

Energy Plan for the Western Man

The history of the concept of ritual is the story of its emancipation. Rituals were considered stereotypical and rigid and were mostly connected to religious actions or habit patterns. Only in the mid-seventies of the last century this setting changed, the creative potential of rituals has been recognized when performance art became popular.

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Joseph Beuys was a spiritual artist. He was a shaman. Rituals were Beuys program. Using tools like fat, felt, copper or animals all represented a spiritually driven metaphor in his work which was produced in public while various rituals took place. Beuys believed *everyone is an artist and all actions are art*.

A brief explanation about the connection between ritual and art: The ritual is an action. A work of fine art is not an act but the result of an action, unless the development process will be celebrated publicly.

Since the implementation of the action as a work of art in the early 20th Century, the relationship between the artwork and ritual changed. A goodnight kiss performed every evening before going to sleep is a common private ritual. The same ritual performed in public in an art context can be understood as performance art. The first major artist manifesting this was Joseph Beuys, although obviously his actions were far from being cute.

Why was Joseph Beuys a shaman? One of his biographers, Stachelhaus, explains: *„Beuys knew what it is to be with shamanism. For him, the shaman was a form which could combine material and spiritual powers. In the present materialistic age, the shaman thus represented the future.“*

Joseph Beuys aimed recreating an all encompassing unity between material and spiritual, human, animal and vegetative realms. This wholeness alone – and not its extreme and singular coordinates – would in his opinion assure the survival for mankind in the fullest and most creative freedom. Beuys believed that the evil materialistic thinking destroys the most beautiful pictures. In most of his performances his goal was to prove that good can triumph over evil. When Beuys first visited the United States performing Energy Plans for the Western Man he even went as far back referring to historic figures like the Renaissance philosopher Campanella who envisaged the Sun State. While performing in New York, Chicago and Minneapolis Beuys commented his approach, „One day man like god will create his own planet – a spiritual state.“ The plan consisted of no precise solution or advice but was itself the continuous, physical and spiritual interaction between the artist and his audience. The enlargement of communicative means and an understanding of worldshaping powers constituted for Beuys the true source of human empowerment. To Beuys the exchange between audience and artist were a source of constant metamorphosis. A state of mind that was bound to and shaped by the specific moment and the specific place. These historically fixed encounters would remain as energy sources. They would function as a battery. The idea of an energy pool, or battery, surfaces often in his work. Beuys always emphasized the possibility that human beings are in a state of evolution, that there may be things to come of which we cannot dream. The possibility of the human capacity for warmth and love. Beuys had great faith in the human capacity.

But Beuys did not chose to be a shaman. The shaman is the chosen one. The decisive criterion for the appointment of a shaman in all Siberian peoples for example is the disease, the experience of fragmentation, ritual murder and resurrection. But the shaman is not just a patient. He is a sick man who is capable to heal itself.

Undoubtedly because of his experiences and injuries during the second world war Beuys had shamanistic traits, also externally.

The shaman always wears a costume and as the most important part a hat. Beuys costume consisted of a fishing-vest over a white shirt, jeans and a felt hat. This costume Beuys was not only wearing while performing his art. Since Beuys believed everyone is an artist and all actions are art he lived a constant performance. Already his birth in 1921 is quoted in his biography as followed: „1921 Kleve exhibiton of a baird-aid contracted wound.“ Beuys costume was his everyday wardrobe.

„We need to get out of the leaden chamber of intellectualising thoughts. We need the mental warmth of spirituality.“ JOSEPH BEUYS

Beuys believed in racial biologism that sees the society as something organically grown. In 1975 Joseph Beuys gave an interview to a German Beesnewspaper saying, „The man is practically a swarm of bees.“ Beuys saw man as a biological being. The bee knows to generate heat by chest contraction in his own body. This heat is stored while forming a cluster, therefore mutually warming is reinforced. That was the idealistic dream of Beuys: People need to warm each other. Felt, present in all of Beuys performances, represent the thermal character.

„Everyone works for everyone. No one works only for himself, but each meets the needs of another.“

JOSEPH BEUYS

During 20 years Joseph Beuys carried out roundabout 30 actions. „These actions are important to expand the old concept of art. So far as to make it as large as possible so that it can encompass all human activities“, Beuys once said during one of his lessons as a teacher. For Beuys all human activities are art. And every action takes a ritual.

In almost all religions, there are purification ceremonies to symbolize the pure of the soul. For Beuys cleansing rituals were existential. Before his actions Beuys always fasted. In the action „Celtic“ in 1971 in Basel for example, Beuys goes so far as to wash the feet of some of the participants and asks to be overwhelmed with water; like a baptism. Beuys believed the complete cleaning is a basic condition for the healing of social relationships.

In 1972 Beuys performs the action „Auskehren“. On May 1st, after the infamous Berlin may demonstrations, Beuys sweeps Karl-Marx-Platz in Westberlin. „So I wanted to make clear that the ideology of the protesters are swept.“, explains Beuys after.

Beuys was generous explaining his thoughts as he knew they were essential for the public to understand his actions.

Der Chef the Chief, performed 1st December 1964 in Galerie René Block in Berlin: one room of the gallery is brightly lit. In the middle of the room diagonally displayed on the floor lays a giant felt roll. In it wrapped is Beuys. At the two ends of the roller, as an extension of

BEUYS TOOLS

Fat

Felt

Iron

Copper

Broom

Wood

Band-Aid

Knife

Crucifix

Water

Fire

Sound

Animals

Trees Or Leaves

Animal Blood

Chalk

Beuys, two dead rabbits. In an article of the German Newspaper Tagesspiegel written at the time a Journalist describes precisely that Beuys pulled a strip of German margarine, which was 168cm long and 7cm thick. Other Beuys action tools: tuft of hair, fingernails, a fat corner, another felt roll and a copper bar. The Journalist wrote: *You could hear breathing, breathe, wheezing, cough, moan, sigh, hissing, whistling and the sentences, I am a transmitter. I radiate.* The answer to the meaning of this action is told by the tools: Felt represents heat, fat mental strength, while Beuys himself acts as the transmitter – thus a high spiritual force. Copper, another typical Beuys material which he used for many of his actions, is the conductor which stands for venus force. The rabbit is the organic force, or like Beuys used to say “nature god”. The answer to the meaning of this action is told by the tools: Felt represents heat, fat mental strength, while Beuys himself acts as the transmitter – thus a high spiritual force. Copper, another typical Beuys material which he used for many of his actions, is the conductor which stands for venus force. The rabbit is the organic force, or like Beuys used to say “nature god”.

The purpose of this action was to show a new cosmic constellation. Beuys was always interested in introducing the new. In 1985 Beuys created the work „Ich glaube – eine Art Batterie für das Denken“: An iron box which contains a layer of cardboard and then a layer of sulfur. On top of that lie approximately 15 organs. Art historian Antje von Graevenitz explains the meaning as follows: *When the ferment in the sulfur bed lying organs and thus oxidize the iron case a fire would occur. So the work could show his power connection itself. Like a battery, the work in intuitive consciousness of the viewer ignite a spiritual fire.*

With „24 Stunden Joseph Beuys“, performed at Galerie Parnass, Beuys created new opportunities to exert influence on the time. During the long period of 24 hours Beuys is sitting on a crate. He reaches out for things that are outside of his reach, but he never loses contact with the box. Then he pulls himself together on the box, activates a tape recorder and listens again intently into the fat pad that hangs over his head. From time to time he takes one of the two spades, which are driven into a board in front of him and holds them with outstretched arms up to his chest. Any action shown an ever-repeated ritual.

In December 1985, shortly after the „Ich glaube“ action Beuys installs his last exhibition at the Museo di Capodimonte in Neapel. The exhibition was called „Joseph Beuys Palazzo Regale“. In a large room, only two glass cases. On the walls are seven brass plates whose surfaces are prepared with gold. In one of the glass case are the relicts from various Beuys actions. Also the infamous fur coat which Beuys was wearing during his „Iphigenie/Titus Adronicus“ action 1969 in Frankfurt and which symbolizes the shaman and the iron head of the warrior from „Straßenbahnhaltestelle“ which represents a self portrait. In the other case are bacon, sausages, copper, felt, and a backpack; grave goods. Beuys died during the duration of this exhibition in his studio in Düsseldorf on 23rd January 1986 of a stroke.

From the first breath to the last living life as an action. Actions performed in public through several chain reactions of rituals.

For Beuys the purpose of all actions are a confrontation with death: „The man accepted death as a methodology of creation. Because he wants the death. Basically because he understands that without this element of death he would not be able to live consciously.“, Beuys once said to the Philosopher Wolfgang Iser. „If he was only interested in life, then he might as well be a piece of seaweed. But he is interested in the death, he is interested in the spirit, the form. When I hit my head against a hard edge, I wake up. In other words, death keeps me awake.“

„Everyone is an artist.“

JOSEPH BEUYS