

**DISCOURSES:**  
**CONVERSATIONS IN POSTMODERN ART AND CULTURE**

EDITED BY  
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**JOSEPH BEUYS**

**Kate Horsfield & Lyn Blumenthal**

**KATE HORSFIELD:** Were members of your family involved in any pursuit of creativity when you were a child?

**JOSEPH BEUYS:** No, I could never find out an interest in creativity. Perhaps there was one forefather from the Dutch roots of my family who was interested in science, but never could I find an interest in art.

**HORSFIELD:** When you were a small child, did you have a direct interest in art?

**BEUYS:** No, this idea never came to my consciousness then, but if I look back, I find that what I did as a child had a lot to do with an understanding of art, from which I later developed this so-called "enlarged understanding of art" that has to do with the theory of social sculpture, the radical transformation of the world. So, what I did as a child—what I experienced in the fields, in nature and also in the industrial part of human activity, in small factories—had a kind of character which people can now see in the Guggenheim Museum pieces, for instance; but this is only apparent through a reflection about my interests as a child and the work I did then; and surely, not only what I did as a child, but also what I felt and what I thought, what I experienced and what...yes, imagined.

**HORSFIELD:** Can you talk specifically about some of these particular kinds of feelings or experiences?

**BEUYS:** Yes—one of my most important general feelings during that time was that I felt myself, on one side, in a very beautiful environment; but from the side of social behavior, I felt that everything was in a very big debacle. I felt a dramatic contradiction in my life and when I was five years old, I felt that my life had to go to an end because I experienced already too much of this contradiction.

I had the feeling that another kind of life—perhaps in a transcendental area—would give me a better possibility to influence, or to work, or to act within this contradiction. So, this was my general feeling: on the one side, this beautiful undamaged nature from which I took a lot and had a lot of possibilities for contemplation, meditation, research, collecting things, making a kind of system; and on the other side, this social debacle that I felt already as a coming dilemma.

Yes, as a child I was aware of it, but later I could analyze the debacle. During my

childhood, I was confronted with the nature of this behavior but didn't analyze the root of such a debacle; nevertheless, surely, this is an intuitive comprehension that already a child can feel; that in such a condition, the root must be in the behavior of the people.

You must see this as a very complicated thing insofar as I cannot accuse a single person to have been the cause of this debacle, this single person against me, and in no way do I intend to criticize certain people of my neighborhood in their behavior toward me; but I saw the relationship between people, I saw their thoughts, I saw their kind of expressionistic behavior in every difficult situation. I saw all the time the unclearness in the psychological condition of the people. You know, that was the time called the "Roaring Twenties" and I felt that this expressionistic behavior, this unformed quality of soul power and emotion of life...I saw it, that it would lead to a kind of catastrophe. That was my general feeling.

**HORSFIELD:** Before you made the decision to be an artist, you were following some early interest in science and you had made up your mind to be a scientist to a certain extent....

**BEUYS:** That is true.

**HORSFIELD:** What goals did you have as a scientist, and, then, what made you stop science and look more closely toward art?

**BEUYS:** Yes...I started from this positive point of the environment, where things in nature were undestroyed, relatively undestroyed, and I began already as a child to work with a sort of circus and theater, a methodology and system which were related to natural phenomena: animals, insects, plants.

When I was seven or eight, I got interested in research already done. I had teachers who were also close to this interest and I had a kind of laboratory all the time until fifteen years of age, when I developed really and factually a laboratory which was involved with physics, chemistry, zoology, botany and such things and I decided to study natural sciences. Then it was already near the time when the Second World War began and that activity was stopped by my call to military duty.

During the war, when I was a soldier, I had the privilege from my commander, when we were situated in a town where there was some academic activity, to go in my free time to the University. And since we had kind of a resting time in Poland, I had the opportunity to visit Poznan University. I think I had an event there, during a discussion with a professor of zoology about the whole theory of natural science, when I found out that this could not be my ability, to become so specialized in such a positivistic, materialistic field; these two terms came to my consciousness then, you know. It was a kind of methodology of the materialistic understanding of the world. So, I realized that the necessities of the so-called exact, natural sciences were a restriction for my specific ability and I decided to try it another way.

Then, during the rest of the war, I was pondering this problem. I had to make a decision about such an established understanding of research of the world and I had to think of a methodology to bring up my specific ability to cooperate with other people, simply to say...not to bring up very, very important things, that was not in my mind. In my mind was the question: how to cooperate with other people in a more meaningful way, to overcome not only the dilemma which I experienced in my youth already and from which the consequence was the Second World War—and this even stronger dilemma which I was mixed up in during the war. I thought about the necessity to come to a decision, to reconstruct, to renew the whole problem of life, labor, work of the people...yes, this was for me the question after the crucial point of humankind's creativity and its implications: freedom of people in their creative work and how to develop from this necessity a kind of social order, another understanding of science and to try it with art. So—then—I tried it with art.

**HORSFIELD:** One thing I'd like to ask is what was the art climate? What did you see about art as a field, you know, where could you attach your notions of experimentation and what kind of goals could you have?

**BEUYS:** Yes, sure, it's a very important question because there was almost nothing to be seen, to be hopeful for in this field. The only hope I had was when I saw one day a photograph of a sculpture which was put away during Hitler's time. It was a sculpture by Wilhelm Lehmbruck, a German sculptor of expressionistic style. This was perhaps the only example, Lehmbruck, between my sixteenth to nineteenth years in which I saw a possibility for art to be principally of interest to innovate some things, instead of writing a very boring, naturalistic repetition of what is already done by nature.

That was a time, one must know, which was very isolated, generally, in Germany, during the fascist era and even more specifically isolated in that region where nobody was interested in art. That was a kind of tradition there, not because people were uncreative, but their professions were mostly agricultural and as far as the industrial impulse of the last century also had its traces in that area, they were workers, employed in factories. Within such a population, almost nothing existed culturally.

It was simply that they didn't know how to work in this specific field and also because of their involvement in the religious tradition—a Catholic area. So, when I saw such examples, one by Lehmbruck and also then some paintings, when I searched for interesting materials, I felt a possibility for art which would be better for my ability.

**HORSFIELD:** At this point, were you studying art?

**BEUYS:** Yes.

**HORSFIELD:** What kind of people were your teachers and how did they influence you at this time?

**BEUYS:** I started to prepare myself to enter a state academy. It was difficult during that time because all these institutions had been destroyed and they were all functioning in a kind of improvised roofing and only a few students could have the possibility to study. So, immediately after the war, after my time in prison, I began to work on some examples of what I felt could be a kind of proof of my skill, my ability and with this stuff I went to the Academy of Dusseldorf and they took me, which was a wonder during that time. I, myself, was very astonished that they took me in this chaotic condition.

I started the university with a teacher who was very academic. I had nothing else to do than to copy models in a naturalistic, almost medical, way. He was pointing out to me where every muscle had to be, had to be observed, reproduced, and I made a lot of anatomic models until I felt very bored with this repetitive character of doing and again I felt that it was a kind of science rather than art. I felt the parallelism with science and the influence that a materialistic understanding of it had on art. My professor appeared to me like a surgeon in a hospital with a white coat and he had some tools in his breast pocket like a doctor, when he came for correction. I felt like in an operating room, you know, and the work was exactly the same. I felt very upset and came in difficulties with this teacher who personally I loved very much because he was a generous person, a very noble character; but I came in difficulties and left him to try with another teacher.

This teacher, Ewald Matare, was well known during that time in the area. He had a style of his own, an understanding of art which was really a kind of innovation for me during that time. He had an autonomy in the understanding of art, but with a medieval methodology. He was a believer in the "Bauhütte"<sup>1</sup> idea, he was an admirer of the ornament, of what we call in Germany "Masswerk,"<sup>2</sup> the geometrical... "*rechtfertigung was heisst rechtfertigung*"? <sup>3</sup>... He was convinced that geometry and ornament should be the basis for all decisions in art. Then I was surely with a very good teacher, an autonomic character, but again I came in difficulties with such a dogma—with such a strict belief in an older concept of art, coming from the Middle Ages, which brought me to a contradiction and discussion with him. He used to pay attention to my experiences with forms in different materials, and through his observation, he declared me, simply, crazy. He didn't say that I was unable, no. He was saying that perhaps I was his most able student, but at the same time he felt it his duty to inform officials about the impossibility to take me later, for instance, as a teacher, because I was crazy—in his mind, completely crazy—a mad man.

This was a time when I spoke a lot about the necessity to find a secure basis for further doings; I came to realize that it wouldn't lead to a solution of the problem to take, for instance, Buddhist concepts, or Middle Ages "Bauhütte" concepts, or to take Tao things or other Eastern wisdom, to recreate spirituality within humankind. I was intensively involved with a kind of...yes, epistemology at that time and this was a reason for him to discard my work. He believed that an artist has to do the things, has not to speak too much, not to get so confused in such complicated stuff like historical analysis, and has not to brood upon these things. In his eyes I was a brooder,

brooding on problems which humankind would never be able to solve, and from this point of view it appeared to him as a kind of madness.

It was already the beginning of my coming away from the traditional art world, getting more and more in connection with people who were interested in interdisciplinary research, and so I had more friends and more discussions with scientists again, and because I already had a scientific background and vocabulary, it was always a very intensive relationship with scientists of different fields. This is now the time from '52 until the next point in my life—this point was a kind of breakdown of everything.

**HORSFIELD:** Let me just insert one question before we go to that.

**BEUYS:** Yes, sure.

**HORSFIELD:** To what extent were you interested in aesthetic solutions in the actual physicality of artmaking?

**BEUYS:** Say it again, please.

**HORSFIELD:** To what extent were you interested in aesthetic solutions and in the process of making art?

**BEUYS:** Again, it's very important to understand the question and I didn't understand it clearly, therefore, please, say it again.

**HORSFIELD:** O.K., as a contrast to art as a carrier of ideas, how interested in the aesthetics of solving a problem were you?

**BEUYS:** That was not a point at all for me. The word "aesthetics" does not exist for me. I found out during all my time in an official institution, a state academy, that this use of the word aesthetics meant nothing, in my understanding. I couldn't locate this meaning of aesthetics, which was a very nebulous, undetermined idea. I couldn't put it in any real and concrete way in my work, my problem, my view. But later, after what I said was the next period in my life, I stated my understanding of it: human being is aesthetics. Aesthetics is the human being in itself.

**HORSFIELD:** You mentioned something earlier, before we started discussing your education as an artist, about being called into the war, during which period you were a pilot. I'd like to ask you about that time, and what were some of the incidents that happened to you, how they affected your concept of art as a social tool, and how it began to manifest itself in works of art?

**BEUYS:** Sometimes those things are looked at in a false way; these physical experiences during the war—accidents, damages on my body, wounds and such things—are overrated in regard to my later work.

**HORSFIELD:** How were they overrated?

**BEUYS:** People look at it in too simplistic a way. They say that because I was in the war with Tataric tribes, for instance, and came in contact with these families, which took me in as a kind of family member to give me perhaps the possibility to desert the army, or when I was badly wounded such tribes found me and covered my body with a kind of fat, milky stuff, and even felt, that this would be the reason why I used such materials later in my work.

**HORSFIELD:** Is that true?

**BEUYS:** True is this event during the war, but not true that that was the reason to take this stuff later for my sculpture. If this were true, then I ask why did I come so late to use such materials?

The proof of why this cannot be true, and is not true, is that before I did these things, I built up a theory to which these materials seemed the most appropriate, to make clear a theory of sculpture, a theory of social order, a theory of the action as a living sculpture and so on.

So, I came to elements, theoretical elements, of isolating materials, raw materials, organic materials. I didn't take these things just as a kind of immediately dramatical means because I was in a dramatic situation during the war, no, not at all; I wasn't interested in that; but later on, when I built up a theory and a system of sculpture and art, and also a system of wider understanding, anthropological understanding of sculpture being related to the social body, and to everyone's lives and ability, then such materials seemed to be right and effectful tools to make clear this theory and to bring impulse in the discussion during the actions and the performances. But yes, surely, I remember the period of war, surely this time was very important for my whole life, and it is a very interesting point that the same material was involved in this emergency condition, personally and for the whole world during that war. So that was later also a very useful element to make clear how to overcome, one could say, the wound of all of us, not only mine. These elements appear as a kind of secret affinity in my life, but this relationship was not the motivation for me to use them.

**HORSFIELD:** Would you say that these materials were chosen by you at a later time, developing out of your theory of sculpture?

**BEUYS:** Yes, you see they are clearly developed, and there were a lot of forerunners until I came to the simple decision to take such materials; and taking these materials, after my thoughts on the necessity of building a theory, I saw, then, the interesting relation they had to my biography.

**HORSFIELD:** Were you surprised?

**BEUYS:** No, I wasn't surprised, because I told you already that, during my childhood, I made such things instinctively, and from the creativity of a child, seeing the things in the same way as now. I worked with machines, one could say simply, that worked without fuel, without so-called physical energy, which would function with concepts. And now, I am slowly on the point to develop such machinery to work without physical energy, and as I can remember that already as a child I did the same things this made a significance in my life, that parallelism of past and future.

**HORSFIELD:** How do you approach deciding to do a piece of art, or in certain cases an action, what comes up to you before you start to do it? What do you know about it, and how do you proceed?

**BEUYS:** I know a lot before I start an action. I know a lot about the necessity of the general idea of sculpture, but I don't know anything about the process in which the action will run. When the action runs, my preparation works, because I am prepared to do a thing without knowing where it goes. You see, it would be a very uninteresting thing—it would have nothing to do with art—if it were not a new experiment for which I have no clear concept. If I had a clear concept of solving the problem, I would then speak about the concept and it wouldn't be necessary to make an action. Every action, every art work for me, every physical scene, drawing on the blackboard, performance, brings a new element in the whole, an unknown area, an unknown world.

So, I never have a clear concept for a performance; I only make a decision about tools, for instance, but I don't determine the run of the action, or the character of the action at all. I never make actions to make actions, as a kind of innovation in the art world, as a new style; but I must say that the nature of the actions as a possibility to arrive at an understanding of art, for the most part was translated into an official modern art style, and again became restricted to the enclosure of an ivory tower, reduced to a traditional view of art as a history of formal innovations without being seen as a possibility to innovate the whole social body. You see that is the dilemma in the art world—but I try to overcome that situation as much as I can; nevertheless, the problem always reappears, and I am always confronted with the temptation of the system to destroy such an impulse.

**HORSFIELD:** I'd like to ask you in terms of people participating in your work, the audience for example, whether you want to refer to the audience at the actions, or the audience in Europe, or at the Guggenheim. A lot has been made out of the fact that people have to rely so much on verbal or written interpretations of your work, in order to understand the symbols and the quality of the meaning behind it. This seems to me, in a way, to be a contradiction with the intention of reaching out across society.



**BEUYS:** If it were true, then it would be a contradiction; but you see, it isn't true. That is transported by a lot of unclear sources and unclear positions by people who are involved in this whole difficulty. Journalists, critics, and art historians, they are all building up this misunderstanding, that one must have interpretations for the phenomena of the production. It isn't true, simply it isn't true. People could work without interpretation, and they still can work without interpretation, but perhaps it is also interesting.... Let's stop on this point, so as not to blur it out.

I never preserved a tool, or a part of my laboratory, one could say, to avoid this term "artist." Because this is already an allusion to a kind of traditional understanding in a restricted way which wouldn't work on its own form, or the relationship between form, material and so on. Sometimes appears such a thing, and such a tool, which doesn't work without interpretation, but I would never give it as an example of my understanding of sculpture, or as a stimulating phenomenon to see something about the problems involved. So it is not necessary to have such an interpretation.

One of the most important statements of the enlarged understanding of art is that not only materials—formed, or in chaos if necessary—has to do with sculpture. Thought is a sculptural process, and the expression of the thinking forms in language is also art. This totality of humankind's creativity, beginning with feelings and thoughts, and their expression in a special material, the language material, for which you need your body and physical tools, your tongue, larynx, lungs, the air, the sound waves, the ear of the other person, all have to do with the idea of sculpture in the future.

There is on one side the physical consequence of the thought: the forms being realized in buildings, in architecture, in agricultural forms, in so-called sculptures because they have a special form, they imply a special imagination rather than being only a repetition of the given. It is possible for people to see those tools, the result of a process; they can see, one could say, the "hardware" character of a process. But from this point we should look at the source, where the sculptural process starts, and it is the thought, the thinking power and its consequence: information, which means for me bringing form in material conditions.

Already when I speak I need my own body, the physical, flesh; it is a kind of clay to form into; and I need my lungs, I need my tools here, existing in my anatomy, I need the physical conditions of other forms of life, in my brother or my sister. I must at once eliminate discussions, interpretations, misunderstandings, deviations of the problem. I have to put everything in this process to bring up as much as possible the germ, the point of development in a special direction, to bring up a reasonable basis where new culture in the future could spring off.

So, that is the second part of the problem; that the language, the thinking on the problem is a more important sculpture even than the end of the process existing in tools or in paintings, or in drawings, or in carvings. This transcendent character of information, in an invisible world, gives us at the same time the proof and a clear knowledge that we are not only biological beings, material beings, but first spiritual beings, not existing on this planet—that we are only partly existing on this planet—and being involved in wood, in felt, in fat, in iron, in rubber, or whatever resources of this planet.

That is for me the reason to speak, and it is the dignity of the speech. Otherwise, if this phenomenon, this reality, is not clear, then the consequence is that every speech is bla-bla, no social power exists, everything is chaos. And the other consequence is: let them do what they do, let the government do what it wants to do, I go out, I go apart and try to survive during my life time, and every language, every expression of human beings is bla-bla. If you don't find the necessity to speak, then surely the language is bla-bla. That is why I stress the necessity to find clear epistemological reasons to go on with art, which begin in humankind's thinking powers to mold, and to bring up the quality of what traditionally appears as the form of a thing, to impulse the world with a radical other understanding of culture.

In the past, it was the special spiritual authority of the high priest, the leader, or the pharaoh, or the tribal collective, the chief of the tribe, then later it was the capitalistic dependency on money power and state power, and now it has to deal with the world which is built up by people, people's creativity; but this will only be possible if people get slowly clear about the power they have, which starts in the thinking, the molding character of the thought. And the transference is in language forms, and other kinds of language, as in the art work where sculpture in its special physical form means also language—one must not have such a limited understanding of language.

That is for me the reason why I have to speak, and I have to speak more often than I do so-called art work. You see, the complication is that I have to use something...I have to use a traditional determination for ideas, so when I speak about art, I can only say that there are two kinds of art: the traditional art, which is unable to bring up art at all, or to change anything in society or in the ability and the joy for life, and then, there is another kind of art, which is related to everybody's needs and the problems existing in society. This kind of art has to be worked out at the beginning, it has to start from the molding power of the thought as a sculptural means. If this sculptural agent is not active in the beginning, it will never lead to result in any physical form, or the physical form will only be pollution for the world, and will only enrich the whole rubbish of production we already have. That is my meaning.

—January 1980

1. Guild of Gothic cathedral builders during the Middle Ages.
2. Precision, exactness of a work.
3. Justification—How do you say "justification"?

THIS TEXT IS A TRANSCRIPT FROM THE VIDEO INTERVIEW TAPE PRODUCED BY LYN BLUMENTHAL AND KATE HORSFIELD. THE INTERVIEW WAS TAPED IN NEW YORK DURING BEUYS' RETROSPECTIVE AT THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM IN JANUARY 1980.

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