

Joseph Beuys Prize for Research 2022

Address in honour of Dr Marta Ryczkowska (Lublin, Poland)
and Professor Daniel Spaulding (University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA)

Dr Petra Richter, 14 May 14 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, on behalf of the jury, I would like to offer our warm congratulations to this year's recipients of the Joseph Beuys-Preis für Forschung:

Dr Marta Ryczkowska from Lublin, Poland, and Professor Daniel Spaulding from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. In view of the outstanding achievements of both of these two international scholars, the five-member jury has declared them joint winners of this year's Joseph Beuys Prize. Following an extensive, very constructive discussion, the members of the jury agreed that the research by both of our prizewinners opens up important new avenues and perspectives.

Before I turn to the outstanding work of our two prizewinners, I would like to briefly look back at 2021 with its many events marking the centenary of Beuys's birth and the anniversary celebrations, *100 Years of Joseph Beuys*, which were initiated and organized by Prof. Eugen Blume. There were numerous special events and museum exhibitions – including the memorable exhibition on Beuys and shamanism, curated by Dr Barbara Strieder here at Museum Moyland, the *Cosmopolitical Exercises with Joseph Beuys* presented by Prof. Blume in Düsseldorf, *Beuys & Duchamp* in Krefeld with scholarly contributions from Prof. Antje von Graevenitz and Prof. Hans Dickel, and *Intuition!*, an exhibition of early works in Kleve with guest curator Dr Wolfgang Zumdick. These events and others concentrated attention on the complex work of Beuys the sculptor, draughtsman, action and installation artist, teacher, politician, and activist. Diverse new aspects of Beuys's actionist or ritualistic methods came to the fore, demonstrating the revolutionary potential of an expanded concept of art and social sculpture, and shedding new light on Beuys's efforts to deploy art as a creative, transformative force in society.

However, Beuys's work – which fundamentally changed art in the twentieth century – has not always enjoyed widespread attention and recognition. On the contrary, when Beuys's artistic and political impact was aired in some media outlets and by certain writers and Beuys biographers, if anything it was obscured by a polemical debate, with certain individuals making slanderous statements regarding his private life, above all his stance regarding National Socialism.

In this connection it is interesting that both of our international prizewinners, having arrived at their own conclusions, expressly resist polemics of that kind. In his dissertation ***Beuys, Terror, Value: 1967–1979***, Daniel Spaulding emphatically and persuasively refutes the notion of Beuys as an ideologically encumbered artist, which has at times been propagated by art historians and critics such as Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss und Eric Michaud.

Meanwhile, Marta Ryczkowska's objective and historically astute dissertation – ***Inspirations, Affiliations, Parallel Processes. Joseph Beuys and Polish Art*** – sheds new light on the discussion surrounding the Holocaust and the difficulty of coming to terms with the past, notwithstanding the fact that her own compatriots in particular might well be suspicious of Beuys as someone who had seen active service in the German army.

In her remarkably comprehensive doctoral dissertation, which she completed at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin which she completed at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin in 2018, Marta Ryczkowska investigates ways in which Polish artists and art critics since the 1960s have engaged with Joseph Beuys's praxis and theories. To this end she presents a detailed, highly informative account of contrasting historical, socio-political, and cultural developments in the two German states and Poland after World War Two; at the same she also discusses parallels and divergences in developments in art in these regions.

She delves deep into Beuys's biography and, in so doing, discusses – among other things – literary, mythological, and religious factors, the influence of Romanticism, Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy; she explores Beuys's relations with the international neo-avantgarde, his ambivalent attitude to Fluxus, and his increasing political engagement during and after the 1960s.

On the basis of extensive research, she discusses contradictions that arose following a failure to fully address collective guilt in East and West Germany after World War Two. With a particular focus on Beuys's *Mahnmal in Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1958), his display case *Auschwitz-Demonstration* (1956–64), and the installation *Schmerzraum* (1941–83) she reviews Beuys's stance regarding the Holocaust and how he dealt with his own personal war trauma, and she explains Beuys's repeated accounts of being rescued by Tatars after his plane was shot down over Crimea in 1944 as a mythical reworking of the actual event.

Marta Ryczkowska shows that Beuys regarded art as the starting point, with therapeutic, homeopathic capabilities, for any attempt to heal society and in fact used it to cleanse 'mass images and symbols of Nazi impurities'. She also credits Beuys with being 'the first to attempt to resuscitate German spiritual identity after the Third Reich'.

She discusses in detail Beuys's gift of over 700 drawings, prints, multiples, and archival materials to Museum Sztuki in Lodz in the summer of 1981. This Action, which Beuys himself named *Polentransport*, was intended by him as a

metaphorical gesture of atonement by a former Wehrmacht soldier in an attempt to break down mental and political divisions. It also reflected his hope that the social upheavals unleashed by Solidarnosc would see – in the spirit of ‘social sculpture’ – Poland developing into a democratic society.

Ryczkowska analyzes individual works by Polish artists against the backdrop of the institutional framework of contemporary art in Poland and elucidates the difficult political situation that Polish artists had to contend with in the 1960s. On the basis of in-depth, methodologically sound analyses of works by artists such as Teresa Murak, Henryk Gajewski, and Tadeusz Kantor, she uncovers inspirations, affiliations, and parallels with Beuys’s work, but also identifies independent approaches that are at odds with his work. She advisedly avoids the term ‘influence’, which has too many problematic connotations in research into reception history. She analyzes direct or indirect artistic, ecological, and political references in a detailed juxtaposition of ideas and artistic work. Jerzy Rosolowicz’s efforts to counteract the destruction of nature and social value call to mind Beuys’s concept of social sculpture, while Teresa Murak’s Land Art projects with organic materials connect with Beuys’s views on a new concept of ecology. Biographical parallels and comparable religious tendencies – for instance between Beuys and Tadeusz Kantor – are reflected in the artistic materials those two artists worked with, in their preference for everyday objects, and in their use of Actions to express their ideas. Ryczkowska analyzes performances by Pawel Freisler and Andrzej Partum (leading Polish exponents of Neo-Dada in the 1970s) in the context of Beuys’s Fluxus activities. And she highlights the artistic affinity with Beuys’s work in Mirosław Balka’s sculptures and installations relating to remembrance and the past (both coming to terms with and investigating the past). In his video *Winterreise*, Balka investigates evidence of war crimes in Majdanek and Treblinka, documents reality after the Holocaust, and shows how nature has absorbed the remains of disused concentration camps. As it was for Beuys, Balka’s focus on the past is always directed towards the future, in the hope that the revolutionary power of art will alert people to the need for responsible political engagement. Ryczkowska surefootedly discusses selected positions in Polish neo-avantgarde art in the 1970s, which both converge – around Beuys – and pursue their own independent paths.

Since gaining her doctorate Marta Ryczkowska, now a freelance curator and critic, has been involved in numerous exhibitions and projects devoted to contemporary art. Her wide-ranging network of contacts in the art world allows her to draw not only on her academic background but also on personal experience. She has a particular interest in artistic engagement in social, ecological, and political settings, always with the aim of facilitating critical reflection and kindling inspiration. As such it is only logical that she has made a particular study of Beuys’s artistic praxis and his theoretical approach. Her doctoral dissertation makes an important contribution to the reception history of the work of

Joseph Beuys, which is still relatively rarely studied in Poland, and it paves the way for a reappraisal of his work there in the context of German history and cultural history.

Our second prizewinner, Prof. Daniel Spaulding, has approached the work of Joseph Beuys with a very different methodology and research perspective. His doctoral dissertation, *Beuys, Terror, Value: 1967-1979*, which he completed at Yale University in 2017, is devoted to Beuys's artistic work in the context of political, economic, and social change in the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s. Spaulding regards Beuys's growing interest at that time in capital and capitalism as a reaction to the global financial crises, which were triggered not only by the imminent end of the economic miracle and impending recession but also by the ensuing social and political turmoil.

In a highly complex social and art-historical analysis, Spaulding draws on just a few, very telling examples of Beuys's work between 1967 and 1969 – such as *Fonds-Arbeiten, zeige deine Wunde* (1974–75), *Unschlitt/Tallow* (1976), and *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* (1977) – and reconstructs the fragile relationship between materialized artistic form, the metaphorical use of materials, and the conceptual contents of a work. Spaulding suggests that, in order to realize a particular artistic form for this highly discordant relationship between materials and metaphor, art and politics, Beuys deployed – as a mediation process – transcendent transfer by means of metonymy, allegory, and abstraction. Beuys ultimately stabilized the tension between concept and materiality by resorting to metaphors, by embracing magical, shamanistic, and mythical thinking, through healing as a strategy: his restorative remedy was his own democratic socialism.

In light of historical materialism in combination with Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and the value creation model expounded by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (1883), Spaulding seeks to decipher the framework of metaphorical meaning that underpins Beuys's artistic work. The fact that Marx's critique of the capitalist economy was by now fundamental to Beuys's thinking is evident not only in his *Aufruf zur Alternative* (1978), in battle cries such as 'Unhinge Capital', and in his multiple *Kunst = Kapital* but also in installations such as *Das Kapital* (1980) and *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* 1977, which we will return to in what follows here.

In his *Rede über das eigene Land* (1985), Beuys described the combination of 'capability, that's to say, creativity and product' as the true economic values. In his view this new definition of capital, detached from money, which he explicitly addressed in the equation 'art = capital', was the prerequisite for escaping the tyranny of money as a commodity and a means of exchange. Beuys, who felt that daily life was dominated by absolute dependence on exchange processes and on the power of money, was searching for a way to use art 'as

the autonomous production of spiritual goods' (Eugen Blume) in order to intervene in the economic conditions of a capitalist society.

His installation *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* serves well as an example of the way that Beuys incorporated the debate on the function of money and exchange processes into his own work. Spaulding regards this work as one of the most important examples of an allegory of both circulating money and the political, social, and economic crises of that time. Beuys's *Honigpumpe*, made for documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977, was intended as a representation of the opposite to the precariousness of economic reality. Beuys described the honey flowing through the tubes, building up and breaking down again, as a metaphor for the work of a swarm of bees, for the blood circulating in human beings, and for the human metabolism. The fat rotating around the copper roller reinforces the image of circulation, with which Beuys referenced the circulation process of money and commodities. Beuys's aim was to incorporate the whole cycle of the accumulation of capital into his concept of artistic forming.

Thanks to the Free International University working group that was set up in the Fridericianum in Kassel, whose members discussed the current economic crisis and their visions for a future society, the *Honigpumpe* became a 'place of work' for a new political practise. The outcome of that connection between the *Honigpumpe* and a working group was that the powerful flow of mental energy merged with the material energy of the installation.

By pointing out the problematic nature of the role of money and of Marx's value creation model, Beuys created important momentum for a form of society that is determined by the will of its free subjects. However, Beuys's redefinition of capital as the potential of creativity has not led to any concrete changes in social conditions, which – as Spaulding puts it – have traditionally been conditioned by the practise of a capitalist economy that, during the course of speculative value creation, merely assigns a commodity value to objects.

Despite Beuys's failure to achieve the realization of democratic socialism as a social model, Spaulding regards Beuys's aesthetic project as ground-breaking for a social art praxis, as inspiration for ecological thinking and activism. In Beuys's view art held out the promise of a counter-position and a new universal viability for important moral concepts and cultural convictions.

Spaulding's dissertation, written – from the point of view of a scholar living in the United States – as a contribution to socio-philosophical and economic-empirical research, opens up new horizons and inspiring perspectives. The contradictions that he has discovered in Beuys's work – which by no means cast a shadow over our appreciation and respect for this once-in-a-century artist – have given rise to new, unorthodox ideas in the field of Beuys research. Even if he only fleetingly refers to Rudolf Steiner's writings, which were one of the main sources for Beuys's concept of capital, this very rewarding dissertation constitutes a highly individual approach in the literature on Joseph Beuys.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me sum up: we have here two different critical responses and two remarkable dissertations. Whereas Marta Ryczkowska discusses Beuys's work in terms of cultural politics on the basis of her own unconventional view from the East, Daniel Spaulding's argument is rooted in the United States and, approaching the work of Joseph Beuys through the lens of historical-materialist cultural criticism, uncovers numerous contradictions. It is hard to overestimate the value of the work done by Dr Ryczkowska and Prof. Spaulding for the field of Beuys research. It is clear that there is a greater need than ever for Beuys's political and artistic theory and practice, for his determination to change wider human attitudes with the ultimate aim of opening up new potential through people's awareness of their own freedom. Beuys's assumption that human beings have a fundamental, natural desire for democracy, freedom, and self-determination seems not least to be substantiated by current events. Overt injustice comes at a cost. Beuys ruled out a failure of the 'long-term process', in which art is a force for political and social change.¹ In Beuys's view, art 'is, by definition, the current that leads out of the dilemma, out of blunders and bewilderment, the schizophrenias of our time, dissolving the forces of rigidity. Its work, which all human beings are capable of and must be made capable of, is the real basis for true healing and development in all realms of human activity.'²

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott

¹ Joseph Beuys, lecture on the occasion of the 'Städtebauseminar', 17 January 1984, manuscript, Bonn 1984, unpaginated.

² Joseph Beuys, *Museumjournaal*, series 14/6, 1969, p. 294.