

Pilvi Kalhama:

"Escaping Aesthetics"

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As Arthur C. Danto once remarked, Joseph Beuys – together with Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol – is one of those artists through whom we understand why contemporary art has become what it is.¹ But, why not take the thought one step further: through Beuys we might actually understand something about the emergence of the megatrends of our time. The idea is inviting, because for Beuys, art was not 'only art' but life as it was lived and a means for engaging in society as an individual. In modern societies, art has always been an area where new phenomena are tested and tried out. The concerns raised in art only spread to the rest of society after years, sometimes even decades. Take ecological sustainability, for example. Issues of sustainability and recyclability began to emerge in art and design, as well as in material production and theory, back in the 1970s; Beuys belonged to that politically aware generation, his actions and thinking providing starting points for considering these issues.

In this essay, I discuss Beuys's conception of materials, reflecting on how contemporary ideas of recycling and sustainability were nascent in Beuys's work. The key question that emerges in the discussion is how to characterise Beuys's aesthetics. Or, to put it in another way, being a conceptual artist, how did he view material reality and the aesthetic properties of materials?

The stream of images in this essay consists of Beuys's sand drawings that he made in 1974 on the coast of the Indian Ocean in Kenya. Beuys drew highly idiosyncratic and characteristic motifs in the sand and allowed the waves and the wind to wipe them away again and again. Photographer Charles Wilp documented the ephemeral artworks and the artist at work. Four years later, the series was compiled into the *Sandzeichnungen* portfolio.²

Useless Materials

What sets Joseph Beuys apart even in the context of art is that he created art from practically nothing. He had an uncanny ability to approach life in all its aspects in a creative and inventive way, saying that everything he did was art. His ritualistic and immaterial works utilising useless materials were in fact more ecological than many products or artworks that over the decades had expressly been deemed ecological.

In production, ecological sustainability is above all entwined with the choice of materials, and yet its actual realisation often paradoxically manifests only as a discursive phenomenon – an ideal in the context of material production, art included. The drive for sustainability has always involved a strong tendency towards faux sustainability, or the mere appearance of sustainability. The reality of its implementation, actual sustainability, is therefore much more complex: it is difficult to achieve and ascertain. As consumers we all know how hard it is to discover the true ecological origin of products. By utilising useless substances, the debris of his own works, everyday waste, even materials that seemed like garbage, Beuys put into practice the idea of recycling in a way that contemporary humanity is only now beginning to implement.

Recycling for Beuys was not the simplistic act of putting products and readymades back into circulation. He saw recycling more profoundly, as the circulation of materials and as ritual. He was driven by a need to promote his own aestheticised version of post-capitalist utopia, where the bohemian aspect of art is transmuted into proletarian action in which work produces the value of being.³ The debris arising from Beuys's actions served for him as readymades, which meant that their uselessness was an important

aspect of the materials. For Beuys, material was endowed with a value specifically as debris and waste. Art dealer Robert Feldman, who was a friend of Joseph Beuys's, described the latter's art with the phrase 'strange sensibility'. He was referring to how difficult Americans found it to accept the aesthetic embodied in Beuys's materials: dead animals, medical supplies, tons of grease, ill-tasting disgusting stuff, and so on. 'Of course, it was antimaterialistic to use inexpensive material,' he remarked.⁴

Waste material, the state of being of no interest to anyone, seems to be the thing that defines Beuys's aesthetics. But is the word 'aesthetic' even appropriate in the case of Beuys? Were his choices essentially aesthetic? It sometimes seems that he took things that others had deliberately discarded, even erased from their minds, to elevate them in his art. Although the debris used by Beuys was often produced by his own actions, it is difficult to associate any nostalgia with these objects or materials: unpleasant, discarded matter is not conducive to feelings of longing, inciting instead a wish to forget. Yet, matter that has intrinsically borne the mantle of the unaesthetic is in Beuys's work transformed into something different. Perhaps Beuys invented a new category of material aesthetic in art?

What is certain is that Beuys employed a new type of aesthetic in his work, and one that made no reference to any existing art. With reference to the artists mentioned by Danto, who along with Beuys have most influenced contemporary art, we could say that Beuys lies somewhere between Duchamp and Warhol: unlike Duchamp, Beuys never elevated any discarded readymade objects into individualistic and aesthetic *objects d'art*, but neither did he rely on the Warholian notion of the anonymous beauty of the unoriginal mass-produced object. Just like Duchamp, Beuys, too, was fascinated by the mystification of art, but for him the value of art did not reside in the object itself.⁵ Beuys's conception of art is more akin to the theory of the French anthropologist Georges Bataille (1892–1962) of the *formless (informe)*. According to Bataille, the *formless* is a *task*. It is not matter, its essence is functional. It is a practical force, a performative operation.⁶ Such an operation has no aesthetic aims: aesthetics are ignored and material is instead seen in terms of its scatological essence. This is close to Beuys's conception of material. In such a view, a work of art and its material form have a different task than to convey an aesthetic impression.

For me, Beuys didn't have an interest in decadent or junk romanticism, which is also based on the aesthetics of matter, taking instead his thinking even further in terms of traditional Western aesthetics. The common thread running through his work is fully *non-aesthetic*. It should be pointed out here that in the case of Beuys we are not dealing with the kind of *anti-aesthetic* orientation that we find in Duchamp or Arte Povera, in which the unaesthetic character of materials is used to elicit an aesthetic response. Anti-aesthetic is the opposite and the negation of the property we call aesthetic, yet it belongs to the same category of judgements of taste. Beuys's non-aesthetics, on the other hand, does not even make an effort to resist the notion, disregarding aesthetics entirely as a category. Thus, Beuys seems indeed to have created a unique relationship with aesthetics.

What was Beuys's non-aesthetic and where did it come from? In their book *Formless*, art theorists Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have defined four *counter-operations*, inspired by Bataille. The purpose of the operations is to analyse the shift in visual art that has undermined the physiologically oriented conventional ways to appreciate art, understand the aesthetic order of artworks or classify their features. Beuys's art is part of this shift: in a way it represents a Bataillean performative formlessness. It is in fact a bit surprising that in spite of discussing numerous artists, Bois and Krauss do not pay more attention to Beuys's methods and artistic choices. It is high time to process Beuys's work through these counter operations.

The Game of Counter-operations

The four counter-operations are *horizontality*, *base materialism*, *entropy* and *pulse*, the last being the only one not borrowed from Bataille. Bois and Krauss emphasise that the purpose of these four categories is not to give rise to new rigid definitions but to establish a classification that deconstructs the categories of broader art-historical realms such as style, theme, chronology and oeuvre.⁷ Thus, the performativity of the formless does not imply any thematisation, stylisation, chronologisation or elevation of the fundamental essence of the work. All this fits beautifully with Beuys's body of work, which eludes the key definitions of modernism – 'form' and 'content' – in the context of any analysis performed

through them. As art theorist Irit Rogoff has also pointed out, Beuys's radical and experimental art and activity express the ultimate freedom from middle-class social and economic beliefs, including the central role of art in its traditional sense.⁸

In my view, Beuys employed all of these counter operations and eschewed the traditional aims of art, the aesthetics trends of his time included. In what follows, I will discuss each counter operation in turn to see how it can shed light on Beuys's methods.

Horizontality implies a state of being and performativity, as well as the idea of lowering oneself, putting oneself on the level with animals. It is abandonment of the pedestal.⁹ The sand drawings are case in point: Beuys lowers himself into a kind of primitive method of drawing, to literally draw horizontally on level with the ground. The series both implies and documents the artist's performance on the beach. Horizontality manifests especially in the performative action and in the fact that the defining form of the work is not objecthood but its absence. Instead, the work is more like a reality that occurs between process and final trace, a space that is subsequently only accessible through records or documentation. The action as a piece of art was obliterated irrevocably by waves and there is no longer any original. The method was extremely typical of Beuys throughout his entire career. Art only exists as a trace in replicas, in multiples and reproducible printed matter. According to Beuys, he himself was an active, talking, functional 'sculpture'. 'Painting' was replaced by a signed or stamped poster, style by a note-like fragment of an idea. These individual fragments that comprise the documentation of the sand drawings – and in fact the entire body of Beuys's work – are not depictions of something perfect or sublime: they are traces of something incomplete and ephemeral. Something that is part of a larger, undefined process.

Base materialism embodies all substances that cannot be given a specific form. For Bataille, this was tantamount to a battle against idealism, renunciation of the fetishising of matter.¹⁰ Base materialism can also be immaterial, such as sound or voice, as was often the case in Beuys's art. Beuys, too, worked with uninteresting waste materials and signed them as artworks. The use of waste implies both revulsion and attraction. Here Beuys was creating a new conception of aesthetics while challenging traditional visuality and the aesthetic hunger that it embodies. Materials were for Beuys a non-visual repository, a source of energy that involved a temporal dimension. Beuys's works that are embodied as objects are therefore carriers of meaning. Matter was a floating signifier that looks towards the future. Energy is the temporal foundation of objects.¹¹ Felt or wax in Beuys's works represent such matter, but the artist never took an aestheticising stance to them or raised them onto a pedestal. They signified other things for him: shelter, care, strength for healing, or isolation.

According to Bataille, base materialism also includes that which is most childlike in us. Here I see a link with Beuys's sand drawings: what indeed could be more commonplace, childlike and primitive than drawing in the sand? In 1930, over 30 years prior to Beuys, Picasso, too, created works with sand. His series of sand reliefs has been interpreted as a playful and not-so-valuable piece among Picasso's oeuvre.¹² Did Beuys, whose body of work abounds with intertextual references to art, know about this particular aspect of Picasso's transitional period?

Art historian David J. Getsy has analysed Picasso's sand reliefs with the concepts of *telic* and *paratelic*, more commonly used in psychology. Whereas the former represents a goal-oriented and solemn approach to art, the latter comes closer to experimental activity. In this series, Picasso's motives were emotional and indefinite, such as spending time with his mistress on a holiday, being inspired by her to make the series in the first place and incorporating her as integral part in the substance of the works.¹³

Did Beuys choose sand as his material because of its lowliness and modesty – and as a specific reference to the loose motifs and use of base materials by the great master, Picasso? Perhaps for Beuys it was also significant that the fragile material lent itself to transformation and the consequent destruction of the original artwork, which is a painful taboo in Western art. Material fragility is a feature that very much characterises Beuys's entire output. Yet, he wanted to display his works in an art context, ignoring their potential destruction in exhibitions or museums, where destruction is a particularly sensitive issue. Jennifer Mundy interrogates Beuys's most famous multiple, the edition of 100 *Felt Suits*, by examining the material challenges of the series. In spite of the work's fragility, Beuys himself was not

at all interested in its preservation because, as he saw it, all things would eventually revert to dust. 'I don't care. You can nail the suit to the wall. You can also hang it on a hanger, ad libitum. But you can also wear it and throw it into a chest,' he is reported to have said.¹⁴ Materials carried meaning to Beuys only in terms of their spiritual content.

Entropy is a form of negative movement, a constant degradation of energy in a system that leads to an increasing state of disorder.¹⁵ As a term, it is borrowed from physics, where it refers to the irreversible process whereby the amount of disorder always increases. The term is also used in information theory, where it refers to the diffusion and mixing of content. In visual art, entropy has most often been mentioned in connection with the work of earth artist Robert Smithson. A common illustration of entropy is a sandbox, one half of which is filled with black sand, the other half with white sand. When a person walks in circles in the box clockwise and counter clockwise, the black and the white continue to mix and do not separate again, even when the direction of motion is reversed.

Many artists were interested in entropy from the 1960s onward, and Beuys must have been aware of the theory and the concept. In his case, however, entropy is temporal rather than spatial. His art is the sum of his actions, and a clear distinction between different works cannot be made. Take the case of *Polentransport*: it is a performance, an archive of old works, a collection of new ones, and ultimately also a performance documentation. It can be broken down into its separate constituent parts, yet, the works that make up *Polentransport* are not simply discrete, individual works. Neither is *Polentransport* an undivided, unambiguous whole in itself, because it contains a multitude of references to or concrete materials from Beuys's earlier work. Definitions recede entropically. The possibilities of combination and presentation of the 'collection' are endlessly branching.

The overabundance in the everyday multiples made by Beuys is also a sign of entropy: postcards, brushstrokes, mathematically mixed formulas and Beuys's stream of consciousness all become a kind of limitless, gathered mass, a noise of messages.

Pulse is perhaps the most descriptive term to apply to Beuys's work in that it challenges the modern concept of temporality.¹⁶ Temporality in Western modernist art is traditionally a linear continuum, whereas in Beuys's case, time is more akin to endless repetition – pulses that fracture order and uniformity. Once again, *Polentransport* as a hybrid of works and a collection is a case in point of Beuys's pulsing cycle of materials and thoughts as well. It disrupts the assumed order and rearranges everything with endless variations. Beuys's time concept was circular: Despite its commitment to the future, his work contains and exploration of the past. This is conveyed through a reference to subliminal subjects in which past and present merge and in which autobiographical experience is linked.¹⁷

Beuys himself saw art as an endless, pulsing stream of energy. He spoke about the free flow of ideas and thought and refused to set any boundaries or limits to his work.¹⁸ In the sand drawings, the waves are, in a way, present between the pictures. We are all familiar with the meditative motion of waves, their regularity and the inevitability with which wave after wave roll onto the shore to wash away the traces of human feet – or in this case, the artist's drawing. Waves are the endless pulse that unites the components of the series, a pulse that will not stop even if the artist were to stop drawing.

Cycles of Motifs

Beuys not only recycled materials, as the above discussion of pulse and entropy shows: his conception of recycling applied most specifically to the endless cycling of motifs. This meant that Beuys's art was also immaterial – it was not important that the works might be originals, or even that they might have a physical form, although Beuys was no stranger to material reality as his careful choice of materials shows. His works must nevertheless be seen as references to or records of something that has ceased to exist. According to Danto, art was for Beuys a mode of prayer that could be used to deal with crisis and process its experience.¹⁹ Perceiving art as a sacred ritual means that the function of art changes from one situation to the next. Thus, any individual work also eludes all concrete, material forms and aesthetic definitions. The concepts discussed above give us an idea of the methods whereby Beuys's aesthetics were constructed: non-visual elements, with a preponderance of cognitive and spiritual aims.

Art cannot solve the problem of ecological sustainability, but actions will. Even today it is extraordinary how few artists interrogate the issues of material reality in the production of art. A work of art can today very well be entirely devoid of material form, existing only as a legal entity, without involving any functional object. Beuys's conception of art created the foundation for such thinking.

Ephemeral art also eludes normative aesthetic assertions, making necessary new concepts or ways to explore the central core of art. Along with artists like Beuys, we have moved away from the extremity of the paradigm, wherein the meaning of art arises from the artefact and towards the other end where the meaning stems from content or a broader continuity of thinking and action. A physical artwork is no longer necessary. We can no longer ask Beuys whether this is what he was aiming at, but as we nail a plastic bag onto a wall (thereby breaking it), when we hang his photographs on a clothesline in the gallery (thereby undermining their sacredness), or fix sheets of beeswax onto the wall with sharp clips, we are confederates of Beuys and we admit that his works, too, as objects, are ephemeral and susceptible to destruction.

On the other hand, Beuys would also multiply a single original into several copies, allowing the work to be used longer. He gave his works to art dealers to be traded, and yet he also made significant donations, including *Polentransport* to Poland in the form of both a work and an action. Because Beuys believed in art to the very end – he never denounced art – he also worked within the art world, not outside of it. Yet by multiplying his originals he also sought a broader audience and gave his art an artificial extension of durability.

The moment Beuys makes us see the cycles that occur through the materials in his works, that very moment our ideas have changed as well. Perhaps that was Beuys's fundamental idea. Society changes, people and their thinking change. Art is the key catalyst that makes all that happen.

¹ Danto, Arthur 2007, Xiii. "Foreword: Style and Salvation in the Art of Beuys". In Joseph Beuys: The Reader.. MIT Press, Cambridge. Ed. Caludia Mesch and Viola Michely.

² The *Sand Drawings* portfolio from 1978 is an edition of 250 copies and one of the key series of the *Polentransport* archive. The series is also in the collections of MoMA in New York.

³ Krauss, Rosalind 1999, 145. Formless. A User's Guide. Yve-Alain Bois & Rosalind Krauss. Zone Books, New York.

⁴ Feldman in Morgan, Robert C. 1996, 155. Art Into Ideas. Essays on Conceptual Art. Robert C. Morgan. Cambridge University Press, USA, Australia.

⁵ Morgan, 151.

⁶ Bois, Yve-Alain & Krauss, 9,18.

⁷ Bois&Krauss, 21.

⁸ Rogoff, Irit 2007, 273. "The Aesthetics of Post-History. A German Perspective" in Joseph Beuys: The Reader. MIT Press, Cambridge. Ed. Caludia Mesch and Viola Michely.

⁹ Bois&Krauss, 26.

¹⁰ Bois&Krauss, 31.

¹¹ Morgan, 160-161.

¹² Getsy, David J. 2011, 81, 87. "Playing in the Sand with Picasso. Relief Sculpture as Game in the Summer of 1930" in From Diversion to Subversion. Games, Play and Twentieth Century Art. Ed. David J. Getsy. Pennsylvania State University Press.

¹³ Getsy, 91.

¹⁴ Mundy 2013, 199. Lost Art. Missing Artworks of the Twentieth Century. Tate Publishing, London.

¹⁵ Bois&Krauss, 34,36.

¹⁶ Bois&Krauss, 32.

¹⁷ Rogoff, 274.

¹⁸ Morgan, 152.

¹⁹ Danto, XViii.