

**Unity in Diversity Through Art?  
Joseph Beuys' Models of Cultural  
Dialogue**

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# Unity in Diversity Through Art? Joseph Beuys' Models of Cultural Dialogue

## Summary

This essay proposes the artist Joseph Beuys and his work as paradigmatic for art that through its own diversity of approach can show possibilities for addressing diverse audiences, diverging receptions and modes of participation. It arises from a symposium on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the artist's death held at the Goethe Institut Dublin, 23 January 2006. The argument focuses on Beuys practice from his Ulysses-Extension to the Migration Workshop at documenta 6, 1977, the FIU, as well as his work (and legacy) in Ireland. Relevant theories include Ecos openness and Adorno's negative and positive representation, since Beuys works relationship to the Holocaust and trauma turns out to be central. Beuys is offered as predecessor of current discourse such as Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics and Documenta11. The article concludes with a new theoretization of participation in culture, Irit Rogoff's Looking Away. It is supported by Beuys multi-layered, diversity-sustaining practice.

**Keywords:** Cultural Dialogue, Joseph Beuys, Diversity, Reception, Participation, Migration, documenta, FIU, Ireland, Openness, Holocaust, Trauma, Relational Aesthetics

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This essay proposes the German artist Joseph Beuys and his work as paradigmatic for art that in its own diversity can show possibilities for addressing diverse audiences, diverging receptions and modes of participation, as well as for interrelated diversities themselves. It arises from a symposium on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the artist's death held at the Goethe Institut Dublin, which I convened on 23 January 2006.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this paper, "Unity in Diversity", is taken from one of Beuys' actions, as he preferred to call performances in the wake of C19 Anarchists' terminology. At the Giants' Causeway, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, he found both the usual six-sided basalt columns, but also five-sided ones. These can be interpreted as symbolic of Christ (the pentagram is among other things a symbol for Christ) and the six-sided star of David standing for Jewish belief and culture: he found an image for peaceful coexistence, even interlocking interdependence of Christians (read: Germans) and Jews in a post-holocaust trouble spot, Northern Ireland. Here, again, religion was (or is) merely one of several social and political factors within a dynamic of marginalization, exclusion and eventually deadly victimization. During his visit and action in 1974, the so-called Troubles were at a bloody height.

Beuys had, however, already in 1957 compared Ireland and its culture to Germany in the wake of the Holocaust. The comparison is between Megalithic culture with Auschwitz in particular. It can be found in Beuys' so-called *Ulysses-Extension*, a collection of almost 200 drawings in six A5 exercise books, created in response to James Joyce's works (both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) between 1957 and 61 (with a few later additions). In these drawings, Beuys charted a private realm of thought. The development of his thinking and work in the years following a deep depressive crisis took place with the help and through the works of James Joyce. Here, like probably in no other collection of his drawings, he develops his strategies or vocabulary. These are in the first

instance private. Beuys only exhibited the drawings towards the end of his life and they only became widely accessible in 1997. The codex contains, among other things, preparatory drawings for Beuys' proposal of sculptural work for the site of the extermination camp at Auschwitz. Here, the artist does not shout. He rightly never prided himself on having confronted his past and recent German history. Aside from later and at times less than helpful remarks to do with this past – to which I will return later – only his works (starting with these drawings) raise this subject persistently. He himself did not do this explicitly.<sup>2</sup>

The diagram as a genre is at the opposite end of the spectrum to what one can here (following Beuys) call the “ultravisible”. One would usually use a diagram for taxonomic purposes or for summaries (simplifications) of concepts; it is often public in its nature. It may now surprise then to find diagrams not only in Beuys' later blackboard drawings but as early as the late 1950s, when the drawings in the first volumes of the *Ulysses-Extension* were created. Book 2, p. 4 shows a chaotic shape on the left, a geometric one (a pyramid) on the right and a line in between with a heart at its centre. “Spirit”, “consciousness” and “eternity” are terms allocated to chaos; “soul” and “time” to the heart and “form”, “body” and “space” to the pyramid. A related diagram was removed from the *Ulysses Extension* and entered *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*. Both drawings are direct predecessors of Beuys' canonical diagram from 1969, explaining his concept of sculpture (Plastik). Despite its ostensible simplicity, the work requires interpretation.

While the first drawing provides the bipolarity between chaotic energy and the unconscious on the one hand and rational thinking, form and idea on the other, the second one introduces the terms fat and felt, substances that also entered his sculptural practice at the time. The words are given in the way in which they appear in the later diagram. In both the 1962 and 1969 drawings, the German for fat (or all nouns) would have to be capitalised and felt means “Filz”, but appears here also (and in the canonical work exclusively as) “felt” in English. Beuys

therefore bent the spelling rules and chose another language (English). It was undoubtedly his intention to show us through the similarity of the words placed side by side just how similar in their chaotic and organic materiality fat and felt are. Considering the context of the two early drawings, the *Ulysses-Extension*, this is clearly a Joycean wordplay, more precisely one inspired by *Finnegans Wake*. Beuys said that his path had gone through language and we find this confirmed.

I had to go into such detail here to show that the artist moved not just from drawing to diagram, but also juxtaposed both and moved between the registers with ease – and that from the very beginning of his practice, the moment when Beuys became Beuys, so to speak. I will return to the coexistence of public and private, explicit and suggestive works and ask which communities they create, which modes of reading and interpreting they demand. But let us for the moment continue to explore content: cultural difference in the shape of the trauma that it can cause and that requires mourning. Gene Ray has convincingly interpreted fat and felt in Beuys' work as relating to the Nazis' extermination camps and how, after liberation, sacks of human hair and piles of other materials revealed the gruesome business with human remains that the Nazis had sustained there.

I view Beuys' approach to Ireland and the holocaust as indicative of possibilities for art to deal with social trauma and situations where difference is not generating harmonious and prosperous relations. According to Theodor W. Adorno, there are two possible – and only one permissible – strategy for culture after the holocaust: Writing poems was, as is well-known, not the latter for Adorno.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Beuys appears to employ mainly that strategy of suggestion and allusion, where a reduced colour range and the mentioned materials can combine to provide grim reminders of what is essentially impossible to imagine.

The strategy is one of openness, according to Umberto Eco, who published his *Opera aperta* in 1962,<sup>4</sup> an inclusive one that puts the onus on the viewers, or

empowers in keeping with theories of the death of the author. Suggestion in order to activate the recipients' imagination was then and continues to be a viable, the right, strategy – for specific audiences i.e., those who, due to their class and education have learned that it is an artist's compliment to their abilities in collaborating in the process that a work proposes and which consists of creating a work with voids and the actuation / interpretation / filling of voids, i.e. of the artist's and the recipients' activities. (I don't mean to say that higher education is necessary to fill the voids, but that education has created different expectations and may also close off the ability for people to trust themselves to be part of such activity through the expectation of nothing but closed meanings).

It also seems relevant at which biographical stage somebody encounters an open work, i.e. if they search for a path and meaning or not. The recent Beuys conference has let me observe that those who found during their formative years in Beuys and his work a path to pursue, have continued to be “disciples” with great energy – but now at times relatively closed and unchanging interpretations. It is contested e.g. that Beuys engaged in his work with the holocaust above and beyond a small number of pieces whose titles make the relationship unmistakable.

Beuys' one time companion in the Celtic world, Caroline Tisdall, also challenged during that conference (in the nicest way possible) my interpretation of what “Unity in Diversity” may have meant in the context of the Giants' causeway where Tisdall herself claims to have uttered the words, which Beuys then took over. For her, the basalt signified solely the unity of fluid, hot lava and crystalline, hard, cold stone, merely yet another manifestation of what is the topic of the “Plastic” diagram shown earlier – without any regard to the political and social reality of the time and place: Northern Ireland. This interpretation I do not discount, but only accept as *one* possibility among many – just like my own.

Beuys' work did not just contain a negative, oblique engagement with certain themes, although he focused on the universal aspects of trauma and discord as we have seen in his employment of Megalithic monuments in order (if possible) to come to terms with the holocaust. This is a political statement also that seems to say: atrocities will, unfortunately happen again – and artistic activity is already (even when only obliquely referring to what is to be mourned) a cultural act, a necessary and positive one.

However, Gene Ray rightly argues that Adorno's "negative" representation has had its day when power structures adopt it, when oblique memorials to the Holocaust become legion and empty declamatory manifestoes. Then it is time to turn to "positive" representation, to what will be too shockingly direct for many. Ray as an American also criticizes how there is virtually an industry of artworks responding to trauma in the shape of Auschwitz, rather than, say, on Hiroshima.

What I am thus exploring is diversity and cultural dialogue on yet another level. Which artistic strategies are apt in which historical circumstances, for which recipients? Beuys was no stranger to positive representation, even shock tactics – and not just those carried in the "negative" representation of what were ugly materials to many. There is much "positive" representation and, especially, social engagement also. The artist has been compared with his hat and in some actions a turned-around walking stick (the *Coyote* action, as well as *Directional Forces* are examples) to Charlie Chaplin (who famously ridiculed Hitler through comedy).

More crucially, though, Beuys varied his register according to his audience. Yellow press reporters prefer slogans and Beuys obliged. He also responded sensitively to where he was. Sabine Lange has analyzed the authoritarian nature of Beuys' lecture at the Tate Gallery in London in 1972. He was e.g. the only person who held the microphone.<sup>5</sup> Did he think that what appears to be a traditional (or authoritarian) format was appropriate to the centre of colonial

cultural power? In Ireland, he seems to have been more open to listen and to share.

His actions were not usually designed for the physical participation – as opposed to imaginary and intellectual participation and extension into life. On the other hand, during his talks, he wrote on his blackboards points that members of the audience had made and didn't seem to mind that a child drew with chalk on one of his boards at the ICA or at *documenta 6*. (Documenta is the largest and most prestigious contemporary art exhibition held every five years in Germany.)

The most important point concerning direct or subliminal, positive or negative representation of memory, trauma and difference is that Beuys took into account historical and spatial contexts in the fact that his engagement did not stop at suggestive, openness-providing felt stacks or the like. Crucially, when faced with wrong that was unfolding – as in Ireland at the time – he made a point of being there. He reacted directly, positively, practically and compassionately, thus showing that Adorno's first imperative was valid for him. Under those circumstances, he used art as a means to an end outside of itself and was eager to "get out of the arts pages", as he said.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the still tangible effects, this apparently pleased him. He said to Robert McDowell from Belfast that he could sleep in Northern Ireland, while he was suffering from at times severe insomnia elsewhere.

Beuys' commitment still shows in the many artists (and other people) who continue to owe him much, including in some cases their career paths. He financially assisted the Arts and Research Exchange, where art could be shown that the few commercial galleries would not touch. Performance was a strength in the wake of Beuys' visits, and the long-term outcomes include the most widely-read Irish art Journal, *CIRCA*, as well as community art projects and cross-community initiatives that are still operating and must be seen as a direct outcome from what would now be called Beuys' "seed funding". Rainer Pagel's

*inclusionmatters* is one of them. The friendships that were then begun, the conviviality shared among artists in these initiatives and in a broad circle, is not too far outside of both Beuys' practice and today's relational artwork to be able to count in the current context.

Beuys invited (Northern) Irish artists to participate in the *Migration Workshop* that he and his German friends organized in Kassel 1977, and for which Southern Italians were as central as other peripheral Europeans, who then discussed issues surrounding migration, diaspora, etc. The whole event lasted for 100 days, and was the first major showcase for the FIU's work, the Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research that Beuys had co-founded with Heinrich Böll (of the *Irish Diaries*) and others, who were subsequently to co-found the German Greens, which has had strong historical impact on policy in the areas under discussion there and here. Beuys hated the idea of it becoming a political party like others. A grouping of individuals was more to his liking – and it will emerge why this was with respect to his art.

The Migration Workshop at *documenta 6* also underlines that Beuys, who is 20 years after his death often portrayed more like a mythological shaman, did not only speak but listened. It can and should also be understood as empirical research and a collaborative effort. It constituted not just an invitation to participate intellectually through “openness”, but in actuality, improving knowledge within the community (i.e. initially the international art community during *documenta*, but in a Düsseldorf shop and elsewhere) about migrants, *Gastarbeiter* and the political and economic contexts they had left and entered. Culture sought to establish and sustain dialogue that has been upheld in Kassel until 1995 and continues in Achberg, Düsseldorf, Oxford Brookes University – and in Milan during the Eurodiv conference.

Beuys was again centrally involved at the next instalment of *documenta*. In 1982, he contributed *7000 Oaks*, a large scale project of planting trees, not just oaks.

This again arose from an awareness of specific needs in the community: the severely damaged and hastily rebuilt city of Kassel was almost treeless following the war.

While Beuys had turned the blackboards from the earlier migration workshop into art (e.g. *Das Kapital Space*), here, more subliminal elements (“negative” ones) have again become part of the work: the basalt columns that accompany each tree are now known to us as a reference to unity in diversity, as well as prehistory and Ireland. They become even more: the initial “store” for them was the main square in Kassel – until people from Kassel and elsewhere had decided to “adopt” and help fund a tree. This addressed the other need Beuys perceived in Kassel: mourning and remembrance of the times when rubble and charred corpses lay there and elsewhere after the War.

I can conclude from this that Beuys dealt with the imperative of interfering when specific needs arise, i.e. when harm had to be averted, in a direct and practical way. This was for him, his students and members of his FIU circle not an extraneous activity in relation to his work, it was part of his/their work. However, when remembrance, history etc. were the theme, his usual strategy was what Adorno would call negative representation: suggestion and what he himself called the “ultravisible” in relation to his *Ulysses Extension* drawings.<sup>7</sup> Here art activates the viewers intellectually in the first instance, but conveying the same kind of themes and issues surrounding human liberty that are also part of the hands-on collaboration and communication at the Migration Workshop and elsewhere.

Beuys’ was, therefore, a mixed-media strategy to activate actively and passively, and remember negatively and positively. Positive and negative approaches apparently have their time (as we see from so-called Holocaust art first negative then – currently – probably positive representation, following e.g. the treatment of the Palestinians by the Israeli Government). But both are required over the

course of time, for different audiences and contexts. Beuys saw and provided this.

His strategies have proven to be a model for current art practice, theoretical thinking and curating. While Beuys negotiated unsuccessfully to plant as an art project the flood planes of Hamburg harbour where contaminated slack had been dumped (Spuehlfeld), Mel Chin has in the last few years done just that with plants that regenerate earth severely contaminated with heavy metals, *Revived Field*, 2002.<sup>8</sup>

The two-artist-collective art/not art performed during the recent Beuys symposium their own engagement with the artist in preparation for a large-scale forum, Cork Caucus, which was a vital part of Cork's programme during the city's time as European Capital of Culture, 2005. The Caucus is envisaged as a more permanent improvement in cultural dialogue.

The most recent documenta, *Documenta 11*, 2002, featured almost every contested border-crossing in the world, focused on engaged and collaborative work with a discussion forum in a socially disadvantaged area (Thomas Hirschorn's *Bataille Monument*), while showing this alongside "merely" aesthetic art, and let the exhibition be preceded by several "platforms" of discussions around the globe. This I would view as a direct extension in our globalized era of Beuys' Migration Workshop 25 years previously. Okwui Enwezor, *documenta 11*'s curator was reacting to a changed European geographic with his wish to have part of the documenta staged at the peripheries. Beuys was not being centralist in holding his migration workshop in Kassel, given the fact that the documenta institution was a reaction in local cultural policy to the new-found peripheral location in Germany, close to the inner-German border in 1950.

However, in *documenta 11*, Beuys was not just merely forgotten about or not mentioned as the discursive platforms' predecessor, but his legacy as *the*

documenta artist was specifically excluded: The Neues Museum was not used for *Documenta 11* (as previously), because that would have necessitated the inclusion of a work by Beuys that could not easily be removed. This installation, *The Pack*, incidentally would have fitted perfectly as one that can be interpreted as addressing emigrants' experiences.

Recently, Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (English 2002, French 1998)<sup>9</sup> has been enormously influential among artists and art workers. The author proposes the committed (or relational) practice of art from the 1990s as something entirely new, mentioning Beuys merely once. I do not need to explain further why I think that particularly Bourriaud's insistence on aesthetics alongside the interventionist aspects are particularly clearly Beusyan.<sup>10</sup>

Current art practice widely embraces forms of interview, lecture, teaching, blackboards, conviviality, cooking, as well as the spaces between performance and documentation for their own means. Rirkit Tiravanija is only one name among the many that Bourriaud frequently mentions. While I am not arguing that Beuys developed these media single-handedly, an awareness of that particular legacy could help better understand current discourse in art and on the themes of memory, mourning, diversity, dialogue, ecology etc.

Despite all of this, Beuys, who may have been complicit in generating the myth that surrounded him, but did *not* create it without help or in a vacuum (his image seems to me the most dated aspect of the artist), is still perceived by some as merely a didactic artist: Marina Abramovic re-performed Beuys' early action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in November 2005. Thus, recently, a stage has been reached where performance is without doubt a canonical art form – and our thoughts about audience participation and audiences performing their own positions vis-à-vis art requires rethinking.

In this context – and following what has been said about Beuys' varied strategies to activate the responses of his diverse audiences – let me conclude by relating the findings of an insightful essay by Irit Rogoff<sup>11</sup> to Joseph Beuys and the receptions of his work.

Rogoff extends the findings of Reception theory (Iser and Jauss, i.e. that voids activate recipients and all reception is active). She takes what I explicated further by complicating the notion of participation, which, it has to be said, has far too often now merely taken the spectacle to the streets without improving anything for the people whose lot was supposed to be miraculously altered by the mere contact with “art”. She writes:

“Having become aware of the very mythic nature of our own critical interventions, it is the minute gatherings of refusal and disruption that are left to us to somehow live out the combined entities of participation and criticism. To make such a statement is to somehow be seemingly gripped by a situationist ethos, by the echo of stealthy street actions, remade topographies and inscriptions left on walls. [...] the great difference between subversive action and what I am calling “disruption” is precisely Agamben’s “whatever” in all its arbitrariness and ephemerality.”<sup>12</sup>

This “whatever” is the Latin *quodlibet*, i.e. what we (or you: every one individually) loves, a construct that attempts if possible to go beyond identity politics and conjure a fluid but compassionate community of individuals. Rogoff interestingly adds the looking away, peoples' own agendas when they are supposed to be in awe of high culture, e.g. watching a beautiful person looking at pictures or being among friends at a discussion of cultural significance – for friendships' sake. Her insights also stretch to peoples' reactions when they perceive that they are not fitting in:

“entering a space [like a museum,] inscribed with so many caveats and qualifications, in a state of [...] “unbelonging”, leads to an active production of questions concerning the very rights of entry and belonging.” (Ibid. p.121) “In the process [of disruption, Rogoff continues] we produce for ourselves an alternative mode of taking part in culture in which we affect a creative bricolage of art works and spaces, and modalities of attention and subjectivities, that break down the dichotomies of objects and viewers and allow for a dynamic manifestation of the *lived* cultural moment.” (Ibid. p.133)

Beuys – for me – is more than an art historical precedent for such practice.

Rogoff even uses Beuys' term of the expanded notion of art:

“In expanding the parameters of what constitutes engagement with art, we might in fact be entertaining an expanded notion of the very notion of participation, of taking part in and of itself. We all believe in the principle of participation [...] What we rarely question is what constitutes the listening, hearing, or seeing in and of itself” [...] Participation [...] goes [...] towards a model in which these spaces re-engage with political culture in unexpected ways [...] audiences produce themselves as the subject of whatever may have been put on view for their edification [...] exhibition spaces might indicate possibilities – rather than provide opportunities – for self-representation.” (Ibid. p.122)

In showing how Beuys has provided different models of participation for diverse audiences and cultural situations, I have presented the artist here as paradigmatic for our thoughts about current developments in art and thought, which engage with the topics of diversity and participation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It also follows on from my previous research on Beuys published in: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. *Joyce in Art: Visual Art Inspired by James Joyce*. Foreword: Fritz Senn, envoi: James Elkins, design: Ecke Bonk. The Lilliput Press Dublin 2004. Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. *James Joyce als Inspirationsquelle für Joseph Beuys*. Olms Hildesheim, Zurich, New York 2001. Recent articles with related themes include: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. "Post-War Germany and "Objective Chance": W.G. Sebald, Joseph Beuys and Tacita Dean". *Searching for Sebald*. Lise Patt (ed.). Institute of Cultural Inquiry, Los Angeles 2006 (forthcoming). Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. "Joyce in Art: Exhibiting Word and Image Boundaries". *Show/Tell: Relationships between Text, Narrative and Image*. Grace Lees-Maffei (ed.). University of Hertfordshire, <http://www.art-design.herts.ac.uk/ocs/viewabstract.php?id=52> and: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. "Erweiterte Kunstgeschichte: Carola Giedion-Welcker, Joyce und Brancusi bei Joseph Beuys". *Dazwischen: Die Vermittlung der Kunst Festschrift für Antje von Graevenitz*. Renate Buschmann, Marcel René Marburger, Friedrich Weltzien (eds). Dietrich Reimer Verlag Cologne 2005, pp.121-132.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Ray, Benjamin Buchloh and Max Reithmann elaborate on this issue (In: Gene Ray (ed). *Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*. New York, Sarasota, FL: D.A.P., The John and Mable Ringling Museum 2001), without, however, being aware of the Joycean context in which it was first delineated. My own book, *Joyce in Art* (see note 1) goes into some detail here.

<sup>3</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of this topic see: Gene Ray. Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime. *Ibid.* (ed) *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*. (see note 2), as well as Gene Ray's new book: *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*. Studies in European Culture and History. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco. *Opera aperta*. Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri: Milan 1962; and differently (without the part on James Joyce, but other short inclusions): Umberto Eco. *The Open Work*. Hutchinson Radius, Harvard College: without place 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Lange. "Questions? You have questions?". *Joseph Beuys Symposium Kranenburg* 1995. Basel: Museum Schloss Moyland, Wiese Verlag 1996, pp. 164-171.

<sup>6</sup> Caroline Tisdall first mentioned this and several other participants remembered it during the recent Beuys conference.

<sup>7</sup> I spoke on the subject of "Beuys between Didactic and 'Ultravisible' Works" at Tate Modern, London, 18 February 2005.

<sup>8</sup> This remark should not be taken as a complaint about the possibly derivative nature of Mel Chin's work – the more such artworks the better – but Beuys' work seemingly needs to be mentioned more frequently as a source of inspiration or paradigm, as it is presented here.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud: *Relational Aesthetics*. Without place: les presses du réel 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Bourriaud (as note 8), p.18: the "'area of exchange' must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria".

<sup>11</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away". In: Gavin Butt (ed). *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*. Blackwell: Malden, MA 2005 Looking Away".

<sup>12</sup> Rogoff, p. 132.

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