



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

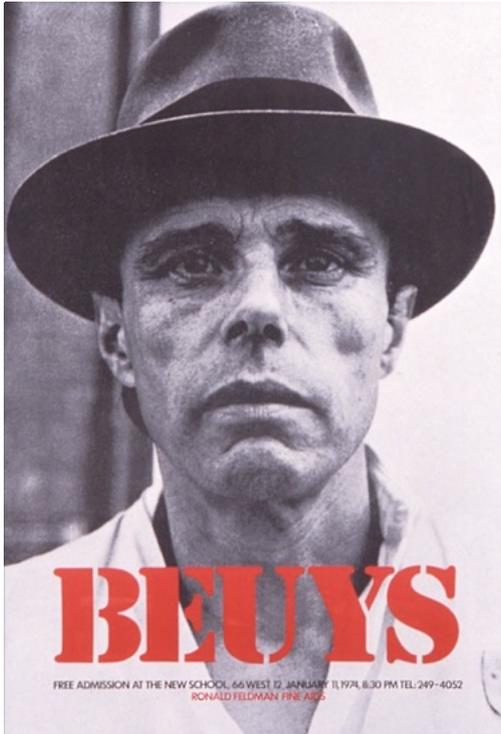
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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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61-14 JOSEPH BEUYS

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Photo of Joseph Beuys at
Feldman Gallery, 1974

- This is Section 61 on recent artists and this talk is on the German artist Joseph Beuys. He is famous for saying “Everyone is an artist”. I will be describing what I think he meant later.

QUOTES

“Art alone makes life possible – this is how radically I should like to formulate it. I would say that without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms...Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being... Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.”

“To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration.”

— Joseph Beuys

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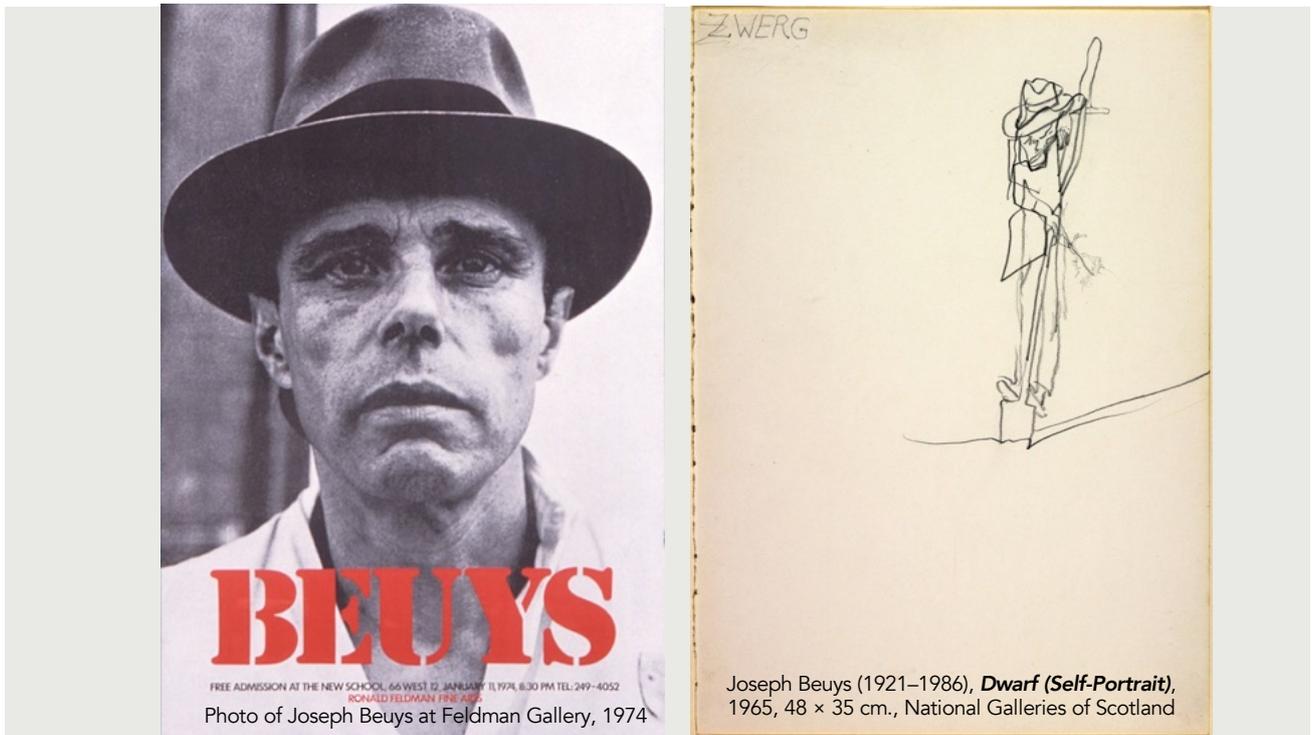
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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Dwarf (Self-Portrait)*, 1965, 48 × 35 cm., National Galleries of Scotland

- First, he was born in **Germany in 1921** and although he **skilled at drawing** at school he finally decided to become a **doctor**. He **joined the Hitler Youth** in 1936 and in 1941 he **volunteered for the Luftwaffe** and trained as a **radio operator**.
- From 1943 onwards he was a **rear-gunner** and the following year his **plane crashed** in the Crimea and he developed a powerful origin myth about how he was **rescued by nomadic Tartar tribesmen** who wrapped him in **animal fat and felt** to keep him warm. Records show he was **recovered by German search party**, remained conscious and stayed in hospital for three weeks.
- After the war he **studied art** and he graduated in 1953 aged 32. He suffered from **depression and self-doubt** and in 1961 was appointed **professor of monumental sculpture** at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf..
- By 1965, Beuys was firmly engaged in **teaching at the Düsseldorf Academy**, shaping a new generation of artists while developing his theories of "social sculpture." He described himself as "**a mediator, not a magician**," signalling his conviction that **art is a form of social intervention**.
- The **drawing on the right** from this period shows the artist himself in miniature, almost vulnerable. The figure is simplified, with exaggerated features, a mix of fragility and symbolic weight. Beuys often used the dwarf motif as a metaphor for marginalised energy, latent potential, and the psychic consequences of

history.

- Beuys had recently recovered from **years of personal trauma**—physical injuries from wartime service, emotional scars from Germany’s collapse—and the small figure acts as an image of those experiences.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
Fat Chair,
1964,
183 x 155 x 64 cm.,
Tate, London

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Fat Chair*, 1964, 183 x 155 x 64 cm., Tate, London

- This work consists of a **plain wooden chair with a wedge of animal fat** placed on the seat. The materials do the work. The chair stands for **structure, order**, and social rigidity. **The fat is unstable**. It softens, slumps, oxidises, and smells. Time is not incidental. It is active.
- Beuys **used fat repeatedly** to signify **stored energy and latent change**. He associated it with warmth, nourishment, and survival, in direct **opposition to cold, rational systems**. Here the fat is trapped by the chair. The implication is clear: human potential constrained by institutional form.
- When first exhibited, museum conservators were alarmed. **The fat changed shape, leaked, and degraded**. Beuys refused replacement. He insisted that transformation and decay were integral. He said, **“If you don’t accept change you don’t accept life.”**
- At this point he was teaching sculpture in **Düsseldorf** and **increasingly frustrated** by academic convention. He believed art education had become mechanistic and exclusionary. *Fat Chair* embodies that critique without words.
- Internationally, **Minimalism and early Conceptual Art** favoured industrial materials and impersonal execution. **Beuys rejected both**. He insisted on organic matter, symbolism, and human vulnerability.
- West Germany in the mid-1960s was orderly, prosperous, and emotionally repressed. Beuys regarded that stability as dangerous. *Fat Chair* stages a quiet conflict between comfort and transformation, warning that rigid systems

inevitably fail.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
**How to Explain
Pictures to a Dead
Hare**,
1965,
performance,
Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965, performance, Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf

- A famous piece of **performance art**. It rejects the creation of objects and so undermines the art market.
- In this performance he covered his **head in honey and gold leaf**, cradled a **dead hare**, and whispered explanations of artworks to it. The audience watched from outside through glass.
- The imagery was deliberate. **Honey symbolised collective labour and intelligence**. Gold suggested transformation. The hare, a recurring figure in European folklore, represented intuition and rebirth. Beuys argued that rational explanation alone could not account for art.
- The performance **divided opinion** sharply. Some critics called it **mystical nonsense**. Others recognised it as a powerful critique of post-war intellectualism and museum culture. Beuys later said, "**Even a dead animal has more intuitive understanding than some humans.**"
- At this point he was loosely associated with **Fluxus**, an international network of experimental artists. However, he **soon broke away**, finding Fluxus too nihilistic. He wanted reconstruction, not destruction.
- West Germany in the mid-1960s was economically stable but culturally repressed. Conversations about **guilt, memory, and responsibility** were still limited. Beuys used ritual and provocation to force those issues into public space.

- This performance cemented his reputation as a **shaman-like figure**. The felt trilby hat became his visual trademark. It covered the two metal plates he had in his head as a result of wartime injuries and he said the hat protected him from the painful extremes of hot and cold.

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Fluxus — FLUCK-suss

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *The Sled*, 1969, 103 × 62 × 50 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York

- I mentioned this origin myth of being wrapped in fat and felt. This work consists of a **wooden sled carrying felt, fat, and a torch**. It looks simple. It is not. Beuys described it as a “**survival kit**”. The materials refer back to his wartime crash narrative, but also to broader ideas of warmth, energy, and human vulnerability.
- Critics initially **dismissed it as private mythology**. Others immediately grasped its **wider implications**. The sled became a compressed image of survival in hostile conditions.
- By 1969 Beuys was already a **controversial professor** at the Düsseldorf Academy. He **rejected traditional entrance exams** and accepted any student who wished to learn. This led to **repeated clashes** with the administration. He believed education was a sculptural process, shaping society itself.
- Internationally, **Conceptual Art** was gaining ground, often austere and anti-emotional. Beuys moved in the **opposite direction**. He insisted on symbolism and biography. He called this “**expanded sculpture**”.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
The Pack,
 1969,
 240 × 400 × 150 cm.,
 Kunstmuseum Basel

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *The Pack*, 1969, 240 × 400 × 150 cm., Kunstmuseum Basel

- A Volkswagen Type 2 van appears to have **released twenty-four wooden sleds** through its rear doors. Each sled carries **felt, fat, and a torch**. The vehicle is immobilised. The sleds move outward, as if in an emergency evacuation.
- The symbolism is direct. The van represents **post-war German industry** and authority. The **sleds represent decentralised survival**. Leadership disperses. Responsibility is shared. No single figure controls the outcome.
- Beuys made the work during a **year of global unrest**: student protests, strikes, and violent confrontations with state power. In Germany, the legitimacy of authority was under intense scrutiny. The Pack rejects hierarchical command structures in favour of collective action.
- Critics quickly connected the work to guerrilla politics. **Beuys denied advocating violence** but accepted the comparison. He argued that creativity, not force, was the true agent of change.
- By 1969 his **position at the Düsseldorf Academy was precarious**. He openly defied admissions rules, enrolling rejected students and declaring education a basic right. The administration accused him of anarchy.
- The Pack marks a shift from personal symbolism toward **explicit social organisation**. Sculpture is no longer an object. It becomes a model for how society might function differently under pressure.

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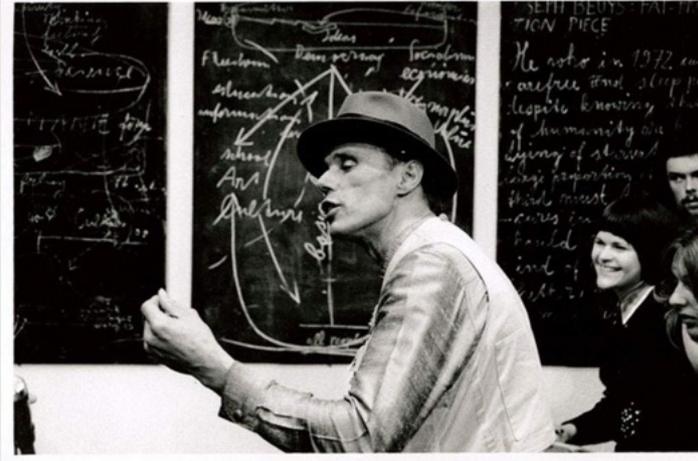
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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
Information Action,
 1972, performed at the Tate Gallery, 26 February 1972

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),.

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Information Action*, 1972, performed at the Tate Gallery, 26 February 1972

- **Information Action** was a **six and a half hour** performance at **Tate Modern** in 1972. He lectured on art, politics and social change. As a central part of his "**social sculpture**" concept, he used **blackboards** to illustrate theories on creativity, direct democracy, and human potential, engaging directly with the audience. The blackboards are preserved and displayed at Tate Modern.
- The work marked a change towards educational performances with an aim of **encouraging collective action** to change society.
- He said, "**We are all artists**". Meaning our lives, our conduct, our decisions help create and change the world and the story of our lives is our work of art, our contribution to the whole. He seems to be saying don't think of art as fine paintings and carved marble but as everyone's everyday lives which is determined by the decisions we make.
- The work highlights Beuys's status as a thinker whose ethics, teaching, and aesthetics are inseparable. It challenges future generations to consider the artist as social agent, historical witness, and moral conscience.

NOTES

The same year he exhibited *Arena – Dove sarei arrivato se fossi stato intelligente!* (*Arena – where would I have got if I had been intelligent!*) is a monumental

autobiographical installation by Joseph Beuys, originally exhibited in 1972, Galleria Modern Art Agency, Naples. It consisted of 100 panels displaying 264 photographs documenting his actions, performances, objects, and personal life, serving as an allegorical portrait of his career and artistic persona.

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Dove sei — DOH-veh SAY

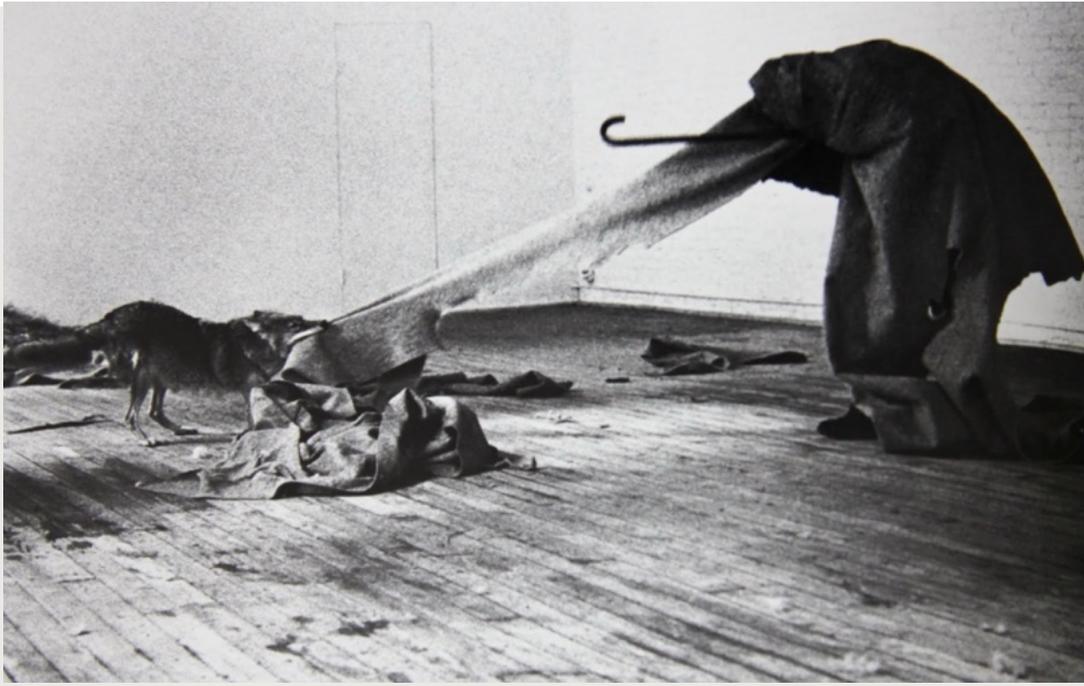
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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, performance, René Block Gallery, New York

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, performance, René Block Gallery, New York

- Beuys **arrived in New York** wrapped entirely in felt, transported by ambulance from the airport to the gallery. He spent **three days inside the space with a live coyote**. He never set foot on American soil.
- The coyote was chosen deliberately. For Beuys it symbolised **Indigenous America, suppressed histories, and unresolved trauma**. He carried a shepherd's staff, wore his felt hat, and received daily deliveries of *The Wall Street Journal*. Capitalism and myth occupied the same space.
- The performance was tense. The **animal growled, tore felt, and occasionally lunged**. Gradually it tolerated his presence. Beuys interpreted this as symbolic reconciliation, though he did not claim resolution.
- Reaction was polarised. Some critics dismissed it as theatrical mysticism. Others saw a precise political allegory. One reviewer wrote that Beuys had "**entered America as a wound, not a guest**." He was opening up a wound in the foundations of America's history.
- This was his first visit to the United States. The Vietnam War had recently ended. Trust in institutions was fragile. Beuys avoided direct commentary, opting instead for ritualised confrontation.
- At this stage **he was internationally famous** and increasingly seen as a **moral figure** rather than a stylist. The work reinforced his self-casting as **mediator, healer, and provocateur**, operating outside conventional political language.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
Show Your Wound,
 1974–1975,
 450 × 700 cm.,
 Lenbachhaus, Munich

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Show Your Wound*, 1974–1975, 450 × 700 cm., Lenbachhaus, Munich

- **Show Your Wound** was an installation created by Beuys in 1974-75 in a **bleak pedestrian underpass in Munich**. Elements used there can be seen in these negatives; This installation consists of **mortuary trolleys, surgical instruments, and fragments of felt** arranged as a tableau of **human vulnerability**. The wound was a recurring theme for the artist. On a personal level it referred to injuries he received in the Second World War, his breakdown in the 1950s and his heart attack in 1975. More generally, he used the idea to reference events in Germany's past and the divide between Eastern and Western cultures.
- Beuys insisted that personal exposure and collective empathy were fundamental to societal healing. **"The wound is the place where the light enters you,"** he claimed, echoing historical and spiritual metaphor.
- Critics initially found the **work shocking and confrontational**. One review in Artforum described it as **"a theatre of ethical provocation,"** insisting that the work forced viewers into moral consideration. The **surgical imagery** evoked both medical intervention and historical trauma, especially **Germany's unresolved wartime legacy**.
- Beuys had begun experimenting with this theme **after intensive teaching sessions** in the early 1970s. He believed education, politics, and art were inseparable. By using objects associated with **care and injury**, he materialised psychological and **historical wounds**.

- At Lenbachhaus, the installation challenged museum conventions. It was **deliberately uncomfortable**, requiring viewers to navigate intimacy and mortality. Scholars note that it exemplifies Beuys's principle that "**art is social energy in action.**"
- Posthumously, *Show Your Wound* has been cited as a crucial precursor to art that focuses on human relations rather than the production of static objects.

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Lenbachhaus — LEN-bahk-house

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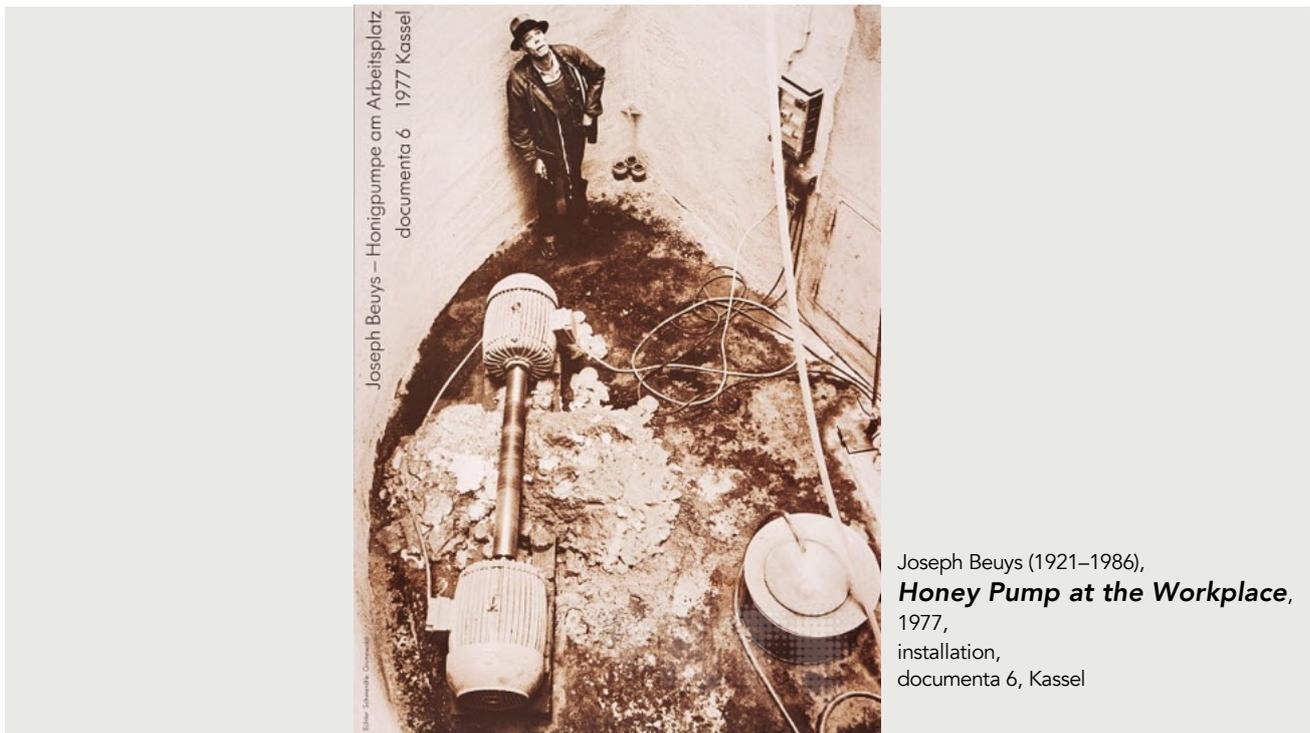
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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Honey Pump at the Workplace*, 1977, installation, documenta 6, Kassel

- This is a **pump that moved two tonnes of honey** through transparent plastic tubes using electric motors. The honey circulated continuously through the exhibition spaces, walls, and stairwells. The system ran only while the exhibition was active.
- The imagery was precise. **Honey represented living thought: warm, viscous, collective.** The pumps represented labour and circulation. Beuys described the work as a model of society in motion, where ideas must flow or stagnate.
- The installation coincided with Beuys's intensive involvement in **political education**. During documenta 6 he staged **daily discussions, lectures, and debates** alongside the work. The sculpture was not complete without speech.
- **Critics were divided.** Some dismissed the work as **didactic spectacle**, moral instruction turned into a circus performance. Others recognised it as a **radical merger of teaching and installation**. One commentator noted that the real artwork was **"the conversation powered by honey."**
- By the late 1970s West Germany was experiencing **economic anxiety, nuclear debates, and environmental concern**. Beuys argued that political systems failed because they treated thinking as abstract rather than biological.
- This work formalised his idea of "social sculpture" as a metabolic process. **Art was no longer representation.** It was infrastructure for collective intelligence.

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documenta — doh-koo-MEN-tah

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Joseph Beuys
(1921–1986),
**The Economic
Values**,
1980,
installation,
various locations

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *The Economic Values*, 1980, installation, various locations

- This installation combined **shelves of everyday consumer goods** from East Germany with blackboards, drawings, and copper plates. The **products were outdated, cheap**, and ideologically loaded.
- Beuys contrasted use value with symbolic value. He argued that economics had become detached from human creativity. The blackboards carried diagrams linking labour, education, and imagination.
- The work emerged during heightened Cold War tension. Beuys refused to align with **either capitalist or socialist orthodoxy**. He **criticised both** for reducing people to economic units.
- At this stage he was **active in founding the German Green Party** and campaigning for direct democracy. However, he increasingly clashed with party leadership, accusing it of bureaucratic thinking. He was later marginalised within the movement.
- Critics noted the bluntness of *The Economic Values*. There was little poetry here. That was intentional. Beuys wanted clarity. **“Capital,”** he said, **“is not money. Capital is human ability.”**
- The installation functioned as an educational environment rather than a spectacle. Viewers were expected to read, think, and argue. This emphasis on responsibility marked his late practice.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
7000 Oaks,
1982–1987,
Kassel

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *7000 Oaks*, 1982–1987, Kassel

- Beuys proposed **planting 7,000 oak trees** throughout the city of **Kassel**, each paired with a **vertical basalt stone**. The project began as part of documenta 7 and was met with **hostility**.
- Local politicians objected to the **cost, disruption, and timescale**. **Newspapers mocked** the idea. Beuys insisted that the work would only be complete when the final tree was planted.
- The pairing was essential. The **oak symbolised organic growth** and time. The **basalt marked permanence** and historical weight. Together they formed a slow, irreversible transformation of urban space.
- This was sculpture without an audience in the traditional sense. It **unfolded over years** and required public participation. Beuys described it as a commitment rather than a monument.
- The project aligned with **rising environmental consciousness** across Europe. Acid rain, nuclear anxiety, and urban decay were dominant concerns. Beuys framed ecology as a **cultural issue**, not a technical one.
- **He died in 1986, one year before completion**. The final tree was planted by his son. **7000 Oaks** permanently altered Kassel and remains one of the most ambitious artworks of the twentieth century.

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Basalt — BASS-alt

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
End of the Twentieth Century,
1983–1985, installation,
90 x 700 x 1200 cm.
Tate Modern

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *End of the Twentieth Century*, 1983–1985, installation, 90 x 700 x 1200 cm. Tate Modern

- Thirty-one large **basalt stones** lie scattered across the floor. Each has been drilled, hollowed, and **refilled with clay**. The violence is precise. The repair is partial.
- Beuys described the work as a **reflection on historical failure**. The twentieth century, he argued, had **prioritised technology over ethical imagination**. The stones are not destroyed, but they are **wounded**.
- **Basalt** had appeared earlier as a **marker of permanence**. Here it is compromised. Clay, a malleable material associated with modelling and learning, fills the cavities. The implication is that repair is possible but incomplete.
- The work was made during renewed **Cold War anxiety** and nuclear escalation. Public faith in progress was eroding. Beuys **rejected nostalgia and optimism alike**. He insisted on responsibility without reassurance.
- Critics noted the austerity of the installation. There is no performative gesture, **no rhetoric**. This **restraint** marked a **shift in his late work**. Meaning is embedded, not declared.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
***Lightning with Stag in
its Glare.***
1958–1985,
470 × 580 × 240 cm.,
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*, 1958–1985, 470 × 580 × 240 cm., Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

- This **monumental installation** brings together bronze, aluminium, iron, felt, clay, and organic forms arranged across the floor like a ruptured landscape. The stag stands at its centre, struck or illuminated by a jagged bolt of lightning.
- The work was started in 1958 and first shown in 1982 at the Zeitgeist exhibition in Berlin. He was never concerned with look but with the idea and used clay, chisels, an ironing board, an old trolley and a tripod with a box on top.
- Later he cast the pieces in bronze and aluminium. He produced different versions and the work occupied him **intermittently for nearly three decades**, making it one of his most sustained projects. He produced five copies of which one is in London at Tate Modern and one is in the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Critics have described it as a retrospective in sculptural form. Nothing here is new; everything is recombined.
- By the 1980s his health was visibly deteriorating. He suffered from **chronic heart problems and diabetes**, yet worked with urgency. This piece reflects that intensity. It has the scale of a public monument but the fragility of a provisional arrangement.
- Let us examine the work piece by piece:
- **Lightning:** the centerpiece is a large suspended triangular bronze form, cast from a section of a the original clay mound. This dramatic triangle hangs from a beam and represents the bolt of lightning itself—embodying creative energy

and transformation.

- **The Stag:** the silver object was originally an ironing board resting on wooden "legs" (two casts of ebony wood), now all cast in reflective aluminium. The aluminium gives it a luminous quality, as if caught and illuminated by the lightning flash. The stag held special symbolic meaning for Beuys as a spiritual guide and resurrection symbol.
- **Primordial Animals:** the thirty-five round objects were made of clay wrapped around tools he found in his studio such as spatulas, chisels, and screwdrivers, with the tool ends protruding like heads. They are now cast dark bronze forms suggesting primitive, half-formed life forms—worm-like shapes representing early evolutionary life.
- **The Goat:** a three-wheeled metal cart with a pick resting on it, symbolizes the goat, a humble animal representing domestication and labour working quietly in the background.
- **Boothia Felix:** finally there is a metal tripod supporting a cubic mass with a small compass resting on top, named after the location in northern Canada where the North Magnetic Pole was first established, Boothia Felix. It was named after the Sir Felix Booth, a gin manufacturer, who financed the expedition led by John Ross that discovered the location of magnetic north pole in 1829. Since then the magnetic pole has moved 680 miles west toward Siberia. It represents humanity's relationship with the natural world and the power of nature. Without the magnetic field power grids and electronic devices would be put out of action, people and animals would receive dangerous levels of radiation and over a period of years there would be mass extinctions.
- So, the installation recreates the moment a lightning strike illuminates a forest clearing populated by creatures at different stages of evolution, making us aware of nature's power, its ability to transform our world, and our delicate relationship with it.

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
Plight,
1985,
installation,
Centre Pompidou, Paris

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Plight*, 1985, installation, Centre Pompidou, Paris

- Two connected rooms are lined floor to ceiling with **thick rolls of felt**. A **grand piano** stands closed. A **black thermometer** hangs on the wall. Sound is absorbed. Movement is dampened. Nothing happens.
- The work addresses **trauma, silence, and unresolved memory**. Felt, previously associated with protection and survival, here becomes **oppressive**. Warmth turns into suffocation.
- **Plight** was created near the end of Beuys's life and is among **his most restrained works**. There is no didactic explanation. Viewers are left alone with sensory deprivation.
- The piano, permanently closed, refers to suppressed cultural expression. The thermometer measures nothing specific. It implies monitoring without intervention.
- Shown in Paris, the work was read as a European meditation on historical amnesia. Critics linked it to unspoken post-war guilt and institutional silence.
- This installation abandons public debate in favour of internal confrontation. It suggests that before collective change, there must be private reckoning.

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Pompidou — POM-pee-doo

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Joseph Beuys (1921–1986),
Palazzo Regale,
1985, installation, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), *Palazzo Regale*, 1985, installation, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

- This installation occupies **several rooms of the former royal palace**, combining vitrines, found objects, and large-scale drawings. Beuys sought to **confront** the layers of **historical authority and civic neglect** in southern Italy. The juxtaposition of palace grandeur with humble materials **dramatises social disparity** and cultural memory.
- He **travelled extensively** before creating the work, engaging with local artists and historians. **Naples fascinated him: a city alive with creativity yet burdened by decay and bureaucratic inertia.** Beuys once said, **“Art is the social organ for understanding history; without it, we are blind.”** He treated the Palazzo as a laboratory for exploring that principle.
- Critics noted its ambitious scale and conceptual density. One historian wrote: **“Beuys transformed a museum into a civic organism; the work is less to be seen than to be inhabited.”** Others emphasised its ethical urgency—he was challenging viewers to think about civic responsibility, memory, and justice.
- This was among his **final major projects**, created at a time when his **health was in decline.** Diabetes, heart disease, and the stress of international commitments had visibly affected him, lending the work a sense of urgency and finality.

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Palazzo — pah-LAT-tso

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61-14 JOSEPH BEUYS

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Joseph Beuys,
Information Action,
1972

- Joseph Beuys **redefined 20th-century art** through his concept of **Social Sculpture**, asserting that "**everyone is an artist**" with the **power to shape society**. A co-founder of the **German Green Party**, his legacy blends **shamanic performance** with **political activism** and **environmentalism**, famously seen in his **7,000 Oaks** project.
- That brings me to the end of today's talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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