

17 years ago I came across with the slogan “*Every human being is an artist.*” As a young teacher student who was interested in art and willing to devote oneself more to it, I of course found the slogan very intriguing. Since then, I have every now and then returned to pondering, what did Joseph Beuys mean by that slogan, or by “*creativity = capital*”. Or, what is “*social sculpture*”. The basic idea is not that hard to figure out, but it seems to be more challenging a task to compose a coherent and solid philosophical grounding for Beuys’s thinking. There is available quite a good amount of texts by and about Beuys, such as writings, lectures, interviews and commentaries, but it has become quite clear that he basically grounds his thinking on the claim that “*thought is already sculpture*” (Beuys 1990). But where does that claim originate from, he does not tell. This, obviously, is one of the key questions of my research. It is not difficult to intuitively understand what Beuys means, especially when keeping in mind that his main interest was to change people’s thoughts of their capacities to mold the society. However, the claim is so fundamental in Beuys’s thinking that it deserves a more thorough scrutiny. Not that surprisingly, I have chosen to investigate the groundings of social sculpture through arts-based research and a phenomenological attitude.

As a matter of fact, Beuys considered himself a phenomenologist – although he never referred to any classic, acknowledged philosophers of phenomenology (Beuys 1990). Either way, studying Beuys’s thinking with a phenomenological approach appears to serve well in this search for a solid grounding. Beuys’s attachment to Goethe and especially to Goethe’s way of science (Beuys 2004) offers quite a justified confirmation to this conclusion. For what does Goethe’s quest for the *Urphänomenon* stand for if not a phenomenological attitude? (Seamon & Zajonc 1998; Robbins 2005.) A quote from Goethe seems to validate the assumption: “*Search nothing beyond the phenomena, they themselves are the theory*” (Goethe 1971, p. 76, as quoted in Robbins 2005, p. 120).

Of course, in addition to the rather colorful collection of written texts about Beuys, one has to take account of his oeuvre – a task not so simple, considering the variety and the scale of it along with the fact that Beuys himself regarded being a teacher as his greatest work of art and the rest being “the waste product, a demonstration” – as he described it to Willoughby Sharp in 1969.

Interestingly enough, on the same occasion Beuys also drew attention to the point that his works are permeated with thoughts originating from scientific concepts. (Beuys 1990.) So, be his works only waste products of teaching or not, it is obviously necessary to consider them as a vital part of his philosophical compound. And naturally, an arts-based approach is more than appropriate way of studying them.

By his own words, Beuys’s main concern throughout his career was trying to change the world through everything he did, and the artworks were merely supporting this intention. For this reason, the artworks I have selected as my research “discussants” are not as much aesthetically appealing as they are conceptually meaningful: The first one, *Tallow* from 1977, consists of twenty tons of fat in five pieces. *The end of the 20th century* from 1983 fills one exhibition hall with 21 basalt stones and some warehouse equipment, and the last one is an installation of one hundred blackboards from 1974 called *Directional forces of a New Society*.

All these works are quite impressive even as such because of their size and – especially in the first two cases – the very concrete sense of the material, the kind of bodily presence of it. The exhibition hall filled with pieces of fat has a very special atmosphere and one can feel the air on the skin – but in a surprisingly pleasant and warm way, almost as if it was protecting. As a contrast to that, the hall with the basalt stones is cool: the cellar like coolness of the stones is almost tangible – even though it is highly unlikely the stones would actually be much colder than the room temperature. In both cases it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to touch the works.

But that is just the surface level, the first impression. The more deeply one involves with Beuys’s thinking, the clearer appears the intensive connection between these works and his philosophy. The

works do serve as conveyors of Beuys's ideas, and although they can be quite powerfully experienced as separate artworks, they reach their full essence only when one knows the theoretical framework they link to.

For this quite obvious reason, my artistic dialogue with the selected works is focused more on the ideas than the actual realization of the works. During the processes of reading, visiting exhibition, writing and artmaking it became clear that the first key concept I had to concentrate on was freedom. Freedom tinges practically everything Beuys says and does, it lies hidden even behind the constitutive thesis "thought is sculpture", as we can see in these next few quotes:

"Man really is not free in many respects [--] but he is free in his thinking, and here is the point of origin of sculpture. For me, the formation of the thought is already sculpture. The thought is sculpture." (1969)

"My theory depends on the fact that every human being is an artist. I have to encounter him when he is free, when he is thinking." (1969)

"I cannot understand the idea of creativity where it is not related to the self-conscious 'I' which stands in the field of inner freedom." (1976)

"[E]verybody can change the world through his free individuality." (1976)

"[T]he capital of the world is not the money as we understand it, but the capital is the human ability for creativity, freedom and self-determination in all their working places..." (1982)

"We could tell man that he has the power to determine his own life, to change the repressive systems, but in respect of freedom, man is at a loss and doesn't know what to do. He must be shown gradually how to make use of his freedom; he must understand that he is allowed to do this." (1986)

(Quotes from Beuys 1990.)

The understanding of freedom that served as the stand point of my artistic process was that freedom is always a relation. We are always free in a relation to something. Freedom as such does not exist. The name of the exhibition, "*Freedom Relations*", originates from this notion.

While working with the pieces for the exhibition I concentrated to reflect on all kinds of thoughts and feelings I had about freedom and dependency or interdependency as its counterpart. The most complicated piece in a conceptual sense is *The Freedom Cage*. It turned out to be the key for the whole exhibition. The cage is 2.5 meters in height and 1.25 meters on each side, and visitors were allowed – hoped – to go inside. It stood alone in the middle of an empty room, the only other element in that room being a text hanging on one wall: *”Every human being is free in the spirit, even if born in chains”* This sentence, mixing Schiller (*“Man is created free, and is free, even though born in chains.”*) with beuysianism, kept echoing in my mind throughout the whole process of putting the exhibition together, and by hanging it on the wall I wanted to add the “everything-is-possible” -level into the experience.

The Freedom Cage demonstrates two levels of freedom quite explicitly – at least as explicitly as I could make it: on the most apparent level the visitor can freely move around the room and in relation to the cage, but the thing is that just below this obvious surface level there is an unavoidable relation of encountering. That is to say that the visitor is free to choose the nature of the relation but he/she cannot decide whether the relation exists or not. These two levels as well as the level of absolute spiritual freedom are explicated in the exhibition catalogue – that the visitors are of course free to read or ignore. The ultimate aim of this piece is to provoke visitors to pay attention to the head-aching complexity of freedom as a concept – and on the other hand to the fact that in our thinking we are free and we should try to use that in order to change the course of the world. To point out that this is basically a matter of revolution in thinking there was a stamp of “Academy of (R)evolution” below the text and here and there around the exhibition rooms.

As a counterpart of freedom there exists of course the overwhelming network of interdependencies. Taking this notion to its ultimatum, Beuys explained in 1983 his notorious action “How to explain pictures to a dead hare” from 1965 giving it an extremely holistic explanation by stating that we are

all one with the universe, as everything consists of same particles. Beuys concludes that everything we do to a hare, dead or alive, we do to ourselves. (Beuys 1983.)

The installation “*The Ultimate Bond*” compounds this holistic attitude to one conceptual meaning of fat. Among other meanings fat represents pure energy: it stands for the energy of life itself. As I was reflecting this it occurred to me that there is even a more fundamental element that connects all life forms we are aware of: the water. In our known universe water is the prerequisite for all life. So I obviously had to make a sculpture out of water. Understandably this required some pondering, but quite soon I ended up realizing the sculpture – or the installation – out of bottles filled with water. This brought along the levels of politics, power, economy, just to name a few, that are all more and more important aspects linked with water. So the installation is both about our dependency with everything around us and the gross capitalistic consequences that our dependency on clear water has produced.

I exhibited also artworks that are more explicitly reflecting on my experiences of Beuys, like “*The Forge of (R)evolution*” that is versioning “*The End of the 20th Century*”, to which my quite instant reaction was the urge to move and work on the basalt stones with the aid of the tools at hand. With “*The Forge*” I wanted to pass on this kind of desire to do something, to create. In terms of freedom, I tried to capture the visitors’ attention and direct them towards creative action.

Whether the visitors reached my ideas or not, I don’t know, but for myself the exhibition was extremely fruitful in terms of collecting my thoughts and gaining new ideas, even new perspectives. Working sculpturally with the idea of freedom and its relational nature put me on a train of thinking the spatiality of sculpture as an extremely meaningful defining characteristics. This led me to Heidegger’s notions of sculpture, that are not as well-known as his famous “*The Origin of the Work of Art*”, even though they offer more developed reflections on “the relationship between bodies and space and the role of art in our lives”. These reflections originate from rethinking of limit, and limit marks the beginning of a thing, not its end. Limits are where things enter into the relationship with

everything else, so that is where things begin, “where space begins its way into the sculpture and the sculpture begins its way into space. Sculpture becomes a work of relation, moving beyond itself and into space without conquering that space...” (Mitchell 2010) In this view it becomes clear that neither are we disclosed into our physical body. Drawn out beyond ourselves we radiate throughout a multiplicity of relations, so the body and space interpenetrate, the body dissolves into space. Sculpture becomes a particular form of art that thickens space, changing the space around it, pushing at the space that runs through us. This is why sculptures touch us, pull us out of ourselves. And this is the medium a sculptor evidently works with. A sculptor is not sculpting the sculpture but the invisible realm of relations, the space around the sculpture. Space is not void, a lack of being, an emptiness between bodies, instead it is “filled with excoriation”, and “we dissolve into it, fray off and dwindle into it, and all this silt shifts in waves through the air, along the ground, swirls, flows, and abrades all appearances alike. Every relation is excoriatingly abrasive [--], while to appear is always to appear in relation.” (Mitchell 2010.)

We might want to stop here for moment and take a look back to see how we ended up dissolving in space with sculptures.

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