18 **Mihai Nadin**, *M. S., Electronics and Computer Science, Polytechnic University of Bucharest; Ph.D. and post-doctoral studies in Philosophy/Aesthetics, University of Bucharest, University of Munich; additional post-doctoral studies in Philosophy and Science Theory at University of Munich, with special emphasis on semiotics. Currently Dean of the Division of Art and Design, F.I.T. Among his awards are the Richard Merton Award, the National University Continuing Education Association, and a Mentor Grant from Austrian Radio and Television (ORF). Author of many articles and books published here and abroad.*

BEUYS: ARTIST OR CHARLATAN?

But maybe it is true that the dead artist is better than the living one.
—Beuys, in dialog with Kiefer

Perspective

Recent history will help put the subject, "Artist or Charlatan," which goes well beyond Beuys, in perspective. Let me start with an account of posthumous Beuys shows and their public reception. First, at the end of 1986, there was the exhibit in Munich called *In Honor of Beuys* (Joseph Beuys, 1921–1986). Actually this exhibit was supposed to celebrate his 65th birthday, but it became a large-scale obituary. The comparison to the way Florentine artists in 1564 gave Michelangelo the last honors did not go unnoticed; admirers and followers pushed the point that the two can and should be compared. Beuys himself (who would have enjoyed the association) had accepted, not without reservation, Bernd Kluser's and Armin Zweite's idea of a show with his works and works of prominent artists eager to publicly acknowledge his influential role in the art of the last three decades. He promised a larger work for the occasion, but it was not to be. His death on January 23, 1986 changed more than his own plans.

Of the 70 invited artists—all of whom had been asked to submit a new work or to select a representative piece from their portfolios—the organizers received 40 original works and 24 statements, later published in the massive catalog of the show honoring Beuys. In short, *Beuys zu Ehren*, which was open to the public between July 16 and November 2, 1986 at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, became a public testimony to whatever Beuys represented, to his influence, his reputation, to everything that accompanied the life and work of a very contradictory figure.

A huge retrospective followed in 1987–1988 in West Berlin (in the Martin Gropius Bau), in the framework of the City's 750th anniversary. Five hundred and eighty objects, drawings, and environments of Beuys were brought together. At the end of February 1988, at the Darmstadt Landesmuseum, an exhibition entitled *Beuys und Warhol* continued the series. Darmstadt is the place where Beuys's principal installations had been assembled since 1968 and where some of Warhol's major canvases ("Green Disaster," "Campbell's Beef Noodle Soup," "Tango," etc.) belong to the permanent collection. (In many ways the question of how much an artist and how much a

charlatan Beuys was extends quite naturally to Warhol.) The Dia Foundation followed suit and in the new galleries in New York juxtaposed Beuys's work with that of Imi Knoebel and Blinky Palermo. More shows will follow leading again and again to the question posed in the title of this article.

Whether it is too early to put Beuys in some perspective is a question for art historians. Whether the prices his works fetch are justified or not will attract the attention of art investors. Whether Beuys and many of his followers deserve the public attention they get is a subject sociologists will not fail to address. My subject here is different, and if I were to rewrite the title I used, I would quote Beuys's words: "Every man an artist," which quite a number of viewers express otherwise: "I can do this too!"

What is an artist?

We have inherited several explanations and models of what an artist is or what an artist is expected to be at some moment in time. And we notice that the meaning of the word "artist" is actually reducible to its use (as the philosopher Wittgenstein would say). The paradox is that while art has been demythified to a great extent, the artist—especially the successful artist—has enjoyed increasingly mythical attributes. After a long history of hesitant public acknowledgment, artists—actually *successful* artists—made the profession enviable and the glory comparable to everything celebrated as success in our day. But is it art or success which mythifies the artist? Beuys definitely embodied this question, becoming the main character of the aesthetic drama he performed in his many public appearances in Europe, as well as on the American continent.

Many inside and outside of the art world never "saw" his art, and many had problems defining it. They felt uneasy about the conventions he submitted, some never before associated with art, or at least not with fine art. His drawings looked like smears of chocolate on cheap brown paper (and that is what some are), or like pilot maps (which some indeed were) to which he added difficult-to-understand markings (the mystery of his life prolonged in the work) after recognition as an artist came to him.

Theatrical in nature, his environments constituted silent plays, tragedies without any characters, rhetorical statements refined visually but quite primitive in their slogan-like quality. His obsession with fat, felt, and slate, intended to translate a very persistent personal experience (as a German prisoner of war among the Cossacks—another source of mystery or only a pretense?!), was noticed, but the meaning got lost since the objects constituting Beuys's environment did not constitute a framework for sharing the background. It is said that cleaning personnel once threw away what they perceived as incidental dirt accumulated in one of his environments. At another time, a mortician invited Beuys's audience to the "real thing," a morgue. Intended as symbols, some of his celebrated works (approached as sculptures or installations) actually seemed assignments in a class on Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (Äesthetik des Häßlichen, 1853). The artist repeatedly argued that the ugliness of existence and the ugly in art (as an aesthetic type of expression) are related.

Did Beuys actually design the environment with a specific intention, or, once it came into being, did he add to the material body explanations that became part of the work? Was his and Nam June Paik's concert for two pianos in honor of George Maciunas (spiritual father of *Fluxus*) one more episode in a history of deceiving the

Joseph Beuys, 1974.

public, or a very intense testimony to another aesthetic (that of the transient)? And what about *La jambe d'Orwell*, (another collaboration with Nam June Paik) on New Year's Eve at the Centre Pompidou? The two tapes of these works, which I heard played in Munich, were emotionally charged. Nam June Paik—the most remarkable video artist of these days—had created a new videowork in remembrance of Beuys. But what had Beuys created? Or was it enough for him just to be there, to make things possible? Or by making things possible, did he introduce a new notion of art?

Bathtub for a Heroine, bronze by Beuys, 1984.

The art of appropriation

It was Duchamp who legitimized artistic appropriation, suggesting (not for the first time in the history of art) that selection and framing are equally (if not more) acceptable to aesthetic representation. Between "L'Urinoir" (1917), and the ironic appropriation of past art in the postmodern, the avantgarde of yesteryear has become the new classic of today. Although the aesthetic ideology of appropriation is relatively coherent, what the public perceives is new and ever more provocative ways of selecting and framing the real. The process is one of change from artistic praxis involving craftsmanship to one dominated by histrionics. Skills, necessary to produce collectible artifacts, are replaced by intuitive directing, necessary to stage unique performances.

Beuys's notion of art crystalizes in a theatrical rather than in a pictorial or sculptural space. His selection—the classroom, the concert hall, the morgue, the streetcar stop (to name a few)—is indeed astute; and for as long as he lived, his participation in the performance ensured uniqueness. From among all those using the strategy of appropriation, Beuys was probably one of the boldest. He liked how Warhol appropriated American icons—from Marilyn Monroe to Coca Cola and Campbell soup—but definitely had a less provincial view of the world. Beuys's themes are life, death, art, environment, wealth, knowledge; accordingly his appropriation of reality happened on a scale Warhol never felt comfortable with.

I met Beuys in 1982 at *Dokumenta 7* in Kassel, West Germany. His "7000 Oaks" project (coming after "Honey Pump" at *Dokumenta 6*) did not entirely succeed. For each tree planted, a stone was added to the *sui generis* monument of our awareness of the environment. Ecology turned into art, and art into politics (should I say demagoguery?), made for good headlines but did little in respect to his creative concept. Quite sad, he had to accept, during our conversation, that the symbolism of the oak (another appropriation?) had been compromised by Fascist art (and reignited the question of his own political past). Followers, never flagging in their enthusiasm, noticed resignation. The brilliant dialogist attracted few to his tent on this occasion. Art was somewhere else—at least it seemed to be. When the project almost failed, reputed artists contributed their own works (proceeds from the auction went to pay for the planting of the trees), and one of Beuys's main collectors, Eric Marx (whom he met in 1975) paid for the entire lot. (Today Marx is almost a billionaire in Beuys works!) Beuys was sincere at that juncture. Defeat made him question even those publicly acclaimed works which brought celebrity.

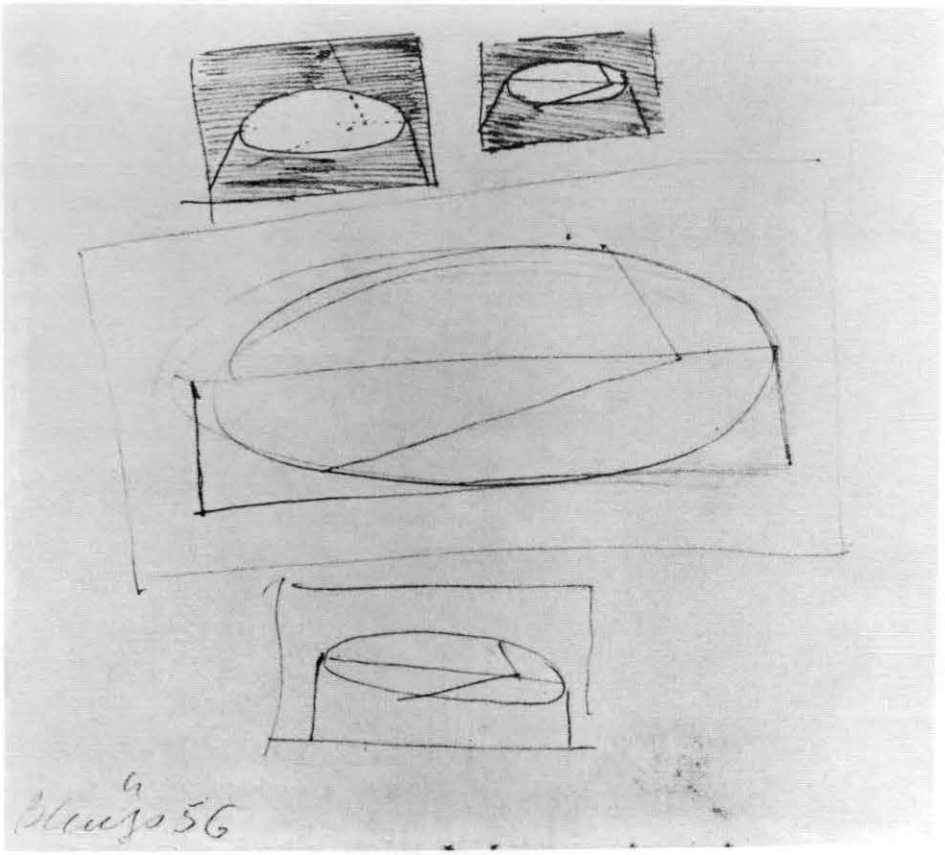
Art as deception

"Indeed," he said, "art is also deceiving. But knowingly. Otherwise it would be a tragedy."

My notes from our short conversation retained one more idea: "Art is related to the entire creativity of the human being. There are no boundaries within which we keep art, and outside of which there is no art." Yes, this relates to his fundamental thought that everybody is an artist, and maybe implies deception not as an accident but as a component of our being, of our activity. If deception is carried on knowingly, as a matter of skill (which was the characteristic of pre-modern movements), or as a matter of attitude (starting with Dada and continued to our day), shouldn't we accept that there is no artist who is not at the same time a charlatan? Yes, the theme of this article was generated by a very controversial personality, and possibly made clear to me as a question exactly because, through his work, Beuys challenged not only previous models of art but even our concept of the artist. In short, Beuys made it easy to approach this question.

In the show honoring his memory, artists and charlatans were as close to each other, as much a part of each other, as they will ever be. The same occurred in the Beuys-Warhol exhibit, and in the Dia Foundation show. There is no way to say how much of an artist Gerhard Richter is (present with his *Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo*), or Palermo—he and Kiefer are Beuys' best known students—or how much so many of those showing their works: Cucchi, Disler, Sol LeWitt, Longo, Oldenburg, Pistoletto, Rauschenberg, Tapies, and Warhol, among others. Not all are necessarily controversial names but indeed all are artists, or at least celebrated as such. Minimalism, conceptual art, environmental art, the new fauvistes, the neo-expressionists all force the public to question their skills, their trustworthiness as artists. This is an interesting twist, without precedent, in the sense that traditionally value was questioned—i.e. how will a certain work perform in time—but not trustworthiness. Some works were not liked, but the accent was on aesthetic preference and not on somebody's character. I believe that bringing character into the aesthetic discussion is indeed one of Beuys's most remarkable contributions.

The work which attracted my attention to Beuys was *Trolley Station* (Strassenbahnhaltestelle, 1976). I missed the reference to Anarchsis Cloots, the revolutionary who, under the name Baptiste du Val-de-Grace, was killed on Robespierre's order, and who yelled out, "People, look at this head! Such one you will never see again!" This cry applies to Beuys, with his well-known hat and very intense look. As a piece of stage design for a play as yet unwritten and never performed, the work had an unbelievable atmosphere. But where was the artist and what

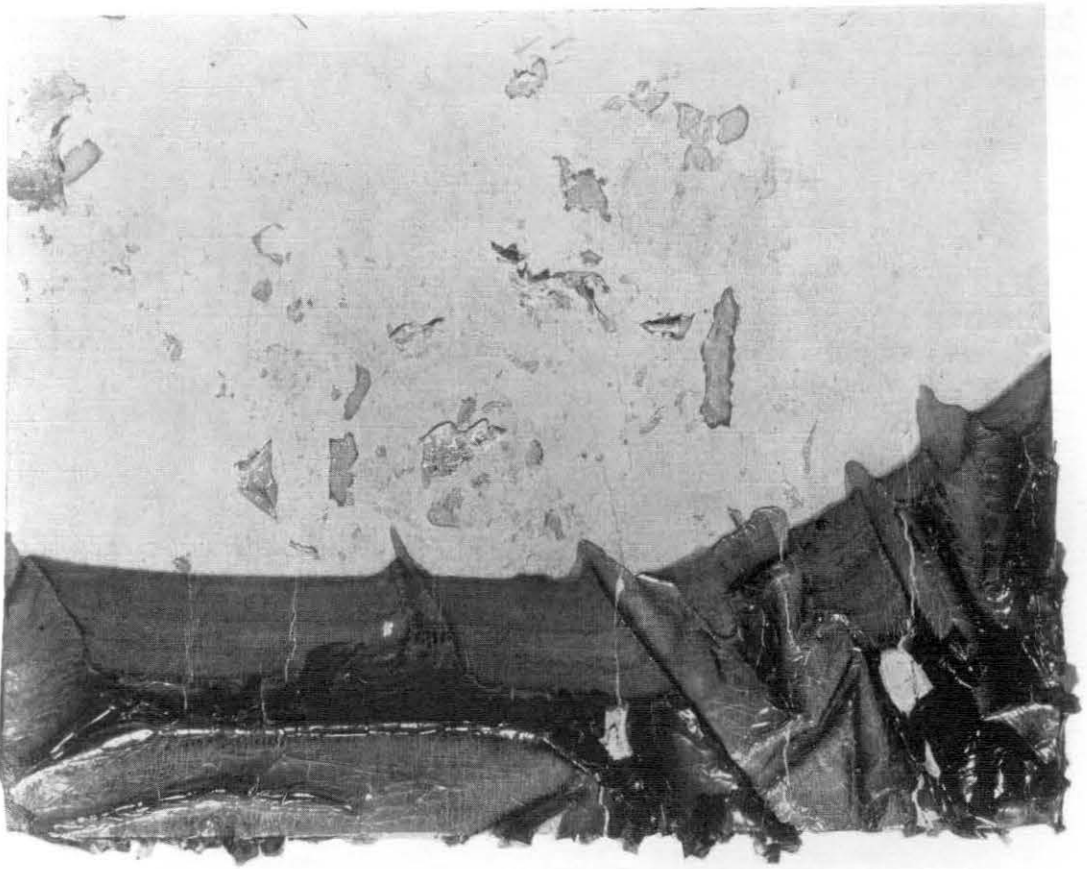


Eisentisch by Beuys, 1956.

defined his art, I wondered. His last installation ("Palazzo Regale" December 23, 1985 in the Museo di Capodimonte) did attract me, and so does the still very controversial *Show Your Wound* housed in the Lenbachhaus. The pairs of stools, chalkboards, stretchers, lamps and other odd objects represent a universe of warning, meditation, and despair. A breakdown is documented here in terms of making the selection more important than the presentation, the ethics more critical than the aesthetics, the statement more important than the art. Such a work was bound to cause controversy in Munich, a city where the classic notion of art is at least as pervasive as the production and consumption of beer. Some wanted to read a political program—Beuys was politically very active for a long time. If it was politics, then it pertained to money and glory, not to his statement of 1972: "We are the revolution." Others wanted to see an aesthetic scandal. And not a few wanted to see charlatanism.

Art as provocation

Quite a few pretend to be artists, and from among these, quite a few receive recognition, which justifies a rhetorical question asked more at this time than at any other in history: Are artists inhabitants of a generic village called Cerreto (to which the origin of the word "charlatan" can be traced), and is art the game of successful pretense? Or is commitment to art today such that the artist must consciously lie about who he is in order to make social and political breakdown evident? As a space of possibilities, art implies research, and its results, contrary to those of science, cannot be checked for correctness, only accepted or rejected. Under the enormous pressure of social and economic expectations, artists play the game at the borderline where victory usually lies, that is, in breaking the rules. In the process, artists sometimes cheat: themselves, us, their patrons, the market. It makes no sense to continue to cultivate the romantic notion of the artist on the pedestal of a new demiurge. Beuys knew this.



Naturgeschichte by Beuys, 1970.

There is a genetic continuity between his fight for the chair at the Düsseldorf Art Academy—which fight turned into a work of art—and the surprising life he decided to enjoy at the expense of the Guggenheim Museum. Thomas Messer's account is gentle but to the point: Beuys indulged in a life with caviar, champagne, a chauffeured Cadillac, and a retinue who lived on his expense account—actions seen as a potential way of destroying the Guggenheim in order to constitute a work of art in Beuys's peculiar understanding of the term. Probably the stock market crash in October of '87, if directed by a Beuys, could be declared a work of

art, difficult, indeed, to imitate. Such performances, at a scale never anticipated by the artists of the '60's, definitely require unusual criteria for interpretation and evaluation. Eventually, Beuys became his own work and was adulated as such a work. Obviously, he knew it, liked it, and expressed himself in forms so cynical that few wanted to read them as a confession. To provoke sounds better than to confess, and has a higher aesthetic aura.

"Artists are, to a great extent, opportunistic," he said. "They are assholes." Again, "Artists have no conscience." But would any of these statements change our perception of what his activity actually meant, of what the activity of his followers, signifies to us? Hopefully they would not. Kiefer, to refer to one of the most successful of Beuys's followers, exemplifies both the strategy of appropriation and the opportunism of art. Appropriating the Holocaust, Kiefer has produced some of the most intriguing canvases in which everything celebrated on the large compositions is at the same time subjected to a *sui generis* doubt. The artist is not self-flagellating. He does not have any sense of responsibility for the mass murders, but he ascertains that our entire system of values—love, thinking, heroism, appreciation of nature—is forever tainted by a criminal past of such proportions that no one can elude it. To what extent his appropriation of the Holocaust is more (or less) legitimate than Beuys's appropriations is an open question. What is less open is the suspicion that somebody is exploiting the theme, avoiding any implication of sincerity in art, actually eradicating sincerity from art, as Beuys himself did so successfully.

Beuys's persona was irresistible—even when he was impertinent, intolerant, and impatient—his work, provocative. But so were Warhol and Palermo, and so is Keifer. And not very much different are the artists who in our day make it "big" in Soho, in Paris, or in Düsseldorf. If, in producing artifacts that, according to some conventions we know too little about, qualify as art, deceit is part of the process, then obviously each artist is at the same time a charlatan. This sentence is obviously tainted by the perception of delusion as being necessarily negative, as well as by moral stereotypes, or at least expectations, according to which artists are models, art is an honest expression of feelings, craftsmanship cannot be acquired without sweat.

It took a long time for us to accept that art lies, but we are still not prepared to accept that the artist himself can be a liar. Beuys had no qualms about this. He invented his own stories, changed his past, changed his present, even changed his future. It cannot go unnoticed that the German shows following his death were shadowed by tremendous scandals (to which his widow Eva, his son Wenzel, as well as Heiner Bastian, his closest friend and adviser, contributed).

Prices for his works literally skyrocketed: "Kunst=Kapital" is the inscription dominating an autoironic image of the artist. Beuys's repeated warning against the transformation of culture into business seemed to be a script for the show going on parallel to his exhibits. The prisoner of war in Russia, the suspected Nazi, the very provocative liberal artist, the very shrewd choreographer of a fame bound to increase in time, are all part of this extended show of the authentic and the deceptive.

Charlatans claim healing powers and the ability to read the crystal ball. Beuys, who sometimes saw himself as a shaman, seemed to come to the conclusion that there is art in the charlatan's performance. Instead of being ashamed of the charlatan identity, he assumed it courageously. When all communication fails because the power of previous means of expression no longer breaks the barriers of social indifference, we can only rely on magic. Magic demythified is what people call charlatanism.

Biographical Index

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