

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## **THINKING IS FORM: THE DRAWINGS OF JOSEPH BEUYS**

February 21 - May 4, 1993

The first American retrospective of the drawings of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), the central figure in postwar German art, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 21, 1993. **THINKING IS FORM: THE DRAWINGS OF JOSEPH BEUYS**, coorganized by Bernice Rose, Senior Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, and Ann Temkin, Muriel and Philip Berman Curator of Twentieth-Century Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, reveals how Beuys's identity not only as an artist, but as a teacher, performer, political activist, and social reformer, can be traced through his drawings.

Beuys's drawings also provide a crucial key to the artist's theory of "social sculpture," a phrase which describes both his own mission and his conception of society and the world as a vast work of art existing in a process of constant transformation. "Beuys designated all of life as a creative activity," Ms. Rose writes in her catalogue essay, "with humanity as its central subject."

**THINKING IS FORM: THE DRAWINGS OF JOSEPH BEUYS** includes some 180 examples in a variety of mediums, from traditional ones such as pencil, watercolor, oil, and collage to less conventional materials such as hare's blood, beeswax, chalk on blackboard, and chocolate. The works show how, over the course of five decades, Beuys's drawings moved from the sketchbook page to the blackboard, from private to public. They also reveal the rich variety of

sources that inform all of Beuys's work, including alchemy, Christian tradition, mythology, literature, anthropology, and science.

Beuys is best known for his sculpture, with its many unorthodox mediums and materials, and for the "Actions" (performances) which made him one of the most visible figures in the art world. But it was in his drawings (generally agreed to exceed 10,000 sheets) that he diagrammed his ideas and first revealed his creative identity. Beuys often likened his drawings as a whole to an energy bank, a vital source of ideas. In her catalogue essay, Ann Temkin writes, "Beuys has been described by those who knew him as constantly drawing; he drew while traveling, while watching TV, while in private discussion, while in performance. Beuys's attitude toward drawings implied it to be as intrinsic to him as breathing."

The exhibition, arranged chronologically, begins with the landscapes, botanical studies, and allegorical subjects of the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, the artist was recovering from the physical and spiritual wounds he sustained during World War II and focused most of his activity on drawing. The spidery lines and emphatic markings, often depicting human and animal figures, are a response to the trauma of the war, an investigation of mythologies that might heal a divided world. As the artist himself often pointed out, they already embody crucial elements of his thinking: the universal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; the fluctuation of the world between "cold" crystalline states and "warm" organic ones; and the unity of the spiritual and material worlds.

In the early 1960s, Beuys allied himself with the FLUXUS movement, where he first emerged in his public role as performer. One of the most prominent figures in that movement's festivals and events, many of his drawings from

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this period serve as scores or plans for "Actions." Beuys's increasingly public concerns, and the transformation from performer into political activist and social reformer, may be traced through the drawings of the late 1960s and 1970s, which show his expanding concept of art and the role of drawing within it. His concern with social and intellectual reform led him into politics in the 1970s, but also into a new artistic territory of drawings both diagrammatic and emblematic which he used to illustrate his thought.

A central work in the exhibition is *Directional Forces (Richtkräfte)*, (1974-77), an installation of 100 drawn blackboards that evolved from a performance into a sculptural installation. It is in these works that one most clearly sees the outlines of Beuys's "social sculpture," an enterprise dedicated to healing social ills. The final works in the exhibition, a poignant series of collages of pressed flowers executed a year before he died, are a deliberate return to the botanical collages of his youth and a completion of the cycle of his own work and life.

Beuys's drawings became eloquent scripts for reuniting elements that modern life had divided: the primitive and the modern, art and science, private thought and public action. When he died at the age of sixty-five, Beuys was hailed and celebrated as one of the most influential European artists of this century.

The exhibition, which continues through May 4, is made possible by generous grants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, Deutsche Bank, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Lufthansa German Airlines, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., The Bohen Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. An indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The New York

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After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (June 6 - September 12, 1993); the Philadelphia Museum of Art (October 10, 1993 - January 2, 1994); and The Art Institute of Chicago (February 15 - April 25, 1994).

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