

“I am a sender, I transmit”

Joseph Beuys, 1964¹

Joseph Beuys Multiple Message

Eugen Blume

In the early 1960s Joseph Beuys developed his idea of the multiple from a relatively basic concept that emerged out of the FLUXUS movement into a more complex art form. This was very much in keeping with his belief that art can be a powerful and far-reaching agent.

The prototypes for these editions, often only slightly altered yet subtly enhanced, are the result of complex social relationships which then demand a critical intervention facilitated by an all-encompassing art context. No other artist of the late 20th century has reacted so prodigiously to the idea generated by George Maciunas, founder of the FLUXUS-movement, of producing inexpensive multiples in opposition to the usual market forces. Joseph Beuys consistently pursued the democratic ideal of creating affordable original works so that art was no longer the preserve of the wealthy elite. His concerns, however, were not centered on merely the social aspect of distributing art, but with a larger universal notion of which he was the creator. In other words, he wanted to distribute this notion of art as widely as possible, not just through explanatory texts and lectures, but through the sometimes provocative production of art objects that he called ‘vehicles.’ These he saw as satellite-like objects, which, precisely because of their large edition sizes, were able to reach a broad audience.

This idea of developing small-scale handheld works has interesting affinities with Marcel Duchamp’s “Box in a Valise” made for friends and collectors in an edition of 20 as a kind of portable mini-museum of his oeuvre. Even if the idea and form of Duchamp’s ready-mades are substantially different from that of Beuys’s multiples, there is an undeniable relationship between the two, namely the multiplication in reduced form of the works in question. Beuys grappled intensively with Duchamp’s ideas, and at an early stage recognized in him a motivating force. In his 1964 performance “The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated” one clearly sees that Beuys had understood Duchamp’s contribution in formulating ahead of his time many of the criteria of the 20th century avant-garde. Duchamp was the towering figure against which even his own far-reaching notion of art had to

be measured. He refused to take seriously the role of the ‘masses,’ which he saw rather as a danger to the intellectual aspect of art. All social implications were anathema to Duchamp, and it is precisely out of this concept that Beuys developed his idea (born from 19th century romanticism) to poeticize the world and to allow everyone to take part in art. Beuys claimed: “everyone is an artist” and he saw art, that is to say the intellectual capabilities of human-beings, as his own capital. For Beuys, these human capabilities, so exemplarily manifested in art, were a guarantee for the future of society as a whole and not the financial gains of strategic speculation and accumulation of enormous riches in the hands of the few. In order to spread these basic ideas of a new society transformed by art, Beuys had to find a comparable format to Duchamp’s 300 boxes. These boxes represented a three dimensional version of Duchamp’s ironically skeptical (one could say Cartesian) world-view.² Beuys, on the other hand, refused all forms of skepticism as the basis for his multiples. Instead, he wanted to express a sense of revolutionary confidence. “La rivoluzione siamo Noi” (We are the revolution) appears in Italian on one of his multiples. Just as the editions in their small formats and as affordable original artworks were supposed to reach everyone, so too were the ideas implicit in them available to everyone.

This “small” art form, which grew to 557 works, encompasses in its totality his complete oeuvre as well as his extensive battery of ideas. Whereas Beuys’s large-scale sculptures are permanently housed in various museums and his extensive body of works on paper are rarely displayed due to their sensitivity to light, the multiples represent a relatively robust and easily movable body of work, which can be installed without too much difficulty in a variety of locations. The multiples are furthermore closely associated with Beuys’s concept of a Free International University (F.I.U.), another movable notion. In 1970, Beuys, in one of his discussions, said: “For me every edition has the character of a condensation nucleus to which many things can attach themselves [...] I am interested in the distribution of physical vehicles in the form of editions because I am interested in

the dissemination of ideas. The objects can only be understood in relation to my ideas.”³

Often, in an international context, Beuys would make use of his multiples to convey his ideas quickly and easily. For example, the comprehensive exhibition of multiples in the Ulbricht Collection⁴ shown in Oslo in 1982 laid out the parameters for future exhibitions.⁵ Invited by the Seibu Museum in Tokyo, Beuys traveled to Asia for the first time in 1984. Here too, he showed the Günter Ulbricht Collection, but on this occasion using it to illustrate his vision of uniting East and West in the Asian world, ideas he had already touched upon in his EURASIA-Thoughts in the early 1960s. The five days in Tokyo were accompanied by an extensive program of lectures and discussions. Also at this time Beuys was campaigning for the realization of his ecological-social monumental sculpture “7000 Oaks” which he had initiated in 1982 at Documenta 7 in Kassel.⁶ Both these exhibitions have been particularly helpful, especially since Beuys’s death, in understanding how the artist himself envisioned the installation of his multiples in a spatial and thought-provoking context.

The assertion made by Joseph Beuys “If you have all my multiples, then you have me completely”⁷ provides the key to understanding the significance, both physically and intellectually, of these editioned pieces. It is less a question of incidental objects produced as favors for collectors and art dealers, but far more a strategic program which has a bearing on every aspect of Beuys’s thinking, thereby encompassing the idea of completeness.

Beuys, as with his monumental sculptures, actions, performances or political events, took great pains to imbue the smaller editioned objects with an aesthetic and memory-laden character that flowed through the overall context of his multiples. He worked on these objects, editions, prints and texts with great care giving them the same special aura inherent in his major works. He wanted to give a complete account of his immense output, while at the same time accepting the legitimacy of single editions which were, however, ultimately conceived to form a unified group, in his words a “Block.” Beuys used this sculptural term to address the idea of bringing together, in one spatial context, works composed of many parts. The most important and best known example is the so-called “Beuys-Block” of 7 rooms installed by Beuys himself in the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt. In the “Beuys-Block” the use of vitrines as sculptural elements is of particular significance. They are not merely containers housing a collection of small ‘things’ but serve as a theatrical stage upon which those objects can be arranged in a precise and deliberate manner that corresponds to the artistic notion of harmony and aesthetics. Fully respecting the idea of a ‘block,’ Beuys understood that the often smaller-sized multiples should be displayed in vitrines. He therefore established a guiding principle that would be helpful when installing exhibitions. Photographic documentation of historical exhibitions, including the ones already mentioned, can be of considerable help to us today in understanding the look and construction of an “original” Beuys vitrine. Having said this, however, Beuys was not a defender of slavishly copying pre-existing installations. He himself loved the notion of variation so long as any changes remained true to his original principle of constant energy. This he entrusted to the exhibition curator.

The Berlin collector Reinhard Schlegel has, for the second time, assembled one of the largest collections of Beuys multiples. This is indeed an astonishing accomplishment,

and one that most certainly cannot be repeated a third time. Today, collections of this magnitude are all to be found in museums, such as the collection of Bernd Klüser now in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich and the collection in the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, to name just two. Reinhard Schlegel’s second collection, larger than his first, in its unparalleled breadth and depth has come to exemplify the full story of Beuys’s achievement.

A few days before his death, Joseph Beuys arranged for a symbolic memorial to be installed in the Museo Capodimonte (Palazzo Regale)⁸ in Naples, his favorite city. In four large museum-style vitrines one could see the paraphernalia of the wanderer, the shaman and Beuys, the artist. These were surrounded by shiny brass plaques, making visible the boundary between life and death. Into this installation Beuys introduced a final multiple glowing with optimism: the Capri Battery, made in December 1985. By combining the notions of human innovation (symbolized by a yellow light bulb screwed into its socket) and nature (depicted by a lemon) Beuys powerfully illustrated the source of all our achievements. This union of two disparate objects testified to an ecological balance which, at the end of Beuys’s life, served to remind us that he had dedicated his entire oeuvre to a potential reconciliation between man and nature. To convey this message, he chose a small multiple, an editioned object, with which his inheritance could be transmitted to mankind in all corners of the world. It was important for Beuys that the lemon should be a real fruit, which the owner of the work has to replace after an interval of time. This necessary action comes to symbolize the life-assuring act of regeneration. Beuys demonstrates in the simplest of terms that nature is essential but that its resources are not infinite. Lest we forget, Joseph Beuys was one of the founding fathers of the first ecological party, “The Green Party,” and put himself forward as a German parliamentary candidate. His is a story told through his multiples. The collected ‘block’ of his life’s work is inseparable from Beuys the political figure. And as a public figure, in his recognizable outfit of hat and hunting vest, Beuys exposed himself to the fundamental experiment of art achieving freedom.

“There is a long term effect. Many write to me, some criticize me. But they keep coming.”⁹

NOTES

1. J.B. on the occasion of the performance DER CHEF, 1964, quoted in Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, Cologne 1973, p. 72
2. Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp. Die grosse Schachtel. Inventar einer Edition*, Munich 1989, p. 21
3. J. B. Conversation with Jörg Schellmann and Bernd Klüser, December 1970, in: Jörg Schellmann (publisher), *Joseph Beuys. The Multiples*, Munich 1992, p. 9
4. The Collection was put together with the help of Joseph Beuys and is the most comprehensive collection of his multiples, now permanently housed in the Kunstmuseum Bonn.
5. Sonja Henie – Niels Onstad Foundation, Hovikodden/Oslo 1982
6. Beuys planned to plant 7000 oak trees in and around Kassel, and sought financial support for this project up until his death. For example, he used the proceeds received from a publicity film made by the Japanese company Nikka Whisky to fund the 7000 Oaks project.
7. Quotation taken from a conversation with Günter Ulbricht on February 8, 1986.
8. The installation is now in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf.
9. J. B. Conversation with Peter Brüggel, “Die Mysterien finden im Hauptbahnhof statt”, in: *Der Spiegel*, no. 23, June 4, 1984, p. 179