

THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

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GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM MOUNTS FIRST BEUYS SURVEY IN UNITED STATES

The first American museum showing of the work of Joseph Beuys will be presented at the Guggenheim Museum from November 2, 1979, through January 2, 1980. Beuys is a German artist whose work has generated much interest and controversy since the 1960s. Although he is well known in Europe, particularly in his native country, and his influence has been acknowledged on both continents, the current survey of his work constitutes his first introduction to a general public in the United States.

The artist himself devised the format of the exhibition and will direct the installation at the Guggenheim. It will consist of 24 "stations," each focusing on one principal sculpture surrounded by related, supporting works. The presentation, placed along virtually the entire Museum ramp, includes a number of large pieces such as a massive tallow sculpture, a Volkswagen bus and a felt-wrapped piano, as well as nearly 400 drawings known as The secret block for a secret person in Ireland.

The exhibition and the fully illustrated catalogue with text by guest curator Caroline Tisdall, the English critic who has worked closely with the artist for a number of years, are supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and the German Federal Republic.

Thomas M. Messer, Director, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, who initiated the show, observes in his catalogue preface, "Beuys has conceived this exhibition not so much as an occasion for the presentation of individual objects but as an autonomous work of art that validates already existing objects in a new, live and stirring context."

Beuys' provocative, at times repellant media, which include gauze, honey, household utensils, fat and felt, evoke a wide range of associations. Caroline Tisdall writes, "Beuys' sculpture throughout the years has been intended as a vehicle of meaning and most particularly of his own understanding of the energies that give meaning and direction to life." Fat, for example, is important for its existence as a mass without divisions or boundaries and for its capacity to change easily from one state to another -- liquid to solid. Objects of different materials are juxtaposed to imply tensions between such polarities as chaos and order, expansion and contraction, male and female. The idea of potential plays a key role in Beuys' work: potential energy is stored in fat; a piano wrapped in felt has sound potential.

Beuys has been known as a draughtsman as well as a sculptor from the beginning of

(more)

add 1
Joseph Beuys

his career. In 1974 The secret block, an important group of drawings dating from 1936 to 1972, was exhibited in Great Britain. Only three of these had previously been shown publicly. Beuys views drawing as a form of thought, an automatic process that cannot stop or remain static. Only seemingly abstract, his drawings often refer to recurrent themes such as swans and stags, wounds, healing and the cross.

Born in Cleves on the German-Dutch border in 1921, Joseph Beuys was exposed from his early childhood to Teutonic myths and traditions. His earliest training was scientific, fostering a lifelong sensitivity to natural forms and mechanical processes. In World War II, as a combat pilot in the German Air Force, Beuys was seriously injured several times. After a near-fatal plane crash during a snowstorm on the Russian Front, he was found by Crimean Tartars who saved his life by wrapping him in a thick insulation of fat and felt. Much later, in the 1950s and 1960s, these materials were to become the most characteristic media in Beuys' sculpture.

At the end of the war Beuys returned briefly to his study of natural history. But dissatisfied with its limitations, in 1947 he turned his attention to art and worked for several years under Ewald Mataré, then Professor of Sculpture at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. He had never fully recovered from his shattering war experience and withdrew into a state of depression that lasted throughout the 50s. Beuys emerged from this period of crisis with new convictions which led him to testify against Nazism. He also spoke out against what he came to consider the growing capitalist greed in postwar Germany. Art became his medium for protest, and advocacy of political, social and educational reform have constituted an increasingly important aspect of his work.

In 1961 Beuys was chosen to succeed Mataré at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, where his dramatic teaching, designed to break down the barriers between art and life, rapidly established him as one of the most popular and influential art professors in Germany. At that time Beuys joined the Fluxus group (a loose association of artists committed to expanding the means of artistic creativity through forms such as multimedia events, street performances, poetry readings and political provocation) and was instrumental in staging the first "happenings" -- Beuys prefers the term "action" -- and "environments" in Germany. He founded the German Student Party and the Organization for Direct Democracy in 1967. In 1972 Beuys was dismissed from his teaching post on the grounds of ignoring enrollment limitations in his classes. He subsequently wrote the manifesto for the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research together with the Nobel Prize-winning author Heinrich Böll. In 1978 a six year-long case for illegal dismissal against

(more)

add 2
Joseph Beuys

the Ministry in Düsseldorf was finally decided in his favor. Beuys was offered a professorship at the Vienna Hochschule für angewandte Kunst, where he taught for about a year. In June of 1979 Beuys ran for election to the European Community Parliament. Although unsuccessful, he received a significant number of votes.

Joseph Beuys' works are included in a number of important museum collections and have been shown at such international exhibition events as the Venice Biennale and the Kassel Documenta. Recently he was the fifth recipient of the Kaiserring of the City of Goslar, an international award given annually to a prominent artist. Beuys currently lives and works in Düsseldorf.

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Information: Mimi Poser or Diane Berger (212) 860 - 1356

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