



OCCULTISM IN  
AVANT-GARDE ART

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# Occultism in Avant-Garde Art The Case of Joseph Beuys

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# Occultism in Avant-Garde Art

## The Case of Joseph Beuys

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# "Occultism in Avant-Garde Art" The Case of Joseph Beuys

by  
John F. "Moffitt"

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after Beuys's death. At the same time, the administration of this university provided me with the word processor upon which all of what follows has been laboriously produced.

To whomever I may have forgotten to mention, my most profound apologies.

This book is fondly dedicated to all admirers of the art and ideas of Joseph Beuys.

# Introduction:

## Scope and Shape of Things to Come

*Ich bin auf der Suche nach dem Dümsten.*

Joseph Beuys

What follows is a contextual study that reads at times like an exercise in cultural anthropology. The various contexts, describing ever-diminishing parameters around Joseph Beuys, function like the diagrams found in any number of old, leather-bound folio volumes belonging to the esoteric tradition. According to this truly ancient scheme, Beuys represents the microcosm. What surrounds Beuys are a series of corresponding, ever-larger, macrocosms—functioning like the intricately carved, husklike motifs of Chinese ivory puzzles.

We shall especially be looking for correspondences between art and life, between myth and reality, between artifact and spirit. Emanuel Swedenborg described these long ago, stating the truth of them so forcefully that innumerable future adherents would believe in occult correspondences similar to those existing between *Heaven and Hell* (1758, the title of his most influential treatise). For the true believers, such correspondences provide an ongoing confirmation of ancient wisdom. This Swedish seer recognized how, unlike contemporary-modern materialists, who live in a “world that primarily focuses on worldly things only,”

the ancient people behaved differently. As far as they were concerned, a knowledge of correspondences was the finest of all knowledges. . . . The nature of correspondence [is that] the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world. . . . Man is both a heaven and an earth in smallest form; on the model of the greatest, he has a spiritual world and a natural world within him. . . . Anything that occurs in his natural world (his body, its senses, and its actions), occurs *from* his spiritual world (his mind, its discernment, and its intention) and is called a correspondent. . . . All this has to do with *the correspondence* of the inner or spiritual realm of man [i.e., the microcosm] with his outer or natural realm [or macrocosm.] <sup>1</sup>



For our purposes, the principal macrocosm of Beuys's world is, of course, the often hermetically sealed inner world of avant-garde art. This is, therefore, "the whole natural world [that] corresponds to the spiritual world" of Joseph Beuys. As we shall see in greater detail, Beuys was just one small component of this convoluted macrostructure. Nevertheless, Beuys was a particular component that so perfectly fitted into the larger cultural matrix that, had he not been born, he would have needed to be "invented." After all, just as Swedenborg explained, it is all a product of our collective imagination: "this mind, its discernment, and its intention." In order to demonstrate a perhaps novel argument, this contemporary art world will at times be viewed almost as an anthropologist might scrutinize the curious clan rites of some obscure tribe situated in a peculiar outback, one still largely unknown to the rest of the ordinary work-a-day world.

Another macrostructure looming large in this investigation is the esoteric tradition, of which Swedenborg was an early and influential spokesman—and Beuys an unacknowledged adherent. Whereas true believers would call such beliefs "spiritual science," others might just call it "occultism." Alas, whatever its occasional nomenclature, such esoterica occupies a bizarre outback largely ignored by scholars in general—and by art historians in particular. Nevertheless, occultism—although it rarely calls itself such—does loom very large in our collective consciousness. As we shall see in due course, it was this pervasive esoteric mentality that had, in effect, created the conditions for the surprisingly widespread acceptance of the curious art activities concocted and performed by Joseph Beuys.

A recent example of the pervasive appeal of occultism occurs in *Time* (December 7, 1987), whose cover story is "The New Age." The full-color cover photo shows a well-known media figure, who, face wreathed in a knowing Cheshire cat smile, offers up to the needy public a handful of sparkling beads and refulgent rock crystals. The caption makes the vital connection between culturally site-specific *imago* and *motto*: "OM . . . THE NEW AGE, Starring Shirley MacLaine, Faith Healers, Channelers, Space Travelers and Crystals Galore" The article within ("New Age Harmonies," pp. 62–72) proves to be a well-written and thought-provoking piece of pop anthropology authored by Otto Friedrich. The all-pervasive New Age is rightly acknowledged to be, besides highly popular (and thus commercially successful), "a combination of spirituality and superstition, fad and farce, about which the only thing certain is that it is *not* new." The case of Ms. MacLaine as occult authoress demonstrates the economic viability of heightened consciousness within high-tech materialist capitalism; her five books of "self-exploration" have sold (at last count) eight million copies. As Friedrich points out, "New Age fantasies often intersect with mainstream materialism, the very thing that many New Age believers profess to scorn." Big business sponsors meditational seminars; according to one corporate spokesman, "The principle here is to look at the mind, body, heart and

spirit." Nevertheless, as the student of historical occultism well knows, this has essentially been "the principle" since time immemorial.

Whatever its rationales, the *symptoms* of New Age credulity represent an essentially harmless anthology of mass illusions. By my reckoning, their outward manifestations presently include such diverse artifacts and obsessions as: "channeling" (that is, to various occult "powers," for which Ms. MacLaine's ubiquitous rock crystals are often recommended), faith healing, color and sound therapy, fortunetelling, acupuncture, transmigration of souls (à la Swedenborg), good vibes, self-healing, numerology, New Age music ("like, I tapped into a radio station on Mars"), transcendental meditation, biofeedback, "harmonic convergence," UFOs and ETs (probably including Steven Spielberg), transmigrations of (kindred) souls, tarot decks and the *I Ching*, neopaganism (replete with postmodernist witches, druids, goddess worshipers, vikings and rune readers), solar energizers, Dianetics, herbal teas, temple bells, colored candles, gem elixirs, holistic massage, rhythmic chanting, and pricey seminars ("Aspects of Zen Practice," "Internal King Fu," "Holistic Systemic Thinking," "Jungian Symbolism in Astrology").

Smaller microcosms treated in this book, more particular to the case of Joseph Beuys (who most likely remained ignorant of the spiritual mission of Ms. MacLaine), include Beuys's unique performance pieces, which he called his "*Aktionen*." Consequently, the history and development of performance art will be examined at some length as another kind of macrocosm. Other kinds of microcosmic investigations of Beuys will include a series of detailed iconographical (and even iconological) investigations of individual works by the master. These too will place themselves into yet another macrocosm: *Anthroposophy* (literally, "knowledge of man").

Other microcosms include discussions of the concept of neoprimitivism in recent art and culture, bicycles and telegraphy (to illustrate "simultaneity"), the possible significance of Beuys's national or ethnographical origins, the meaning of the shaman in recent paperback culture, Vitruvius and L. B. Alberti, Nazi pseudoscience, the visual artist as *auteur* and *acteur*, lost golden ages and ancient wisdom, conversations with animals (living and dead), political activism in the arts, Atlantis and Lemuria, Richard Wagner's operas, the rise of esoterica in modern Germany, magical and alchemical "impoverished art," the moral responsibilities of an art teacher, Tacitus's noble savages and sylvan Teutons, and other incidental discourses. Although it may not be apparent at first, throughout this book there looms the presence of yet another all-pervasive macrocosm, in this case a deep-thinking and hypersensitive human being: Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy.

All in all, whether he is finally judged by history to have been either a dwarf or a giant in modern art (or even, ultimately, a nonentity), an in-depth

discussion of the odd case of Joseph Beuys illuminates some curious workings of the world in which we live, at least for the minority world of the avant-garde, which delights in, and even thrives upon, elitist esoterica. And, for these purposes, “esoterica” can be either art or ideas. In the case of Joseph Beuys, it actually became both at once.



## The Art World: Beuys in a Contemporary Context

### Redefining Joseph Beuys through Redefinitions of Modern Art

For the past twenty years, Joseph Beuys (1921–86) has been generally reckoned to represent the most significant expression of the radical avant-garde in post-World War II Europe. Given his preeminent status in the contemporary art world, evermore approaching that of a true cult figure, writings on this artist and his unusual works have been quite plentiful (see bibliography).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the bulk of the bibliography on Beuys results from the rapid jottings of art critics, writers belonging to a somewhat specialized branch of journalism. For the most part, their often ephemeral publications are noncritical, even to the point of reading at times like hagiography. They also strive to remain narrowly “factual” and are, therefore, generally noncontextual in any significant historical sense. There are other problems associated with the art critic, particularly when he is seen from a larger perspective, that is as an active, collaborating agent of the marketplace.

Unfortunate as the truth of the matter may be, it should by now be recognized that artists and their artworks are generally treated as commodities in our late-modernist consumer culture, in which support for, or direct acquisition of, artworks is often a game of status-seeking. The current situation has been most effectively summed up by David Carrier:

The critic's role in the present art-world system is to promote artworks, to persuade people to buy them. . . . Today, interpretation of a work involves a three-way collaboration between the artist who makes it, the critic who describes it, and the audience who, by accepting the critic's description, makes it true. . . . Critics thus make assertions which, if they are good rhetoricians, come to be widely believed, and so then are true. . . . Criticism [in short] creates aesthetic value.<sup>2</sup>



Given the fact of Joseph Beuys's recent and widely lamented death, other opportunities for consensus now present themselves. Posthumously, Beuys's entire career finally becomes the fitting subject for the objective scrutiny of the art historian, who, states W. Eugene Kleinbauer, "is dealing with art as a historical document that demands interpretation and evaluation. . . . The art historian also deals with classification, not as an end in itself, but as a first step in establishing order among individual works of art." Conversely, the proper domain of the art critic is "determining the unique qualities of a master's work and relating these qualities to the values and needs of the beholder." The crux of the problem of dealing with art criticism is that "it dispenses with historical evidence and [instead] takes the form of a literary expression." In sum,

the art historian's response is framed within an illuminating, historical matrix and is generally less re-creative than the response of the critic [whose] criticism conveys primarily the critic's personal impression of the work of art [and] tends to use precise words in vague and subjective contexts and to omit what the art historian would deem essential.<sup>3</sup>

The means for an enhanced and strictly historical evaluation of Beuys's work is at hand, and applicable even to its most "dematerialized" states. As it turns out, the solution to the Beuys riddle had always been at hand, specifically in the form of numerous statements provided by Beuys himself. Given this wealth of published documentation, it seems curious that no one has yet taken advantage of these materials, and with them attempted to present a comprehensive evaluation of the underlying, scarcely disguised meanings and purposes of Beuys's work. With such an interpretive goal in mind, these documents—the art works and their supportive statements—can now be finally "read" as a logical and consistent whole.

What has been conspicuously absent in any previous reading of the ponderous mass of written materials dealing with this self-appointed messiah of the avant-garde, with encomia still being published in abundance by the European and American press, is a certain art historical technique, iconology. This investigative and analytical conceptual tool was effectively defined long ago by Erwin Panofsky. As he wrote in 1939, iconological investigations of various artists and their artworks, undertaken in any particular historical moment, intend to instigate revelations of

a unifying principle, which underlies and explains both the visible event and its intelligible significance, and which determines even the form in which the visible event takes place. . . . We [iconologists] deal with the work of art as a symptom of "something else" which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms. . . . The discovery and interpretation of these "symbolical" values (which are often unknown to the artist himself, and may even emphatically differ from what *he* consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call "iconology," as opposed to "iconography," [i.e., the simple identification of symbolical mo-

tifs, which] implies a purely descriptive, often even statistical, method of production. . . . [To the contrary,] iconology is an iconography turned interpretive . . . a method of interpretation which arises from synthesis rather than [scattered] analysis.<sup>4</sup>

This evaluation of the means and purposes of any such iconological investigation certainly represents very familiar material to scholars who have worked within the traditional areas of art historical research—i.e., dealing with interpretive problems presented by the art of the Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. However, Panofsky's definitive statement has been quoted at some length precisely because this comprehensive investigative technique is rarely applied to the study of modern art per se. Nevertheless, modern art, particularly that of the post-1945 period, seems increasingly to demand some rigorous applications of this kind of "art-scientific" (*kunstwissenschaftliche*) analysis. In fact, only very recently has a new and comprehensive attempt at scholarly analysis of the historical significance of the entire range of modern art been undertaken. This new approach may seem particularly novel inasmuch as it eschews the customary, that is, usually wholly formalistic, explanations of the origins of abstract art.

In short, the new school of the historical interpretation of modern art—opposed to the previous school of descriptive and categorizing (formal) analysis—states that modern, particularly abstract, art is not just a matter of certain contrived manipulations of visual forms. Instead, recent research underscores the idea that the visual products of modernism were the results of preexistent *ideas*. Therefore, ideas are what we must identify, since it is these underlying impulses that generate those individual surface manifestations, or forms, that some would just call a given artist's "style." As it turns out, in fact, the art historian working in this way often finds that the artist's ideas have either arisen directly from, or have been confirmed by, certain statements contained in published texts. Consequently, iconological investigations, whether of traditional or of modern art and artists, generally include the identification and subsequent interpretation of certain texts established by the researcher to have been of primary interest to the artists in question.

In particular, the most recent iconological investigations of the generating ideas of modern art have focused upon one particular phenomenon: occultism. A recently published exhibition catalogue—*The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (1986), with twenty accompanying case studies by recognized specialists—represents the first sweeping revisionist and philosophical interpretation of the ideological roots of modern abstract painting in its near entirety.<sup>5</sup> Besides providing a new overview of the intellectual concerns generating much of modern abstraction, this anthology contains fundamental reappraisals of the works of dozens of the influential pioneers of nearly a century of avant-garde figuration.<sup>6</sup> (Other scholarly anthologies since published continue such reap-



praisals.)<sup>7</sup> The underlying premise of *The Spiritual in Art*, convincingly documented in nearly every case, is that the historical motivation of nearly all nonrepresentational imagery—first manifested during the Symbolist period and since a consistent characteristic of the modern *Weltanschauung* in general—was essentially philosophical and utopian in nature, as opposed to merely visual and stylistic.

The philosophical impulse behind much of pioneering abstract art, beginning nearly a hundred years ago, derived from occultism. Alternatively—given that “occultism” may suggest to many readers a kind of aberrant lunacy—one may simply state that the overwhelming evidence points to the fact that a great many of the more progressive modern artists have customarily partaken of the “esoteric tradition.”

The findings of the various authors represented in *The Spiritual in Art* may be briefly summed up. The critical shift in the appearance of the plastic arts, initiated around 1875, was signaled by a movement away from naturalism towards abstraction. In this case, “abstraction” embodied a preference for “symbolic” over phenomenal color, “signs” over physical perceptions, and amorphous “moods” (*Stimmungen*) over the “facts” of direct observation. Such phenomena were directly tied to certain fundamental, sweeping changes in beliefs held by visual artists, naturally reflective of similar ideological shifts apparent among other classes of the European intelligentsia. The significant new themes of abstraction—all encountered in and presumably often directly derived from contemporary occultist publications—included concern for the quality of earthly life, a deeply felt need for spiritual wholeness, a fundamental mistrust of material values (and hence, materialist appearances in general) and an obsession with “universal knowledge,” to be attained by passage (or initiation) through ascending perceptual stages, steadily rising toward higher and more elevated states of spiritual enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

Those partaking of such ideas—whether artists or self-acknowledged occultists—specifically believed that the universe is a single, vibrant substance in which all things are alive. In this scheme, all things evolve in dialectical oppositions, or opposites in pairs: male-female, mind-matter, light-dark, vertical-horizontal, positive-negative, etc. The goal of the modern occultist was/is to dissolve these polarities, thus achieving what the medieval hermeticists had called a “*coniunctio oppositorum*.” Another key idea, dating back to Swedenborg but since adapted by the modern esoteric tradition, is that of the “correspondences”: mind and matter are one, things above are as they are below, the imagination is reality itself, and so forth. Such archetypal esoteric ideas, in the narrower sense, may be further characterized as being either vaguely mystical—that is, referring to the individual’s search for the state of oneness as an absolute reality—or strictly occultist—that is, dependent upon certain hidden, secret (*occultus*) phenomena that can only be divulged by and for those who are

appropriately initiated into the creeds and rituals of a given sect. In retrospect, the typically ideographic art of the pioneers of abstraction more often than not directly reflected a desire to express spiritual, utopian, or metaphysical ideas, *none of which could be expressed by traditional pictorial means.*

Though he is not adequately discussed in this manner in *The Spiritual in Art* (or any other such publication),<sup>9</sup> Joseph Beuys unquestionably belonged to the mainstream of this grand occultist tradition of avant-garde, a tradition now acknowledged to be in force for over a century. It is, therefore, the primary purpose of this book to redefine the art and life of Joseph Beuys in light of this ongoing esoteric tradition. However, in order to put matters into a clearer perspective, Beuys will first be placed in a strictly contemporary artistic context which will include discussions of such diverse factors as the history and development of the performance piece and its largely unrecognized larger context, neoprimitivism. Besides examining in detail a few of Beuys's more characteristic pieces, we shall also make an examination of a factor strictly extrinsic to the artist's work, but one which is nevertheless essential for a correct appraisal of the materials at hand. This is what I call the "Beuys phenomenon." This deals with the acceptance, even popularity, of Beuys's work and actions as a social phenomenon. In short, at times we will be as interested in the audience for Beuys's work as we are in the work itself.

Beuys's appeal, outside of some fairly restricted circles belonging to the domain of the avant-garde,<sup>10</sup> is obviously limited. The "man in the street" (except perhaps in Germany) likely will never have even heard of Beuys. This is a fact that professional artists and art historians can easily overlook. This book is, therefore, itself an elitist product, targeted for an elitist audience, one which is, *a priori et fortiori*, favorably predisposed to the subject at hand (although perhaps not to all of my arguments and conclusions). One should be forever cognizant of the intellectual and emotional distance separating Beuys from the interests and concerns of the great masses of humanity peopling this weary globe. Its exclusivity is another important aspect of the Beuys phenomenon; for the greater bulk of humanity, it has no significance whatsoever!

Without intending to make any value judgments about this fact one may cite what is in effect a curious kind of art-historical document. This is a widely read little paperback book by a witty, often acerbic journalist. Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* (1975) is best read as a statement of the vox populi (but only of the middle and upper classes), registering in this case their sense of hostility to, alienation from, and near total incomprehension of the avant-garde world that both spawned and nurtured Joseph Beuys. (This negative reaction must also be considered, for it represents the opposite pole of the macrocosm embracing the Beuys phenomenon, itself one of the many microcosms in the ever-changing world of avant-garde interests and obsessions.) Wolfe is especially good at registering the emotional effects of the public's estrangement from vanguard



culture: "If a work of art or a new style disturbed you, it was probably good work. If you hated it—it was probably great!"

If it were possible to make a diagram of the art world, we would see that it is made up of (in addition to the artists) about 750 culturati in Rome, 500 in Milan, 1,750 in Paris, 1,250 in London, 2,000 in Berlin, Munich and Düsseldorf, 3,000 in New York, and perhaps 1,000 scattered about the rest of the known world. That is the art world, approximately 10,000 souls—a mere hamlet!<sup>11</sup>

Having pointed out something of the inherent irrelevancy of our topic, we will now examine the Beuys phenomenon in a more objective fashion. Doing so, we will better understand the nature of the materials at hand—and what must be done with them.

### A Physiognomy for the Art of Joseph Beuys

Even a casual glance at the intense "expressionistically" gaunt and hollow-eyed face of Joseph Beuys produces a striking effect upon the viewer. The distinctive Beuys physiognomy appears, at least to Howard Smagula, to "express the essence of Germanic history and art. In him, one can see traces of beatific suffering, found in Medieval religious paintings, transcendent expressions seen in Dürer's engravings, and the tormented *Angst* of German Expressionism."<sup>12</sup> Smagula's perception is not unique: for many, Beuys's greatest exhibited work has always been himself.

During the seventies, Beuys was an immensely popular art instructor at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, a city acknowledged to be the fashion center of the *Bundesrepublik*. His public persona included some unique quasi-sacramental vestments: an old narrow-brimmed Homburg felt hat; well-worn blue jeans; a white, open-necked, long-sleeved shirt; and oddly, a grey multipocketed fisherman's vest, with a scrap of attached animal fur. Thus mysteriously garbed, the charismatic Professor Beuys held sway over hundreds of enchanted young students who had flocked in from all around the world. He was indeed what Smagula has labeled him: "a contemporary Pied Piper of Hamelin." As may be wryly added, he was the self-invested leader of the children's crusade of the avant-garde. Besides being what Smagula rightly recognizes to have been "the most widely exhibited and hottest-selling European artist of the past decade," a true celebrity and media creation, he was also that truly rare individual: a financially successful but still completely dedicated and committed art teacher.

In fact, the financially well-off Beuys had always insisted that his most important "artwork" was his teaching. This artist not only wanted a public; he needed converts. As he repeatedly insisted, his "art" existed not in the product

but instead in the expanded awareness of people who witnessed it. All of his unusual actions and artifacts were directed towards the "expanded awareness" of his hushed and enraptured acolytes, a congregation of the truly faithful. Certainly his broad, dialectic vision of art runs counter to the prevailing attitude of most teachers of art, who all too often leave the dreary and frustrating routines of the academic round once they have achieved a certain measure of commercial success. Instead Beuys's mission was not so much to be "artistic" as to educate all of humanity. Beuys thus would transform the human heart according to his own lights. Not surprisingly, many of his later activities took on specifically political connotations, some of them overtly so.

Beuys employed a wide variety of processes and materials, many of which had little to do with traditional artistic means. For instance, he made sculpture out of animal fat and greasy felt scraps, ephemeral drawings on worn-out blackboards—scrawls of mythical stags and nomadic tribesmen, illuminated by nearly illegible statements in his sprawling neo-Gothic script—and even on occasion produced "ordinary" objects, like archaic sleighs, transmuted under his wonder-working hand into mysterious and compelling artifacts. Such were the visible leavings of this poetic social critic and messianic teacher of the whole of humanity. Although he worked in a diverse range of tangible materials—making sculpture, multiples, and complex drawings—above all his other creations he preferred his performance pieces, which he called his "Actions" (*Aktionen*). Because these exerted the greatest impact upon the legions of his devoted followers, they have come closest to fulfilling his concept of art as "teaching."

By nature, Beuys was an indefatigable and wholly committed activist. He equated passivity with ignorance, maintaining that "knowledge" (of a rather specific kind, as we shall see) shall set you free. A key idea was "evolution": only through purposive creative activity does mankind *evolve*. Evolution allows for the realization of the hitherto unrealized potential of the individual and society. In the Beuys canon, creativity and the arts were meant to bring about fundamental changes in the development of contemporary society. Thus, in one unique package, Beuys combined the contemporary predisposition of the pragmatic radical reformer with the archaic soul of the romantic visionary. He was, therefore, both crusader and seer. His art even had a quirky democratic purpose. He reasoned that because art is inspired by life (in the broadest possible sense), it should be made for all the people. Instead of being narrowly confined to the realm of pleasing oil paintings and beautiful outdoor sculpture, art (in this case *Kunst* has earned its capital letter) should be actively directed towards expanding the hidden or latent potential of our lives. Moreover, as the Beuys canon states, art activity and life experiences are scarcely unrelated. All creative work—sometimes even such traditional and apparently shopworn ventures as drawing, sculpture, and painting—should be directed towards a fusion of experience



which might eventually achieve that powerful, wonderworking, neoalchemical transformation of human nature.

Transformation is the central idea of the Beuys canon. This is the swelling undercurrent pulsing throughout the late artist's diverse activities and works. Beuys "transformed" in his works the most incredible range of materials imaginable. He laid his magician's hands upon, among other strange things, old car batteries, babies' bassinets, animal bones and skulls, beeswax, Volkswagen vans, meters of pressed felt, grand pianos, and shepherds' staffs. But the most important artistic material to be magically transformed was the artist himself. His whole life had been presented in the shape of a bewildering series of codified gestures and symbolic activities and artifacts. Thus, the truly central issue lying behind the Beuys phenomenon was autobiography.

Before we attempt to redefine the real meaning of Beuys's imagery in the global sense, it will be useful to define literally the elements and background of one particular piece in order to give the reader the unique flavor of this artist's work. The piece in question is *The Pack*, executed in 1969. In the strictly literal sense, the piece, which might just as well be called an assemblage, consists of a real Volkswagen bus with twenty sledges trailing from its open back. Each of these sledges carries its own neatly rolled woolen blanket, lump of fat, and flashlight. As for its potential artistic significance, we have Beuys's fairytalelike statement:

This is an emergency object: an invasion by "The Pack" [*das Rudel*]. In a case of emergency, the Volkswagen bus is of limited usefulness, and more direct and primitive means must be taken to ensure SURVIVAL. The most direct kind of movement over the earth is the sliding of the iron runners of the sleds, shown at other times as a skating figure, or suggested by the iron soles placed on my feet in [the Action] EURASIA. This relationship between feet and earth is made in many [of my] sculptures, which always run along the ground. Each sled carries its own survival kit: the flashlight represents the sense of orientation, the felt [stands for] protection, and fat is a food. On a purely formal level, this is a FILLED sculpture, rare in art, common in life.<sup>13</sup>

Beuys presented *The Pack* with his four-hour-long Action called the "Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony" at the Edinburgh College of Art, twice a day during a four-day period in August 1970. For all their inherent strangeness, Beuys's performances evidently made a positive impression upon a Scots public not much given to welcoming the avant-garde with open arms. One of the enthralled witnesses was Alistair Mackintosh, who described the artist's motifs of both felt and fat, those persistent attributes of the Beuys myth—the artist's own miraculous survival of an apocryphal event, the crash of his Stuka in Russia during World War II. Mackintosh, who was clearly not cognizant of the largely autobiographical nature of Beuys's repertoire of symbolic materials, later recalled:



All the defenses I had prepared caved in as I turned a corner in the Edinburgh College of Art to find a herd of sleds pouring out of the back of a Volkswagen bus. Each had its blanket (neatly rolled), a torch and a lump of wax: they looked very happy, as if they were all about to set out on a picnic, although there was just the possibility that they might take over the world instead. Reality exploded the myth: the man I had expected, the art-historians' delight, could not have made this! This was much too rich and too personal, and this points to the main difficulty in dealing with Beuys: his art is so individual that current art-language cannot describe it without distorting its essential character.

He didn't quite look as I had expected either. For some reason, I had imagined someone anonymous and rather grim. In fact, he was recognizable from fifty yards, rather in the same way that one recognizes the Mona Lisa from reproductions; by now I had seen photographs of the man. He never took off his [felt] hat or his [fisherman's] jacket. The face was remarkable. T. S. Eliot has the line—"Webster saw the skull beneath the skin." Beuys' face is like that, except that it has none of the terror that the line implies, and often breaks (for once the word is exactly accurate) into a broad grin. Already, you see, I am assessing the man by himself, rather than by his work: *Joseph Beuys' greatest work is Joseph Beuys, or rather the presentation of Joseph Beuys*.<sup>14</sup>

I conclude this introduction to the impressions Beuys has left upon his public by citing a long statement from the witty pen of an excellent art critic, Robert Hughes. In what follows, he admirably sums up the distinctive, even engineered qualities of Beuys's vast appeal within its original German context, here viewed of course from an Anglo-Saxon viewpoint. Hughes's summary also points up Beuys's very considerable art-historical significance:

Sculptor, maker of happenings, guru, and fantasist, Beuys became the most influential figure in the post-modernist European art world. In part, this was due to his magnetic and benevolent character which, like the Pied Piper's fluting, drew hundreds of young people. . . . It also sprang from his talent for publicity. . . . Astutely realizing that an artist who wants the attention of the mass media must have a uniform and a stereotype, and be seen as an identifiable product apart from his work, Beuys turned his grey fedora hat and fishing-jacket (which never came off in public) into a trademark. . . . He is seen by the Right as a demented blend of gangster and clown, by the Centre as a good investment, and by some of the less militant student Left as a messiah.

Here are Hughes's remarks on the autobiographical element crucial to the Beuys phenomenon:

Beuys did not become a professional artist until he was in his forties and had survived a series of crippling depressions; indeed, the late conversion of this Luftwaffe pilot, and the spiritual anguish that preceded it, have become an important part of the legend for his fans, who take his role as penitent prophet almost as seriously as though he were Martin Luther. For them, Beuys' wartime sufferings have joined Van Gogh's ear in the hagiography of modern art: and particularly the occasion in 1943 when he crashed in a Ju-87 and was saved by wandering Tatar tribesmen who wrapped his traumatised body in felt and fat, thereby planting the germ of Beuys' later obsessive interest in fat and felt as art materials, emblems of healing and magic.

Hughes then notes that for Beuys art was intimately intertwined with politics:

As a political artist, Beuys went for an all-inclusive and metaphorical vagueness. . . . In essence, his answer to the incapacity of art to transform society on a direct level was to extend the word "artist" to cover everyone—so that art would be *any* kind of being or doing, rather than specifically *making*. . . . Since in the present intellectual climate of Germany it is hardly possible to pick one's nose without someone calling it a political act, the utterance of all these newly designated parts of [what Beuys called] the "Social Sculpture" are then credited with revolutionary potential. . . . Their end-product is the celebrity as political *Luftmensch*, reeling off harmless Utopian generalizations about social renewal through universal creativity.

Finally, Hughes addresses the issue of the mass appeal of Beuys's artworks:

Beuys' sculpture (not the illusory "Social Sculpture," but the stuff exhibited and sold in galleries) is so wrapped in personal myth that it all looks equally good to his devotees, as genuine relics must. . . . The strict, "artless" qualities to Beuys' found objects is utterly convincing; they are like frames from a historical documentary. . . . His obsessive interest in shamanism and the invocations of animal totems—hare, bee, stag, and the like, scribbled out in countless drawings, moulded in wax, and scratched on slate—has much more to do with [timeless] pantheism, [complementing] Beuys' insistence on the need for an "anthropological" art which could give ordinary human actions the character of ritual. . . . These mock-shamanistic rituals, this fiddling about with sticks and fat, bones and rust, blood (or at least *Blutwurst*), coarse felt, mud, gold, magicians' wands, and dead animals are meant to embody a state of pre-civilized consciousness. . . . They suggest, as the earlier "primitive" uses [of the early modernists] never did, that some return to barbarism is impending, that Europe will fall apart, and that its politics will revert to the magicians.

Hence the popularity of Beuys' art with young romantics. It offers the delicious *frisson* of earth-and-race imagery to people who live in high-rises. In Germany, the very idea of art based on primitive Teutonic origins has been fatally contaminated for the past forty years by Nazi fantasies. . . . Joseph Beuys was the first German artist after 1945 to wander freely among its more *völkische* areas . . . and to assemble from them an art of obstinate personal idiosyncrasy. As an inventor of memorable images and as a fabricator of contexts for them, Beuys has no European rivals. And he is an emblematic figure, too, typical of the late-modernist dilemma: a social critic whose work is underwritten as a prime culture-asset by the West German Government, and collected by every third banker and financier in the *Bundesrepublik*.<sup>15</sup>

Later in this book several of the points brought up here by Hughes will be examined in much greater detail. As we shall see, fat and felt had great meaning for Beuys, but, until now, the actual, published sources of his symbolism have gone unrecognized. The fact that Beuys's symbolism is essentially textual in origin also serves to demolish the famous Beuys myth about the helpful Tatars and their wonder-working fats and felts, a myth which, in any event, should be severely questioned on other grounds. As we shall also notice, even Beuys's distinctive raiment, the ubiquitous hat and vest, also has its likely *locus classicus* in this same body of published sources. Moreover, these occultist materials are specifically the source for Beuys's odd notions about "healing and magic."



These materials also inform Beuys's ideas about the great importance of education as the instrument of mankind's salvation and the means for a complete reformation of modern society.

But before we pursue these matters, we must first deal with the general context of Beuys's public activities, particularly what Hughes called his *völkische* and anthropological art" and his "mock-shamanistic rituals." These factors will all be analyzed here, not only as performance pieces but also as pseudoevents. Additionally, the strange case of Joseph Beuys will be here viewed as part and parcel of other, much larger phenomena in avant-garde culture, which have their own particular historical roots and quirky developments.

### Joseph Beuys, the Pseudoevent, and the Heroic Myth

Joseph Beuys and his ambiguous art products have been viewed by art critics (as opposed to art historians) in three ways. The largest critical camp would patently ignore him. The general public, and the Spaniards and the French in particular, have displayed a singular lack of interest in Beuys's otherwise widely heralded art activities. A second, far less passive group is composed of his youthful German-speaking *aficionados*, most of whom appear to accept his odd doings without posing probing questions about their ultimate significance. As one suspects, this unquestioning acceptance is due to the fact that Beuys's portentous "*Aktionen*" seem to them to have been generated by accepted, traditional or *völkische*, German practices. A third group is the transatlantic, or Anglo-Saxon, contingent. Here we find some fundamental misunderstandings, especially when Beuys is casually lumped in with the American (that is to say, decidedly *unvölkischer*) practitioners of the so-called "happenings," staged by conceptual (or) performance artists. The problems resulting from this mutual incomprehension are summed up by the English art critic, Adrian Henri, a chronicler of "total art," of environments, happenings, performances, and all those other avant-garde events. By Henri's reckoning, "Of all the artists [surveyed] in this book [*Total Art*], Joseph Beuys is the most difficult to characterize. . . . Furthermore, Beuys is quintessentially German [hence] often untranslatable and inexpressible."<sup>16</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment probably largely fictitious questions about the "untranslatable and inexpressible" German *Weltanschauung*, we see that Beuys himself was a shrewd appraiser of at least the superficial distinctions existing between his performance art and the kind put on in America. Beuys's stage activities were for a while associated with a movement he called *Fluxus*. In this context, as Beuys so clearly recognized, his staged activities were not art but instead social education. According to the artist, "The participatory role of the audience is not an essential element of the action. In contrast to Fluxus, in American Happenings almost every thing is reinforced by the audience, who



also act as themselves . . . i.e., they had more of the character of demonstrations and the audience took part conceptually." Therefore, and to the contrary, according to a further clarification by Beuys's Fluxus colleague, George Maciunas,

Fluxus' goals are social—not esthetic [and are aimed at a] step by step elimination of the fine arts: music, drama, poetry, prose, painting, sculpture, etc., etc. This motivates the desire to direct wasted material and human capabilities toward socially constructive goals . . . having an educational function: that of showing people how superfluous art is. . . . By the way, it is a good teaching method to scorn art and the avant-garde! . . . Because of this, Fluxus is ANTI-PROFESSIONAL: against professional art or the artist who earns his living through art. Secondly, Fluxus is against art as a medium and vehicle for the artist's ego [: it is] not to express the artist's personality or ego. For this reason, Fluxus tends toward the spirit of collectivism, to anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of Beuys's repeated assertions to the contrary, his Actions *are* generally judged as art, and thus they have become a favored fodder for art critics. But how could it be otherwise? Since these *Aktionen* had been literally "envisualized," in a literal sense they *were* "visual art." Then, of course, they were additionally presented as public events. Still, this is a unique kind of art—in effect, transmedia. Sometimes noisy, always colorful, and perennially enigmatic, Beuys's widely publicized Actions must be then ranked as theatre, another notoriously artistic endeavor. By this analysis, *Aktionen* at least had to belong to, or have been sanctioned by, art historical experience, since Beuys's performance pieces have their functional analogues in Dada and Cubist theatre pieces dating back to World War I.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the artist himself was filled with charisma, and his voluminous and cryptic statements smacked of poetry. As many people must have muttered to themselves, if you really cannot understand these phenomena so widely reported in the press, then they must be art, as they have commonly been called art in the media.

Nevertheless, Beuys had himself said that the Action was *not* art. So what was it? Leaving aside for the moment sticky matters of esthetic evaluation, we will consider Beuys's Actions as a series of pseudoevents, at least for the purpose of some radical redefinition. By taking this tack, we leave behind matters narrowly considered as art history and instead venture into the fuzzier territory of undifferentiated social phenomena. Nevertheless, this attitude may lead us toward some useful, new, and more wideranging perceptions of the Beuys phenomenon—indeed of certain preexistent and widespread cultural phenomena that have made such a thing both possible and important.

The classic definition of the pseudoevent is that provided some years ago by Daniel J. Boorstin, who said that, properly speaking, a pseudoevent must possess the following four characteristics:

1. It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview.

2. It is planted primarily (but not exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported. . . . The question "Is it real?" is less important than "Is it newsworthy?"

3. Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. Its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity. Concerning a pseudo-event, the question "What does it mean?" has a new dimension. While the news interest in a train wreck is in *what* happened and in the real consequences, the interest in an interview is always, in a sense, in *whether* it really happened and in what *might* have been the motives. Did the statement *really* mean what it said? Without some of this ambiguity, a pseudo-event cannot be very interesting.

4. Usually it is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. [For instance,] the hotels' thirtieth-anniversary celebration, by saying that the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually *makes* it one.<sup>19</sup>

Boorstin then goes on to tell us just which characteristics of pseudoevents make them overshadow spontaneous, or real, events. Legitimate questions exist concerning *what* might constitute a "spontaneous or real event" in the context of the contemporary art world. Nevertheless the reader is encouraged to ponder the applicability of the term pseudoevent—a situation having its own very real psychological causes and effects—when considering the overtly public nature of much of today's avant-garde performance art, the effects of which are widely disseminated by avant-garde media. Again by Boorstin's reckoning, there are eight factors that make pseudoevents inevitably superior to their "real" counterparts:

1. Pseudo-events are more dramatic.
2. Pseudo-events, being planned for dissemination, are easier to disseminate and to make vivid. Participants are selected for their newsworthy and dramatic interest.
3. Pseudo-events can be repeated at will, and thus their impression can be reinforced.
4. Pseudo-events cost money to create; hence somebody has an interest in disseminating, magnifying, advertising, and extolling them as events worth watching or worth believing. They are, therefore, advertised in advance, and re-run, in order to get their money's worth.
5. Pseudo-events [such as political debates], being planned for intelligibility, are more intelligible and hence more reassuring.
6. Pseudo-events are more sociable, more conversable and more convenient to witness. Their occurrence is planned for our convenience.
7. Knowledge of pseudo-events—of what has been reported, or what has been staged, and how—becomes the test of being "informed" [of] what has been reported in the news magazines. Pseudo-events begin to provide that "common discourse" which some of my old-fashioned friends have hoped to find in the Great Books.
8. Finally, pseudo-events spawn other pseudo-events in geometric progression. They dominate our consciousness simply because there are more of them, and ever more.<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to observe that, of the eight factors cited by Boorstin as making a pseudoevent preferable to the "real thing," only intelligibility seems *inappli-*



cable to Beuys's staged pseudoevents. Nevertheless, as even the public would probably acknowledge, that factor is just what makes it avant-garde.

In any event, clearly the Beuys phenomenon was a media creation. As David Carrier had observed, capitalistic, media-based art criticism may have ominous connotations in "the present art-world system." For instance, Allan Sekula, an exhibited photographer, has commented upon the present-day "fact that the art-promotional system converts everything it handles into 'fashion,' while dishing out a good quantity of liberal obfuscation." Since this artist presumably has some "insider" perceptions of the working relationships between the art media and the art marketplace, his comments are worth examining alongside Boorstin's definitions of the factors determining the pseudoevent. In the marketplace of postmodernism, Sekula states that

elite culture becomes a parasitical, "mannerist" representation of mass culture, a private-party sideshow, with its own photo-journalism, gossip column reviews, promoters, celebrity pantheon, and narcissistic stellar-bound performers. The charisma of the art star is subject to an overdeveloped bureaucratism. Careers are "managed." Innovation is regularized, adjusted to the demands of the market. Modernism, *per se* (as well as the lingering ghost of bohemianism), is transformed into farce, into a professionalism based on academic appointments, periodic exposure, lofty real estate speculation in the former factory districts of decaying cities, massive state funding, jet travel, and increasingly ostentatious corporate patronage of the arts. This last development represents an attempt by monopoly capital to "humanize" its image for the middle-managerial and professional subclasses (the vicarious consumers of high culture, the museum audience) in the face of an escalating legitimization crisis. High art is rapidly becoming a specialized colony of the monopoly capitalist media.<sup>21</sup>

If we grant validity to Sekula's acerbic observations, then we may carry his arguments a further critical step by pointing out yet another contemporary functional cultural analogue. Given that we are dealing with commercial ventures—"business"—and granted that these enterprises are based upon the particular business of exhibiting certain products—"showing art"—then, by an inevitable tautology, we literally have "show business." We shall then point up the known characteristics of show business, as best epitomized by the popular TV show aptly called "Entertainment Tonight." After watching several editions of this quintessentially neo-*völkische* product (the ultimate expression of the vox populi), we deduce that the essence of show business must embrace the following factors: (1) It is basically omnivorous and ephemeral in nature; (2) it invests all its actions with "glamor" (a term impossible to define succinctly, given its nearly mystical ramifications); (3) it has for a focal-point the concept of the "celebrity," an ephemeral byproduct, omnivorously consumed; (4) it is, given the preceding, both prey to and the product of endlessly fluctuating "fashion"; (5) it provides, as a rule, a bogus palliative, a way of distancing its audiences from the dreary facts of their humdrum daily existence, singularly devoid of but



striving for glamor, or for "fashion," its ersatz alternative; (6) it is both self-generating and self-congratulating; (7) it is based upon networking, that is, it is internally referent and highly exclusive in its membership; (8) and finally, and most importantly, show business is both the creature and the accomplice of the media.

Whether or not Joseph Beuys was a willing accomplice, these are undeniably the latent manifestations of the late-modernist art world in which he flourished as a star. Nevertheless, even if the skeptical reader were to grant that Beuys's widely extolled performance pieces did function within the social-psychological matrix of the media-generated pseudoevent, this viewpoint still fails to take into account Beuys's own stated purposes. In effect, a pseudoevent is what *others* made of Beuys's unquestionably sincere public demonstrations. Moreover, it is the course of time—specifically of art history—that has tended to make *all* performance art partake of the "art promotional system" psychology attached to the pseudoevent. Boorstin, although certainly not a historian of art, sums it up neatly. After the world premieres of the avant-garde performance piece, just before World War I, such "pseudoevents spawned other pseudoevents in geometric progression."

The preceding is not a value judgment, simply a more-or-less objective historical observation. To this, one may add yet another observation, again not drawn from the literature of the visual arts. As the evidence strewn about in the popular German press amply confirms, in his *Heimat* Joseph Beuys was viewed as a hero. Thus, his life course, "*Lebenslauf*," takes on the mythic characteristics of another *völkische* staple, the "*Heldenleben*." As we learn from a classic study of literature and myth—Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)—all genuine heroes of folk tradition, are the multiform expression of "truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology."<sup>22</sup> Following Freud, Campbell explains that all heroes are in effect expressions of a greater monomyth which includes the following three liminal passages through the universal *Lebenslauf*: (1) separation or departure; (2) trials and victories of initiation; (3) return and reintegration with society; in short, the ultimate triumph and vindication of the hero's life and labors. All of this also applies to the Joseph Beuys's *heldenartige Lebenslauf*, which explains why, regardless of any question of possible esthetic worth, we may believe that Joseph Beuys will become a literally "timeless" figure. And, as a *kunsthistorische* type, this is one to be enshrined forever in that ultimate monument to the eternalized avant-garde personality, the undergraduate art history textbook.

## Joseph Beuys on Stage as *The Chief*

In attempting to approach the larger meaning of the Beuys phenomenon, it will be useful to reexamine the surfaces of its distinctive physiognomy. This particular reconnaissance surveys the terrain under which we shall eventually, like assiduous archaeologists, begin to excavate, with the spoons and dental tools of the iconologist. For these purposes, a characteristic Beuys *Aktion* will serve nicely, epitomizing, at least on the surface of the dig, the philosophical ramifications of the classic Fluxus event. Acoustic effects, dancelike body movements, far-out music, mumbled mouthings or shouting, and the manipulation of bizarre materials all shaped the format of the Fluxus performances. Beneath the surface, Howard Smagula has perceived a shared belief in "*animism*: the conviction that all objects possess hidden life, meaning and vitality." As he affirms, "this philosophical aspect of Fluxus strongly appealed to Beuys' own *mystical belief* in the potential life of certain materials; also, he believed that through their performance-methodology everything could be illustrated. This form turned out to be a perfect vehicle for his didactic art."<sup>23</sup> Although essentially accurate, these observations still merit some criticisms. While Smagula's argument is correct on one level, it lacks any awareness of the fact that Beuys's notions are largely occultist. Moreover, in the art-historical sense, no attention has been paid to the current scholarly awareness of the esoteric tradition, especially the fact of its obsessive, century-long progress in avant-garde art. This omission confirms the accuracy of recent scholarly observations. In effect, if we offhandedly and uncritically claim that an artist was beholden to a certain "mystical belief," we take this "mystical" condition for granted, as a given.

Radical artists are apparently now *expected* to work from mystical beliefs. The consequence of this tacit assumption, at least in the skeptical view of the art-historical detective, is less than enlightenment. In short, because someone like Beuys is expected to be, by nature, "mystical," no one ever bothers to find the specific sources of his esoteric beliefs. Furthermore, such unquestioned assumptions seem in themselves to be occultist, specifically, astrological: it is as though this or that artist had been born under the baleful conjunction of some unnamed mystical stars. Such obfuscation-by-omission fails both to specify the exact nature of those mystical beliefs, and to determine the character of their specific effect upon the artist's choice of imagery. Such are the many unasked questions we mean to answer in the course of what follows.

Before these literally *occultus* details can be unearthed, we must, however, return to a consideration of the surface. Smagula's point of interpretive departure is an Action of 1964, *The Chief*. First performed late in 1963 in Copenhagen, it was to be repeated on December 1, 1964, in the temporarily "sanctified" architectural context of the René Block Gallery in Berlin. *The Chief* is a slow, concentrated, meditative, and particularly ceremonial performance piece.



It is designed to elicit not outrage but a kind of quietest introspection and some meditative questioning ("What does it really mean?") from the enraptured audience. It is long too, like a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For nine unrelenting hours, the unprepossessing Berlin art gallery was magically transformed by Beuys's ritualistic activities, oddly combining anachronistic aspects of ancient primitivist ritual with modern high-tech electronics. Such were the provocative New Age media for old-fashioned "consciousness expansion."

According to a German critic, this highly contrived affair had truly portentous and potentially far-reaching consequences, that is, it was nothing less than an attack on "indifference and stereotyped thinking," designed "to set into motion a thrust of energy (*Energieschub*) that would awaken in the audience the sensibility for a human creative existence embracing time and space, whose complexities would be presented in the sum of the action."<sup>24</sup> Throughout his intense performance—"the sum of the action"—Beuys, who had completely hidden his physical presence within an oblong roll of grey felt, muttered a series of varied sounds, seemingly incantations. These were electronically conveyed to the rapt witnesses by means of a microphone stuck into Beuys's hermetically sealed felt cocoon. The would-be chrysalis had been wired to an amplifier, allowing Beuys's hermetic libretto to be projected from a multiple speaker system. The evidently highly effective sound effects included heavy breathing, gurglings, coughs, groans, sighs, and whistles. Predominant, however, was this particular litany: "uh, uh, uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh; uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh"; this represented, said Beuys, the poignant, throaty cry of the "wild stag."

If we grant that Beuys's *The Chief* was conceived, at least in part, as a kind of media event, then we must also believe that a media representative would eventually have made his presence—as witness and chronicler—known in print to the stay-at-home masses huddled outside the pale of this transient gallery experience. In this case, the obligatory testator for the media was Wolf Vostell, and his detailed eye-witness report to the *Volk* quickly appeared in a Berlin newspaper. Because of the invaluable documentary quality of this highly circumstantial and speculative account—including minute measurements, but reading at times like an anachronistic "*acti apostolorum*"—it deserves to be quoted in full. It very nearly allows us the sensation of having been there, of having shared in this uniquely liminal, ego-transformative, conscious-expanding experience. As Vostell later explained to his readers,

During the long soiree at the René Block Gallery there occurred a situation [*eine Umgebung*], a space, a demonstration, or whatever one wants to call it, by Joseph Beuys. . . . It was entitled "*Der Chef-Fluxus-Gesang*" and the performance began at 4 p.m. and ended around midnight.

What was seen?



In a 5 × 8 meter, brightly lit room in the gallery, a roll of felt lay diagonally in the middle of the floor. Inside the roll was Joseph Beuys, a professor at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, and, since 1963, a self-proclaimed member of the international Fluxus group, who, with George Maciunas in 1962, helped these international efforts achieve a breakthrough in Fluxus Festivals. arrived at by means of the new music and the newest ideas. The felt roll was 2.25 meters long and 46 centimeters wide. At both ends of the roll, as an extension of Beuys [hidden inside], there were two dead rabbits, one being 24 cm wide by 64 cm long, and the other one was 70 cm long and 13 cm wide. On the left wall of the room, and parallel to the lower edge of the walls, ran a 167 cm long by 7 cm wide length of fat, or German margarine.

About 165 cm above the floor was a hank of hair, 6 × 7 cm thick, and, to the left of this, there were two fingernails, each 1.5 cm wide—and possibly both were fetishes from the unconquered past [*Fetische aus der unbewältigten Vergangenheit*]?

In the left corner of the room there was another corner of fat, 30 × 30 cm, with two others by the door, to the right and left hand. In the right corner of the room there was yet another square of fat, 5 × 5 cm. To the left, near Beuys in the roll, a second roll of felt was wrapped around a staff made of copper, 178 cm in length. In the room to the right there was an amplifier, registering in minute detail everything that happened in the environment.

What was heard?

At regular intervals, through his microphone, which loudly amplified them, from his roll Beuys sent out acoustical messages. One heard: breathing in, breathing out, gurglings in his throat, coughs, sighings, grumbings, hissing, whistling, and a whole encyclopedia of fragmentary sounds—a vocabulary. From a second tape recorder a composition by Eric Anderson and Henning Christiansen was played at quite irregular intervals, apparently to contrast with Beuys' noises.

In the next room of the Gallery (which was otherwise empty that day) was the audience: the curious, hungry seekers after novelty, people sleeping in their clothes, representatives from the press, family members and friends, the disconcerted and the timid, the contemplative ones, those gasping for their breath, those seeking explanations; people sitting, people standing, people.

One heard phrases, such as this one: "Unfortunately, I know nothing at all about this; what is it?" Or: "Has Herr Professor Beuys really been inside that roll for eight hours?" Or: "Isn't he hungry?" Or: "Is *this* Fluxus?" Or: "Is this a Happening?" What are both of these? [Answer:] A Happening is a multiple series of events that one must experience with one's own body!

People come and go. Much of the time it is quiet—and even pious, something like a religious, mystical rite [*einem religiösen, mystischen Akt*]. Is it then Ritual? Many had waited (but for what?). Some finally saw Beuys climb out of his roll at twelve midnight. One of them asked him a direct question: "Why did you recommend that the [Berlin] wall be raised by five centimeters?" Beuys' reply: "On the wall there are two kinds of men who are pushing against one another, who have independently developed in different situations. That could only happen here!" Beuys loves all men [*Beuys liebt alle Menschen*].

For the majority of the public, this represented an encounter with Beuys, his impulses and his notions about sculptural form. For the rest, it was just a reason to see one another again. Socializing? Or should Beuys' tragic "Fluxus Song" instead really pose for them a riddle? Often it appears to do so; but then, again, there is just laziness: personal and familiar chitchat about the problems of daily life. But, here and there, there is devotion, and wonderment for [Beuys's] display.

A funeral rite? This is another factor. Beuys calls his work a demonstration of a sculptural principle. Very few of the people were aware that he had by another means [i.e., magically] transported the roll of felt, with the copper staff that had lain near him, namely by means of himself and the two rabbits. This reminded me of an African who, at the gathering of his sect,

had played at being a locomotive for an hour. Does that mean then that the locomotive replaces itself as sculpture, as an event? Beuys as sculpture? The whole environment as sculpture? Is it to let oneself become an Event? Is it to be sculpture and [at the same time] alive?

Beuys said: "I am a transmitter; I radiate out." Is this a cult action [*eine kultische Handlung*]?

What did Beuys really think about as he lay within his roll? What did the audience in Berlin think? . . . What did the dead rabbits think; can dead hares actually think [*können tote Hasen eigentlich denken*]? What did the corners of fat think? Can sculptures made of fat actually think? [Is it meant] to bring us to a state of reflection? *Ja!* Will the image persist?

These are all questions and answers offered to us by Beuys. In deciphering them, our uncertainty is immense; but that is also good. In any case, the evening was rather more like a road leading to a philosophical theatre.<sup>25</sup>

So, as attested to by Wolf Vostell, what are the effects of and the questions still posed by the provocative "*Weg zum philosophischen Theater*" of Joseph Beuys? Whereas these effects were based upon "the newest ideas," nevertheless the questions posed were timeless, at least for those sufficiently sensitive to perceive them. "What is it?" was, of course, not the proper reaction. On the other hand, the notion of "a riddle" seemed more acceptable, particularly one resembling those once posed by the Sphinx. It all seemed, somehow, "tragic." For the insensitives, it was merely an opportunity to "socialize" (not surprisingly, given the latent pseudoevent context). Moreover, merely to see (rather than actively witness) this event is just to fall into another bout of laziness and miss the experience of "wonderment," or even, for the hypersensitives, "devotion." Such were the positive effects of *The Chief*, that is, after one had been forcibly driven to a proper state of "reflection." It is, after all, "a good thing" when the whole effort seems so difficult to decipher, due to all these wonderful "questions and riddles," leaving *das Volk* "gasping for its breath." In sum, and as Vostell correctly guessed, this was pure "ritual," nothing more or less than "a cult action."

A cult action obviously presupposes the existence of a more-or-less cohesive group, a body of people holding certain interests or beliefs in common. To them, the ritual action portends significance; to the outsider, of course, it probably means nothing. As with a language, one must be initiated into the operating principles and governing rules. Without any knowledge of these, there is no inner connection, no communication. As previously stated, and in different ways, the Beuys phenomenon—regardless of what Beuys himself signified—must take into account the nature of its audience, of its committed promoters and of its avid consumers. Thus, the Beuys phenomenon, as a peripheral object of art-historical interest, must itself be interpreted within the timeless context of crowd psychology. The lone artist is one thing, the heterogeneous crowd/audience perhaps something quite different. This critical distinction was perhaps best summarized by the poet Friedrich Schiller: "Anyone, taken as an individual, is tolerably sensible and reasonable—as a member of a crowd, he at once

becomes a blockhead." Certainly the study of crowd psychology is nothing new; as Charles Mackay observed in 1852 in his classic study on *The Madness of Crowds*,

In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly, more captivating than the first. . . . Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.<sup>26</sup>

The context of Beuys's performances and, particularly, the lair of their audiences is the generic "city." The urban setting, and its highly specialized psychological conditionings, are essential to a general understanding of the Beuys phenomenon. Thus, according to Mackay,

The popular humours of a great city are a never-failing source of amusement. . . . But, like all other earthly things, [any particular fashion] has its season, and passes away as suddenly as it arose, never again to be the pet and idol of the populace. A new claimant drives it from its place, and holds undisputed sway, till, in its turn, it is hurled from its pre-eminence, and a successor appointed in its stead. . . . These are the whimsies of the mass—the harmless follies by which they unconsciously endeavour to lighten the load of care which presses upon their existence.<sup>27</sup>

This mass-psychological digression may now lead us back to our proper subject, in this case to a historical consideration of performance pieces as a characteristic genre of avant-garde art—in effect, very specialized "whimsies" for an elite class of cognoscenti. Beuys's ever-enigmatic *Aktionen* appear to belong to—or at least to have developed from—this tradition, one going back at least to the Renaissance. However, he certainly added some new (and apparently unexpected) wrinkles to its evolution.



## The Performance Piece: A Functional Context

### A Background for Beuys: The Origins of Performance Art

Ignoring some possible medieval precedents—including, on the one hand, the itinerant troubadours and the jongleurs and, on the other, the mystery plays—the true functional antecedents of modern performance art should be traced directly to the Renaissance period. Neoplatonism, a mythicizing and inherently allegorizing belief system, represented a “new wave” in fifteenth-century Italy. Following the surrender of Constantinople in 1453, Byzantine scholars fled to the West, bringing in their train direct knowledge of and a heightened interest in both original and derivative (neo) Platonist texts. Under the patronage of the Medici family an “Academia Platonica” was founded in Florence, with Marsilio Ficino as a major promoter of the new ideas. As is well known to students of Renaissance art, neoplatonic ideas soon shaped patrons’ notions of the role of the artist and eventually determined the character of many courtly commissions for both painting cycles and ephemeral processions.<sup>2</sup>

As a natural vehicle for allegorical display, Neoplatonism soon became a vital factor in artistic attempts to give visual form to abstract political notions; thus did a prototypical avant-garde philosophy become a convenient medium for didacticism and timely propaganda. The Renaissance performance piece had of course its own traditional precedents: on the one hand, medieval ecclesiastical ritual and urban church processions; and, on the other, the formalized rituals of secularized feudalism, such as jousts between competing knights. Of central interest to the Renaissance developments, however, was a generalized but specifically neoplatonic idea that the earth is but an imperfect, mundane representation in visual form of the perfect, supercelestial archetypes, or “*ideas*,” known only to the divine *Logos*.<sup>3</sup> This notion gave the neoplatonically inspired and symbolically staged rituals the potential to become “parallel realities.” In short, these artificial, but often highly illusionistic, representations were apparently

taken to be at least as “real” as the world around them. (This imposed dialectic between phenomenal reality and artistic illusionism remains an ongoing concern of late-modernist dialectics.)

The Renaissance designers of those propagandizing pageants, or parallel realities, became by their activities visionary “creators” rather than mere artisans (or propaganda hacks). Once this useful philosophical component had been established within *Quattrocento* culture, artists were free to create all manner of artworks compatible with the technology of the day—and in conformity with the self-aggrandizing interests and pretensions of their powerful patrons. From designing fountains to producing transient triumphal spectacles, Renaissance artists—protomodernists—were encouraged in new, specifically multimedia, directions. Among the new categories of allegorizing propagandistic activities, all encouraging the new ephemeral multimedia experimentations, were the following: (1) *carri allegorici*—“allegorical carts,” the real predecessors of the Rose Bowl floats; (2) *trionfi*—triumphal processions, often requiring the construction of elaborately programmed triumphal arches largely constructed of papier maché; (3) *grottescherie*, *capricci*, and *balle mascherie*—masquerades and choreographed events with elaborately costumed actors, sometimes including the sovereigns themselves in featured roles, all directly leading to the magnificent contrivances of the topical masques of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.<sup>4</sup>

Records, textual for the most part, serve to document the existence of some early ventures in the public, multimedia performance piece. In 1492 the great Renaissance architect Donato Bramante was ordered by Gian-Galeazzo Sforza, Duke of Milan, to create “*una fantasia per mettere a spettacolo*”; unfortunately, today we know no other details of this “fantastic spectacle.” Thanks to written descriptions by the court poet Bernardo Bellincioni, more is known of Leonardo’s pageant, called *il Paradiso*, staged at the behest of the Sforzas in 1490, in which performers costumed as the seven planets spun in orbits while reciting verses proclaiming the return of a golden age, due of course to the efforts of the Milanese rulers.<sup>5</sup> A few years later, Raphael painted the sets for a dramatic spectacle, Ariosto’s *Lena*. In 1535 Polidoro da Caravaggio designed the elaborate trappings for a triumphal procession into Messina by the Hapsburg emperor, Charles V. In 1589 Bernardo Buontalenti designed a round of festivities—“*gli Intermezzi*”—for the marriage of the Medici dukes in Florence, including a mock naval battle to take place in the flooded courtyard of the Palazzo Pitti.<sup>6</sup>

What is important to note here is the sheer ephemerality of all these concoctions, another major conceptual link to the contemporary performance piece. Whereas the present-day avant-garde event is carefully “documented,” either through still photography or videotape, these earlier efforts are known to us today only through a few written descriptions, drawings from the hands of their designers, occasional prints, and, more usefully, illustrated commemora-

tive pamphlets attempting to make a more permanent record of these thoughtfully conceived works.<sup>7</sup> The latter kind of documentation became ever more abundant in the Baroque period, often accompanied by lengthy texts outlining the underlying symbolic programs.<sup>8</sup>

Central to the concerns of the Renaissance designers of performance pieces was the notion of what we may call "theatricality." As expressed by Leon Battista Alberti, this concept clearly elaborates certain ideas first laid down by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, a contemporary of the emperor Augustus. In his *De re architectura, libri decum*, the Roman architect provided the Renaissance with the only known complete treatise on classical theory and practice of fine arts, also including practical descriptions of many kinds of elaborate machinery largely forgotten during the Middle Ages. Vitruvius in fact made some strange, even cosmic, evaluations of such contrivances, thus perhaps explaining the fascination for the elaborate stage-machinery-generated effects in the Renaissance *spettacoli*; as the Roman observed, almost neoplatonically,

All machinery is derived from nature, and is founded on the teaching and instruction of the revolution of the firmament. . . . Thus, when our ancestors had seen that this was so, they took their models [*ideas*] from nature, and, by imitating them, were led on by divine facts, until they perfected the contrivances which are so serviceable in our life. . . . Whatever they found to be useful for investigations, for the arts, and for established practices, they took care to improve step by step on scientific principles.<sup>9</sup>

In the fifth part of his book, discussing the design principles of ancient theatres, Vitruvius made another authoritative statement, in this case one dealing directly with what may today be called the site-specific nature of the relationships between mood and setting, as ordered within a specifically theatrical situation. As Vitruvius affirmed,

There are three kinds of scenes. . . . Their decorations are different and unlike each other in scheme. *Tragic* scenes are delineated with columns, pediments, statues and other objects suited to kings. *Comic* scenes exhibit private dwellings, with balconies and views representing rows of windows, after the manner of ordinary dwellings. *Satyrical* scenes are decorated with trees, caverns, mountains, and other rustic objects delineated in the landscape style.<sup>10</sup>

By the time Leon Battista Alberti came to write his treatise on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (first published in Florence in 1485), such functional-psychological, site-specific ideas had become commonplace. As we read in the opening statements of his eighth book,

We have formerly observed, that the ornaments annexed to all sorts of buildings make an essential part of architecture, and it is manifest that every kind of ornament is not proper for every kind of structure. Thus we are to endeavor, to the utmost of our power, to make our sacred works, especially if they are of a public nature, as completely adorned as possible, as



being intended for the honor of the Gods; whereas profane structures are designed entirely for men. The meaner therefore ought to yield to the more honorable; but yet they too may be embellished with such ornaments as are suitable to them.<sup>11</sup>

Alberti, as he inferred from Vitruvius's references to certain long-lost treatises, came to realize that ancient Greek knowledge of perspective had been derived from scenographic design techniques; thus perspective itself had been developed within the context of the theatrical performance piece. In 1435 Alberti authored the first Renaissance treatise, *Della Pittura*, dealing with geometrical perspective construction systems in painting. In his pioneering little book, Alberti manifested a neoplatonic bias, stating that the plastic arts—once they have been firmly based upon scientific mathematical principles—represent an artificial imposition of the universal Ideas, extrapolated from a phenomenal world in a state of continuous flux. As Alberti put it,

Mathematicians measure with their minds alone the forms of things separated from all matter. The permanent qualities [of the plane] are of two kinds [:] the outline [*orlo*] and the surface [*superficie*]. . . . [Nevertheless.] as soon as the observer changes his position, these planes *appear* [to be] larger, of a different outline or of a different color. . . . [Painters] should only seek to present the forms of things seen on this plane, as if it were of transparent glass. . . . Each painter, in painting this plane, places himself at a distance, as if searching the point and angle of the pyramid, from which point he understands that the thing painted is best seen. . . . All things are known by comparison. Perhaps Protagoras, by saying that man is the mode and measure of all things, meant that all the accidents of things are known through comparison to the accidents of man.<sup>12</sup>

Once again the argument is site-specific; as Alberti concludes, "A painted thing can never appear truthful where there is not a definite distance for seeing it."<sup>13</sup> The illusionistic art of painting is above all else the capturing of ephemera: "What else can you call painting but an embracing with art of that which is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain? Quintillian said that the ancient painters used to circumscribe shadows [momentarily] cast by the sun, and from this our art has grown."<sup>14</sup> Alberti even came up with a concrete means by which to mediate between the artificially fixed artistic Idea and the phenomenal world constantly in flux: the veil, or *velo*. "It is a thin veil, finely woven. . . . This veil I place between the eye and the thing seen. . . . Good relief and a likeness of the subject should be expected. This I do not believe can ever be done without the use of the veil."<sup>15</sup> Another central concept revealing Alberti's quasitheatrical ideas is that of the *Istoria*, a narrative and, above all, a psychological linkage between the disparate parts, creating a protoeurythmic unity that he describes as almost literally "choreographed":

That which first gives pleasure in the *istoria* comes from copiousness and variety of things. In food and in music, novelty and abundance please, as they are different from the old and

usual. . . . However, I prefer this copiousness to be embellished with a certain variety, yet moderate and grave, with dignity and truth. . . . I strongly approve in an *istoria* that which I see observed by tragic and comic poets. They tell a story with as few characters as possible. In my judgment, no picture will be filled with so great a variety of things that nine or ten men are not able to act with dignity. . . . [But] be careful not to repeat the same gesture or pose. The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man portrayed there clearly shows the movements of his own soul [:] we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. *These movements of the soul are made known by the movements of the body.* . . . Whatever the persons do among themselves, or with the beholder, all is pointed toward ornamenting or teaching the *istoria*. . . . We painters who wish to show the movements of the soul by movements of the body are concerned solely with the movement of change and of place. . . . Thus each one with dignity has his own movements to express whatever movements of the soul he wishes.<sup>16</sup>

From this Attanasio di Felice has concluded that in Alberti's widely read scientific speculations and prescriptions, "including the pioneering use of illusionistic perspective, [there was] the seed of that tendency toward theatricalization in all the arts which culminated in the Baroque."<sup>17</sup> And it is from the Baroque period that we have for the first time a substantial body of documentation about the performance art of a major artist, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680).<sup>18</sup> From the outset, his career was marked by a concern with spectacle and ritual, either absolutist-monarchistic or religious, specifically Catholic. For his many staged spectacles, Bernini wrote the scripts, designed the scenes and costumes, carved the sculptures, planned innovative effects of lighting and sound derived from elaborate feats of engineering, and even served as his own producer-director. Perhaps the most brilliant example of his daring theatricality was his *L'Inondazione*, a flood scene staged in Rome in 1638 and featuring real rushing waters that alarmed the audience greatly—and rightly so, since a substantially built house situated alongside the Tiber collapsed as a result of Bernini's titanic merging of illusion and reality.<sup>19</sup> Howard Hibbard observes how Bernini's theatrical devices "tended to break down the psychic as well as physical barriers between staged drama and human spectators," that is between "art" and "life."<sup>20</sup> The artist's son, Domenico, recalled in detail yet another daring performance piece by Bernini,

named *La Fiera*, in which he represented on the stage a carnival float with an escort carrying torches of tar and tow. One of those, who carried the torches and whose part it was to make the trick, rubbed and then re-rubbed his torch against the scene, in the way one usually does against the sides of walls, as if he wanted to spread the flame. Some of the spectators and, moreover, some of those on the stage shouted loudly for him to stop, for fear that he would ignite the set. His action, and the voices of the others, awakened in the people some apprehension, which was scarcely conceived before it degenerated into fear: because they saw the set, and with it a good part of the stage, kindled by artful and innocent flames which, spreading little by little, created a universal conflagration of it all. The terror of the spectators was such that someone would have perished in the precipitate escape from the imminent danger. But at



the height of the confusion and of the fire, the scene was changed with extraordinary orderliness, and the apparent conflagration became a most delightful garden. In the audience the astonishment at this sudden novelty was greater than the terror created by the fire, so that everyone, being stupefied, excused his fear by *praising the deception*.<sup>21</sup>

As striking as these earlier examples of the performance piece must have been for their audiences, they are, other than in their most generalized analogies, far removed from the spirit and, above all, the context of the performance piece of the present-day avant-garde. As Domenico Bernini explained, for a seventeenth-century connoisseur, the major attraction was "deception," admittedly combined with a certain *frisson* of imminent danger. This was an art of illusionism, par excellence; in the Renaissance and Baroque *spettacoli* appearances aped the accepted rules of reality "out there." Above all, there was a communal reference point, a common language of learned, allegorical display. All of this, however, radically changed with the withering of interest in and growing incomprehension of religious and courtly ritual. No longer communal, later performance art became largely sensual in its effects, hermetic in its symbolism, and, above all, private and individualistic in its enactments.

### A Precedent for Beuys: The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Superficial structural analogies aside, we have briefly observed the radical break between the function and spirit of the Renaissance performance piece and its modern offshoots. This break with tradition needs to be examined in further detail. In the most obvious sense this caesura has to do with a basic idea of modernism itself, a commonplace notion which has been summed up by one writer as representing "the idea of a radical rupture with European artistic tradition."<sup>22</sup> In another sense, performance art conforms to a fundamental notion underlying the concept of the avant-garde, one of the functions of which is, according to Renato Poggioli, the expression of "activism," obviously a prerequisite for the activity-based performance piece. For instance, Poggioli has observed how "activism" also describes "a precise formal tendency within German Expressionism . . . elevating psychological revolt to the level of practical and social reform." Nevertheless, this tendency nearly inevitably leads to a seemingly opposed result: "the idea of a blind, gratuitous activity, the cult of the act" (Poggioli also notes the titles of two quintessentially Expressionist publications, *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*).<sup>23</sup>

Other key, distinctly modernist, ideas separating the intentions and formulation of the late modernist performance piece from its supposed Renaissance predecessors are the complementary notions of "synesthesia"—the overlap among sense perceptions—and "simultaneism"—a manifestation of the totality of expe-



rience.<sup>24</sup> One can trace these specifically modernist effects in turn to their own immediate artistic-historical prototype: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner, what the German musicologist H. H. Stuckenschmidt calls "a 'total' work of art involving both eye and ear."<sup>25</sup> Stuckenschmidt also calls our attention to a much larger Wagnerian effect: "a cult of suffering, finding sanctuary in the idea of redemption. . . . Not merely agony, but the ability to give expression to it in its most intensified form, became the paramount aim in the aesthetic hierarchy of the age. . . . Wagner signified the beginning of a new era in which there would be an end to harmonic and tonal tradition."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Wagner's highly popular performance pieces—incorporating music, painting, poetry, drama, dance, and lush, overripe emotionality—had first introduced the typically modernist-subjectivist concept of the "total theatre" to mass audiences in both Europe and the Americas. The excitement attendant upon these performances was brilliantly conveyed by Charles Baudelaire in an article published in 1861:<sup>27</sup>

Wagner's concerts promised to be a veritable battle of doctrines, like one of those solemn crises in art, one of those confused scimmages into which critics, artists and public have the habit of flinging all their passions. . . . I quote the following passage from an article by M. [Héctor] Berlioz (9 February 1860): "The foyer of the Théâtre-Italien was a curious sight to see on the night of the first concert. It was nothing but angry shouts and arguments, which always seemed on the point of ending in blows. . . . In our country at least, when it is a matter of appreciating a type of music different from the normal run, passion and prejudice alone are vocal, preventing good sense and good taste from getting a word in."<sup>28</sup>

Having drawn for us (with the help of Berlioz) a vivid picture of the avant-garde context of doctrinal strife surrounding Wagner's overwhelming performance piece, Baudelaire then sets about to convey the uniquely mystical-sensual-emotional—in short, *synesthesiac*—perceptual-conceptual significance of what he had just witnessed. From this it becomes clear that, at least for this hypersensitive witness, "total" theater leads to a truly "total" experience, that is, "simultaneity"—nothing less than a revelation of the "reciprocal analogies," the "oneness" of all of God's creations! According to Baudelaire,

By means of the innumerable combinations of sound, the tumults of the human soul, Richard Wagner was the equal of the most exalted, and certainly was as great as the greatest. I have often heard the opinion expressed that music could not claim to convey anything with precision, as words or painting do. That is true to a certain extent, but it is not wholly true. Music conveys things in its own way and by means peculiar to itself. . . .

The only really surprising thing would be that sound could not suggest color, that colors could not give the idea of melody, and that both sound and color together were unsuitable as media for ideas; since *all things always have been expressed by reciprocal analogies, ever since the day when God created the world as a complex, indivisible totality.*<sup>29</sup>

Baudelaire, having thus thoughtfully acknowledged the transcendental nature of his performance-induced cosmic revelation, with spectacular eloquence then proceeds to relate to us the exact nature of this revelation's sensual, earth-bound equivalencies:

I felt freed from the constraint of weight, and recaptured the memory of the rare joy that dwells in high places. . . . Then, involuntarily, I evoked the delectable state of a man possessed by a profound reverie in total solitude, but a solitude with vast horizons and bathed in a diffused light; immensity without other decor than itself. Soon I became aware of a heightened brightness, of a light growing in intensity so quickly that the shades of meaning provided by a dictionary would not suffice to express this constant increase of burning whiteness. Then I achieved a full apprehension of a soul floating in light, of an ecstasy compounded of joy and insight, hovering above and far removed from the natural world.<sup>30</sup>

Baudelaire correctly concluded that he "had undergone, or so at least it seemed to me, *a spiritual operation, a revelation*." To these striking observations by Baudelaire, there may now be added another, pointing out a much larger historical context for his otherworldly experiences. In short, his account both sets the rapturous tone and has the transcendental content found in all the greatest mystic writers belonging to the esoteric tradition (including, of course, Swedenborg). As one now wonders, are these not the same marvelous and soul-transforming results sought by all *modern* performance artists? Whatever the "average" performance artist today might answer, the evidence will prove that certainly these were the "soul-transformative" effects eagerly desired—and apparently achieved—by Joseph Beuys in his own *Aktionen*.

But what precisely was in Richard Wagner's mind over a hundred and thirty years ago? Can his underlying ideas be shown to parallel those of Joseph Beuys? To answer these questions, again our best source is Charles Baudelaire. The Frenchman, unquestionably endowed with a most discerning mind, quoted some statements written by "the master himself"; in these, Wagner got right to the heart of the significance and purposes of his multimedia performance art. As transcribed by Baudelaire, the German composer stated that

the only picture of human life that may be called poetic is the one where all motivations, that [used to] have meaning only for the abstract intelligence, [now] give way to purely human motives rooted in the heart. This tendency—the one relating to the invention of the poetic subject—is the sovereign law that governs the poetic form and representation. . . . From this stage, I say that I was inevitably being led to point to the *Myth* as the ideal material for the poet.

As Wagner further claimed,

The myth is the primitive and anonymous poetry of the *Peuple*, and we find it taken up again in every age, remodelled constantly by the great poets of cultivated ages. In the myth, indeed, human relations discard almost completely their conventional form, intelligible only to abstract



reason. They show what is really human in life, what can be understood in any age, and show it in that concrete form, exclusive of all imitation, that confers upon all true myths their individual character, which is recognizable at the first glance. . . .

I abandoned once and for all the domain of [factual] history, and established myself in that of legend. . . . Whatever the epoch or nation it belongs to, legend has the advantage of incorporating exclusively what is purely human in the given epoch or nation, of presenting it in an original and very striking form, thus intelligible at the first glance. . . . The nature of the scene and the whole tone of the legend combine to transport the mind to a dream-state—quickly carrying it on to perfect clairvoyance—and the mind then discovers a different concatenation of phenomena, which the eyes could not perceive in the normal state of waking.<sup>31</sup>

Wagner's analyses of the "clairvoyant" *raison d'être* of his own multimedia performance art share numerous ideas with those much later *Aktionen* devised and performed by Joseph Beuys. These common reference points would include the following. As Wagner said at the outset, there exists in such modern art an understood opposition between "abstract intelligence" and the irrational profundities of the poetic instinct, "rooted in the heart." *Myth* (or legend) is the proper vehicle for poetic expression. Why? Above all, it is "*primitive*," rooted in the "anonymous poetry of the People." Such *völkische* materials are timeless, "taken up again in every age, remodelled constantly." These eternal (*ewige*) themes are the antithesis of "conventional form, intelligible only to abstract reason." Nevertheless, they are "recognizable at the first glance."

— So much for the content of the Wagnerian (and Beuysian) *Gesamtkunstwerk*. What seems to be its central formal principle? In a word, this is rhythm. This is the means by which the performance artist is led "to the extreme limit of his art." As for the audience, what does rhythm do to it and, specifically, what are the desirable psychological effects of rhythm? As Wagner repeatedly states, rhythm is powerful; it captivates its audience; it governs their emotional states; it works a spell; it transports the mind. In sum, all the artistic effects are calculated to alter consciousness, leading it "to a dream-state, that quickly carries it on to perfect clairvoyance—and the mind then discovers a different concatenation of phenomena, which the eyes could not perceive in the 'normal' state." Again, this is pure mysticism! These ideas are nothing less than the familiar arguments of the esoteric tradition, a phenomenon whose documents date back at least to the Hellenistic period. The psychological characteristics of such a state of purely mystical transport were probably best described in 1902 by William James in his classic study on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. . . . [Nevertheless,] mystical states seem, to those who experience them, to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain. . . . When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.<sup>32</sup>



In the terminology of modern occultism, the kind of psychic state (in this case, art-induced) so vividly described by both Wagner and Baudelaire is properly called "cosmic consciousness." As the influential Canadian occultist Richard M. Bucke explained in his study, *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901),

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness . . . of the life and order of the universe. Along with [this] there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence—would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking, and more important than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever his putative occultist inclinations, Richard Wagner was of course quintessentially "Germanic." This ethnographic attribute of the composer is also recognized by a German scholar, Hans Kohn, who, in his important study of *The Mind of Germany* (1960), points out how this awesome figure, so centrally placed in the modern consciousness of Germany,

bore a message of specific Germanic values, an interpretation of history and society, based upon the incomparable pre-eminence of Wagner's art and of German folkdom. Wagner saw himself not only as a musician of genius but also as a prophet and savior. All of his creative work was infused with, and serves, this avocation . . . protesting against the nineteenth-century bourgeois world, against men without myth, passion and greatness. . . . [His was] the realm of primitive, pre-Christian myth. . . . These Nordic-Wagnerian myths [were] rediscovered and adapted in the age of nationalism for nationalistic purposes. . . . Wagner proclaimed it is necessary to found a true community of life (*Lebensgemeinschaft*), which cannot be achieved by political means, but only through art. . . . His art-work will restore the loving union of all arts, and thus set the example of a true folk-community. . . . Alone in Europe, the Germans possess the particular talent of becoming impassioned with what they take as abstract truth, without considering its practical consequences.<sup>34</sup>

Kohn's observations about Wagner's more-than-artistic significance in his own country will later lead us to a consideration of similar traits characterizing the equally Germanic Joseph Beuys, namely the idea of a kind of *Lebensgemeinschaft* of the true believers. However, we shall see how Beuys and his many followers meant to effect a post-Wagnerian, but still *völkische*, union of art and politics. Like Wagner, Beuys saw himself "as a prophet and savior," protesting against the "bourgeois world" of the twentieth century. Before these issues can be examined further, we shall have to return to the historical development of the avant-garde performance piece, an artistic form drastically reshaped by Beuys in order to achieve his own transcendent vision of the "transformation" of the soul of society at large.

## A Context for Beuys: The Early Modernist Performance Piece

We have just examined the essential elements of the precedent-setting Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*: primitivism, *völkische* myth and legend, irrationality at odds with abstract reason, spiritualist revelations, indivisible totality, antibourgeois social alienation, titanic rhythmic unity, audience manipulative techniques, the rule of instinct, consciousness-altering effects, paranormal clairvoyance, and the will towards mass psychological and social transformations. These factors all apply to Beuys. We may now examine in greater detail the historical setting, physical and cultural, for the concepts of "synesthesia" and "simultaneity," two notions already implicit in the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but which were only to become wholly explicit in the early modernist performance pieces inaugurated by the Futurists and Dadaists.<sup>35</sup>

The physical setting of the fin de siècle seemed in fact to demand a universally heightened consciousness of synesthesia, an effect (as yet unnamed)<sup>36</sup> already popularized by the awesome transemotional effects of the Wagnerian showpiece (significant in European culture since 1860). Synesthesia—along with simultaneity—was also alluded to by Baudelaire in his famous poem "Les Correspondances" (ca. 1861).<sup>37</sup> Simultaneity, however, has largely technological, rather than narrowly artistic, origins. In our revisionist view, strictly physical facts explain the emotional gulf separating the two cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the particular case of simultaneity, we are dealing with new cultural apprehensions of the very nature of time and space.<sup>38</sup>

Since the invention of the mechanical clock,<sup>39</sup> the single most momentous development in the history of the uniform cultural grasp of time was the gradual introduction at the end of the nineteenth century of a world standard time, supplanting "natural" notions of day and night (and whatever else might fit in between). The natural divisions between day and night had already been blurred by Edison's invention of the electric lamp in 1879. Then the invention of the telegraph made it necessary to impose this preternaturally unnatural time scheme worldwide. The creation of swift, international railway networks emphasized the need for organized, simultaneous world time zones. The next, inevitable, development was the wireless telegraph (which the U.S. Navy had employed as early as 1905). By July 1913 the first time signal had been sent around the globe, transmitted from the Eiffel Tower.

On the literal level, electrical impulses were traveling around the world at the dizzying speed of light itself. In a larger sense, traditional heterogeneous "time" and "space" had been displaced by a homogeneous continuum: all human activity had become a construction of measurable, interchangeable time bits floating in continuous flux in a world without apparent physical distance. In 1905, in his "Special Theory of Relativity," Albert Einstein concluded that "every reference body has its own particular time."<sup>40</sup> Newton's vision of an



atomistic time, a sum of infinitesimally small but discrete units, was now replaced by a theory of flux and continuity, in short, by simultaneity.

Space as well as time became further compressed with the general acceptance of the bicycle (made possible by the introduction of a pneumatic tire in 1890), an invention comfortably speeding the rounds of ordinary people to four times the velocity of walking. Besides being an instrument of social equality—everyone, rich and poor, men and women, came to ride them—the bicycle also expanded the radius of accessible social contacts, from three to five kilometers to some fifteen to thirty. The automobile, of course, compresses space and time yet more; there were only 3000 of them in France in 1900, but already 13,000 by 1913. With the invention of the electric clock in 1916, the world became familiar with a visual model for the notion of time as inexorable flux, an operation as significant for Paris as it was for Patagonia. In 1896 there was the first public exhibition of the cinema, an artistic medium that broke up time into discrete, movable parts.<sup>41</sup> Soon the artistic possibilities inherent in the new medium—public and democratic par excellence—were stretched, and cinematographers commonly played with the reigning strictures on the irreversibility of near and far—both in time and space—through editing techniques, montage, devices both contemporary and analogous to the Cubists' collages. As a sculptural concept, this simultaneist combinatory technique became known as *assemblage*.

The cheap, popular press—*les journaux* and *die Zeitungen*—similarly created a simultaneous collage-montage perception of events, all presented without much pretense to hierarchical ranking; the trivial and the anecdotal rubbed shoulders with the momentous and the portentous. In the daily papers, everyman's universal informational experience, the ominous distant rumblings of *Realpolitik* competed with the fashionable gossip of the inner-city *salons*. Such were the transient disposable "facts" of daily existence in the newly created global village based on wired simultaneity. Even before the cinematographers, however, the Impressionist painters had already "invented" the idea of an artistic depiction of time, and even space, as a transient fluid medium. As Claude Monet explained, "One does not paint a landscape, a seascape, a figure; [instead] one paints an impression of an hour of the day."<sup>42</sup> Cézanne also spoke of the subjective fragmentation of space, as well as time, in a letter of 1906: "The same subject [*motif*], seen from a different angle, gives a subject for study. . . . [It is potentially] so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending more to the right or left."<sup>43</sup> In 1910 an art critic, Leon Werth, told the public that Picasso's Cubist constructions depicted "the sensations and reflections which we experience with the passage of time."<sup>44</sup> A Cubist painter, Jean Metzinger, went even further, claiming that his colleagues "have allowed themselves to move [in space] around the object, in order to give a concrete representation of it, made of several successive



aspects [in time]. Formerly, a picture took possession of space—now [art] reigns also in time.”<sup>45</sup>

In 1884, for the first time the term “stream of thought” appeared, in an essay by William James.<sup>46</sup> In 1890, this author added that “consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. . . . In speaking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness.”<sup>47</sup> Such simultaneist notions quickly became universal and when Henri Bergson contemplated his inner self, he encountered “a continuous flux, a succession of states,” thus explaining our existence in a spaceless time, that elastic, all-encompassing ether he called “*la durée*.”<sup>48</sup> As he affirmed (in *L'Évolution créatrice*, 1907), mentally alert people all “see the material world melt back into a single flux, a continuity of flowing, a becoming.”<sup>49</sup> One need not have read Bergson to grasp such ideas; they were “in the air.” Virginia Woolf quoted Thomas Hardy’s lament to the effect that contemporary writers had “changed everything now. We used to think there was a beginning and a middle and an end. We [of the older generation] believed in the Aristotelian theory.”<sup>50</sup>

This new, technologically induced and universally perceived, sense of time—immediate and constant—overturned and nearly destroyed the concept of history as something locked in “the past,” and thus left discrete and removed. Accordingly, the burning issues of sequence versus simultaneity were also hotly debated—and employed—by numerous artists. By then, the concept had a name, and thus it became an artistic technique; the Futurist Tommaso Marinetti called it “*la simultanéità*.” But ultimately, as Stephen Kern recognizes,

The model for the simultaneous art and poetry was music. . . . In [Wagnerian] opera two or more voices might sing different words at the same time. . . . to intensify the urgency of their encounter. . . . Richard Strauss combined two keys at the same time in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896), as did Debussy in parts of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). In the first of the *Fourteen Bagatelles* of 1908, Bela Bartok produced . . . two simultaneously sounding melodic parts written in different keys. Prokofiev had such bitonal passages in *Sarcasmes* (1911), and Stravinsky made extensive use of tri-tone harmonies in *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913). While there were precedents to polyrhythm and polymeter in counterpoint and classical symphonic music, there was a striking concentration of them in twentieth-century music, beginning with Charles Ives’ combination of two marches in different tempi in *Three Places in New England* (1904).<sup>51</sup>

As we know it today, performance art is inevitably a product of the external factors we have just examined, shaping the distinctive mentality of early modernist culture. The performance piece is by its very nature (according to Rosalee Goldberg) “a collage of media.”<sup>52</sup> As we would now state, it is the “simultaneous” art experience par excellence. Moreover, “as a permissive open-ended medium, with endless variables,” Goldbert adds, “it has *always* been attractive to artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms. . . . Like

tribal ritual, it provides a *presence* for the artist in society while its references remain tightly knitted into the art context." Regardless of a certain apparent "timelessness" to the performance experience, for our purposes we may cite as the originating moment of early modern performance art the Futurist experience of a few years before the outbreak of World War I. The Futurists banded together in 1909 under the leadership of Tommaso Marinetti and had clearly stated their collective aim by 1912: "the simultaneous states of mind in the work of art: that is the intoxicating aim of our art. . . . We have proclaimed ourselves to be *the primitives of a completely renovated sensitiveness*."<sup>53</sup> 1910 saw the invention of the so-called "Futurist Evening," a deliberately outrageous kind of performance piece that preceded any theoretical formulation. As described by Caroline Tisdall,

The 'Evening' was a dynamic concoction of manifesto reading, poetry declamation, theatrical interludes and outright provocation of the audience, in which poets and painters alike took part. The degree of success of such an Evening depended, as Marinetti said, on the level of abuse received, not applause. It proposed an outrageous alternative to all that Marinetti hated in dreary traditional theatre: "We feel deep disgust for contemporary theatre because it oscillates stupidly between historical reconstruction ("*zibaldone*" or plagiarism) and the photographic reproduction of our day-to-day life: niggling, slow, analytical and diluted theatre worthy, at most, of the age of oil lamps."<sup>54</sup>

The idea was to describe the life of matter (the universal *materia*), which was to replace the ego of the writer, whose function now would be to shape the nets of analogy that would capture elusive matter adrift in the mysterious sea of phenomena. The lyrical obsession with *materia* was additionally to protect it from the anthropomorphic emotions with which Romantic poets had endowed it. Accordingly, three previously neglected elements were to be introduced into the poetry of Futurist performance: (1) sound—as a manifestation of the dynamism of objects; (2) weight—representing the faculty of flight inherent in objects; (3) smell—signifying the means by which objects spread and disperse. As later outlined in the "Manifesto of Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation" (1916), the Futurist performer was to vary his speed and rhythm, using the whole range of his voice tone, bodily movement and all parts of the theatre. Just as in contemporary performance art, such effects were designed to ensure that the spectator could no longer remain in a cool position of critical detachment.

As already mentioned, performance pieces mounted before the common use of newsreels or videotaping are mainly known today through written descriptions by onlookers. Reports by two British journalists of a Futurist Evening, put on in the Dore Gallery in London by Marinetti and his colleagues, are found in *The Observer* and *The Times* (3rd and 8th of May 1914).<sup>55</sup> Curiously (or not so curiously), these reports concur with many of the details of performances put



on much later by Joseph Beuys. As described in the London newspapers, Marinetti "marched through the hall with dynamic gestures." Three blackboards were placed at various points in a room, to which he "alternatively walked and ran," drawing diagrams, theorems, equations and synoptic visualizations of "the Words-in-Freedom"—*le Parole in libertà*—at the same time as he sang them. The physical space of the audience was invaded since they had to swing about in their seats in order to follow his eccentric movements. As Marinetti put it, "the listeners turned continually to follow me in all my evolutions, participating with their whole bodies." Sound was also stage-managed so that it assaulted the audience from different directions. Marinetti also had a telephone installed so that he could pass on the orders of the "Turkish General" to a confederate in the next room who, from time to time, would be commanded to bang upon two huge tympani while Marinetti kept time with hammers, producing "intimations of artillery." In spite of the rhetorical fireworks, the number of people who showed up was so small that, at the conclusion of his performance, an enraged Marinetti shouted: "This was a very imperfect rendering. There should be no passive listeners! Everyone should take part and act out the poem."

Another important contribution of the Futurist performance piece was the addition of "*bruitisme*": waves of sheer, largely undifferentiated, noise. According to the theory of the Futurist "Art of Noises"—*Arte di rumori*—the artist was not to imitate preexistent or naturalist sound but was instead to extract and/or synthesize combined aural materials from all the sonic ranges available, just as the contemporary painter felt himself free to transform in a radical way all colors and shapes. The basis of the proposed "Futurist Orchestra" were six principal bodies of sound, often machine-produced: (1) rumbles, roars, explosions, crashes, splashes, booms; (2) whistles, hisses, snorts; (3) whispers, murmurs, mumbles, grumbles, gurgles; (4) screeches, creaks, rustles, buzzes, crackles, scrapes; (5) percussive effects produced on: metal, wood, skin, stone, terracotta, etc.; and (6) voiced effects, either man-made or by animals: shouts, screams, groans, shrieks, howls, laughs, wheezes, sobs.<sup>56</sup>

Such outrageous gestures and bruitist effects quickly entered into the repertoire of the so-called Dada artists who had established themselves early in 1916 as an anarchic art-oriented and defiantly antibourgeois "movement" centered in Zürich. Their nihilistic program was perhaps best summarized by one of Dada's founding fathers, Richard Hülsenbeck. Writing in retrospect (*En Avant Dada*, 1920), he recalled how

we immediately launched a sharp attack . . . under the watchword of "action," acquired through our fight for the principles of bruitism, simultaneity, and the new medium. . . . There is only a simultaneity, in values as in everything else. . . . The Dadaist considers it necessary to come out against art. . . . If Dada dies here, it will some day appear on another planet, with rattles and kettledrums, pot covers and simultaneous poems.<sup>57</sup>



Even more than the Futurists, the youthful Dadaists further “popularized” performance art by putting it into a cabaret setting, making it, just as it is now, a staple of the avant-garde armory of elitist-tribal rituals. One of the Zurich group, the Roumanian expatriot Tristan Tzara, described (in the third person) the notorious (but typical) “Dada Night” of July 14, 1916, as follows:

In the presence of a compact crowd Tzara demonstrates, “we demand the right to piss in different colors.” . . . [Hugo] Ball demonstrates[:] the dogs bay and the dissection of Panama [is performed] on the piano. . . . [There follows a] shouted Poem—shouting and fighting in the hall; first row declares itself incompetent, the rest shout, “who is the strongest?” The big drum is brought in. [Richard] Hülsenbeck [is pitted] against 200. “*Ho ostenlatz?*” [a cry] accentuated by the very big drum and little bells on his left foot, and the people protest, shout, smash windowpanes, kill each other, demolish, fight; here come the police [:] interruption.<sup>58</sup>

While other such descriptions could be quoted,<sup>59</sup> we can in any event confirm here the truth of Hülsenbeck’s prediction: “Dada will some day reappear.” Even without those “rattles and kettledrums,” Dada’s anarchic-amorphous spirit still lives-on in the contemporary performance piece, largely put on by youths for a youthful audience.

### **A Stage for Beuys: The Late Modernist Performance Piece**

We have noticed the extinction of the spirit and purposes of the splendidly engineered Renaissance and Baroque performance piece, for the most part an entertaining exercise in pure illusionism. This decline was perhaps inevitable. Performance art after the French Revolution had ceased to be either a positive factor or an effective tool in the service of communal (versus individualistic and subjective) beliefs, whether these were of a religious, ethical, historical, or governmental nature. The demise of these ideological macrostructures—the support systems for the earlier manifestations of performance art—also signaled an end to self-explanatory content. We have also observed a new collective consciousness arising before 1900, postulating values of simultaneity in the human sector. Specifically, around this time modernist performance expression, seeking the inherent possibilities of “theater” as a metaphorical experience, returned to its primitive origins, to the actor as autonomous performer and subjective creator. In short, far from skillfully representing a Faust or a Falstaff, the modern performance artist (often in a deliberately clumsy manner) presents his own “identity,” that is, his own narcissistic feelings and personal (perhaps puerile) ideas. He lives out his own unique autobiography, and the audience (all willing participants) becomes the sanctified “witness” to the autobiographical ritual.

From around 1910 until the late 1980s, both the salient characteristics and the spirit of the modernist performance piece remained largely constant. These

followed the Futurist and Dadaist innovations—largely a matter of technique, since the larger operative issues were already implicit in the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The enduring identifying marks of modernist performance ethics have been neatly summed up by Rosalee Goldberg:

The history of performance art in this century can thus be seen as a series of waves; successive periods when performance provided a release from the stagnation and complacency of set styles and attitudes. Moreover, within the history of the avant-garde—meaning those artists who led the field in breaking with each successive tradition—performance in the twentieth-century has been at the forefront of such activity: an *avant-avant-garde*. . . . Usually, these [avant-avant-garde] artists turned to performance as a means to gain access to a wider audience and to shake up the public's attitude toward art, life, and culture. . . . Such manifestations were intended as a reaction to the prevailing art establishment and to the disproportionate influence of critics in determining the "value" of art. . . . The stance of performance artists has historically been a radical one: *against* the Establishment (be it art or politics), *against* the commercialization of art, and *against* the strict confinement of museums and galleries. Performance artists have acted *against* the overriding belief that art is limited to the production of art objects, insisting instead that art is primarily a matter of ideas and actions. Each performance calls on the audience to experience the making of an artwork rather than contemplating static objects within an exhibition framework.<sup>60</sup>

Within this set of largely negating ideological parameters, the means of expression vary widely according to the personal background and inclinations of each individual performance artist.

Performance art slipped into a somnolent state after the mid-1920s, a post-war period that largely devoted its physical efforts to reconstruction. Critical issues seemed less relevant than before and art criticism thus became less overbearing. The art world fired itself up again following World War II, and the idea of literal artistic activism—the artist as physically active performer—gained new impetus with the choreographed confrontations of the American Abstract Expressionist painters. As is readily apparent from viewing old film clips of Jackson Pollock busily at work on his "drip paintings," the artist relieved his stifled creative *Angst* by energetically attacking huge swatches of stretched canvas with gallons of roiled pigments. In addition to being "painting," this was beginning to look like activist theater.

The international superiority and success of the new American painting—perhaps aesthetic and certainly monetary (New York was "stealing the idea of Modern Art," according to a disgruntled Frenchman)<sup>61</sup>—brought about, for the first time, a vigorous new school of American art critics, who quickly entrenched themselves, becoming their own monolithic establishment.<sup>62</sup> Neoscholastic and radically reductivist, art-oriented issues (flatness, objectness, Minimalism and Maximalism) were quickly generated and soon came to dominate the art world. Nevertheless, average artists (i.e., all those without any critically sanctioned status) felt alienated by those all-pervasive, all-too-abstract, "art



issues." Crushed by the weight of these issues, many came to wonder what had happened to individual spontaneity. In short, the times were ripe for another eruption of performance art, a form of expression with neither rigid rules nor set limits. Although lacking intrinsic procedural authority, performance art was of course sanctioned by the weight of art historical authority, according to which it was a perfectly legitimate and established, quintessentially "modern" medium. The critical impasse around 1970, just at the time of the second great outbreak of modern performance art, was vividly described in a widely read article by Kim Levin:

It was as if history was grinding to a halt. Its innovations were [now] disguised as revivals. The question of imitations, the gestural look of Abstract Expressionism, and all the words that had been hurled as insults for as long as we could remember—"illusionistic," "theatrical," "decorative," "literary"—were resurrected, as art became once again ornamental or moral, grandiose or miniaturized, anthropological, archeological, ecological, autobiographical or fictional. It was defying all the proscriptions of modernist purity. The mainstream trickled on, minimalizing and conceptualizing itself into oblivion, but we were finally *bored* with all that artistic purity. . . . Modernity had gone out of style. It even seemed as if style itself had been used up, but then Style—that invention of [recognizable] sets of forms—was a preoccupation of modernism, as was Originality. . . . The [visual] styles of modernism have now become a vocabulary of ornament, a grammar of available forms, along with the rest of the past. Style had become a voluntary option, to be scavenged and recycled, to be quoted, paraphrased, parodied—to be used as a language. . . .

By the 1960s, with Pop art embracing the processes and products of mass production and Minimalism espousing the materials and methods of industry, the ultimate decade of technology had arrived. . . . But at the height of this optimism, Modernism fell apart. . . . Modernism, toward the end of its reign, came to be seen as reductive and austere. Its purity came to seem puritanical. . . . Formalism implied not only the logical structures of modernist invention but also the strictures of rigid adherence to established forms. . . . In practice it was elitist: the public never understood abstract art. It was as specialized as modern science. . . . Like capitalism, it was materialistic. . . . What started as radical physicality turned into commodity.

At this point, Levin deftly establishes the psychological framework, the emotional needs, that caused the second great wave of performance art. In the 1970s this *nouvelle vague* became a swelling current, one upon whose foaming crest rode the triumphant figure of Joseph Beuys, an eccentric who had conformed to the new prescriptions—and had done so since the late 1950s! As Levin puts it (without, however, referring either to our hero or to performance art),

In diverse and unexpected ways, Art was going back to Nature. But having been absent so long, nature was unrecognizable. At the beginning, it looked like demolition. But the post-Minimalist movements—statements against formal purity that were modernist reductions as well—were not just an issue of withholding goods from the marketplace, an embargo on the object. Whether returning materials to their natural state, subjecting them to natural force,



sending art back to the land or internalizing it within the body, they were evidence that time and/or place were becoming crucial, clearing the way for the psychological and the narrational, for personal content, lifelike contexts and subjective facts. . . . Post-Modernism mimics life, accepts awkwardness and crudity, takes an amateur stance, . . . it uses memory, research, confession, fiction. . . . Subjective and intimate, it blurs the boundaries between the world and the self. It is about identity and behavior. . . . bringing art back to nature and into the world, assuming all the moral responsibilities of life. . . . [It is] based not on scientific reason and logic, and the pretense of objectivity, but on presence, subjective experience, behavior, on a weird kind of therapeutic revelation in which it is not necessary to believe or understand—it is enough if it works.<sup>63</sup>

In America, the morally elevated *Aktionen* of Joseph Beuys seemed to have their analogues in the “happenings,” whose particular historical sources were the films and widely publicized environmental exhibitions of the Surrealists. Another impetus was the Pop artists’ desire to take the trivia of modern society as a fitting subject, thus producing new kinds of “junk” environments. The Cubists’ concept of collage also suggested the juxtapositionings of unrelated real-life elements in artistically contrived compositions. The self-acknowledged prophet of American happenings was Allan Kaprow, who explained how, in the late 1950s,

I developed a kind of action-collage technique, following my interest in Pollock. [It became] the ritual of my own rapid action. . . . The action-collage then became bigger, and I introduced flashing lights and thicker hunks of matter. . . . I thought how much better it would be if you could just go out of doors and float an Environment into the rest of life so that such a caesura [between artist and audience] would not be there. I tried destroying the sense of bounded space. . . . I immediately saw that every visitor to the Environment was part of it. I had not really thought of it before. And so I gave him opportunities, like moving something, turning switches on—just a few things. Increasingly . . . I offered him more and more to do, until [at last] there developed the Happening.<sup>64</sup>

Another performer of the new avant-garde theatre was Claes Oldenburg, a Swedish-born Pop artist who turned to happenings in the mid-’60s. He has described what his action called *Store Days* meant to him in the following, somewhat rueful manner:

It is good to have an audience, though the nature of this theatre is such that it would go on without an audience, as a painter might go on painting with no one to watch him. . . . I hope you are not too miserable. . . . My aim is to develop under these concentrated circumstances a sort of kernel of infinite expansion. The “Happening,” which was in the beginning a very limited form, is bearing fruit as a new physical theatre, bringing to the dry puritan forms of the US stage the possibilities of a tremendous enveloping force.<sup>65</sup>

Certainly, this line of earnest avant-garde endeavor is not exclusively American. A Czechoslovakian, Sonia Seclova, has written about one of her unperformed

(and sublimely banal) demonstrations:

I am on a tram. The tram is crowded with people. I am smartly dressed, nicely coiffed and made up, so that I create the impression of being a lady. After ten minutes, I suddenly ask the people standing near to me to please make room. I place a little white rag, about 5 cm. square, on the ground and stand on it, after removing my shoes. From my luxurious beaded handbag I take shoe polish, a brush and a rag. I polish my shoes nicely. . . . If anyone asks me what I am doing, I politely offer the shoe-polishing materials.<sup>66</sup>

Americans tend to be more theoretical about such matters. For instance, Vito Acconci kept a notebook on his performance activities in 1971, in which we find the following tactical observations:

If the artist is a performer, in action his presence alone produces signs and marks. The information he provides necessarily concerns the source of information, himself. . . . If the artist cannot be continuously on exhibit, he can present a situation on which, because of everyday living, he is required to act, wherever he may be at the time. . . . The intention of the performer can be to make unwitting moves, observable behavior unoriented to the assessment of an observer. . . . The performer can balance between tactics, selecting an immediate action from his available repertoire, and strategy. The performance can be set up as a learning process. . . . The use of feedback can steady and bring into unison one stage of the performance, after which can come change as new material is imported and adapted to. . . . The performance can continue to a stage of exhaustion. . . . A performance can provide an occasion for wearing out his channels of resistance and rules of order. . . . The subject of a performance can be the control (or lack of control) of personal information. . . . When assessment is the basis of an activity, the performer can become a parasite on the other party, or he can absorb him.<sup>67</sup>

Today, surely the most popular performance artist working in the United States is Laurie Anderson, an Acconci follower.<sup>68</sup> Before large, highly appreciative audiences, she appears in her own special costume; dressed all in black, with a short-cropped punk haircut and dark, sunken eyes, she cuts a foreboding figure. The popularity of her well-attended performances is due to her adaptation of a slick professional-theatrical approach—the physical format of rock concerts—with electronically enhanced, quite sweetly sung, ballads. She is, however, wholly postmodern, an avant-garde mediatrix between easily understood, catchy pop music and portentous, “meaningful” statements (i.e., the lyrics) that question the very nature of contemporary life. The title of her epic performance piece of 1979 explains it all: *United States (Transportation, Politics, Money, and Love)*. She has explained disingenuously that “my idea of the perfect performance was analogous to a bad movie [where] you notice the popcorn under feet, the height of the armrests, placement of the exit signs, etc., throughout the film. At a good movie you fall away . . . and, at the end, it’s a mild surprise to find yourself sitting there.”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the reasoning is still high-tech, broadly

politicized avant-garde: "The reason I use technology in performance is it's a way of looking at information filters . . . to look at those kinds of—particularly American—voices that try to convince you that there's a person behind it and there isn't. There's a corporation behind it."<sup>70</sup>

As might be expected, the tactics and strategies of performances in German-speaking countries are likely to be rather different in form and content than what goes on in the States. Here we find the opposite of the mild Laurie Anderson. For example, a rather gruesome kind of action became associated with the Orgies-Mysteries Theatre in Austria. As proposed by its leader, Hermann Nitsch,

on 4 June 1962, I shall disembowel, tear and pull to pieces a dead lamb. This is a manifest action—an "aesthetic" substitute for a sacrificial act—the sense and necessity of which will become clear after a study of the theory of the OM Theatre project. Through my artistic production (a form of the mysticism of being), I take upon myself the apparent negative—unsavory, perverse, obscene, the passion and the hysteria of the act of sacrifice—so that YOU are spared the sully, the shaming descent into the extreme. I am the expression of all creation. I have merged into it and have identified myself with it. All torment and lust, combined in a single state of unburdened intoxication, will pervade me and, therefore, YOU. The play-acting will be a means of gaining access to the most "profound" and "holy" symbols, through blasphemy and desecration. This is a blasphemous, anthropologically-determined view of existence, in which grail and phallus appear as two mutually necessary extremes.<sup>71</sup>

### **A Soapbox for Beuys: The Fluxus Movement**

We have taken a brief look at happenings and at a later, more developed, offshoot called performance art. In the latter, the individual artist more and more appears to take a firm control over the performance—and over the audience. It has also been noted that the directions of each of these staged art events will take a certain unique turn, depending upon the aims and personality of its individual creator. Another factor to be considered is the place in which the art event occurs, particularly its country of origin. There is apparently a latent "ethnographic" principle that contributes something to the varied natures of individual performance pieces. A case in point is the rather amorphous, so-called Fluxus movement, in which Joseph Beuys was a major performer. Before citing Beuys himself on the significance of this movement and his place within it, we may begin with evaluations presented by Ken Friedman, one of the founding fathers of Fluxus:<sup>72</sup>

Fluxus germinated in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a group of artists, composers, and performers who came together to present innovative works and projects that had no home in the art world of their time. No one has ever succeeded in defining Fluxus to the satisfaction



of its many members and participants. The group has been characterized at various times as a movement, a cooperative, a school, and a philosophy. The real structure of Fluxus lies somewhere among these. The success (and the occasional failure) of Fluxus consisted in remaining flexible and open to new growth, to an opportune revision of experience. Fluxus was experimental in practice as it was in philosophy.

As Friedman points out, Fluxus is a very difficult phenomenon to analyze according to specific principles. It is far easier to record its specific phenomena than it is to determine its overriding programmatic sense. In effect, its philosophy was heterogeneous, varying according to the lights of each of its participating members. Moreover, its membership was anything but constant. As will become apparent later in this study, the particular philosophy of Joseph Beuys, acknowledged to be the leader of the Fluxus confederation, did not necessarily represent the aims of any of his colleagues. In any event, the origins of Fluxus, a multimedia, would-be movement, are known to have antedated Beuys's involvement in it. In fact, it began in America, and, as Friedman explains,

Fluxus began loosely, primarily as a publishing and performance programme conceptualized by several artists. A common bond among some of them was the fact that they had studied with John Cage in his famous courses at the New School for Social Research in New York. Others were more generally influenced by Cage and his Zen-inflected philosophy. One artist, architect and architectural historian George Maciunas, seemed to take on a role as provisional chairman to the Fluxus "*posse comitatus*," if only by virtue of the fact that he was willing to manage organizational matters. Maciunas, passionately energetic and madly methodical, proceeded to contact nearly every kindred spirit in the worlds of art, music, theatre, dance, and poetry. He invited them to participate in a rigorously structured series of programs, concerts, and publications envisioned under the rubric "Fluxus." . . . No one really knows who invented the name Fluxus. It has been defined in many ways, [as] relating to "states of Flux," "confusion," "a bloody evacuation of the bowels," "spatial and temporal instability," and many more. Scholars offer differing theories. It is significant to the nature and identity of Fluxus that there has never been a precise recorded definition of the name, a fact that accounts in part for its generative and regenerative strength.

John Cage, acknowledged here by Friedman to have been the primary inspirational figure for the founders of Fluxus, had always been a major figure in the post-World War II development of the spontaneous art event in America. In fact, the concept of the happening may be traced back to a famous soirée in 1952, when Cage organized an action unique for its time and place, but one to have far-reaching consequences.<sup>73</sup> In this case, Cage literally "shaped" his audience, seating them in four triangular, inward-facing blocks, an ensemble looking something like a Maltese cross. Cage's proto-Action, however, took place partly outside of the seating area, and partly in aisles running through it. Perched precariously upon a ladder, Cage delivered a "lecture" (frequently punctuated by excruciating silences) while his colleagues—following familiar Futurist simultaneous schemes—either read poems, played a piano, danced, or cranked out

recorded music on an old gramophone. Cage, a mystical man, has always acknowledged his indebtedness to the old Chinese text of the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), upon which he postulated his highly influential theory of chance.<sup>74</sup> This haphazard "theory" is another offshoot of the modernist interest in patently occultist writings and theories. Recent research has shown that in Dada theory the "*Gesetz des Zufalls*" (law of chance) was similarly based upon the prognostic dicta in the *I Ching*, among other kinds of materials derived from the esoteric tradition.<sup>75</sup>

Now that we have briefly placed Cage in his own esoteric context, we return to Friedman's account of Fluxus. The pattern described here is that which has been faced by *all* such utopian avant-garde minimovements: initial euphoria and camaraderie, a flurry of manifesto writing, a spate of group projects, and finally, inevitably, disillusionment, dissension, and ultimate breakup. As Friedman tells it,

Some participants stuck [with it]. Some became unglued, while remaining friendly colleagues—or distant colleagues—depending on who might at any moment have been feuding with whom. . . . The roster of participants in Fluxus took its basic shape by the year 1964 or so and continued to expand through late 1966. . . . The artists included: Eric Andersen, Ay-O, *Joseph Beuys*, George Brecht, Henning Christiansen, Phil Corner, Robert Filliou, Henry Flint, *Ken Friedman*, Bidi Forbes Hendricks, Geoff Hendricks, Dick Higgins, Hi Red Center, Jose Jones, Per Kirkeby, Bengt af Klintberg, Milan Knizak, Alison Knowles, Addi Koepecke, Takehisa Kosugi, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Robin Page, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Tomas Schmit, Carolee Schneemann, Mieko Shiomi, Daniel Spoerri, Ben Vautier, Wolf Vostell, Bob Watts, Emmett Williams, Le Monte Young, and Zaj. . . .

At only two or three times has Fluxus been "organized" in any usual sense. The first instance was in the formative stage [in 1961], when Maciunas had prepared lists of national committees, chairs, editors, and directors, most of whom never actively fulfilled their assigned roles. The second was in a brief, lucid period of heavy publishing and concert-making, between about 1964 and 1967. . . . The final moment of clearly structured activity came in the early 1970s, when Fluxus West presented the Fluxus Year and Fluxshoe.

By Friedman's accounting, we find German, Swiss, American, Swedish, Danish, Czech, Japanese, French, English, Korean, and Italian artists all bunched together under the Fluxus standard. How did they all communicate among themselves? Perhaps they never really did. Certainly the products were, as one would expect, widely eclectic. Though disparate in results, they seem to have found a common bond in oriental-esoteric elements. According to Friedman,

Fluxus attitudes toward performance have been as varied and individual as the artist-participants themselves. There are leanings toward Zen in austere and often ritual works by George Brecht, Bob Watts, Mieko Shiomi, Alison Knowles, Shigeko Kubota, and others. . . . A look at a few [surviving] scores will illustrate the "Fluxus Zen" attitude. For example, Brecht's *Word Event* (1961) simply reads "Exit." There is a variation that states, "Audience is instructed



to leave theatre." It is clear that the piece can be performed theatrically, as a visual event in a gallery context, or as in a private ritual. Some events take on further potential, such as Brecht's *Three Aqueous Events* (also 1961): "Ice. Water. Steam." This piece not only permits performance as theatre, but can easily be extended to film, radio, or even television. In the context of extended performance structure *Three Aqueous Events* can be understood as a description of physical processes taking place in real time on a daily, global basis. Brecht's continual revision of the boundaries between performance and life typifies Fluxus Zen. . . . Austere, ritual, but warm in its overtones, the work of Alison Knowles includes pieces that are subtle but dazzling in their witty charm. . . . During an active career of performance work, now spanning over a quarter of a century, Knowles has moved more and more toward the silent, the liminal, and the meditative. . . .

If the "sane Zen" of Japanese Fluxus artists and Alison Knowles represents one pole of the Orient, [the Korean] Nam June Paik's "crazy Zen" represents the other. Long acclaimed as the "George Washington" of video art, he has had an active career, moving from music to robotics to cybernetics and electronic media. Paik has been keenly prophetic of a future he himself has helped to shape. . . . Paik's performances are inter-active. He often engages the audience, as in his famous tie-cutting incident in homage to John Cage (and to John Cage's tie). His work—and statements—often comment directly on the *Zeitgeist*, on the moment in culture and on the moment in his life.

From the outset the declared goals of the Fluxus group were, according to (traditional) Dada tenets, antiart; to this element there was added an interesting notion of collectivism and social activism. All of this was made perfectly clear in the statement of purposes prepared by George Maciunas in 1962:

Fluxus' goals are social, not esthetic. They, ideologically, can be related to those of the 1929 LEF Group in the Soviet Union, and are set up like this: Step by step elimination of the fine arts (music, drama, poetry, prose, painting, sculpture, etc., etc.). This motivates the desire to direct wasted material and human capabilities toward socially constructive goals. . . . Fluxus is strongly opposed to the art object, a useless piece of merchandise whose only purpose is to be bought to provide the artist with an income. . . . [We] have an educational function: that of showing people how superfluous art is. For this reason [art] should not be permanent. . . .

Secondly, Fluxus tends toward the spirit of collectivism, to anonymity, and to ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM—[tending] also to ANTI-EUROPEANISM (Europe being the area which strongly supports the idea of artistic professionalism, the "l'art pour l'art" ideology, the expression of the artist's ego through art, etc., etc.; and as the area which brought forth these ideas). All the FLUXUS concerts, publications, etc., are (or will be in a few years) long-term bridging solutions to the time when the fine arts (or at least their institutional forms) can be totally eliminated, and artists can find other activities.<sup>76</sup>

As Maciunas explained further (in a letter of November 3, 1964, to Wolf Vostell), Fluxus would in effect replicate the performances put on by the Dada cabaret artists in Zürich during World War I: "One can say that Fluxus opposes serious art or culture and its institutions. . . . Hence, Fluxus concerts tend to be vaudevillian, or, many times, satires of serious concerts. . . . We do not want to call our pieces "Happenings"; they are really not rehearsed or staged, so that they become more unpredictable."<sup>77</sup>



Following long descriptions of various participants, Friedman finally gets around to mentioning the stellar figure in Fluxus, Joseph Beuys. Oddly, here we do not find Friedman's usual circumstantial descriptions of staged events, but instead the muted evocation of an already legendary presence:

Beuys' work is well enough known that it does not require description or illustration. The sensibility that he espouses stands as artistic parent to much work in the areas of Arte Povera, process and performance art. It is profoundly humanitarian and spiritual. . . . In style and tone Beuys is somber, yet charismatic in his rich sobriety. His work can be warm, but it stands in definite contrast to the passionately exuberant actions [of the others, thus representing] clearly spiritual Fluxus. . . . One could say that Paik and Beuys share the ethereal yet earthly qualities of Zen-oriented Fluxus [to which is added] the gutsy, Pan-Eurasian folk culture, with its magical and often mystical ethos.<sup>78</sup>

Beuys has recorded the moment of his entrance into the group: "My Fluxus activities began in 1962, when I spoke with Nam June Paik about all the possible activities which one could make, and perhaps should make."<sup>79</sup> Beuys, however, was sensitive from the outset to his divergences from the general run of Fluxus activities, particularly those of an American character: "I was able to discuss many different themes with [Allan] Kaprow [and] I found his idea of a Happening to be untenable, at least conceptually."<sup>80</sup> In general, Beuys felt that, unlike him, his Fluxus colleagues lacked any coherent theory. As he put it, the affected, "shocking," neo-Dada effects of his colleagues were anathema to him; he wished instead to "better the condition" of his audience:

All the Fluxus people were sensitive spirits; they attempted and experienced a great deal, especially in the area of atmosphere. [But] what they lacked was a real theory, a recognizable, underlying structure, with a clearly marked goal. They held a mirror in front of people—but without using it to lead to a betterment of their condition. . . . I wanted to address deeper dimensions and other connections.<sup>81</sup>

Besides decrying the lack of a suitably profound theory of the "*Verbesserung des Zustandes*," Beuys also differed from his Fluxus colleagues in questions of technique, particularly when their performances leaned toward American activist notions which led to a lessening of the authority and autonomy of the performer-artist. As Beuys explained,

Happening differs from Fluxus in that, in the latter, the participatory role of the audience is not an essential element of the action. In contrast to Fluxus, in American Happenings almost everything is reinforced by the audience, who also act themselves. The only one who used this American concept with Fluxus was [Wolf] Vostell [whose performances] had more of the character of demonstrations and the audience took part conceptually; . . . the audience also came on stage.<sup>82</sup>

However firm in his own theoretical underpinnings, Beuys did find a positive element in Fluxus, namely, its potential open-endedness—which made it suitable for the didactic illustration of broad significant ideas. As he stated,

Everything, from the simplest tearing of a piece of paper to the total changeover of human society, could be illustrated. Everything was included in a global concept; there was no special Fluxus ideology—*denn es gab keine spezielle Fluxusideologie*. . . . The individual actions were integrated into a rich common tone. Nothing depended on discussion—it would merely be asked which materials would be needed for each action, and what environments or rooms were wanted. . . . Whatever else was necessary one brought himself.<sup>83</sup>

In short, for Beuys, Fluxus was a convenient soapbox for his own already developed ideas. These ideas form a complicated, esoteric system that will take us some time to unravel.

## Beuys in an Esoteric Modernist Context

### Rauschenberg and Johns: Art into Nature into Art

The rise of the Beuys phenomenon in Europe, embracing performance art in its particular Fluxus manifestations, may be related to certain phenomena arising (apparently independently) in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By observing these symptomatic correspondences in what had by then become a truly internationalized avant-garde body politic, we can better appreciate Beuys in the historical and macrocosmic sense. In this case, the key idea is that of bringing art into life, and vice versa. Emblematic of such simultaneous, trans-Atlantic developments in vanguard culture were the burgeoning careers of two young American artists (since become Old Masters by avant-garde standards): Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930), who first met in 1954. The next year, as the ironies of history would perhaps have it in retrospect, Marcel Duchamp became a naturalized American citizen.<sup>1</sup>

Rauschenberg was born in Port Arthur, Texas, a grimy, sweltering Gulf Coast oil-refining center. This steamy town is also notable for one other significant contribution to contemporary mass culture: the late queen of rock music, Janis Joplin. Rauschenberg was a truly American hybrid, half German (second generation) and half Cherokee Indian. His life as a child was lonely, even with four siblings: "My mother and father never paid too much attention to me. They were so close that there didn't seem to be too much room for anybody else. They'd sit holding hands." Both parents belonged to an austere fundamentalist sect, the Church of Christ, which forbade dancing, cardplaying, movies, and other youthful diversions. Given such pious parental role models, it is hardly surprising to hear Rauschenberg recalling how "I was going to be a preacher until I was thirteen. . . . Giving that up was a major change in my life." To make matters worse (or nearly hopeless, in American adolescent terms), Rauschenberg was inept at sports and too shy to make more than one friend at a time. In short (and like Beuys, as we shall see), he was a loner, an alienated outsider.

After graduating from high school in 1942 (where only chemistry interested



him—for “the tactile aspect of it”) Rauschenberg embarked briefly (six months) upon an abortive career as a college freshman. Then came his draft notice and his induction into the Navy. In boot camp, and for the first time in his life, Rauschenberg found himself popular, thanks to his accomplished pencil portraits of his fellow recruits. He was eventually assigned to the Hospital Corps and spent the rest of his service in California, attached to the Marine Corps at Camp Pendleton. As a neuropsychiatric technician, “I learned how little difference there is between sanity and insanity, and realized that a combination is essential.” This was also the first time in his life that he saw “real art.” This occurred during a visit to the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, where he was particularly struck by the sentimental virtuosity of Thomas Lawrence’s *Pinkie*, Gainsborough’s *The Blue Boy*, and Sir Joshua Reynold’s *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*. Such was the unlikely first exposure to art for a future prominent avant-gardist. The next step, after discharge from military service, was to enroll in the Kansas Art Institute on the GI Bill. The apprentice art student moonlighted to support himself, building sets (for a firm making movie commercials), fabricating models (for industrial exhibits), and doing window displays (for a haberdasher). It is possible that all of this seemingly inartistic and strictly practical experience provided the real basis for Rauschenberg’s later, notorious ventures into an art of “combines,” a free-wheeling, collage-type sculptural technique.

After a brief 1948 excursion to Paris as an art student on the GI Bill, he followed his future wife, Susan Weil (whom he was to divorce only four years later, after his bisexuality became patently manifest), to the now celebrated, experimental Black Mountain College. Remotely situated in the mountains of North Carolina, the school enrolled between twelve and ninety students. During its precarious tenure between 1933 and 1956, Black Mountain exemplified (*avant la lettre*) a youthful search for a meaningful counterculture in postwar America. Its program was described at the time as the “training of consciousness,” a process that involved learning to know “the true nature” of materials. Eschewing any traditional, structured curriculum, Black Mountain proved to be a significant magnet for America’s nascent avant-garde, drawing to its miniscule, ramshackle campus most of the country’s protoexperimental artists: Buckminster Fuller, Richard Lippold, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Paul Goodman, Josef Albers, and—most importantly for Rauschenberg—John Cage, whom Rauschenberg was to meet in 1951.

In June 1949 Rauschenberg took up residence in New York City, where he had heard that “everything was happening” in the arts. By this time, of course, Abstract Expressionism had established itself as *the* new art in America. The current critical rage was Jackson Pollock’s “all-over” and “all-at-once,” “no-composition” paintings, in which the canvas—growing ever larger and larger—was presented (in the terminology of the times) as “an arena in which to act.”

According to contemporary avant-garde folk wisdom, that which was to go on the canvas was "not a picture, but an event." Such metaart works were meant to be experienced in a single rush of unchanneled but heartfelt, raw emotionality. Traditional materials and the entire ethos of professional art-making were, moreover, to be rejected out of hand. Militant mess was master, and spontaneity was the solemn shibboleth. According to the verities of the time, the artist was—like a modern, urbanized shaman—"taking art back to its primitive origins" in mystery and in magic. Even though there were perhaps only fifty advanced, or modern, artists working in New York City at this time, for the most part they all knew one another and each other's radically experimental work. All in all, it was quite a well-networked tribal village.

Soon after his wholly unheralded arrival in Manhattan, Rauschenberg began working in his tiny apartment on (besides blank and enigmatic, "white on white," canvases) sprawling collages, juxtaposing wholly unrelated images. Much of his material were "found images," mostly taken from the mass media. At age twenty-six, Rauschenberg met the pivotal figure in his life, John Cage (then thirty-nine years old). This fateful encounter took place early in 1951 at the Betty Parsons Gallery, a pristine temple—starkly white walls, rugless wood floors, no frivolous decor—dedicated to the new experimentalism. Cage (as we have seen) had by then established a formidable reputation as the guru of the new metaaesthetics, based on amorphous, Zen-derived concepts of the absence of order, structure, and control. Cage, a great talker and an effective proselytizer, had, as a child (like Rauschenberg), planned to become a minister. That notion discarded, he now preached the new gospel of the American avant-garde: an aleatory art of pure chance, through which every effort would be made to extinguish the artist's personality, his memory, and even his will and desires.

Art was for Cage "purposeless play," a perpetual process of ludic discovery, in which everyone could participate in the ultimate celebration of democratic esthetics. Above all, Cage believed in, and constantly espoused, the idea that one must break down all the barriers between art and life. One thus arrived at a heightened consciousness of the true imitation of nature by directly and unthinkingly participating "in the manner of her operations." This operation was, affirmed Cage, "largely indeterminate"; accordingly, the artist—an experimenter par excellence—was to relinquish artistic control. In Cage's stage performances, just as in Pollock's often balletically created paintings, the arena of action was perceived as an "activated field," in which nothing was allowed dominance, in which nothing is ever really centered or fixed, and in which no gesture is subordinated to any other. The key concept, a perfectly nonhierarchical one, is an art of the undifferentiated field, an *idée fixe* expressed as much in visible form (*sans forme*) as in the (non)expression of content.

For Rauschenberg, a visual artist, collage was the specific means by which to answer Cage's call for indeterminacy. Collage was, moreover, a well-en-



trenched (since the Cubists) art-historical technique, enabling any artist to incorporate reality into art, but without imitating it. As noted earlier, collage represents *the* quintessentially twentieth-century form of expression, particularly of the heightened consciousness. Therefore this time-honored method of juxtaposition—the purportedly random placement of one unconnected thing alongside another—now is commonly taken by artists and critics alike to be a cultural emblem. This symbol supposedly reflects the “breakdown” of the linear, sequential, positivistic, cause-and-effect thought processes of science, that monolithic boogeyman of bohemians since the mid-nineteenth century. Without resorting to such apocalyptic proclamations, Rauschenberg merely espoused a kind of neonominalist position: “I think a [combine-]picture is more like the real world when it’s made out of the real world,” itself characterized by “non-order.” This was the rationale for such emblematic combine-pictures as his *Monogram*, shown at Leo Castelli’s in 1959, that famous paint-besplattered, stuffed Angora goat with an old tire draped around its well-worn middle. Another sublimely Rauchenbergian catalogue of contemporary urban detritus was his *Rebus* (1955). Measuring eleven by eight feet, it consisted of the following pseudoarcheological found fragments: an election poster, two running athletes, a comic strip, a (bad) reproduction of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, a cheesecake shot from a girly magazine, Dürer’s *Self-Portrait*, a child’s drawing, lots of swirled, dripped pigments (by Bob), and so forth.

Jasper Johns, five years Rauschenberg’s junior, was another refugee from the south, hailing from Augusta, Georgia. He came from a broken family: his parents separated soon after his birth, and Jasper was thereafter shunted from one relative to another, finally ending up with an aunt in a tiny road-crossing called “The Corner.” His grandmother, however, was an amateur painter and, for as long as Johns could remember, he had wanted to be an artist. After a bleak year and half at the University of South Carolina, he dropped out; eventually (like Rauschenberg) he got his draft notice, in this case for the Army. After his discharge (in 1954), he drifted from one odd job to another in New York, mainly doing window-display work—whence he went into partnership with Rauschenberg, doing commercial shop-window setups that were well received by art critics.

Besides sharing a Greenwich Village loft, Johns and Rauschenberg shared a similar art ethos: “realness.” There is certain validity to the claim that Johns initiated the so-called Conceptual Art phenomenon of the mid-60s when, in 1955, he painted a large American flag, a “thing” par excellence. Literally “real” it was—truly red, white, and blue, and, moreover, absolutely faithful to the proportions of its emblematic archetype. According to this truthful and indeterminate artist, “Using the design of the American flag took care of a great deal for me because I didn’t have to design it.” A master of conspicuous ambiguity, Johns painted it in encaustic, a nearly extinct and exacting antique



technique using hot wax as a vehicle for his pigments. The paradoxical result is exceedingly sensual visually, yet cerebrally "cool" in the extreme. Whereas the lush, lickable technique of its manufacture seemed to proclaim Johns's *Flags* as works of art, nevertheless the very "realness" of the imagery simultaneously made the viewer raise newly pertinent questions: What is art? What is reality? From this newly won position of exquisite indeterminacy, Johns quickly went on to paint (in encaustic): targets (concentric rings of color: what you see is what you get), series of neatly drawn numerals, and of letters of the alphabet. All of these are self-referential imagery—that is, if they refer to anything at all. As he blandly put it, these images represented "things the mind already knows: that gave me room to work on other levels."

A brief word must be said about Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). In this context his work, career, and even his very lifestyle are important because his ideas greatly influenced both Rauschenberg and Johns but proved to be anathema to Joseph Beuys, who was fond of proclaiming, "*Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet*" ("The silence of Marcel Duchamp has been [greatly] overrated"). Whatever Beuys's reservations, by the mid-1960s Duchamp was widely recognized as the most influential artist of the twentieth century. He filled the vacuum left by disillusion with Picasso and his largely formalistic exercises, which had obsessed advanced artists in America since the Depression era. Moreover, from a specifically post-Abstract Expressionist perspective, the cool Gallic cerebrality of Duchamp represented the antithesis of the romantic, breast-beating, macho rhetoric associated with Pollock's generation. This was, therefore, a truly propitious moment for the appearance of the first interpretive catalogue raisonné of Duchamp's oeuvre, the book by Robert Lebel (*Sur Marcel Duchamp*) which appeared in both English and French in 1959.

As Johns and Rauschenberg learned from reading Lebel's monograph, Duchamp had long before set about to blur, if not erase, the rigid and hieratic frontiers existing between art and life. For this defiant assault on the bulwarks of artistic tradition, Duchamp's favored weapons were his "ready-mades," random assemblages of *objets trouvés*: an ordinary snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Art*), a porcelain urinal (*Fountain*), a reproduction of Leonardo's *La Gioconda*, defaced with a Van Dyke beard (*L. H. O. O. Q.*), and several more. As Lebel told eager readers on both sides of the Atlantic, any particular ready-made had been chosen because there was nothing discernibly esthetic about it; these iconoclastic artifacts deliberately eschewed art, taste, design, formal beauty, uplifting allegory, and all similar concepts taught in art schools since the Renaissance. Moreover, the accidental loss or destruction of a ready-made created no problem: it could be instantly recreated without physical difficulty, economic hardship, or deep thought. Ready-mades are undifferentiated; they cannot be patented. Therefore, it also seemed significant at the time that Duchamp had

made no attempt to sell them, thus maintaining the purity of his metaartistic act of willfulness at the same time that he wryly mocked seven centuries of high art.

In the event, this timely rediscovery of the career of Marcel Duchamp by artists (mostly American) after 1960 probably really did not have any great art historical significance. After all, in this sense Duchamp was himself a ready-made, a found object, one fortuitously retrieved from the conveniently placed cornucopia of modernist art history. As Beuys would be much later, in the 1960s this artifact, *Duchamp redivivus*, was an idea whose time had come; were he not in place at that time, he would have to have been invented. It was not so much Duchamp's art that mattered (largely nonexistent in any event); rather it was his nihilistic *ideas* that counted. There was only one way these ideas could become known to interested young artists: through the media. The Duchampian myth perpetuated in the print media at the time embraced the following bits of dogma and doggerel: that Duchamp had definitively given up art ("now he only plays chess"); that, anyway, he never meant to say anything with his art (it never had any discernible narrative intention, a desideratum only for low brows); that he was never committed to art in any event (art was only there to be mocked by a superior class of reductivist thinkers); that all thoughtful artists should share in such cynicism (artists are intellectuals, not rude manual laborers, like sign painters); that the very idea of art should be actively and continually questioned (artists are like Thomistic philosophers, representing a new, critical boost in social status for them in America); that art had become too far removed from life (salon-type painting is a pricey, élitist commodity, hence undemocratic in America), and so forth.

In short, the discovery by Johns and Rauschenberg (among innumerable other young avant-gardists) of Duchampian attitudes around 1960 was of crucial importance to them—but only insofar as it confirmed what already must have seemed to them a highly questionable use of their talents in the face of accepted artistic traditions. Thus Duchamp represented a timely license to practice nihilism, permission certified by the recently rewritten history of modern art.

### **Magic and Alchemy in "Impoverished Art"**

In the previous chapter we found a passing reference (by Ken Friedman) to Joseph Beuys's occasional role as "parent to much work in the area of *Arte Povera*," a term literally meaning "impoverished art." This name was given (*a posteriori*) to a disparate group of artists apparently working in a similar manner all over the world, but it is not the name of a movement. Instead it was mainly the title of a book: a nearly textless pictorial anthology whose creator, Germano Celant, recognized that "the book, even though it wants to avoid the logic of consumption, is [itself] a consumer's item," priced (in 1969) at \$4.95.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being a rigidly programmed movement, we have instead an example of



convenient terminology by which to describe a mood typical of a certain period in the history of art. This mood, common to a number of widely scattered artists, produced work having certain common visual characteristics. It demonstrated, as Kim Levin said, that "Art was going back to Nature." Needless to say, this was not the "nature" known to naturalists but instead the decidedly unnatural interpretation of nature common to avant-garde manifestos.

The prehistory of the "impoverished art" phenomenon can be briefly documented. This nonmovement embraced Rauschenberg and Johns, among others. For instance, Donald Judd, then a major figure of the Minimalist persuasion, wrote in 1964 that conventional media and the canvas rectangle were no longer adequate for contemporary expression, and he accordingly called for an art with "the specificity and power of actual materials, actual colors, actual space." In October 1968 the Dwan Gallery in New York mounted an exhibition of literalist "Earthworks," made either with actual soil or (at the hands of Dennis Oppenheim) by marking lines, digging holes, or cutting rings upon or into selected portions of the earth's surface.

Such gestures epitomized a new, post-Duchampian esthetic, that anything can become an artistic medium, as long as it is used literally rather than symbolically. Also implicit (but made repeatedly explicit by Joseph Beuys) is the complementary idea that *anyone* can, and should, be an artist. And why not? Such activities require no special, acquired skills, but are merely the expression of literalist ideas. Thus, since 1967, the Italian branch of the phenomenon (elsewhere called "process" or "conceptual" art, but in Italy, *Arte Povera*) began to present environments and actions involving the public and staged in places formerly considered alien to works of art. Whatever they called themselves, the resulting almost-art products (naturally all carefully documented) tended toward immensity, fragility, and sometimes even invisibility. They were, in short, often far more concerned with process than with product—the latter being something that could be sold. In any event, the artists that Celant included under the newly spread banner of "impoverished art" included Walter de Maria, Richard Long, Eva Hesse, Michael Heizer, Jannis Kounellis, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Jan Dibbets, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Keith Sonnier, Hans Haacke, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, and Joseph Beuys (among many others).

Let us now turn to the larger ideas informing that period-mood with which Joseph Beuys had allied himself. Germano Celant is an articulate and reasonably well informed spokesman for the movement.<sup>3</sup> Upon analysis we shall find that his ideas are often considerably more cosmic in their implications than are those statements from the other performance artists we have examined. In any event, other evidence we will examine shows the similarity of Celant's ideas to those of Beuys. According to Celant, the basic assumption of all of his colleagues in "impoverished art" is that:



Animals, vegetables and minerals take part [now] in the world of art. . . . *The artist-chemist organizes living and vegetable matter into magic things, working to discover the root of things.* . . . What interests him, instead of the representation of nature, is the discovery, the exposition, the insurrection of the magic and marvelous value of natural elements[: the artist mixes himself with the environment, camouflages himself, he enlarges his threshold of things. . . . He identifies with them in order to live the marvelous organizations of living things.

Straightaway, at least by Celant's accounting, we have the idea of the new artist as "magician" in general, and as "chemist" in particular. Need it be said at this point that this is pure occultism? But this is no random leitmotiv; Celant goes on to describe in further detail the ideas, long familiar in the esoteric tradition, of the wonder-working magician-*artifex*, he who transforms the inert materials of nature, reshaping them by the force of his conscious will because he alone has the clairvoyant powers to see through to that mystical unity underlying all random surface manifestations:

Man, minerals and animals have little in common [that is, for the uninitiated]: even though [we know] all of these systems function in a similar way, tied as they are to a *common process of transformation*. . . . Thus the artist rediscovers the *magic* (of chemical composition and reaction), the inexorableness (of vegetable growth), the precariousness (of material), the falseness (of senses), the realness (of a natural desert) . . . [all] become discovered as an instrument of *consciousness in relation to a larger, comprehensive acquisition of nature*.

Celant here reaffirms the idea that the artist-magician sees the common linkages, those hallucinatory correspondences all quite unattainable to the sense organs of the average person. With his uniquely heightened powers of perception, the artist transforms nature—as did a Renaissance magus, like Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim.<sup>4</sup> He means to acquire the totality of nature, achieving this by the force of his will and by traditional, esoteric, and quietist meditational means.<sup>5</sup> But, by so doing, at least according to Celant's new tenets of the avant-garde, the artist

abolishes his [traditional] role of being an artist: intellectual, painter, or writer—and learns again to perceive, to feel, to breathe, to walk, to understand, to make himself a man. . . . [He feels a] total aversion for discussion, and [instead feels an] aspiration towards continuity, towards aphasia, towards immobility, for a progressive identification of consciousness and praxis, [and] the dimension of life as lasting, without end [and] the loss of identity with himself. . . . "Art comes," states Cage, "from a kind of experimental condition in which one experiments with the living." . . . To communicate with persons and things then means to be in aesthetic and participating *communion with the world: it is a cosmic living*.

This is not art in any traditional sense: this is literally cosmic thought, pure esotericism. It is another example of the occultists' antimaterialistic concerns with mind over matter; and (taking on a neat contemporary political turn) it is defiantly against the old, now discredited, materialist conceptions of the func-

tions of art, associated with bourgeois values that "create art as a separate language, that speculate on codes and on instruments of communication, in order to live in a dimension of exclusiveness, [which] makes it an aristocratic and class question, an action that [only] scratches at the whole of the superstructure." As Celant concludes, according to the didactic program of his group and given the strictures of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*,

art, life and politics "*poveri*" . . . do not have as an objective the process of the representation of life. . . . [Ours] is a moment that tends towards de-culturization, regression, *primitiveness* and repression, towards the *pre-logical* and pre-iconographic stage, towards elementary and spontaneous politics, a tendency towards the basic element in nature . . . and in behavior (family, spontaneous actions, class struggle, violence, environment). . . . Thus, art, politics and life "*poveri*" . . . offer themselves as self-representative in the state of essence.

Leaving aside momentarily the all-important question of the cultural relevancy of "primitiveness" and "pre-logical" thought processes inherent to this supposedly new kind of art, we may now further explore the matter of the commonality of Celant's strictly esoteric ideas. For these purposes we may consider the widely read book by two Belgians, Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, called *Le Matin des magiciens*.<sup>6</sup> First published in 1960, it was subsequently translated into all the major languages. This work, which sold in the millions, is pure occultism. I cannot prove that it was read by Celant (or, for that matter, by any other "impoverished artist"), but as its phenomenal sales record proves, its ideas were very prevalent in Europe during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As such, it proves a most enlightening social document for anyone pursuing an anthropological reconnaissance of avant-garde culture in that time and place. As a normal historian of art is (properly) unfamiliar with such esoteric materials—the stuff, however, of popular paperback culture—this work will be extensively quoted in order to suggest the flavor of its distinctive, historical message.

In the forward to *Le Matin des magiciens*, Pauwels quotes a memorandum from his father which, he states, had shaped his own cosmic perceptions of the nature of the contemporary world. In effect, this represents Celant's apocalyptic vision. According to Pauwels *père*,

even the most troubled epoch is worthy of respect because it is the work not just of a few people but of humanity; and thus it is the work of creative nature—which is cruel but never absurd. If this epoch in which we are living is a cruel one, it is more than ever our duty to love it, to penetrate it with our love, until we have removed the heavy weight of matter screening the light that shines on the farther side.<sup>7</sup>

The commentary made by Pauwels *films* on this affecting document makes clear (as did Celant's statements) the necessary, strictly modernist, connection between occultism and heightened political consciousness:

[Dad] belonged to the generation of romantic socialists [and] succeeded in reconciling an ardent trade union activity with a search for an inner liberation. . . . Full of confidence in progress and science, believing the coming to power of the proletariat, he had constructed a powerful philosophy for himself. The reading of [Camille] Flammarion's study of pre-history had been a sort of revelation for him.<sup>8</sup>

The real conclusion reached by the son was that one should be prepared to "make contact with the intelligences of other worlds, to draw nearer to the very soul of the Cosmos. . . . By virtue of the spread of communal living and the slow creation of a universal psyche, [mankind] is progressing toward a state of super-consciousness."<sup>9</sup> Pauwels *films*, a creature of World War II (he was born in 1920), makes an acrid and nihilistic statement that may be considered typical of the mood of many Europeans of his age (which was exactly that of Joseph Beuys):

In this stricken world, where priests, thinkers, politicians, sociologists and manipulators of all kinds seemed to me like dung-eaters, the only dignified behavior lay in traditional [i.e., esoteric] studies and unconditional resistance to the spirit of the age. . . . The bourgeois sentiment, which sees this world as nothing but a comfortable habitation, was to be swept away in the gale of a new spirit . . . a Unity was to be achieved, a Truth to be realised. . . . I [wanted] to erect a bridge between mysticism and the modern mind. . . . This book sums up five years of questing, through all the religions of consciousness, to the frontiers of science and tradition.<sup>10</sup>

The aim is that of modern occultism, and, again, the resulting manifesto reads like Celant's, even including the necessary reference to the modernist alchemist:

The important thing is to discover the extent to which the rhythms of the so-called traditional mode of [occultist] thinking merge with the movements of contemporary thinking. At their present, farthest, limits, physics, biology, mathematics touch on certain aspects of esoterism: visions of the Cosmos, of the relation between energy and matter. Modern science, once freed from conformism, is seen to have ideas to exchange with the magicians, alchemists and wonder-workers of antiquity. . . . The need is to surmount the apparent contradiction between the material and the spiritual.<sup>11</sup>

According to Pauwels, the most suitable role model for the artist is the alchemist, because only he, by working with materials, came to know how to transcend them:



Artists who seek for the fantastic, outside reality in the clouds, lack true imagination. They return from their exploration with nothing more than counterfeits. As it is with rare minerals, so with the fantastic; it has to be torn out from the very bowels of the Earth, from the heart of reality. True imagination is something other than a leap into the unreal: "No other aspect of the mind dives as deeply as the imagination." The fantastic is usually thought of as a violation of natural law, as a rising up of the impossible. That is not how we conceive it.<sup>12</sup>

Following a pattern common to distinctly modernist occultism, science now confirms the truths of the timeless esoteric tradition. As Pauwels puts it, strictly artistic fantasy illustrates a "natural" reality, one which, however, lies beyond the dulled cognitive powers of mere (i.e., bourgeois) spectators. As the art historian recognizes, this, higher and clairvoyant, artistic fantasy is, of course, *le Surréalisme*:

It is rather a manifestation of natural law, an effect produced by contact with reality—reality perceived directly and not through a filter of habit, prejudice, conformism. Modern science has shown us that, behind the visible, there is an extremely complicated invisible. . . . Only the fantastic is likely to be true at the cosmic level. We believe that human phenomena must also be measured against the cosmic scale. The [esoteric] thinkers of antiquity said this. Our modern world, with its planetary rockets and its efforts to contact other intelligent beings, is saying it.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is the alchemist the new role model for the postscientific world of high modernity, but his transformations of raw matter are the model for the new consciousness: "The modern alchemist is a man who reads treatises on nuclear physics. He is convinced that transmutations and still more extraordinary phenomena can be obtained by manipulations and with the aid of comparatively simple apparatus."<sup>14</sup> This idea fits in with yet another leitmotiv of the esoteric tradition: ancient wisdom. And this is, as I believe, the real significance to all the neoprimitivism associated with "impoverished art." Again, the obligatory link has been forged by Pauwels between magic and art:

The sublimest idea is perhaps the equivalent of the Cro-Magnon witch-doctor's drawing of a bison. . . . At the highest stage of magic, the model is not a drawing or a statuette, or even a symbol. It is an idea . . . conceived only with a view to attaining another stage in the quest . . . to reveal the secret of the Universe. . . . It is in this sense that we can say: everything is a symbol, everything is a sign, everything is an evocation of another reality.<sup>15</sup>

However, as will be directly shown, thaumaturgic "impoverished art" is but one facet of a far-ranging phenomenon in postmodernism: neoprimitivism.

## Late Modernist Neoprimitivism

We began this study by stating that Joseph Beuys would have to have been invented had he not been born, given his useful role as an epitome of certain tendencies inherent in avant-garde expression of the late modern period. What he epitomizes in particular is a larger, rather amorphous idea that we may call the ethos of neoprimitivism. The products associated with this phenomenon are many and quite varied, but ultimately all are linked to what Kim Levin called that anomalous "return to Nature," characterized by artists either "returning materials to their natural state, subjecting them to natural force, sending art back to the land, or internalizing it within the body." When we survey the specific manifestations of neoprimitivism we can better understand the apparent inevitability of Beuys.

This new primitivism, unlike the first primitivism that inspired so much innovative abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>16</sup> is bookish rather than motif-oriented, idea-derived rather than visually centered. It is more art historical (literally) than outraged or even rebellious. As we know (since the publication of Robert Goldwater's pioneering study on *Primitivism in Modern Painting* in 1938),<sup>17</sup> after around 1907 the early Cubists and Expressionists had become fascinated by *l'art nègre*, tribal arts seemingly offering them a viable artistic-stylistic (that is, wholly visual) alternative to prevailing European traditional esthetic tenets, which produced the polished artifacts of the contemporary art salons. Once avant-garde cultural values were attached to the tribal models, these translations would then tend to be of a generalized—and anthropologically incorrect—sort; for instance, "simple" and "sincere" were the favored adjectives at the time, tags to be applied to primitive materials worked by primitive techniques. Another cultural value was therefore implicit: tribal art was diametrically opposed to the prevailing esthetic canons of European art (values already under sharp attack since the Symbolist movement). In the event, it was "the look" of primitivism that counted.

In a narrowly visual sense, tribal (which was to say largely African) art conveyed important stylistic-conceptual ideas, ones already employed by radical European artists by 1910: an ethic of rawness (or *non finito*); geometricity and ideographicity; unaffected truth through simple materials; and emphasis on extremes of combinatory invention. In this case, however, more important was what was *lacking*: as far as we know, none of the early modernist artists employing such nontraditional ethnographic materials knew anything specific about either ethnography or anthropology. In short, the ideas generating the forms they (more or less) copied largely remained a mystery to them. The purport of the individual artifact's subject matter did not, as it were, enter into the picture. A comment by Emil Nolde may be taken as representative of his generation: "Why is it that we artists love to see the unsophisticated artifacts of the Primi-

tives? . . . What we enjoy, probably, is the intense and often grotesque expression of energy, of life."<sup>18</sup> As Goldwater concluded, in early modernist primitivism, "for the first time the products if a native culture were being considered as isolated objects, entirely apart from the context of their creation."<sup>19</sup> Until recently, as William Rubin affirmed, "Few modern artists have been readers of ethnographical books."<sup>20</sup>

All this has now drastically changed, thus explaining the fundamental distances between the first and the latest primitivism in avant-garde art. The new situation is cogently explained by Kirk Varnedoe:

Central to these changes [in primitivist perceptions] has been a new kind of artist and an expanded idea of modern art. In the sixties, a new generation of predominantly middle-class, college-trained, artists, sophisticated and self-conscious in art-historical awareness, began producing . . . unorthodox work that rejected many of the premises of earlier modernism. In one sense, the intention of these artists was to make art that was newly shocking and difficult to accept, thereby reviving the avant-garde combativeness they felt had been smothered by the broad acceptance of abstract painting in the 1950s. Nevertheless, much of the rhetoric of the day spoke of closing, rather than widening, the gap between art and its public.<sup>21</sup>

To complement Varnedoe's trenchant observations, Robert Hughes touches upon the current state of primitivism by setting the present crisis in a wider (i.e., sociological) context, specifically that of contemporary art education. In short,

every five years, the art schools of America alone produce as many graduates as there were people in Florence in the last quarter of the fifteenth-century. . . . In the sixties there was a glut of students, and in the seventies a glut of teachers, since the art-education system had in effect created a proletariat of artists, a pool of unemployable talent for which society could find no use—except as trainers of more pupils.<sup>22</sup>

This other crisis aside, Varnedoe had followed his first assertion with another observation that provides the strictly material difference between the old and new modernist primitivisms:

This changed notion of modern art in turn encountered an altered picture of the Primitive. In the sixties and seventies, the paperback bookstore—rather than the curio shop, the gallery, or the ethnological museum—became the prime locus of many artists' contact with tribal cultures. . . . All this has yielded a primitivism that declares itself, for better or worse, more knowing, and, in the process, begs the question whether its frequently bookish results are more truly radical or authentic than the allegedly "merely formal" incorporations of tribal art by early modernists, such as Picasso.<sup>23</sup>

The very ambitious range of this neoprimitivism is understandably immense, given that it is: (1) college-trained; (2) art-historically self-conscious; (3) paperback-derived; and (4) the product of a glut of young artists eager to



establish the quick ("bubble") professional reputation. In fact, its range is so wide as to constitute a mixed bag of anthropological/ethnographical tricks. And, to our other contemporary contexts, we must also of course add the still burning big issues of our culture: ecology, protests against government waste and land management, feminism, nuclear disarmament, the imperiled nuclear family, urban decay, overcrowding, and unrest, civil rights and social activism in general, occultism, and plain old romanticism. As for the last, Lucy Lippard has probably best summed it all up: "The simplest explanation for contemporary artists' current attraction to ancient images, artifacts, and sites is *nostalgia*—not only for those periods we now [naively] imagine offered a social life simpler and more meaningful than our own, but also for any time when what people made—art—had a secure place in their daily lives."<sup>24</sup>

The common characteristic unifying the wide variety of works we shall briefly survey is that they generally attempt to render things thought impossible to express in a (by-now) traditional modernist art language. One of the commonplace strategies recently employed is neomegalithicism.<sup>25</sup> A well-known example of this particular trend is a work by Carl Andre, *Stone Field Sculpture*, consisting of an installation of thirty-six glacial boulders, emplaced in 1980 in alignments in front of the municipal art gallery in Hartford, Connecticut. On a carefully manicured green museum lawn surrounded by sleek skyscrapers, André's great stone configurations offer a domesticated version of Stonehenge, but at once formally and less symbolically complex than its venerable model. A work like Stonehenge, among many others of its ilk, is now generally accepted by scholarly pre/paleohistorians to be practical in function, probably representing an astronomical arrangement designed to make prognostications relevant to planting and harvesting cycles; hence, on the putative symbolic level, it also apparently functions as a fertility image.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the original functions and metaphorical meanings of the venerable prototype, Andre has succeeded in reducing and domesticating the awesome ancient symbol to the level of the urban sculpture garden, an apt symbol in itself for the contemporary art-consuming culture that sponsored the anomalous piece in the first place.

The literally archaeological aspect of the new primitivism is perhaps best illustrated by the odd constructions of Charles Simonds, who makes mini-architectural, mock-archaeological habitations for his mythic race of the Little People. These petite terra-cotta models, whose form is largely suggested by that of Indian pueblos, are not necessarily made for exhibition in art galleries; Simonds has, in fact, often made them for various derelict sites in New York City. Wherever they appear, one part of the structure is commonly shown to be crumbling into ruin while the other end of the arc is seen to be in a process of being (re)built, thus suggesting the timeless continuity of the human community. Another interesting phenomenon is the late Ana Mendieta, a Cuban refugee who made a series of *Siluetas* based on her own schematized figure. These she

cut into the earth; silhouetted in flowers, candles, and fireworks; set on fire; floated down a river. Her image was consecrated to Timeless Earth. Once she had herself filmed beneath the grass as a pulsing mound of turf, thus herself becoming the fecund archetype of *La Tierra*. Her last earthwork production was inadvertent; in the course of a violent argument with her husband, Carl Andre, she was pitched out of a high window, thus coming to make her last, violent communion with asphalted *terra firma* situated some stories below.

As it appears, high order and childlike spontaneity are the keynotes of the new primitivism. Other rituals are less mixed up with blood and earth displays. For instance, we have the harmless perambulations of a Richard Long. Beginning in 1967, he made geometric forms in the landscape with paper or turf. Subsequently, he began to walk, thus, for instance, transforming Dartmoor Heath into a sculpture. Naturally, such enterprises had to be documented photographically. Since then, the indefatigable Long has been photographed walking/making art on every continent, stating that, "I like simple . . . quiet vigorous art, . . . sensibility without technique. . . . A walk expresses space and freedom. . . . A walk traces the surface of the land; it follows an idea."<sup>27</sup> The purported significance of making such marks upon the land (by the way, neatly coinciding with discussions in the popular press about the Megalithic "Ley system lines")<sup>28</sup> has been remarked upon by critically acclaimed minimalist/conceptual artist Robert Morris, and of course in typically cosmic terminology: "Assuming that the lines point to power-points in the Sierra (as well as the literal sources of water), we then have both terms: the flat and the spatial . . . the abstract figure and the concrete existent. Here, *the artifact-symbol functions to channel the powers of nature into human design* analogous to the biological function of the life-force."<sup>29</sup> A literally prominent offshoot of neomegalithicism is a recent preoccupation with grandiose earthworks—particularly those to which their creators attribute portentous cosmic significances. In this case, systems of geometrical and numerical symbolism—traits already fundamental to minimalist and conceptual art—often take pride of place, as we see in a statement from archminimalist Sol LeWitt: "Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development. . . . All ideas may not be made physical. . . . If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art (and not literature); numbers are not mathematics."<sup>30</sup> But if numbers are not mathematics, then what are they? An example of LeWitt's obsessive modular/numerical thinking is a piece called *A 2 5 8* (1968), a square having a framework in the shape of a block, equal in height to the module cube but triple its width. It covers nine tiles, thus containing nine times the area of the module cube. Another cube sits above the third module cube on tile eight, covering again nine tiles but, being a cube, it is twenty-seven times the size of the module cube, and so on ad infinitum.<sup>31</sup>

This obsession with primary, or primordial, forms (the real "what" of numbers) in turn suggests an underlying concern with strictly mystical mathe-



mathematical symbolism. All such ideas of course go back to Pythagoras, to the neoplatonists and, particularly, to the visionary writers of the Cabbalistic tradition (who are evidently well known to Mr. LeWitt).<sup>32</sup> In the case of strictly neoprimitive concerns, lately one has heard much about a "Megalithic Yard," supposedly the ubiquitous modular basis of the ancient earthworks.<sup>33</sup> Whatever their real sources (or meaning), in the popular collective mind today all these venerable number and measurement schemes are lumped together into that larger category called "ancient knowledge" (to be discussed in the following section). All this points to an even larger contemporary cultural issue: if one distrusts the value systems of this society, where does one search for alternatives? As it now appears, we must look back to the beginnings.

Probably the most spectacular of the recent symbolic earthworks is *Roden Crater*, the grandiose (and as yet unrealized) project of Los Angeles artist James Turrell. Widely reported in the mass media, this is in effect the real thing, a genuine (*formatio Deo*) huge volcanic crater, purchased by the artist in 1977 and situated in a nearly inaccessible quarter of the northern Arizona deserts. But what does Turrell plan to do to alter the divine plan? An explanation of the artist's schemes, incorporating an awesome series of complex numerical and astronomical alignments, is given by Craig Adcock:

From the side of the chamber opposite the stairwell, an opening will subtend out one-half degree of arc; that is, it will frame an area of sky about the size of the sun or the moon as [seen] at an angle of approximately twenty-six degrees, in the direction of the pole-star. . . . A complete "precession of the equinoxes," as this slow cycle is known, requires some 25,800 years. . . . The primary orientation of the Eastern Space will be toward the section of the horizon . . . delimiting the yearly oscillations of the rising sun back and forth along the horizon, from one solstitial extreme to the other. . . . The sun traverses one degree of arc every four minutes, and will thus cross the eastern opening of the chamber fairly quickly. . . . At summer solstice, the sun is at its northernmost position, which is sixty degrees, thirty-six minutes; at winter solstice, it is at its southernmost position, 119 degrees, twenty-four minutes. . . . The cycle involves some seventy lunar eclipses during a period of 870 years, and some fifty solar eclipses during a period of twelve hundred years.<sup>34</sup>

What are Turrell's purposes in all this? In effect, he means to add to nature, allowing for a clairvoyant perception of pure and primordial creation. As the artist put it in an interview,

I like to find a site that has unique opportunities for light or the perception of space. . . . I'm interested in the weights, pressures, and feeling of the light inhabiting space itself, and in seeing this atmosphere . . . Seeing volume as a whole is one thing, but there are densities and structuring within a space that have to do with a penetration of vision and a way of seeing into it. . . . [I want to create an atmosphere] that can be consciously plumbed with seeing, like the wordless thought that comes from looking into fire[:] the light is used to make a realm that's of the mind. . . . Roden Crater is not taking from nature as much as placing you in contact with it. . . . Within the setting, I am making spaces that will engage celestial events. . . . The



work will have a horizon and will use the sky overhead. . . . The space works in a very large *Ganzfeld* [total-field]. . . . The sites I like to use are ones that, in general, have no function, *spaces that are really only inhabited by consciousness*. This inhabiting of space by consciousness is the entry of self into space through the penetration of vision. . . . This is, I think, the space that we inhabit most of the time, much *more than this conscious, awake space that is called "reality."*<sup>35</sup>

At this point, one has to ask: Just what was it that James Turrell had been reading?<sup>36</sup> As it turns out, it was the literature of mysticism and occultism, since all this talk of manipulating and then abolishing materialist reality by means of the elevated consciousness, not to mention the ubiquitous leitmotifs of light and nonspace,<sup>37</sup> are all familiar, archetypal concerns of the literature defining the esoteric tradition.

### From Classical Primitivism to Occult Ancient Wisdom

Kirk Varnedoe has cogently remarked how "each civilization invents the 'primitive' it needs, not just as an antithesis to its cultured sophistication, but also as a partial reflection of itself, compensating for, or criticizing that civilization's doubts and ideals."<sup>38</sup> Certainly this is the case in the numerous examples of neoprimitivism manifest in recent art. Our survey, however brief, of these still-current cultural byproducts has provided evidence for the mood of the avant-garde at this time, a time in which Joseph Beuys rose to unprecedented heights of public approval (that is, within rather restricted, elitist circles). This examination of the broader cultural background of the most recent of the recurrent primitivisms has perhaps given some substance to the initial assertion that, had not Beuys been born, he would have had to be invented.

Nevertheless, even the first great wave of modernist primitivism (apparently beginning around 1907, by current art-historical consensus) was nothing new. In effect, primitivism, in its fundamental and nearly unchanging aspect—that is, as the manifestation of a perennial tendency to admire the largely imagined virtues of early and/or less materially developed societies—has had a long and diverse history within mainstream occidental thought and culture. This we shall now examine (providing, perhaps, further evidence for the near inevitability of a Joseph Beuys). Then we shall link these obviously ancient beliefs to yet another kind of ancient wisdom, one which is, paradoxically, very largely a modern invention, since it derives directly from the late-nineteenth-century developments of the esoteric tradition.

One of the fundamental tenets of applied primitivism is the "theory of progressive degradation," having as its postulate the notion of a mythic Golden Age.<sup>39</sup> Apparently the earliest *written* record (meaning that the concept had probably been prevalent long before) dates from the middle of the eighth century

B.C. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* (lines 109 ff.), we find the following assertion:

First of all, the deathless gods, who dwell on Olympus, made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos [Saturn], when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods, without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but, with legs and arms never failing, they made merry with feasting, beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth, unforced, bore them fruit abundantly, and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands, with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.<sup>40</sup>

Thus in the oldest surviving bucolic picture of "soft primitivism,"<sup>41</sup> happy, well-fed, and thoroughly idle natives frolic and play. Hesiod's generational theory, however, further postulated "Five Ages of Mankind," of which we need only consider the last, the "present age," describing the inevitable, apocalyptic "Fall from Grace":

For now is truly a race of iron, and men never rest from labor and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall lay sore trouble upon them. . . . And Zeus will destroy this race of mortal men also when they come to have grey hair on their temples at their birth. [At that time] the father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father, nor guest with his host, nor comrade with comrade; nor will brother be dear to brother as before. Men will dishonor their parents as they grow quickly old, and will carp at them, chiding them with bitter words; hard-hearted they are, not knowing the fear of the gods. . . . Men will praise the evil-doer and his violent dealings. . . . Bitter sorrows will be left for mortal men, and there will be no help against evil.<sup>42</sup>

This familiar jeremiad (along with its classical descendants such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I, 76–215),<sup>43</sup> set the moral tone (and details) of innumerable editorials published in provincial papers throughout the land, particularly those that ask "what's happening to the youth of the nation," meaning, "how do we account for this moral decay?" Similarly, this is the tone of many art critics, who decry the latest, necessarily outrageous, innovations of the avant-garde: "*Nihil novum sub sole*." In any event, an unbroken continuity of such ideas contrasts the present, decadent age with that far happier one that ("naturally," in both senses) characterized the primordial beginnings of mankind—before the advent of civilization and all its attendant, mainly technological maladies. *Avant la lettre écologique*, Virgil in particular (*Aeneid*, VIII, 314 ff.) made clear the "naturalness" of the primordial condition of that preternaturally happy "race of men, born of tree trunk and hard oak, who had neither a rule of life nor civilization, nor did they know how to . . . store up their wealth."<sup>44</sup> This idea was developed by Porphyry (*De abstinentia*, IV, i, 2), who pointed out how



simple and joyful life was before the advent of art, an enterprise that he associates (as we might today) with the idea of competitiveness:

All things then presumably grew spontaneously, since the men of that time themselves produced nothing, having invented neither agriculture—nor any other art. It was for this reason that they lived a life of leisure, without care or toil. . . . And there were no wars or feuds between them; for there existed among them no objects of competition of such value as to give anyone a motive to seek to obtain them by those means. Thus it was that their whole life was one of leisure, of freedom from care about the satisfaction of their needs. . . . Consequently, this manner of life of theirs naturally came to be longed for by men of later times who, because of the greatness of their desires, had become subject to many evils.<sup>45</sup>

Thus we see that, by definition, the happy primordial period—prehistory—was both art-less and artless in its “natural” character. This art-as-fall-from-nature theme was carried on by the Stoic philosophers, particularly Seneca, who bewailed (*Epistles*, 90, 24) the fact that “Nature has made it impossible for man to [maintain life] without so many arts . . . none of them are needed to be painfully sought out in order that our lives might be prolonged. . . . We have made everything difficult for ourselves, through our disdain of what is easy . . . we have made those other, needless things precious and wonderful.”<sup>46</sup> In historical times, however, certain uncivilized peoples still knew how to avoid the temptations leading to material decadence and moral decline. Foremost among these natural tribal peoples, especially given their actual physical proximity to the prolific Roman chroniclers, were the *Germani*, “Germans.” Seneca (*De providentia*, IV, 15) noted certain details of their harsh and austere way of life, naturally finding it admirable. He asked his decadent urban readers, “Do they seem to you unhappy? No one is unhappy when custom has led in the path of Nature—*Nihil miserum est quod in naturam consuetudo perduxit*.”<sup>47</sup> In short, the Germans had become in antiquity the epitome of what we would today call the “noble savage” (a Teutonic theme to which we shall return).

As we have just seen, this longstanding tradition is predicated on the basic idea of evolving time cycles, beginning with a golden age in which prehistoric rustic peoples lived on the land in a simple, untutored, and artless manner in a winterless and lawless land of milk and honey. This rudimentary lifestyle epitomizes natural, inherent wisdom. Alas, this paradisaical existence was eventually supplanted by the last age in the great cycle: civilization, with all its laws and technology, arts and ills. We may close this survey of the ancient roots of primitivist notions in modernist thinking by citing one (out of many such) Hindu-Vedic account, for this Eastern branch of the gnarled old tree of esotericism plays a part in the modern notions of ancient wisdom, as these were reinvented by modern occultism. This example is drawn from the *Mahabharata*,



but it displays all the themes found in Hesiod and his innumerable followers in the West:

The *Krita* [finished] age is that age in which righteousness was constant. . . . Duties did not then languish, nor did the people decline . . . no buying or selling went on. . . . The fruit of the earth was obtained by mere wish. . . . There was no malice, weeping, pride or enmity. . . . In that age, the classes, alike in their functions, fulfilled their duties, were unceasingly devoted to one deity, and used one formula, one rule, one rite. . . . They attained the supreme felicity.<sup>48</sup>

The strictly modern idea of a revival of ancient wisdom dates to the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Historically, theosophy grew out of spiritualism, a vague but widespread belief in life after death and in communication with the spirits of the dead. In turn, spiritualism had grown out of the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who had developed the idea of correspondences, demonstrating that there are higher, invisible, spiritual analogues of visible, materialist things. The purpose of theosophy was to impose upon American spiritualism a veneer of philosophical and intellectual learning and prestige. That window-dressing turned out to be pure occultism, defined by a former theosophist as “a concern for theories and practices based on esoteric knowledge. Occultism often includes the study of writings felt to contain secrets known to ancient civilizations, but subsequently forgotten.”<sup>49</sup> The driving force behind theosophy was Madame Helene Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), called by her knowledgeable (nontheosophist) biographer a “brilliant, occult con-artist . . . the cranky, obese shrew with a femme fatale’s power to charm both men and women, and attract them to her cause.”<sup>50</sup> The first major manifesto of theosophical beliefs was Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877), a dense work in two volumes which eventually sold half a million copies. The fascination perennially exerted by the complex ideas propagated in this widely read publication is neatly summarized by Bruce Campbell:

Beneath the diversity of topics treated, there is an underlying theme: the work is a treatise on the ancient wisdom-religion. The theme explains the appeal of *Isis Unveiled* to its late nineteenth-century audience and its continued popularity since. Its readership has been composed, to a large extent, of educated persons to whom religion is important but who have become estranged from established religious organizations. Their learning makes them both sensitive to the challenge of science to religion and aware of the insights of different religious traditions. The idea of wisdom-religion, a universal and ageless occult knowledge derived from a [lost] civilization in which there was [once] a unity between science and religion, suggests [to the true believers] a possible common ground between science and religion, and a way to integrate the insights of the various faiths into a grand synthesis. . . . [According to theosophy,] every religion is thus based on the one and same truth: the “secret doctrine” or [timeless] wisdom.<sup>51</sup>

Like the ancient primitivist doctrines we have examined, theosophy posits a succession of ages; and, like mainstream primitivism, it states that the rise of

civilization was in reality a descent. As Campbell explains, it represents "the physical devolution of man from higher and more spiritual natures."<sup>52</sup> In combining the Darwinian idea of evolution with certain ideas borrowed from Oriental (particularly Indian) religions—mainly the ideas of *karma* (fate) and *maya*, (the illusory nature of the real world)—"theosophy was," according to Campbell, "able to give a sophistication to Occultism that had not been present before."<sup>53</sup> Whatever its supposed spiritual merits, in Blavatsky's cosmogony modern materialistic civilization represents the final stage of the descent from the golden age of the classical primitivist thinkers. As Blavatsky repeatedly affirmed, "All things had their origin in spirit—evolution having originally begun from above and proceeded downward, instead of the reverse, as [is] taught in the Darwinian theory. In other words, there has been a gradual materialization of forms, until a fixed, ultimate debasement is reached."<sup>54</sup> It is generally agreed that Blavatsky's magnum opus is the massive six-volume work called *The Secret Doctrine* that first appeared to an eager public in 1888.<sup>55</sup> The indefatigable author set forth here what purports to be the root knowledge out of which all religion, philosophy, and science have since grown. If we believe Blavatsky, the ultimate source of all subsequent human knowledge (and the basis of her exegetical treatise) are the "Stanzas of Dzyan," scrupulously copied by Madame Blavatsky from a fragmentary manuscript containing ancient Tibetan sacred writings. This is the oldest book in the world and, as she tells it, Blavatsky suffered great hardships toiling across the high Himalayas in order to retrieve it for our edification. Unfortunately, other than in Blavatsky's florid English translation, this priceless incunabulum is otherwise unknown to modern scholarship.

We may briefly examine the bizarre particulars of her neoprimitivist history of mankind. It is a colorful, albeit turgidly told, story of a succession of seven ages, each with its own root-race inhabiting its own continent. The first age was the most spiritual, and thus corresponds to Hesiod's and Ovid's golden age; and its root-race was the "Self-born," or "old or Primitive Race." According to Blavatsky, this was "a period more blissful than the Golden Age."<sup>56</sup> The second root-race was the Hypoborean; like those of the preceding age, its inhabitants were disembodied and thus quite sexless. Strictly nonspiritual means of reproduction are first encountered in the third, or Lemurian root-race, from the famous lost continent of the same name, extending (so we are told) south from the Gobi Desert to the current Indian Ocean. Then men first developed bodies, became sexual, and thus became responsible for evil as well as good—notions that never had proved a problem in the two preceding androgynous ages. The fourth age belongs to the Atlanteans, who inhabit yet another famous lost continent—about which much ink is still being spilled today. The fifth race is the Aryan, arising in northern Asia and spreading to the south and west. The other two root-races are still in the offing.



Campbell, for one, sees much actual and potential significance in this skewed scheme:

After the appearance of the final two root-races, humanity will have reached the end of its allotted cycle of evolution, and the life-impulse will withdraw from our globe. This story of cosmic and human evolution is the backdrop for the theme that explains the deep and abiding interest the book has held for occultists over the last century. *The Secret Doctrine* is a treatise on individual human destiny, one that places moral problems of individual development against the backdrop of cosmic evolution and, in fact, makes the development of the inner man the heart and reason of evolution. . . . This central theme suggests the psychological and religious needs of the middle- and upper-class audience who have been its readers.<sup>57</sup>

Theosophy's guiding ideas are indeed complex (and often quite indigestible). For our immediate purposes, however, we need only quickly deal with Blavatsky's ideas on ancient wisdom, for which *The Secret Doctrine* remains the best guide:

However superhuman the efforts of the early Christian Fathers to obliterate the SECRET DOCTRINE from the very memory of man, they all failed. Truth can never be killed; hence, the failure to sweep away entirely from the face of the earth every vestige of that Ancient Wisdom, and to shackle and gag every witness who testified to it. . . .<sup>58</sup>

No true thinker, no one who recognizes the presence of a common bond between Man and Nature, visible as well as invisible, would see in the old relics of Archaic Wisdom "childish nonsense and absurdity," as so many Academicians and Scientists have done.<sup>59</sup>

Evidently so; in fact, many notable modern artists were unquestionably influenced by theosophy.<sup>60</sup>

## Occultism in Contemporary Culture and Art

Recent scholarship has noted the ubiquitous influences of esoteric belief systems upon numerous notable pioneers of modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> The effects of primitivism upon that generation have been similarly observed. As we saw, the common link between modernist occultism and neo-primitivism is the notion of a revival of ancient wisdom. This search for esoteric knowledge can, however, take many forms, given that such illumination is currently drawn from many diverse sources. The author of a book appropriately called *The Occult Explosion*<sup>62</sup> underscores the importance of this underlying theme for the majority of contemporary occultists. The matter at hand is two-fold. The first task is to provide a survey of the present-day widespread infiltration of esoteric beliefs into contemporary—New Age—culture on its most popular levels (not a difficult endeavor given existing studies of the phenomenon).<sup>63</sup> The second undertaking is rather more difficult: to document the employment of occult ideas by avant-garde artists active today. In this case we have a serious



problem: the subject has scarcely been broached by art historians.<sup>64</sup> This scholarly lacuna probably either exists because the typical academic abhors the very idea of occultism or because the esoteric ideas in question have become so accepted, even commonplace or New Age, that they have lost their character as "esotericism." In any event, the larger purpose is to underscore the cultural inevitability of a Joseph Beuys.

When studying the infiltration of occultist phenomena in contemporary popular culture, we are no longer dealing with the likes of theosophy, a fairly sophisticated belief system that must be learned. Unlike the recent manifestations of esotericism we shall survey, theosophy was above all (and still is) a unified, quasiphilosophical, neotheological belief system. Conversely, New Age occultism is scattered, decidedly untheological, and generally not very philosophical. Mainly, the revived esoteric experience is popular, in the most literal sense of the word: it is for and of the general populace, who need not be learned in order to reap the proffered spiritual benefits. The variety and accessibility of New Age esotericism is perhaps best introduced by a journalist investigating the tribal folkways of a fairly typical pack of middle-class adolescents in an affluent suburb of San Francisco, Marin County:

Besides sex, [fifteen-year-old] Marlene's other new interest that summer [of 1975] was the occult. . . . of course, in a teen-age subculture, where one's [astrological] sign was often better known than one's name, *everybody believed*: in astrology, UFOs and extrasensory perception, or their Eastern analogues, the *I-ching*, tarot cards and the mysteries of the pyramids. Even the merits of such harder-to-swallow occult phenomena as black magic, witchcraft and demonology were generally accepted. To most of the kids in Marlene's new circle of friends, the laws of the occult were as axiomatic as the laws of geometry—and far more widely known.<sup>65</sup>

If you think this catalogue represents only the kinky interests of a bunch of drugged out kids, take a look at the newspaper to which *you* probably subscribe: undoubtedly, it has a regular contribution of syndicated astrological prognostications (just as horoscopes appear in most of the German newspapers one sees). Is it mere coincidence that the University of California at Berkeley offered its first B.A. degree in "magical studies" in 1970, thus becoming the first reputable academic institution in history to legitimize the subject? This was the same year in which the first Festival of the Occult Arts was put on in New York at the Fillmore East, a rock concert hall. (Somewhat to the surprise of the entrepreneur, Bill Graham, three times the expected audience turned up.) In the summer of 1971 eighteen psychic tours of the British Isles were scheduled (at £350 per head). In the 1950s the German Institute of Public Opinion found that 29 percent of a national sampling affirmed a connection between human fate and the stars, and in mid-1988 we found that the president of the United States was governed "by the stars." Walk into any well-furbished bookstore and you will see shelves of publications dealing with such topics as Inspirational Readings, Self-Help,

Metaphysics, and Religion. Many of these should be shelved with the larger collection there: Occultism. Occultism has, in short, unquestionably become a commonplace expression of the vox populi.<sup>66</sup>

Recent paperback best-sellers on college campuses were Carlos Castaneda's several books detailing his spiritual encounters with an American Indian shaman, Don Juan. These purported to be fact, and, indeed, the first of his tomes had previously been presented and accepted as a Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology at UCLA (hence Castaneda's insistence on documentary proof, embellished with footnotes). Nevertheless, recent serious research (not, of course, by Dr. Castaneda) reveals his works to be an example of "a slowly unfolding *occult fiction*."<sup>67</sup> Their lucrative popularity (whatever their bogus purpose) has been described by David Murray as a product of "the modern concern for the paranormal, with its broad ecological and holistic assumptions about the natural world and its relation to a development of psychological insights."<sup>68</sup> Equally popular (but considerably less anthropological) is the cult of Dianetics (formerly Scientology) espoused by the late L. Ron Hubbard, whose paperback books are widely advertised on TV. This is a kind of self-help psychotherapy. As Nat Freedland comments, "Scientology is not occultism, but it competes in the metaphysical marketplace for the Groovy Culture's losers who are seeking desperately for One Simple Answer [and it] puts itself forward as a rational, updated version of the occult tradition's self-perfection techniques."<sup>69</sup> It must work; at last count, Dianetics/Scientology had a worldwide paying membership of fifteen million.

Another manifestation of the worldwide occult explosion is the UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) phenomenon. Reportings of these (sometimes with murky photographs) are standard fare in the news racks situated next to the checkout counters in supermarkets. As it turns out, this is another twist on the venerable theme of ancient wisdom; in this case, however, the source is literally otherworldly. The modern manifestation dates from the early 1950s, a postnuclear period in which the Western world became suddenly obsessed with security against all manner of often unspecified enemies. In 1948 Congress issued *The Strategy and Tactics of World Communism*, and the next year George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published. Senator Joe McCarthy began his witch-hunts and the collective paranoia of the age was signaled by its buzz words: invasion, infiltration, subversion, and brainwashing. The first flying saucers were "seen" in 1947 and were immediately identified as invaders, perhaps from the USSR but more likely from Mars. Given the superior acrobatic qualities of these vehicles, their pilots were obviously harbingers of a technologically superior, extraterrestrial civilization. John Sladek, who quotes a number of such reports (some excruciatingly funny), observes how, "under the pressure of objective investigation, UFOs have been retreating, like unicorns,



deeper into the forests of fantasy.”<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, hardly an issue of the *National Enquirer* goes by without yet another sighting on its front pages.

The flying saucer/outer space connection with theories of ancient wisdom made its biggest recent splash with the widely sold (forty million copies), pseudoscientific paperback production of Erich von Däniken, a shrewd Swiss whose contribution was the introduction of the ancient astronaut. The advent of these superior intelligences from outer space (the easy riders of UFOs) brought to mankind the gift of the Egyptian pyramids, the stone monuments of Easter Island, and the architecture of the pre-Inca peoples of Peru. Morris Goran, underwhelmed by von Däniken’s bits of extraterrestrial “evidence,” points out that

psychiatric reports on the man when he was in trouble earlier in life describe him as a compulsive liar. More serious charges are that the ancient-astronaut writers misquote, misinterpret, and make no distinction when citing as authoritative the work of certified nuts or established scholars. . . . The situation in the category of unidentified flying object books is similar: a very large assortment offering the extraterrestrial hypothesis, another space-time continuum or mystery, and very few books explaining away the so-called “unidentified.”<sup>71</sup>

Another familiar source of ancient wisdom is the famous lost continent of Atlantis (with Lemuria coming second in popularity). Since a credible historical source for this considerably embellished myth has already been exposed,<sup>72</sup> we need not go into the matter further, only noting a comment by John Sladek concerning its strictly modern sources: “Occultists haven’t been slow in taking up Atlantological proofs. . . . Theosophists like Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant and W. Scott Elliott staked their claims early.”<sup>73</sup> Such is some of the abundant evidence for a widespread contemporary “occult explosion.”

Besides Beuys, what evidence do we have that contemporary artists, those enjoying a certain measure of critical acceptance at this very moment, are attracted to the occult, and even directly appropriate its materials for their art? In effect, the contemporary artist with occultist proclivities would be carrying on an esoteric tradition that had already manifested itself in the work of artists of the previous generation, that is to say, those artists who had achieved critical prominence between 1945 and 1965. Fortunately, some work has already been done on the occult underpinnings of the art of that era.<sup>74</sup> In the case of present-day occultist-infiltrated art, a few concrete examples may be cited in passing.<sup>75</sup> The reader is nevertheless reminded that this subject—esotericism in contemporary art—remains largely unexplored territory and, therefore, what follows is neither systematic nor comprehensive. This is only an introduction, calculated to spur further explorations of what appears to be an ongoing phenomenon.

In 1967 Bruce Nauman constructed a wall sculpture out of peach and blue



colored neon-light tubing, and this he called a *Window or Wall Sign*. The message literally spelled out by the artist in his declamatory *Sign* is most revealing: "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths." The late (as of 1981) Alfred Jensen's abstract paintings customarily took the form of a mandala, a symmetrical image, either circular or square, which in esoteric Hinduism or Buddhism was used to assist concentration and meditation. For true believers, "regardless of medium, each mandala is a microcosm, or spiritual diagram of the universe, illustrating the various principles, qualities and forces in the world, their derivation from the ultimate, and the process by which the individual can return to the original source."<sup>76</sup> As may be further divined, the patently Eastern origins of this motif can be called a neotheosophical effect, given the historical role of that pseudoreligion, integrating Asian esotericism into mainstream Occidental occultism (not to mention the fact that Madame Blavatsky commented upon the mandala as a cosmic symbol).<sup>77</sup> Jensen further established the connection by entitling one of his mandalas *My Oneness: A Universe of Colors* (1957) and another *Unity in the Square* (1967).

A far better-known figure is the late Ives Klein, a painter and performance artist whose theories still exert considerable influence in the European avant-garde. As recent scholarship has shown,<sup>78</sup> Klein took up a vegetarian lifestyle in 1948 at the time that he became a practicing Rosicrucian. For the rest of his life, he spent four hours a day reading a bizarre theosophical work by Max Heindl, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* (1909). Klein the artist was notorious for his body paintings, *Anthropométries*, in which he publicly dragged nude women—covered in "pure" pigments, usually in bright blue (indigo)—across wide expanses of canvas. As one art critic blandly comments, "in the mature monochrome paintings the color is everything: plain blue canvases, deep, vibrant, endless. . . . This unique shade of blue he called 'International Klein Blue'."<sup>79</sup> Heindl's comments on mystical, Rosicrucian color indicate, however, that Klein was no mere formalist painter:

We do not sin against the "oneness" of light because we distinguish three primary colors into which it divides itself. The white light of the Sun contains the seven colors of the spectrum. The occultist sees even twelve colors, there being five between red and violet. . . . Four of these colors are quite indescribable, but the fifth—the middle one of the five—is similar to the tint of a new-blown peach blossom. It is in fact the color of the vital body. Trained clairvoyants who describe it as "bluish grey," or "reddish-grey," etc., are trying to describe a color that has no equivalent in the physical world. . . . Color will enable us to realize the oneness of God with the Seven Spirits before The Throne better than anything else . . . and one color—*indigo*—contains the entire gamut of colors, making in all the seven colors of the spectrum. These colors represent the Seven Spirits before the Throne.<sup>80</sup>

Nonwestern ideas, however, are standard fare for many recent artist-participants in the occult revival. We have already noted John Cage's addiction to the

*I Ching*, in addition to the great influence he exerted on younger artists. Besides the Fluxus group, mainly centered in Europe, there were also major pioneers of the post-Abstract Expressionist school in New York; thus, comments Maurice Tuchman, "Cage's interests in Zen and other non-Western, quasi-occult realms were of particular interest to Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg."<sup>31</sup> On the West Coast, I recall painters eagerly reading Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* and Alan Watts's and D. T. Suzuki's many writings on Zen and other kinds of Oriental wisdom, all available in the ultimate vox populi form: the cheap paperback. The ancient wisdom found in the *I Ching* (the basis of Cage's celebrated aleatory theories) has been neatly debunked by John Sladek:

In essence, the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, is a compendium of proverbs, indexed and with an elaborate random-access system. Its present popularity in the Western world seems to have three roots: that it is old and Chinese recommends it to users who are neither. That it is mathematical excites number-mystics. That its pronouncements are often uncannily appropriate makes it irresistible to anyone. . . . [Nevertheless] the uncanny appropriateness of its message seems to depend largely on [subjective] interpretation by the user. The inert text, often murky in translation, may act as a kind of Rorschach ink-blot pattern, which the user invests with the answer he desires. The best evidence of this is that, when people by mistake or miscalculation read the wrong prophecy, they seem to derive just as much meaning from it as otherwise.<sup>32</sup>

Sometimes contemporary artists with mystical inclinations go past the general ideas and directly copy the iconography of occultism. Two such paintings come to mind: Jess's *De Macrocosmi Fabrica* (1969) and Wally Hedrick's *Hermetic Image* (1961). Although current scholarship suggests that the two painters derived their occult imagery from the original sources (rare seventeenth-century publications), their prototypes were actually taken from modern paperbacks, from which sources we derive the true titles—and expanded meanings—of these two paintings.<sup>33</sup>

Doubtless, many other random examples of this sort can be unearthed, but it is enough to state at this point that much further serious scholarship is called for in order fully to elucidate the involvement of contemporary artists with occult sources. This engagement ranges, as we have seen in the few examples studied here, from the most generalized propositions commonly associated with the esoteric tradition on down to isolated cases of specific iconographic borrowings.

We may now return specifically to the case of Joseph Beuys, looking at his shamanistic posturings in the light of the paperback culture of the avant-garde.



## Joseph Beuys and Paperback Shamanism

Earlier, we saw Robert Hughes signaling Joseph Beuys's "obsessive interest in shamanism." We can easily relate this notion—one to which Beuys himself freely admitted—to the previously drawn picture of the effects of contemporary neoprimitivism in avant-garde art and performance. According to Thomas McEvelley,

In general, performance works involving the appropriation of religious forms [such as Beuys's *Aktionen*] have fallen into two groups: those that select from the neolithic sensibility of fertility and blood sacrifice, and those that select from the paleolithic sensibility of shamanic magic and ordeal; often the two strains mix. Both may be seen as expressions of the desire, so widespread in the '60s and early '70s, to reconstitute within Modern civilization something like an ancient or primitive sensibility of oneness with nature.<sup>84</sup>

Viewing the situation in a broader context, we also see that all the symptoms outlined by McEvelley are really the functional analogues (if indeed not the direct effects) of the modern occultists' search for ancient wisdom, a paradigm of that mythic, lost golden age when oneness with nature was commonplace. Such a utopia has been sought by innumerable thinkers since classical times: *nihil novum sub sole*. McEvelley also recognizes the larger mystical and meditational factors that clearly lift these artworks from the familiar, superficial parameters of traditional modernist formalism. Under such subsurface conditions, "art then functions like a kind of universal awareness practice, not unlike the mindfulness of southern Buddhism or the 'Attention!' of Zen."<sup>85</sup> Moreover, one now clearly sees the ideological linkages with some earlier art movements, which look not at all like these later phenomena. Among these mystical predecessors should be counted the Chinese-Indian-Japanese-derived art of artists working in the immediate post-World War II period. Such eclectic influences worked upon both the Abstract Expressionists and more conceptual artists, such as Rauschenberg and Johns (both of whom have acknowledged their indebtedness to the *I-Ching*-derived aleatory theories of John Cage). In the largest sense, as McEvelley recognizes, "clearly there is a residue of Romantic pantheistic mysticism here, with a hidden ethical request."<sup>86</sup>

To take the argument even further, that "hidden ethical" effect, so heavily overladen with "pantheistic mysticism," is occultism pure and simple, that ubiquitous esoteric factor that has become so engrained into the very fabric of our contemporary, New Age culture that we seem not to have remembered its real name. (Recall that even occultists call themselves "students of metaphysics.") Whatever we choose to call it (the term "esoteric tradition" seems to avoid hurt feelings), we must pause to consider the truly positive or salutary aspects of the phenomenon.



Seen in a positive light, then, the "esoteric" diagnosis begins to acquire a useful, therapeutic value. Putting aside the petty esthetic issues of flatness and/or self-referentiality (the largely obscure and self-seeking avant-garde shibboleths of the Vietnam era), once again vanguard art means to concern itself with human and social values. Whether it means to address itself to individual spiritual maladjustments or to larger concerns (like the rape of the earth), art is at least attempting to reintegrate itself into the emotional interests and concerns of humanity at large. Ironically, we thus see art history making a massive cyclical readjustment, returning to the communally addressed, spiritualized art of the Christian Middle Ages—another art-historical period that began with highly abstract art forms. The minor changes seem largely semantic; certainly Catholicism (literally "the universal Church") appears to be wholly absent from the mainstream scene. Even God is scarcely mentioned, at least not by any of the traditional names given to the old monotheistic deity.

In this light we may now contemplate the details of Beuys's shamanistic admissions. As he explained to Caroline Tisdall,<sup>87</sup> the shaman deals with "transformations of substances." He mimics (or subverts) the "concrete processes of nature." He is like a witch doctor because his functions are "therapeutic"; therefore this fellow practices white (vs. black) magic. He can only function within a (neo)primitivist society, one at "an earlier stage of development." In any event, we can call the underlying idea occultist since, admits Beuys, it represents "the deepest root of the idea of spiritual life." We can also call it occultist since Beuys's definition of his white magic is in perfect accord with the definition given by Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse-Louis Constant), certainly the most important figure (before Blavatsky) in the nineteenth-century occult revival.<sup>88</sup> Lévi explained this kind of science—both natural and ancient wisdom—in his highly influential and often reprinted book, *L'Histoire de la magie* (1860):

Magic is the Science of the Ancient Magi [and] magical initiation constitutes a true royalty; because also the Great Art of the Magi is characterized by all adepts as the Royal Art, as the Holy Kingdom—*Sanctum Regnum*. . . . Magic, therefore, combines in a single Science that which is most certain in Philosophy, which is eternal and infallible in Religion. . . . It furnishes the human kind with an instrument of philosophical and religious certitude as exact as mathematics. . . . The adept becomes kin of the elements, transmuter of metals, interpreter of visions, controller of oracles, master of life in fine, according to the mathematical order of Nature. . . . There is a composite agent, a natural and divine agent, at once corporeal and spiritual, a universal plastic mediator, a common receptacle for the vibrations of movement and images of form, a fluid and a force which may be called, in a sense at least, the Imagination of Nature. By the mediation of this force, every nervous apparatus is in secret communication together. . . . The existence and possible employment of this Force constitute the great secret of Practical Magic. . . . It destroys nothing but, on the contrary, gives Reason to all that is. . . . On such intellectual and moral heights it will be understood that the human mind and heart enter into the deep peace.<sup>89</sup>

Semantics aside (whether “shaman” or “white magician,” the end result is the same), one recalls that Kirk Varnedoe pointed out how the bulk of the artists (and supporters) of the new primitivism are middle-class and college-educated—thus having been exposed to introductory anthropology courses with required reading lists. As he also observed, “the paperback bookstore—rather than the curio shop, the gallery, or the ethnological museum—became the prime locus of many artists’ contact with tribal cultures.” Therefore, even though what follows is not necessarily directly applicable to Beuys himself, it will be interesting to see just what the paperback culture—the school of all these avant-garde neoprimitivist adherents—has to say about shamanism. By so doing, we shall be taking an “anthropological” look at the élitist public supporting the Beuys phenomenon. McEvilley is a great help in this endeavor, allowing us to narrow considerably the field of paperback bibliographic inquiry; as he usefully points out, “the works most commonly mentioned as influential are Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, often in the [paperback] abridgment and revision of Theodore Gaster, and Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, dist. by Pantheon Books, 1964.”<sup>90</sup> In effect, even though Frazer’s classic study of primitive beliefs had first appeared as long ago as 1890, it was really the paperback abridgment, appearing in 1964 (and costing only \$1.25), that put it into the hands of all those ready to absorb the neoprimitivizing spirit. In this case, the object of our pursuit is nothing less than homeopathic magic, as becomes clear in Frazer’s first mention of the wonder-working shaman:

If homeopathic or imitative *magic, working by means of images*, has commonly been practised for the spiteful purpose of putting obnoxious people out of the world [as in voodoo], it has also, though far more rarely, been employed with the benevolent intention of helping others. . . . Thus, among the Esquimaux of [the] Bering Strait, a barren woman desirous of having a son will consult a *shaman*, who commonly makes, or causes her husband to make, a small doll-like image, over which he performs certain secret rites. . . . This is done as a charm to make her conceive.<sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere, we are again told just how much the shaman is appreciated as a magician (in fact, the index to *The New Golden Bough* lists the following for the entry in question: “Shaman—see Magic”). According to Frazer, therefore, shamans are appreciated

more especially for their tact in magic and mysteries, in which they all deal to a very great extent. . . . In all tribes their doctors are conjurers—are magicians—are sooth-sayers, and I would had like to have said high-priests, inasmuch as they superintend and conduct all their religious ceremonies; they are looked upon by all as oracles of the nation. Similarly, in California, the shaman was, and still is, perhaps the most important individual. . . . As a class they are regarded with much awe, and, as a rule, are obeyed much more than [is] the chief.<sup>92</sup>



Somewhat to the contrary of the broad-based anthropological interests of Sir James Frazer, Mircea Eliade is known and respected specifically as a historian of "religious" beliefs (a term I take to include most *pseudoreligious* beliefs, including of course occultism, especially given Eliade's well-known work on alchemy).<sup>93</sup> As Eliade states (like William James), his primary concern is "the interpretation of religious ideology, behavior, and institutions . . . things that are 'wholly other' to us as modern Westerners: other cultures, other times, other systems of speculation and reflection."<sup>94</sup> As one might suspect, it is this very distancing from the materialist concerns of contemporary Western urbanized culture that has made Eliade's works so popular with artistic neoprimitives. Witness, for instance, the following statement, from Eliade's *Sacred and Profane* (1959):

For religious man, nature is never only natural. Experience of a radically desacralized nature is a recent discovery; moreover, it is an experience accessible only to a minority in modern societies, especially to scientists. For others (i.e., nonmoderns or primitives), nature still exhibits a charm, a mystery, a majesty in which it is possible to decipher traces of ancient religious values. No modern man, however irreligious, is entirely insensible to the charms of nature. We refer not only to the aesthetic, recreational, or hygienic values attributed to nature, but also to a confused and almost indefinable feeling, in which, however, it is possible to recognize the memory of a [now] debased religious experience. . . . We need only imagine what an aesthetic emotion of this sort could become in a modern society, and we shall understand how the experience of cosmic sanctity can be rarefied and transformed, until it becomes a purely human emotion—that, for example, of art for art's sake.<sup>95</sup>

And, as we may easily believe, that is just what all our neoprimitives, choosing the agreeable route of "art for art's sake," are seeking: "cosmic sanctity." Be that as it may, Eliade concurs with Frazer in calling "the shaman [a] medicine man, priest, and psychopompos." Moreover, the shaman is the kind of "*magus*" that even Eliphas Lévi could have appreciated; as Eliade puts it, "he cures sickness; he directs the communal sacrifices, and he escorts the souls of the dead to the outer world. He is able to do all this by virtue of his techniques of ecstasy, i.e., by his power to leave his body at will."<sup>96</sup> Again our purpose in examining these materials is to try to divine the thought processes of neoprimitivist artists and/or their audiences, those whom we have good reason to suspect have read the authoritative thoughts of the respected academic. And Eliade's art criticism and prognostications as well as his explanation of the purposes of art are wholly occultist. Of course, he does/will not say as much; he is another devoted "student of metaphysics." Whatever the particular self-denomination, from our own study of the literature of the esoteric tradition, we *know* the identifying marks: (1) a distrust of material reality; (2) a revelational search for hidden (*occultus*) realities; (3) the belief in invisible, underlying cosmic truths (correspondences); (4) a sense of a hidden knowledge, and even of a superior,



clairvoyant vision; (5) a parallel trust in the superiority of ancient wisdom; and (6) a concomitant suspicion of contemporary society. Eliade has it all.

For instance, we see how Eliade has even gone so far as to equate "cosmic religiosity" with the rise of modern art—and even the scholarly art historian must now agree with him.<sup>97</sup> According to Eliade,

Man in Western society . . . continues to participate in the sacred through his dreams and his daydreams. . . . But if what we are saying is true of Western man in general, *it is, a fortiori, still more true of the artist* [who] does not act passively, either in regard to the Cosmos or in regard to the unconscious . . . [and] penetrates—at times dangerously—into the depths of the world and his own psyche. From Cubism to Tachisme, we are witnessing a desperate effort on the part of the artist to free himself of the "surface" of things, and to *penetrate into matter in order to lay bare its ultimate structures* . . . revealing its secret or larval modalities . . . ventures provoked by his desire to *grasp the deepest meanings of his plastic universe*. . . . *The artist's approach to his material recovers and recapitulates a religiosity of an extremely archaic variety* that disappeared from the Western world thousands of years ago. Such, for example, is Brancusi's attitude towards stone, an attitude comparable to the solicitude, the fear, and the veneration addressed by neolithic man towards certain stones that constituted hierophanies . . . reveal[ing] simultaneously the sacred and ultimate, irreducible reality.

The two *specific characteristics of modern art*—namely the destruction of traditional forms and the fascination for the formless—for the elementary modes of matter, *are susceptible to religious interpretation*. The hierophanization of matter, that is to say the discovery of the sacred, manifested through the substance itself, characterizes that which has been called "cosmic religiosity," that type of religious experience which dominated the world before the advent of Judaism, and which is [still] alive in "primitive" and Asiatic societies. . . . [The modern artist], like all neolithic men, sensed a presence in the [material], a power, an "intention" that one can only call "sacred." . . . [Hence] this will to demolish formal worlds, made empty and banal . . . and to reduce them to their elementary modes, and, ultimately, to their original *materia prima*. . . . From the structural view, the attitude of the artist, in regard to the Cosmos and to life, recalls . . . the ideology implicit in "cosmic religion."<sup>98</sup>

If Wassily Kandinsky, known to have been a follower of theosophy,<sup>99</sup> were alive today to read this, he would nod his head and ruefully murmur, "So true, too true."

## Beuys in an Esoteric German Context

### A Native Element: The *Völkische* Component

Previously we encountered a British student of performance art, Adrian Henri, who had found that “Joseph Beuys is the most difficult to characterize [being] quintessentially *German*,” which for him meant, “untranslatable and inexpressible.” As it appears, Anglo-Saxons have long since found even the German language, to say nothing of the culture behind it, nearly untranslatable; for this we have the word of Mark Twain, writing in 1880 that, in German,

there are ten parts of speech, and they are all troublesome. An average sentence, in a German newspaper, is a sublime and impressive curiosity; it occupies a quarter of a column; it contains all the ten parts of speech—not in a regular order, but mixed; it is built mainly of compound words constructed by the writer on the spot . . . ; it treats of fourteen or fifteen different subjects, each enclosed in a parenthesis of its own. . . . Finally, all the parentheses and re-parentheses are massed together between a couple of king-parentheses . . . *after which comes the VERB!* . . . I think that to learn to read and understand a German newspaper is a thing which must always remain an impossibility to a foreigner.<sup>1</sup>

Linguistic and semantic problems aside, it is the task of this prolegomena to explore the meaning of Beuys’s Germanness, certainly a legitimate reason to separate him from non-German artists apparently doing similar things. Granting the dubious nature of most proposed ethnic identifications, particularly those interpretive efforts working from a putative mass-psychological point of view, nevertheless we take the position of Hans Kohn that whereas “it is superfluous to mention that descent or ‘race’ has nothing to do with a man’s political allegiance or moral attitude, such attitudes are influenced by historical traditions and circumstances, by environment and education, . . . in Germany as much as elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup>

In this case the term *völkische* is particularly useful as a diagnostic tool, even though it is in itself nearly “untranslatable and inexpressible.” In general,

however, it may be defined as, "of the [German] people," *das Volk*. Further, *völkische* is an adjective, applied to and expressive of those native things deemed most pertinent to the culturally engrained habits and prejudices of the German people. One of the more important components of the *völkische* is "myth." We have already dealt with the universally distributed myth of the shaman, but now we (again pretending to be anthropologists)<sup>3</sup> mean to identify the mythic structures of a single given *Volk*, one endlessly searching out that true or "primevally arising German folk-spirit" ("*dem ureigensten Geiste des Volkes*"). A sympathetic French observer, Joseph Rovin, remarks that in Germany, "pantheism, the cult of nature, the cult of race, blood and soil, has continued alongside and beneath official religion, sometimes as intellectual speculation, sometimes a popular survival, even folklore. . . . The Germanic myths and legends from the pre-Christian period reveal a conception of the world in which man participates entirely in nature, from which he proceeds."<sup>4</sup> Again, the German scholar Hans Kohn is useful in pointing out the central role of collective myth in Germanic consciousness:

Richard Wagner revived primitive native heroes and gods, singing of fate and doom and rushing toward their own annihilation through a web of crime and deceit. . . . The word *Mythus* began, at this time, to occupy a central passion in German thought. Friedrich Gundolf, in his book on Stefan George (1920), defined myth as "*Wort und Schau von Volk und Gott, von wirklichem geschehen*," [that is,] as "word and vision telling of folk and God, of what really happens." Myth, it was believed, not only opened the way to a deeper understanding of reality and its fundamental values—the concrete folk and a rather vague God—but myth was also acclaimed as a life-enhancing and life-renewing force.<sup>5</sup>

A great nineteenth-century philosopher, August Wilhelm Schlegel, also spoke, most positively, of the role of the collective myths, that vast storehouse of hidden great national "memories," in the formation of the new German character, mythic *Erinnerungen*,

often lost in the darkness of the time, but preserved and enhanced by poets. Such national memories, the most wonderful heritage that a people can have, are an advantage which nothing else can replace; and if *ein Volk* finds itself, in its own feelings, elated and, so to speak, enobled by the possession of a great past, [especially] of *memories from prehistoric times*, in brief by the possession of poetry, it will be raised by this very fact, in our judgment, to a higher plane. . . . This self-consciousness of a nation, which expresses itself in reflective and descriptive works, is its history.<sup>6</sup>

The unique characteristics—character, customs, and geography—of the Germans had even been remarked upon in classical antiquity. In general, these comments (mostly from Roman authors) were favorable, invidiously contrasting the noble, martial, and rustic virtues of the *Germani* to the ignoble, unwarlike,



and urbanized moral deficits of the decadent contemporary Latins, such as is apparent from Tacitus (ca. 98 AD):

They live, therefore [and quite to the contrary of contemporary Romans], fenced about with chastity; corrupted by no seductive spectacles, no convivial incitements. Men and women are alike unacquainted with clandestine correspondence. Adultery is extremely rare among so numerous a people. . . . None there looks upon vice with a smile [as in Rome], or calls mutual seductions the way of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Given the didactic, ethical but still largely political concerns and purposes of these Roman authors, we may think their emphatic contrasts were at times overdrawn. Nevertheless, these rhetorical devices passed for objective records, were seen as *historia*. As such, their colored evaluations have been since routinely recycled—by generations of Germans. In this case it is fitting that Professor E. M. Butler (among others) has observed the “tyranny” of classical literature over the Germans, and its baleful results: “the insidious disease of *mythomania* undermining nearly all.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, particularly in the example of Tacitus, that which had first been written to castigate the decadence of ancient Romans later became a tool by which to anneal the character of modern Germans. By then, the psychological traits of the old Roman characterizations had become part of a cultural legacy, the renewed *völkische* legends describing the unique, innately superior, *deutsche Volk*. In short, the ethnographic caricature established by ancient precedent states that Germans, besides being wonderfully chaste and loyal, have always been warlike, forest-dwellers, and mystical.

Among these earlier *auctoritates*, Tacitus was probably the most explicit in dealing with the bellicose traits of these enviable peoples; as he explained in his treatise *Germania*:

In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; it is disgraceful for the companions not to equal their chief. . . . The chiefs fight for victory; the companions for their chief. If their native country be long sunk in peace and inaction, many of the young nobles repair to some other state then engaged in war. Since, besides that repose is unwelcome to their race, and that toils and perils afford them a better opportunity of distinguishing themselves, they are unable, without war and violence, to maintain a large train of followers. . . . The funds for this munificence must be found in war and rapine: nor are they so easily persuaded to cultivate the earth. . . . They even think it base and spiritless to earn by sweat what they might purchase with blood. During the intervals of war, they pass their time less in hunting than in a sluggish repose, divided between sleep and the table. . . . So wonderful is the contrast presented by nature, that the same persons love indolence, and hate tranquillity!<sup>9</sup>

As modern scholars have observed, here we see “the usual traits of the ancient ‘noble savage’: fortitude, sexual continence and hospitality.”<sup>10</sup> These commendable traits were also noted by Julius Caesar (*De bello gallico*, VI, 21–23), who,

however, differs from Tacitus in being essentially unrhetorical since he was an objective eyewitness:

The Germans' whole life is spent in hunting and in military pursuits; from childhood they strive in toil and hardship. They who remain chaste for the longest period, bear the highest honors among them; some believe that this increases their stature, others the strength of their sinews. . . . They do not engage in agriculture. . . . They give many reasons for this: [mainly] that, snared by steady habit, they may not change their zeal for waging war into agriculture . . . [and] that a certain love of money may not arise from which factions and dissensions are born; that they may keep the people in equanimity by having each see that his possessions equal those of the most powerful.<sup>11</sup>

Tacitus is also the primary source for the legend of the sylvan nature of the "natural" German *Ur-Volk*, innately opposed to urban temptations:

It is well known that none of the German nations inhabit cities; or even admit of contiguous settlements. . . . Every one surrounds his house with a vacant space, either by way of security against fire, or through ignorance of the art of building . . . and for every purpose they employ rude unshapen timber, fashioned with no regard to pleasing the eye.<sup>12</sup>

Most importantly, Tacitus is the main ancient spokesman for the legend of *deutscher Mysticismus*. As he tells it, they are all pantheists, nature-worshippers. They are also, "by nature," shamans, or magicians. Their nature-worship allows them to "read" the hidden messages concealed beneath the opaque surfaces of natural phenomena. According to Tacitus, their magical practices involve manipulations of certain animals "privy to the divine will," especially horses. This is particularly interesting to us since Beuys himself often included animals, even white horses, during the ritualistic course of his *Aktionen*. In fact, our ancient Roman authority could be here describing a modern performance piece by Joseph Beuys:

No people are more addicted to divination by omens and lots [than are the Germans]. The latter is performed in the following simple manner. They cut a twig from a fruit-tree, and divide it into small pieces, which, distinguished by certain marks, are thrown promiscuously upon a white garment. Then, the priest of the canton, if the occasion be public; if private, the master of the family; after an invocation of the gods, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, thrice he takes out each piece, and, as they come up, he interprets their signification according to the marks fixed upon them. If the result proves unfavorable, there is no more consultation on the same affair that day; if propitious, a confirmation by omens is still required.

In common with other nations, the Germans are acquainted with the practice of auguring from the notes and flight of birds; *but it is peculiar to them to derive admonitions and presages from horses also*. Certain of these animals, milk-white, and untouched by earthly labor, are pastured at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves. These, yoked to a consecrated chariot, are accompanied by the priest, and king, or chief person of the community, who attentively observe their manner of neighing and snorting; and no kind of augury is more



credited, not only among the populace, but among the nobles and priests. For the latter consider themselves as the ministers of the gods, and the horses as privy to the divine will.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, the Germanic identification with the prosaic facts and mystical rhythms of *die Natur* has been a curious phenomenon often since commented upon by foreign observers. One particularly acute observer of modern German folkways is a long-time American resident, George Bailey:

There is a love that abides among Germans . . . the German's filial devotion to Mother Nature, and especially his fraternal love of animals. . . . I am tempted, as others have been, to assert that the honest Teuton has more feeling for and understanding of his fellow animals than he has for his fellow men. . . . As with fauna so with flora. . . . All things in nature are moving numbers that reduce themselves to the absolute Unity. The ether is God's body, matter is thickened ether, light is the stretching of ether. . . . This is an example of the typical German fusion of science and religion, of the material with the abstract, within the terms of an abounding love of nature.<sup>14</sup>

About the source of superstitious folk beliefs, Bailey observes that

. . . The [eighth-century] conversion of the Saxons, who were the last heathen holdouts, . . . accomplished the first partition of Germany, namely the partition of the German psyche into "*Glaube*" (faith) and "*Aberglaube*" (other-faith or superstition). . . . They never recovered. The old German forest gods were a pretty grim bunch to begin with. But when consigned to devildom by the Church fathers they became demons, monsters, dragons, goblins, gargoyles, poltergeists, kobolds, elves, poisonous dwarfs, and, above and below all, witches. . . . In Germany it proved impossible to mark a dividing line between belief (*Glaube*) and "other-belief" (*Aberglaube*).<sup>15</sup>

That all this is *völkische* seems confirmed by a statement published in 1927 in the *Enzyklopädie der Aberglaube*, wherein all such *Aberglauben* were designated "folk beliefs"—*Volks Glaube*. The editors of this encyclopedia justified their semantic liberties by observing that,

with the word "folk-belief," the concept of folklore includes all manifestations of belief insofar as they belong to the realm of folklore. . . . We should then find folk beliefs in all strata of the population, since folklore [*Volkskunde*] does not deal with the imaginative world of a certain, socially defined stratum of society [instead] it is a matter of the thought processes of humanity at large and the formation of their imaginative world. . . . If, on the other hand, we should still use the word "*Aberglaube*," then we should be pronouncing such judgments as are only relative and not scientifically ascertainable.<sup>16</sup>

Thus one sees the sweeping power of the term *völkische*, specifically in the time when Joseph Beuys (born in 1921) was a child and teenager. During the twenties and thirties, in Germany *völkische* was, according to Bailey, "A blanket concept that covered a multitude of sins and attracted the widest possible variety of



feelings, emotions, tendencies, attitudes, impulses—political, religious, cultural, and social. The *imprimatur* of the “folk” accommodated and sanctioned them all.”<sup>17</sup> Having said all that, we must now find out just what *völkische* meant, specifically in the arts, during Beuys’s youth.

### Germany’s New *Völkische* History of Art

In the preceding section we attempted to make “translatable and expressible” the “Germanness” of Joseph Beuys. For these purposes, we found useful the idea of a self-perpetuating series of *völkische* myths describing favored characteristics of the German race, now a staple of German folklore, the collective wisdom of the people. On the one hand, as we noted, when Beuys was a boy in the late 1920s, the concept of *Volkskunde* had come “to include *all* manifestations of beliefs”—whether orthodox-religious or patently superstitious and/or occultist—that pertained to *das deutsche Volk*. On the other, some of these folk myths we were able to trace back to classical authors, particularly Tacitus, who found Germans (the archetypal noble savages) innately bellicose, rustic, and mystical. As we saw, this mysticism was commonly described as being pantheistic and shamanistic in character. Moreover, it is functionally analogous to contemporary occultism inasmuch as the *Ur-Germani* were esteemed for their clairvoyant powers, as uniquely able to read nature’s hidden essences, veiled beneath materialist appearances. Obviously, it is particularly the last trait—in all its ramifications—that pertains most to the Beuys myth.

Our present task is to elucidate the idea of a *völkische* history of art in modern Germany. In short, we wish to examine yet another set of self-perpetuating myths, apparently accepted *en masse* by the German people, presumably including Joseph Beuys, the major figure of German art in the postwar period. For these purposes we shall first examine the writings of two prominent early twentieth-century art historians: Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) and Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), both very much concerned with questions of psychological “German” traits in art. Following this, we shall briefly review some official dicta on the social significance of art during the *Hitlerzeit*, the period when Beuys was a schoolboy and, hence, presumably susceptible to such official pronouncements.

In his widely read essay, *Abstraktion and Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1908),<sup>18</sup> Worringer proposed some sweeping determinants governing “the psychology of style” by drawing certain broad and basic conceptual distinctions between geometrical (abstract) and organic (empathetic) forms throughout the history of art. According to his thesis (the book was in fact his 1907 doctoral dissertation), organic styles characterize peoples (and “realistic” arts, like those of Hellenism and the Renaissance) who have an affinity for nature and who find spiritual satisfaction in it *per se*. On the contrary, as Worringer

(and his numerous readers) believed, abstract styles characterize peoples oppressed by nature and deeply involved with "spiritual reality." Worringer traces the cause of this opposition of styles to the various *Weltanschauungen* that underlie artistic creation. As Eugene Kleinbauer tersely observes, "the consequences of such a position for later German thought were indeed fateful."<sup>19</sup> In effect, Worringer had associated "abstract" art—soon thereafter to be the *lingua franca* of modernism—with principles we have already associated with the recurrent, modernist themes of ancient wisdom.

In short, as Worringer puts it, the "psychological" cause of visual abstraction is man's collective wish to withdraw from the world. As such, these figurative signs directly represent the abstract artist's antagonism to the world in general and demonstrate his need for a refuge from the vast confusion of materialist phenomena. Worringer's widely discussed thesis and antithesis became a kind of manifesto of then-contemporary Expressionistic art. Moreover, he made it quite clear that such psychological-artistic impulses, rejecting all norms, were innate "north of the Alps," that is, in Germany:

The essence of Cis-Alpine [Nordic] art consists precisely in the fact that it is incapable of expressing what it has to say with purely formal means. . . . The work of art no longer speaks a language that is taken in and understood . . . but [instead] appeals to the feelings of aesthetic complication in us, to that quite different complex of psychic experiences, which changes with every individual [being], as illimitable and inapprehensible as the shoreless ocean of individual potentialities. . . . It is aesthetically inaccessible. . . . Of course, the individualistic Northerner, who always has a long way to go to the understanding of form, that negation of the individual, tends to deem the aesthetically accessible [artwork] inferior and empty—because he does not understand the language of form. . . . This originally faulty attitude to the aesthetic significance of form has *predestined* the Northern peoples to all their confusions and misconceptions in matters of art, and has set upon all their theoretical investigations the stamp of unclarity.<sup>20</sup>

Here we see the convenient invention of another *völkische* myth, evidently one still in force in German art. In the first place, it is all a matter of fate: Germans are just "predestined" to be innately against the norms of academic art. Such art is, moreover, not aesthetically appealing since an appealing artwork is "inferior and empty." German art is (read: "ought to be") murky and unclear. Such art can only be approached individually because it is the product of that *unicum*, the individualistic Northerner. This noble but simple fellow *always* has a long way to go in understanding how to shape his art because he does not understand the language of form. As a result, "naturally," we have a great many confusions and misconceptions. Not such a bad thing after all, since we end up with a psychologically direct art, even if a bit ugly and inept. Further on, Worringer makes the obligatory connection with what we have called ancient wisdom, that other trait innate to the mystic-minded *Urvolk*:



The native Northern nature-religion, with its cloudy mysticism, knew nothing of that deep dread which we felt in the Oriental-Semitic religion of transcendence. It stood *before* cognition. The Northern peoples experienced within a harsh and unyielding nature the resistance of this nature, their isolation within it, and they confronted the [materialistic] things of the outer world and their appearance full of disquiet and distrust. No clear blue sky arched above them, no serene climate, no luxuriant vegetation surrounded them. . . . [Instead] a repellent nature precluded the emergence of that secure, sensuous instinct which is necessary before man can surrender himself to nature with confidence. The consequence was an inner disharmony, and it was this which steeped all religious notions into dualistic elements. . . . [The result] was the most profound consciousness of the unfathomableness of the world. Northern man felt only a veil betwixt nature and himself, a veil that he believed he would one day be able to raise. The problematic nature of all cognition had not yet dawned on him.<sup>21</sup>

This statement expresses a profound and deep-seated sense of *alienation*, or "isolation," as Worringer puts it. Art (that is, the sincere "German" kind) is thus an expression of a schizophrenic relationship to the world: we live *in* it but do not feel a part *of* it. It is also based on the old Tacitus equation: Germans are naturally given to strife; are woods-bound; are intensely mystical. Finally, this statement is implicitly *occultist*: only the clairvoyant German can see beneath the sensuous and deceptive veil of natural appearances; with his superior psychic vision, he penetrates beneath appearances to capture the essence of the hidden life rhythms of nature. Also present is another leitmotiv of the Tacitus thesis, namely the idea that the sunny South (to which the harsh North is invariable contrasted) is somehow basically decadent, or sensuous and tranquil. As Worringer concludes,

Here in the North, however, there is anything but tranquillity; here an inner need for expression desires, in spite of all the inner disharmony—or rather all the more so because of it—to speak itself out. . . . This [Germanic] unrest, this seeking, has no organic life that draws us gently into its movements; but there is life there, a tormenting, urgent life that compels us joylessly to follow its movements. Thus, on an inorganic fundament, there is heightened movement, heightened expression. This is the decisive formula for the whole medieval North [which] needed the intensification of a resistance; it needed that uncanny pathos which attaches to the animation of the inorganic. And so that contradictory, hybrid formation comes into being: abstraction on the one hand, and most vigorous expression on the other.<sup>22</sup>

Wölfflin, much the older scholar, was less addicted to purple prose and transcendental oracular pronouncements. Nevertheless, he too was vitally interested in legitimizing the claims for the superiority of the German spirit in art. In particular, he stressed the importance of race and soil in the formation of artistic expression. Therefore, in Wölfflin's view, art is always a nationalist (and also perhaps socialist) product.

Such ominous biases were made blatant in Wölfflin's last major publication, *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (1931), whose introduction states that: "only brief reflection is needed to realize that *the various styles of a country*



do contain a common element, that stems from the soil, from the race . . . racial types change only slowly.”<sup>23</sup> Consequently, in 1931, “the German feeling for form” in art is first and foremost a “racial” affair. As a result, “to the Germanic people, Italy denotes something foreign to its nature,”<sup>24</sup> however much lip service may be paid to its seductive delights.

For Wölfflin, as much as for Worringer, the key term is *Einfühlung*. Accordingly, Wölfflin was also oriented towards what he called the “psychological notion of sensibility [*Einfühlung*, literally ‘inward-leading’],” finding therefore that “the North has the capacity to enter into *the spirit of that which lies both behind and beyond objective form*, and to be transported from the well-defined to the undefined.”<sup>25</sup> Again one sees hints of artistic clairvoyance, and the essentially animistic idea of hidden life forces is recurrent; for instance: “A German artist can always be recognized by his *perception of a secret life*, one that goes from leaf to leaf and entwines one leaf with the next.”<sup>26</sup> Another leitmotiv is *Bewegung*, the notion of hidden, rhythmic-kinetic energies only perceivable to the racially initiated: “To Northerners, MOVEMENT is the essential quality.”<sup>27</sup> This perceived quality is supposedly self-evident, even in strictly architectural constructions:

Germans do not conceive of space as fixed within definite limits and do not enjoy the beauty of fast and stable proportions. Instead, they desire to feel an intangible meshing in space. They seek less the proportions of self-contained space than the movement that pervades it and somehow always refers beyond it . . . which the Germans perceive as the true life of the space.<sup>28</sup>

German art, Wölfflin also tells us, reveals a subtle sense of the sublime insignificance of the human being as an independent individual; instead all individuals are subordinated to the herd instincts of the uniform mass, in which the individual is lost. Therefore,

in Italian art . . . the human figure appears in isolation and more or less maintains its independence within all combinations. . . . Each form is then presented as a self-sufficient independent entity, in both architecture and the pictorial arts. . . . [To the contrary,] even the most cursory comparison makes us aware how few free-standing figures there are in Germany; of how everything (completely apart from the mode of execution) is somehow dependent and interlocked; in short, how all is bound up in a larger context from which it cannot be released—not even in thought.<sup>29</sup>

In short, in art (just as in real life after 1933),

the North was of a different opinion. The primary element was not the figure as such; instead, the Northern conception was determined by the figure-complex, by the interconnection of the form and its surroundings. It was a long time before the motif of the single body, as conceived

by the Italians, could achieve importance; by that time the German Renaissance was almost over.<sup>30</sup>

The psychological link is again "movement," that hidden kinetic life force, uniquely perceivable to the mystical German. Wölfflin in this case is speaking of picture frames, noting the anachronistic Nordic preference for complicated tracery overlays at a time when the Italians had turned instead to the rectangular enframement for paintings, an imposed device—both physically and psychologically—clearly demarcating the boundaries between "the fictive" (picture) and "the real" (the frame-as-aesthetic-boundary). This is a psychological blurring of limits that we previously encountered in the confusions established (by 1927) between *Glaube* and *Aberglaube*. Be that as it may, Wölfflin was speaking of

the lack of emphasis on limits [between real and unreal] in the North [which] is only a concomitant of the impression of all-embracing movement. The nature of this movement is such that the space enters into a peculiar union with all its contents, both animate and inanimate. Space and figure are not two separate entities but function together as a unity.<sup>31</sup>

This almost militaristic impulse towards *Gemeinschaft* (togetherness) is also recognized by Wölfflin as a recurrent characteristic of German architecture, that art form by which man shapes the environment into his own psychological *Weltanschauung*: "In Germany, even a monumental building tolerates dependence. Although there are, of course, examples of detached architecture, the reigning spirit is generally one of cohesion."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the other reigning principle is the "naturalness" of architectural elements, all reflections of the cosmic workings of *die Natur*: "The South read the column into the tree; the North the tree into the column."<sup>33</sup> As in architecture, so too in the land itself: all is tied together by the convulsive, rhythmic movements of the invisible (to us) life forces of nature. According to Wölfflin,

The German feeling for landscape differs from the Italian in its more intense awareness of a total coherence. . . . In the northern landscape, clouds and earth, trees and bushes, the hill and its crest, merge together in an all-pervasive sensation of life and motion. . . . the interweaving of existence and the feeling for the life of an unbounded formal whole are the essential elements. The northern talent for this kind of interpretation manifest in the peculiar bond between the human figure and the landscape. . . . The principle may become less rigorous, but it will not disappear as long as the national tradition lasts.<sup>34</sup>

Like Worringer, Wölfflin stresses the virtues of the intrinsic arbitrariness and "irrationality" of German art, a sign of its "individuality" and "naturalness," perennial traits traceable (naturally) to the *Urvolk*:

For the Germans, some trace of willfulness, some trace of broken rules, must always remain if they are to believe in the freedom of existence. . . . We cannot consider it a deficiency that the North has never adhered strictly to rules and frequently even treated them lightly; rather, this expresses a distinct and positive basic attitude indicative of the entire German relationship to nature. Germans do not believe in the absolute value of rules but perceive a streak of irrationality in all living things. This feeling for an irrationality that simply cannot be expressed in stable forms already conditions the style of the German primitives.<sup>35</sup>

According to Wölfflin, this leads to the “monstrous” and the “bizarre”: “Indeed, devoted to nature as the German is, the transcendence of the natural tangible world runs in his blood. He yields himself up to an impulse toward the fantastic. . . . Detached from the basis of the natural organic world, this impulse can be intensified in the direction of the bizarre and the monstrous.”<sup>36</sup> And we close this survey of Worringer’s and Wölfflin’s *völkische* art history with the obligatory reference to Tacitus, found on the last page of Wölfflin’s book: “Germans cannot conceive of the divine contained in the finite world [as do the Italians]. Tacitus wrote that the Teutons worship the invisible. The transcendental art for the Germans [therefore] appears to be music, and not the visual arts.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Völkische* Art and Life When Beuys Was a Boy

Since Joseph Beuys was born on May 12, 1921, he was still a schoolboy, in fact a twelve-year-old, when the National Socialists came to power in Germany. By the time the *Hitlerzeit* drew to a close in May 1945—the ultimate Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung*—Beuys was nearly twenty-four. Thus virtually all of his formal schooling, and certainly his impressionable adolescent years, took place precisely during the twelve-year tenure of the “Thousand-Year Reich.” Since this inescapable fact is never really mentioned in the copious literature on Beuys, its implications have been ignored. Nevertheless, we have only to think upon the momentous consequences of our own education and life impressions, received between the ages of twelve and twenty-four, to realize the great significance of this formative period for the later development of our individual outlooks. Taking this into account, and recognizing that most of our later actions and attitudes had their emotional roots in this highly impressionable period of our lives, we realize the critical significance of the omission of this formative period in the life of Beuys in all previous discussions of his intellectual formation.

Beuys certainly granted the omnipresence of the attitudes so forcefully imposed by the new regime, remembering how, during the 1930s, “everybody went to Church, and everybody went to the Hitler Youth.”<sup>38</sup> As he further admitted, “I had no scruples about it; perhaps my parents did. One must admit



that, in contrast to today [1972], the situation was, to a certain extent, *ideal for young people to live a full life*.”<sup>39</sup>

Needless to say, what follows does not mean to suggest that Beuys was a Nazi. Even if that term could be coherently defined in the present avant-garde and artistic context it would still represent a pointless, indeed stupid, argument. Instead, we mean to locate certain ideas current during the *Hitlerzeit*. Once we have identified these, then we might expect to find their functional analogues in much later expressions by Beuys, particularly in those directly relating to the social purposes of his art. In short, some notions peculiar to the *Hitlerzeit* seem to provide yet another meaningful context for Beuys’s unique, and quintessentially German, kind of manipulative and theatrical expression.

The official line in German *Kultur* between 1933 and 1945 was largely the product of the mind of Adolf Hitler. Few of his policies, including his dictates on the functions of German art, evolved after 1933. In fact, most of this had already been laid out years before in *Mein Kampf* (1927).<sup>40</sup> Needless to say, at least something of its contents was made known to every German alive during this period. As a former grammar school student recalled, “*Mein Kampf* became the textbook for our history lessons . . . and when we had finished it, we started again from the beginning.”<sup>41</sup> As Hitler made clear here, the primary task “begins in education (*Bildung*),” arresting “all these symptoms of decay . . . the consequences of the absences of a definite, uniformly acknowledged philosophy,” for want of which “humanitarian bilge becomes stylish.”<sup>42</sup> In general, education is directed “primarily to . . . the breeding of absolutely healthy bodies. The training of mental abilities is only secondary.”<sup>43</sup> Specifically, the new program is to educate the Folk into the national myth:

The question of the “nationalization” of a people is, among other things, primarily a question of creating healthy social conditions as a foundation for the possibility of educating the individual. For only those who, through school and upbringing, learn to know the cultural, economic, but above all, political, greatness of their own fatherland can and will achieve the inner pride in the privilege of being a member of such a people.<sup>44</sup>

The artful tool of education is propaganda, blurring the divisions between lies and realities:

The function of propaganda [is] calling the masses’ attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision. The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc. . . . All propaganda must be popular [*völkische*], and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to. . . . The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to their attention and, thence, to the heart of the broad masses. . . . All effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points, and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the

public understands. . . . Thus we see that propaganda must follow a simple line and, correspondingly, the basic tactics must be psychologically sound.<sup>45</sup>

As we further learn, propaganda functions something like performance art. It is skillfully orchestrated: "live," intensely visual and oral—in short, a messianic, didactic, and highly theatrical art form. This propagandistic performance art requires a mass audience, whose emotions and spirits are to be magically manipulated and transformed by the charismatic director-artist. It is also the primary instrument for the inculcation of the new beliefs of a new mass religion based upon "lofty and noble great ideas":

Particularly the great masses of the people can be moved only by the power of speech. And all great movements are popular [*völkische*] movements, volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotional sentiments. . . . A movement with great aims must therefore be anxiously on its guard not to lose contact with the broad masses. . . . It must, furthermore, avoid everything which might diminish, or even weaken, its ability to move the masses, not for "demagogic" reasons, but in the simple knowledge that, without the mighty force of the mass of a people, no great idea, however lofty and noble it may seem, can be realized. . . . The masses, it is true, need superior minds to set them into motion in a given direction, but which then, like a flywheel, lend the force of the attack momentum and uniform persistence.<sup>46</sup>

As we learn from looking at the daily schedules of the secondary schools of the Third Reich, young Beuys had been indoctrinated in *Aktionen*, a term used then to describe the organized expression of "meaningful customs" through group celebrations. These *Feierstunden* were based, like Beuys's later *Aktionen*, upon action, speech, and music. As was explained in a 1941 report,

In school celebrations, the incorporation of the school into the great *Volk* community is most strikingly expressed. . . . Specific celebrations should be held if they grow organically out of the life of the school and its link with the great *völkische* events. Since it is the purpose of these celebrations to serve as climaxes, they should be held only infrequently. . . . Action, speech, and music are the pillars upon which the great national celebrations rest. Music serves to prepare the celebrants. Speech opens bridges to their hearts. *Aktion* creates meaningful customs.<sup>47</sup>

Hitler had made clear that the new doctrine—as a "visibly better substitute"—must take on both the moral force and the liturgical power and trappings formerly reserved to orthodox religion:

The great masses of people do not consist of philosophers; precisely for the masses, faith is often the sole foundation of a moral attitude. . . . If religious doctrine and faith are really to embrace the broad masses, the unconditional authority of the content of this faith is the foundation of all efficacy. . . . For the political man, the value of a religion must be estimated less by its deficiencies than by the virtue of a visibly better substitute.<sup>48</sup>



Again the key—the concrete link between ecstatic religion and the newer secular belief system—is the term *völkische*; Hitler conscientiously explained that

The designation “religious” only becomes tangibly conceivable in the moment when it becomes connected with a definitely outlined form of its practice [,when] it can even convey a definite, more or less sharp, picture of that soul-state leading to that efficacy which arises from religious inner-longing in the moment when, from the purely metaphysical, infinite world of ideas, a clearly delimited faith forms. Assuredly, this is not the end in itself, but only a means to the end. . . . By helping to raise man above the level of bestial vegetation, faith contributes in reality to the securing and safeguarding of his existence. . . . By abolishing religious education, but without replacing it by an equivalent, the result will be a grave shock to the foundations of existence. . . . Higher ideals provide the premise for man’s existence. Thus the circle closes. . . . The situation with the term “*völkische*” is similar to that with the term “religious.”<sup>49</sup>

As is all too well known, for Hitler, “the *völkische* philosophy finds the importance of mankind in its basic racial elements.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the final justification rests upon the recurrent phenomenon we have called ancient wisdom, ancestral in this case: “*What has been profitably Germanized in history is the soil which our ancestors acquired by the sword and settled with German peasants*” (Hitler’s emphasis).<sup>51</sup> Just as Worringer and Wölfflin had earlier affirmed, this is the “primeval culture-creating force,” in part arising “from the northern climate.”<sup>52</sup> Like Worringer and Wölfflin, Adolf Hitler thought “art” was important—although for rather different reasons. As he tells it, “At the early age of twelve—how it happened, I myself do not know—but one day it became clear to me that I would become a painter, an artist.”<sup>53</sup> “Yet, strange as it may seem, with the passing years I became more and more interested in architecture. At that time, I regarded this as a natural complement to my gift as a painter, and only rejoiced inwardly at the extension of my artistic scope. I did not suspect that things would turn out differently.”<sup>54</sup>

Even though his own artistic predilections “turned out differently,” Hitler decreed that art should be properly included in the new *völkische* educational curriculum:

Important as the type of physical and mental education will be in the *völkische Staat*, equally important will be the human selection as such. . . . [Presently] questions of [intrinsic] talent play a subordinate role. . . . [Nevertheless,] a peasant boy [as Hitler had been] can possess far more talents than the child of parents enjoying an elevated position in life. . . . If the talented peasant boy had, from his early years, likewise grown up in such an environment, then his intellectual ability would have been quite different. Today, perhaps, *there is a single field in which origins are really less decisive than the individual’s native talent: the field of art.*<sup>55</sup>

Not only is art the only really democratic area in the *völkische* educational curriculum, but it is also the only one where the student need not demonstrate acquired knowledge: hidden, native talent at once overcomes both academic



demands and inherited privilege. Moreover, adds Hitler, our failure to realize this fact is a mark of our current spiritual impoverishment: we cannot see that art is the real mark of *all* human intelligence:

*Where a man cannot merely "learn," but ever thing has to be originally innate, . . . money and wealth of the parents are almost irrelevant. . . . The greatest artists arise not seldom from the poorest houses. . . . It does not exactly argue great depth of thought in our time that this realization is not applied to our whole spiritual life. . . . Creative achievements can only arise when ability and knowledge are wedded. . . . Here too the *völkische Staat* will some day have to intervene by education. Its task is not to preserve the decisive influence of an existing social class, [but instead] to pick the most capable kinds from the sum of all the national comrades and bring them to office and dignity [by] opening the gates of higher state educational institutions to *all talent, absolutely regardless of from what circle it may originate*.<sup>56</sup>*

It may be added at this point that Hitler's feigned antiaristocratic attitudes—opening universities "to all talent"—have their functional analogues in Beuys's repeated statements that "every one should be an artist." Consequently, he, too, opened his own art classes "to all talent."

Hitler's concern for the educative functions and didactic uses of art was to reappear in the writings of the later, lesser propagandists of the Third Reich. Since detailed documentation on the *Kunstpolitik* of the *Hitlerzeit* is readily available,<sup>57</sup> we need only quote a single representative author, Kurt Karl Eberlein (*Was ist deutsch in der deutschen Kunst?*, 1933). Addressing the question, "What is German in German Art," he affirms that

Art is never objective. . . . [It properly] belongs either to the soul or to the language of the soul. . . . Art is contemplation. . . . It is the language of the *Heimat*. . . . One speaks German and then the soul speaks. . . . In folkways [*Volkstum*] lives the child, with his customs, the dialect of play, of a celebration; in it live the song, the fairy tale, the proverb, native costume and furniture and utensils. In it lie the ultimate energies of primordial folk art [*Urvolksgewerbe*], the work done in the home, handicraft, tradition. . . . Here the life rhythm of the year pulsates squarely, through house and field, growing close and vitally out of the very soil. . . . Here nothing is being judged; it is not a question of art criticism, but of something much more essential, namely, life itself.

"*Kunst*," therefore, for most racial comrades—let's be honest about it for once!—is not the bread of life, not a life value, not a nourishment for the soul. Rather, *Kunst* is still the priceless, unnecessary thing . . . the comfortable accoutrement of the propertied classes. . . . The life of the working people unfolds beyond this *Kunst*. Bread and work are more important. . . . *Kunst* is still "*Kultur*," hence uncomfortable, alien to *das Volk*.<sup>58</sup>

From these documents a number of themes emerge which parallel ideas expressed by Joseph Beuys decades later. "Fine Art" (in the traditional sense) is *unvölkische*, antidemocratic, and not at all representative of real life values. By implication, what is called for instead is an esthetic that arises out of (as Beuys called it much later) "*das Programm einer Identifizierung von Kunst und*

*Leben*,"<sup>59</sup> that is, the program of an identification of art with life. Additionally, states Hitler, art is the single field in which the lone individual's "native talent is decisive." Art, moreover (as Beuys later held) is not "learned," being instead "innate." We have also seen that a precedent for Beuys's *Aktionen* is found in the *Feierstunden* of the Third Reich, those cleverly staged but infrequent group festivities. These are yet another offshoot of Hitler's arts of propaganda—adjusted to the most limited intelligence. Whatever the IQ level of the audience, all such organized presentations parallel (as "a visibly better substitute"), even duplicate religious rituals, being "metaphysical" events helping the witnesses "to rise above the level of bestial vegetation." All such organized multimedia mass spectacles—as it were, all performance pieces *avant la lettre*—express "higher ideas for the premise of man's existence." Consequently, just as Hitler claimed, the term "völkische" is similar to . . . 'religious.'" In short, art, rather than being learned, must be popular and mystical and accessible to all men.

### Esoterica in Modern Germany

We have just seen some of the specific manifestations of the *völkische* elements in life and art in the Third Reich during the period in which Beuys was a schoolboy. In order to establish another viable context for Beuys as a German we must examine another "ethnic" context which antedates the *Hitlerzeit*: occultism. As we have seen, mysticism, specifically the idea of the implantation of alternative belief systems, was an officially sanctioned and predominant aspect of German culture during the 1930s. These manifestations in part support James Webb's suggestion that, throughout the modern period, "we shall find that the religious and the political, the occult and the revolutionary, run in the same paths."<sup>60</sup> Thus, following a brief survey of the rise of alternative belief systems—the esoteric tradition—in German culture, we shall document its institutionalization in German textbooks of the 1930s, particularly those treatises that purportedly presented a scientific explanation of the workings of the universe to ingenuous schoolboys. By such means we shall better understand the intellectual furnishings of the mind of Joseph Beuys.

After the Age of Reason there came what has been called an "Age of the Irrational," characterized by an attitude simultaneously rejecting rationalism and materialism.<sup>61</sup> Its immediate historical context is the Industrial Revolution, a period in which technology appeared to promise increasing mastery over the physical world. Ironically, at just this point, mankind's always precarious hold upon his spiritual relationships with the hidden mechanisms of the universe began to loosen. At the same time, cultural disruptions caused by the new technological lifestyle (the shift from agrarian to urban, from relative economic independence to monetary dependence, bringing the breakdown of the family, etc.) brought about much social agitation among a newly impoverished indus-



trial working class. The age of the Industrial Revolution was not coincidentally the Age of Romanticism, a period in which new significance was accorded to the self—a burden that weighed ever more heavily upon the lone individual, now apparently the supreme arbiter of his destiny. From this new homocentric vision of the universe came the idea of the Romantic as a dreamer and escapist, a self-dramatized “unrealist.” Old notions of security—mental, physical, financial, and spiritual—seemed menaced on every front.

In circumstances of anxiety and uncertainty, *Aberglauben* are sure to make a prominent showing. Not surprisingly, this period also witnessed a return to archaic forms of belief and, particularly among the intelligentsia, a sinister concentration on superstitions thought long buried. In the larger view, all such phenomena spring from anxiety about social change and also reveal an inability to accept the bleak findings of the scientific method concerning humanity’s newly insignificant place in the universe. Accordingly, the nineteenth century saw the renaissance of an astonishing collection of heterogeneous esoteric interests: Swedenborgianism, mesmerism, and hypnotism, ritualized (black and white) magic, spiritualism (and other communications with the dead), astrology and other prognostic devices: Tarot cards, geomancy and water divining, the Kabbala and similar gnostic wisdom, hermeticism in general and alchemy in particular, secret societies (such as the Masons, Rosicrucians and Theosophists), oriental wisdom (due to colonial contacts), and so forth. A convenient benchmark is the year 1848: the annus mirabilis of the great European revolutions and, simultaneously, the moment of the appearance of spiritualism in America.<sup>62</sup>

The historical situation of the esoteric tradition complements a larger, ongoing problem of specific interest to this study. As we have repeatedly suggested, and as James Webb also emphasizes, occultism has always been of particular interest to the modern artist. Basically, according to Webb, the well-known stance of modern artists as alienated bohemians has as its more positive correlate the “stance of the elect race.” As he further recognizes, this pose parallels the perennial “need among occultists to appear especially elect.” Therefore,

another group which proclaimed itself “elect” was that of the Artists. . . . Because of the juxtaposition of Occultist and Artist in [nineteenth-century] Bohemia, occult teaching became the source to which the priests of this, one of the several secular religions, most easily turned. The two traditional patterns of redemption—the pursuit of the Beautiful, the Good, representing the search for Divine Union, whilst the descent into the Abyss is the alchemical process, the progress through the Mysteries, trial by ordeal—these became translated into terms of Art; but also of the Artist’s life. Without these traditional [esoteric] bases, the mythical figure of the Artist would not be as it is popularly conceived.<sup>63</sup>

As was previously observed, theosophy was the most important modern alternative belief system precisely because it offered the semblance of a coherent



theology to a generation particularly threatened by the theory of evolution. Whereas others only saw the destruction of the sustaining myth of man's divine origins by Darwin, it was the genius of Mme. Blavatsky to offer a hopeful resolution of the new findings: the concept of evolution could apply also to the strictly spiritual aspects of existence. Mankind was, she affirmed, on its way to higher and better things, namely reincarnations, realized through the governing factor of *karma* (the sum of one's accumulated debts in past lives). Moreover, Blavatsky's occultism, postulated upon ancient wisdom, was an avowed attempt to reconcile science and religion. Unfortunately—and there we discern an emerging German connection—theosophical speculations about the nature of the world and mankind partook of many of the scholarly delusions of the age, in particular of the racial theory of history. As we saw, Blavatsky had postulated the existence of four races on earth before the advent of the present one; accordingly, she spoke of (just as Hitler would much later) “a process of decimation [that] is taking place all over the globe, among those races whose ‘time is up’—among just those races, be it remarked, which esoteric philosophy regards as the senile representatives of lost archaic nations.”<sup>64</sup> As Webb comments, “this doctrine of the occult destinies of races . . . may well account for the influence which theosophy has exercised on several nationalist movements.”<sup>65</sup> He sums up the overall significance of the Theosophical Society as follows:

As a prototype occult society it presents an example of unfamiliar patterns of thought. . . . Of itself it was in its hey-day extraordinarily extensive, with branches throughout Europe, America, Asia. . . . The mode of thought which can properly be called Theosophical has had remarkable repercussions; for *it is the epitome of the pseudo-intellectual*. . . . In terms of occultism and the 19th-century revival in particular, Theosophy was the disseminator and distorter of countless non-rational theories of the universe—since it combined Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and diverse manufactured notions into one eccentric whole. . . . There was nothing aristocratic about Theosophy. Particularly in its later phases as a millenarian movement, it attracted the same sort of recruit which such movements have always attracted . . . mainly from the lower strata of the intelligentsia.<sup>66</sup>

Theosophy had, as it were, opened the Pandora's box of the esoteric tradition. It was certainly rife in Germany; in fact, the Theosophical Society had opened a German branch in 1884, and *The Secret Doctrine* was published in translation in 1903. Another great impetus for esotericism was the moral and physical collapse following World War I, as Hermann Hesse attests:

Shattered by the War, in despair as a result of deprivation and hunger, greatly disillusioned by the seeming futility of all the sacrifices in blood and goods, our people at that time were lured by many phantoms, but there were also many real spiritual advances. . . . There was one thing after another that seemed to point to what was wonderful and beyond the veil [of material reality]. There was also at that time a widespread leaning towards Indian, ancient Persian and other Eastern mysteries and religions.<sup>67</sup>

A typical product of the German approach to the esoteric tradition was the utopian artists' colony of "Monte Verità" (The Mountain of Truth), founded at the turn of the century at Ascona in Switzerland and designed to be "a school for higher life, a place for arousing expanded knowledge and expanded consciousness . . . made fruitful by sunbeams of the Universal Will."<sup>68</sup> Long a gathering place for theosophists, vegetarians, political refugees, philosophers, and artists, Ascona became a center for the radical underground of the avant-garde after 1902. Among the celebrated visitors to the site—demonstrating the alliance between advanced politics and art—were Bakunin, Kropotkin, Lenin, Trotsky, Martin Buber, Isadora Duncan, Stefan George, Hesse, Boris Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Hans Arp, Emmy Hennings, and Hugo Ball (the last three being, of course, the lights of Zürich Dadaism). Monte Verità, with its vegetarianism and nude solar frolics, may be taken as one of many examples of the institutionalization of occultism in Germany before the *Hitlerzeit*. For Webb, Nazi Germany itself "presents the unique spectacle of the partial transformation of the Occult Underground of rejected knowledge into an Establishment."<sup>69</sup>

We have already glimpsed the typically antiindividualist, antimaterialist, and antirationalist tenor of the official writings of the Third Reich during Beuys's boyhood. These all resemble familiar statements issued in the esoteric tradition. The new (or not so new) addition was the *völkische* element, the buzz-words of which are "nation," "tribe," and "race," all of which hark back to the mystics' desire to absorb the self into the divine. Now, of course, subjects of *der Staat* must dissolve their personal identities into that of the people, *das Volk*. A primary figure in the transition from the theosophists's statements about the ancient "root races" and the virulent, specifically anti-Semitic racism of the Nazis was Guido von List (1848–1919). Von List placed a romantic interpretation on the Germanic landscape and its ancient relics—runes, solar symbols, peasant carvings, and heraldry, in which the "sun wheel," or swastika (*Hakenkreuz*), played a great part. He wished to discover the existence of a purported religion of the "Ario-Germans," who had their own sacred primeval language and a secret Aryan priestly caste, the "Armanen." A follower was Adolf Lanz von Liebenfels (1874–1954), who founded the Order of the New Templars and expounded the doctrine of Ariosophy in his book called *Theozoologie* (1904), obviously indebted to the recent German translation of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*.

Another important pre-Nazi figure was Dietrich Eckart (1868–1923), who enjoyed a great reputation as a *völkische* playwright. He greatly admired the theosophical statements on *maya*, which held that the world was an illusion, and also their revived Christian mysticism, which postulated that mankind must free itself from the materialist world and deny the supremacy of matter, itself pure *maya*. This morally upright negation of the world had, thought Eckart, its opposite in the teaching of "world affirmation," the great representation of



which was “the Jew.” Thus, at least in this author’s mind, mysticism and racism are inseparable principles, as they certainly were in *Deutscher Bürgervereinigung*, a mystical, anti-Semitic organization (calling for “more spiritual standards”), founded by Eckart in 1919.

Today, far better known than Eckart is Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), a leader in the *Thule Bund* from which, after 1919, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazis, emerged. Rosenberg wrote *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), a “racial history” which had sold over a million copies by 1944. The myth in question was the death of materialism and individualism and the submersion of the grasping individual in the all-embracing *Volk*, representing the *Ahnenerbe*, or primeval cultural heritage. Rosenberg’s widely accepted “history” of the Aryans was nothing but occult history, *à la* theosophy, since the “root Aryan Race” arose on “Atlantis”: “And these waves of Atlantean people travelled by water on their swan and dragon ships into the Mediterranean, to Africa; by land over Central Asia to Kutschka, indeed, perhaps even to China, across North America to the south of the Continent.”<sup>70</sup>

Since the only function of this mention of the Nazis’ familiar racial arguments is to demonstrate their clear-cut analogies with contemporary occultism, we may leave this disgusting line of thought behind in order to look into the occultist basis of contemporary German pseudoscience, a matter of particular interest given Joseph Beuys’s own pseudoscientific interests. Typical of this irrationalist, mystical trend is a massive tome called *Deutsche Physik* (1936) by Philipp Lenard (1862–1947), a 1905 Nobel Laureate. This authoritative textbook, praised by the Party leaders, equated “Natural Science and the Spiritual Sciences” in the following, wholly esoteric manner:

Originally, physics meant—and essentially continues to mean even today, especially in our conception—natural science in general. This is one part of human knowledge; the other part consists of the spiritual sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. . . . We call that portion of the world that is accessible to our senses the material or substantial world; the other part, of which our inner being [alone] gives us information . . . we call the spiritual world. . . . The endeavor of the spiritual sciences should produce a new cognition, wrested from the spiritual world. . . . The great founders of religions . . . are the bearers of such knowledge. Also true artists [are] sufficiently conscious of the most fundamental differentiations in the spiritual world—namely, that every organism has its own special spirit, that portion of the total spirit world which its body is able to hold on to. . . . The perception of the total interconnectedness in nature is one of the most distinguished achievements of the investigation of nature. . . . It was precisely the yearning of Nordic man to investigate a hypothetical interconnectedness in nature which was the origin of natural science.<sup>71</sup>

Only one other example of such wholly esoteric clairvoyance, passing itself off as science, need be cited. A standard Nazi textbook on mathematics by Bruno Thuring, *Deutsche Mathematik* (1936), also emphasizes the so-called “spiritual



factors,” in this case in order to overthrow the “materialist” doctrines of “that Jew” Einstein and instead praise

Kepler and Newton, who made their own anti-materialistic mode of thinking perfectly clear. Their scientific aspirations . . . were in the first instance born of a deep religious feeling. . . . The ancient magnanimity of the soul of the Germanic man, directed away from the world and all external appearance, posed the first world-encompassing question about nature and thus became the mother of natural science [and] determined the scientific attitude which made Kepler the prototype and example of the German natural scientist.<sup>72</sup>

We now understand the significance of the official, but as yet unspoken, German educational background of Joseph Beuys: “*Ahnenerbe*,” that primeval *völkische* cultural heritage, innate to the German male and allowing him to see “the interconnectedness in nature.” We will next consider the last link in an occultist chain directly leading to Joseph Beuys: Rudolf Steiner.



## The Beuys-Steiner Connection

### Joseph Beuys's Close Encounters with Rudolf Steiner

Having examined the external contexts for the oeuvre of Joseph Beuys, we now must ask what to make of his work in and of itself. For our purposes of redefinition, the basis of which is synthesizing art-historical analysis, it is probably best to discard the term "art" at the outset—a point already tacitly conceded by Beuys's more perceptive critics in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, for this strictly art-historical (versus art-critical) inquiry, we shall instead substitute the all-encompassing term "philosophy." Thence, we shall more specifically dub all these Beuysian manifestations the ritualized, indeed literalized, reenactments of a very specific *pseudophilosophy*, namely Anthroposophy, founded at the turn of the century in Germany by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).<sup>2</sup>

The reason for this act of terminological transsubstitution, still a novelty in the Beuys literature, is Beuys's repeated invocation of the awesome (to him) authority of Rudolf Steiner.<sup>3</sup> Some art critics—nearly all Germans—have already drawn passing attention to this fact, but, unfortunately, they appear to have profoundly misunderstood the real significance of Steiner's thought. In effect, for Germans, Steiner represents a still familiar historical component in the modern history of central Europe. Nevertheless, they err in remembering him only narrowly (and rather dimly) as a kind of *political* philosopher.

In order to carry out this proposed redefinition of the art and thought of Joseph Beuys—the most highly regarded figure of the post-World War II avant-garde art scene in Europe—it is essential that we examine in some detail the "spiritual evolution" of his acknowledged mentor, Rudolf Steiner, a once highly influential figure in German cultural life but one today still largely unknown to art historians. From this comprehensive viewpoint it becomes clear that, while Steiner may legitimately be called a political philosopher, that designation represents but one ancillary strain of the multifaceted and often obsessive interests of this Austrian seer. In fact, Steiner's voluminous writings address in detail nearly all the strictly ideological interests of his self-admitted follower, Joseph



Beuys. Besides concerning himself with questions of art as such, Steiner provides the concrete means by which simultaneously to decipher, and thus to elevate to a comprehensive philosophical level, Beuys's enthusiastic forays into such diverse fields as education, "eurhythm" (meaning, in effect, "performance art"), (pseudo)science, religion, economics, sociology and the whole pressing question of the contemporary social order. Moreover, in the strictly biographical sense, we shall also observe certain interesting parallels between the public *personae* of Beuys and Steiner.

Joseph Beuys's initial acquaintance with Rudolf Steiner's writings can be dated to the prewar period, long before Beuys had declared himself an artist. For this we have Beuys's own recollections. As he put it, he and his fellow students at the Kleves Artists' Union, which he had joined in 1946, "discussed, no argued, often about Rudolf Steiner. While [my friend, Rainer] Lynen, then and even today, is a strong opponent of Steiner, I had already been following his train of thought with great interest for many years."<sup>4</sup>

Beuys was originally introduced to the grand corpus of Steinerian thought by a school chum, Fritz Rolf Rothenburg, later to be killed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1943. But Beuys, by his own admission, was then not yet ready to see the all-illuminating light cast by Steiner's profound Anthroposophical insights into the primarily spiritual workings of the entire cosmos. As Beuys later explained,

at that time, I could find no enthusiasm for them; it was not until after the War, in 1945 and 1946, that I took up Steiner's writings. [Then] I received a very strong impression, particularly from his well-founded knowledge of scientific problems. From the beginnings of my discussions with Lynen, I brought up the topic of Steiner in order to demonstrate to Lynen that Steiner's ideas displayed a tendency which refers directly and practically to reality and that, compared to this [Steinerian credo], all other forms of scientific-theoretical discussion remain without direct reference to the forces of time.<sup>5</sup>

Beuys continued along these lines, adding that his spiritual education took some fifteen years to complete:

By 1958 and 1959, I had finished all the literature which was available to me in the scientific field. At that time, a new understanding of knowledge became clear to me. Through consideration and analysis, I came to the knowledge that the concepts of art and science in the development of thought in the western world were diametrically opposed, and that, on the basis of these facts, a solution to the polarization in these conceptions must be sought, and that expanded views must be formed. . . . *This means that everything, both human and scientific, stems from art.* In this totally primary concept of art, everything is brought together, and one comes to the conclusion that the scientific was originally contained in the artistic.<sup>6</sup>

Given this crucial interpretative key—Beuys's admission of his great indebtedness to Steiner's complicated thought—the art historian can see just how Steiner's copious writings explain, perhaps better even than Beuys himself, exactly what

was being consistently expressed through the media of Beuys's mysterious assemblages and *Aktionen*. Indeed, Steiner's ponderous and apocalyptic proclamations delineate the sweeping philosophical implications and, further, the intentions behind nearly all of Beuys's cryptic gestures. They also explicitly identify the exact emblematic meanings of several of Beuys's well-known individual motifs.

To sum up, as viewed from this strictly iconological perspective, what Beuys's shamanistic busywork most shared with familiar (that is, historical) art practice or functions was its operation as a kind of *ekphrasis*.<sup>7</sup> As *ekphrasis*, Beuys's art activities assumed the task of making visible the verbal particulars of an authoritative text, thus linking his actions to artistic traditions common since antiquity and revived during the Renaissance. In Beuys's case, all the texts had been produced by Rudolf Steiner and, according to the standard *Encyclopedia of Occultism* (where such intellectually dubious materials are rightly relegated), Steiner was the

Austrian social philosopher and mystic, founder of the movement known as Anthroposophy. . . . Eventually his [initial] Theosophical interests broadened into a very personal kind of mysticism associated with the Rosicrucian tradition [and] culminated in a movement known as *Der Anthroposophische Bund*, founded in 1912. . . . Steiner's Anthroposophical teaching is a remarkable mixture of Rosicrucian, Theosophical, Christian, and Occult traditions, synthesized in a very individual way. Steiner was a seer, and much of his insight was derived from clairvoyant perception. Many of his teachings were given in the form of lectures, later published in book-form by his followers. The movement has organized a number of schools, which place great emphasis on color, form, rhythm and the life of the universe. . . . The Anthroposophists were pioneers of Bio-Dynamic farming, which dispenses with the use of chemical fertilizers.<sup>8</sup>

Martin Gardner, a witty debunker of occultism and pseudosciences, has observed that Steiner's "Bio-Dynamic farming is closely related to the organic farming movement," which had already attracted numerous adherents among the esoterically inclined.<sup>9</sup> Steiner's followers, however, went even further than did their like-minded predecessors, "regarding the earth as an actual living organism." As Gardner explains, they claim that the earth "breathes twice a day, and its soil is 'living' in much more than a metaphorical sense. . . . In essence, the Anthroposophists' approach to the soil is like their approach to the human body—a variety of homeopathy." Even without having read Gardner, one must recognize that the homeopathic fallacy remains fertile ground for the pseudosciences. As further evidence of Steiner's theories (based on familiar occultist beliefs in the vitalist universe, the workings of which are only to be recognized by the initiated), Gardner cites his "explanation of how mistletoe, when properly prepared, will cure cancer by absorbing 'etheric forces' and strengthening the 'astral body.'" Adherents to Steiner's beliefs accept that "the



soil can be made more 'dynamic' by adding to it certain mysterious preparations which, like the medicines of the homeopathic 'purists,' are so diluted that nothing material of the compound remains." As we shall see, this is the same kind of logic that informed the ritualistic manipulations of Beuys's *Aktionen*—whether or not he ever practiced Bio-Dynamic agriculture as such. (It appears that he did.)<sup>10</sup>

Mistletoe and homeopathy aside, Steiner's belief system is, above all else, highly "ethical" in its overall purposes. Therefore, at the very outset of these arguments we should situate Beuys's popular performance pieces within their own ethical context, that is, as social sculpture. This is the term that Beuys himself employed to describe the entire corpus of art works from his mature years. From his statements, it becomes obvious that, for Beuys, the *Aktionen* represented a sweeping polemical statement against narrow materialism, which he saw as a rampant contemporary phenomenon, leading directly to social chaos and a concomitant dearth of spiritual sensitivity. Not surprisingly, given that Steiner was a self-avowed occultist, antimaterialist ideas are repeatedly encountered in Steiner's writings; indeed they are fundamental to Anthroposophical belief.

It is apparent from Beuys's many public pronouncements that he wished to elevate perception, to lead his disciples into new avenues of heightened sensitivity—in short, to self-knowledge. Likewise, these were all notions serving as keystones to the tottering architectural fabric of Anthroposophical occult science—*Die Geheimwissenschaft*. Overall, like a spiritual therapist—or shaman, as Beuys himself would have admitted—the artist wished to reintegrate (or, as he put it, "make intact") humanity in the larger sense. He sought to resynthesize both body and soul. Unmistakably, such ideas of spiritual healing have a wholly Anthroposophical locus classicus. Even though Steiner's name was not then mentioned, Beuys made these ethical proclivities perfectly clear in his statement to Caroline Tisdall late in 1978, in which he spoke of his "therapeutic," "shamanistic," or "ancient behavior," and also stressed "the idea of transformation and substance." As he said then, such behavior should be recognized as the search for "the deepest root of the idea of spiritual life." He concluded:

When we consider our own stage of materialism, and all the things we experience as negative in our current crisis, we have to admit too that this stage is also an historic necessity. I experienced it in the War, and I feel it now every day: this state of decay that comes with a one-sided understanding of the idea of materialism. When people might say that shamanistic practice is atavistic and irrational, one might answer that the attitude of contemporary scientists is equally old-fashioned and atavistic, because we should, by now, be at another stage of development in our relationship to the material. So, when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities, and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances. For instance: in places like



universities, where everyone speaks so rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear.<sup>11</sup>

Also for Tisdall,<sup>12</sup> Beuys provided the following diagrammatic schematum of what he repeatedly called his

SOCIAL SCULPTURE—how we mould and shape  
the world in which we live:

*Sculpture as an  
evolutionary process:  
everyone an artist.*

To further explain this cryptic chart, both “evolutionary” and quintessentially democratic, in that “everyone is an artist,” Beuys stated that, according to the ethical tenets of the new kind of social sculpture,

My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke ideas of what sculpture *can be*, and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, color changes, decay, drying up. *Everything is in a state of change.*<sup>13</sup>

Similarly employing antimaterialistic, spiritual, therapeutic, and evolutionary terminology, Rudolf Steiner had first set forth the program in 1909 in the following way:

We are living in the present, materialistically-minded age, and the inflow of spiritual knowledge into our culture is needed in order that mankind's longing for such knowledge may be satisfied. . . . Modern thinking is simply unable to cope with and master the chaos of outer conditions. . . . Thinking itself will become rigid [and] soon no longer sufficiently fluid and flexible to grapple with and transform the complicated conditions of life. . . . The true meaning of the mandate—“Know thyself!”—lies in our following in this way the [occult] evolution of the Cosmos. . . . The self is formed out of, born out of the whole universe, and our own [spiritual] ascent leads us finally to merge in the whole Cosmos. The aim of self-knowledge is to give man his place in the great world in order to reveal to him there the true meaning of the word, self-knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Steiner next reveals the basic psychological conditioning of Anthroposophy: alienation from the modern world. The answer to materialism is, Steiner tells us, religion; but we know that by this he really means to say occultism:

Materialism has led to a tremendous upsurge of intellectual power and activity, with merely the satisfaction of physical needs in view. . . . The culture of the present age works only for the needs of the physical plane, but it works with a subtlety hitherto unachieved. It is,

therefore, clear to Occultism why the contrast between Religion and Science, expressed as it is in the many different movements, is so great and the cleft between them so wide. The conflict between Religion and Science—under which Art also suffers—is always in evidence when the level of culture declines. . . . There is only one solution, which is that *Science, Art and Religion—the three branches of culture—must again be united* and mutually enrich each other; *spiritual life must stream from them. To achieve this union is the task of Western spiritual science [i.e., Occultism].*<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of this single statement from Steiner, one can here sum up the rest of what follows in this book. In short, in the mature work of Joseph Beuys, Science, Art and Religion, the three branches of culture, had been again united. Beuys's mission, or task in both life and art was to achieve this union. Since he was preeminently successful in his quest, spiritual life "streamed" from his *Aktionen*.

### Rudolf Steiner, a Spiritual Pseudoscientist

Rudolf Steiner was born in 1861 in Kraljevec (now part of northern Yugoslavia); thus he was by birth a subject of the still-expanding Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire.<sup>16</sup> His origins were, however, less than imperial: his family was peasant stock, recently turned proletarian. Throughout the rest of his life, this great *mitteleuropäische* occultist guru apparently looked and acted very much like what he really was—the earnest, provincial, physically gawky, and socially awkward elder son of a minor railway official and an uprooted village peasant woman. The leitmotiv of Steiner's formative years was, however, dislocation, as much geographical as social and psychological. Both his grandfather and his father had been gamekeepers attached to an aristocratic estate. However, in his early thirties Steiner's father finally broke with the timeless pattern of his ancestors and reluctantly joined the Industrial Age by serving as a telegraphist and stationmaster for the Austrian Imperial Railways. Throughout his life, Steiner would feel psychologically torn between the primordial rhythms of nature—grounded in the land-rooted life patterns of all his peasant ancestors, evidently all devout Catholics—and mechanical science—concretely represented by the roaring trains and singing wires associated with his free-thinking father's daily professional activities.

In his autobiography—*Mein Lebensgang* ("My Life's Course," posthumously published in 1925)—Steiner speaks cosmically of the dualities, nature and science, typically associating them with reincarnation, destiny, and the like. In rather more mundane terms, the preschooler, already a withdrawn, dreamy, and frail child, was repeatedly moved about, following his father's transient job assignments from one isolated and dreary stationhouse to another. Whatever a child psychologist might make of this today, Steiner saw that "karma" (the newer, fashionable theosophical jargon for that old, *völkische* cliché "*das Schick-*

sal") was inexorably directing him to act as a spiritual guide to that noisy Industrial Age into which his family had been propelled. In more specific (even pictorial) terms, *Lebensgang* draws a heavily moralized dichotomy between the rigid linearity of iron rails and telegraph wires and the sweeping, expansive archetypal cycles of the timeless Alpine regions into which the noisy trains rushed, belching forth smoke and soot. The autobiographer also tells us that even as a child he was aware of certain hidden "beings" in trees and mountains. From the age of eight he lived clairvoyantly—or in Anthroposophical terms "supersensibly"—with the "spirits of nature"; he had visions of the future deaths of relatives and friends. He was also solitary: "Indeed, these questions about all sorts of things made me as a boy very lonely."<sup>17</sup> As Steiner disarmingly added, "Even as a child, I was marked by a gift for the fantastic: no wonder then that a fantastic philosophy should have developed within me."<sup>18</sup> In short, depending upon one's present-day inclinations, we can read these manifestations as the signs of either an enviable spiritual double life or incipient schizophrenia. As for the latter diagnosis, a single quotation from the *Lebensgang* will, I think, suffice:

I have made it very clear in this account of the course of my life that, even in childhood, I lived in the spiritual world, such as that which was self-evident to me, but that I had to struggle hard in achieving everything pertaining to the outer [i.e., real] world. For this reason, I have been a person slow in development as to this form of knowledge in all its aspects. The direct knowledge of what can be experienced in the spiritual world had always been to me something self-evident. The perceptual grasp upon the sense-world [however] caused me the greatest difficulty.<sup>19</sup>

A turning point occurred when Steiner, at the age of nine, was introduced to the objective, nonsensual, and abstract purity and absolute certainty of geometry: "I found in this a solace for the unhappiness which my unanswered questions had caused me. . . . I am sure that I learned through geometry to know happiness for the first time."<sup>20</sup> To the skeptic, this kind of absorption in abstractions could merely indicate a commonplace preadolescent retreat from human society. This reclusive trait was further reinforced when Steiner's father was transferred to Neudorf in western Hungary. Here Steiner was to live in a kind of exile, from his seventh to his seventeenth years. As a German speaker, he was rudely rejected by his Magyar classmates; in fact, we hear no mention of any close friends of his own age until his college years in Vienna. These mundane social facts underlie what Steiner chose grandly to call his cosmic sense of alienation from the sense world.

Rather than ordinary humans, what young Steiner identified with were the formulas of the academic curriculum of that time: strict scientific method and a mechanistic, cause-and-effect, model of the workings of the universe. To this scheme he would eventually adapt his own peculiar spiritual intuitions. In 1879



the senior Steiner was again transferred, now to a station on the outskirts of the imperial capital. This move allowed Rudolf to commute to the Wiener Technische Hochschule, where "I had myself enrolled for mathematics, natural history, and chemistry."<sup>21</sup> Several years later he earned a Ph.D. from the provincial University of Rostock. The means by which the peasant-born "Herr" Steiner became a prestigious "Herr Doktor" was a thesis advancing his unique, "Fundamental Questions Pertaining to the Theory of Cognition" (*Die Grundfragen der Erkenntnistheorie*, 1891). Even though this dissertation certainly had not been written in Rostock, its sensitive author nevertheless was able there to find an eccentric neoplatonist professor, Heinrich von Stein, who was willing to underwrite Steiner's academic ambitions. Still, Professor Stein told his pupil that "your dissertation is NOT such as is required. One can see from it that you have NOT produced it under the guidance of *any* professor."<sup>22</sup>

Although Steiner never would have admitted it, his formal, wholly quantitative education had been consistently and profoundly neglectful of a critical area of human inquiry: the liberal arts. Had Steiner been exposed from the very start to such humanistic studies, he might have learned critical judgment, something that could have radically altered the future pattern of his obsessions. Two more quotations serve to document this serious omission in Steiner's "intellectual" approach: "I had always an antipathy against the dissipating of creative fantasy through intellectual interpretation."<sup>23</sup> He also felt that his approach to the solution of "Nature's problems" was of the "all-encompassing" sort, "beginning with the Idea." His conclusion was that "it is the business of Nature, as it were, therefore to conform with this Idea."<sup>24</sup> He had apparently been omnivorously devouring the likes of Kant and Hegel (notorious "Ideist" philosophers) since the age of twelve. In that case, the best advice he ever got (which, of course, he ignored) came from his high school literature teacher: "I have noticed for a long while that you have a philosophical library. I would advise you NOT to read in it; you will only confuse your thinking by so doing."<sup>25</sup> A little knowledge, purely of a technical nature, proved to work dangerous (and confusing) effects upon such a susceptible, even neurasthenic, personality.

In effect, Rudolf Steiner, a self-avowed occultist, became what Martin Gardner would have called the epitome of the pseudoscientist. Gardner provides some psychopathological hallmarks typically associated with this familiar type, who fills the historical records of many modern occultist sects:

There are five ways in which the sincere pseudoscientist's paranoid tendencies are likely to be exhibited. (1) He considers himself a genius. (2) He regards his colleagues, without exception, as ignorant blockheads. . . . (3) He believes himself unjustly persecuted and discriminated against. . . . It never occurs to the crank that this opposition may be due to error in his own work. . . . (4) He has strong compulsions to focus his attacks on the greatest scientists and the best established theories. . . . This same defiance can be seen in a tendency to assert the diametrical opposite of well-established beliefs. . . . (5) He often has the tendency to write in

a complex jargon, in many cases making use of terms and phrases he himself has coined. Schizophrenics sometimes talk in what psychiatrists call "neologisms," words which have meaning to the patient but sound like Jabberwocky to everyone else.<sup>26</sup>

Of course Steiner's pseudoscience still has its many sincere defenders. One of these, a tenured academic at the City University of New York (who admits to teaching regularly "a course in history of Western philosophy from Steiner's perspective"),<sup>27</sup> acknowledges that, in general, what he calls the "straight academic" reader might "have good reason to be wary of writings on such topics as karma and rebirth, etheric and astral bodies, and claims of knowledge of the cooperation between the Buddha and St. Francis in the spiritual world. Steiner's claims to privileged knowledge immediately, and rightly, render his writings suspect."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, this author still believes that we should take his statements seriously, since Steiner is officially sanctioned in Europe. (This is demonstrated by the existence of "thousands of [Anthroposophical] schools, including a recently founded German university with a doctoral program, law school, and medical school—all approved by the Federal Republic of Germany.")<sup>29</sup> He concludes, "Exactly how *we* respond to the spiritual mystery attending all aspects of Steiner's life, teaching, and influence will tell us as much about ourselves as about the spiritual world."<sup>30</sup>

Steiner's own complicated and defensive statements clarify his real relation to Gardner's classic definition of the self-absorbed pseudoscientist. All of the traits cited by Gardner, including an angry claim to complete originality, are, for instance, manifested in the forward to Steiner's central work, *An Outline of Occult Science (Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss, 1909)*:

Occult Science is the antithesis of Natural Science. Objections have repeatedly been made to my perceptions of the spiritual world by maintaining that they are [merely] reproductions of what, in the course of the ages, has appeared in human thought about the spirit world [in similar] expositions from the Gnostics, from the poetic records of Ancient Oriental Wisdom, and so on. Such objections are superficial. My knowledge of the things of the spirit is a direct result of my own perceptions. . . . [My critics will say] the author treats the simplest scientific concepts in a manner that shows the most inconceivable ignorance concerning even the most elementary facts of scientific knowledge [and] "It is certainly queer what eccentricities can be brought forth by a wrong trend of thought in the present day." . . . Yet, nevertheless, THE STATEMENTS IN THIS BOOK REALLY AGREE WITH EVERY FORWARD STEP OF MODERN SCIENCE. . . . Thirty years ago, I was in a position to make a thorough study of physics having ramifications into the various fields of *Geheimwissenschaft*. The expositions belonging to the so-called "Mechanical Theory of Heat" ("Theory of Thermodynamics") occupied at that time the central point in my studies in the field of heat phenomena. . . . [Therefore] I am striving really to know modern research. . . . Although this book deals with the results of research lying beyond the power of the [ordinary] intellect, bound to the sense-world, nevertheless nothing is offered that cannot be comprehended by anyone possessing an unprejudiced reason.<sup>31</sup>



Anyone who has waded through any portion of Steiner's voluminous writings—hundreds of books and pamphlets,<sup>32</sup> most of which do clearly “lie beyond the power of the intellect bound to the sense-world”—must remark, as did Steiner's sympathetic British biographer, Geoffrey Ahern, that “the total effect is not far short of conceptual Jabberwocky.” Even though Ahern does not seem familiar with Gardner's earlier conclusions about the functional linkages existing between pseudoscientific jabberwocky, occultist neologizing, and the clinical traits of schizophrenia, he does cite various instances of Steiner's typically schizoid verbiage, concluding that:

The tree in the Anthropological wood can scarcely be seen for the verbiage. [As a result] it is almost impossible to pin the revelation down to specific facts—let alone to refute it—because its words are then justified as leading one towards experience of “Spirit.” . . . There are no internal rules which enable one to know when the words connect literally with observable matter and ordinary concepts, and when and how they do *not*. Thus spiritual reductionism can be employed as a means of avoiding criticism while making statements about the material world. . . . [In short, all such] mystical language has an underlying core which is, *inter alia*, non-spatial, non-temporal, beyond language and ineffable, paradoxical, sublime and joyful.<sup>33</sup>

As it was eventually to be developed by Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy was to be an all-embracing pseudoscience that would provide answers that are both materially and, above all, spiritually satisfying for all sectors of life: agriculture, dance, politics, art, education, architecture, and so forth. Steiner meant to have an answer for everything. Despite those indignant claims for a total originality in his thought, Steiner was clearly and profoundly influenced by Madame Blavatsky's theosophical writings after 1889, when he was first introduced to such esoteric literature in Vienna in the circle of Marie Lang.<sup>34</sup> Even though he was later to criticize the “philosophically inadequate intellectualism” and “sheer chaos” of Blavatsky's writings,<sup>35</sup> Steiner had by then taken from the Russian prophetess the basic concepts of karma and esoteric reincarnation. He broke with theosophy, however, in eschewing its more blatant Anglo-Indian (pseudo-Vedic-Buddhist-Hindu) ancient wisdom, reverting instead to a traditional, strictly Christian, but nonsectarian, mysticism. This, of course, proved to be much more palatable to Steiner's German-speaking followers, naturally devoid of British colonial “pukka Sahib” types. Nevertheless, he did hold fast to Blavatsky's most outrageous “secret doctrine”: the historical reality of the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria.

Even though Joseph Beuys does not appear to have ever reenacted all the facets of Rudolf Steiner's complicated cosmology, it will nevertheless prove useful to summarize Anthroposophy, if only because Beuys freely admitted to having followed Steiner's line of thought. Therefore, as Steiner sums up his beliefs (which we may equally take to represent Beuys's), they “teach us that everything physical or material is born out of the spiritual. . . . Behind every-



thing material, everything physical, there is the Spiritual, an essential but abstract consciousness of Spirit. What is necessary is to develop definite concepts and ideas of how the spiritual becomes manifest in each domain."<sup>36</sup> And that was the major impulse behind the various manifestations of the Beuys phenomenon.

### The Shared Cosmologies of Steiner and Beuys

In its most general outlines, Steiner's cosmological theories are exactly in line—"in each domain"—with Joseph Beuys's social theory of sculpture. For the German artist-shaman, generalized physical phenomena—either (as he put it) "cold" or "warm"—were ascribed to larger symbolic potentialities: order or chaos. Beuys's symbolic dualities, expressed in terms of identical physical polarities, have their hitherto unrecognized counterparts and locus classicus in Steiner's occultist texts. The essential components of Beuys's theory have been briefly but accurately summarized by Caroline Tisdall:

This Theory of Sculpture describes the passage of everything in the world, physical or psychological, from a chaotic, undetermined state to a determined or ordered state. *Chaotic* is the state of raw material and unchannelled will-power, characterized as WARM. *Ordered* is the state of material that has been processed or formed, symbolized by the heart-sign of movement at the center. Here it acquires form and definition and appears in a crystalline state, represented in [Beuys's] diagram by a tetrahedron, and characterized as COLD and INTELLECTUAL. If the process goes too far, the crystal becomes a burnt-up, over-intellectualized "clinker," and falls out of the system. Carried on to a psychological level, this is a diagram of those [people], at one extreme who are motivated by the chaotic warmth of will power, those in the central area who are governed by feeling and the heart, and [a third group:] those who have reached the over-intellectualized pole of extreme theory. Ideally, a balance should be achieved, although the overriding tendency today [Beuys believes] is towards the intellectual pole. Balance, reintegration and flexible flow between the areas of thinking, feeling and will, all of which are essential, are the objective of the Theory. The moulding processes of art are taken as a metaphor for the moulding of society: hence, SOCIAL SCULPTURE.<sup>37</sup>

Following Blavatsky's theosophical theories, Steiner had also committed himself to an evolutionary thesis.<sup>38</sup> According to the Austrian seer, "Man is not obligated to remain stationary at the point of view he occupies today, and it is possible for [occult] organs—spiritual eyes—to develop after a similar fashion to that in which those [real] sense-organs of the body, the eyes and ears, have been developed; and once these new organs are developed, higher faculties will make themselves apparent."<sup>39</sup> Thus, as man advanced in his development—actually a gradual process of initiation—presentiments of "higher worlds" would be recognized by him, and he would accordingly advance also in sensitivity and knowledge. Steiner chiefly used his "supersensible," or clairvoyant, faculties for: (1) enunciating moral doctrine; (2) describing the occult structure of the universe; and (3) elucidating the (purely hypothetical) primordial-evolutionary

“history of mankind.” Unlike Blavatsky’s forward-looking scheme, Steiner’s system saw man as evolving backwards (or *de-evolving*) towards a lost, divine condition, progress towards which has been impeded by certain malevolent powers (called “Ahriman” and “Lucifer”). Steiner saw the figure of Christ as central to his cosmology, and His coming was in essence initiatory: it returned man to a consciousness of his own divine origins. Hence, once a correct understanding of Christ has been attained—one which is scarcely comprehensible today to orthodox Christians—then, states Steiner, the “etherized blood” of the individual mingles with the etherized blood of Christ, a substance all-pervasive in the cosmos.

Aside from his Christological concerns, Steiner used Anthroposophical “science” to integrate conventional, Industrial Age scientific discoveries. He believed (contrary to the Darwinists) that animals had a “descending” evolution, evolving to their present states “downwards” from their archetypal origins—that is, the “spiritual human form”—and then they hardened into their respective, present-day “specializations.” Thus, human beings later descended and “condensed,” or became “incarnated”: “Everything is experienced in reverse order.”<sup>40</sup> For Anthroposophists, the physical body is what man today has in common with minerals, plants, and animals. The “etheric” element corresponds to the life of plants and animals; the “astral” corresponds to the animals, while “spirit” is within humanity and other, higher “beings.” “Evolution” is also ascending towards greater conscious spirituality as it increases in complexity. Life on earth derives from supernal and immanent beings, existing in first, second, and third hierarchies. Everything tangible in the solar system has condensed and fallen into hardened matter, thus has descended from an original state of amorphous or “pure” spirit. The coming of Christ marked a turning point. Steiner’s central aim was to demonstrate how matter—when “truly perceived”—is an offshoot of spirit. Steiner’s grandiose thoughts about the nature of man, and his place within the ascending, collective evolution of the Cosmos, rising steadily toward the bright heights of spiritual individuality, were only elaborated in the first decade of the twentieth century, culminating in 1909 in his *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*.

In the light of previous discussions, it is of interest here to note that, in spite of Steiner’s obviously *völkische* beliefs, Adolf Hitler declared him the “greatest enemy of the Nazi Party” and even tried to have him assassinated in 1922.<sup>41</sup> This fact seems useful in order to comprehend the phenomenon of Steiner’s renewed popularity and polemical value in Germany during the tension-ridden de-Nazification period following 1945, the epoch in which Beuys’s theories began (in Steinerian terminology) to “crystallize.” Hence, there is a curious historical imperative (at least in Germany) accounting for the revival of occultism in the period of “*die Teilung Deutschlands*,” when the land was divided against itself (East and West) and the Germans themselves were polarized (Demo-



crats against Nazis). Joseph Rovin has drawn an evocative picture of this period, the nadir of German economic and cultural life:

Unless one lived in Germany for the first three years after the War, it is impossible to realize the moral and social effect of this sudden change of perspective. Faces were grey and hollow, clothes were creased and worn, bodies were unwashed. Demolition work in bombed towns proceeded with extreme slowness since there was no machinery. Trains progressed with heart-breaking slowness along single-track lines, for the other track had been dismantled by the [Allied] occupiers as part of their reprisals; there were no windows, no lights. . . . Underground passages in ruined stations became rest centers every evening. Homeless people slept there. . . . People ate, deloused themselves and made love in public without being offended by looks which, in any case, remained indifferent. . . . Everything was on sale, from gold to human flesh. No regular work could earn anyone enough money on which to live decently. . . . Industry was in a bad state; the War and the dismantling policy had robbed it of thirty percent of its capacity. . . . Life was dreary, cheerless, grey, without any obvious scale of values, and virginity sold more cheaply than chocolate.<sup>42</sup>

As the historian of occultism would immediately recognize, the times were ripe for a revival of *any* ecstatic, otherworldly, esoteric belief system. And, at this very point in time, there was Anthroposophy, already well formed, organized, and waiting in the wings, ready to sing its delectable siren song. The main aim of Anthroposophy, as Steiner had stated long before, is *to heal*, by means of

the soul's awakening to such a higher state of consciousness, what may be called initiation. . . . This has come about as a sort of involuntary self-awakening. Such a human being will feel that, through it, his entire nature is transformed. A boundless enrichment of his soul-experience occurs. He will find that there is no knowledge of the sense-world that gives him such bliss, and such inner warmth as he now experiences through the revelation of knowledge inaccessible to the physical eye.<sup>43</sup>

The larger purpose of this meditative path is to restore the "Unity," and thereby to transcend the soul versus body, or binary, division imposed by our own constitutions. The particular means for achieving this meditative-transmogrative state is very clearly derived from the writings (*Ejercicios Espirituales*) of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Steiner's meditative system likewise rests upon the willed use of thought pictures, what Steiner called "visualizations." Like Beuys's *Aktionen* of the postwar period, Steiner's "symbolic visualizations" are, according to their Anthroposophical spokesman,

so constructed that they do not depict anything external, but have in themselves the peculiarity of effecting an awakening in the soul. *The best visualizations for this purpose are emblematic or symbolical.* . . . In spiritual training, everything depends upon the concentration of the entire soul-life upon *one* visualization. This visualization must, by means of free-will, be placed at the center of consciousness. Symbolic visualized images are, therefore, better than those that represent outer objects or processes, for the latter have a point of attachment to the outer world.



making the soul less dependent upon itself than when it employs symbolic visualizations that are formed through the soul's own energy. The essential factor is not "what" is visualized; what is essential is the fact that the visualization liberates the soul from dependence upon the physical.<sup>44</sup>

Steiner continues in this vein, providing what we may take to represent further details on the meditative, "emblematic and symbolic" meanings and functions of Beuys's *Aktionen*:

The symbol, as a whole, is certainly not produced by nature, but all its details are, nevertheless, borrowed from nature. . . . One should [also] consider that it is not the pictures of sense-perception that lead to the awakening of the higher soul-faculties, but that [instead] *this effect is produced only by the manner of combining these details*, and this combination does not picture anything that is present in the sense-world. . . . In spiritual training, the most manifold pictures of this kind can be employed, and they can be constructed in the most varied manner. Also, certain sentences, formulae, and even single words, upon which to meditate, may be given. In every case, these means to inner meditation have the objective of liberating the soul from sense-perception, and of arousing it to an activity.<sup>45</sup>

An opposite example of Joseph Beuys's Steiner-derived, "symbolic and emblematic visualizations" is the *Aktion* of December 1966 called "Manresa." This had been enacted and photo-documented in the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf—after which the gallery went out of business. The name of Beuys's performance piece arises from a village in Spanish Catalonia, situated at the foot of a holy mountain: Montserrat. It was precisely in this humble hamlet, not far from the modern metropolis of Barcelona, that the future St. Ignatius of Loyola was to spend a long time in penitence, undergoing mystical experiences. It was also here that Ignatius was to begin (in 1523) to write a highly influential manual of applied mysticism, now called *The Spiritual Exercises*. Loyola was led to critical self-contemplation and intensive religious introspection because of his recent serious war injuries. Hence we find one excellent reason for Beuys's strictly autobiographical sense of identification with "Manresa," a symbolic town that Beuys evidently viewed as the sixteenth-century counterpart to his own traumatizing, twentieth-century experiences as a combat flyer on the *Ostfront*.

On another, nonbiographical level, such a prototypical Beuysian *Aktion* is clearly a reenactment of one of those "emblematic or symbolic visuations" endorsed by Rudolf Steiner. During this, and all other such performances, Beuys's emotional and spiritual intensity can be explained by Steiner's conviction that "everything depends upon the concentration of the entire soul-life upon one visualization." The scenario for "Manresa," both as a series of written texts and as a group of photographs documenting Beuys's "eurythmic" activities, is extremely complex. Since the details have been scrupulously recorded else-

where,<sup>46</sup> we need not repeat them here. For this particular omission of certain occasional minutiae we also have the authority of Rudolf Steiner: *"The essential factor is not what is visualized; what is essential is the fact that the visualization liberates the soul from dependence on the physical."*

In any event, according to Steiner, the desired, liberating effect is produced "by the manner of the combining of the details," the selection of which, at least in this particular case, is apparently wholly a matter of strictly artistic choice. However that may be, here follows a partial transcription of the script for "Manresa." Readers are earnestly enjoined to take whatever meditative benefit from this they may:

It was 8 p.m. as the voice [Beuys's] from the tape recorder announced:

"Five elements in organically divided form.

Here speaks Fluxus/Fluxus

Here speaks Fluxus/Fluxus

Now element 2 has climbed up to element 1

Now element 1 has climbed down to element 2 . . ."

[repeat; repeat, etc.]

[New litany:]

"n is the point of intersection of three rays

one sculpture

two potential arithmetic

or also one and two integrated

and element 3

corners of fat/corners of fat

filter corners of fat

corners of felt

---

## BROWNROOMS

Good day, where are you going?

Thorvaldsen Museum

---

Now element 2 has climbed up to element 1

Now element 1 has climbed down to element 2

. . ." [repeat; repeat, etc.]

---

[New litany:]

"n is the point of intersection of three rays

one sculpture

two potential arithmetic

or also one and two integrated

and element 3

. . ." [repeat all of above, until:]

"In = here speaks, etc.

a = now is, etc.

a/1 = half of a

x = n is, etc.

v = corner of fat, etc.

vu = Good day, etc.

y = up to you, etc."

[Then repeats all of the above until:]

"MANRESA. I fly to you

n is the intersection of three rays, should not be perceived as infinity, but as possibility.

1 is sculpture = 2 potentially (potency) arithmetical, or both.

Necessary so that everything 'works' is the presence of Element 3.

---

The transformation of corners of fat to corners of felt occurs over

Filter-corners of fat/corners of felt leads directly to the

Brownrooms. A possible brownroom is Thorvaldsen Museum and from here: MANRESA.

The room is painted totally black. In the background is the halved felt Cross (gray). Every five minutes the lights go out for 1 minute.

The spear is suitable in front of the Cross

The plate with the terra cotta—Man on a Cross—is led to the point.

On the back a felt sun on cardboard.

26 pneumatic pumps with fat pressed into the opening of the pump that is sprayed onto the wall—it remains hanging there—drops slowly on the floor.

A bird on a pole flutters its wings.

Block of felt will be lead against the point of intersection

. . . [constantly repeated until the end]"

In "Manresa," as in nearly all the other of Beuys's many *Aktionen*, it is again just as Steiner recommended: "certain sentences, formulae, and even single words, upon which to meditate," had been provided by Beuys for the meditative enlightenment of his select audience. And, thanks to the attentions of Beuys's disciples, most of these ritualistic sentences, formulae and mantra-like "single words" have been preserved, reading like ancient gnostic texts on crumbling papyrus.

## **The Heated Historical Evolution of Steiner's Cosmos**

Apparently, then, such Steinerian ideas represent the "physical" basis of Beuys's enigmatic performance pieces. They are the concrete manifestations of the polarized schemes of Beuys's theory of social sculpture, and thus account for his "emblematic or symbolic visualizations." Thus, some mention must be made



here of Steiner's frequently bizarre theories of the "historical" evolution of the complicated Anthroposophical cosmos.<sup>47</sup>

According to Steiner, "in the beginning," there was no earth, no sun, no solar system, no stars, meteors, or comets as we think of these astronomical entities. Instead, the macrocosm consisted of undifferentiated "essences," existing in stages of "spiritual warmth." To this stage of prehistorical macrocosmic *Ur*-evolution, Steiner gave the name *Saturn*. Tension, caused by rotation, led eventually to a denser cosmic "embodiment": *Sun*. Tension further increased, leading to the "liquid" embodiment—*Earth*—in which matter "fell," thus becoming "abnormally" hard or gross. As it turns out, these, and all the other planetary embodiments (*Jupiter*, *Venus*, *Vulcan*, and so forth) are but convenient fictions, as Steiner himself confessed:

We speak here of the celestial bodies, planets, and of their names in exactly the way as was the custom of a more Ancient Science [largely known to theosophists]. What is meant [only] becomes clear from the context. . . . Only someone who has traced back—with the penetration of the supersensible Primeval Past—is capable of recognizing the connection between the present-day planets and their ancestors.<sup>48</sup>

Consistent within the Steinerian scheme is the constant factor of "temperature changes," the single factor that characterizes all of those physical-spiritual "embodiments." Steiner, as had been stated in the *Lebensgang*, reckoned himself to possess a complete command of "the Mechanical Theory of Heat (Theory of Thermodynamics)." According to the Austrian seer's pseudoscientific theories, with each state of increasing condensation and decreasing warmth—conditions in themselves symbolic of progressions from gaseous, to liquid, thence to solid states of being—a harder state of matter accompanies an ascent of consciousness. Conversely, each "hardening" parallels a descent from pure spirit. Concomitantly with such hardenings-descents, light, nutrition, excretion, and smell begin to develop within the evolutionary process of Steiner's cosmos. Further internal complications involve certain "recapitulations," comprising certain inner "differentiations" and even more "respiritualizations."

During one of these differentiations there occurred the "Lemurian Epoch." During this period the "water" (here set off by quotation-marks, since this is very probably not H<sub>2</sub>O) of "Moon" (*Mondwasser*) solidifies into "Earth" (ours this time, we think). At this crucial point the continent of Lemuria congeals somewhere between Sri Lanka and the Malagasy Republic. All told, the Lemurian Epoch was not a very nice time because the first ideas of good and evil then came into being. Such baleful notions led, as they must, to an earth catastrophe, an even worse time, characterized by storms and earthquakes. In the event, the Lemurians—"souls standing at the stage midway between the realm of human and animal souls"—fled from the cataclysmic uproar, seeking

refuge in “the earth-region existing at that time, situated between modern Europe, Africa, and America, which is called ‘*Atlantis*’ by Spiritual Science.”<sup>49</sup> This convenient refuge lasted for around a million years until finally Atlantis sank beneath the ocean in the tenth millenium B.C. But then, quite a while later, in the middle of the “Fifth Post-Atlantean Period,” Christ—the archetypal “I” or “Sun-Being”—descended to earth. This epiphany marks the redemptive turning point of the still-evolving solar system.

Just as with his fanciful statements about Earth, Moon, and Saturn, Steiner also tacitly acknowledged that his notions of history (i.e., periods marked by the physical appearance of men—or something rather like them) probably had a similar fanciful basis. If such “facts” were not, after all, the creatures of his imagination then, he says, they came from that well-known source of ancient wisdom, the “Akasha Chronicle.” Unfortunately (like so many sources of modern-day occult wisdom), states Steiner, this particular “historical” incunabulum remains accessible only to “initiates”:

By means of ordinary history, man can learn only a small part of what humanity experienced in pre-history. Historical documents shed light on but a few millennia. . . . [Nevertheless] everything which comes into being in time has its origin in the eternal. But the eternal is not accessible to sensory perception. Nevertheless, the ways to the perception of the eternal are open for man. He can develop forces dormant in him so that he can recognize the eternal. It is a fact that [truly occultist] history is [always] written in other characters than is ordinary history. In Gnosis and in Theosophy it is called the “Akasha Chronicle.” Only a faint conception of this chronicle can be given in our language since our language [only] corresponds to the world of the senses. . . .

Several chapters from the Akasha Chronicle will be given [which] described what took place when the so-called *Atlantean* Continent still existed between American and Europe. This part of our earth’s surface was once land. Today, this forms the floor of the Atlantic Ocean . . . once a continent, that for about a million years . . . was the scene of a civilization which, to be sure, was quite different from our modern ones. . . . The last remnants of this continent sank in the tenth millennium B.C. . . . The aim here is to record some details concerning [Atlantean] spiritual character and the inner nature of the conditions under which they lived. . . . What is described here, however, did not take place only on the continent now covered by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, but also in the neighboring regions of what today is Asia, Africa, Europe and America. What took place in these regions later all developed from this earlier civilization.

After informing us that everything had its historical roots in “Atlantis,” Steiner gives us the core idea of all such occult “knowledge”: its sources (or proofs) remain forever hidden—“*occulta*”—to the uninitiated:

Today I am still obliged to remain silent about the sources of the information given here. One who knows any thing at all about such sources will understand why this has to be. . . . How much of the knowledge hidden within the Theosophical Movement may gradually be communicated, that depends entirely upon the attitude of our contemporaries.<sup>50</sup>



In short, the only "fact" demonstrated by this account is that, for true believers, occult assertions need not be in any way credible. For them, such assertions need merely be, as Geoffrey Ahern described them, "non-spatial, non-temporal, beyond language and ineffable, paradoxical, sublime and joyful."

In 1977 Joseph Beuys voiced another version of his unique social theory of sculpture. On its surface, this affirmation seems similarly "non-spatial, non-temporal, sublime and paradoxical." Regardless of its apparently esoteric stylistic characteristics, especially prominent in Beuys's statement are the dualistic and Steinerian "totalized" evolutionary principles, expressed by Beuys (in typically Anthroposophical terms) as representing dialectical processes of "solidification" and "liquidification." As Beuys put it, his strange theory (decidedly unique in the history of art) is truly comprehensive. Moreover,

There are two different concepts in my Sculptural Theory: Sculpture and Plastic [*Skulptur und plastik*]. "Sculpture" would correspond to the German word "*Bildhauerei*" [a term specifically suggesting a process of reduction, like carving], and "Plastic" would then correspond to organic images from inside. . . . In contrast to the *bildhauerischen Element*, when I find a bone, one would say that it has really been formed out of fluid processes, which are then solidified. . . . Everything, which later becomes hardened in human physiology, thus originates out of the *Flüssigkeitsprozess*, and is also very clearly followed back: embryology. . . . And, little by little, it becomes hard, out of a fluid, common, movement-process, out of an *evolutionären Grundprinzip*, which [in turn] means *Bewegung*. . . . That is why I have also taken fat, because it is lighter, more mobile; in other words, because it tends towards fluidness. Especially now, what interests me is fluid, like oil, which hardens, and is then more or less firm.

All this has a function within this Theory; that is why I did not intentionally take fat, not because it looks so awful, but I took it because I wanted to make something clear about this matter: how it reacts within the whole Theory. . . . The *totalisierten Kunstbegriff*, that is the principle that I wanted to express with this material, a material which, in the end, refers to EVERYTHING, to ALL forms in the world. And not only to artistic forms, but also to social forms, or legal forms, or to economic forms, or also to agricultural problems, or also to other formal and educational problems. ALL questions of Man can only be a question of Form, and that is the totalized concept of Art. It refers principally to every man's possibilities to be a creative being and to the question of the social totality [*des sozialen Ganzen*].<sup>51</sup>

We may now analyze this curious statement, summing up the totality of Beuys's artistic ambitions, finding in it certain interesting parallels with Steiner's equally ambitious Anthroposophical prescriptions. Just like Steiner's, Beuys's cosmology curiously arises from fluid processes, which are then solidified. Although Beuys wisely chose to eschew Steiner's pseudoastronomical terminology, nevertheless he certainly kept a firm grasp upon all the physical "facts" of the Anthroposophical evolutionary cosmology. The common ground between the two, an Austrian occultist and a German artist, lies in their unique appraisals of the governing laws of physics. By their lights, the rules of the "sense world" are postulated upon: (1) evolutionary cycles of ever-increasing "coldness" or



“condensation”; (2) the reverse cycle of “warmth,” leading to “liquidification”; (3) these endlessly repeatable cycles are in turn figured by an array of generic gases, liquids, solids (and so forth); (4) according to this transmutative scheme, any particular “real” substances (i.e., any object partaking of the deceptive “sense-world”) may conveniently serve to embody the transcendental, essentially symbolic concept lying behind (or “spiritually above”) its particular, mundane, and transient manifestation.

Therefore, by reference to Steiner’s gnostic gospels, we can now even begin to perceive the real—Anthroposophical and thus highly moralized—occult significance of Joseph Beuys’s physical materials, apparently arrived at through a process of *völkische* serendipity. Fat and felt, rather than just being “awful,” are instead highly charged with profound symbolic meanings. The key to this higher significance lies in their very ability to be transformed. As Steiner made clear, with condensation and solidification (or “specialization”), the first ideas of good and evil had appeared in the universe. Thus, by manipulating his materials, in effect reversing the process—thus “restoring” these materials to the primordial state of that “water of the moon”—in the same way, the modern artist-shaman can restore the “soul-faculties” of his witness-audience. The real function, the real purpose behind all this transformation is homeopathic magic.

By means of Beuys’s “symbolic visualizations,” the enraptured testators are led to that enviable, primordial state of “spiritual health” and “cosmic consciousness.” We, in turn, can call this reversal to an “*Urwesens*” (primeval state of being) either Lemurian or prelapsarian, in which case it becomes the bucolic state before the Anthroposophical “fall of matter.” In the overall sense, therefore, as Steiner himself had proclaimed: “*The essential factor is not WHAT is visualized: what is essential is the fact that the visualization liberates the soul from dependence on the physical.*” Since Beuys had read Steiner’s books giving instruction in “spiritual science” (among other topics), it behooves us to see how Steiner explained his overall purposes to his readers. At the beginning of his 1904 treatise *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?* (“How One Gains Knowledge of the Higher Worlds”), Steiner makes perfectly clear that his readers are embarking upon the development of “occult powers”:

Mystics, Gnostics, Theosophists—all speak of a world of soul and spirit which, for them, is just as real as the world we see with our physical eyes and touch with our physical hands. [This causes the reader to believe that:] I, too, can learn, if I develop within myself certain powers which today still slumber within me. There remains only one question: *how* to set to work to develop such faculties. . . . *Such a training is called occult (esoteric) training, and the instruction received therefrom is called occult (esoteric) teaching, or spiritual science.* . . . The secret of initiation can only be understood by those who have, to a certain degree, experienced this initiation into the higher knowledge of existence. . . . Just as all can learn to write, who choose the correct method, so too can all who seek the right way become esoteric students—and even teachers.<sup>52</sup>

The student, and the teacher, of "occult spiritual science" is selfless, inner-directed, and shuns the temptations of worldly possessions and power:

In all spiritual science there is a fundamental principle which . . . should be impressed on the student in very form of esoteric training. It runs as follows: *All knowledge pursued merely for the enrichment of personal learning and the accumulation of personal treasure leads you away from the path; but all knowledge pursued for growth to ripeness within the process of human ennoblement and cosmic development brings you a step forward.* This law must be strictly observed, and no student is genuine until he has adopted it as a guide for his whole life. *Every idea which does not become your ideal slays a force in your soul; every idea which becomes your ideal creates within you life-forces.*<sup>53</sup>

As was noted, Beuys greatly cherished his role as a teacher; and we may assume that he approached this role exactly according to the prescriptions laid down by Steiner:

No teacher of the spiritual life wishes to establish a mastery over other persons. . . . Indeed, none respect and cherish human independence more than the spiritually experienced. . . . [Thus] adapt each one of your actions, and frame each one of your words in such a way that you infringe upon no one's free-will. The recognition that all true teachers of the spiritual life are permeated through and through with this principle will convince all that they need sacrifice none of their independence.<sup>54</sup>

We must now follow up these observations with a detailed look at the career and works of Joseph Beuys. Like Rudolf Steiner, Beuys had his own colorful *Lebensgang* (life course)—even though he chose instead to call his a *Lebenslauf*. Such slight shifts of terminology aside, and however different their approaches might be, it appears that the spiritual goals of Beuys and Steiner were always the same.





## Beuys's Anthroposophical Imagery

### The *Ur*-Evolution of Joseph Beuys

The life course (*Lebenslauf*) of Joseph Beuys formed an essential component of his primary opus—himself.<sup>1</sup> Beuys was an only child, born in 1921 in Kleve (Cleves), a provincial Rhineland town situated on a plain adjacent to the Dutch border. As Beuys himself characterized his place of origin, Kleve was an anomalous Celtic-ethnic and strictly Catholic enclave tenuously attached to a Germanic and Protestant country. Beuys's devoutly Catholic and petit-bourgeois family was of local stock. His father, Jacob, himself a miller's son, ran a flour and fodder store in nearby Rinten (to which the Beuys family moved in 1930), while his mother, Johanna (*née* Hülsermann), mainly busied herself with the affairs of her own relatives. As Beuys described himself, he (like Steiner) was a rather lonely, independent, and self-absorbed child: "My relationship with my parents could not be described as close. I had to look after myself from an early age. Times were hard then [that is, before the *Hitlerzeit*] and they had an incredibly oppressive and threatening effect on me as a child. But I had a very close relationship to the Lower Rhine landscape and to Kleve."<sup>2</sup> Beuys (again like Steiner) had a strict Catholic upbringing and demonstrated a precocious interest in natural history, even building a makeshift home laboratory. This pseudoscientific fascination developed out of elaborate, mythic games he enacted as a child between 1925 and 1933, and these diversions he later acknowledged to be the basis of his much later *Aktionen*:

I can remember that, for years, I behaved like a shepherd, with a shepherd's crook in my hand and an imaginary herd around me. Then came the interest in plants and botany, an interest which has stayed with me all my life. It started as a kind of cataloguing of everything that grew in that area, all noted in exercise-books. Our games became more elaborate. We would go off hunting for anything we could find, then we'd build tents from rags and bits of material so we could show off our collections. There was everything—from beetles, mice, rats, frogs, fish and flies—to old farmyard machines, or anything else technical we could get our hands on.

Then we had our underground spaces too: dens and caves in a labyrinth we tunnelled under the earth.<sup>3</sup>

In the mind of Beuys the boy, older men, serving as role models, and impressive bits of big machinery occupied an equally important place:

There were, among our neighbors, certain men whom one could look upon as models. Johannes Sanders, for example, who had a great influence on me, owned a big laundry near my parents' house; bombed during the war, it therefore no longer exists. This laundry was a dark building with huge chimneys. Sanders himself was a progressive spirit who regularly experimented with all sorts of equipment. There was always interesting equipment at his place, such as boilers and heating fixtures, ironing machines and centrifuges with enormous flywheels. As a youngster [of four or five], all this naturally fascinated me; it was fantastic and grotesque at the same time. . . . All of this occurred in Kleve between 1925 and 1933.<sup>4</sup>

As told in the *Lebenslauf*, however, the period between 1921 and 1933, the year of Hitler's ascension to power, acquires a strange, dreamlike character. A literal transcription conveys the curious flavor of this surrealistic curriculum vitae:

- 1921: Kleve exhibition of a wound held together with an adhesive bandage
- 1922: Exhibition at Rindern dairy near Kleve
- 1923: Exhibition of moustache cup (contents: coffee with egg)
- 1924: Kleve public exhibition of heathen children
- 1925: Kleve documentation: "Beuys as exhibitor"
- 1926: Kleve exhibition of a stag leader (*Hirschführer*)
- 1927: Kleve exhibition of radiation (*Ausstrahlung*)
- 1928: Kleve first exhibition of the excavation of a trench  
Kleve exhibition to explain the differences between loamy sand and sandy loam
- 1929: Exhibition at the grave of Genghis Khan
- 1930: Donsbruggen exhibition of heather together with medicinal herbs
- 1931: Kleve connecting exhibition  
Kleve exhibition of connections
- 1933: Kleve exhibition underground (digging) parallel to the ground

When Beuys was twelve, in 1933, the Nazis came to power and, as already noted, Beuys remembered that in Kleve "everyone went to Church, and everybody went to the Hitler Youth." This included Beuys, who said of his incorporation into the eager ranks of the *Hitler Jugend*, "I had no scruples about it. . . . The situation was ideal for young people to live a full life [*Ideal war, um sich auszuleben*]. There's no question but that we were manipulated. O.K., so one stood in the ranks and files and wore a uniform but, otherwise, we felt ourselves to be quite free and independent [*unabhängig*]."<sup>5</sup> At this time Beuys was also enthusiastically responding to the revised curriculum of the Third Reich which, as mentioned above, placed a heavy *völkische* emphasis on blood and soil, upon

the *Ahnenerbe* of Nordic folklore and mythology, and on the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or pseudosciences, which propounded a nearly clairvoyant perception of the secret workings of nature. Beuys, moreover, saw such a curriculum as representing a positive alternative to traditional European humanistic values, the kind that Worringer and Wölfflin associated with the sub-Alpine regions. Interestingly, the formative years, 1933–40, do not at all figure in Beuys's schematic *Lebenslauf*. Besides ignoring the details of the officially imposed *Hitlerzeit* curriculum examined in the preceding chapter, Beuys's German biographers only tell us that, during this critical period, "Beuys discovered his interest in Nordic history and mythology, less because it furthered the spirit of the times than out of an aversion for his one-sided humanistic education," previous to 1933. As they continue, after that crucial date,

Beuys's interests were many-sided, ranging from the stories of Hanns Heinz Ewers to Kierkegaard, from Richard Wagner to the impressionist [*sic*] piano pieces of Eric Satie and Richard Strauss. The polemic between classical and Romantic literature had an especially important place in Beuys's studies, as did Schiller and Goethe, Hölderin and Novalis, as well as the Nordic element [represented] by Edvard Munch and Knut Hamsun.<sup>6</sup>

In 1940, at the age of nineteen, having graduated from the Hindenburg Secondary School in Kleve, Beuys volunteered for military service, entering the Luftwaffe as an enlisted man. Before taking this momentous step, however, he had at first briefly toyed with the idea of taking up some premedical coursework, with the aim of perhaps becoming a pediatrician (*Kinderarzt*); however, by his own admission, he did not feel particularly committed: "It was difficult for me to commit myself in any way; besides the goal of becoming a pediatrician was never anything concrete. This idea was only a manifestation of my strong interest in science and technology—as was my decision to join the Luftwaffe."<sup>7</sup>

First trained as a radio operator, Beuys eventually qualified as an NCO pilot. Flying a Stuka dive-bomber, he was injured five times in the line of duty, thus qualifying for the Gold Wound Badge (*Goldene Verwundetenabzeichen*). He was stationed throughout Europe during his five emotionally and physically demanding years of active wartime duty: in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Italy, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and, above all, southern Russia. In the winter of 1942/43 there occurred the fundamental event underlying the future Beuys myth. Flying in a dense snowstorm in the Crimea after having been struck by groundfire, pilot Beuys's altimeter failed to function and he crashed into the ground. As a result, he suffered serious head injuries, being rendered completely unconscious for an indeterminate period, between eight to twelve days. According to the myth, Beuys was rescued by nomadic Tatars, an ethnic minority persecuted by the Soviets, hence made sympathetic to the German enemies of the Stalinist regime.



As Beuys told this harrowing tale years later to Caroline Tisdall,

Had it not been for the Tatars, I would not be alive today. They were the nomads of the Crimea, in what was then no-man's land between the Russian and German fronts. . . . Their nomadic ways attracted me of course, although by that time their movements had been restricted. Yet it was they who had discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. *I was still unconscious then, and only came around completely after twelve days or so and, by then, I was back in a German field hospital.* . . . [When I hit the ground,] I must have shot through the wind-screen, since it flew back at the same time as the plane hit the ground; that saved me, though I had [sustained] bad skull and jaw injuries. Then the tail [of the plane] flipped over, and I was completely buried in the snow. That's how the Tatars found me. I remember voices saying "*Voda*" (water), and then [I perceived] the felt of their tents, and the dense pungent smell of cheeses, fat and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it to regenerate warmth. and wrapped it in felt, as insulator to keep the warmth in.<sup>8</sup>

During his recuperation from this injury in 1943, Beuys obtained an education leave to study at the University of Pozen (now in Poland). His brief exposure there to a structured curriculum in the Germanic "*Naturwissenschaften*" (we have already seen what passed for "natural-scientific" instruction during the *Hitlerzeit*) definitely turned Beuys away from further academic pursuits of this kind, thus leaving him open to the kind of pseudoscience advocated by Rudolf Steiner. As Beuys recalled his brief sojourn in the university environment,

I experienced it as a vivid shock, in the middle of a lecture by a professor, who had spent his whole life pondering a couple of fuzzy images of single cells, somewhere between plant and animal structure. It gave me such a fright that I said: "No, that's not the idea of science." I'm still haunted by the image of those little amoebae on that blackboard.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, the mention of the traumatic war years in the *Lebenslauf* is schematic and abstract:

- 1940: Pozen exhibition of an arsenal (together with Heinz Sielmann, Hermann Ulrich Asemisen, and Eduard Spranger)  
Exhibition at Erfurt-Bindersleben Airport  
Exhibition at Erfurt-Nord Airport
- 1942: Sevastopol exhibition of my friend  
Sevastopol exhibition during the capture of a JU-87
- 1943: Oranienburg interim exhibition (together with Fritz Rolf Rothenburg and Heinz Sielmann)
- 1945: Kleve exhibition of cold

In the spring of 1945, Joseph Beuys was captured by the British in Cuxhaven. After spending nine onerous months as a POW, he was eventually returned home to recuperate ("Kleve exhibition of cold"). Summing up all these traumatic experiences, Beuys said that for him the war had had a particular meaning:

"It was a totally alienating and ignoble struggle of brute force and vested interests."<sup>10</sup> In 1946, Beuys the civilian joined the informally organized Kleve Artists' Union, to which he was to feel a sentimental attachment for the rest of his life. The following year, aged twenty-six, he was finally exposed to an organized education in the visual arts when he matriculated into the Düsseldorf Academy of Art (*Staatliche Kunstakademie*), with which he was to be formally associated for most of his remaining years. In 1949, he was accepted into the class of Ewald Mataré, a sculptor notorious for his mystical belief in the unity of all creation, who also (perhaps more usefully) emphasized to his students the craft- and handwork character of art.<sup>11</sup> Beuys soon became the master pupil of the otherworldly Mataré. At the age of thirty Beuys terminated his formal education at the Düsseldorf Academy, although he continued to work upon the school's premises. There, he executed occasional work for private patrons, including the van der Grinten brothers, who were to prove an important source of moral and financial support in years to come.

In 1961, upon the unanimous decision of the school faculty, Joseph Beuys, aged forty, was appointed Professor of Monumental Sculpture—*Professor für Bildhauerei*—at the Düsseldorf Academy. Four years later, he had his first one-man show at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf. Beginning in 1968, Beuys's increasingly strident "political" manifestations led his colleagues in the Düsseldorf Academy to try to have him dismissed from his professorial post.<sup>12</sup> These efforts were to continue through the seventies and were given wide publicity. For our present purposes it is sufficient to observe that the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum, founded by Beuys in mid-1971, is recognized by Beuys's German biographers to have "developed a comprehensive socio-political concept structured [*aufbaut*] upon the three-structure [i.e., state, economy, and intellectual coexistence] movement of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy."<sup>13</sup> Beuys pursued such extracurricular activities until he died early in 1986.

In fact, Beuys himself acknowledged Steiner as the direct source of his wideranging conceptions of free democratic socialism. By his accounting, it was specifically

this teaching of the three-structure social organism [*Lehre des dreigliedrigen sozialen Organismus*], which was stated for the first time in an organic form, referring to the essence of man [*des Wesen des Menschen*], in [the published works of] Rudolf Steiner. Here the causes were clearly elucidated on all sides, so that one had the impression that it concerned an organism that is in the position to perform those things which must be performed in the future—*die in der Zukunft geleistet werden müssen*.<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, the strictly Steinerian significance of Beuys's "political" activism will be properly developed in the following chapter.



## The Artistic Evolution of Joseph Beuys

The early postwar years, between 1949 and 1952, saw Beuys's first decisive creations in the plastic arts. By means of an elementary iconographic analysis of certain works from this formative period, one can easily trace the first steps of Beuys's evolving process of spiritual initiation, a process developed strictly according to orthodox Steinerian evolutionist dictates. Such analysis is essential for an understanding of the latent meanings of much later works, in which the original—Anthroposophical, for the most part—sources had become somewhat better hidden. The inscribed titles of these early works best reveal their true sources in Rudolf Steiner's copious writings.

A case in point is a work of 1949—*Sculpture Body (Crystal)* which little resembles the amorphous blobs characteristic of Beuys's later oeuvre. Nevertheless, even though this is a relatively straightforward example of what Beuys called an "illustration," it has truly cosmic implications. It is an illustration of Rudolf Steiner's thoughts about all such primordial crystalline structures. For the devout Anthroposophist, crystals are, in themselves, paradigms of the basic sources and transformations of body. According to this line of thinking, body is expressive of life and force and thought—all latent factors pointing directly back to Steiner's obsession with the migration of souls. As Steiner explained,

The same materials and forces that are present in the mineral kingdom are so combined in the human body that thought can manifest itself by means of this combination. This mineral structure, built up in accordance with its function, will be called, in the pages following, *physical body of man*. . . . Through propagation and growth, what is living differentiates itself from the lifeless mineral. Life gives rise to life by means of the germ. Descendent follows forefather, from one living generation to another. The forces through which a mineral originates are directed upon the substance of which it is composed. [As a prime example,] a quartz crystal is formed through the forces inherent in the silicon and oxygen that are combined in the crystal. . . . How a living being develops depends on what father and mother it has sprung from—in other words, on the species to which it belongs. The materials it is composed of are constantly changing, but the species remains constant during life. . . . The forces that determine species will be here called *life-force*. . . . Mineral forces express themselves in crystals, and the formative life-force expresses itself in the species, or [specific] forms of plant and animal life.<sup>15</sup>

After presenting his uniquely generational theory of life, all originating in humble but beautiful crystalline structures, Steiner now proceeds to describe how the "life-force" represented by the archetypal crystal form is, in effect, "undying," even when its outer form (that perceivable in the sense world) is smashed:

When a crystal is smashed, it is its form alone that is destroyed. This can, however, be reconstructed somewhere else, independently of the form that was destroyed. . . . [To sum



up,] the form must pass over from progenitor to offspring in the case of the souls of the beings in the realm of form; procreation takes place as the result of the transmission of the form. The form alone—nothing else—is contained in the seed.<sup>16</sup>

From this point of view, therefore, Beuys's sculpted *Crystal* may be taken to represent a concrete, but still highly symbolic sign of the undying, basic life force, that which can "be reconstructed [perhaps by Joseph Beuys] somewhere else, independent of the [original, perishable] form." In this case, it is perhaps ironic that Beuys's *Crystal*, made of glued cardboard, is no longer physically present among us. It may instead be waiting to "be reconstructed somewhere else."

Another, perhaps more characteristically amorphous, early work by Beuys is a *Grave-Marker*, cast in lead in 1949. Compositionally speaking, this is a diptych: above there is displayed a curious variant of a Greek cross, that is, a conventionalized form having four short arms with cross members lying over the extremities; below this lies a recumbent, emaciated corpse. In effect, the amorphous cross placed in the superior position appears to be an ethereal vision—something like a thought balloon—floating above the dissected body of a dead man. This arrangement recalls in general terms the familiar hermetic maxim: "that which is above is like that which is below." However, the specific underlying meaning of Beuys's two-part image is made perfectly clear by the title of a similarly composed thought-balloon drawing of 1951: *Dead Man—Astral Figure*. Again, the iconography of both works was drawn directly from Steiner's published works, revealing in this case how these two images—both incorporating astral figures in combination with representations of the deceased, those "gone through the gate of death"—function as precocious witnesses to Beuys's evolving powers of clairvoyance. Steiner explains in some detail how this unique process works:

The physical body as such is present when the human being has gone through the gate of death. The corpse remaining is the real physical body, the body freed from all the higher members of man's nature. . . . In earthly existence, the body of man would be a perpetual corpse were it not permeated by the etheric body that, throughout life, fights against the decay of the physical body. The ether, or life-body, is the second member of man's being.

Of man's *astral-body* [that is, the astral-figure], it is possible to have a much clearer idea. It is the third member of his constitution. . . . Anatomists and physiologists investigate man's physical body only. But, in this physical body, there is something—the blood and nerves—that is much more closely related to man's consciousness. This consciousness is aware of his happiness, suffering and joy, all of which take effect in the space filled by his physical body. The bearer of these experiences is invisible to the individual concerned, but it is visible to clairvoyant-consciousness as a *luminous cloud*. *This is the astral-body*. . . . It displays the greatest possible variety of colors and changing forms, like a cloud floating by with ever-changing movement. . . . The ego-bearer, the fourth member of man's nature, is seen as a kind of oval form. . . . When, but not until, the clairvoyant can also suggest away a man's astral-body, he is able to perceive the ego-bearer. . . . The ego begins first of all to work upon

the astral body. . . . The inner work upon oneself is known in occultism as purification, cleansing or catharsis.<sup>17</sup>

Given this detailed explanation, the iconographic identity of the two parts of Beuys's diptychs becomes apparent: below there is represented "the decay of the physical body" while above one finds "the astral-body," experiencing "purification, cleansing or catharsis," directly as the process "is known in occultism."

As a Christian mystic, Steiner also imposed a heavy cargo of symbolism upon a cross, that strange motif that floats in the upper regions of Beuys's *Grave-Marker*, a motif that would, for instance, reappear much later in a complicated *Aktion* of 1966 called "Eurasia," which prominently displayed a truncated black cross. As we learn from Steiner, in both cases Beuys's motif is a magical "seal," that which "discloses infinite wisdom" and "raises the self to the holy mysteries of the world." As Steiner explained:

Here stands the Theosophical Rose-Cross. It rays forth to those [future] times in which religion and science will be reconciled. You can see how the whole world presents itself in such seals and, because the Magi and Initiates have put the whole Cosmos into them, they contain a mighty force. You can continually turn back on these seals and you will find that, by meditating upon them, they will disclose infinite wisdom. They can have a mighty influence on the soul because they have been created out of cosmic secrets. Hang them in a room where such things are to be discussed, as we have been doing here, discussions in which one raises one's self to the holy mysteries of the world, and they will prove enlivening and illuminating to the highest degree, although [ordinary] people will often not be aware of their effect. . . . *Signs of spiritual things belong where spiritual things are enacted and reach effectiveness.*<sup>18</sup>

In case we still had any lingering doubts that Joseph Beuys's "black cross" (particularly the one so prominently displayed in "Eurasia") had its ultimate locus classicus in Steiner's occult science, we need only read the following explanation by the Austrian guru:

After we have pondered on such thoughts and feelings for a time, we are to transform them into the following *symbolic visualization*. We visualize a black cross: let this be a symbol of the destroyed base-elements of instincts and passions. . . . Such a symbolic visualization should be called forth in the soul in the way illustrated above through a visualized memory-image. Such a visualization has a soul-awakening power—if we surrender ourselves to it in inward meditation. We must seek to exclude all other thoughts during meditation: only the characterized symbol is to hover in spirit before the soul as intensely as possible. . . . Especially effective are the meditations characterized here about the growth and decay of the plant, about the slumbering creative forces in the plant seed, about the forms of crystals.<sup>19</sup>

Even a reader wholly uninitiated into the Anthroposophical mysteries should have discerned by now that Beuys's performance pieces all dealt in some way with "growth and decay," as well as those myriad, "slumbering creative forces



in forms." In brief, with Steiner's writings in hand, mere intuition now becomes somewhat more enlightened art history. Yet another of Beuys's statements also bears the stamp of Steiner's thoughts. Beuys directly attributes one of his religious-symbolic ideas to the "Rösicrucian" Rudolf Steiner.

In reality [stated Beuys] the symbol of Christ is not the cross but the pentagram . . . the only figure which is both dynamic and can be drawn with a [single] line. All other geometric figures are more abstract—for example, the Jewish symbol [the Seal of Solomon], consisting of equilateral triangles placed inside each other, is a symbol of the [hermetic] dialectic: what is above is also below [*also was oben ist, ist auch unten*], or the symbol of the *Mikrokosmos und Makrokosmos*. All have dualistic principles, and are overcome by the pentagram. Thus the pentagram is a symbol of the dynamics of movement, [*Zeichen für Bewegungsdynamik*], and is thus the symbol of Christ. For this reason, [my] *Rosenkreuzer* have a pentagram in the form of five roses around the black cross, which indicates the edges of the pentagram. Perhaps a figure like Rudolf Steiner, when considered in a strictly cultural-historical context, and actually only be understood from the point of view of Rosicrucianism [*nur vom Rosenkreuzertum her verstehen lässt*].<sup>20</sup>

Once again we can cite the corresponding ideas in Steiner. In this particular case, Beuys is echoing a passage in which Steiner had stressed the profound occult significance that must be accorded to a given repertoire of symbols. In effect, they were exactly those particular motifs that had been recalled by Beuys: the triangle and the pentagram:

A familiar sign in Theosophical allegories [writes Steiner] is the so-called PENTAGRAM. Furthermore, you must know that in various religions a TRIANGLE, for instance, would mean the Higher Trinity, and the like. . . . Let us consider the PENTAGRAM. . . . To perceive it, clairvoyant methods are necessary. . . . The etheric body, like the Ocean, is flooded through by many currents, flowing in all directions. Among them are five main currents. . . . They form a PENTAGRAM [therefore] the occultist speaks of the PENTAGRAM as the figure of MAN. . . . From these brief considerations, we see how matters stand with regard to the real meaning of a symbol. *All signs and symbols that we meet in occultism direct us to such realities [:] they then are the means towards reaching cognition, or clairvoyance.* . . . There is no sense in thinking out contrived, arbitrary meanings for these signs. One must place them before one's inner eye, then *they lead us to Occult Realities*.<sup>21</sup>

As we can now perceive, Joseph Beuys doubtlessly had been following Steiner's "train of thought with great interest for many years." In fact, in 1945 and 1946, when he returned from the war, emotionally shattered and nearly destroyed in body, he "took up Steiner's writings" and "received a very strong impression"—strong enough to cause him to create an intensely charged, and mostly consistent, symbolic art form. Besides being based upon an often recognizable microcosmic repertoire of symbols—communicative signs that, although remaining essentially subverbal, still functioned like words—Beuys's performance pieces are also apparently unique inasmuch as they consistently hewed to a macrocos-



mic functional structure of supersensible clairvoyance. If we believe Steiner, all the component parts, those occult signs in Beuys's extensive symbolic repertoire, were specifically "the means towards reaching cognition, or clairvoyance."

In short, all those Steiner-derived occult signs served in concert to direct Beuys's audiences towards "such realities" as are embraced by an occultism of a very particular kind: Anthroposophy. As such, and very much according to the authoritative conclusions of Rudolf Steiner: "They all lead us to occult realities." With that injunction in mind, we now turn to consider the interesting case study of Joseph Beuys among the bees.

### Joseph Beuys's Apian-Anthroposophical Symbolism

Another characteristic and persistent motif that Beuys incorporated into his mythic repertoire—that is, as a concrete example of Steiner's ubiquitous "signs and symbols"—is the bee. Two examples will suffice to establish the early importance of this particular leitmotiv for Beuys: an etching from the suite called *The Physiology of Bees* (1952); and a small sculpture, in wood and wax, called *Queen Bee III*, also from 1952. Beuys charged the bee with great significance—particularly as represented by its most characteristic products, its "signs and symbols": wax, fat, and honey. As he affirmed:

The heat organism of the bee-colony [*Bienenstaat*] is, without a doubt, the essential element of the connection [I draw] between the wax and the fat and the bees. What had interested me about bees, or rather about their life-system, is the total heat organization of such an organism, and the sculpturally finished forms [*plastische Ausformungen*] within this organization. On the one hand, bees have this element of heat, which is a very strong fluid element and, on the other hand, they produce crystalline structures [*bilden sie Plastiken aus, die kristallin sind*]; they make regular geometric forms. Here we also find something of [my Social] Theory of Sculpture, as we do in [my] corners of fat, which also appear in a geometric context in certain situations. But the actual character of the existing heat is a fluid initial element, whereby the fat is affected by the heat and thus flows off. From this undefined element of motion, by way of a diminishing element of movement, there surfaces a form which appears in abstract, geometric configurations. This is practiced regularly by bees.<sup>22</sup>

Unmistakably, Beuys's fascination with bees—concretely expressed by his shamanistic manipulations of wax, fat, and honey—stems directly from Rudolf Steiner. The Austrian savant had said that "the whole beehive has a spiritual life that, in some ways, corresponds to life on *Saturn* at a lower stage." Overall, states, Steiner, "the bee is the symbol of the Spiritual Man who does not know mortality." For Steiner, as for Beuys, the key element is heat. As Beuys would have read in Steiner's texts, "the whole beehive develops a temperature compa-

rable to that of blood. . . . Thus, the occultist designates the bee as having been born out of warmth."<sup>23</sup>

Steiner believed that the humble little worker-bee evoked awesome occult powers, an idea he had developed at great length in a published lecture ("Ueber die Bienen") which he had originally delivered in 1923. According to familiar occultist strategies, besides being a "sign" of the ubiquitous "microcosm" of the esoteric tradition, Steiner here argues that even the miniscule bees are exponents of ancient wisdom:

The bees were held in the oldest times to be sacred animals. Why? They were held to be sacred animals because they actually showed, in their whole work, just what happens in Man himself. When one receives a small piece of bees-wax, he actually has a middle product between blood, muscles, and bones. It inwardly goes into man through the wax-stage [*Wachsstadium*]. The wax in this way does not yet become firm, but remains fluid until it can be led over into the blood, muscles, or bone-cells. Thus one actually has in wax that which one has in himself, considered as powers or energies [*Kräfte*]. When people in ancient times made bees-wax crosses, and then lit them, they thus actually saw in them a totally holy action: this wax which was burning there, we had gotten it from the bee-hive. It became solid there. When the fire melts this wax and it evaporates, then the wax comes to the same condition which it is in their own bodies. . . . [This act] led them to look upon bees as especially sacred animals because they prepared something which man must also continually prepare in himself.<sup>24</sup>

From the preceding, it now becomes obvious (as it apparently never has been to art critics and historians) that Beuys's artistic materials were not chosen for their intrinsic "awfulness" (a point Beuys had already conceded). Instead they were selected for their symbolic connotations; and all of his symbolism is today best explained in Rudolf Steiner's published texts.

For instance, in the case of apian-derived wax, fat, and honey, we now have their exact symbolic equivalents. Such antiesthetic materials represent occult powers or energies—*die Kräfte*. They point to those latent, thus literally occult, potentialities existing in all men, that which "man must also continually prepare in himself." Furthermore, we now have the concrete meaning behind Beuys's wood and wax fabricated rose cross appearing in the Action "Eurasia": "people in ancient time made bees-wax crosses [because] they thus actually saw in them a totally holy action." Steiner's further statements on bees also make clear their metaphorical relationships to Beuys's highly symbolic sculpture called *Crystal*, which we now find to be a simulation of the human microcosm. According to Steiner,

Worker-bees bring home that which they collect from plants, and work it into wax within their own bodies, and then they make these totally wonderful cell-constructions. But the blood-cells in the human head also make it. They go from the head into the entire body. . . . The blood which circulates in the body performs the same work that bees perform in the bee-hive. . . .



Thus, blood has the same power that worker-bees have. . . . If I could show you the cells of the bees, they would look like quartz crystals, only they are hollow. Quartz is not hollow. But, in form, they are the same. . . . The bee-cells in the bee-hives are hollow quartz crystals. . . . The bees fetch material from the flowers and make, through their own bodies, a reproduction of the quartz crystal. Therefore, there proceeds between the bees and flowers something similar to that which once proceeded outside—in the Microcosm. I mention these things so that you will see how necessary it is not merely to look at this totally miserable abstract—which is present in carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, etc.—but that it is necessary to observe the wonderful formation-process [*Gestaltungsprozesse*] manifested in the inward-intimate conditions of nature and natural proceedings.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly no entomologist could make any sense whatsoever of this apparent zoological aberration. Nevertheless, Joseph Beuys had drawn some valuable lessons from such colorful pseudoscience. Accordingly, he drew up for himself a complex repertoire of bee symbolism, a metaphorical menu obviously designed directly to “lead to Occult Realities,” just as Steiner had said it would. We have already seen Beuys fabricating “bees-wax crosses” just like the ones made by those “people in ancient times” described by Steiner. In this case, the visual-material vocabulary consists of wax, fat, and honey. On one level, these generally symbolize “total heat organization.” On another, higher (Anthroposophical) level, potential “crystalline structures” are represented. Through a diminution of movement—cooling—there come about those “totally wonderful,” “abstract, geometric configurations—practiced by bees,” as Steiner put it, evidently unaware that these miniscule apian artists may themselves have been inadvertently prefiguring the highly esteemed social theory of sculpture of the late modernist artistic vanguard.

On yet another higher and even more symbolic level of understanding, we have here a clean-cut microcosmic-macrocosmic configuration, with the industrious bees work revealing “just what happens in Man himself.” And that “what,” that apian end product alluded to by Steiner, is supposed to represent immortality, the goal of spiritual man and of nearly all brands of occult science.

Once again an unmistakable Steinerian bias is revealed in a 1978 statement by Beuys in which he announced that his *Queen Bee III* led directly up to his later work, even though

*Queen Bee III* only shows the [external, “sense-world”] formal characteristic of a bee. . . . What interested me was the general *warmth character*, which forms an important part of the Theory of Sculpture, even extending to social and political concepts. This warmth characteristic is to be found in honey, in wax, and even in the pollen and nectar gathered from plants. In mythology [i.e., ancient wisdom], honey was regarded as a spiritual substance and bees were godly. . . . This [belief] was widespread and influenced by the whole process of honey-production as [constituting] a link between earthly and heavenly levels. The influx of a substance from the whole environment—plants, minerals and sun—was the essence of the bee-cult. The allusion to socialism [is also apparent]. There you can see how many sculptures



of bees [function] as symbols of socialism . . . a socialist organism in which all parts function as a living body. . . . The whole builds a unity, which has to function perfectly, but in a humane, warm way, through principles of cooperation and brotherhood.<sup>26</sup>

One one level, the strictly Steinerian coloring of this statement is quite apparent: bees, according to (largely fictitious) ancient wisdom, produce "spiritual substances." These we already know to be honey, fat and wax, Beuysian substances par excellence. As in the Steinerian dialectic, Beuys's bees are in tune with, and partake of the whole divine pattern of creation: "plants, minerals and the sun." Accordingly, the historical basis of the Beuysian bee cult was founded long ago when already these industrious little creatures constituted "a link between the earthly and the heavenly levels." Nevertheless, in Beuys's statement we find a motif not previously encountered in Steiner's writings: bees as "symbols of socialism." For Beuys, bee life is an admirable, microcosmic model of unity, "a socialist organism in which all parts function as in a living body." However, as we shall shortly see, Steiner, in his role as political scientist, not pseudoscientific "entomologist," also recommended utopian social structures. Like Beuys's socialist castles sketched out in thin air, Steiner's utopian schemes were "humane and warm," and likewise all too optimistically postulated upon broadly conceived "principles of cooperation and brotherhood."

### Joseph Beuys's Anthroposophical Illustrations

Joseph Beuys has explained that some of his earlier works (before 1952) had essentially functioned as "illustrations." On the basis of what we have just learned, we would now strongly suspect that the Beuysian term "illustration" really refers to what the erudite art historian would rather call a series of "*ekphraseis*." As explained, an *ekphrasis* represents a nearly direct text-to-picture combination. Therefore, according to our analysis of the available evidence, Beuys's enigmatic *Aktionen* all represent imaginative attempts at the pictorialization of the contents of certain authoritative written texts. In this case, of course, the sacred texts were the writings of Rudolf Steiner, particularly those dealing with the evolutionary processes leading from chaos to order. A major purpose of Steiner's evolutionary process was to lead would-be spiritual man to that clairvoyantly perceived "higher plane," the inevitable goal of the occultist.

Speaking of these earlier attempts at "illustration," Beuys recalled that

I approached my early sculptural forms with the simple ideas of an illustrator. The formal aspect, which had been decisive in 1952, could understandably serve in the later 1950s as a guide to [deeper] interpretations, to confirm and experience a new [pseudo]scientific concept. At that time, I attempted to deal with the *Warmebegegriff* in sculpture. . . . It was never my

intention to do away with positivistic or materialistic concepts of knowledge; to the contrary, it can be shown that I even celebrate these things—however, I only celebrate them as a transitory situation in its sectoral existence. . . . [Man] must find these connections on a higher plane, after he has been, so to speak, liberated. . . . It was up to me to break off all the residues present in the subconscious, and to transfer a chaotically detached, orderly procedure into turbulence: the beginning of the new [order] always take place in chaos.<sup>27</sup>

Again the real, or largely Steinerian, significance informing Beuys's allogical logic is easily inferred. Bees, for instance, are "symbols of socialism" for the artist-shaman, but this is not socialism in a merely mundane (or remotely practicable) form. This replaces the ancient great chain of being, another expression of the micro/macrocosmic connections preexistent between man and God which remain imperceptible to us because we lack the "spiritual eyes" by which to perceive this nexus. As Beuys explains, his apian symbolism represented "a link between earthly and heavenly levels, the influx of a [spiritual] substance from the whole [i.e., micro/macrocosmic] environment." Such busy-bee socialism leads to urgent collective "thought-discipline," so stirring the creative activities of mankind at large as to make it a joyful participant in this magnificent "liberating process." This process the mere mortal will find when, like the "supersensible" clairvoyant, he suddenly perceives all those occult "connections on a higher plane."

Now we can turn to what Steiner has said about thought discipline as a liberating process. As expected, Steiner is again the source of Beuys's ideas. According to Steiner, men are moved to actions—that is, to the expression of freedom—through a mental action, represented or reenacted as a "mental picture." And, as has been already suggested here, Beuys's diverse *Aktionen* were, in effect, reenactments of Steiner's "mental pictures," or his "visualizations" (both functionally the same thing). In his *Philosophie der Freiheit* (1894), Steiner spoke of the "means of unprejudiced observation," through which

one has wrestled through to the recognition of the truth of the intuitive essence of thinking. . . . To see this, we have but to observe thinking with an open mind. The "I" is to be found within the thinking; the "ego-consciousness" arises through the traces which the activity of thinking engraves upon our general consciousness. . . . The "ego-consciousness" is built upon the human organization. Out of the latter flow our acts of will [i.e., "freedom, or *Freiheit*"]. . . . In any particular act of will, we must take into account the motive . . . a factor with the character of a concept of a mental picture. . . . Mental pictures become motives of will by affecting the human individual and determining him to action in a particular direction. But one and the same concept, or one and the same mental picture, affects different individuals differently. They stimulate different men to different *Aktionen*. . . . The general content of my mental pictures is itself conditioned by the sum total of those concepts which have, in the course of my individual life, come into contact with the precepts, that is, have become mental pictures. This sum, again, depends on my greater or lesser capacity for intuition [in effect, for clairvoyance].



As the Austrian seer concluded,

We must, therefore, distinguish: (1) the possible subjective dispositions which are capable of turning certain mental pictures and concepts into motives, and (2) the possible mental pictures and concepts which are in position to influence my characterological [i.e., innate] disposition so that an act of will results. For our moral life, the former represent the *driving force*, and the latter, its *aims*.<sup>28</sup>

Having discussed the use of mental pictures to attain intuition and, thus, freedom, Steiner now places these devices within that strictly social sphere—in effect, “the progress of civilization, or the moral evolution of mankind”—that had so interested Beuys:

One tries to understand the reason why a particular maxim of behavior should act as a motive in him. . . . At this level of morality, a man will try to find out the requirements of the moral life, and will let his actions be determined by the knowledge of them. Such requirements are: (1) the greatest possible good of mankind, purely for its own sake; (2) the progress of civilization, or the moral *evolution* of mankind towards ever-greater perfection; (3) the realization of individual moral aims grasped by pure intuition.<sup>29</sup>

Steiner concludes with another sweeping, utopian statement dealing with the relationship between the “free” man and the “state and society”:

The human individual is the source of all morality and the center of earthly life. State and society exist only because they have arisen as a necessary consequence of the life of individuals. That state and society should, in turn, react upon individual life is no more difficult to comprehend than the butting, which is the result of the presence of the horns of the bull, which [otherwise] becomes stunted through prolonged disuse. Similarly, the individual would become stunted if he led an isolated existence outside human society. Indeed, this is just why the social order arises: so that it may in turn react favorably upon the individual.<sup>30</sup>

We now return to consider the 1966 *Aktion* by Beuys called “Eurasia,” interpreting this much later, but still typical, Beuysian event in the light of Rudolf Steiner’s occultist dialectics. The striking details of this Action were reported by a Dane, Troels Andersen, as follows: “At first sight, Beuys seems like a cross between a clown and gangster. Nevertheless, as soon as he is in action, he is transformed. Absorbed in his enactments, he is intense and evocative. He employs very simple symbols. . . . The symbols are completely clear and they can all be translated.” At this point Anderson launches into a minute description of the bizarre pseudochoreography of Beuys’s performance piece:

The introductory motif was the “Division of the Cross.” Kneeling, Beuys slowly pushes two crosses lying on the floor toward a blackboard. On each cross is placed a watch with a set alarm device. On the board he draws a cross, erases half of it, and then writes under it “EURASIA.”



The rest of the piece is comprised of Beuys maneuvering along a drawn line a dead hare, whose legs and ears are lengthened with long, thin black wooden sticks. When Beuys puts the hare on his shoulder, the sticks touch the floor. From the wall Beuys goes to the blackboard, where he deposits the hare. On the way back, three things happen. He sprinkles white powder between the legs of the hare, places a thermometer in its mouth, and blows into a pipe. After this, he turns to the board with the half-cross and lets the rabbit smell with its ears, during which time he lets one of his feet, to which an iron plate is tied, hang over another plate on the floor. Every so often he stamps his foot on the plate.<sup>31</sup>

So much for the choreographic—or, more accurately, “eurythmic”—specifics of “Eurasia.” But what is its larger meaning? For Beuys, “Eurasia” overall had what must be reckoned a patently occult significance, specifically serving as a sign (mental picture) of the reconciliation of opposites (*coniunctio oppositorum*). Hence, in this sense Beuys’s “Eurasia” serves as the synonym of an exemplary occultist attempt at realizing the unity of all life. In the more specific or temporal sense, Beuys employs “Eurasia” as a metaphor of the current East-West ideological polarities, embracing further antithetical concepts of “Western man” and “Eastern man.” Following her many talks with Beuys, Caroline Tisdall (evidently unaware of its Steinerian basis) prepared this comprehensive evaluation of the significance of “Eurasia”:

EURASIA is the vast uninterrupted land-mass that stretches from China to the Atlantic, criss-crossed by peoples as well as migratory animals. *It means unity in diversity*. Beuys’ EURASIAN STAFF [which he continuously brandished like a magician’s wand] is the symbol of a future unity. It runs from East to West, then doubles back towards the East. In this way, Beuys proposes it as a conductor of energies, linking the Eastern capacity for transcendental thought with Western materialism, the idea being that, if the two abilities were united, the split between intuition and reason would be overcome. The DIVISION OF THE CROSS represents this split, successively perpetrated by the Roman Empire and the various institutionalized forms of Christianity, and finding contemporary expression in the rival political ideologies of East and West, and the divisions that result.<sup>32</sup>

What Tisdall failed to recognize is what Beuys’s stereotypical antithesis—of “Western man” contrasted to an intuitive “Eastern man,” both, stated the artist, “Metapher auf die grundsätzliche Ost-West-Polarität”—directly echoes ideas formulated by Rudolf Steiner in 1922:

Eastern Man has no sense of “proving.” Beholding, he experiences the content of his truths and knows them by this means. And what one knows, one does not “prove.” Western Man demands “proofs” at all times. Letting his thoughts run, he struggles with the content of his truths, starting with the external reflection; by this means, he interprets them. That which one interprets, however, one must “prove.” If Western Man frees the life of truth from his “proofs,” then Eastern Man will understand him. If, at the end of Western Man’s concern for proof, Eastern Man finds his unproven dreams of truth in a true awakening, then Western Man will salute him as a co-worker in the task of human advancement [*Menschenfortschritt*], as one who can accomplish that which he was not able to do himself.<sup>33</sup>

As we shall eventually see, Steiner was elsewhere to describe the supposedly historically based figure of a certain "Christ Initiate," who migrated long ago from West to East, bringing spiritual education to central Asia, thereby allowing the initiated "to experience the supersensory world." Having thus specifically situated the source of Beuys's East-West, Intuition-Rationality polemics in Steiner's writings, we can now hypothesize that "Eurasia" itself, as a "real" geographical entity, was also derived from yet another prominent Steinerian "sign and symbol." In this case, we believe, this fictive environment was, like a stage, meant to display the healing, or thaumaturgic, ministrations of a great, promised prophet—someone of Christ-like stature. We have seen how, in his basic text, *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, Steiner recounted that the postdiluvian Lemurians had fled in terror to that now-lost paradise called Atlantis, "situated between Europe, Africa, and America."

As may now be believed, for Beuys the new Atlantis was Eurasia, a mythical never-never-land, one "that stretches from China to the Atlantic." In this place, the new saviour—Beuys himself—will discharge his messiah-like mission of spiritual healing. Steiner states that (like Eurasia) Atlantis was the specific geographical setting for the first division of mankind into certain dichotomized, specifically rational versus intuitive, categories. As Steiner himself put it, "Evolution on Atlantis is the time of the actual separation of Mankind. . . . The division into waking and sleeping states had special consequences for the human being that appeared especially in Atlantean humanity." At this crucial juncture in Anthroposophical pseudohistory, men first came into contact with "corrupting" beings: "They increased the urge toward error in their soul," leading to that baleful "separation of the physical and life body . . . an obstacle to human evolution."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Steiner had also affirmed that the eventual resolution of the Atlantean problem would be the coming of an "exalted Being," through whom "an understanding of the Christ unfolded itself in human beings." Therefore, as Steiner had concluded,

They would be brought, by means of the described state of initiation, to a prophetic revelation of the Christ. . . . The leader of these spiritual beings became the higher ego of the above-described initiates and their adherents. . . . Their eyes were turned more toward earth phenomena than was the case with the other initiates. They laid the first foundations for what appeared later on among human beings as "Science" and "Art." . . . The gradual destruction of the Atlantean region, through terrestrial catastrophes of air and water, [caused] great migrations. For our present day, the most important of these went eastwards. What is now Europe, Asia, Africa [in short, Eurasia] became gradually colonized by the descendants of the Atlanteans.<sup>35</sup>

Should this exclusively Steiner-derived interpretation of the scenario of Beuys's Action called "Eurasia" prove acceptable, then we have further evidence testifying to the immense philosophical and spiritual distance that separates the inimitable performance art of Joseph Beuys from all those many other performance



works executed by his contemporaries during the 1960s and 1970s—even those by his colleagues in the short-lived but highly influential Fluxus movement. The basic issue is simply stated: to the best of our knowledge, no other performance artist has ever chosen to execute *ekphraseis* of the Steinerian liturgy.

### Joseph Beuys, an Anthroposophical Messiah

Joseph Beuys's messiah mimicry was, of course, notorious—and this infamous trait was certainly more blatant in works other than “Eurasia,” for instance, the *Aktion* “Celtic.”<sup>36</sup> Such sacrilegious role-playing was, in part, one of the reasons for Beuys's abrupt dismissal from the Düsseldorf Art Academy, whose director, Norbert Knicke, observed that his subordinate Beuys had outrageously fancied himself “a representative of suffering [*Vertreter im Leiden*]: he plays the Messiah; he wants to convert us, he wants to let the [Art] Academy take over the role of the Church—that is, for me, his Jesus fakery [*sein Jesu-Kitsch*].”<sup>37</sup> However, as Beuys explained, Christ is not just a “role”; instead, the Christian Saviour is a “principle”—not just a particular person, like, for instance, “Joseph Beuys.” Moreover, this all-unifying, essentially abstract, Christ principle, through a most curious kind of Beuysian intuitive reasoning, comes to stand for materialism.

Beuys explains this reasoning by first posing a rhetorical question:

How can man attain materialism? How can men be brought to the point where they are very strongly, so to speak, in contact with the earth, in contact with matter? That is an incarnational process: Materialism is—in this sense—a Christian method. Without Christ, there is no materialism. . . . Materialism is a technique for liberating oneself. . . . Then man awakes and stands as an individual and egoist, who only thinks of himself. . . . [Nevertheless,] one cannot condemn materialism. First one must see that materialism is an outstanding performance in humanity's development.<sup>38</sup>

We may ask how, if we are of such supposedly spiritual turn of mind, we can advocate materialism in this way. Beuys gives the essential clue: “materialism is an outstanding performance in humanity's development.” According to Anthroposophical thinking, as we know, that development is bound to be exclusively spiritual. Again it is Rudolf Steiner who tells us exactly how materialism, in effect those “events in the world that surrounds us,” is to be the very starting point, the means by which to rise above such material “details of everyday life.” It is all a part of the “supersensible” meditational process. As explained by Steiner,

Preparation [for initiation] consists in a strict and definite cultivation of the life of thought and feeling, through which the psycho-spiritual body becomes equipped with higher senses. . . . To begin with, the attention of the soul is directed to certain events in the world that surrounds



us. Such events are, on the one hand, life that is budding, growing, and flourishing, and, on the other hand, all phenomena connected with fading, decaying, and withering. The student can observe these events simultaneously, wherever he turns his eyes, and on every occasion they naturally evoke in him feelings and thoughts. . . . [Since] he hurries on too quickly from impression to impression, it is necessary, therefore, that he should fix his attention intently and consciously upon these phenomena. . . . Yet it must not be thought that much progress can be made if the senses are blunted to the world. First, look at the things as keenly and as intently as you possibly can; then only let the feeling which expands to life, and the thought which arises in the soul, take possession of you. . . . Just as the eyes and ears of the physical body are built by natural forces out of living matter, so will the organs of clairvoyance build themselves out of the feelings and thoughts thus evoked. . . . Fully conscious self-control must never be lost during all these exercises, and they must be accompanied by the sane, sound thinking, which is applied to ALL THE DETAILS OF EVERY-DAY LIFE. To lapse into reveries would be fatal.<sup>39</sup>

Now that we somewhat better understand Beuys's essentially paradoxical idea of how "materialism" can be, after all, an essential factor in "humanity's [spiritual] development," we may return to his original statement, noting in this case how Beuys again equates "the mystery of Golgotha" with a "Materialist-Incarnational" principle of Christ. He through whose sacrifice "man first became an earth-man." As Beuys put it,

Materialism has worked out the principle of death. When one looks upon this as a *Mysterium*, it is nothing more than a repetition of the Mystery of Golgotha. At this point [i.e., the sacrifice of Christ], man is first incarnated. He lands on his feet on the earth and stands there firmly. Then, one can say: through materialism, man first became an earth-man. Before this, he swung a little over it. He came down slowly and he stood strongly in the middle of matter; then he had to get out of this conformity of matter. But nothing, such as there was in olden times to help him, either by spiritual forces, or by seers or mediums, or from high priests, or from druids, none of that will [now] help him; he has to do it for himself. Now man walks for himself.<sup>40</sup>

Besides remarking upon the thaumaturgic and messianic powers Beuys ascribed to the "incarnational" manipulations of materials in general, we note that Steiner also spoke of a certain "Christ Initiate," an omniscient, healing "World Soul," a certain symbolic figure who seems the unmistakable role model for Beuys's consistently misunderstood *Jesu-Kitsch*. As Steiner informs us,

The companions of the Christ Initiate were human beings, with highly developed intelligence, but, of all human beings of that [post-Atlantean] time, their experiences in the realm of the supersensible were the least. With them, the Christ Initiate migrated from west to east, toward a certain region in inner Asia [evidently later to be known as "Eurasia"]. . . . He educated these companions in accordance with the mysteries revealed to him, and chiefly worked in this way upon their descendants. Thus, he trained a host of human beings who had received into their hearts the impulses that corresponded to the mysteries of the Christ-Initiation. . . . These seven initiates became the teachers and leaders of the people who, in the post-Atlantean epoch, had settled in the south of Asia, chiefly in ancient India. . . . In a large number of these human

beings there was also present a tremendous urge of the heart and mind to experience the supersensible world. . . . The Indian felt, that in this supersensible world, there was the primeval home of mankind. From it, he was removed into a world that is revealed only through the perceptions of the outer senses, and grasped by the intellect bound to these perceptions. He felt the supersensible world as the true one, and the sensory world was [only] a deception of human perception, an illusion—"Maya."

According to Steiner, therefore, this peripatetic "Christ Initiate" is an "educator," who, whilst wandering about over the steppes of Eurasia, instructs his devoted apostles in an essential, primeval truth: the wholly illusory nature of the "sense world." Even though, Steiner continues, this is likely to be the only world we "know," nevertheless it must be overcome. This fundamental desideratum of occultism is, once again, a manifestation of "unwritten, primeval wisdom":

By all possible means, the human being strove to gain insight into the true [i.e., supersensible] world. He was unable to develop any interest in the illusory world, or at least only insofar as it proved to be a veil over the supersensible world. . . . Since the possession of the transmitted life and astral bodies endowed these teachers with sublime powers, they were able to act magically upon their disciples. They did not actually teach. . . . Only supersensible retrospection can discover an unwritten, primeval wisdom behind the written records. . . . The teacher, however, who was the spiritual successor of the Christ Initiate, did not present what this Christ Initiate himself was able to reveal. The latter had remained in the background of evolution.<sup>41</sup>

Given this, it is easy to believe that Beuys's *Jesu-Kitsch* was no mere idle posturing. Instead, Joseph Beuys, the self-admitted artist-shaman, was, above all else, a surrogate "Christ Initiate," one able, moreover, "to act magically upon the disciples." As such, he is a teacher, one endowed with "sublime powers"; "thus he trained a host of human beings," thereby allowing them to "receive into their hearts the impulses that corresponded to the mysteries of Christ-Initiation." Through his mediumship, the loving disciples sitting at his feet were enabled to "discover an unwritten, primeval wisdom [hidden] behind the written records." Besides being that "teacher, who was the spiritual successor of the Christ Initiate," Beuys also called himself an artist. He enacted both roles simultaneously.

For this dual conclusion, regarding the inextricable coincidence of art and teaching, again we have the authority of Rudolf Steiner:

Religious creed, therefore, has a far-reaching effect upon the whole soul-life; its influence becomes ever stronger in the course of time, because it works by means of constant repetition. It, therefore, acquires the power of working upon the ether body. *The influence of true art has a similar effect upon the human being. If, through outer form, through color and tone of a work of art, he penetrates to its spiritual basis with thought and feeling, then the impulses, that the "I" thus receives, work down, even into the ether body. If we think this thought*



through to the end, we can estimate what a tremendous significance Art has for all human evolution.<sup>42</sup>

Beuys, as one should by now have anticipated, said very much the same thing about the nexus between art and teaching:

I have come to the conclusion that there is no other possibility to do something for man other than through art. And, to do this, I need an educational theory; I need a conception-of-perception theory. . . . Only the creative man can change history, can use his creativity in a revolutionary way. To go back to my educational concept, it would mean: art equals creativity equals human freedom. . . . The transformation of the social situation, as it is now, and how it repressively affects mankind—which we call the majority of the workers or the proletariat—is under consideration at this moment.<sup>43</sup>

Another notorious symbolic demonstration by Beuys was the Action of February 1976 (repeated in 1980); provocatively called “Show Your Wounds” (*Zeige deine Wunde*), it produced striking visual tableaux clearly dealing with metaphors of sickness and death, healing and therapy (or, as Steiner put it, “fading, decaying, and withering”).<sup>44</sup> The dimly-lit atmosphere was that of a mortuary; assembled at intervals around the edge of the darkened gallery space were objects in pairs (like *Doppelgänger*), including a pair of much-used dissection tables and, resting below, were (as Caroline Tisdall described them) “two zinc-covered boxes coated with translucent fat—like ‘spiritual heads,’ surveying the spiritual decay below.”<sup>45</sup> Obviously, this arrangement represents a purposive reversion to the symbolic, diptychlike compositional schemes employed well over twenty years before, as in the *Grave-Marker* and *Dead Man—Astral Figure*. Even the title of Beuys’s *Aktion*—“Show Your Wounds”—in turn points to yet another reversion to Anthroposophical scripture, in this case, where Steiner speaks of

the historical event on the physical plane, a spiritual happening, which was also a symbolic happening, that took place when the blood flowed from the Redeemer’s wounds . . . [when] He appeared in the spiritual world to the souls living between death and rebirth [i.e., a “*doppelgänger*” situation], and the darkness abated. Just as the objects placed in a dark room suddenly become visible when a ray of light shines into a room, and you see the objects that were always there—although you could not previously detect them—then did light [i.e., enlightenment] pour into the world of the dead.<sup>46</sup>

After, in effect, verbally drawing for us a picture of the enshadowed physical setting of Beuys’s grim tableau, in which “light pours into the world of the dead,” Steiner then goes on to mention Golgotha, a sacred place of epiphany which Beuys already had linked to the “incarnation of man,” where, “through materialism, man first became an earth-man.” For Steiner also, this is a place where “wounds are shown”:



We will now consider, from still another side, the Mystery of Golgotha and the secret of the blood flowing from the wounds of the Redeemer. We know that man on earth has received an inheritance from Old Moon: the three lower bodies—physical body, etheric body and astral body—had been prepared for him and it was on the earth that the ego was first added: the ego as the expression of human freedom and independence. . . . The blood is the expression of the ego. Blood Kinship and the ties of blood were the ruling principles. The physical blood was the medium operating from man to man. This was how things were in times of antiquity. But, through Christ Jesus, love became a non-material bond. . . . It was against love based on blood that the luciferic beings at all times directed their sharpest attacks. . . . But divine beings, bearers of love, strove to bring individuals together through bonds other than those based on ties of blood, which take no account of freedom. The Christ Principle unites with the full expression of the "I" [i.e., the ego]. . . . The love based on blood was transformed by Christ into spiritual love, into the brotherly love streaming from soul to soul. . . . With the blood that flowed on Golgotha from the wounds of the Redeemer, the superfluous blood of humanity was, as it were, sacrificed.<sup>47</sup>

The wound motif was, however, a catastrophic metaphor common to much of Beuys's work, an oeuvre replete with signs of "fading, decaying, and withering." Moreover, and by Beuys's own admission, "the content and meaning of catastrophe" was specifically a homeopathic—that is, a strictly Steinerian—healing process to which, as a starting point, the metaphor alludes; according to Beuys,

I do not feel that such works [like *Zeige deine Wunde*] were made to represent catastrophe, although the experience of catastrophe has certainly contributed to my awareness [of] the content and meaning of catastrophe. That must be the starting point—like a kind of substance—something that surmounts. . . . "*Similia similibus curantur*": heal like with like—that is the homeopathic healing process.<sup>48</sup>

## Deeper Yet into Anthroposophy

### An Anthroposophical Theory of Sculpture

We have just witnessed how, besides embracing an anomalous homeopathic-Christological context (certainly a novelty in the realm of contemporary performance art), Joseph Beuys's social theory of sculpture was conceptually based upon, and consequently physically expressed itself through certain metaphorical, elemental polarities. The dialectics of Beuys's much-discussed social theory of sculpture included such antitheses as: chaotic versus ordered, warm versus cold, amorphous versus crystalline, expansion versus contraction, mass versus crystalization, intuition versus rationalization, life versus death. Whatever we may think of the reasonableness of such antithetical cosmic schemes, certainly for Beuys these "opposites" were of fundamental importance. And why not? Without the prior (indeed, a priori) condition of the antitheses, there can be no overriding, primary (and largely hermetic) goal, that of the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Beuys explains:

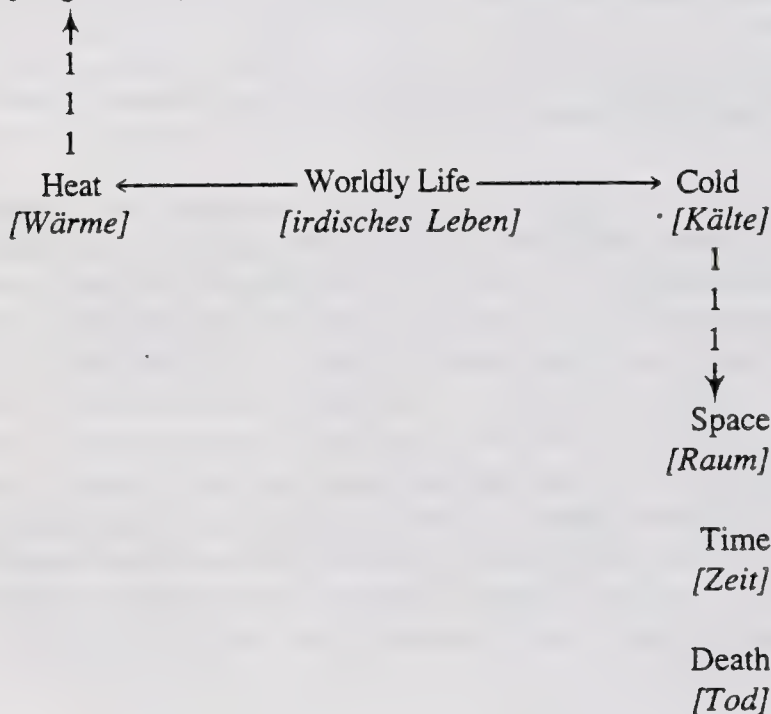
In the course of my sculptural attempts, I noticed that usually something emerged in opposition, something that could be encompassed by the concept "death." Something was expressed that had warmth-character, in opposition to the coldness of death, and which now and then evolved like a constant companion in extremely contracted or tiny forms, in contrast to the warmth-forms, which have an involuted character. I recognized that warmth and coldness were sculptural principles, on a level above space, which corresponded to expansion and contraction, amorphous and crystalline, chaos and determined form. At the same time, I gained a clarified perception of the essence of time, movement and space.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, Beuys drew up yet another cryptic diagram, this time one illustrating his unique heat theory:<sup>2</sup>

Life after death  
[*Leben nach dem Tod*]

Overtime  
[*Überzeit*]

Contrary space  
[*Gegenraum*]



Similarly, this curious scheme represents another familiar leitmotiv within the complicated Steinerian world picture. Thus we find Steiner describing how

ancient occultism distinguished the four Elements of Earth, Water, Air, Fire—or WARMTH. For a modern physicist, this no longer has meaning: what modern science calls an “element” does not coincide with what the Occultist means by the word. The modern expression “aggregate condition” means roughly the same as “Element.” Everything that is solid in present temperatures on earth is called by the Occultist, “earthy” or “solid”: a quartz crystal, for example, in conditions of present-day temperatures, is “Earth” for the Occultist. Everything fluid, also fluid metals and so on, is “Water” for him. . . . I well know that modern science considers it a veritable abomination when Fire is regarded not merely as a condition, but as something on a par with Earth, Water, or Air. On Old Saturn, you would have found no earth, water or air; WARMTH, or Fire, alone was in existence. If, at that time—perhaps by putting a chair in cosmic space—you would have been able to observe the Saturn Evolution with clairvoyant sight, perception of it could only have been [attained] through the sense of WARMTH.<sup>3</sup>



It is well known that Joseph Beuys liked to play with fat. A good example of one his many fatty exercises is to be seen in his 1963 installation piece called *Filter Corner of Fat, or Corner of Fat with Filter*—a title that neatly describes all that need to be known about this object on the strictly physical level. However, for the meaning of fat as a cosmic metaphor, we must again turn to Beuys's explanation, which turns out to be wholly Steinerian in tone and character: "FAT is an ideal material for demonstrating the "Theory," since it can exist as a physical example of both extremes; as a chaotic, formless and flowing liquid when WARM, and as a defined and ordered solid when COLD: a paradox that is compounded when it is placed in that most ordered of forms, a right-angled corner or wedge."<sup>4</sup> In short, such an unartistic material inherently represented for Beuys all the possibilities for the expression of the Steinerian "Saturn Evolution," apprehended purely by means of "clairvoyant [*übersinnliche*] sight." This we know because, as Steiner himself had affirmed, "perception of it could only have been through a sense of WARMTH." Furthermore, the given form enfaming Beuys's "Fat Corner," a triangle, most likely represents Steiner's: "Triangle, meaning the Higher Trinity and the like."

Felt is another of the archetypal Beuysian materials. Besides its latent, strictly Christological, potential (to be discussed shortly), there also existed in this commonplace material other, potentially transcendental, kinds of symbolism for a clairvoyant artist. These apparently inherent metaphorical values have been recognized by a German writer (and familiar of Beuys's) to have been: "the solid, static qualities of felt, which, because of its homogeneity, can affect the generation, insulation, and preservation of heat."<sup>5</sup>

Because these wholly metaphorical meanings of both fat and felt fit in so well with Steiner's equally symbolic mechanical theory of heat (theory of thermodynamics), we can finally lay to rest the persistent idea that Beuys had picked up such quaint notions from the benevolent Tatars of the Russian Crimea. (In any event, Stuka pilot Joseph Beuys had been completely unconscious throughout the eight to twelve days when he had been supposedly healed by the tender felt-and-fat ministrations of the mysterious nomads of the frozen Steppes.)<sup>6</sup> As we may now instead believe, his "memory" (actually another case of *déjà vu*) of such primordial thermodynamic/homeopathic therapy was but a garbled recollection of Steiner's texts. This supposition arises because we already know that Beuys had begun to read these occultist treatises long before his traumatic *Kriegsdienst*—and the resulting serious injuries to his head.

In the light of this evidence, we need only analyze in detail one other *Aktion* by Beuys. We will begin by noting the uniqueness of the term *Aktion* in the German language. As was already noted, the distinctive Beuysian term has commonly been translated by the English word "action," which, as Webster (*Collegiate Dictionary*, 4th ed., 1935) would have it, principally represents: "1. The function or operation of that which acts; the doing of something; 2. State

of motion; activity; operation.” In this case, the closest German equivalents would be *Handlung*, *Tätigkeit*, or *Wirkung*. To the contrary, the Beuysian term, *Aktion*, conveys in German more aggressive and didactic significance, as in a military “action” (*Unternehmung*), where *Aktion* signifies a drive, operation, or any other kind of extended campaign. In this case—and in its proper Anthroposophical context—the Beuysian terminology might remind certain Americans of a certain ill-fated American military *Aktion* designed to “win hearts and minds.”

In any event, on the strictly linguistic level, there is further decidedly “militant” and “sustained” significance pertinent to the particularized Beuysian terminology. English-speaking art critics, moreover, compound the confusion by suggesting that the word *Aktion* must be the functional equivalent, at least in contemporary art practice, of the term “performance piece.” Nevertheless, our investigations of the esoteric-philosophical underpinnings of Beuys’s *Aktionen* render that idea somewhat untenable, if not outright obsolete.

With these definitional points in mind, we can better appreciate the purposiveness of a quintessential *Aktion*. In the following section we shall examine Beuys’s extended conversations with a dead rabbit, which first took place late in 1965. Before that, however, we will consider the final entries in the *Lebenslauf*, which pertain to the years 1964 to 1973. Uncut, they read as follows:

1964: Beuys recommends that the Berlin Wall be heightened by 5 cm. (better proportions!); 1964 Beuys “VEHICLE ART”; Beuys the Art Pill; Aachen; Copenhagen Festival; Beuys felt works and fat corners. WHY? Friendship with Bob Morris and Yvonne Rainer; Beuys: Mouse Tooth Happening Düsseldorf-New York; Beuys Berlin “The Chief”; Beuys: “The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated”; 1964 Beuys Brown Rooms; Beuys Stag Hunt (behind); 1965 and in us . . . under us . . . landunder, Parnass Gallery Wuppertal; Western Man Project; Schmela Gallery Düsseldorf “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”; 1966 and here already is the end of Beuys; Per Kirkeby “2,15”; Beuys Eurasia 32nd Set 1963—René Block Gallery, Berlin—. . . with brown cross.” Copenhagen: Traekvøgn Eurasia: Affirmation: the greatest contemporary composer is the thalidomide child; Division of the Cross; Homogen for grand piano (Felt); Homogen for Cello (Felt); Manresa with Bjorn Nørregaard, Schmela Gallery, Düsseldorf; Beuys The Moving Insulator; Beuys The Difference between Image Head and Mover Head; Drawings, St. Stephan Gallery, Vienna; 1967 Darmstadt Joseph Beuys and Henning Christiansen: “Hauptström”; Darmstadt Fat Room, Franz Dahlem Gallery, Aha-Strasse, Vienna Beuys and Christiansen: “Eurasienstab” 82 minute fluxorum organum; Düsseldorf June 21st, Beuys founds the DSP German Student Party; 1967 Mönchengladbach (Johannes Cladders) Parallel Process 1; Karl Stroher; THE EARTH TELEPHONE; Antwerp Wide White Space Gallery: Image Head—Mover Head (Eurasienstab); Parallel Process 2; THE GREAT GENERATOR 1968 Eindhoven Stedelijk van Abbé Museum Jan Leering. Parallel Process 3; Kassel Documenta 4 Parallel Process 4; Munich Neue Pinakothek; Hamburg ALMENDE (Art Union); Nürnberg ROOM 563 491 573 (Fat); Earjom Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Braunschweig, Wuerm-Glacial (Parallel Process 5); Frankfurt: Felt TV II The Leg of Rochus Kowallek not carried out in fat (JOM)! Düsseldorf Felt TV III Parallel Process; Intermedia Gallery Cologne: VACUUM—



MASS (Fat) Parallel Process, . . . Gulo borealis . . . for Bazon Brock; Johannes Stüttgen  
 FLUXUS ZONE WEST Parallel Process—Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Eiskellerstrasse  
 1: LEBERVERBOT, Intermedia Gallery, Cologne: Drawings 1947–1956; Christmas  
 1968: Crossing over of the IMAGE HEAD track with the track of the MOVER HEAD  
 in All (Space) Parallel Process—1969 Düsseldorf Schmela Gallery FOND III; 12.2.69  
 Appearance of MOVER HEAD over the Düsseldorf Academy of Art; Beuys takes the  
 blame for the snowfall from 15th–20th February; Berlin-René Block Gallery: Joseph  
 Beuys and Henning Christiansen Concert: I attempt to set (make) you free—Grand  
 piano jom (zone jom). Berlin: National Gallery; Berlin: Academy of Art: Sauerkraut  
 Score—Concert with Henning Christiansen; Düsseldorf Kunsthalle Exhibition (Karl  
 Stroher); Lucerne Fat Room (Clock); Basel Kunstmuseum Drawings; Düsseldorf PROS-  
 PECT: ELASTIC FOOT PLASTIC FOOT

1973: Joseph Beuys born in Brixton<sup>7</sup>

And with that final entry, alluding to Beuys's fictitious rebirth in a dismal London slum, the convoluted *Lebenslauf* wends its way to a (somewhat premature) close.

### “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”

Probably the most notable (or notorious) event ever staged by Joseph Beuys was the *Aktion*, performed in November 1965, that he picturesquely (but literally) entitled “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare” (“*Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*”). In the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf, then completely closed to the public, Beuys, his head covered with a thick application of honey sprinkled with gold leaf, spent three hours patiently explaining his “art” to a dead rabbit held in his lap. This noteworthy pseudoevent was videotaped in order to leave a record for posterity. For Beuys's biographer, Caroline Tisdall, this was indeed a significant and highly poetic art-historical event:

This image of the artist annointed, silently mouthing to a mute animal what cannot be said to his fellow men, became one of the most resonant images of the 1960s. This is, in part, a testimony to the skill of Beuys' most constant photographer, Ute Klopheus. But, beyond that, the appeal of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* lies in the combination of that title, which says much about our anxious need for explanations, with the ritual mask, through which the identity of the man is psychologically obscured, and the intimate inclusion, where we are excluded, of an animal in a state of total vulnerability.<sup>8</sup>

In a typical interview published in 1972, Beuys accorded sweeping levels of significance to this particular zoomorphic and shamanistic manipulation:

This was a complex tableau, about the problem of language and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness and the consciousness of animals, and of course about the abilities of animals. This is placed in an extreme position because this is not just an animal, but a *dead* animal. Even this dead animal has a special power to produce. The other question would be,



how do plants communicate? Normally, their sounds are not perceptible to human beings, and are related to the elements the plant lives in. . . . The sound of plants is more directed from the outside, while the sound of animals and humans comes from a closed inner system—expressed through the throat and moving into the exterior. You could consider the structure of an animal as being like a plant internalized.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, here and elsewhere, Beuys failed to explain the significance (or published sources) of his sticky head covering. This probably derives from Rudolf Steiner's "ethereal" story about the industrious and "sacred" bee, the tiny, busy creature that produced this nimbuslike aura of honey, symbolizing for Steiner "occult powers or energy." In another statement, Beuys again explains the rabbit:

The hare has a direct relation to birth. . . . For me the hare is a symbol of the Incarnation. The hare does in reality what man can only do in thought: he digs himself in, excavates an edifice. The hare incarnates himself into the earth, which is what we human beings can only radically achieve with our thinking: he rubs, pushes, digs himself into *Materia* (earth); finally, the rabbit penetrates into its laws, and by this work his thinking is sharpened.<sup>10</sup>

Beuys explained the rest in considerable detail:

In putting honey on my head, I am clearly doing something that has to do with thinking. Human ability is not to produce honey, but to think, to produce ideas. In this way, the death-like character of thinking becomes life-like again since honey is undoubtedly a living substance. Human thinking can be lively too. But it can also be intellectualized to a deadly degree, and remain dead, and it [then] expresses its lethality in, say, the political or pedagogic fields.

Beuys goes on to give his own explanation for the materials he put upon his head and his foot for this performance piece:

Gold and honey indicate a transformation of the head, and therefore, naturally and logically, the brain and our understanding of thought, consciousness and all the other levels necessary to explain pictures to a [dead] hare: the warm stool [I sat upon], insulated with felt, the "radio," made of bone and electrical components [placed] under the stool, and the iron sole [on my foot] with the magnet. I had to walk on this sole when I carried the hare around from picture to picture; so, along with a strange limp, there came the clank of iron on the hard, stone floor—that was all that broke the silence, since my explanations were mute, and the radio was on an almost inaudible wave-length.<sup>11</sup>

Having described the bizarre accessories needed for his ritualistic performance,<sup>12</sup> Beuys essays to interpret its overall significance:

This seems to have been the *Aktion* that had most captured people's imaginations. On one level, this must be because everyone, consciously or unconsciously, recognizes the problem

of explaining things, particularly where art and creative work are concerned, or anything that involves a certain mystery or questioning. The idea of explaining to an animal conveys a sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence, one that appeals to the imagination. Then, as I said, even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings, with their stubborn rationality.

The problem lies in the word "understanding," and its many levels, which cannot be restricted to rational analysis. Imagination, inspiration, intuition and longing, these all lead people to sense that these other levels also play a part in understanding. This must be the root of reactions to this *Aktion*. This is why my technique has been to try to seek out the energy-points in the human power-field, rather than demanding specific knowledge or reactions on the part of the public. I try to bring to light the complexity of creative areas.

At this point in his argument, Beuys brings the theme back to a wholly Steinerian logic, that kind which consistently questions the reality of reality. For both Beuys and Steiner, the real question is: Which is more significant, matter or spiritual substance? And Beuys answered the question, so prominent in the esoteric tradition, as follows:

This is also a technique to bring about discussion of the human position at a critical time, when materialist and rational ideas are still current, coupled with loss of imagination, inspiration and understanding of other things. It's a question again of Which Reality? Is it the limited materialist understanding of *materia*?, or is it *substance*? Substance for me is a greater issue, and includes evolutionary power, that which ultimately leads to the real meaning of *Materia*, with its root in *MATER* (Mother—as in "mother earth"), as one pole of spirituality, while the other [pole of spirituality] encompasses the whole process of development.

We will now examine these statements in their broader, Anthroposophical context. In the first place, regardless of the particular nature of the props employed, this shamanistic act of Beuys's "Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare" is, in the strictly structural sense, a clear-cut example of an Anthroposophical "visualization," what Steiner had called those:

genuine meditative formulas that are actually "photographs" of the spiritual world. . . . [Through them] we learn gradually to contemplate objectively, without sympathy or antipathy, what is connected with our own physical life, like pictures at which we gaze. . . . We experience in pictures, or in images around us, what we formerly experienced inwardly. . . . What we feel personally in physical life is experienced in yonder world [beyond death] in connection with totality. . . . Such is the knowledge concerning joy and suffering that we acquire in the life-after-death. We live there with thoughts that are realities.<sup>13</sup>

Besides toying with dead rabbits, Beuys had also performed with any number of other kinds of animals, mostly live ones—including a white horse and a scrawny coyote. Are we really supposed to assume that this curious cast of furry characters had been picked by Beuys on an idle whim? I rather think not. As for the white horse, we find perhaps a clue to its real significance in

Tacitus, an ancient Roman writer who contributed greatly to *völkische* neoprimitivist beliefs and practices based on the ancient wisdom of the primeval Teutons and whose writings are still of vital interest to contemporary Germans. According to the Roman historian,

In common with other [primitive] nations, the *Germani* are acquainted with the practice of auguring from the notes and flight of birds; but it is peculiar to them to derive admonitions and presages from horses also. Certain of these animals, *milk-white* and untouched by earthly labor, are pastured at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves. These, yoked to a consecrated chariot, are accompanied by the priest and king, or chief person of the community. They attentively observe their manner of neighing and snorting; and no kind of augury is more credited [because] they consider themselves as the ministers of the gods, and the horses as being privy to the divine will.<sup>14</sup>

We can also attribute Beuys's zoophilic behavior directly to the mesmerizing influence of Rudolf Steiner, who had stated that such psychic interactions between men and beasts were mutually beneficial:

Through the sentient soul, man is related to the animals. In animals also we observe the presence of sensations, impulses, instincts and passions. The animal, however, obeys these immediately, and they do not become interwoven with independent thoughts, thereby transcending the immediate experiences. This is also the case, to a certain extent, with undeveloped human beings. The merely sentient soul, therefore, differs from the evolved, higher member of the soul, the one that brings thinking into its service. This soul, that is served by thought, will be termed *intellectual soul*. It could also be called the mind-soul. The intellectual soul permeates the sentient soul. The one who possesses the organ for seeing the soul sees the intellectual soul as a separate entity, in contrast to the mere sentient soul.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, Steiner goes on to praise the superior, spontaneously supersensible abilities of dumb (and/or mute) animals:

In the *animal world*, sensation and impulse are added to the capacities for growth and propagation. These are the manifestations of the soul-world. A being endowed with these capacities belongs to the soul-world, receives impressions from it, and reacts on it. Now, every sensation and every impulse that arises in the animal is brought forth from the foundations of the animal soul. . . . *The animal is soul; the man is spirit*. The spirit-being, which in the animal is engaged in soul-development, has now descended a stage deeper still. In the animal, it is soul-forming. In man, it has entered into the world of sensory matter itself. The spirit is present within the human sensory body and, because it appears in a sensory garment, it can only appear as the shadowy reflection of the spirit-being that thought represents.<sup>16</sup>

With Steiner's texts in hand, we know at last how to read Beuys's bizarre zoophilic tableaux (with either living or dead participants). The real connection between the oddly paired protagonists—one living, the other dead; one a man, the other an animal—has nothing at all to do with art, at least not in the generic



sense. Instead, the obvious link between them is “the sentient soul.” However, for Beuys (as opposed to Steiner) the best means of connecting these disparate “sentient souls” is through the medium of art: the living shall “explain pictures” to the dead, and the world of men make a useful spiritual contact with that of the animals.

“Pictures”—visualizations for Steiner, art for Beuys—“transcend the immediate experiences.” For Beuys, the animal, even dead, “preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings,” those whom Steiner had reckoned to be “undeveloped human beings.” Beuys, serving as “the intellectual soul that brings thinking into the service of the soul-world,” thus “permeates the sentient soul” by means of his thoughtful and illuminating gallery chats, including a generous dollop of what the artist had called (Anthroposophical) “evolutionary power.” Additionally, Beuys admitted that he was endeavoring to “seek out the energy-points in the human power-field”; as Steiner would have recognized, Beuys “receives impressions from it, and [accordingly] reacts on it.” In sum, the major, typically occult, purpose of this thought-provoking *Aktion* is the “reconciliation of the opposites,” of soul and spirit. As Steiner had affirmed, “The animal is soul; man is spirit.”

Finally, the writings of Rudolf Steiner explain the occult, emblematic significance of Joseph Beuys’s public trademarks, which Robert Hughes recognized to be “his grey fedora hat and fishing jacket, which never came off in public.” It becomes readily apparent that both these items can also function as Anthroposophical, quasi-Christological emblems. The first device, Beuys’s tiaralike hat, is made of felt. Certainly Beuys was himself quite cognizant of the emblematic significance of his ubiquitous headgear. As he explained,

The hat represents another kind of head and functions like another personality. Many people are strangely involved with it, and it works like a permanent theatre, there, in front of people’s eyes, but not immediately decipherable. When they describe it flatly as a “trademark,” this is because *the meaning is not really clear to them*. That’s exactly what I meant when I talked of the shaman; it is impossible [for you] to decipher precisely the way it functions. A simple meaning would be that the hat alone can do the work, and that it acts as a vehicle—I personally am not so important anymore.<sup>17</sup>

Beuys’s famous fedora, what he called the “vehicle” for his spiritual, shaman-like powers, is made of felt. Felt comes from wool, wool comes from sheep, and all sheep begin as lambs. Lambs, according to Steiner, represent “a group-soul for the higher manifestation of men [being] represented by the lamb in the center of the seal, the mystical *lamb*, the *sign of the Redeemer*.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Beuys’s ubiquitous grey waistcoat is unquestionably a familiar part of the commonplace equipment of the angler. Such men are themselves catchers of *fish*, and, having, as it were, caught this essential piscatorial clue, then, states Steiner,

You will now be able to understand with what deep intuition Esoteric Christianity conceived of the fish-form, because it signifies the outer symbol of Sun Power, that is, the forces of the Christ. To be sure, the fish is outwardly an incomplete being—but it has not descended so deeply into matter, and thus it is penetrated to a smaller extent by egotism. . . . [In short,] *the fish is the symbol for the spiritual being*, as it has developed itself out of the Sun.<sup>19</sup>

## Eurythmy and Anthroposophical Performance Art

In the course of this extended investigation of the art and thought of Joseph Beuys, it has been repeatedly suggested that his anomalous performance pieces partook of the distinctively Anthroposophical form of expression known as “Eurythmy” (*Eurythmie*), an art form which, by his own account, Rudolf Steiner had invented in 1912 to serve his clairvoyant and occultist purposes. Steiner’s term is a Greek amalgamate, from the prefix *eu-*, meaning advantageous, and the suffix *rhythmos*, meaning measured and proportionate motion.

Once credibility is granted to our major thesis—that not only the form but also the content of Joseph Beuys’s little understood *Aktionen* largely stemmed from Rudolf Steiner’s writings—then eurythmy will provide yet another important piece of evidence testifying to the immense emotional and intellectual distance separating these from apparently similar examples of contemporary performance art. The *Aktion* just analyzed in some detail, “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare,” offers an apposite example of the eurythmic performance art of Joseph Beuys. For our purposes, whatever we shall need to know about eurythmy is contained in a posthumously published (1927) series of lectures by Steiner, *Eurythmie als sichtbare Sprache*,<sup>20</sup> and in a lecture, given in August 1923 (and published much later), *Ein Vortrag über Eurythmie*.<sup>21</sup>

We may begin with Steiner’s own definitions of *Eurythmie*. As did Steiner, we “shall endeavor to deal with Eurythmy from its various aspects; not only from the *artistic* side, which naturally calls for our first consideration here, but also from the point of view of *education* and *healing*.”<sup>22</sup> Before dealing with these three complementary subpurposes, we shall first give Steiner’s general definitions of this “new art of movement in space, different from anything arisen up to that time [1912].”<sup>23</sup> In this new art, “one can use the entire body . . . thus there arises visible speech, visible music—in other words, the art of Eurythmy.”<sup>24</sup> Above all, “*purely Eurythmic movements are the truest means of giving outward and visible expressions to all that is contained in the human soul.*”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, “in the case of Eurythmy, body, soul and spirit work harmoniously together.”<sup>26</sup>

Eurythmic expression is of a threefold nature: “in the first place, there is *movement* as such; then there is *feeling*, which lies within the movement; and, lastly, there is the *character*, that which flows out of the soul-life, and flows into the movement.”<sup>27</sup> “Eurythmy is something which makes man, in accordance with the possibilities of his organism, into an instrument, a means of



expression.”<sup>28</sup> “The gestures in the air which are produced by speech . . . are transformed into *visible gestures*. And these visible gestures are Eurythmy.”<sup>29</sup> As highly verbalized art form, it “can not be accompanied by the soul-qualities of the human being which must be given expression here: both *audibly*, through speech, and *visibly*, through Eurythmy.”<sup>30</sup> As Steiner also argued, “Eurythmy must be looked upon as a quite particular art, an art which is based upon the revelation of the nature and being of man [expressed] through movements of the limbs, carried out by a single human being or by a group of human beings, either standing still or moving in space.”<sup>31</sup> Above all, and as is obvious throughout, eurythmy is purely occultist in nature, being “this art which springs from no humble source, but which has as its lofty origin that *Cosmic Knowledge* which creates from, and out of the spirit.”<sup>32</sup>

As Steiner also informs us, eurythmy is—like Beuys’s *Aktionen*—a necessarily public art, one which directly engages the spectators. As was supposedly the case with a large number of witnesses to Beuys’s performance pieces, Steiner did not demand that the audiences for his eurythmic performances be apprised of their deeper, occult significance; for him, it was sufficient that the enthralled spectators appreciate art. Steiner’s eurythmic performances were also—like Beuys’s public art—a specifically didactic and rhetorical art form; likewise, they were additionally meant to become “an expression of life itself”:

In every branch of eurythmic activity, it is above all necessary that the personality, the whole human being of the eurythmist should be brought into play, so that the eurythmist may become an expression of life itself. This can not be achieved unless one enters into the spirit of Eurythmy, feeling it actually as visible speech. As in the case of all artistic appreciation, it is quite possible for anyone to enjoy Eurythmy, as a spectator, without having acquired any knowledge of its essential basis, just as it is quite unnecessary to have studied harmony or counterpoint to be able to appreciate music. It is an accepted fact of human evolution that the healthily developed human being carries within him a natural appreciation and understanding of art.<sup>33</sup>

In education, Steiner believed that eurythmy mainly enabled children to work out or reenact negative feelings, such as “jealousy and ambition,” by “working directly into the soul-life of the child.”<sup>34</sup> But this only points to the other, larger purpose of eurythmic exercises, “healing.” Therefore, Steiner spoke of “the curative action of eurythmy, which may be effective, not only in the sphere of the moral-psychic life, but also in the physiological-physical life.”<sup>35</sup> All the same, and here the relevance to Beuys becomes particularly apparent, what Steiner is really advocating (although using other terminology) is ancient wisdom, specifically shamanistic magic:

Eurythmy [heals] because it makes use of the human being as its instrument; one is able to penetrate most deeply into the connection existing between the human being and the cosmic



being. . . . When illness of some kind of another overtakes the human being, then the forms corresponding to his divine archetype receive injury. . . . What shall we do then? We must go back to those divine movements; we must help the sick human being to make those movements for himself. . . . Thus we have to look upon Eurythmy as an art of healing, just as in ancient, clairvoyant times it was known that certain sounds, uttered with a special intonation, reacted [magically] upon the health of man.<sup>36</sup>

This is not an isolated instance. For Steiner, eurythmy is pure "primevalism" (thus making it at least as old as the shamans), because "one who is able to gaze with unprejudiced vision into the earliest times [*Urepochen*] of human evolution on the earth can see that, in certain primeval languages [*Ursprache*], a really fundamental [i.e., eurythmic] artistic element entered into human evolution. . . . Especially this was the case when a dignified form of expression was sought, in the form of some ritual or cult."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, as one must inevitably conclude, "for this reason, Eurythmy must, in its very nature, be something which represents a primeval creation."<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, for Steiner, eurythmy was, above all else, an art. In fact, he called it a kind of (then contemporary) "Expressionism"; Beuys's eurythmy was therefore *neo*-Expressionism. As Steiner succinctly put it, "simply by 'expressing' Eurythmy, in a certain way one creates the impulses which underlie what is being sought after today [1924] as a special form of art—Expressionism in art. For Eurythmy is, from a certain point of view, absolutely 'expressionistic.'"<sup>39</sup> Besides being superbly "expressionistic," eurythmy is also a highly pictorialized art form; as Steiner explained (in italics), "A [eurythmic] picture must have this quality; it must make us feel that it goes beyond reality and that it gives us an impression which transcends its own image. . . . *The inner plastic element of eurythmic language depends upon this possibility.*"<sup>40</sup>

But Eurythmy is a special kind of visual art; it is, above all, "sculptural," and, as such, of course, it superbly fits in with Beuys's famous social theory of sculpture. According to Steiner,

Eurythmy arises naturally out of sculpture. . . . [When we look at classical sculpture,] the urge remains to bring movement into this motionless form. As a consequence, there arises that moving sculpture to which we give the name of Eurythmy. Here the Cosmic Word is itself: *Bewegung*. In Eurythmy, man is no longer silent but, through his movement, communicates innumerable cosmic secrets. . . . In the case of the human form of today, it is as though one had allowed an inner mobility to become dried up, to become rigid. . . . People today often appear as frozen, immobile beings, incapable of metamorphosis. And what we achieve by means of Eurythmy, when we make it into a visible speech, is no less than this: The bringing of movement, of fluidity, into the frozen human form. This demands a study which must, in its very nature, be artistic. In this sphere, everything intellectualistic is positively harmful. Eurythmy is, and must remain, an [unintellectualistic] art.<sup>41</sup>

At this point we arrive at a truly interesting *völkische* conclusion. Besides being inherently antiintellectual, eurythmy works best in the German language, itself a sculptural medium! Here is how Steiner arrived at this odd linguistic *trouvaille*: "When we take the German language, we find that it is of a plastic nature. *The genius of the German language is really a sculptor*. This must not be overlooked. The peculiar characteristic of the German language is that it is plastic [*Plastik*]: the genius of the language is a sculptor."

Steiner gives us more examples of such additive "plasticity" and then concludes, saying:

The remarkable feature of the German language is that one can find in it so much that really corresponds to plastic art, that really makes up the plastic element of language. Hence, it is perhaps not without significance that Eurythmy, in the first instance, could most easily arise within the German language, since Eurythmy may be said to be sculpture brought into the realm of movement, and it is from out of the German language that this living sculpture can be most easily developed in the present day. . . . The German language can not be said to be musical but, for this very reason, the plastic element is all the stronger.<sup>42</sup>

Steiner then goes on to describe in some detail a number of poses and gestures to be assumed by the eurythmist in order to express certain specific states of his mind and moods. These are all quite definite in form (illustrated by schematic diagrams), and all of them are to be, as it were, "choreographed" by the eurythmic performer into his eurythmic scenarios. Based on Steiner's texts and any of the several videotapes made of the *Aktionen*, one could probably now decipher the symbolic-eurythmic choreography found in the individual ritual poses and passes in Joseph Beuys's highly formulic performance art.

We need read only a single description of Steiner's many eurythmic gestures in order to grasp the construction and purposes of all the other, essentially rhetorical eurythmic devices and motifs:

Another gestures [states Steiner] which brings us into relationship with the outer world, with other human beings, is the one which we can make of use when we wish to impart something, when we wish to make a communication. This gesture is carried out in the following way. You must stand quite naturally on the one foot; the heel of the other foot is further forward, resting lightly upon the ground. The right arm must be lifted up—with the thumb, first- and middle-finger pointing forwards; the left arm must be held lower, and must also be stretched somewhat outwards, towards the front, with the palm of the hand turned upwards. This movement indicates that something is given; not an actual gift, but something is imparted by means of speech. There is, therefore, at the same time an indication of a gift, and here in the left arm is the gesture of communication [*Mitteilung*]: I am communicating something. This is the significance of the movement.<sup>43</sup>



Whatever the particular choreographical devices, the overall purposes are, of course, occultist in nature; according to Steiner:

The hands and arms reveal the life of the soul. This soul-element is the most essential part of what may be brought to expression in Eurythmy. . . . Here already we pass over into the realm of the spiritual, for it is in the transition from one sound [or gesture] to the next that we find the best means of expressing that which is spiritual, [features discovered] in everything that emanates from the human spirit, from man himself, in that he is a spiritual being, gifted with intelligence in the best sense of the word. Such things must be indicated by means of the head, for the head is the instrument of the spirit.<sup>44</sup>

As is well known, before giving one of his performances, some often repeated, Joseph Beuys would have worked out a scenario or program for it, just as Steiner had recommended:

Another thing must be borne in mind: that the learning of Eurythmy entails an actual transformation of the human organism. Any performance which reveals the slightest trace of struggle between body and soul must be looked upon as unfinished and imperfect. In a Eurythmy-Performance the whole body must have become soul. A programme is sometimes given—as you yourself know—which has been prepared with unbelievable industry and is then shown for the first time. One can enjoy such a programme, where everything is fresh and spontaneous, where there is still a struggle with the form-running, and where, in occasion, the arms are not moved but thrown about, appearing so heavy as to be liable at any moment to fall to the ground. There is spontaneity in all this and it gives us a certain pleasure. Then the time comes when the programme is taken on tour. . . . Now the pleasure is of a very different kind. Everything has become easy and fluent. . . . The performance is now sheer delight, and one can only exclaim: “Oh, if this programme could be performed fifty times more, how beautiful it would be then!” . . . It is in the sphere of art, above all, that it is important to realize this: one must come back to a thing again and again.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the celebrated business with the dead hare, another quintessential Beuys performance was *The Chief*. Finally, with Steiner in hand, we can decipher the muffled, but still eurythmic, meaning of Beuys's chant (while buried in a felt blanket): “uh, uh, uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh; uh, *uh*, uh, uh, uh (etc.).” This arises from Steiner's precocious (after 1912) advocacy of the artistic means of nearly pure sound effects, because “the poet has to fight against the conventionality of speech in order to be able to draw from speech that element which could make of it a way leading to the super-sensible worlds. . . . Thus the chief concern of the poet is the embodiment of his poetic inspirations in [nonrepresentational] *sounds* which are imaginative, plastic and musical.”<sup>46</sup> In the larger sense, from such nonrepresentational sound effects, one is led to “the possibility of perceiving that archetype, of which speech is but the shadow; one becomes aware of an imaginative language in which imaginations can be expressed through the microcosm, a little world, though man, who is enabled by his form, as a spatial being, to bring all mysteries to expression.”<sup>47</sup>



Against this "microcosmic" background we now begin to suspect that Beuys's "uh, uh, uh" litany, muffled by felt, was really "a, a, a" (the letter *a* in German is pronounced "ah"). For Steiner, however, all the letters of the "sculptural" German language expressed "the primeval Word," signifying "a birth of the whole etheric man when the alphabet is spoken aloud."<sup>48</sup> But, of all the letters, *a* was the most significant by far, because, when we say it (over and over), "we are in a state of *wonder* and *amazement*."<sup>49</sup> According to Steiner,

With primeval, instinctive-clairvoyant, understanding, one might equally well have said: Philosophy begins with *a*. To a primeval humanity this would have meant exactly the same thing: Philosophy, love of wisdom, begins with *a*. . . . Philosophy strives after self-knowledge, and this self-observation begins with the sound *a*. . . . For this reason, *a* corresponds to man in a state of wonder, to man filled with wonder at his own true being, that is to say, man looked at from the highest, most ideal aspect.<sup>50</sup>

### The World Mission of the Anthroposophical Artist

In 1923, Rudolf Steiner gave a series of eight lectures in which he described the form and content of a weighty world mission awaiting any would-be Anthroposophical artist. Subsequently published, these explained *Das Künstlerische in seiner Weltmission*.<sup>51</sup> Our purpose now is to demonstrate that Beuys also felt himself an artist destined to discharge his own evangelical *Weltmission*. Among other things, this revelation will bring us a particular insight into the industrious artistic perambulations of Joseph Beuys around the world, spreading his own artistic gospel.

For Steiner, art, like so much else of interest to him, was just another expression of ancient wisdom, albeit the highest expression. Of course, art now is not nearly as good as it had been in days of yore. This idea dovetails with his largely determinist notions of history as a series of cosmic evolutions, most of which *devolve*, that is, go from better to relatively worse. According to Steiner, in the larger sense, "we see that the epochs described in Anthroposophical Spiritual Science take their shape from the particular soul-constitution of the human beings alive at any given time. This differs greatly from epoch to epoch." Most unfortunately, "today, however, there is little inclination to look beyond man's present-day makeup."<sup>52</sup>

Historically speaking, the worsening of humanity's cosmic consciousness took place in the period of Roman culture and art: "Prior to the Graeco-Latin period, people's feelings, and indeed their will-impulses, were, if I may use the expression, elementary-cosmic." In that preclassical period, "within himself, man felt not a human but a divine ego: a drop from the ocean of divinity."<sup>53</sup> And how was this superior perception expressed? In a properly *völkische* man-

ner resembling the superior spiritual attunement with the forces of nature attributed to the ancient *Germani* by Tacitus, the Roman historian. As Steiner tells it,

In ancient times, the teacher in the Mysteries spoke to his pupils something like this: "You see how the trees sway, how the river water flows, how the ocean churns." But, from neither the moving trees, the flowing rivers, nor the heaving ocean, could the ego learn to develop those impulses of motion which human beings display when they carry their bodies over the earth. This the ego can never learn from any moving thing. . . . Only from Mars, Jupiter, Venus, and so forth [i.e., astrology], can the ego learn motion. . . . All that modern man believes to appear as complete knowledge would appear as incomplete knowledge [to ancient folk]. The ancient human being knew well that thoughts can never spring from brain-substance; that it is the Sun which call forth thoughts, and the Moon which stills them. . . . Thus it was in the first post-Atlantean epoch.<sup>54</sup>

Steiner goes on to say that, as a rule, modern man is also visually insensitive because we have lost touch with nature.<sup>55</sup> In the good old days people were much more sensitive to what we might today call the big "ecological" issues:

When the winter solstice arrived [ancient man] felt: Now the earth-soul has united with the earth. The snow, which for present-day man is nothing but frozen water, was at that time experienced as the garment the earth dons in order to shut itself off from the Cosmos, and to develop an individually-independent life within that Cosmos. The [ancient] human being felt: "Now, indeed, the earth-soul has so intimately united with the earth; man must turn his soul-nature to what lives in the earth." In other words, the snow-cover became transparent for man's soul. Below it, he felt the elementary beings, those which carry the force of plant-seeds through winter into spring. . . . Thus man lived with the changing seasons.<sup>56</sup>

According to theories of Steinerian historical determinism, the conclusions are obvious:

Indeed, in all art, we have gradually lost the experience of the permeation of the physical body by the soul. . . . Present-day man is completely uncertain in regard to the nature of thought; he wavers. . . . Today, man must more and more develop the faculty of disregarding the physical, disregarding the physical starry sky, disregarding the physical course of the year, disregarding his sensations when confronting objects. *He can no longer behold his thoughts in matter.* [To the contrary,] he must [now] acquire the possibility of *discovering the divine-spiritual* as something special, above and beyond the physical sense-world, before *he can find it again within the sense-world.* To emphasize this truth energetically is the task of Anthroposophical Spiritual Science.<sup>57</sup>

How can modern man find the divine-spiritual element astray within the matter of the everyday sense world? Through art, viewed in the context of Anthroposophy, which proposes a general "fructification of the arts," especially given "the fact that Anthroposophy strives to foster, in every possible way, the artistic element."<sup>58</sup> "Genuine Anthroposophy leads, inevitably, at a certain point, into art because, far from thought-killing, it inspires us; it permits the artistic spring

in the human soul to gush forth.”<sup>59</sup> Again, the “gushing,” archetypal model is ancient wisdom, since, “in times when ancient clairvoyance made for a living connection with the spiritual world, the artistic was considered absolutely vital to civilization.”<sup>60</sup>

Anthroposophy holds two fundamental positions on making art in the modern age; as it maintains, art will ideally be antinaturalistic in appearance and, in content, it will always be the expression of the spiritual world: “We must have the will to penetrate into this material world spiritually.”<sup>61</sup> Steiner maintains:

Present-day human beings do not draw the logical conclusion from naturalism as it affects the art. . . . It [i.e., naturalistic art] is quite unnecessary. . . . In other words, *only a person who participates in spiritual life has an impulse for a creative activity transcending the merely natural* [in appearance]. . . . It was out of a spirit-attuned state that the artistic urge proceeded. And this [antinaturalistic] relation to the spiritual world will be, forever, the prerequisite for genuine creativity.<sup>62</sup>

What will the “spiritual world” look like as limned in by the skilled Anthroposophical artist? It will be amorphous, generally aspatial but often brightly colored, especially around the edges. For this predictive conclusion we again have the authority of Rudolf Steiner:

Though the world from which the soul descends has no spatial forms or lines, it does have color intensities, color qualities. Which is to say that the world man inhabits, between death and a new birth, is a soul-permeated, spirit-permeated world of light, of color, of tone; a world of qualities; *a world of intensities rather than extensions*. . . . To [ancient man] the physical body was completely attuned to space, and he said to himself: “This is foreign to me, it was not so in the spirit-soul world. Here I am under the yoke of three dimensions—dimensions which had no meaning before my descent into the physical world. But color, tone-harmonies, tone-melodies, have very much meaning in the spiritual world.”<sup>63</sup>

Since, as an “artist,” Joseph Beuys mainly thought of himself as a sculptor, it is of interest to see just what Rudolf Steiner had to say about this particular art form (disregarding for the moment its potential social-theoretical ramifications). As Steiner put it,

In sculpture we behold, spiritually, the human being as he is placed into the present. . . . Whereas architecture begins with the erection of tombs, sculpture shows how man, through his earthly form’s direct participation in the spiritual, constantly overcomes the earthly-naturalistic element; how, in every detail of his form and in his entirety, he is an expression of the spiritual.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Steiner, the sculptor ought to be, as it were, empty-headed:



*If a person would become a sculptor, his head must cease to think. . . . The head must be able to rest, to remain empty; arms and hands must begin to shape the world in images. . . . It is thus a spiritual sensing and beholding of the world, rather than cerebral thinking, which leads to art, and which receives an impulse from Anthroposophy. For the latter says to itself: "There is something in the world which can not be tackled by thought; to enter it at all you must start to become an artist." . . . The Anthroposophical way of thinking demands that he immerse himself in the not-himself, and recreate, with living formative force, what the Cosmos created first. . . . The sculptor does nothing more nor less than imitate the form of the etheric body.<sup>65</sup>*

Among Beuys's works is a series of four, wholly planar and non-representational paintings, consisting of absolutely flat, pure-hued squares placed upon equally flat, neutral, rectangular backgrounds.<sup>66</sup> These arouse our curiosity about Steiner's ideas concerning such pure color/planarizing art. As it turns out, Beuys's pure pictorial exercises exactly fit Steiner's prescriptions:

Today, in the fifth post-Atlantean age, painting has assumed a character [dangerously] leading to naturalism. Its prime manifestation is the loss of a deeper understanding for color. The intelligence employed in [some] contemporary painting is a falsified sculptural one. Painters even see human beings in this way. The cause is space-perspective, an [unfortunate] aspect of painting developed only after the fifth post-Atlantean period [i.e., during the Quattrocento]. Painters express through lines the fact that something lies in the background, something in the foreground; their purpose being to conjure up on canvas an impression of spatially formed objects. But in so doing they deny the first and foremost attribute of their special medium. A true painter does NOT create in space—but on the plane, in color, and it is nonsense for him to strive for the spatial.<sup>67</sup>

Certainly, color held great significance for Rudolf Steiner,<sup>68</sup> but in a way that might have puzzled a modern colorist master-painter like Henri Matisse. And naturally so; to the best of our knowledge, Matisse was not an occultist. Nevertheless, Rudolf Steiner believed that

Color, however—this should have become perfectly clear to Anthroposophists—*color is something spiritual*. Now we do see colors in certain natural entities which are not spiritual; that is, in minerals. Recent physicists have made matters easier for themselves by saying that colors cannot inhere in dead substances because colors are mental; they exist within the mind only; outside, material atoms, vibrating in dead matter, affect eye, nerve, and something else undetermined; as a result of which colors arise in the soul. . . . Physics [therefore] does something absurd. It places behind the world swirling atoms, which are supposed to produce colors within us—when all the time it is divine-spiritual beings, creative in the infinitely distant past, who call forth, through colored minerals, a living memory of primeval acts of creativity.<sup>69</sup>

For Steiner the spiritual means by which to "annihilate" the dangerous sense of spatial illusionism is "the fourth dimension."<sup>70</sup> Steiner begins by noting how

strange [it is] that today painters chiefly ask themselves: "Can we, by rendering space more spatial, transcend space?" Then they try to depict, in a materialistic manner, a fourth dimen-

sion. But the fourth dimension can exist only through annihilation of the third, somewhat as debts annihilate wealth. . . . If we rise from matter's three dimensions to the etheric element, we find everything oriented two-dimensionally, and can understand the etheric only if we conceive of it so. . . . In the etheric it is not the third dimension which changes, but color. Regardless of where the plane is placed, the colors change accordingly. Only then can we live with and in color; rise from the spatial arts to those which, like painting, are two-dimensional. We overcome the merely spatial.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, Steiner had always recommended an intense scrutiny of the things of the material world—precisely in order to overcome them:

It is not theorizing when I say: In beholding the lifeless material world in color we stir cosmic memory; and, through Anthroposophical vision, we learn to understand how, in precious stones—in colored objects of all kinds—we call to mind the creative acts of the primordially active gods; and feel, therefore, the enthusiasm which only an experience of the spiritual kindles.<sup>72</sup>

As it turns out, such scrupulous study of natural effects is an essential component of Steiner's notorious pseudoscientific inclinations, in this case because "the spiritual evolution of mankind has always proceeded from the unity of science, art and religion. [Although], in present-day spiritual life, we have science, art and religion separated, yet we can look back to the time when these three streams flowed from a common source."<sup>73</sup>

The world mission of the Anthroposophical artist is, therefore, to restore this lost, primeval unity, which explains all those pseudoscientific babblings by Beuys. But, on the other hand, why employ babblings of any sort? Again, Steiner provides us with the answer:

By such [spiritual] awareness, man [today] could transplant himself into the time of the beginnings of primeval art. What is primeval art? It is nothing other than speech itself (a fact little understood today). . . . At that time, human beings did not intend to express through speech what they experienced upon earth, but rather what the soul experienced when it felt transported into the Cosmos.<sup>74</sup>

By definition therefore, any Anthroposophical artist is bound to be both a neoprimitivizing and a multimedia artist, that is, if he pays any heed to Steiner's injunctions:

If we wish to reawaken in mankind the true artistic mood, we must, to a certain degree, transport ourselves back into those ancient times, when the celestial, the poetic mood, lived in the human soul. Then we will receive an impression of how best to use other media to carry art to the world of the spirit; which is what must happen if art wants to be art.<sup>75</sup>

We conclude by touching upon the matter of the world mission of the Anthroposophical artist, who links his heightened awareness to spiritual ends,

thus bringing superior knowledge to his audience by means of his morally uplifted art. As Steiner put it,

Thus the Anthroposophical world-conception is capable of giving a strong impetus to cognition as well as to religious experience. In the case of cognition, it stresses the fact that one must travel a road of purification before passing the gate to the spiritual world. On the other hand, it stresses the truth that religious life leads far beyond the facts observable by a person with only ordinary earthly consciousness. . . . *It is here that art enters.* It forms a bridge across the abyss. That is why art must realize that *its task is to carry the spiritual-divine life into the earthly.*<sup>76</sup>

To accomplish his noble world mission, then the Anthroposophical artist must “find the way back to presentation of the spiritual, the genuine, the real; must re-find the divine-human element in art by re-finding the divine-spiritual. . . . Anthroposophy would like to lead human culture over into honest spiritual world-experience.”<sup>77</sup> In short, these were predetermined conditions of the artistic world mission of Joseph Beuys, an Anthroposophical artist par excellence.

### The Anthroposophical Educator

Joseph Beuys had been known primarily as an artist; now we can also identify him as an Anthroposophist. Accordingly, we have just examined in some detail the conditions, as laid out by Rudolf Steiner, of the world mission of the Anthroposophical artist. We have additionally noted on repeated occasions how Joseph Beuys took great pride in his other professional role, that is, as an educator of humanity at large. Consequently, it will now behoove us to look at the given conditions of being an Anthroposophical educator, a situation complementary, as we shall see, to this artist’s *Weltmission*. For this venture, as before, Steiner’s writings will prove our most dependable guide through the labyrinthine path of Joseph Beuys’s often cryptic public utterances. In this case, our needs will be largely served by four of Steiner’s publications: *Erziehung und Unterricht aus Menschenkenntnis* (1923); *Der Pädagogische Wert der Menschenkenntnis und der Kulturwert der Pädagogik* (1923); and *Die Methodik des Lehrens und die Lebensbedingungen des Erziehens* (1924); as complemented by the fundamental early work, *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?* (1904).<sup>78</sup>

First, however, we will examine some of Beuys’s own ideas, and the often politically radicalized means of their implementation, all the concrete results of his perceived world mission. As a teacher, Beuys followed the guiding principle that “one can no longer start from the old academic concept of educating great artists—that is always a happy coincidence. What one can start from is the idea that art, and experiences gained from art, can form an element that flows back



into life.”<sup>79</sup> This is of course rather vague. Fortunately, we have at hand a firsthand account by a former student, Johannes Stüttgen, summarizing Beuys’s activities in the Academy—where he was evidently more noted as provocateur than as professor:

When Beuys was invited [1961] to become Professor of Monumental Sculpture at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, it exactly fitted the state of his work on the widening of the concept of art, since this meant that it penetrated the institutions, and, first of all, the institution for which he was most competent: the art academy. What Beuys found [there] was a redundant and atrophied scene, state-run and bereft of ideas. Beuys proceeded systematically. He had brought the substance of the widened concept of his art to his workplace, and now it was taking effect. . . . Having declared that every human being is principally an artist, and that only a concept of art that embraced this totality could be of contemporary value, he naturally needed to insist on the unlimited acceptance of all who wished to be admitted as students. . . . It becomes clear how inappropriate [for Beuys] the separation of the “artistic” from the “pedagogical” or the “political” would be, since each developed logically out of the others. It follows that the widening of the concept of art means the extension of the freedom-impulse to all other concepts and to the field they determine, meaning that government and shaping of all earthly relationships are in the hands of the people. . . . And that was the experience of [Beuys’s] Monumental Sculpture: the redundant art academy had been blown up from within, and its indigestible remains had then to be completely ejected.<sup>80</sup>

Beuys himself elaborated upon these peculiar pedagogical ideas, again by taking a decidedly political stance, announcing,

*I am searching for “Field Character.” Only on the condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effect of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death-line: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This, the most modern art discipline—Social Sculpture/Social Architecture—will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or architect of the social organism. Only then would the insistence on participation by the action are of FLUXUS and Happenings be fulfilled; only then would democracy be fully realized. Only a conception of art, revolutionized to this degree, can turn it into a politically productive force, coursing through each person and shaping history.*

At this point Beuys introduces the spiritual element:

But all this, and much that is as yet unexplored, has first to form part of our consciousness: insight is needed into objective connections. We must probe (theory of knowledge) the origin of free individual productive potency (creativity). *We then reach the threshold where the human being experiences himself primarily as a spiritual being.*

This is the concept of art that carries within itself the revolutionizing [factor], not only of the historic bourgeois concept of knowledge (materialism, positivism), *but also of religious activity.* EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST, who, from his state of freedom—the position of freedom that he experiences at first hand—learns to determine the other positions

in the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. [The tenets include:] self-determination and participation in the cultural sphere (freedom), in the structuring of laws (democracy), and in the sphere of economics (socialism); self-administration and de-centralization (three-fold structure): FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM.<sup>81</sup>

However, as we learn from Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophical education is, in effect, both social and revolutionary in character: "Teachers ought to be conscious, especially nowadays, of their great social task, that they should ponder a great deal about this task. The teacher, above all others, should be deeply permeated by awareness of the great needs of modern civilization."<sup>82</sup> Steiner's educational policies, like Beuys's, were particularly committed to the principle of individual freedom; as Steiner had said, in reviewing the course of modern history,

We shall everywhere find the striving towards freedom, which ultimately finds expression in the revolutionary movements of the eighteenth-century. And this struggle of humanity to experience freedom inwardly is still going on. This could not have been, if the old [pre-Anthroposophical] mode of perception had remained. . . . [Therefore] *the educator must, above all things, develop a full consciousness of what is proceeding in human evolution on the earth.*<sup>83</sup>

The principle of freedom in the teacher-pupil relationship—leading to (as Beuys put it) "the threshold where the human being experiences himself primarily as a spiritual being"—was similarly of great concern to Steiner, who believed that

No teacher of the spiritual life wishes to establish a mastery over other persons[:] the bond of union embracing all initiates is spiritual. . . . Adapt each one of your actions, and frame each one of your words in such a way that you infringe upon no one's free-will. The recognition that all true teachers of the spiritual life are permeated through and through with this principle will convince all who follow the practical rules proffered to them that they need sacrifice none of their independence. . . . The teacher, as we know, can confer upon the pupil no powers which are not already latent within him, and his sole function is to assist in the awakening of slumbering faculties.<sup>84</sup>

Beuys also laid out his own ideas of education, finally putting to one side his strictly political soapbox. For Beuys, the ideal teacher-pupil relationship works very much as Steiner said it ought:

Communication occurs in reciprocity; it must never be a one-way flow, from the teacher to the taught. The teacher takes equally from the taught. And thus—at all times and every where, in any conceivable internal and external circumstance, between all degrees of ability, in the work-place, institutions, the street, work-circles, research-groups, schools—the master-pupil, transmitter-receiver, relationship oscillates. The ways of achieving this are manifold, corresponding to the varying gifts of individuals and groups.<sup>85</sup>

Now we will examine Steiner's general definitions of "the whole spirit of the pedagogy which should flow from Anthroposophy":

The basis of our pedagogy is to discover the method of teaching, the life-conditions of education, through reading in human nature itself, a reading which gradually reveals the being of man to us in such a way that we can suit our education to it in every step of the curriculum and of the time-table. . . . We reckon with a conception which advances in the true sense to a world-knowledge which realizes that man must cooperate in the great spiritual Cosmos that is also revealed in the world of sense. . . . We need a conception of the world, not for the intellect alone, but for the whole man, for the thinking, feeling, and willing man—a conception of the world which in the body, soul and spirit of man again discovers the world in him.<sup>86</sup>

Steiner's pedagogy, "this art of education," is holistic, spiritually restoring modern man's sense of alienation from nature and his fellows:

Modern civilization, which is otherwise so wonderful in its results and which has brought certain phenomena of nature so near to us, has actually alienated us from the human being. . . . [Ours is] the art that is working with the noblest substance of any that can be placed at the disposal of man, with the being of man himself. . . . True, genuine knowledge of man can not concern itself solely with understanding the single human being in body, soul and spirit, but that, above all, it must acquire a vision of the relations between man and man in earthly life.<sup>87</sup>

This is both art and pseudoscience; as for the latter, Steiner says that, "it is unjustifiable to say that Anthroposophical knowledge disregards natural science."<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, "we are grateful to science, but only in the sense in which we are grateful to the violin-maker for giving us the violin."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the Anthroposophical teacher "must be filled with the consciousness that all the knowledge acquired through modern science is dead knowledge, out of which we must create something living."<sup>90</sup> Why? "Matter oppresses men. Matter confines each man within his bodily nature, and each individual thereby becomes more or less an isolated soul."<sup>91</sup> How do we create something living, given that science is largely "dead knowledge"? The answer is, through art. Anthroposophical education is highly pictorial; according to Steiner, "I impart what I have taught the pupil in the form in which I bear it within me. *It must all be artistically transformed, brought into pictures.*"<sup>92</sup> Steiner believed that, from puberty on, all men wished to be artists:

Between the change of teet and puberty the child is an artist, albeit in a child-like way. . . . Since the child now wants to have everything brought before him in an artistic, pictorial way, the teacher must come to the child as one who gives artistic form to what he imparts. This is a demand that must be made of the teacher and educator of our age; it is an element that must flow into the art of education.<sup>93</sup>



To achieve this "flow," states Steiner, "we abandon the intellectual for the pictorial." In order to rationalize this move to antiintellectuality, Steiner posits that this kind of mindlessness prevents illness: "If we overstrain the intellect, and are not able to pass over into the pictorial, the breathing process in the child gets into disorder in a delicate, subtle way."<sup>94</sup> This is not an isolated instance; Anthroposophical education appears perversely to take a stand against learnedness. Steiner makes the nature of this "battle with deadening intellectualism" perfectly clear:

In our civilization, a healthy condition will be achieved only when we realize that to be "learned" in [the traditional] sense is actually harmful and, far from adding anything to a human being, it takes something away from him. . . . We must overcome the professorial quality—the learned knowledge, intellectual knowledge—which, at the present time, is the most disastrous of the three kinds [the two others being gymnastics and rhetoric] in all education.<sup>95</sup>

For our purposes, given that Joseph Beuys mainly fancied himself a sculptor, it is most enlightening to see the value placed upon sculpture in the polemics of Anthroposophical pedagogy. The Steinerian educator believes that "everywhere education must be brought to the point where it can *manipulate* what is needed by the human being—if I may use this rather material expression." Therefore, the Anthroposophical teacher mainly works "like a sculptor, working at the molding of his material."<sup>96</sup> But this is no mere poetic metaphor; the motif of the educator-sculptor is a constant leitmotiv in Anthroposophical antiintellectual pedagogy. According to Steiner,

Our present-day intellectuality enables us [only] to acquire knowledge of the physical body, and it serves this purpose admirably; anyone lacking intellect can not acquire such [materialistic] knowledge. But our university studies can take us no further than this. Because the [purely occultist] ether-body can not be comprehended by means of the intellect, but rather only by pictorial, intuitive perception, it would be immensely important if the teacher could learn to understand the ether-body.

You can not say: "But we surely can not expect all our teachers to develop clairvoyance, and so be able to describe the ether-body!" But, *let the teacher practice the art of sculpture*: this instead of studying those things which are so often studied in University courses. Anyone who really works at sculpture, and enters into its formative nature, will learn to experience the inner-structure of forms, and indeed of just those forms with which the human body of formative forces is also working.

Anyone who has a healthy sense of form will experience the plastic, sculptural element only in the animal and human kingdoms, not in the plant kingdom. Just imagine a sculptor who wanted to portray plants by means of sculpture! Out of sheer anger, one would feel like knocking him down! The plant consists of the physical-body and the ether-body; with these it is complete. The animal, on the other hand, envelops the ether-body with the astral-body, and this is still more the case with man. *This is why we can learn to comprehend the human etheric-body when, as sculptors, we work our way into the inner structure of the forms of Nature.* This, too, is why modelling should take a foremost place in the curriculum of a training

college, since it provides the means whereby the teacher may learn to understand the [occultist] body of formative forces.<sup>97</sup>

Surely Joseph Beuys, above all other artists, heeded Steiner's dictate that one should "let the teacher practice the art of sculpture." Now we also see why Beuys would not limit the sizes of his classes at the Düsseldorf Art Academy; as he well knew, "modelling should take a foremost place in the curriculum of a training college." Moreover, it is man's nature to be an artist, "albeit in a child-like way." As we now know, and as Beuys had already informed us in the title of his 1951 drawing called the "*Astralische Figur*", besides instilling principles of world-knowledge, the real purpose behind this social theory of sculpture was to reveal the existence of what Steiner called "etheric-bodies" and/or "astral-figures." As Steiner told any Anthroposophical educator, "We must acquire [and impart] a vision, a soul vision, to perceive the delicate, fleeting elements that play from soul to soul."<sup>98</sup>

### Politics and Anthroposophy

By now the strong and multifaceted Beuys-Steiner connection should be abundantly clear. We have already tightly drawn the Anthroposophical lasso around a great part of the corpus of Beuys's work as an artist, further identifying points of either near or exact convergence in certain critical Beuysian art activities. To sum up, our investigations have revealed compelling evidence for the Beuys-Steiner connection in such critical subcategories as: performance art (as "eurythmy"); sculpture ("the inner structure of the forms of Nature"); art theory (hot-cold = transformation-evolution); art teaching ("*geistliche Welterkenntnis*"); painting ("color is something spiritual"); and iconography (bees to bones; fat to felt).

In this section, the final one in this prolonged series of individual investigations, we shall take up the only area in which the Beuys-Steiner connection had been previously established. Specifically, this deals with a political factor prominently displayed in Beuys's pedagogical manifesto concerning the "total art work of the future social order." In this document, Beuys argued "that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power," capable of "dismantling a senile social system." Consequently, art is to be turned "into a politically productive force." Specifically, its basis was what Beuys had called the "three-fold structure." As had however been recognized some years ago by Beuys's German biographers, this statement essentially expressed "*ein umfassendes sozialpolitisches Konzept, das auf Ideen des Anthroposophen RUDOLF STEINER aufbaut.*"<sup>99</sup> In German, the still-current name for this distinctive pattern of pseudopolitical/pseudoscientific beliefs is "*die Dreigliederung des Sozialen Organismus.*" As we shall quickly see, this is another "total" concept, one in effect



embracing all of man's activities in the "sense-world." For this analysis our primary sources are two treatises by Rudolf Steiner, both dating from 1919: *Soziale Zukunft*, and *Die Kernpunkte der Soziale Frage in den Lebensnotwendigkeiten der Gegenwart and Zukunft*.<sup>100</sup>

In general terms, according to Rudolf Steiner, "society," or the "social order," consists of three separate but mutually dependent spheres, all forming the triadic totality (*die Dreigliederung*): the economic, the political (or state rights), and the cultural-spiritual. The last, or *geistiges*, sector embracing religion, science, education, and the arts is best explained by the peculiarities of the German language, in which the term *Geist* can mean "spirit," "mind," "ghosts," "intellect," "wit," or "the creative imagination"—or all of them at once. The essential characteristic of the cultural-spiritual realm, hence of education itself, is freedom. According to the elaborate picture drawn by Steiner, in the political-economic sphere, education requires and in turn enhances the individual's human freedom. All three spheres of society, says Steiner, benefit from education. Nevertheless, only the cultural-spiritual realm (not the political or economic) should exercise a decisive influence over education, and then only in a manner compatible with a "true," which is to say strictly Anthroposophical, understanding of human development.

Throughout his many writings on society and education, Steiner sought to solve the double problem of society and education, a complementary dualism in his mind. Specifically, he recommended imagination, inspiration, and intuition to all students coming within his reach. As was constantly explained in Steiner's basic works (ranging in tone from the most blatantly occultist to the more obscurely "practical"), imagination is primarily cultivated by the etheric body; inspiration is native to the astral body; and intuition is fostered by the ego, or "I." With the development of the astral body during puberty, the student is capable of inspired knowledge—actually pseudoscientific, protoartistic "knowledge" and relationships underlying observable phenomena. These "laws" are all essentially grasped in, or subjected to, a supersensible, clairvoyant-intuitive, perception. Whatever the means, the arts and sciences, literature and history—in short, all those *Natur- und Geistwissenschaftliche* subjects—are treated as complementary ways of enabling the student to develop an imaginative and inspired knowledge of the supersensible world, and of his or her own rapidly changing, personal life course. When, at approximately age twenty-one, the "I" incarnates in the person, one then gains the capacity for self-education. At this point, and however awkwardly, the young adult enters into the double task of harmonizing the self and developing a creative relationship to the external world.

All of this, as we have repeatedly seen, was based upon a notion of polarities, or "opposites"; the ultimate goal was therefore the hermetic *coincidentia oppositorum*. As Steiner and his followers all agreed, personal and



social life in the modern West is spiritually crippled by several dualisms: inner-outer, scientific-artistic, thinking-feeling, physical-spiritual, and so forth. Accordingly, in order to make those "opposites coincide," Anthroposophical education, based upon countless pedagogical and curricular experiments, aims to enable its students to replace the "dead intellectualism" characterizing the materialistic and commercialized "Scientism" of modern Western life. This shall be replaced by a new kind of thinking, one that is supposedly more alive, whole, imaginative, and socially sensitive. This was also Beuys's pedagogical program.

But, even as an author wholly sympathetic to Anthroposophical "spiritual science" has recognized, "objections to Steiner's social theories will ultimately focus on his contention that the ideal social order is, or ought to be, determined by the spiritual needs of each individual."<sup>101</sup> Even so, in a highly appreciative foreward to a book by Steiner decrying the limitations of modern science, Nobel laureate Saul Bellow states that we cannot think of social renewal until we begin to attain Steiner's keen, "initiated" insights into strictly "spiritual science," and thus raise our minds to that higher consciousness that will help the monolithic West to move beyond the boundaries of its present-day, materially-bound scientific thinking.<sup>102</sup> By doing so, suggests Bellow, we shall attain the imaginative and free experience of all those latent spiritual forces known to the esoteric tradition. Bellow also warns us that any failure to develop a closer, truer relation to both the external world and the interior self-will shall result in a civilization bereft of mobility and will leave us with communities that are spiritually more dead than alive. As becomes evident, Bellow's apocalyptic vision certainly warrants more scholarly investigations along strictly Steinerian lines.

Having drawn this macrocosmic Anthroposophical context, we may now examine the microcosm of Steiner's thoughts on the "social question." Its central tenet is that "liberated spiritual life will, necessarily, develop social understanding."<sup>103</sup> Moreover, "everything in the social organism, when viewed *realistically*, indicates the necessity for the transformation of the social organism."<sup>104</sup> Overall, "the chaotic condition of our public life derives from the dependence of spiritual life upon the political-state and economic interests." Therefore, "the liberation of spiritual life and culture from this dependence constitutes an important element of the burning social question."<sup>105</sup> Accordingly, and just as Beuys had demonstrated, the *Geistesleben* requires free self-administration [i.e.,] the administration of education, from which all culture develops, must be turned over to the educators."<sup>106</sup> However, in true esoteric, macro/microcosmic fashion, Steiner then uses a human-corporeal metaphor to illuminate his tripartite discussion of, as it were, the "body politic," that is comprised of "economy," "civil rights," and "spiritual life."

Economic life must constitute an autonomous member within the social organism, as relatively autonomous as is the nervous-sensory system within the human organism. The economy is

concerned with all aspects of the production, circulation and consumption of commodities. The second member of the social organism is that of civil rights, of political life as such. . . . This second member of the social organism can only concern itself with all aspects of the relations between human beings which derive from purely human sources. . . . The economy is separate from the rights member, as in the human natural organism the activity of the lungs [is separate] from the activity of the lungs in processing the outside air [in turn] separate from the processes of the nervous-sensory system. The third member . . . pertains to spiritual life . . . that which must enter into the social organism, based on the natural aptitudes, spiritual as well as physical, of each individual. . . . It is concerned with everything which must blossom forth from each human individuality and so be integrated into the social organism.<sup>107</sup>

The present problem is, as one might guess, specifically a modern one: before this there was "ancient wisdom." Specifically, the problem arose in the fifth post-Atlantean age (or, as others might call it, the Renaissance); before then, "the old world-connections considered the human being to be a soul-entity, existing within a spiritually existential framework."<sup>108</sup> In the larger sense, as Steiner recognized,

In a healthy social organism the autonomous spiritual sector must function alongside the political and economic sectors. The evolutionary forces in modern mankind point toward a triformation *Dreigliederung* of this organism. As long as society was essentially governed by instinctive forces, the urge for this formation did need to arise.<sup>109</sup>

And what has caused the present-day social problems? It was/is that old intellectualizing and unspiritual bugaboo: science. As Steiner believed,

According to modern scientific thought, however, man is no more than a natural being, within the natural order of things. This science is not experienced as a current, one which flows from man's mind from a spiritual world and which also sustains his soul. . . . Those old-world conceptions, with their religious foundations, were not able to impart their soul-sustaining impulses to modern modes of thinking.<sup>110</sup>

Steiner affirmed that "a fundamental, determining characteristic of the present [chaotic] social situation is that modern proletarian class-consciousness has been cultivated by concepts which derive from modern *scientific* developments."<sup>111</sup> This baleful, uniquely modern situation is, of course, pejoratively contrasted to the good old days, when life could "only be justified through belief in a universal, spiritual order of things." Now, unfortunately, "the modern proletarian is continuously harangued by agitators with such things as: modern science has cured man of believing that he has a spiritual origin; he knows now that, in primitive times, he clambered indecorously around in trees and that he has a purely natural origin."<sup>112</sup> In the present case, besides Darwin, the big bugaboo is

Karl Marx's thought, which can be accepted by one individual and rejected by another. . . . Its most meaningful characteristic is, to me, the fact that the most powerful impulse active in the



working-class world is a system of thought. No practical movement has ever stood so exclusively on a foundation of *pure* ideation as does this modern proletarian movement. It is the first movement of its kind in history to have chosen a *scientific* foundation. . . . He believes [therefore] that only the evolution of unspiritual, soulless economic life can bring about conditions which *he* feels correspond to human dignity. He is, therefore, forced to seek his salvation in the transformation of economic life.<sup>113</sup>

Among other things, what we learn from this is that recent talk of "godless communism" is, after all, "nothing new under the sun." But, after all this, and given our interest in the workings of the mind of Joseph Beuys, it should be mentioned that Rudolf Steiner is very much concerned with the question of a social art. According to him, "in reality, the meaning of the [Anthroposophical] movement is to be found in its striving, with set purpose, to bring about a renewal of our whole civilization, as it is expressed in art, religion, science, education and other human activities; in fact, it may truly be said that a renewal is sorely needed, from the foundation of social life upwards."<sup>114</sup> Art, as Steiner sees it, is particularly indicative of the need for a renewal in modern life: "The chief characteristic in the development of modern art is that it has lost the inner impulse that should drive it to place before the world what is felt by humanity as a pressing need."<sup>115</sup> The underlying problem is summed up by a rhetorical question: "What will be the future of art, if it is inspired only by the recent impulses towards naturalism? Art such as this can never grow out of life."<sup>116</sup> The answer is that, in effect, art must once again get in touch with everyday life: "It is distinctly evident in social life that great numbers of people look on art as something that does not belong to every human life."<sup>117</sup> This theme is further expanded into a veritable jeremiad, in which the baleful effects of naturalistic art that does not touch everyday life are likened to the pernicious effects stemming from modern science:

Do we not see how art has lost its connection with life? Here, too, praiseworthy endeavors have come to light in the last few decades, but these have been by no means decided enough. . . . Practical life can not be raised to artistic form because art has separated itself from life. . . . Objects must transcend nature, just as human life transcends itself. If art merely imitates, it fails in the shaping of practical life, and practical life thereby becomes prosaic, uninteresting and dry. . . . We have moved in like manner in other domains of modern civilization. Have we not seen that science has gradually ceased to proclaim to us the [spiritual] foundation that lies at the base of all sensory life? Little wonder that art has not found the way out of the world of the senses since science itself has lost that way. By degrees, science has come to the point of merely registering the outer facts of the senses, or at most to comprise them in natural laws. Intellectualism of the most pronounced types has overspread all modern scientific activity to an ever increasing degree.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast to the false, strictly physical science, Steiner states that "Spiritual Science will penetrate the phenomena and facts of nature. Instead of remaining



in regions foreign to life, it will find its way into reality. . . . Spiritual Science will be able to pierce the surface and penetrate into the social order, and will work for a reality in social life, which baffles our abstract, intellectual, natural science."<sup>119</sup> In the new Steinerian world of social renewal, art will play a central social role, casting its immense spiritual powers into every mundane sector. Steiner's utopian vision describes the "renewed," Anthroposophical millenium when

once more an Art will arise, filled with spirit, an art in no way symbolical, in no way allegorical, which does not betray its luxurious character by attempting to rival Nature, to the perfection of which it can never attain. Art demonstrates its necessity, its justification, in human life by proclaiming the existence of something of which the ordinary, direct beholding of Nature—"naturalism"—can give us no information. Even if the artist's attempt to give expression to something spiritual be but a clumsy effort, he is giving form to something that has a significance apart from nature because it transcends nature. . . . Then, for the first time, large numbers of people will feel spiritual life to be a vital necessity, when [through Art] spiritual life and practical life are brought into direct connection with each other. As Spiritual Science is able to throw light on the nature of matter, so will Art, born of Spiritual Science, attain to the power of giving direct form to every chair, every table, to every man-created object.<sup>120</sup>

To conclude, what Steiner wrote, Beuys believed.

## Epilogue

In the preceding series of essentially iconographic analyses, we examined a considerable body of documentary evidence, all of which appears to confirm Joseph Beuys's evidently mostly unquestioning, but certainly consistent, adherence to the tenets and even the tactics of Anthroposophy, a specific kind of occultism. As has been revealed in these pages, Beuys's much discussed *Aktionen*, in addition to many of his less transitory or more tangible art works, must now, for the most part, be taken to represent imaginative *ekphraseis*—visual reenactments of authoritative texts. These texts we have specifically identified as Rudolf Steiner's esoteric teachings, known to Beuys through Steiner's literary remains, which have so often been posthumously reprinted by Anthroposophical presses all over the world. Inevitably, the real subject of all Steiner's divers published proclamations was—as Beuys well knew—occult science, *Die Geheime Wissenschaft*.

By comparing statements originally issued by Steiner with certain phrases uttered much later by Beuys, we have finally uncovered the real significance of Beuys's active involvement in such diverse fields as art, education, performance, science, economics, religion, agriculture, sociology, and the contemporary social order. Such revelations recover, and for the very first time, the absolute consistency of Beuys's thought, uniting, and thus explaining, his eager participation in such a plethora of seemingly diverse subjects and interests. In short, these were all topics upon which Rudolf Steiner had written copiously and, for Beuys, convincingly.

At the outset of this investigation I proposed that Joseph Beuys would serve as a microcosm, and that the larger macrocosm, into which he fit so perfectly, would be the world of the contemporary avant-garde, *La Avanguardia* in the terminology of its foremost historical theorist, Renato Poggioli. At this point it is of interest to note that the term "*avant garde*," now standard in English and in German, whether in the original French or the Italian adaptation (or in Spanish: *La Vanguardia*), was borrowed from military usage, where it originally designated a sort of cavalry action, an armed reconnaissance, a perilous and fugitive sweep behind the lines into enemy territory. The common "enemy" of

the avant-garde of alienated modern artists, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in these pages, is—*épater le bourgeois!*—the harmless but philistine middle-class worker-citizen, who industriously and narrowly applies himself to his job and to the material needs of his nuclear family. But there is nothing new about this élitist attitude either; as Horace had it, “*Odi profanum vulgus et arceo.*” Other targets of opportunity, constantly being sniped at by the twentieth-century dragoons of the avant-garde, are materialism, the state (or “the establishment”), and, last but not least, the quantitative physical sciences. All these are lumped together under the pejorative rubric of “tradition,” that which should be spontaneously overturned, noisily and dramatically if not violently, with all the reckless flair of an unarmed terrorist *razzia*. The Italian Futurists had a convenient term for this particular impulse: *antipassatismo*.

As we have repeatedly seen demonstrated in practice, the rationale explaining this essentially abstract choice of diverse avantgardist targets is that they are all somehow unspiritual. Moreover, avant-garde art is, by definition, literally esoteric to the larger masses of humanity, as José Ortega y Gasset recognized: “The characteristic of the new art, from a social viewpoint, consists of dividing the public into two classes of men—those who understand it and those who do not.”<sup>1</sup> The larger program of the militant-esoteric front of the avant-garde is at once revolutionary and utopian. All of the rhetorical essentials of the militarized (albeit in mufti) artistic avant-garde programs had been laid out nearly a century and a half ago. In 1845, a little-known Fourieriste, Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant, published an equally little-known treatise, *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*. In this obscure work, we find the same kind of prescriptions (i.e., dealing with the initiatory role of art as an instrument for radical social action and reform) that Joseph Beuys was to make seem so “new” in the 1960s and 1970s within the context of a newly revitalized avant-garde of performance art. According to Laverdant,

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is. . . . Along with the hymn to happiness [the artist pictures] the dolorous and despairing ode. . . . To lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society, this is the mission of the avant-garde artist.<sup>2</sup>

As Poggioli acutely recognized, antagonism is the underlying psychological current stirring the turbid waters of the coming avant-garde millennial maelstrom. Nevertheless, Poggioli also observed that

At times, the socio-psychological dialectic is left behind altogether, and the antagonism is elevated to a cosmic, metaphysical antagonism: a defiance of God and the Universe. . . . At



other times, with less extreme but purer tension, it surmounts its own specific hostility to the external factors of public and tradition to establish a context between subject and object, artist and artifact. Both the artist and artifact thus come to be antithetical or contrasted. . . . But then the contest is nothing other than the wrestling of Tobias with the Angel. *Antagonism transcends itself in agonism and ascends to the sphere of aesthetic mysticism.*<sup>3</sup>

Somewhat to my surprise, what Poggioli had termed "the sphere of aesthetic mysticism" turned out to be the largest macrocosm of all those contained in this book. That particular macrocosm, which encompasses "aesthetic mysticism," has revealed itself to be the nearly universal cultural enframing. As it now appears to me, this is the macrocosm enfolding not only Beuys but, additionally, huge stretches of the disjointed territories encroached upon by some of the more notable avant-garde phenomena of the late 1960s and 1970s. Under the innocuous soubriquet of New Age lifestyle and trappings, the ubiquitous esoteric tradition even insinuates itself with undiminished vigor into the present day, and into nearly every nook and cranny of popular life reached by the mass media.

Taking Poggioli's aperçu out of a narrowed esthetic sphere, looking at it instead from a global cultural perspective (one pertaining only to the so-called developed nations), we can call what Poggioli viewed as a rather vague premonition of mysticism instead of the recognizable outbreak of the esoteric tradition—or, more simply, revived occultism (*occultismus redivivus*). In this case, the art historian is fortunate in finally having at hand a variety of recent scholarly publications documenting the importance of the esoteric tradition in the formation of radically avant-garde art, at least up to the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> However, as all the arguments presented in this book have demonstrated, Joseph Beuys was unquestionably a card-carrying member of the esoteric tradition, even if a late bloomer.

Our other task in these pages has been to present a preliminary reconnaissance (the avant-garde of scholarship) into a stretch of largely virgin territory: the esoteric tradition and its effects upon thinking about art during the late modernist period, beginning in the mid-1960s. Needless to say, much more detailed scholarly work is called for, work of the sort that has here been mainly applied to the art and thought of Joseph Beuys. We have already seen the hallmarks of the still-vital esoteric tradition, revealing its essence in certain stereotypical attitudes, all constituting a distinctive psychological response. By recognizing the commonplace components of this particular psychological syndrome, one can now begin to perceive the still-hidden connections between traditional occultist thought patterns and certain concrete, specifically visual manifestations, currently gathered together under the rubric of "art."

Besides endless reiterations of the theme of a largely fictitious ancient wisdom, we could sum up all the individual and diverse ramifications of the ongoing occultist attitude (the details and specific manifestations of which were explained in chapters 2 and 3) by simply repeating Germano Celant's statement

to the effect that his cohorts in *Arte Povera* were "Artist-chemists, who organize living and vegetable matter into magic things, working to discover the [hidden] root of things." In sum, once the general currency of such often blatantly esoteric ideas is granted, then we see the validity of my constantly reiterated assertion that, had not Joseph Beuys been born, we should have had to invent him.

If we grant the general acceptance (at least in certain elitist quarters) of often subtle occultist thought patterns, then we need to seek an explanation for it. What psychological needs does it answer? As one author has recognized, such widespread contemporary occult activities and beliefs mainly

appeal to those disillusioned with the apparent failure of traditional values and systems. Seeking beliefs and ideas, the individual is beckoned by the occult and pseudo-sciences. The latter also serve as vehicles for "outsiders," those whom the Establishment has not, or can not absorb. Perhaps the natural tendency is a by-product of adolescent rebellion [hence] younger people are [most often] the customers.<sup>5</sup>

In the particular case of pseudoscience, that essential component of modern occultism, Martin Gardner points out that "The average fan may well be a chap in his teens, with a smattering of "scientific" knowledge (culled however mainly from science fiction), enormously gullible, with a strong bent toward occultism, no real understanding of the scientific method, and a basic insecurity, for which he compensates by fantasies of scientific 'power.'"<sup>6</sup> While valid, these conclusions are still rather generalized. It has been demonstrated here that, unquestionably, Joseph Beuys yielded to the seductive thrall of Anthroposophy. In this case some serious scholarly research has been done specifically on the psychological traits distinguishing the present-day adherents to Rudolf Steiner's "occult science." Geoffrey Ahern appears to be the only scholar ever to have explored in a methodical way the question of "who is most likely to be converted to Anthroposophy."<sup>7</sup> Based on extensive interviews, Ahern finds that eleven psychological traits characterize the Anthroposophical convert. Ironically, the results of Dr. Ahern's investigations into the psychological makeup of Steiner's current followers may also remind one of the characteristics of some New Age art students. According to Ahern,

1. Such people tend to come from middle-class backgrounds.
2. "Many described themselves as unhappy as children."
3. Instead of worldliness, there tends to be in these devotees a "rather quaint earnestness," leading to "a removed quality, which could become strange and disturbing."
4. There is among them "considerable criticism of their mothers," and "nearly all reacted against their fathers."



5. Most had been accepted for traditional university courses, which most had then "rejected as meaningless."
6. For such people, "conventional work-roles were seen as an imprisonment."
7. There is also a "strong tendency towards vegetarianism."
8. All these people "basically deplored a wage-mentality."
9. "Almost all the members were white."
10. Most followers "come from cold and broken pasts, that often lacked satisfactory social contacts."
11. Finally, and above all, "Anthroposophists strive to leave materialism and individualism behind, and to develop spiritual individuality instead."

On the basis of what we have learned about Joseph Beuys, he fits the pattern with near-clinical perfection.

One other observation may be added to Ahern's conclusions: obviously Anthroposophists are in the thrall of a great leader. Before Beuys the charismatic *Führer* of such esotericism was Rudolf Steiner. His magnetic effect upon his devoted followers was lovingly recorded by his wife and occultist helpmate, Marie von Stivers-Steiner:

During his performances, as he himself delivered them, the cadences of his voice seemed to stream out from spiritual depths, revealing radiant glimpses of cosmic mysteries. And now, even after his death, he still makes for us that sacrifice which he had to make throughout his whole life—the sacrifice, that is to say, of allowing the disjointed fragments of his spirit to be preserved and written down by another hand. Those who drew life from his spirit demanded this sacrifice. None know what it cost him. But the sacrifice was made. It has saved for our age the wisdom which reveals the relationship of universe and man; it has preserved for present-day humanity—no longer able to remember the word of the spirit without the aid of the written record—that store of knowledge which can raise man, ever more and more, to the consciousness of the concrete reality of the spirit; it contains the kindling, life-awakening spark. . . . Salvation lies in the spiritual work of Rudolf Steiner. He sounded the awakening call which can free humanity from the dangers of becoming animalized, stupified and mechanized.<sup>8</sup>

Since we have already read the written reminiscences of certain enthralled testators to the magic of Beuys's *Aktionen*, we can easily believe that Marie von Steiner's hagiographical memories of her husband's magical performances before thrilled crowds of earnest Anthroposophists are analogues to some still-living memories of Beuys's own public activities.

In the case of the present art historian-emanuensis, the preceding only represents "the disjointed fragments of [Beuys's] spirit, as preserved and written down" by this author's hand. Nevertheless, by such memorializing industry it is to be hoped that one can once again see Beuys's performance pieces, "as he



himself delivered them," and thereby once again hear "the cadences of his voice," and feel the magnitude of his "spiritual depths, revealing radiant glimpses of cosmic mysteries."

Now a final statement is in order. Only after investigating the influential but little understood *Aktionen* of Joseph Beuys can we fully appreciate his considerable stature as an artist. In short, as we now understand, Beuys took as his immediate subject matter a sprawling body of pretentious and garbled writings. Like a truly masterful alchemist, Joseph Beuys transcended this dross, transmuting his esoteric source materials into haunting, often unforgettable images, many of which breathed an undeniably great poetic and evocative power, and some of which were invested with a strange but undeniable beauty.

With our new-found art appreciation, we can now wholeheartedly wish all success to the "astral body" of the late Joseph Beuys, an ethereal being now surely transported into those exalted higher worlds of pure spirit discussed so often and so eloquently by Rudolf Steiner. Finally, we must fittingly consign to the Anthroposophical supersensible world the corpus of Joseph Beuys—both his physical body and his spiritualized oeuvre.

# Notes

## Abbreviations for works on Joseph Beuys

*Beuys I:* Adriani, G., Konnertz, W., Thomas, K., *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, New York: Barron's, 1979 (*idem.*, *Joseph Beuys: Leben und Werk*, Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1986).

*Beuys II:* Tisdall, C., *Joseph Beuys*, London: Phaidon, 1979.

## Abbreviations for works by Rudolf Steiner

*Steiner I:* *An Outline of Occult Science*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1979.

*Steiner II:* *Occult Signs and Symbols*, New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1980.

*Steiner III:* *Rosicrucian Esotericism*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1978.

*Steiner IV:* *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man*, New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1971.

*Steiner V:* *The Course of My Life*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1986.

*Steiner VI:* *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1986.

## Introduction

1. E. Swedenborg (G. F. Dole, ed.), *Heaven and Hell*, New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1984, pp. 80–82.

## Chapter 1

1. My principal sources for what follows on Joseph Beuys are *Beuys I* (note: references to the 1986 edition in German follow in brackets) and *Beuys II*; but see also Bibliography, citing all the pertinent published literature up to 1986. For the contemporary German art context, see K. Thomas, *Zweimal deutsche Kunst nach 1945: 40 Jahre Nähe und Ferne*, Cologne: DuMont, 1985.
2. D. Carrier, "Art and Its Market," in R. Hertz (ed.), *Theories of Contemporary Art*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985, pp. 193–205.

3. E. Kleinbauer (ed.), *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History, An Anthology of 20th-Century Writings on the Visual Arts*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, pp. 2–5.
4. E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955, pp. 28, 31–32. For more on this scholarly technique, so rarely employed for problems of modern art, see E. Kaemmerling (ed.), *Ikonographie und Ikonologie: Theorien—Entwicklung—Probleme*, Cologne: DuMont, 1979.
5. M. Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985*, Los Angeles: L.A. County Museum of Art, 1986; henceforth, *SPART* (in which I deal with Marcel Duchamp's involvement with alchemical symbolism; see pp. 256–71).
6. Previously, scholarly analyses of modern artists' involvement with occultist ideas and motifs have largely dealt only with case studies of individual artists; see, for example, the pioneering study by Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Åbo Akademi, Finland, 1970. For another earlier bibliography, see *SPART*, esp. pp. 58–61.
7. See J. F. Moffitt (ed.), "Modern Art & Alchemy," special issue of *Cauda Pavonis*, VI/1, Spring 1987; L. D. Henderson (ed.), "Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art," special issue of *Art Journal*, XLVI/1, Spring 1987; K. J. Regier (ed.), *The Spiritual Image in Modern Art*, Wheaton, IL, Quest, 1987.
8. All of these ideas, particularly as they relate to the formulation of modernist art theory, were developed in the Symbolist period; for their respective sources (often found in contemporary occultist publications), see F. E. Burhan, *Vision and Visionaries: Nineteenth-Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France*, Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 1979.
9. For instance, Beuys is mentioned only in passing in a largely unfocused essay by Donald Kuspit attempting to explore occultist involvements by contemporary artists; see *SPART*, pp. 313–25.
10. For a classic statement about the ramifications of this sweeping concept, manifested in literary, artistic, and other cultural contexts since 1870, see R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
11. T. Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, New York: Bantam, 1975, pp. 25–26, 44, 89. Certainly, Wolfe is not the only observer of the trendiness of the avant garde; in fact, Renato Poggioli (ibid., p. 79 ff.) had some illuminating comments to make about "fashion, avant-garde, and stereotype," noting that "the chief characteristic of fashion is to impose and suddenly to accept as a new rule or norm what was, until a minute before, an exception or whim, then to abandon it again after it has become a commonplace, everybody's 'thing.' . . . In the particular case of modern taste, [fashion] appears simultaneously as the great justifier, modifier, and denier of avant-garde art. In the art world it also exercises its function of arbiter of the ephemeral."
12. H. Smagula, *Currents: Contemporary Directions in the Visual Arts*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983. p. 224 ff.
13. *Beuys II*, p. 190.
14. Mackintosh, ibid., p. 192 (emphasis mine).
15. R. Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 381–83. For the immediate, German art historical context, see Thomas, op. cit.



16. A. Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings, and Performance*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 147.
17. *Beuys I*, pp. 82–83 [pp. 95–98].
18. For thorough accounts of these earlier phenomenon in their art historical contexts, see A. Melzer, *Latest Rage the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance*, Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1980; J. Garrett Glover, *The Cubist Theatre*, Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1983. Also useful are the following, also published by the U.M.I. Research Press (1980–1986): D. G. Zinder, *The Surrealist Connection: An Approach to a Surrealist Aesthetic of Theatre*; T. Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*; A. DeShong, *The Theatrical Designs of George Grosz*; S. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962–1964*.
19. D. J. Boorstin, *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, pp. 22–23.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.
21. A. Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism," in Hertz, *Theories*, pp. 163–66.
22. J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, rpt: London: Abacus, 1975, p. 11.
23. Smagula, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
24. *Beuys I*, p. 118 [137].
25. W. Vostell, "Beuys: Ich bin ein Sender, ich strahle aus," in *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, December 3, 1964; in *Beuys I*, pp. 119–24 [pp. 139 = 45].
26. C. Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, rpt: New York: Page, 1932, xix–xx.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 619–31.

## Chapter 2

1. Some of the ideas developed here were first suggested by the following (all too brief) introduction to the matter at hand: A. di Felice, "Renaissance Performance: Notes on Prototypical Artistic Actions in the Age of the Platonic Princes," in G. Battcock (ed.), *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984, pp. 3–23. For other recent critical-historical perspectives, see S. C. Foster (ed.), *"Event" Arts and Art Events*, Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988.
2. Although the literature touching upon various aspects of Neoplatonic influences on Renaissance art is copious, the following classic studies may serve as useful introductions: E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New York: Norton, 1968; E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London: Phaidon, 1972.
3. The fundamental study of this phenomenon was produced some time ago by E. Panofsky, *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1924.
4. On this, see F. J. Yates, *Theatre of the World*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969; S. Orgel and R. Strong, *Inigo Jones*, London: Sotheby Park Bernet, 1973; S. Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1975.

5. For Bellincioni's written description of Leonardo's *Paradiso*, see M. Fagiolo (ed.), *La scenografia, dalle sacre rappresentazioni al futurismo*, Florence: Sansoni, 1973, pp. 45–46. One wonders whether in this case Leonardo's conception had not in fact been shaped by a passage from Ficino's *Theologia platonica*, discussing mechanical models of the heavenly spheres: "Since man has observed the order of the heavens, when they move, whither they proceed and with what measures, and what they produce, who could deny that man possesses, as it were, almost the same genius as the Author of the Heavens? And who could deny that man could also make the heavens, could he only obtain the instruments and the heavenly material, since even now he makes them, though of a different material, but still with a very similar order?" (Ficino, as quoted in Orgel, 1975, p. 58).
6. For more on this spectacle, see A. Warburg, "I costumi teatrali per gli *Intermezzi* del 1589; I disegni di Bernardo Buontalenti e il 'Libro di conti' di Emilio de' Cavalieri," in G. Bing (ed.), *La rinascità del paganesimo antico: Contributi alla storia della cultura*, Florence: Nuova Italia, 1970, pp. 59–107.
7. For a selection of the surviving visual documentation, see the following: J. Scholz (ed.), *Baroque and Romantic Stage Design*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949; F. Mancini, *Scenografia italiana: Dal Rinascimento all'età romantica*, Milan: Fabbri, 1966; M. Fagiolo, *La scenografia*, op. cit. (including a useful appendix with some of the surviving texts).
8. Much of late has been written on the symbolic programs of the Renaissance and Baroque spectacles; for several model analyses of these materials in Spain, see S. Sebastián, *Arte y humanismo*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1978; idem., *Contrarreforma y barroco: Lecturas iconográficas e iconológicas*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1981.
9. M. H. Morgan (ed.), *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914, p. 284.
10. Ibid., p. 150. As is well known, this idea soon became a commonplace in Renaissance thought, being developed at much greater length by Sebastiano Serlio in his *Secondo Libro d'architettura* (1545, p. 28 ff.); for Serlio's text, see Fagiolo, op. cit., pp. 47–52.
11. James Leoni (ed.), *The Architecture of Leon Batista Alberti. In Ten Books . . .*, London, 1755, p. 162. Rpt. New York: Dover, 1986.
12. J. R. Spencer (ed.), *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, pp. 43–55.
13. Ibid., p. 57.
14. Ibid., p. 64.
15. Ibid., p. 69.
16. Ibid., pp. 75–80 (emphasis mine).
17. Di Felice, op. cit., p. 8.
18. For Bernini's stage productions, see V. Mariani, "Bernini regista e scenografo," in *Studi . . . in onore di L. de' Gregori*, Rome, 1949, pp. 254–64; C. Molinari, "Note in margine all'attività teatrale di G. L. Bernini," *Critica d'arte*, II, 1962, pp. 1–5.
19. For a detailed contemporary description of Bernini's flood scene, see Domenico Bernini, *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernini*, Rome: Rocco Bernabò, 1713; translated in G. C. Bauer (ed.), *Bernini in Perspective*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976, pp. 24–41.

20. H. Hibbard, *Bernini*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965, p. 133.
21. Domenico Bernini, as quoted in Bauer, op. cit., p. 32 (emphasis mine).
22. I. B. Leavens, *From "291" to Zürich: The Birth of Dada*, Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1983, p. 52.
23. Poggioli, op. cit., 27–29.
24. For these two fundamental concepts in modern art thinking, appearing in many different contexts, see *SPART*; these are also discussed in a specifically Dadaist context by Leavens, op. cit.
25. H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth-Century Music*, London: Weidenfeld, 1969, p. 17.
26. Ibid., pp. 7, 24.
27. Ch. Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris," *Revue Européenne*, April 1861; in P. E. Charvet (ed.), *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, pp. 325–57.
28. Ibid., p. 326–27.
29. Ibid., pp. 327–31 (emphasis mine).
30. Ibid., pp. 331–32.
31. Wagner, as quoted in ibid., pp. 338–40. Another statement by Wagner provides apparently convincing evidence for the composer's involvement with contemporary occultist beliefs. As Wagner affirmed, "I am convinced that there are universal currents of Divine Thought, vibrating in the ether everywhere, and that anyone who can feel those vibrations is inspired, provided he is conscious of the process. . . . I believe, first of all, that it is this universal vibrating energy that binds the soul of man to the Almighty central power, from which emanates the Life-Principle to which we all owe our existence. This energy links us to the Supreme Force of the Universe, of which we are all a part. . . . In that trance-like condition, which is the prerequisite of all true creative effort, I feel that I am one with this vibrating Force, that it is omniscient, and that I can draw upon it to an extent that is limited only by my own capacity to do so. . . . Imagination is the creative force, and this is true, I find, not only of musical creations but also of external circumstances. . . . Believe me, imagination creates the reality [*die Fantasie schafft die Wirklichkeit*]. This is a great cosmic law." Wagner, as quoted by J. Godwin (ed.), *Music, Mysticism and Magic: A Sourcebook* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 238; as Godwin concludes from this statement, Wagner's "beliefs had come to resemble those being publicized at the same time [1880] by the Theosophical Society," founded by Madame Blavatsky five years earlier.
32. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, rpt: New York: New American Library, 1958, p. 293.
33. R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, Philadelphia: Innes, 1902, p. 2.
34. H. Kohn, *The Mind of Germany: The Education of a Nation*, rpt: New York: Harper & Row, 1965, pp. 190–204.
35. For these early performance pioneers, also including detailed examinations of Cubist, Expressionist, Surrealist, etc., theatre practice, see Melzer, Glover, Zinder, Benson, DeShong, Banes, op. cit. Note, however, that "Expressionist" theatre *per se* is not like contemporary



performance art inasmuch as it generally has some kind of a narrative line, however "abstract" the characters may be; for this, see J. Willett, *Expressionism*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970, p. 117 ff., "Expressionism in the Theatre."

36. According to the *OED*, the first reference to the word "synesthesia" appeared in *The Century Dictionary*, 1889–1891.
37. As Baudelaire put it in this famous sonnet: "Tout signe exprime une pensée./ Et toute forme sous les cieux/ Est une figure tracée/ Par le penseur mystérieux." For the complete text of "Correspondences," see Burhan, *op. cit.*, p. 216, pointing out (p. 139) how heavily Baudelaire's poem was influenced by the writings of the prominent modern occultist Eliphas Lévi, who in 1851 had written a verse by the same name. In fact, adds Burhan, "Lévi's 'Correspondences' presented virtually every element of that mystical theory [of the correspondences] which was involved in the construction of the Symbolist aesthetic . . . attributing genuine perception, or clairvoyance to the 'sacred instinct of genius'." Since Burhan's study represents the most profound analysis to date of the complicated intellectual issues informing Symbolism (the sources of which she has mostly pinpointed), this is essential reading for anyone interested in the meaning of the art of this period, from which, it may be argued, *all* the major ideas of early modernism ultimately stemmed.
38. For what follows, I am greatly in the debt of a magnificent contextual study by S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. Also useful are the ideas (and details) found in W. S. Heckscher, "Die Genesis der Ikonologie," in Kaemmerling (ed.), *Ikonographie und Ikonologie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–64.
39. For a contextual study of the significance of the discovery of measured "Time" (and similar issues derived from a history of practical inventions), see the fascinating analysis by D. J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers*, New York: Random House, 1983 (Book One, "Time," pp. 4–78).
40. A. Einstein and L. Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938, p. 181.
41. For an iconological study of the consequences of cinematic techniques and thought patterns, see the pathbreaking essay by E. Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," *Critique*, I/3, 1947, p. 7 ff.
42. Monet, as cited by G. H. Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson, and the Image of Time," *College Art Journal*, XVI/3, 1956, pp. 2–12.
43. Cézanne, in J. Rewald (ed.), *Paul Cézanne: Letters*, Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 262.
44. L. Werth, "Picasso," in E. F. Fry (ed.), *Cubism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, pp. 57–58.
45. J. Metzinger, "Cubism and Tradition," *ibid.*, pp. 66–67 (emphasis mine).
46. W. James, "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology," *Mind*, January 1884, p. 2.
47. W. James, *Principles of Psychology*, New York: Holt, 1890, vol. I, p. 239.
48. H. Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, (1903), rpt: New York: Liberal Arts, 1955, pp. 23–26.
49. H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, rpt: New York: Modern Library, 1944.
50. V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954, p. 93.
51. Kern, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

52. R. Goldbert, "Performance: A Hidden History," in Battcock (ed.), op. cit., pp. 24–36.
53. U. Boccioni, C. D. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla and G. Severini, "The Exhibitors to the Public (1912)," in H. B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1968, pp. 294–98 (emphasis mine).
54. C. Tisdall and A. Bozzolla, *Futurism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 91–92.
55. These accounts are summarized in *ibid.*, p. 104.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.
57. R. Hulsenbeck, "Dada Forward," in L. R. Lippard (ed.), *Dadas on Art*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 45–54.
58. Tzara, in H. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, p. 224 (I have added some punctuation for clarity).
59. For these descriptions, see Melzer, op. cit.
60. Goldberg, op. cit., pp. 26, 36.
61. S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983.
62. See *ibid.*, esp. chapter 3, "The Creation of an American Avant-Garde, 1945–1947."
63. K. Levin, "Farewell to Modernism," *Arts Magazine*, Oct. 1979; rpt. in Hertz (ed.), op. cit., pp. 1–9. For the diversity of the art of this period (that of the rise of Beuys), see E. Lucie-Smith, *Art in the Seventies*, London: Phaidon, 1980. For a wider panorama of the critical issues of the period (of which performance art is but one offshoot), see C. Gottlieb, *Beyond Modern Art*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976 (including many quotations from artists and specific discussions of numerous artworks). Of course, from the new and largely occultist view presented in this book, much more work now needs to be done.
64. Kaprow, in M. Kirby, *Happenings*. London, 1965, pp. 44–46.
65. C. Oldenburg, *Store Days*, New York: Something Else, 1967 (unpaginated).
66. Seclova, in Henri, op. cit., p. 129.
67. V. Acconci, "Notebook: On Activity and Performance," in Battcock (ed.), op. cit., pp. 194–98.
68. See R. La Frenais, "An Interview with Laurie Anderson," *ibid.*, pp. 255–69. Here she acknowledged that she was not beholden, by way of technique, to any other performance artists, "but in terms of intent, probably [to] people like Vito Acconci. In terms of politics, William Burroughs is one of my heroes."
69. Anderson, in Smagula, op. cit., p. 249.
70. Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 255. As to the avant-garde "authenticity" of Anderson's art, compare her music videos (e.g., "Sharkey's Day") to those of the blatantly commercial pop stars featured on MTV, most of whom seem to me possibly more "profound" than our particular performance artist. The issue here seems more a matter of labeling ("high" vs. "low" art) than of intrinsic content.
71. Nitsch, in Henri, op. cit., p. 168; see also H. Nitsch, *Orgien-Mysterien-Theater*, Frankfurt: März, 1969; and the exhibition catalogue, *Wien: Bildkompendium: Wiener Aktionismus*, Frank-

furt, 1970. If nothing else, these publications indicate a certain level of interest in the German-speaking countries in these gruesome *Aktionen*.

72. For his detailed written recollections, see Ken Friedman, "Fluxus Performance," in Battcock (ed.), op. cit., pp. 56–70. For useful background, see also Thomas, op. cit., pp. 152–62, "Die Experiment einer Synthese von Kunst und Leben—Happening und Fluxus." See also J. Becker and W. Vostell (eds.), *Happening, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme. Eine Dokumentation*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1965.
73. The features of Cage's famous event of 1952 are summarized in Henri, op. cit., p. 88; see also M. Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, New York: Anchor, 1972; M. E. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987. Karin Thomas (op. cit., p. 153), however, cites Cage's "1950" [*sic*, 1952] musical piece, "Klangstücke 4' 33," "als das erste Happening." Nevertheless, as Duberman and Harris inform us, transmedia experimentation was very much in the air in the summer of 1952 at Black Mountain.
74. For this artist's highly influential working philosophy, with numerous references to his theories of chance, see J. Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961. See also C. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, esp. p. 65 ff., "John Cage," noting how "Cage believed in breaking down all barriers between art and life [with] ideas of no-order, no-structure, and no-control." In passing, it may be noted that Beuys did not ever give up *his* control, either over the structure of his performances or over his audience, to anything like the degree advocated by Cage. For our purposes, even more significant is the fact (stated by Tomkins) that "Cage was a great talker and proselytizer . . . he had wanted as a child to become a minister . . . to express universal truths." As will be later made apparent, it is only in this shared, mystical-messianic impulse that one finds the strongest, but still largely coincidental, connection between Cage and Beuys.
75. For instance, it is now known that the *I Ching* was consciously employed by Hans Arp as early as 1916; see H. A. Watts, *Chance: A Perspective on Dada*, Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1980, p. 117. Given the nature of her subject, it is unfortunate that Watts does not cite the pioneering work espousing the "chance operations" of human cognition: Pierre Janet, *L'Automatisme psychologique*, Paris: F. Alcan, 1889, even though this publication was certainly known to André Breton, that most prominent Surrealist advocate of the artistic priorities of the operations of *le hazard* (Breton evidently had read the ninth, 1921, edition of this work). Further research by Watts has, however, since shown the *other* varieties of esoteric, published materials that had become familiar to the Zürich Dadaists; see H. A. Watts, "Arp, Kandinsky, and the Legacy of Jacob Boehme," *SPART*, pp. 239–55.
76. Maciunas, *Beuys I*, pp. 82–83 [pp. 96–98]. Thomas, op. cit., p. 155, calls Maciunas a "Fluxus-Diktatur."
77. Maciunas, *ibid.*, p. 85 [p. 99].
78. Friedman, op. cit., p. 67. For the distinctive products of "L'arte povera," see G. Celant, *Art Povera*, New York: Praeger, 1969 (with Beuys having a featured role; see especially pp. 48–55). As Celant explains (p. 230), his heterogeneous and deliberately amorphous movement responded to a perceived *Zeitgeist*, defined by Celant as "tending towards de-culturalization, regression, primitiveness and repression, towards the pre-logical and the pre-iconographic stage, towards elementary and spontaneous politics, a tendency towards the basic element in nature." The fact that it was thought appropriate to publish an English translation of this work



in the same year that it had been published in Italy seems significant to me, as I suspect that this picture book had a wider impact on the American avant-garde scene than is commonly acknowledged. In any event, the wider cultural significance of Celant's statement (and others by him) will be fully explored here.

79. *Beuys I*, p. 77 [p. 89].
80. *Ibid.*, p. 96 [p. 114].
81. *Ibid.*, p. 86 [pp. 101–2].
82. *Ibid.*, p. 82 [p. 95].
83. *Ibid.*, p. 79 [p. 95].

### Chapter 3

1. For what follows I am mainly indebted to the biographical data given in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, op. cit.; for my deep skepticism concerning the standard interpretations of Duchamp, see my essay in *SPART*, pp. 256–71.
2. Celant, op. cit., p. 5 (in a book review of this work, published many years ago, I pointed out such contradictions; see *Art Journal*, XXX/1, Fall 1970)
3. The following quotations are all taken from *ibid.*, pp. 225–30 (with my added emphases).
4. See L. W. de Laurence (ed.), *The Philosophy of Natural Magic by Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim*, Secaucus, NJ: University Books, 1974; for instance (p. 74), "It is now manifest that the occult properties in things are [hidden], not from the nature of the Elements, but infused from above, hid from ourselves, and scarce at last known by our reason." For the then-contemporary, pseudoscientific intellectual milieu of Agrippa's (and others') thought and writings, see W. Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1979 (Agrippa on pp. 134–55).
5. For the traditional willed means leading to states of mystical illumination, see, besides James, op. cit. (1902), Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; rpt.) New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961; F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and An Anthology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
6. L. Pauwels and J. Bergier, *The Morning of the Magicians*, New York: Avon, 1968.
7. *Ibid.*, xvi.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, xvii.
10. *Ibid.*, xix.
11. *Ibid.*, xxii.
12. *Ibid.*, xxvi.
13. *Ibid.* Pauwels himself documents (p. xxv) the Surrealist connection drawn here: "At the time I left the [occultist] Gurdjieff circle, I had a very great friend in André Breton. Through him, I met René Alleau, the historian of alchemy."
14. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

15. Ibid., pp. 346–47.
16. For this phenomenon, see the fundamental critical anthology: W. Rubin (ed.), *"Primitivism" in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, 2 vols.
17. R. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, rev. ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
18. Nolde, as cited in *"Primitivism"*, p. 383.
19. Goldwater, op. cit., p. 87.
20. Rubin, *"Primitivism"*, p. 78.
21. K. Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," *"Primitivism"*, pp. 661–84 (p. 661; emphasis mine).
22. Hughes, op. cit., p. 402.
23. Varnedoe, op. cit., p. 662.
24. L. R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 4 (surprisingly, Lippard makes no mention of Beuys in her book). As another author puts it, these are the "expressions of the desire, so widespread in the '60s and early '70s, to reconstitute within Modern civilization something like an ancient or primitive sensibility of oneness with nature." Moreover, the artists participating in this widespread desire "have fallen into two groups: those that select from the neolithic sensibility of fertility and blood sacrifice, and those that select from the paleolithic sensibility of shamanic magic and ordeal." See Thomas McEvelley, "Art in the Dark," *Artforum*, Summer 1983; rpt. in Hertz (ed.), op. cit., pp. 287–305, an essay containing many other pertinent observations, some even in reference to Beuys. To these I may add another, namely that this neoprimitivistic sensibility is scarcely limited to the so-called avant garde: witness, for example, the phenomenal sales record of Jean Auel's novel *Clan of the Cave Bear* (1983), a best-selling, quintessentially neoprimitivist, fantasy that was even made into an appropriately popular movie.
25. Although the term "neomegalithic" is mine, the examples referred to here can all be found in Lippard, op. cit.
26. For current speculations on megalithic cultural monuments, see (among others), G. Daniel, *The Megalith Builders of Western Europe*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963; G. S. Hawkins, *Stonehenge Decoded*, New York: Doubleday, 1965; F. Hitching, *Earth Magic*, London: Cassell, 1976 (according to the cover blurb: "Soon to be a TV Special!"); P. Lancaster-Brown, *Megaliths, Myths and Men: An Introduction to Astro-Archaeology*, New York: Taplinger, 1978; J. Michell, *Megalithomania: Artists, Antiquarians and Archaeologists at the Old Stone Monuments*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1982. For our purposes, culturally speaking, the most significant publication of this lot is Hawkins's paperback, since I can remember that many artists I knew read it. This is the book that "proved" that Stonehenge was an astronomical observatory, a conclusion reached by using a lot of high-tech computer hardware and brandishing bunches of numbers and geometrical propositions. Otherwise, Michell's book does a nice bit of work debunking many megamyths. By way of pseudodocumentation I may mention that Nancy Holt, whose *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) is shown on the cover of Lucy Lippard's *Overlay* (op. cit.), kindly informs me that she too had read Hawkins's paperback (and also Peter Tomkins's *Secrets of the Great Pyramid*, New York: Harper & Row, 1976). She also recalled the general fascination with the moon shot of 1969—as reported in the media.

27. Long, in Lippard, op. cit., p. 129.
  28. For these, see especially Lancaster-Brown, op. cit., pp. 221–49, “Leys and Ley Hunters” (representing the rational approach).
  29. Morris, in Lippard, op. cit., p. 139 (emphasis mine).
  30. LeWitt, *ibid.*, p. 94
  31. LeWitt’s tactics, as explained by Gottlieb, op. cit., pp. 192–94.
  32. According to LeWitt (in 1969), “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions logic cannot reach. . . . Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically” (LeWitt, in Lippard, op. cit., p. 78). For traditional Jewish number mysticism, see G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York: Quadrangle, 1978, p. 337 ff., “*Gematria*.”
  33. For this supposedly standard ancient measurement, see Lancaster-Brown, op. cit., pp. 164–69, 187–91.
  34. C. Adcock, “Light, Space, Time,” in J. Brown (ed.), *Occluded Front*, Los Angeles County Art Museum, 1985, pp. 101–35.
  35. J. Brown, “Interview with James Turrell,” *ibid.*, pp. 13–46 (emphasis mine).
  36. Craig Adcock, an art historian (Notre Dame University) and friend of Turrell’s, who is now working on a monograph on the artist, kindly drew up for me a list of the books of interest to this artist. Besides many technical works on surveying and astronomy, some properly mystical titles were verbally recommended by Turrell. Besides C. W. Leadbeater’s *The Chakras* (new ed., Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Press, 1969), most notable is the theosophist Edwin D. Babbitt’s *The Principles of Light and Color* (London, 1878; new ed., Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1967; for which see *SPART*, pp. 31, 149, 251).
  37. The ideas of an all-engulfing, mystical-revelational light and a decorporealized, spiritualized nonspace are such a commonplace in mystical and occultist literature (just as in the two works cited in n. 36) that it will suffice here to quote but a single traditional example, St. John of the Cross’s ecstatic poem, “The Living Flame of Love”: “If you would attain to the last degree of [mystical rapture], the love of God will succeed in wounding the soul, even in its deepest center—that is, in transforming it as regards all the being. . . . In this state the soul is like the crystal that is clear and pure; the more degree of light it receives, the greater concentration of light there is in it, and this enlightenment continues to such a degree that, at last, it attains a point at which the light is centered in it, with such copiousness that it comes to appear to be wholly light, and cannot be distinguished from the light, for it is enlightened to the greatest possible extent, and thus appears to be light itself.” For such common metaphors (actually verbalized pictorializations of sublime mystical truths), see W. James; E. Underhill; F. Hap-pold; all op. cit. (with San Juan de la Cruz being quoted in the latter: pp. 362–63).
- Nevertheless, Turrell’s favorite metaphysical reading materials turn out to be (see note 36 above) largely derived from the strictly modern occultist tradition—essentially meaning that the source of the desired revelation is not necessarily “God”.
38. Varnedoe, in “*Primitivism*,” op. cit., p. 181.
  39. For this, and nearly all the other ideas developed in this section, see A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, New York: Octagon, 1973.



40. Hesiod, in W. H. Auden (ed.), *The Portable Greek Reader*, New York: Viking, 1965, p. 55.
41. For an explanation of the effects of this idea in Renaissance painting, see E. Panofsky, "The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo," in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York: Harper, 1962, pp. 33–67.
42. Hesiod, in Auden, op. cit., pp. 57–58.
43. See for instance, M. M. Innes (ed.), *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, pp. 33–35 (ending: "All proper affection lay vanquished and, last of the immortals, the maiden Justice [Astraea] left the blood-soaked earth").
44. Virgil, in Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 58.
45. Porphyry, *ibid.*, p. 95.
46. Seneca, *ibid.*, p. 271.
47. Seneca, *ibid.*, p. 364.
48. Vedic hymn, *ibid.*, p. 434; several other pre-Hindu works to the same effect are cited in the pages following.
49. B. F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1980, p. 10.
50. M. Meade, *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman behind the Myth*, New York: Putnam, 1980 (an excellent scholarly, witty biography).
51. Campbell, op. cit., pp. 35–36.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
54. H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, Pasadena, CA: Theosophical Press, 1972, vol. I, p. 154.
55. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, Adyar (India): Theosophical Press, 1938, 6 vols. (henceforth: SD).
56. SD, vol. III, p. 130.
57. Campbell, op. cit., p. 45.
58. SD, vol. I, p. 62.
59. SD, vol. V, p. 331.
60. Recent research has shown the influence of theosophical thought and imagery on the following pioneers of modern art: *Paul Gauguin* (see K. Varnedoe, "Gauguin," in "Primitivism", op. cit., pp. 179–209, which also cites further relevant bibliography); *Wassily Kandinsky* (see Ringbom, op. cit.); *Franz Marc* (see J. F. Moffitt, "'Fighting Forms': 'The Fate of the Animals.' The Occultist Origins of Franz Marc's 'Farbentheorie'," *Artibus et Historiae*, VI/12, 1985, pp. 107–26); *Piet Mondrian* (see C. Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction," *SPART*, pp. 89–111, also citing further relevant bibliography); *Arthur Dove* (see S. B. Cohn, *The Dialectical Vision of Arthur Dove: The Impact of Science and Occultism on his Modern American Art*, Ph.D. diss., Washington Univ., 1982); *Jackson Pollock* (see W. Moritz, "Abstract Film and Color Music," *SPART*, pp. 296–311 [especially p. 309, citing Pollock's early exposure to theosophical beliefs]).

This brief bibliography does not, of course, pretend to exhaust the subject (with several more theosophical artists being discussed in *SPART*) and, doubtlessly, more discoveries of this sort have been (or are about to be) published since this writing.

61. For some major artists involved in occultism, see the preceding note.
62. N. Freedland, *The Occult Explosion*, New York: Putnam, 1972, pp. 33–34.
63. Besides Freedland, see (among others): J. Herrmann, *Das falsche Weltbild: Astronomie und Aberglaube. Eine kritische Untersuchung über Astrologie, Weltelehre, Hohlwelttheorie, Bewohnbarkeit der Sonne, fliegende Untertassen und andere astronomische Irrlehren*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1973; J. Sladek, *The New Apocrypha: A Guide to Strange Science and Occult Beliefs*, London: Granada, 1974; M. Goran, *Fact, Fraud and Fantasy: The Occult and Pseudosciences*, Totowa, NJ: Little-Adams, 1979.
64. The only study I know of that attempts to draw a comprehensive picture of occult-derived art during the period 1960–1985 uses murky terminology and lacks specific references and adequate documentation; see D. Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," *SPART*, pp. 313–25.
65. R. M. Levine, *Bad Blood: A Family Murder in Marin County*, New York: Bantam, 1982, p. 117.
66. For a detailed, semischolarly examination of the wide range of such neopaganism, see M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today*, Boston: Beacon, 1986.
67. D. Murray, "Anthropology, Fiction, and the Occult: The Case of Carlos Castaneda," in P. B. Messent (ed.), *Literature of the Occult: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981, pp. 171–82.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
69. Freedland, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
70. Sladek, *op. cit.*, p. 47; for more on the "fliegende Untertassen," see Herrmann, *op. cit.*, p. 151 ff.
71. Goran, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
72. As should be well known, the only authentic/ancient literary source for the Atlantis myth (*qua* myth) is Plato (*Timaeus*, 20d–27a; *Kritias*, 108c–109a, and 113a–end). The modern, strictly occultist version of the legend first appeared in full-blown form in Ignatius Donnelly's (still) widely read *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, first published in New York in 1882 (and, for instance, translated into German in 1894). Modern scholarship, backed up by some convincing archaeological evidence, now finds that Plato's stories had a certain measure of historical substance. As it appears, the factual basis was the recognized and widespread destruction of Knossos—and of Cretan (Minoan) civilization generally—soon after 1500 BC, the direct result of ultraviolent volcanic activity on the Aegean island of Thera (Santorini), located some 110 km. north of Crete. See J. V. Luce, *The End of Atlantis: New Light on an Old Legend*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969; for the modern occultist versions, see Sladek, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–69 (wittily citing many modern sources).
73. Sladek, *ibid.*, p. 64.
74. See, for instance, K. Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," in "*Primitivism*," *op. cit.*, pp. 615–59. Here the author notes the repeated "suggestions of myth, archetype, and totemic

signs" and "the prominence of references to the [tribal] art of the Americas . . . or, to a lesser extent, in the great lost empires of Central or South America," all expressive, finds Varnedoe, of the "primal mysteries in the natural world." See also W. Jackson Rushing, "Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism," *SPART*, pp. 273–95. Although both of these studies provide a wealth of documentation about such primitivist interests, neither sufficiently stresses their forerunner—ancient wisdom—and, consequently, neither emphasizes the latent occultist bias. For a recent study, which does point to some then-current publications emphasizing strictly occultist biases, see J. F. Moffitt, "Hermeticism in Modern Art: An Introduction," *Cauda Pavonis*, VI/1, 1987, pp. 1–5 (this too presents only an introduction to a still largely untouched art historical problem).

75. The examples following are discussed (but inadequately, as I have stated) by D. Kuspit, *SPART*, pp. 313–25, where illustrations of these works may be encountered.
76. R. Galbreath, "A Glossary of Spiritual and Related Terms," *SPART*, pp. 367–91 (p. 375, "Mandala").
77. *SD*, vol. II, p. 100.
78. J. Freeman, "Chronologies: Artists and the Spiritual," *SPART*, pp. 393–419 (p. 406: as Judi Freeman informs me, the Klein archives, now located in Phoenix, AZ, beg for more serious attention along these lines).
79. Henri, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
80. M. Heindl, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception, or Mystic Christianity. An Elementary Treatise upon Man's Past Evolution, Present Constitution and Future Development*, Oceanside, CA: Rosicrucian Foundation, 1956 (23rd ed.!), pp. 253–55.
81. M. Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," *SPART*, pp. 17–61 (p. 51), which also notes (p. 49) that the Abstract Expressionists' and later artists' "spiritual sources tended to be not Theosophy and Anthroposophy but beliefs and practices associated with native [American] and non-Western cultures [mainly East Asian] . . . and Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of archetypal form. . . . Blavatsky or other [acknowledged] occultists were definitively out of favor with most New York artists of the 1940s." Tuchman includes James Turrell among such "spiritual" artists (see preceding section), due to his impulses "toward immaterialization and toward the invisible" (p. 57).
82. Sladek, *op. cit.*, pp. 284–87.
83. The source for Hedrick's painting (as Tuchman recognizes, p. 54) is plate 35—labeled "Hermetic scheme of the universe"—in Kurt Seligman's *The Mirror of Magic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948); my copy is a reprint with a new title: *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1971 (see p. 103 for the hermetic image which along with Seligman's chapter on alchemy, inspired Hedrick's picture). In my 1987 article (see note 74 above) I have cited the probable importance of Seligman's occultist publications for New York artists in the 1950s, and probably later, given that this paperback book is copiously illustrated and deftly written. The source of Jess's painting (Tuchman's plate 55) is not (directly) Robert Fludd (*ibid.*, plate 56), but instead the reproduction of this illustration in yet another inexpensive but copiously illustrated paperback compendium of occult lore; see Emile Grillo de Givry, *Illustrated Anthology of Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy*, New York: A & W Visual Library, 1973 (rpt. of 1963 English language version of *Le Musée des Sorciers*, Paris, 1929), fig. 177: "The Creation of the World According to Occult Doctrine." Thus we have the expanded, correct titles for the two paintings in question.



84. McEvelley, op. cit., p. 294.
85. Ibid., p. 288.
86. Ibid.
87. *Beuys II*, p. 23 (emphasis mine).
88. On the published works and historical context of this highly important, premodernist magus, see C. McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, London: Rider, 1972.
89. Eliphas Lévi (A. E. Waite, ed.), *The History of Magic, Including a Clear and Precise Exposition of Its Procedures, Its Rites and Its Mysteries*, London: Rider, 1982, pp. 29–53 (“Introduction”).
90. McEvelley, op. cit., p. 304, note 16.
91. J. G. Frazer (T. H. Gaster, ed.), *The New Golden Bough, A New Abridgment of the Classic Work by Sir James George Frazer*, New York: NAL, 1964, p. 39 (emphasis mine).
92. Ibid., p. 92. The California Indian tribe referred to here was the Maidu (of which I have previously heard nothing, but which I suspect to have since relocated in central Los Angeles).
93. See, principally, M. Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, (rev. ed.), Paris: Flammarion, 1977.
94. Eliade, in W. C. Beane and W. G. Doty (eds.), *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p. xvii (“Preface”).
95. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 151–55 (since this work appeared in 1957 as a Rohwohlt paperback in Germany, it may have even been read by Beuys).
96. M. Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen. A Thematic Sourcebook on the History of Religions*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 423–24.
97. That is, an art historian must agree with Eliade after having read *SPART*, a scholarly publication appearing some twenty years after Eliade’s prescient observations. But, it must also be granted that labored scholarly research is rather different from hasty, occultist, intuitions.
98. Eliade, “Cosmic Religiosity,” in *Eliade Reader*, op. cit., pp. 126–29 (emphasis mine). Given the preceding, it appears to me that what is called for now is a scholarly, esoteric rereading of Eliade’s highly influential published oeuvre.
99. For Kandinsky’s involvement with theosophy in particular and with occultism in general, see Ringbom, op. cit.; and Moffitt, op. cit. (1985).

## Chapter 4

1. Mark Twain, “The Awful German Language,” in C. Neider (ed.), *The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales of Mark Twain*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961, pp. 439–55 (p. 441). This linguistic evaluation becomes all the more hilarious the more German one knows. Samuel Clemens is not the only one to have commented on this phenomenon: see G. A. Craig, *The Germans*, New York: Putnam, 1982, p. 310 ff., “‘The Awful German Language’.”
2. Kohn, op. cit. p. x.

3. For instance, see an American anthropologist's examination of the Germans' culturally engrained senses of time and space: E. T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969, pp. 131ff.: "Proxemics in a Cross-Cultural Context: Germans, English, and French."
4. J. Rovin, *Germany*, London: Studio Vista, 1962, p. 35 (first published as *L'Allemagne*, Paris, 1959). For other useful insights on postwar Germany, see R. W. Leonhardt, *This Germany: The Story since the Third Reich*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966 (*X-mal Deutschland*, Munich, 1961).
5. Kohn, op. cit., pp. 11–12.
6. Schlegel, *ibid.*, p. 62 (emphasis mine).
7. Tacitus, in B. Davenport (ed.), *The Portable Roman Reader*, New York: Viking, 1951, p. 593; see also the complete report: Tacitus (H. Mattingly, ed.), *The Agricola and The Germania*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p. 101 ff.
8. E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany. A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 336.
9. Tacitus, in *Roman Reader*, op. cit., pp. 590–91.
10. Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., p. 362.
11. Caesar, *ibid.*, pp. 363–64.
12. Tacitus, in *Roman Reader*, op. cit., p. 591.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 587–88 (emphasis mine).
14. G. Bailey, *Germans: Biography of an Obsession*, New York: Avon, 1974, pp. 131–34.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 342–48.
16. "Encyclopedia of Superstition," as quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 348–49 (emphasis mine).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
18. W. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, New York: International Universities, 1967.
19. Kleinbauer, op. cit., p. 30.
20. Worringer, op. cit., pp. 31–32.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
23. H. Wölfflin, *The Sense of Form in Art: A Comparative Psychological Study*, New York: Chelsea, 1958, p. 18 (emphasis mine).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 24 (emphasis mine).
26. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).
27. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

28. Ibid., p. 31.
29. Ibid., p. 43.
30. Ibid., p. 45.
31. Ibid., p. 52.
32. Ibid., p. 75.
33. Ibid., p. 87.
34. Ibid., pp. 56–57.
35. Ibid., pp. 88–89.
36. Ibid., p. 214.
37. Ibid., p. 223.
38. *Beuys I*, pp. 12–13 [p. 19].
39. Ibid.: “Im Gegensatz zu heute, damals die Situation für die Jugendlichen in gewisser Weise ideal war, um sich auszuleben.” In the posthumously published diary of Inge Scholl, a *Hitler Mädchen* (but later to be a martyred member of the German resistance movement), we find mention of that “full life” led by members of the Hitler Youth when Beuys was a boy: “We went with our [male] comrades of the Hitler Youth on long hikes and rambled in wide sweeps through our homeland. . . . Wasn’t it wonderful suddenly to have something in common, a bond with other young people, whom otherwise we might never have come to know? . . . We felt we were part of a process, of a movement that created a people out of a mass. In our groups we held together like close friends. The comradeship was something very beautiful.” I. Scholl, *Die weisse Rose*, Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1961, pp. 11–12.
40. A. Hitler (R. Mannheim, ed.), *Mein Kampf*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971 (henceforth, *MK*).
41. Ilse McKee, *Tomorrow the World*, London: Dent, 1960, p. 11 (the author, who later married an Englishman, wrote her book from that enlightened perspective).
42. *MK*, p. 266.
43. *MK*, p. 408.
44. *MK*, pp. 33–34.
45. *MK*, pp. 179–81.
46. *MK*, pp. 107–8.
47. Hermann Klauss, *Feierstunden der deutschen Schule*, Stuttgart, 1941, pp. 7 ff.; as quoted in G. L. Mosse (ed.), *Nazi Culture. Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968, pp. 127–29.
48. *MK*, p. 276.
49. *MK*, pp. 379–80.
50. *MK*, p. 382.
51. *MK*, p. 390.
52. *MK*, p. 393.



53. MK, p. 9.
54. MK, p. 17.
55. MK, pp. 428–29 (emphasis mine).
56. MK, pp. 429–31 (emphasis mine).
57. See H. Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1963; J. Wulf (ed.), *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich. Eine Dokumentation*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1966; see also B. Hinz, *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus. Kunst und Konterrevolution*, Munich: Hanzer, 1974 (with a useful documentary appendix); B. M. Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918–1945*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.
58. Eberlein, in Mosse (ed.), op. cit., pp. 163–65.
59. Beuys (speaking of Fluxus goals), as cited by K. Thomas, op. cit., p. 156.
60. J. Webb, *The Flight from Reason*, London: MacDonald, 1971, p. xiv.
61. The term was coined by Webb, whose two fine volumes on the history of modern occultism (see also note 69 below) are collectively called *The Age of the Irrational*.
62. For a detailed discussion of the rise of the various esoteric interests mentioned in this paragraph, (besides Webb) see Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism*, New York: Pocket Books, 1972.
63. Webb, op. cit., pp. 183–85.
64. Blavatsky, as cited in *ibid.*, p. 54 (although the reference is taken from *SD*, I cannot find it since the pagination of my 6 vol. copy differs from Webb's, the Adyar edition of 1909).
65. Webb, *ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65 (emphasis mine).
67. H. Hesse, *Journey to the East*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969, p. 6. For other curious and evidently widespread beliefs from this period in Germany (including astrology, the "hollow earth" theory, and the "ice-age principle"), see Herrmann, *Falsche Weltbild*, op. cit.
68. For this group (and their mystical site), see the sixteen essays collected in a recent exhibition catalogue (no editor named), *Monte Verità: Lokaler Anthropologie als Beitrag zur Wiederentdeckung einer neuzeitlichen sakralen Topographie*, Zürich, 1978.
69. J. Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1976, p. 275.
70. Rosenberg, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 315.
71. Lenard, as quoted in Mosse, op. cit., pp. 201–5.
72. Thuring, *ibid.*, pp. 208–9.

## Chapter 5

1. For the rejection of the term "art," see *Beuys I*, p. 66 [p. 76]: "Beuys' invention of images was not artwork in the esthetic sense, but rather a personally established magic-drawing, a transcendental connection, a fetish, a religious activity, and, last but not least, a way of knowing nature and one's environment."

2. For the purposes of this investigation, especially useful has been an analytical biography by Geoffrey Ahern, *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and the Western Esoteric Tradition*, Wellingborough (Norts., U. K.): Thorsons, 1984. This is the revised version of a 1981 Ph. D. dissertation for the London School of Economics. Although Ahern professes not to believe in the tenets of anthroposophy, he does nevertheless seem strangely sympathetic to some of its most outrageous notions. In any event, this is by far the best study on the subject to date, especially since most of the other literature has been written by true believers. Also useful for these purposes is Steiner's autobiography: *Steiner V* (see Bibliography).
3. For instance, see the references to Steiner in *Beuys I*, pp. 23, 25, 38, 39, 142, 220, 221, 289, 290; *Beuys II*, pp. 44, 254, 261, 269, 270, 284. Most of these citations will be analyzed here in their proper contexts.
4. *Beuys I*, p. 23 [pp. 30–31].
5. *Ibid.*, p. 25 [pp. 31–33].
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66 [p. 74] (emphasis mine).
7. A representative example of this once-familiar artistic practice is Botticelli's famous painting called *The Calumny of Apelles*, derived from Alberti (op. cit., pp. 90–91), who in turn had taken the image from Pliny's *Historia naturalis*. Unfortunately, I know of no comprehensive scholarly study of the centuries-old practice of *ekphrasis*, a topic which sorely needs some serious study.
8. L. E. Shepard (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology*, New York: Avon, 1980, vol. II, pp. 882–83.
9. M. Gardner, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, New York: Dover, 1957, p. 224 ff.
10. On this (with a photograph of Beuys at work at what appears to be Steinerian biodynamic farming), see *Beuys II*, p. 14: "Many of his metaphors for warmth and growth processes in art and life come from botanical sources. On the practical side, this has meant [for Beuys] an increasing involvement with the regeneration of agriculture through natural means . . . like growing carrots in Dutch sand-dunes, or potatoes in the center of Berlin" (which the photograph in question documents).
11. *Beuys II*, p. 23.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Steiner III*, pp. 5–13.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–18 (emphasis mine).
16. For what follows, the principal sources are Ahern, op. cit., and *Steiner V*.
17. *Steiner V.*, p. 9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–37.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 148. As fondly remembered by Steiner many years later, von Stein then added that

the marvelous contents of Rudolf's dissertation nevertheless "make it possible that I can very gladly accept it."

23. Ibid., p. 132.
24. Ibid., p. 112.
25. Ibid., p. 31.
26. Gardner, op. cit., pp. 12-14.
27. Robert A. McDermott (ed.), *The Essential Steiner: Basic Writings of Rudolf Steiner*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p. x ("Preface").
28. Ibid., p. 1 ("General Introduction").
29. Ibid., p. 2.
30. Ibid., p. 6. Another comment (p. 4) by McDermott, neatly dividing the world into acolytes and nonbelievers, deserves mention. According to his claim, "a reader of these pages, who confidently rejects the possibility of spiritual knowledge, will presumably not read this book with profit, and will probably not read it *at all*." One mentions this assertion since it bears on the whole issue of spiritual knowledge, a field whose frequently outlandish claims remain largely unchallenged precisely because those who could demolish them with ease "probably will not read it at all." Nevertheless, as is fairly well known, it is very easy to refute all those esoteric claims about the kind of physical phenomena whose appearance "challenges science." Besides the other works cited here, see also a classic, strictly psychological appraisal of the bases for all those "physical" claims for stigmata, poltergeists, seances, telepathy and e.s.p., dowsing, visions and out-of-body experiences, levitation, automatic writing, and auras: D. H. Rawcliffe, *The Psychology of the Occult*, London: Ridgway, 1952 (rpt. by Dover, as either *Illusions and Delusions of the Supernatural and the Occult*, or *Occult and Supernatural Phenomena*).
31. *Steiner I*, pp. xiv, xxvii-xxxiv.
32. For an annotated bibliography of many important works by Steiner, see McDermott, op. cit., pp. 359-450.
33. Ahern, op. cit., pp. 180-81.
34. *Steiner V*, p. 115.
35. Steiner, in McDermott, op. cit., p. 21; this is taken from a brief "Autobiographical Sketch," written in 1907 for Edouard Schuré, another notable purveyor of esoterica. Steiner makes an interesting comment/revelation here (p. 17): "The occult point of view requires: 'No unnecessary polemics,' and, 'Where possible, do not defend yourself'." Obviously, unchallenged, occultist claims cannot be refuted.
36. *Steiner III*, p. 16.
37. *Beuys II*, p. 72.
38. The following observations are based on *Steiner I-VI*, as complemented by Ahern, op. cit.
39. *Steiner V*, p. 254.
40. *Steiner III*, p. 38.



41. For Nazi antipathy to Steiner, see (with certain reservations, given the author's esoteric interests): T. Ravenscroft, *The Spear of Destiny. The Occult Power of the Spear Which Pierced the Side of Christ*, New York: Bantam, 1974, pp. 261–74.
42. Rovin, op. cit., pp. 86–87; for more details on life in this grim postwar period, see F. Grube and G. Richtens, *Die Schwarzmarktzeit*, Hamburg, 1979.
43. *Steiner I*, pp. 256–57.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 263–64 (Steiner's emphasis).
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 268–69 (Steiner's emphasis).
46. See *Beuys I*, pp. 142–55, for the source of my literal transcription of the cryptic texts generated by Beuys's "Manresa" (curiously, this is omitted from the 1986 reprinting in German).
47. As before, the principal sources for what follows are *Steiner I–VI*, as complemented by the observations given in Ahern, op. cit.
48. *Steiner I*, pp. 198–99.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
50. R. Steiner, *Cosmic Memory: Prehistory of Earth and Man*, New York: Steiner, 1981, pp. 38–42.
51. *Beuys I*, p. 283 (emphasis mine).
52. *Steiner VI*, pp. 1–3 (emphasis mine).
53. *Ibid.*, p. 17 (Steiner's emphasis).
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

## Chapter 6

1. For Beuys's curious *curriculum vitae*, see *Beuys II*, p. 9, and *Beuys I* (*infra*: embellished with the author's interpretive remarks, some of which may be purely fanciful).
2. *Beuys II*, pp. 13–14.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. *Beuys I*, pp. 11–12 [pp. 16–18].
5. *Ibid.*, [p. 19].
6. *Ibid.*, p. 13 [p. 20].
7. *Ibid.*, p. 14 [p. 22].
8. *Beuys II*, pp. 16–17 (emphasis mine). For a searching (and highly skeptical) analysis of the Beuys myth, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the God. Preliminary Notes for a Critique," *Artforum*, January 1980, pp. 35–43. As this author observes, the centerpiece of the Beuys myth, that is, "the plane crash in the Crimea . . . has never been questioned, even though it seems as contrived as it is dramatic." Buchloh also shrewdly calls the version given to Caroline Tisdall (as quoted above) "an updated version of the *fable convenue*." As I would add, this fable becomes considerably less convenient as soon as one takes into account Beuys's ingenuous admission that he was completely unconscious through-

out the fabulous Tatar experience. In sum, it all seems like Steiner's adventures with spiritualistic *déjà vu*.

9. *Beuys II*, p. 18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
11. Ewald Mataré (1887–1965) is today a rather obscure figure, chiefly remembered for his associations with Beuys; on him, see (briefly) K. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
12. Nine of Beuys's outraged and exasperated colleagues wrote an open letter, dated 24 November 1968, to the entire faculty of the Düsseldorf Academy (*Beuys I*, p. 179 [p. 208]), accusing Beuys of "ammassender politischer Dilettantismus, Sucht nach weltanschaulicher Bevormundung, demagogische Praktik und—in ihrem Gefolge—Intoleranz, Diffämierung und Unkollegialität." Being familiar with academic procedures, one can sympathize with these complaints about Beuys's "presumptuous political dilettantism, passion for ideological tutelage, demagogical practices, and, in its wake, intolerance, defamation, and an uncollegial spirit aimed at the dissolution of the present order, reaching disturbingly into the fields of art and education."
13. *Beuys I*, p. 220 [p. 260].
14. *Ibid.*, p. 270 [p. 323].
15. *Steiner IV*, pp. 12–13.
16. *Steiner III*, p. 20.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–28.
18. *Steiner II*, pp. 59–60 (emphasis mine).
19. *Steiner I*, pp. 267–68 (emphasis mine).
20. *Beuys I*, p. 48 [pp. 57–58]. Anybody who has followed Steiner's writings certainly knows that, and according to Steiner himself (cf. *Steiner III*), indeed he should have been "understood from the point of view of *Rosicrucianism*," an important occult sect founded at the beginning of the seventeenth century, on which see F. A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972. As for the very traditional (that is, within modern occultism) esoteric significance of both the seal of Solomon and the pentagram, see Eliphas Levi, *op. cit.*
21. *Steiner II*, pp. 3–5 (emphasis mine).
22. *Beuys I*, pp. 41–42 [pp. 47–52].
23. *Steiner III*, pp. 27–28.
24. Steiner, as quoted in *Beuys I*, pp. 289–90 [p. 371–72]. The original source for this transcription (which these authors—Adriani, Konnertz and Thomas—carefully document) is Steiner's *Neun Vorträge vor Arbeiten am Goetheanum*, Dornach (Switzerland), n.d. (ca. 1924), pp. 23 ff. (in English: *Nine Lectures on Bees*, New York: Steiner, 1975). Given that this passage has been quoted *in extenso* in this particular publication—written and researched by German authors and purporting (when originally published in 1973) to be the definitive work on Beuys—it seems passing strange that these three enthusiastic German art historians and critics should have found nothing significant in Beuys's reliance on such works by Steiner—even the one they had just quoted! Never once in this book, nor in the revised edition of 1986, is Steiner called—as he called himself—an occultist. Indeed, the book betrays no awareness of

the wholly esoteric significance of Steiner's thought, here acknowledged to have contributed so much to Beuys's creative endeavors. As a result, the book is both victim and perpetrator of the continuing, widespread, and obfuscating Beuys myth.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 290–91 [pp. 372–73].
26. *Beuys II*, p. 44.
27. *Beuys I*, pp. 71–72 [pp. 83–86].
28. R. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom: The Basis for a Modern World Conception*, London: Rudolf Steiner, 1964, pp. 122–28.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
31. Andersen, in *Beuys I*, pp. 139–41 [pp. 161–65].
32. *Beuys II*, p. 108.
33. Steiner, as quoted in *Beuys I*, p. 142 [p. 168]. Again these authors (Adriani, Konnertz and Thomas) are careful to cite their published source: "Johannes Hemleben, *Rudolf Steiner*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1963, S. 84." Again, they ignore Steiner's rampant "Okkultismus."
34. *Steiner I*, pp. 216–18.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 220–24.
36. For a resumé of Beuys's Christlike "foot-washing" exercise in "Aktion Celtic" (1971), see Schmied (ed.), *Zeichen des Glaubens*, pp. 76–78 ("Die christusgleiche Zeichenhandlung"); for more on this, see *ibid.*, pp. 203–8; H. Schwebel, "Gespräche mit Joseph Beuys."
37. *Beuys I*, p. 180 [p. 210].
38. *Ibid.*, p. 273 [pp. 328–29].
39. *Steiner VI*, pp. 37–42, 63.
40. *Beuys I*, p. 274 [p. 330].
41. *Steiner I*, pp. 229–31.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42 (my emphasis).
43. *Beuys I*, p. 226 [p. 267].
44. For this grim tableau, see Schmied, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–9.
45. *Steiner II*, p. 215.
46. *Steiner III*, pp. 110.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
48. *Beuys II*, p. 21 (emphasis mine); for another reference by Beuys to the traditional homeopathic motto, "*similia similibus curantur*," see *ibid.*, p. 87.

## Chapter 7

1. *Beuys II*, p. 89.



2. *Beuys I*, p. 130 [p. 130].
3. *Steiner III*, p. 64.
4. *Beuys II*, p. 72.
5. *Beuys I*, p. 97 [p. 115].
6. For more on the several contradictions inherent in the *fable convenue* propagated by Beuys, see the comments above in note 8, chapter 6.
7. *Lebenslauf*, in *Beuys II*, p. 9; for the post-*Lebenslauf* period, see *Beuys I*, p. 323 ff.
8. *Beuys II*, p. 101. In regard to Beuys's odd choice for his defunct animal companion, it is interesting to note that Rudolf Steiner, through his awesome magical powers, had caused an exodus of rabbits that had been infesting a country estate in East Prussia; for this miraculous event, see Ravenscroft, *op. cit.*, pp. 318–21.
9. H. Lieberknecht (editor and interviewer), *Joseph Beuys. Zeichnungen I, 1947–59*, Cologne: DuMont, 1972, p. 10.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Beuys II*, p. 105.
12. Beuys specifically explained (*Beuys II*, p. 157) his steel-plate footgear as a means of attracting occult powers, since, "the foot, as the most overlooked part of the body, lowest of the low, yet is most directly in contact with the earth and its energies. The iron soles used in performances were abstracted representations [of this idea]." This idea, like so many others of Beuys's, has its exact counterpart in Steiner's writings, for instance in a poem stating (in part), "*Der Erde Schweremacht/Durch meiner Fusse Wort*" (see Steiner, *Eurythmy*, p. 224; as in note 20 below).
13. *Steiner III*, pp. 42–43.
14. Tacitus, in *Roman Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp. 587–88.
15. *Steiner IV*, pp. 21–22.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–34.
17. *Beuys II*, p. 25 (emphasis mine).
18. *Steiner I*, p. 52 (emphasis mine).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 25 (emphasis mine).
20. R. Steiner, *Eurythmy as Visible Speech: Fifteen Lectures*, London: Steiner, 1984. Henceforth, *Eurythmy*.
21. R. Steiner, *A Lecture on Eurythmy*, London: Steiner, 1977. Henceforth, *Lecture*. For other relevant readings, see Steiner's *Eurythmy as Visible Music; Speech and Drama; Art in the Light of Mystery Wisdom*.
22. *Eurythmy*, p. 21.
23. *Lecture*, p. 7.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 27 (emphasis mine).

26. Ibid., p. 33.
27. Ibid., p. 28.
28. *Eurythmy*, 186.
29. Ibid., p. 287.
30. *Lecture*, p. 25.
31. *Eurythmy*, p. 281.
32. Ibid., p. 241.
33. Ibid., p. 21.
34. Ibid., p. 190 ff.
35. Ibid., p. 188.
36. Ibid., 37.
37. *Lecture*, pp. 12–13.
38. *Eurythmy*, p. 23.
39. Ibid., p. 272.
40. Ibid., p. 152 (emphasis Steiner's).
41. Ibid., pp. 256–57.
42. Ibid., pp. 76–77 (emphasis mine).
43. Ibid., pp. 95–97; for descriptions of several other “eurythmic gestures and poses” created by Steiner, see pp. 91–99. As it turns out, Steiner's *Mitteilung* pose-gesture has ancient, rhetorical roots: it is a variant of the familiar *ad locutio* attitude, struck in many examples of imperial Roman sculpture; for this, and other related examples of rhetorical poses, see R. Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art*, Yale University Press, 1963.
44. Ibid., p. 231.
45. Ibid., pp. 238–39.
46. *Lecture*, p. 23. Given the fact that, by his own account, Steiner was actively practicing—and vocally propagating—eurythmic declamations by 1912, it seems that further research on the influence of his artistic ideas is now called for, especially in the light of the many manifestations of “concrete poetry,” purely based upon such “sound effects,” that had become common (after 1916) among the German-speaking participants in the Zürich Dada outburst. I suspect (but cannot as yet prove) that Steiner's ideas were known to these artists—just as they were known to Paul Klee (*The Diaries of Paul Klee, 1898–1918*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1964, pp. 378, 387).
47. *Eurythmy*, p. 286.
48. Ibid., p. 27.
49. Ibid., p. 29.
50. Ibid., pp. 31–32.
51. R. Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic, 1986.

52. Ibid., p. 1.
53. Ibid., p. 3.
54. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., pp. 5–6. This strain of ecological-occultist thinking is at least as prominent today—the New Age—as it was in Steiner's day. By way of further support for this assertion (see also the Introduction to this book), I submit the evidence of another article encountered in a national, mass-circulation (nonoccultist) weekly: "The End of the World (Again). Preparing for the Harmonic Convergence," *Newsweek*, August 17, 1987, pp. 70–71. This particular "cosmic" pseudoevent was mainly the product of the fertile mind of one José Argüelles, "a 48-year-old art historian" (denied tenure a few years ago at the University of Colorado). As José explained, "It's the first time in 23,412 years that nine of our planets will be aligned in a configuration called a grand trine, which allows for an unprecedented amount of energy to converge in one place." The idea was, on August 16th and 17th, 1987, to get "144,000 people to gather to 'resonate in harmony.' In other words, get together with some friends and hold hands and hum." For best results, one should, however, have hummed at such naturally cosmic "power points" as Popocatepetl, Machu Pichu, the Great Pyramids, Mt. Fuji, Sedonia, AZ, Mt. Olympus, Chaco Canyon, NM, or the Ganges River. For an(other) elaborate discussion of contemporary modes of consciousness-raising, see (besides Shirley MacLaine), Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1987.
57. Ibid., pp. 11, 13 (emphasis mine).
58. Ibid., p. 15.
59. Ibid., p. 87.
60. Ibid., p. 15.
61. Ibid., p. 111.
62. Ibid., pp. 16–17 (emphasis mine).
63. Ibid., p. 23 (emphasis mine).
64. Ibid., p. 31.
65. Ibid., pp. 91–92 (emphasis mine).
66. For these four paintings by Beuys, all dating from 1984, see *SPART*, p. 316; their wholly self-descriptive titles are: *Blue on Centre*; *Yellow on Centre*; *Red on Centre*; *Green on Centre*.
67. Ibid., p. 31.
68. For much more on this particular aspect of anthroposophical aesthetic theory, see R. Steiner, *Colour: Three Lectures*, London: Steiner, 1982.
69. *Mission*, pp. 33–34.
70. For all one needs to know on this particular subject, nearly universally applied by radically abstract painters in the early decades of the twentieth century, see the excellent monograph by Linda D. Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Princeton University Press, 1983 (Steiner, "another anti-materialist trend," is here briefly mentioned: pp. 104, 240, 260, 340).



71. *Mission*, p. 36.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 62 (emphasis mine).
76. *Ibid.*, p. 45 (emphasis mine).
77. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.
78. R. Steiner, *Deeper Insights in Education: The Waldorf Approach*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic, 1983 (henceforth, *Insights*). Anthroposophical pedagogy is often called the Waldorf method, since, immediately after World War I, “Steiner answered the call from Emil Molt, the owner of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory, in Stuttgart, to found a school initially intended for the children of the factory workers” (p. vii). R. Steiner, *Human Values in Education: Ten Lectures*, London: Rudolf Steiner, 1971 (henceforth, *Values*). R. Steiner, *The Essentials of Education: Five Lectures*, London: Steiner, 1982 (henceforth, *Essentials*). Steiner VI. For what follows on anthroposophical education, I have also consulted Ahern, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–42, 61–63.
79. *Beuys II*, p. 265.
80. *Ibid.*
81. *Ibid.*, pp. 268–69.
82. *Insights*, p. 45.
83. *Essentials*, p. 54 (Steiner’s emphasis).
84. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19, 58.
85. *Beuys II*, p. 269.
86. *Essentials*, pp. 85, 97–98.
87. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
90. *Insights*, p. 49.
91. *Essentials*, p. 96.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 29 (emphasis mine).
93. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
94. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
95. *Insights*, pp. 5, 18.
96. *Essentials*, p. 56.
97. *Values*, pp. 147–48 (emphasis mine).
98. *Essentials*, p. 19.

99. *Beuys I*, p. 220 [p. 260].
100. R. Steiner, *The Social Future*, Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic, 1972 (henceforth, *Future*); R. Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal: Basic Issues of the Social Question*, London: Steiner, 1977 (henceforth, *Renewal*).
101. McDermott, in *Essential Steiner*, op. cit., p. 290.
102. S. Bellow, "Foreword," to R. Steiner, *Boundaries of Natural Science*, New York: Anthroposophic, 1983 (it is also interesting to note that the translator of this work, Dr. Konrad Oberhuber, is a distinguished art historian).
103. *Renewal*, p. 98.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 101 (Steiner's emphasis).
105. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
106. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16.
107. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.
108. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
110. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 33 (Steiner's emphasis).
112. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
113. *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 47 (Steiner's emphasis).
114. *Future*, pp. 76–77.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
117. *Ibid.*
118. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.
119. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
120. *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 94.

## Epilogue

1. Ortega y Gasset, as cited by Poggioli, op. cit., p. 91.
2. Laverdant, *ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33 (emphasis mine).
4. Again, see the several scholarly contributions to *SPART*, and the extensive bibliographies compiled therein. This anthology, however, was not the first book to examine the causes of modern art in the light of the esoteric tradition. From this particular investigative point of view, the pioneering effort was by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbins, *Mona Lisa's Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947 (perhaps ironically, my copy, which I bought used, is personally inscribed by its now-late author). When the author is

(occasionally) correct in his interpretations of the occultist influences operating upon certain modern artists, this seems more the result of intuition than of scholarship. Scarcely any of his statements are documented and, worse, he provides little evidence. Even worse, the whole purpose of this curious effort is to show that modern art, like modern occultism, is essentially a sign of recent decadence, and that both are the dire results of a hidden conspiracy designed to hoodwink the gullible. Given the publication date, 1947, this is probably best understood in the light of post-World War II polemics about hidden conspiracies and foreign conspirators corrupting the noble minds and hearts of Americans.

5. Goran, *op. cit.*, pp. 170–71.
6. Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 348.
7. For more details, see Ahern, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–30.
8. Marie Steiner, eulogy in Steiner, *Eurythmy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 244–45, 249.





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## A Joseph Beuys Reading List

While what follows is sufficiently complete to serve most scholarly needs, it will be recognized that any such bibliography cannot pretend to be exhaustive since much material on Beuys's activities was published in European newspapers and other periodical ephemera which often only mention Beuys in passing, particularly the case with a number of brief notices or reviews of art exhibitions. Be that as it may, the following entries are presented in chronological order under three headings: books, catalogues, and articles.

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