average of one lecture for every single weekday."(13) He also wrote many books including: Christianity as Mystical Fact, Theosophy, Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment, Occult Science, as well as an autobiography of his early life entitled The Course of My Life. His lectures spanned the gambit of human interest: science, philosophy, religion, history, agriculture, art, music, dance, theater, but especially the cultivation of spiritual seeing and the spiritual nature of the human being and human evolution. It is not unlikely that Beuys read extensively in Steiner's lecture series as well as his many published books. It is certain that he was influenced by Steiner's lectures on bees. Many of his works prior to Fluxus reference these lectures. Both the lectures and the works relate bees spiritually to the sun. It is also very likely that he was influenced by Occult Science, this being the most likely place that he would have encountered the ideas of both the warmth principle and the idea of the formative forces at the foundation of reality. There is little doubt that many of the materials included in his art have personal and perhaps archetypal connotations that do not directly relate to Steiner's teachings but the intrinsic qualities inherent in the material which are essential to an understanding of Beuys were perhaps first suggested to Beuys by Steiner or at least validated by Steiner.

His use of metals in many of his works throughout his entire career have a direct relationship to cosmic forces emanating from the various planetary spiritual realms referenced in Steiner's writings and lectures. For instance, Gold embodies the spiritual forces emanating from the present Sun which is, according to Steiner, the dwelling place of various spiritual hierarchies directly related to the evolution of humanity. This would include the Christ being up until the time of Golgotha, when The Christ joined his fate with the fate of humanity. This was during the Greco-Roman period which Steiner refers to as the age of the intellectual mind soul. This was the period in which the ego conciseness became prevalent among humanity. In our present epoch Which Steiner sometimes referred to as the European epoch, we are in the process of developing

the consciousness soul, a purified form of the astral body. Middle Europe was to play a decisive role in this period of human development. The animals have an astral body but not ego consciousness. Only at the level of the group soul do they have ego consciousness. Later humanity will develop Spirit consciousness out of a purified etheric body. The plants have an etheric body but not the astral or ego. The mineral realm have only a physical form and only in this realm do the physical laws of cause and effect truly apply. At a much later time humanity will purify even the physical body and become spirit man. This is What Christ represents to Steiner and I would assume as well to Beuys. What Beuys has done in an artistic and almost ritualistic way is consciously made a connection to past human spirituality, by incorporating elements of shamanism, divination, hermeticism, animism, mythos, alchemy, and mystery drama, imbuing these with an Anythroposophical understanding of human evolution. He expands the idea of art to encompass social and ecological impulses not always included in art, and the role of the artist as holistic spiritual healer. Without this healing, especially of Middle Europe the task of the present age will have been thwarted.

If we look at one of Beuys most emblematic and visually striking actions certain patterns in his work may begin to make more sense. In "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" Beuys Has covered his head with honey and gold leaf. Honey, as well as fat and wax in other works, are indicative of formative forces in nature that are brought into play by warmth forces both literally and figuratively represented here by the head, a head coated with gold, drawing spiritual forces from the Sun. With felt on one foot and iron strapped to the other he is belabored to hobble from one picture to another. Iron is the hardened earth forces indicative of the conflicted Mars aspect of the present earth. This contrasts to the soft felt formed of lambs wool, once again related to the warming qualities of the Christ spirit. Beuys in archetypal sound forms explains the pictures to the dead hare which even in this state acts as a communicative link to the animal soul realm. The pictures are encased in glass indicative of human consciousness and action which has become separated from life and nature. The hare is variously related to the Moon, the Sun, and the Earth; humanities spiritual past and future as well as the present realm of action and consequent

sacrifice. The hare embeds itself in the Earth and thereby sacrifices itself for the sake of human evolution. This also is an Anthroposophical view of the part that the animals play in human evolution. Beuys is the prophet of the conciseness soul, a Christ-man, reshaping his thoughts with the warmth from the spirit Sun, bridging the gap between the intellectual mind soul and the alienated and suffering spirit in nature, one manifestation of the divine Sophia. The dead hare is also Eurasia which has suffered from a Western materialistic paradigm. Later, when Beuys goes to America, he is Eurasia which engages with the spiritual forces in America, once again to heal.

Another mode of being which Beuys has most definitely adapted from Steiner is his use of chalk board diagrams, as well as the open forum classroom style that may well have originated with Steiner. Most lectures before Steiner did not include a question and answer period. Beuys himself explains that there is one idea of Steiner's that had the most influence on him. Just as the Actions evolved into ecological initiatives, culminating in his "7,000 Oaks", his open forum discussions evolved into political action and the unfolding of his concept of social sculpture to reveal a resurrected form of Steiner's threefold social order.

It is difficult to briefly state what the threefold social order is either from Steiner's perspective or from Beuys'. It is based on the idea that the human being is a threefold being and that human society should be structured accordingly. The human being is body, soul, and spirit. These are in turn related to will, thought, and feeling which manifest successively: intuition, imagination and inspiration. This has its historical counterpart, coming out of Free Masonry, in the motto of the French Revolution: "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!" In the threefold social order humanity must have liberty or freedom in the cultural realm, equality in the political realm, and fraternity or cooperation in the economic realm. When Beuys declared that Art= Capital he was reiterating Steiner's premise that the economic realm must cease to be motivated by profit. Neither, however, advocated socialist ideology in which the government is unduly involved in economics and culture. By culture is implied not only the arts but science, religion and education. Another Beuysian slogan, "Everyone is an artist!", implies that the creative forces have become too isolated within limited aspects of the cultural sphere due to an imbalance in the threefold

nature of humanity. Creative impulses must revive all aspects of society. In an intense discussion with the sculptor Heinz Georg Haussler, Beuys clarified his relationship to Steiner's Anthroposophy. He said he had nothing to do with the art impulse of Rudolf Steiner, indicating that was others' task, but that his task was the threefold social order.(14)

Steiner gave numerous lectures on the arts. He even became an accomplished visual artist in his own rite. He developed a unique painting style for the first Goetheanum and gave indications for painting and sculpture that still persist today among Anthroposophical artists. The Second Goetheanum has become the world focal point for Anthroposophist. It is a theater, a university and a total work of art. It was one of the first buildings literally sculpted with reinforced concrete and remains inspirational in the realm of modern architecture.. The idea of total art pervaded the first and the second Goetheanum. The idea of total art is a constant theme in Beuys art as well. Beuys, however applied this concept not to his physical surroundings per se, but to the spiritual and cultural forms that he endeavored to stimulate and coax into being. Why then does Beuys not concentrate solely on the spiritual qualities indicative of the purely visual aspect of art. Some of his early water colors suggest that he may have even practiced a kind of Anthroposophical painting style, but much of his production from this early period he destroyed. So we may never know. "I say may" because I too do not believe in absolute limits to knowledge.

The first Goetheanum was destroyed by fire, possibly arson, and the second was left incomplete for over half a century. Steiner's Society was plagued by feuding and dissension after his death, and though many of his ideas have taken hold around the world and had tremendous influence, Anthroposophy is still a relatively small outward movement. Two world wars and subsequent strife in Europe and elsewhere have derailed much of what might have born fruit culturally and spiritually. In 1973 Beuys joined the Anthroposophical Society.(15) He also tried to send his children to a Waldorf or Steiner school though they were turned down.(16) I could not find the reason. I was a member of the society for over 18 years and for a shorter time I was in the School of Spiritual Science. The first is open to anyone the second requires a sponsor and a commitment to Anthroposophy. My place in the school was withdrawn when I was unable to

attend class readings because I lived too far away and had other conflicts. My art has been informed by Anthroposophy but unlike Beuys, I invested more in traditional visual modes and found it hard, except in thought, to implement other aspects of Anthroposophy. I am perhaps one of those others that Beuys mentioned whose task is to implement at least some of what Steiner indicated for the visual arts..

Though I do find visual beauty in many of the works that Beuys has left to the world, and understand his work much more than I did originally, judging it simply on its visual merits as I was trained, there is still much that is disturbing in his work if not outright distasteful. An article by Gene Ray in the book: Joseph Beuys, Mapping the Legacy (17), reiterates my own conclusions. He points to the holocaust and the decimation of European Jewry as a constant underlying theme of Beuys' work, not only those works which deal directly with the Holocaust but all of his work. Fat is not only indicative of formative forces but also of the sickening smell of burning flesh. Felt is not only indicative of the warmth principle, but of human hair collected insidiously by the Nazis. His works are also a reminder of the decimated state of all Europe after the war both culturally and spiritually. He stood in direct opposition to the materialistic forces which have supplanted the more spiritual role that Europe might still play in the world. But he, as one of those that lived through and participated in the devastation, walked like a penitent and a prophet, in sack cloth and ashes, like Judas reborn as a true believer.

(A)

Receptively, tightly analyzed + argued.!

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