

Outside the Box. Joseph Beuys Through Contemporary Visions.

"Introduction" to the book, by Pilvi Kalhama and Łukasz Zaremba

Pp 7-9.

There cannot be any doubt that Joseph Beuys is making a come back. After a period of intensified critiques and overblown recapitulations in the 1980's and 1990's, followed by a partial fall into oblivion at the beginning of the 21st century, in the second decade of the new millenium the work of Beuys proves to be exceptionally relevant: artistically, theoretically, and politically. Its relevance grows out of a series of factors. First of all, one should point to the relevance of Beuys's critical apparatus – the problems and ideological constructions analyzed by Beuys from the 1960's to the 1980's are still the key issues today, constantly reappearing and influencing our existences. Beuys's famous prophetic powers are primarily a result of his sharp critical gaze, which allowed him to catch sight of certain economic, social, and ecological processes in their early phases. Today the world is grappling with their mature manifestations. Second of all, in Beuys's practice an incisive critique is followed by unobvious (sometimes even utopian) propositions of solutions and alternative projects. A diagnosis is thus coupled with a treatment plan. The artist's work expresses an encouragement to act and points to several possible ways out of the crisis. Third of all, Beuys's contemporary relevance is located in the not at all trivial sphere of work methods. The materials and techniques used, his ideas about the place of the art and artists within broader social structures should prove to be inspiring today: if not as models to imitate then at least as attitude and concepts worth discussing.

This book accompanies the exhibition *Outside the Box*, presented in EMMA from February 8 till May 21 2017. The exhibition and the publication are an effect of the cooperation between the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź and EMMA. *Outside the Box* is a presentation of four fundamental fields of Beuys's activity, selected by us curators as potentially the most influential and crucial inspirations for contemporary thinking and action. These broad fields are: politics, ecology, economy and margins. We treat each of these categories as helpful in both diagnosing the conditions of contemporary living and proposing possible solutions and transgressions. The latter range from utopian projects through metaphorical proposals to extremely practical, material actions (like the artist's activities as a member of the Green Party or his ecological activism).

Kommentoinut [ŁZ1]: we need to put them in the right order ©

Through the exhibition we are thus trying not to celebrate or commemorate Beuys, but to collaborate with him and point to certain areas in which his thought and practice might inspire and provoke us today, in the context of actual socio-political issues of our society.

The exhibition has been collected from the works in the Polentransport 1981 archive – a gift personally delivered by Beuys to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. The gift consisted of a wooden crate filled with a variety of objects of different status: from posters and exhibition invitations to unique art objects. However, it should be noted that *Outside the Box* is not a straightforward presentation of this fascinating archive. The cooperation between EMMA and the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź goes further – it works through the archive and seeks to construct a relevant story out of its elements. Obviously this narrative does not encompass the whole of Beuys's oeuvre, but perhaps its fragmentary – and thus constructed – character is also what makes it interesting. The specificity of the Polentransport archive, its material form and the ambiguous status of many of its objects is challenging, but it also allows for the examination of Beuys's theoretical strategies – carried out not only through visual means, but also through the diverse material qualities of the art objects.

If the exhibition is not a simple presentation of the archive, then this book also does not simply offer a straightforward description of the exhibition, it rather provides an extra layer on top of it. The publication seeks to be an autonomous analytical proposal, which concentrates not on the aforementioned four fields (although these categories appear throughout the book), but on chosen works from the collection and the Polentransport gift itself. The essays analyze such aspects of Beuys's art practice as the circulation of commodities and objects, imitation and copying, the ephemeral and temporary character of artworks. They closely analyze the material form of the Polentransport archive and the theoretical notion of the gift. They propose to interpret Beuys's artistic practices as acts of thinking through matter, waging critique through putting physical objects in motion, making art as working with material objects, ones possessing prior symbolical and practical (including economic) dimensions.

In his essay Łukasz Zaremba focuses on the a whole archive of such multiples and analyzes the Polentransport archive as an artistic and theoretical enterprise. According to Zaremba, the value of Polentransport lies in its power to uncover the constructed character of supposedly objective economical mechanisms. Beuys achieves this through performing a gesture, which escapes the basic laws of economy – the act of presenting a gift without a debt. Pilvi Kalhama's essay explores the ephemeral and temporary state of matter of Beuys's art - leading to a new aesthetic mood, as Kalhama suggests. Kalhama examines the mechanisms of sense attribution to specific material objects in Beuys's practice, pointing to the fact that while objects always carry specific meanings, they also carry energy. Both meanings and energies result from specific mechanisms, which govern the lives of material objects: the ways they transform over time, the dynamic of their disintegration etc. These processes are visible in the Beuys's *Sand Drawing (Sandzeichnungen)* series. Kalhama describes the way Beuys's aesthetics departs from the traditional aesthetical categories of beauty and ugliness to the categories of matter and sensuality. She runs Beuys's activity through bataillean counter-operations and opens an overview how he created the category of non-aesthetics in his recirculation of materials. The essay corresponds with Alexandra Alisauskas's text devoted to the movement of objects from the West to the East and their passing through the imagined and artificial – and yet simultaneously very real – border of the Iron Curtain. Alisauskas examines the way that objects and meanings change their status while circulating. Not incidentally she focuses on a number of „multiples” – objects produced in series – whose senses mutate radically along with the context of their appearance. The three essays are completed by a historical conversation between Joseph Beuys and the director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Ryszard Stanisławski, held right after Beuys's arrival in Łódź during the Polentransport 1981 action.

The word play in the title of the exhibition and the book is supposed to point to the inseparability of matter and thought. In Beuys's work thinking outside the box is performed together with what is in the box (the material objects, which traveled from Germany to Poland in 1981), including the box itself.

