

JOSEPH BEUYS + ITALY/ THE DEFENSE OF NATURE

An introduction

2004. Twenty years have passed since the Defense of Nature operation promoted by Joseph Beuys in Abruzzo, an Italian region.

Even though this philosophical-artistic-socio-cultural-scientific action was conceived in Italy, there have been few initiatives to remember the event. And yet, that title/ programme has become an all-too general slogan, it is no longer the prerogative of exclusively environmental associations.

The reflections that follow mark out the role that Italy has played in redefining the poetry and philosophy of Beuys and especially his "expanded" concept of art: art = man = creativity = science. The reflections were written down in 1997 in order to make it clear that, if it is true that Andy Warhol has created a global image of 20th Century Western society, Beuys donated a strategic vision of criticality and potentiality of the 21st.



Kassel, Contemporary urban landscape, produced by the 7000 Oaks Action

Within the vision of Nature and the world of Beuysian thinking, the central theme is energy.

A natural energy, stated in the cosmic/ alchemic sense: "We plant trees and the trees then plant us". A global defence of natural cycles (the temporal dimension) and especially that of biodiversity, intended as protection of local and global ecosystems (the spatial dimension). A vital energy that in Social sculpture becomes an anthem to human creativity: a concept broadened of the artistic work. A primary art, anthropological, which, even today, is able to dialogue with research into a new developmental model pertaining to the strategies of integrated

environmental, economic, socio-cultural and ethical sustainability. His proposal of a Third path represents a welding between criticality-potentiality extra humans (the privileged relationship man-Nature) and of criticality-potentiality among humans (the overcoming of conflicts both at a local and global level). Even the materials used in his works and/ or performances are the fruit of energetic processes or contain energetic elements: sulphur, bee's wax, fat, felt, copper, etc., right on till we get to blood: the metaphor for antonomasia of Life. The concept of Freedom, furthermore, shows a sense of the value of original energy throughout the works and thoughts of Beuys, in that they are able to rejuvenate and stimulate - through creativity - the resources of natural organisms (ecosystems), and of the single organism (the human being), as well as the social organisms (humanity).

"To liberate people is the goal of art, therefore, for me art represents the science of freedom".

Since the time of beauty has passed...

1786. Wolfgang von Goethe crosses the Brenner Pass (Italo-Austrian border) and begins his Grand Tour of Italy. A journey in search of antihistoricism and pessimism, in that he considers the canons of classical aesthetics "immutable": "Since the time of beauty has passed and only necessity and hard material needs fill our days"¹. The visit to the Giardino d'Europa represents a pause dedicated to the study of *Arti belle* and "later, however, return my attention to my routine work, studying chemistry and mechanics"².

1971. Joseph Beuys arrives in Naples, at the invitation of the art gallery manager Lucio Amelio. Following some initial resistance, he accepts to work in the Parthenopean city.

Beuys carries a virtual suitcase with him, inside which he carries his most recent artistic and political works with him.

In 1967 he founded the G.S.P. (German Student Party), at the Academy of Düsseldorf; in 1970, the Organisation of nonvoters and free referendum, in 1971, the Organisation for Direct Democracy.

In that suitcase there was also a film: the images of a performance *Eurasienstab*, played in Vienna in 1967³. Yet, there is no separation between Art and Politics.

The theory of the "Expanded concept of Art" is already practised by Beuys.

Both the political movements founded by him, as well as the Viennese performance, wish to reiterate the values of a Europe united in unity and peace; the overcoming of the Cold War, of East-West blocks, a new integration of western materialism and eastern mysticism.

In *Eurasienstab*, Beuys put a blind over his eyes, so as to assert that Art was a freeing process and not simply image and form.

In every Neapolitan experience, the imprinting of "La rivoluzione siamo Noi", (We are the revolution), his first performance (1971) played at Amelio's Modern Art Agency, was present. "The only revolutionary tool is a global concept of art, from which a new concept of science is born. (...) Here, I have written: art = man = creativity = science. (...). The moment artists, creative men, realise the revolutionary power of art (creativity) - I, here place art, creativity, freedom - at that moment they will recognise the true aims of art and science"⁴.

Beuys had also put a lot of German romantic thought into that "virtual suitcase": Hegel, Novalis, Shelling...bearing Goethe particularly in mind, mediated also by the anthroposophic philosophy of Rudolf Steiner⁵.



The Defense of Nature. Sheet of Postage Stamps of the Republic of San Marino. 2004

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It had been precisely Goethe who reasserted that: "The Scientific was originally contained in the Artistic" and it was Steiner who came to the final essentials of the matter, saying: "The whole world is but an enigma, the true universal enigma, and it is man himself who is the solution"⁶.

Beuys rediscovers in Naples the Goethean sense of Classicism: "nostalgia of being-at-the-home-of-being-reconciled in the beautiful terrestrial home (...) The Modern is represented by Umweg – his element is "going", or rather, "oblique" going, not the home (...) The Classic is represented by living, in owning a home. It is in this sense that the Classic spoke of man as a "political animal"⁷.

The artistic work of Beuys in Naples is based on dialogue, it needs the presence of the audience during his performances, that last for over four hours. He abhors every form of violence and does not love provocations without purpose.

An original standpoint, if we think of his interest/ participation in the Fluxus neodada movement and in the political crisis of the 70s. During this time, both left- and right-wing terrorist strategies and actions, especially in Germany and Italy, were taking shape.

As in Goethe on his Grand Tour, during those years a sort of anthropological pessimism, that can be seen in his drawings, work, and actions, exists in Beuys: "In exclusively scientific terms, I would say that at their core is the anthropological component, illustrated in every possible aspect. I have experienced, in a very elementary way, throughout my life that the times in which we are living are not suited for man"⁸.

From the Tyrrhenian to the Adriatic

From La rivoluzione siamo Noi (We are the revolution) to the L' Utopia concreta (Possible Utopia)

The anthropologic pessimism, which fluttered in the thoughts of and throughout the initial works in Naples of Beuys, is radically transformed in the experiences and work completed in that Italian Land, bathed by the Adriatic sea.

From Naples, the German artist heads for Foggia. At Vallo Malbasso, in a mountainous area, he finds signs of German aerial machine-gunfire.

It was here that he, a nineteen-year-old aviator, had been trained with all the latest war technology at hand along the Italian front. Yet, notwithstanding the atrocities of war, he had appreciated the spirit of the local people as well as that of the Italian culture: "I loved Foggia a lot, emotionally speaking, it is the place that I remember most in my life"⁹.

The journey throughout the Puglia Region tastes of a reconciliation. In the Abruzzo Region, after the invitation (1973) of Lucrezia De Domizio and Buby Durini, the projects, the operations, the works of Beuys take on the character of true compensation. In the Latin sense of the word: "resarcire"-, where 're' means again and 'sarcire' (cf. tailor) to adjust, to mend, to compensate.

It is in the small Municipality of Bolognano, on the estate of the Durini barons, that the work of l'Utopia concreta (Possible Utopia) of the Master from Düsseldorf comes to life.

In 1976, the debate for the Fondazione dell'Istituto per la Rinascita dell'Agricoltura (Foundation of the Institute for Agricultural Rebirth) begins, an Institute promoted within the political programme called: Azione Terza Via (Action Third Path) by the F.I.U. (Free International University), established by himself and the Nobel prize-winner Heinrich Boll¹⁰.

In 1979, he completes the "Grassello Ca (OH)₂ + H₂O" (Lime putty ...), a type of lime, imported from Foggia and transported from Pescara to Düsseldorf, which should have been used to paint the walls of F.I.U. central offices, as well as Beuys' own house¹¹.

In this case, the ethical compensation takes the shape of energy exchange between old Mediterranean-style traditions and the new German culture. No longer is there separation/ opposition, as there is in times of war, rather the coming together of a common plan which finds its turning-point, in 1980, with the off of The Defense of Nature.

Following the ecological work in the Seychelles (December 1980 – January 1981), that too promoted by Lucrezia De Domizio, in 1982 the Piantagione Paradise (Plantation Paradise) is started: doing up of a 15-hectare farm, as well as the re-establishing of a botanic biodiversity (a cultivar on the verge of extinction) that was lost owing to the needs of the market. "The project that brought me here bears the title The Defense of Nature and these words represent much more than a mere slogan: we are dealing with a real project that will bring us to plant seven thousand trees, each of a different species, here in Bolognano. At Kassel, I worked with oak trees, while here at Bolognano, we will develop a type of PARADISE where we will have seven thousand different trees"¹².

In 1984, the debate concerning The Defence of Nature Operation goes on, even by way of the performance Piantagione (Plantation) and in the same year Beuys becomes honorary citizen of Bolognano¹³.

Still, it is in the small town of the Abruzzo region, that he finds inspiration for the Olivestone - operation presented to the F.I.A.C. of Paris in 1984, later re-thought over/ re-planned for the inauguration (in December 1984) of the Museum of Contemporary Art at Castello di Rivoli¹⁴.

It would be reductive to link the complex nature of The Defense of Nature operation to a simple ethical compensation (of a psychoanalytical nature?), Beuys, during his stay in the Abruzzo region, gives shape to and experiments with his theory, capable to transform Humanity into: "Social sculpture: every man is an artist"¹⁵, in that,

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as a creative Being he is able to design, in a responsible way, his own existence in Freedom and with Nature. Beuys, while in the Abruzzo region, has set up home and is no longer a traveller, he has reconciled himself to Nature and men in the beautiful earthly home of Goethean memory.

He did it (maybe unknowingly?) by making the sense and meaning of the revolution, undertaken in 13th - century Italy by S. Francesco (St. Francis) of Assisi and Giotto, topical again.

The social sculpture of the Düsseldorf maestro is very similar to the anti-religion of S. Francesco (St. Francis), no longer based on the

fear of Nature and men that was typical of the High Middle Ages but rather inspired by the *Cantico delle Creature* (The Canticle of All Creatures)¹⁶ as well as by the attempt to dialogue with Islam. Other corresponding themes or assonances are worthy of note: the friar's habit and the felt clothing of the artist (new clothing - new morality, from the Latin *mores* = customs); Francis tames the wolf, Beuys domesticates the wild coyote; one preaches to the birds, the other speaks to hares; the former retires to a solitary hermitage, the latter meditates in the countryside, the travelling preaching/ the wandering discussion; the foundation of a new religious



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order/ the foundation of a new political movement: *Azione terza via* (Action Third Path); the Franciscan poverty/ the austerity of Beuys; the gift of the cloak/ the gift of works of art; at last, but never so, if Francesco (Francis) praises Nature, Joseph puts the Defense of Nature into act.

The Italian *Bel Paesaggio* is reborn, in the 13th- century, and takes shape again because of Francesco (Francis), too.

The Earth is no longer felt as a stepmother: "a new class, the communal middle-class, is heading the agrarian progress (...) Their freedom – whether won or conceded during the struggle of the free cities against the feudal landowners – is for now written on paper as is that of the *Liber Paradisi* of 1256, which not to serfs, it has to be said, open the doors to a terrestrial heaven.

Rather already, within that freedom, farmers and artists learn that it is not enough to reflect upon the reality of the countryside, its own intimacy as well as its own painful effort: we must - and can - leave a mark of active and creative forms¹⁷.

Another analogy: Liber Paradisi/ Piantagione Paradiso (Plantation Paradise)

It is the anti-art of Giotto to give new features to the anti-religion of Francesco (Francis) and the political, economic and social creativity of the up-coming middle-classes. With Giotto, we see a positive revolutionary reconsideration of contemporary, which will become one of the characterising elements of 14th/ 15th - century Italian art¹⁸. Why do we not recall the lay painting of the frescoes produced by Giotto in the Palazzo della Ragione, at Padua?

In those frescoes, that are now lost to us owing to fire, the new art of Giotto gives shape to the new 13th - century technical-scientific cognitive anxiety. Giotto is inspired by the astronomical-astrological doctrines of Pietro d'Abano. The new realism of Giotto wants to represent, in a global way, the influence of the starry cosmos upon the earth, upon human events, upon the technologies and the new professions¹⁹.

Art and Science dialogue in order to renew themselves reciprocally.

The realism of Giotto also expresses itself through the recovery of ancient techniques, (e.g. the fresco) which oppose the noble, metaphysical and static aura of the Byzantine mosaics. Poor techniques, like Beuys', but just as effective to express a New Realism that records and spreads the new possibilities reached by the individual enterprises of the communal middle-class. In the free communes, Freedom is the most precious of goods: "The air of the city makes you free".

It is in Beuys' Gothic and universal feeling that the Abruzzo region inspires a spiritual, environmental, material and ethical Rebirth of the Italian Bel Paesaggio.

His is a thinking that poses as a model for action, a gift for all Humanity. An experimenting locally in order to innovate on a global scale.

The thinking of Beuys is to "cogitate", in the Latin sense: 'cum' = with/ together and 'agitare' = act/ excite/ move: the stirring of minds, of wills, of energies which produces movement of consciences.

His Art-Science is a theory in the Greek sense of the word: 'theoria'=observation, observing. A theatre-theorem in which, with actions and works, comes the investigation of the Truth which is the basis for practical action. A Rule of art or science, searched for and established by dint of consideration and discussion.

"First and foremost, the individual feels isolated, then feels the need as a man, to communicate, to live, to speak, as well. This passage is called 'sociology'. is nothing more than a

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scientific concept of love. The reciprocal exchange between man and man is the most important thing"²⁰.

The reciprocal exchange must also happen between Man and Nature. A project, within the scope of the Defense of Nature operation, would have had to consist in the Elicottero-semina montana (Helicopter - mountain sowing) operation, to renaturalise those areas that cannot be accessed by land²¹.

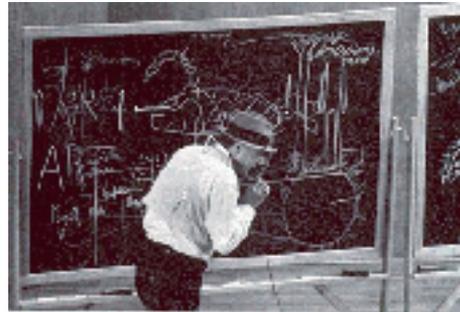
With the Progetto elicottero (Helicopter project), Beuys' tautology concerning ethical compensation concludes. That mountain ecosystem which, in Vallo Malbasso, he had injured and on which he had raged, as a young Nazi soldier, was now cured. Renaturalisation must not only be local in extent, but must constitute a model to be scientifically pursued in other contexts as well, with the important contribution of the volunteer. Elicottero-semina montana (Helicopter - mountain sowing) operation, thus becomes the emblem of a reconciliation of the human technological potential with the operating rules of natural ecosystems.

Thus, the Adriatic journey/ message of Beuys draws to a conclusion: from the thanatos (death) of the wartime insults to the eros of the Defense of Nature project.

That project, however, remains unfinished owing to the death of Beuys on 23 January 1986.



7000 Oaks Action, Documenta 7, Kassel, 1982



Social Sculpture, New York, 1974

On 16 April 1986, a small German motorboat bearing the Spanish name Sueno (sleep/ dream) drops the ashes of the German Maestro into the North Sea²².

The earthly body of Beuys returned to Nature, to the Cosmos. The corpus of his thinking, on the contrary, spread, in an unknowing way too, even further throughout the world, throughout the Earth.

The global questions posed by Beuys become/ will become all the more unescapable for all Humanity.

Photographing Beuys, with Beuys

Beuys has not left ponderous written works behind. His is a type of communication which comes across through performances, works, deeds, but – especially – through public discussion.

In keeping with the methods proposed by Steiner, he privileges the term 'dialogue', "according to me it is the word that produces all images. It is the key symbol for every process of modelling and organising. When I use language, I try to induce the impulses of this power...the power of evolution..."²³. The difference that exists between to inform and to communicate is perfectly clear to him: "By information, I mean the entire world contents: men, animals, history, plants, stones, time, etc. In order to communicate, man uses language, adopts gestures, or writing, or else he makes a mark on the wall, or takes the typewriter and then extracts letters from it. In short, he adopts different methods. Which method do we use for a political action? I have chosen art. To make art is therefore a means of working for man in the field of thinking"²⁴.

Whenever the written language marries the drawing, the score is born which represents a completely original way, a way invented by Beuys, to give energy to written communication.

But what is the relationship that Beuys establishes with the medium of photography?

It is useful to remember that the impressions received from photographic illustrations of the works of the German artist Wilhelm Lembruck (supporter of the "anthroposophy" of Steiner), allow the young, school-boy Beuys to mature that interest for the world of art²⁵.

Yet, Beuys is not an artist-photographer, in his artistic communicating he uses photography, but does not himself photograph.

Within him persists a certain degree of diffidence in respect of works of art, where retinal, contemplative or even purely aesthetical aspects are to the fore.

The performances of 26 November 1965: "How to explain pictures to a dead hare", carried out in Düsseldorf, at the Schemela Gallery, goes ahead behind closed doors. The public may see the show either through the windows or else on a screen outside, onto which the recording of the art event is projected.

But, it will predominantly be photographs that document the most sensational phases of that action, as well as to expand his fame in Germany and abroad²⁶.

of the real thought. The 35 photographs of the "Grassello" (Lime putty) do not evoke the event, they are the event.

They represent authentic pulsations of an assembling-disassembling of life-giving elements in order to generate new stimuli where the photographic image is understood as being the evolution of thought"²⁸.

Photographing Beuys, with Beuys, means also relativising the false sacredness, the separation of daily life which sets the great artistic events apart:

"The twenty-five days spent with Beuys at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in October 1979 will forever remain memorable in my life. There he wanted me to take pictures of him day and night, both in public and in private... later, two splendid works were born and they both belong to our collection"²⁹.

The photographer Durini may be defined in several ways, as far as Beuys is concerned, he is: a friend, a Maecenas, he cultivates and promotes contemporary artwork very accurately and carefully, he is a collector, a scholar of the natural sciences, a lover of music and animals, a refined guest, etc.

If The Defense of Nature operation had to have a photographic image, the choice of Beuys to use Buby Durini was not a casual one.

Why not remember the words of Susan Sontag: "A false picture (that is, a picture wrongly attributed) falsifies the history of art. A false photograph (that is, an altered or tampered with one or accompanied with a false caption) falsifies reality"³⁰.

In the case of the actions of Beuys, where reality coincides with artistic work, the falsifying would be double.

Genius or Charlatan? After a long yawn came a great scream

1979, November. Inauguration of the grand exhibition dedicated to Joseph Beuys at the New York Guggenheim Museum. The first, from the start of the postwar years, dedicated to a German artist. Perhaps the only German artist who, during that time, was considered to be of international repute within the USA.

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On that occasion, the magazine *Der Spiegel*, which enjoys a wide circulation,³¹ – an exceptional occurrence for a living artist – dedicates its cover to this event, but however leading with the question: “Beuys, charlatan or genius?”. At the end of the article the doubt is no clearer in the mind³².

1997, June. “Europa, la ‘terza via’ tra politica e mercati. Un continente al bivio” (Europe, the ‘third path’ between politics and markets. A Continent at the crossroads): this was the title of an article that appeared on the pages of the biggest economics newspaper in Italy – *Il Sole 24 Ore* – on 15/06/97. The journalist labours on the “difficult search for balance between needs of democracy and reasons of economics”.

The concept of *Politique d’abord*, in French, or the primacy of politics, in English seems to come to the fore. The “Terza via” (Third path) indicates that, following the collapse of the communist system, even European capitalism and the processes of the globalisation of the economy were not in the best of health.

1997, November. “Our precious Planet. Why saving the environment will be next century’s biggest challenge”. This was the cover title of a special issue of the American weekly magazine *Time*, dedicated to the world problems of environmental sustainability and its safeguard.

Did the mass media become unknowing advocates of Beuys’ thinking? The 1979 charlatan, if he were not today considered a genius, should at least be recognised as a prophet.

Can Beuys be reduced to/ led back to the role of futurologist, then? To that figure of artist-Cassandra who foresees the catastrophes of mankind and the world?

The 1978 booklet-programme *Azione Terza Via* (Third Path Action) - A promotional initiative - Idea and practical attempt to carry out an alternative to the social systems in the West and in the East”, drawn up and promoted by the F.I.U.³³ represents the attempt to provide solutions to the global problems of all Humanity.

Beuys’ is a Concrete Utopia, which aspires to the Utopia of hope that during the 70s was at the basis of thought and action of enlightened men, innovators,

like: E. Fromm, R. Garaudy, S. Mansholt, A. Peccei, just to refer to those quoted most in the booklet-programme.

1997, September. "For a programme of ethics for the future. Scholars from all over the world gathered together under the aegis of UNESCO for a series of meetings concerning the twenty-first century. This Next Century will have to rehabilitate the long periods of time and the idea of a long-term project", article taken from the "Il Sole 24 Ore" newspaper. Hopes are renewed. P. Ricoeur emphasises "...we must resist the temptation of expectations of a purely Utopian nature: they can but disperse action. (...) Yes, the vanishing of the horizon of waiting must be hindered; we must make it closer to the present by staggering intermediate projects, within action's reach"³⁴.

Another testimony that man must no longer go in search of Promethean Utopias, founded on grand metaphors of technologies, consumption, globalisation, etc, but must rediscover the sense of the possibile Concrete Utopia, which daily modifies the world and, particularly, the troubled daily world.

These references and events, these criticisms and proposals would be enough to falsify – in the sense of Popper – the political/ artistic/ scientific thinking and programme of Beuys.

One could, nevertheless, object that Beuys basically was prevalently an "artist". Whatever happened to his idea that: art = man = creativity = science?

Perhaps the reading of an essay by Paul K. Feyerabend could be of help to us in answering this question, the title itself being most meaningful: "L'arte prodotto della natura come opera d'arte" (Art product of nature just as a work of art)³⁵. Here, the American epistemologist puts us on our guard from privileging more realistic and outmoded paradigms in our reading of phenomena and laws of Nature: "...when approached in different ways, nature gives differing answers and that projection onto her of a single one of these answers to describe her true form is not science, but only believing to be true that which we ardently desire"³⁶.

What does the defender of the Methodological Anarchism suggest? Feyerabend asserts that the growing of scientific knowledge has been made possible precisely by the actual transgression of methodological rules, that were

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gradually established and recognised by the scientific world as untouchable. It is therefore necessary to fight the technological-scientific myths of fundamentalist rationalists: "Scientific nature is partly understandable, partly nonsense; can be expanded, changed, integrated with new ideas, habits, parts of culture bringing to light other, and maybe kinder, aspects of nature, and therefore, also of ourselves. Here progressive artists can carry on an important role. Rationalists (this group includes many scientists and philosophers), rather, love to nail things down. Changes confound them and they cannot stand ambiguities. Instead, poets, painters and musicians love ambiguous words, drawings that make one puzzled, movements without meaning. They all are necessary means to undoing the scientists' nature that appears so rigid and objective, and they wish to replace it with another one that is useful or changeable in appearance or in manufacture, and in such a way, make us aware of the enormous and unfathomable powers that are around us."³⁷

1973, March. In the newspaper Corriere della Sera (6/ 3/ 1973), Mario Perazzi publishes a review / interview about the Arena action, that has been re-installed in the Studio Marconi in Milan, and asks: "... Even working a piece of margarine or putting lead boots on and falling into feigned catalepsies as you do in some of your 'actions'?"

J.Beus: "Certainly, because in doing so, I, if nothing else, incite discussion, awareness. This is already an act of freedom"

M.Perazzi: "Mister Beus, certain people say that you are crazy".

J.Beus: "If I am or not it is totally beside the point".

1997, December. What kind of answer, therefore, can we give today to the question asked by Der Spiegel: "Beus, charlatan or genius?"

The best thing is to paraphrase Beus' words: "Regarding whether he is a charlatan or a genius, it is totally beside the point. The important thing is that his Art-Science incited discussion, awareness of those big global problems that worry Humanity".

It is curious to ascertain that the vast majority of those who considered Beus crazy in the 70s, those same ones who were annoyed and bored by the discussion of those problems, are today really worried about not having ideas, projects, solutions exactly on the same matters.

After a long yawn came a great scream.

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