

How this discussion came about

'The most important discussion is epistemological in character.' (J. Beuys)

This discussion with Joseph Beuys took place as one among frequent gatherings of a group of young people who met together over many years. At these meetings, lasting hours, a whole weekend, or even several days, we tried to discover fundamental insights into the world, society and ourselves. We studied ancient and modern philosophical texts, explored psychology and concerned ourselves with social problems. Essentially our questions related to how we should lead and shape our lives. It seemed natural therefore to concentrate not only on discussion and theoretical considerations but also to engage with specific, practical exercises. Such exercises were essentially artistic in character, and did not serve any immediate, external purpose. They did not serve to prepare an exhibition or a publication, but solely to 'come into movement' ourselves, to discover new forms and ways of living. And even if these forms were not new, they were at least self-discovered; for in discovering them ourselves they remain available to consciousness and can then – more or less – be implemented in all areas of practical life.

I would like to describe some of these exercises. One of the questions that emerged was: 'What is colour?' Since this is not a question that can be answered by resorting to statements from the field of physics – as physics no longer even speaks of colours but of units of measurement, of electromagnetic impulses – we had to try to expose ourselves to colour phe-

nomena themselves. Thus, for example, we painted a room all in red, enhancing the effect further by covering one wall in bright red paper. Then we lit the room fairly brightly, to bring out the red as much as possible, and sat in the room to experience red's effect on us. We each had a notebook and tried to describe the effects of red on ourselves from the first moment onwards, in as differentiated and precise a way as possible. After about twenty minutes we took a break, and then read out our experiences to each other, checking whether there were any similarities between them.

We carried out the same exercise with blue. Comparing the results it became still clearer that, despite any inadequacies in our descriptions, the direction of each person's experience was fairly unanimous. I will leave to one side here the actual content of the experiences and the resulting conclusions for our personal lives.

Another exercise addressed the experience of form: from the forest we fetched arm-length sticks, perhaps forty of them, sat down – as the room itself necessitated – in an oval, and started to lay these sticks down, one after another, in the enclosed floor area created by our group. Each time another stick was added we tried to observe carefully whether anything changed in our feelings and experience, and what direction this change took. From time to time each person sat in a different place. This made it possible to see that the way in which this person perceived the detailed relationships between things was by no means independent of his or her physical position. Rather, it was always connected with the way in which the emergent

form related to each person, who, in turn, became a kind of axis of symmetry in relation to the plane in front of him/her. There arose a right-left relationship, a distant-close, or above-below relationship. The more precisely we observed, the more clearly we felt the strong and differentiated way in which the developing composition affected us. Once almost all the sticks had been used, and the composition came to its conclusion, we tried to see which of the sticks had most influence on the form or composition, and which could perhaps be dispensed with. We therefore continued the exercise by continually trying out different things: taking one or other stick away whilst carefully noting whether the quality of the composition was reduced or even enhanced. This was a stimulating exercise, for much that had been positioned in the finished form perhaps somewhat unthinkingly and arbitrarily, and had only apparent importance, triggered a general sense of relief as it was withdrawn again. We reduced the whole form to five or six sticks and, through this process of reduction, had a strong experience of an extraordinary intensification, of which we could have had no prior inkling. The original composition that had unfolded now contracted like a plant when it forms fruit and seed. And a seed remained. This seed, now outwardly completely reduced, nevertheless bore huge energy within it. The reason for this was that what had been unfolded had now been completely retracted, had been relinquished. We began to understand something of what is called, in medieval philosophy, 'actus' and 'potentia': two Latin terms for the Aristotelian expressions 'energeia' and 'dynamis' – reality and potential.

We were unaware at this point of the huge extent to which these two terms related to Joseph Beuys's 'theory of sculpture'. We exten-

ded these exercises to an experience of fundamental forms or basic polarities of form, as they appear in the work of Paul Klee. From the above description one begins to see how, above and beyond an experience of form and its effect on the observer, a social process can also be seen to be at work here.

The questions relating to the creation of a social process became the immediate subject of observation in a third exercise. From a scrapyard we fetched pieces of iron of different lengths and thickness: either hollow or solid, in the shape of rods, slabs or sheets. We did not intend to weld them together into some kind of construction but to use them according to the tones they produced. Holding the iron bars between two fingers we tested them at small intervals along their length until we found where the best sound was produced. At this point we drilled through them and hung them up on strings from an iron frame. Then, sitting around the iron bars, rods and sheets, which were hung in a rectangular formation, six or eight of us embarked on the exercise. This consisted of relating to one another non-verbally, communicating just through tones. The sounds that were possible were obviously atonal. The only prior agreement we made was to stop when we had a sense of having connected with one another, or when something developed that, of its own accord, came to rest.

Enormously stimulating processes came about. First, each person entered into the developing sound formation in a way determined by his or her own constitution. That is, without questioning whether something shared was beginning to arise or what this might be. In other words, instead of focusing on the end product, on a composition to be shaped and structured, we each pursued our own experiences, and familiarized ourselves with the

material to hand. During this phase little attention was given to what the others were producing. After this phase of familiarization with the material, the next thing to emerge was what each individual brings in the form of constitutional qualities – whether we remained subtle and quiet, listening more, or bashing away, enthralled by the sounds each of us produced; whether a person began to take the lead or followed another faithfully, corresponding and adjusting to the other. When this happened it was clear that connecting with one of the other players was easy, although all the others were then left out. You can imagine the diverse ways in which musical experience arose here. A particular problem emerged, however, because one of the participants found it enormously difficult to have any perception at all of what the others were doing. They had all long since connected with one another, creating a musical, social situation where it would have been most appropriate to stop. But he didn't notice this. How could one get him to tune into this situation without using looks, gestures or words? It didn't happen. Finally, individual players gave up and stopped, until only he was playing and finally noticed this and stopped too. In this way, it was possible to have strong experiences of naïve behaviour too. Other aspects of social behaviour could also be read from these experiences. At the same time, however, a clear question took shape: When is what we have created satisfactory, and for what reason? Are we satisfied if, finally, amongst the range of clanging iron tones, something which we begin to enjoy can be heard – say the interval of a third? Does a fascinating rhythm gain the upper hand, in which all ultimately participate but which leaves out other musical qualities like tone and melody, and which in itself might never come to an end? If the three

elements of rhythm (arising from will activity), melody (that has more of an individualizing, thinking character), and range of tone all work together, harmoniously, without one dominating the other – without falling back on baroque harmonies – then a richly modulated sound form may arise through a social process in which no one person is subordinated to another but all listen together to what is emerging. This shared listening and action, this shared question about what can and is trying to emerge, was the most satisfying part of the process. We also spent a day on this exercise at the documenta 6 as part of the FIU (Free International University), working on these processes there with Beuys and the audience.

It was this group, which had worked on many other exercises, that asked Joseph Beuys whether he would like to spend a day with us discussing the question: What is art? That is how the discussion on 23 April 1979 came about.

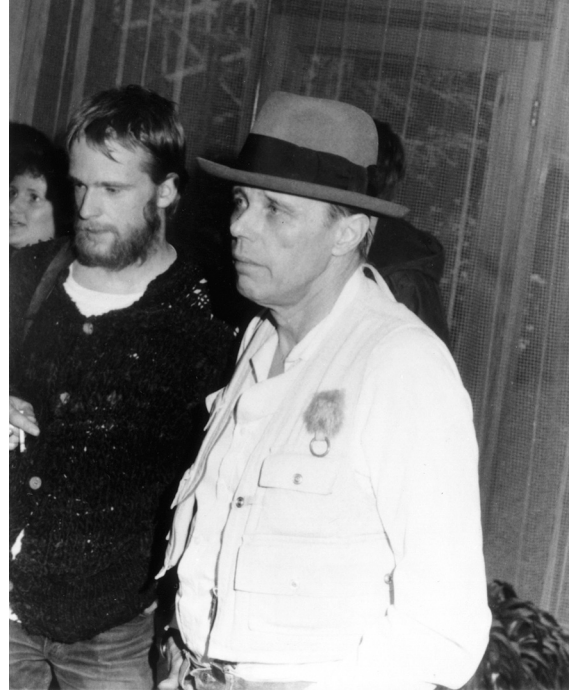
In the course of the discussion it becomes clear that participants do not use the radically extended concept of art which Beuys puts forward, but rather view art as a sphere of life where one can be playful and live without external compulsions; as a kind of free space, where one can undergo and try out experiences that are helpful and strengthening for each individual in 'practical life', thereby enhancing personal independence.

The discussion took place in the foyer of St John's Church in Bochum, designed by Hans Scharoun in 1966. Fritz Winter and Wilhelm Wagenfeld had a hand in designing the church's interior, the former with a large-scale panel painting and the latter with seven lights the size of human figures. As the entrance foyer was intentionally kept plain, without seats or seminar room, it was well suited for exhibiting

What is Art?

images or sculptures, and for meetings and discussions in which people were standing. Beuys refers to its floor, and to the wall of

clinker brick, which is also the church's outer wall.



2. Beuys with the 'scrap-organ' at documenta 6, 1977, and in the discussion room in St. John's Church

I Conversation with Joseph Beuys

What is art?

My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone:

*Thinking Forms – how we mould our thoughts or
Spoken Forms – how we shape our thoughts into
words or*

SOCIAL SCULPTURE *how we mould and shape
the world in which we live:
Sculpture as an
evolutionary process;
everyone an artist.*

*That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed
and finished. Processes continue in most of them:
chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes,
decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of
change.*

What forces give rise to art?

Beuys: All my life I have returned to this same question time and again: What is the need – that is, what is the truly objective constellation of forces working in us and the world – that justifies the creation of something like art? This question has certainly had a central place in my life, and has led me to distance myself from my initial involvement in the scientific field. Before I made this shift, provoked by this question, this search for answers, I began my studies in

the natural sciences, and experienced certain things about the prevailing scientific paradigm, which made me realize that an answer would not be found here. In questioning the value of this kind of research, or alternatively, as a means of exploring the overall field of existing forces – including life forces, the forces of the mind, that is of the soul, psyche-spirit and their higher forms – I was compelled to consider, on purely experimental grounds, whether I should explore the sphere of art, that has manifested through time as a form of cultural activity. However, I already had a sense that this fundamental question would remain unresolved there too. And then, during my studies at the academy, I found that this question about the impetus and source of art, the need for the world to develop and evolve through art, did indeed remain unresolved. I found that art had undergone a kind of parallel development with science, an academicism, with a long tradition going back to the Renaissance, and that people no longer knew exactly what they were trying to do. On the one hand there were teachers who, as I saw it, approached the problem as an anatomist or surgeon would in an operating theatre: approaching things in a mimetic way, based entirely on the observation of what is there before you, reproducing it from this same perspective, on paper or in spatial form, in other words, copying. On the other hand, there were those teachers who had a radical stylistic approach of their own. However, the source and impetus of their intentions was very hard to discern. They demonstrated a stylistic

What is Art?

approach that, if you like, derives from 'abstract art' – which is a kind of popular concept – that asserts that abstract form can also be art. That both these positions obviously had something to do with this question was clear. In this sense, I had teachers whom one could truly call artists. However, the thing that was missing was that all these fundamental questions, that is, the fundamental research into art and its function, could not be answered at the academy. And this increased my resolve to pursue the matter myself. For now, I'll just say this. And I have been pursuing it ever since, though I'm not pretending that I haven't gone some way towards subverting and shaking things up a little in this field. However, one thing in particular seems clear to me: if this question does not become the central focus of such research, and is not resolved in a truly radical way that actually sees art as the starting point for producing anything at all, in every field of work, then any thought of further development is just a waste of time. This idea – that it is from art that all work ensues – needs to be borne in mind, if we want to reshape and re-form society, because it will also have a bearing on economic questions and issues to do with legal and human rights. I am saying 'will', for it has become clear to me in the meantime, and is increasingly understood, that this is a viable way of compensating for the errors in the philosophy or sociology of the last century – for instance by balancing the mistaken tendencies in Marx with something that, extending beyond his correct analysis, can lead to a truly holistic development of the world.

So we're right in the midst of this question about the necessity of art, which, without doubt, is also a question of freedom. For if we want to work at these things, these problems which humanity has: the potential inherent in

such forces and therefore the energy question too, including technological energy – which is so pressing and relevant nowadays... if we want to deal with this question we also have to pose it as an overall energy question. So, we need to take stock, at the outset, make an inventory of all the energies before us, which correspond to what is actually there. Nowadays people very often overlook the fact that human beings have a quite different kind of energy than they had 200 years ago, or 500 or 1000 years ago; that today the energies of freedom are emerging in us, and that this is exactly the point where one can speak of art – that this is, so to speak, a kind of science of freedom. Once the bottom line in our stocktaking of the world has been found then everything must orientate itself toward this new energy situation. This includes recognition of the fact that a new manifestation of energy is in the world, represented by the human being; and that this is also something new in human beings – leaving aside for the time being the extent to which it has spiritual links to other networks of forces, individualized in the world. And although this is a given, it is still something that must actually be perceived, as well as practised, taught and investigated. So, first of all, we have art as the science of freedom, and as a consequence of this, we also have art as primary production or as the original, underlying production for everything else. Now this concept is apparently too lofty for many people; many object that not everyone can be an artist. But that's precisely the point: to make the concept into one that once more describes the essence of being human, the human being as the expression of freedom, embodying, carrying forward and further evolving the world's evolutionary impulse. So what we have here is an anthropological concept rather than the traditional,

middle-class concept of art, as it currently exists. This gives rise to difficulties in discussion, when one has always to speak on two levels: talking on the one hand about what has come down to us from the past, what our forefathers developed, which now stands in our way today as something no longer relevant unless we go beyond it; and on the other hand having to project into the future in a preliminary, anticipatory way. This is often a difficulty – having to discuss both at once, in the same way that, you can say, the new develops in the womb of the old.

I'm sure we'll come to speak about more specific things later on, but I have to begin by casting my net wide.

Surely the problem with the anticipatory approach is – if I have understood you correctly – that we shouldn't be trying to develop definite ideas about what ought to be done, what ought to be achieved, but rather that we allow something to emerge out of the energies that are in human beings. And if, despite this, we do still have to give some direction to what we do – without just implementing an ideology – then this is one of the tasks that, ultimately, only art can deal with, since through art one can unite such contradictions. How do you see something like this happening; how do you approach something like this, in specific terms?

Beuys: Well, first of all I need to understand what you mean; and if I answer this question I can obviously only answer it out of my own experience, and in terms of what I think about this. By doing so I am saying how things appear to me. For me, it cannot simply be a matter of allowing something to emerge from oneself. That is not what it's about: simply allowing something to come out. This is obviously one process, but the process itself must be looked at, and in such a way that I say: Good, some-

thing has emerged from me, but does it have any quality in itself? This, of course, points to the fact that I can't simply say art is a process that somehow just comes out of me, like something vomited up, for what emerges can of course be quite false. So it is not enough for something to emerge out of us any old how simply by letting something out of us; and nor will what comes out necessarily be the right thing. That's where the difficulty begins: for in each of us there are forces that on occasion – how shall I put it, when we simply allow a process to unfold and do nothing more – that emerge like a psychograph of pathology, for instance. That can happen. In fact, that's often the case, at least in my experience. So this was your starting point: you said, or you were concerned that if, in an anticipatory way, one puts forward a particular set of ideas, that this would be detrimental to art. That's how I experienced what you said. You saw in this a predetermined conception. You probably also thought that there would be a kind of intellectual planning process before anything could arise; before anything could form artistically, or draw on all the potential forces at hand. That's more or less how I understood the question.

Yes, I meant something in between; between 'simply doing' and 'having an ideology', which would, I believe, actually endanger the project.

Beuys: Yes, we haven't yet spoken about ideology.

No, you haven't mentioned it, but if one. . .

Beuys: For instance, ideology would be. . .

. . .it easily becomes contradictory, and how does one resolve this. . . given that you can't just 'let it happen'? Because, on the other hand, you clearly know that what you do also has a direction –

although I'm not suggesting here that what you said before was ideology.

Practice and realization

Beuys: But first we need to talk about the nature of ideology. What you just said, this fear that thinking about these things, thinking really critically about them, could be ideology, is something I don't see in the same way. I actually see ideology in what you said: that simply doing without such reflection is much healthier than, let's say, planning something, reflecting on it, in contrast to simple, playful activity that has its own dynamic. This ideology does indeed exist in our times and is widespread: that one simply gets people to do things and says that the less influence one has on it the more will emerge in the process; and then one simply leaves it at that. That is ideology. This means that one assumes that something worthwhile will emerge from the whole gamut of unsorted and impure stuff that is part of our inner creative resources. But this is not necessarily so if our inner resources are no longer sound; if, in other words, the inner psychological forces are disturbed then what comes out may be of a purely instinctual nature. And if one then builds an ideology of making, on top of something that is purely instinctual, then one has an ideology in the field of creativity. For ideologies are not just ideas, but misuse ideas in order to glorify instinctual urges by means of a thought apparatus. They simply embellish and veil things, as if certain things were worthy of discussion at all. So we have to pursue things much more rigorously. And now back to your question: you were asking whether I plan things in advance?

I am concerned with the contradiction implicit in the fact that one cannot simply make something

any old how – there I completely agree with you – nor can one plan it precisely either. For there is also a danger in the other direction, that it will be much too pre-planned, pre-formed. Nevertheless one must use this activity in a certain way, give it some direction. And this interests me. It's a general problem: how do you delineate the boundaries?

Beuys: Now I've got it, now the question is more clearly delineated. Basically it can only be answered by saying that it cannot be answered at all in an abstract way that is taken out of the flow of time. Thus, put simply or naively: if this wasn't a thread running through my whole life, then this work to shape criteria or ideas that can guide us in such matters wouldn't succeed. If I think I can decide today that this is going to happen in the next hour, that we will make the complex connection between formative ideas that lead us in some direction, and, let us say, what emerges from the human being, from creative constellations of forces, this won't work. In other words, I have to keep preparing myself throughout my life, conducting myself in such a way that no single moment is not given over to this preparation. Whether I'm gardening, or talking to people, whether I'm in the midst of traffic or reading a book, whether I'm teaching, or engaged in whichever field of work or activity I'm at home in, I must always have the presence of mind, the overview, the wider perspective, to perceive the overall context and set of forces. In other words, I must always be preparing and planning; and then, when it comes to a specifically artistic act, when I have to decorate a room or lay a table, or even perhaps paint a picture or create architecture – then I'll have the necessary resources. I'll have the principles. Then something will emerge from me that is already substantially better than if this preparatory work had not taken place. That is simply practice, to start with. But I must

then, of course, also look at *what* has emerged from me: in the architect's case the draft plan is perhaps the starting point, in the painter's case it can of course be the whole image straight away. I have to look at it and see how it works. So I have to bring a further monitoring organ to bear on it. But I also have to introduce it to other people, in fact, one must immediately enter into dialogue with others and listen to their arguments, for I cannot claim – ever – that what I have drawn out of myself is something objective and right from all perspectives. No one can claim that. One can only say that what I have drawn out of myself here is the result of my work, and I invite further arguments, for I am, after all, developing. I cannot say that anyone has to believe in what I have done, quite the contrary: everything that people place out there – and this should also be how it is with the new concept of culture – should exist in the world as a question looking to be augmented, improved, enhanced. This is the kind of faith one can have in art; one can say that it is on the path towards something; because, in keeping with the principles of life – let me just say for once very generally – it certainly cannot be about something that has already been perfected. In certain circumstances such predetermined views of how things should be could even be the death of art. It is something living, sometimes only an initial impulse. But even such a fragmentary impulse can have a certain evolutionary value. Art can even have a value as a kind of surrogate. Just think what one can do with a surrogate in our contemporary psychological situation. I have often used such methods, where I knew that I was using a material in a way that would provoke, would stimulate and provoke discussion. But in most cases I managed to go beyond this kind of surrogate character to discover what provoca-

tion, what fundamental considerations or, let us say, intuitions, are embedded in the materials; why it had to be these, in particular, and not others. I would just like to leave it open like that: but this doesn't mean that you can't aim for perfection – that one shouldn't value rigour and direction; that one mustn't avoid being imprecise or looking through ideological spectacles.

It seems to me that this approach you speak of also has two directions. On the one hand what one seeks in terms of knowledge will always lead to something general, for the thread passing through all activities is, you might say, a search for that which unifies, for the One, if you look at it in purely philosophical terms. Whereas the artistic process, in practice, also means that more or less tangible ideas are individualized when I engage with them artistically. In this process of individualization there is, in fact, not only a cognitive process at work but a drawing of the idea into reality so that phenomena come into being neither through natural or chance occurrences, nor do they appear as do ideas and concepts. Rather, they manifest through materials or, let's say, combinations of marks, or something similar. So, in art we have, on the one hand, the general and on the other, the most radical subjectivity, through the fact that only one person can create it.

Beuys: Yes, I can accept that, although there are art forms that one cannot create on one's own, that one can only create in collaboration with others. I can accept this if I may just illustrate it by saying that you can have an idea, an idea about art that derives its principles from what you call the One, which you can ultimately also express as a formula. However, as worker or producer – leaving aside the concept of the artist altogether for a moment, for it's already clear, given our point of departure, that this has

to do with art – as producer, speaking in ideal terms, one would have to do with both of these things: which includes finding a formula that, speaking quite generally, can solve world problems. This means approaching in a way comparable to Einstein's equation, for instance, which has revolutionized many things in the physical arena; in other words, finding a formula in the traditional physical domain that, in relation to human beings and their future evolution, functions a great deal better than Einstein's, revolutionizing everything in that domain. By this I mean that such a formula would no longer necessarily be the result of thinking, as in classical philosophy, but would reflect the need for something that is attainable only through intuition, imagination and such higher forms of thought. In contrast to this, one can express an idea by painting a simple watercolour of an olive leaf. Of course one cannot represent such an idea in pictorial form; but by getting close to such an idea, let us say, the olive leaf or sunbeam, or a small bit of gravel on the path appear in a quite different light. So I would never relinquish the desire to portray such simple things just because I supposedly have a grand idea. On the contrary, the great ideas in art often manifest in very humble form, through a small area of colour, or through a green tone around a certain small form, or for instance through such an olive leaf. This is the bigger context, in the scheme of which all possible forms exist. But we must, I believe, see just how radical this is: that art, in and for itself, has this tangible quality – which, as you said, is only realized through its specific instances. That it is something different from the product of cognitive knowledge. Nevertheless, I would still say it's a process of cognition, if one is to be at all clear about the relationship between the olive leaf and the

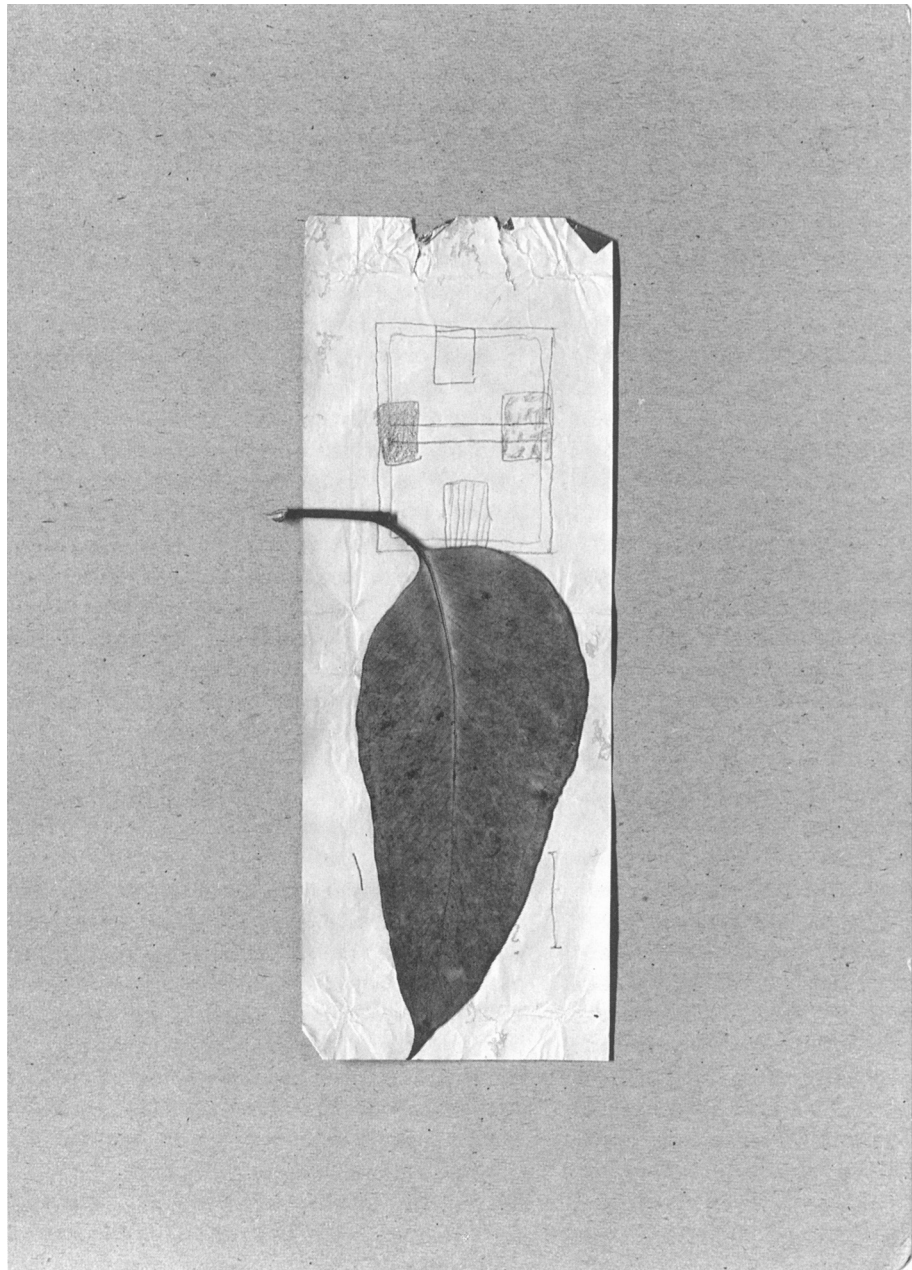
bigger idea. After all, isn't the olive leaf also knowledge in pictorial form?

So what is happening in those instances where materials – I'm thinking of wax or fat for instance – are linked with some living being, such as the being of the bee: you have used it, but what precedes this? There is surely first a cognitive engagement and unpacking of what occurs in a beehive. As individuals we somehow can't enter into this group of bees, but nevertheless we have their products. We see the products honey and wax. And you also use them.

Beuys: Well, first of all I would dispute that people are incapable of entering into the bee.

No, I'm not saying that, but into the image of bees as a group being.

Beuys: Yes, I dispute that too, for if you enter into the bee it is, I think, easier to enter into the whole group being. That's particularly difficult [laughs] for that is already an atom of the totality. But that's precisely my intention, to develop this capacity, so that art, whether painting or sculpture, does not remain something merely retinal. After all, we live in a culture that regards art in formal terms and repeatedly says that the fine arts are retinal, are just grasped by the eye. The eye is a very important sense organ, one of the most important especially for colours. But if that is all that's happening then, in my view, no interesting painting can come about, it will just decline into surface form. So I have explored and engaged with substances, my aim being this fundamental engagement with substance, as the substance is, of course, also the soul process. When it comes to bees a vital, living process is at work, in which processes of warmth and heat are involved. Here one witnesses a constellation of forces that has nothing to do with the retinal.



3. Joseph Beuys:
'Das Bild'
['The Image'], 1947

The fact is that warmth is not perceived through the eye, or if it is then, at most, by a circuitous route. When one says a colour is warm, I experience it as warm through the eye. So, what I have tried to do is to open up a discussion that links the whole nature of substance, in the sense of an holistic perception of the chemical, to painting for example, or to sculpture or drawing: so that one has to enter into the forces in these substances. Once immersed in them, one can then, as it were, explore them as symbol or pointer or tool; as orientation points, or stimulants or as therapy, as medicine, or everything else that might be possible. When I engage with the fundamental questions concerning substance, which naturally includes both the retinal and questions of form – this shows that this artistic process is possible in all professions; that this process is possible in every field of work, and can be seen in conjunction with the issue of human work. That is what I have tried to do – to say something through substance: substances which, layer by layer, extend into a supersensible dimension, and are no longer present as physical substances. Thus the link with spiritual substance is also part of the substance discussion. And not only what can be put on the scales and weighed is substance. This discussion also encompasses its sacramental character, right through to the last stage of substance where it has condensed, for instance in wax, but where, in this condensed form, one can make the process accessible by arranging the material in particular ways or doing certain trials and experiments with it. I don't go any further than that and say that I've achieved anything. I say only that I have done certain experiments and explorations that have stimulated discussion. They were, in fact, only successful once they provoked discussion. Further than this, I don't go. I

certainly do not claim that any lasting value attaches to these experiments that I have conducted. That cannot be my concern. My concern can only be whether one can instigate this kind of process, this movement; in other words, whether one can bring people to and into this kind of movement, in the culture that holds and has held sway, and has numbed them into inaction; whether things can be freed up and released, so that people accomplish this together. That is where my interest lies, in fact; again it's a therapeutic interest you might say, a medical, chemical, therapeutic interest in making something happen, that extends right into political action – which is not really political since the concept of politics is no longer appropriate. Without this as the background I wouldn't want to do what I do; that is, if, without this background, I had to conduct an election campaign as I'm doing at present, I wouldn't conduct it. But since I have this background and believe I can make a contribution, I can conduct this campaign and can of course also integrate mundane political concepts into this underlying idea.

For me the question was actually more to do with the phenomenon: in other words, if we stay with the bee for a moment, warmth processes are of course connected with wax. This is actually apparent to anyone involved with the bee, like the beekeeper... he will perceive this, these warmth processes, just through his feeling.

Beuys: But not necessarily. . .

Beehives are warm after all.

Beuys: Yes, they're warm of course, and a stove plate is warm too. If he sits on that he'll jump off pretty quick, the beekeeper, when it gets too hot for him. It is remarkable that this sense is no longer there, amongst beekeepers in particular.

I wrote an article on something like this in a bee journal – some beekeepers were interested and said: yes, we also sense these things. But most beekeepers don't understand things like this. Nowadays all professions have degenerated. Just as the blacksmith no longer has a real sense of the fire element, which cannot be totally divorced from the fact that this sense is increasingly disappearing, and because everything is now being done with welding tools etc. In the same way the beekeeper today often no longer has a sense for what I mean by warmth. That there is warmth in there and that the bees should not freeze to death is something he obviously knows. But he can no longer make a meaningful connection between this and the human being. That's why it's so important to consider all jobs and professions in the light of the overall forces involved and the contemporary energy issues; because this alone will enable the right kind of connection between the human being and cosmos to come about. For it is not only about understanding the whole context of the energy question; it is much, much bigger than this. Yes, far greater than anything physics or materialism teaches us.

What you have just said about warmth surely also belongs to our preparatory activities. I have just been thinking how to go about this, this preparation: being continually able, in all that you do, to make yourself inwardly ready. When you then actually create an artwork something worthwhile can come of it, can be seen in it. Perhaps this is one exercise that one should keep doing, so that one can really sense what warmth is, and also what light really is, and such things.

Beuys: Yes, of course. All that is important. But if one hasn't had this source of warmth, how can I put it, given to one at any early stage,

experienced perhaps already as a child – you always have to question how things actually were. Did I know all this once myself, have I just forgotten it again? Because the best way to practise it, is not so much by resorting to feeling, but by simply thinking correctly. That, in my view, is the best way to explore and engage with the 'Philosophy of Freedom'.¹

I wasn't referring now to methodology.

Beuys [laughs]: Yes, in fact it becomes clear that the will, as warmth impulse, is necessary for independent thinking. One is involved in a sculptural process here, about which one can rightly say: thinking is practically a sculptural process. It can also be understood as a truly creative achievement, engendered by the human being, by the individual himself, and not a process indoctrinated by some authority or other. That's very important. From this, as I see it, one learns to recognize a great deal about sculptural situations and about warmth in the creative realm; in the principle of evolution. Thinking in the free individual is a reoccurrence of the evolutionary principle in existence from the beginning of time. The human being himself becomes creator of the world and experiences how he can continue creation. This now also becomes his responsibility, and all the facts and realities connected with this become visible. And then one is actually inside it all. Feeling doesn't achieve anything here.

I wasn't referring to feeling either, but more to sense perception.

Beuys: Nor does sense perception, directly. At least, I think one can say that. Without first engendering it in yourself, as self-motivated activity, sense perception alone will not give it to you, for sense perception, above all, retinal perception, through the eye, is cool and dis-

tanced. You have to add something to it, in other words you have to initiate something with the eye so that it can even begin to grasp warmth processes. If one leaves the eye as it is, it will, let's say from the contemporary cultural perspective, tend rather to cool down and differentiate things, divide and analyse them, like a camera, separating things out from each other in a crystalline way. That is particularly the case with the eye. Hearing is somewhat different. That's why it's important to hear images and sculptures with the ear as well. For this, one has to set in motion a much more inward, deep-seated machinery, which creates this warmth, this evolutionary warmth, which enables us to become beings capable of carrying evolution forward – in my view this is important.

Perhaps we could start moving towards a more concrete description of how you do this when you look at a honeycomb, or when you consider warmth in relation to bees; and how you go about perceiving this. It's actually difficult, if one only sees something like this in a retinal way, as you say, to get beyond this. Of course one has one's feelings, one thinks and knows things; but I would be glad if you would describe this specifically, so that we could somehow grasp how it's done, or how you do it, or what you draw on in yourself. I have a feeling that you have different organs, and even, that the human being actually has different organs for absorbing something into himself – for when I perceive something I do actually take it into myself. You clearly mean something holistic here. . .

Beuys: Yes, we're back with the difficulty of extracting something focused out of a general daily exercise with phenomena. But if, for instance, one looks to see what constellation of forces is present, then for me this is something I have to pursue back into my childhood

experiences, where I had an inkling of something wholly different. For this does not just differ in terms of form, though that's also the case, but above all is very different as far as its inner impulses are concerned. For instance, the crystal is very different in this sense from bone formations, so that I am compelled to suspect the presence of quite different interrelationships of forces. I cannot demonstrate simply how I shift my attention to this. Of course there is another aspect to this. It can't just be like this in my case! For if it's like this with me, I can logically deduce from this that it isn't so *only* in my case. If I'm logical, I have to say: if this question surfaces in me, it must also, by rights, surface in others. For I also recognize myself as a person among other people; I also experience things, and I also had my teachers at school who thought a great deal about all sorts of things. I learned a great deal from my teachers, though perhaps they didn't necessarily drive me in this particular direction. But isn't it simply the case that when I see what is in my environment, I have to ask myself what forces have given rise to this, within history, let us say – history in its widest sense, as evolution of the human being and the world. However, I believe one shouldn't see this as distinct and separate either, but rather as embedded in the whole context. I can't tell you in a step by step way how I do this, as I'm not doing it this way right now; it is not something that happens when I confront things at a particular moment in time, because it has actually been an engagement and a meeting with things throughout my life. Whatever I do, I try out something and observe the experiment. Now too I am experimenting, attempting to express myself about this question. Today the attempt might fail. Next week, it may succeed better. So I attempt to move towards this now. But above all one must avoid

thinking that what I am describing is something special. It isn't, it's a quite normal situation; in fact, it's just as it should be. It is the most run-of-the-mill thing that I'm speaking about. I'm not talking about an exceptional situation, and above all I want to avoid people thinking that I'm presenting myself here as someone who is different from others; what I'm talking about is the reality of force constellations in the broadest sense.

Yes, but that isn't the problem at all. It is more that if I now think: Over there is a honeycomb that I will first just try to find out about. . . I take hold of it and feel that it's roughly similar to my skin, for instance. Or I can also see it in connection with warmth. Then on the other hand there's its shape. This is very abstract, and actually has little to do with the fat that in fact, one can say, has no tendency to form. At least one does not see the form inherent in it. What I mean is that one finds points of departure. How does one proceed now? You see, I've been preoccupied with your things for a long while now, and I think I've found a way into them, that is, how one repeatedly re-establishes a relationship to things – to warmth, for instance. How do I experience warmth? I can definitely experience warmth in a supersensible way, in sympathy, in loving attention, for instance.

Beuys: Yes, but that's just what I mean.

Yes, so now I would be glad to have a few wholly specific, really specific clues or aids, not so generalized, about human and world evolution, or the human being and the cosmos. Of course I also live in the cosmos, I feel myself to be a part of it, but I'm alive now, I have legs, I have my feet on the ground – well, maybe not completely, but to some extent. And this is where the whole, absolutely concrete problem starts for me, not with the

human being and cosmos in general terms but: How do I handle this right now?

Beuys: It starts where you say, for instance, that you're standing with your feet on the ground. If you walk consciously, rather than in an habitual way, and as you walk concentrate on how you stand and walk on the ground; if you then perceive this and enact it consciously, you'll already experience warmth. This is an example of how we can experience this kind of warmth; which rises up through the action of the will, and is what enables us to walk upright, to go upright on the earth. If I stop doing this in an habitual way and, let's say, live with full awareness, into my skeleton, of how this warmth works right into the head, into the fingertips, how it works in a concentrated way into my perceiving and thinking, then, let's say for now, one engages in an exercise where one experiences this aspect of warmth. All at once you experience yourself as touched by this warmth. Now you also have a measure of whether you are feverish or too cold. You get a feeling for this warmth: now you can also get in touch with your state of health. Yes, that's all connected with this. I can make sense of it myself, I don't necessarily have to go to the doctor. Of course it's advisable to go to the doctor if I can't solve the problem; but that's where it begins, and I can practise this in the simplest things. There is hardly any activity, is there, which is accomplished outside of this question? For instance when I cook a meal. When I cook a meal there's the question first of all of whether I should cook at all, or how long the food should cook for etc., and how it should be cooked. These are all warmth processes. We handle warmth on a daily basis, we ourselves are warmth beings, we live as an upright, walking, warmth entity; and when this is disturbed we, quite simply, become ill. So that is

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something for which I can only give indications, put images before you, tease out trains of thought; but of course I can also say how I myself would do something like this. For instance walking: one must first experiment with this, but also engage in a more general way with bigger manifestations of warmth. If a house burns down you'll quickly notice what kind of a warmth process is happening. And you can also engage with heat and cold when there is no particular wider significance, let's say by trying it out at the stove. You can observe something, a candle, or strike a match and observe the processes that take place, and how, at the end of it all, a blackened end remains. Then you can say: What is this blackened end that we're left with? And is its blackness all that there is? What is this, here, this black end? Then you might say: Yes, I learned something about carbon at school. Usually such things went in one ear and came out the other since our teachers may not really have got anything about the significance of carbon across to us. In other words we have to take a more careful interest in the store of things with which we live, and in the midst of which we live. That's a suggestion I can give, and one that also says something about how I have done this. I have taken an intense interest in the substances in my environment, but of course also in all different conditions, in the state of death, in the corpse, in the living state. I have given a lot of attention to a great number of plants and how their life manifests in diverse forms. The place where a plant grows, its central axis or function by which it lifts itself into the upright position, how the plant stands, orientates itself; or how a living creature, an animal, is horizontal; or the point at which a living being stands upright, becomes a human being – I have simply taken an interest in such things. Certainly, we could

speak about all this for days on end, about the diverse possibilities which daily life offers human beings. But the important thing is to let this become a reality in oneself.

A true experience of things means: giving life meaning, quite simply noticing how important life is, that you are alive, and not overlooking the fact that life may be sad, may be a burden and might not amount to much; let's say, getting rid of all these forms of despondency to which people are often subject, by making something new of oneself. And in making something new of oneself one is obviously enabling something new to happen with regard to other human beings too. But if you just do this by and for yourself, you'll see that there's no warmth process involved. If you bring about something in yourself it only becomes a warmth process once you involve others, and hear from other people about what they do. But this doesn't necessarily have to be a 'warmth work'. No, this is not a must. Rather one has to let others have the complete freedom to express what they draw out of themselves. It could be ice-cold, but this is something that I just have to deal with. I can't say: Since you are such an ice-cold fish, and I see things differently, I will simply ignore your existence and draw a clear dividing line. Absolutely not. Instead I have to enter right into the midst of this, for only here do you have a perfect warmth issue, only then do things start to be interesting. The rest is only preparatory work. That's the field of social sculpture as a new 'machine', one could say – as an energy carrier.

It is obviously difficult to have such a conversation without any actual examples of what may already have been tried out. As a teacher in a school, for instance, one learns from conversations with others who have done something, who have written something, or

painted something, or made something in clay, or anything else. And when you have something before you, to respond to, you can approach the discussion in a much more precise way. Answering questions without something in front of you, without something that someone has attempted, can never be convincing. There too you can see how important it is to make mistakes; in other words this whole discussion is inconceivable without mistakes. And such discussion is always interesting if you discover a mistake in yourself and try to improve it; or if one tries together, that is with a student, a pupil, to trace where the mistake lies, or where something is still lacking; or also, of course, where the pupil knows something a great deal better than the teacher [laughs] – that's possible of course. No, people undertake things that assume specific form.

After all, people can only express themselves in ways that have material forms. Of course this is already there in language. But if this model, which doesn't have to be at all grand – everything today is far too grand – if this tangible expression is there, then one can see better where it has come from and whether the matrix of forces that constellates it, let's say, is really the optimum one. And one can discuss this forever. And this whole process is culture; this is what it's all about. It really is not culture if something is just asserted, or made into an ideology, enthroned. Then, of course, one wants to dethrone it again, as it is no longer modern. Every five years a new fashion ascends the throne, and every five years it has to vanish again. That's the modern cultural industry that one can read about in the newspaper supplements, and that's no culture at all!

I'm interested in how this works – I can imagine it, I can trace this very well inwardly – that you enter

a state of more or less permanent practice, in which you de-automate life, simplify it, do properly what you otherwise only do out of habit; so that it is already something which acquires this continual character of practice, which then also enriches life immeasurably – not only through enjoying oneself, but simply because one experiences something other than oneself. So now, for me, the question is really: How does one bring this into form?

Beuys: You see, we all still live in a culture that says: there are artists and there are non-artists. This becomes something inhuman, giving rise to the concept of alienation between people. No, every person continually performs material processes. He continually creates interrelationships. Even when he gives, when he defers to another, or the way he behaves in a crowd, there are always, let's say, form processes at work. Dancers, after all, do nothing other than move, on their feet. And people on a crowded street are basically dancers too. So the moment you become conscious of this, you are involved in this problem. I want to get away from this: from the way the issue of form is laid on artists, or on art in the traditional sense. I want to get things to the stage where people experience themselves as being continually involved in this question; and then, as they keep experiencing and creating these material processes, that they basically also experience that social sculpture is a necessity, and that it is necessary to take things in that they normally don't perceive. In other words, social sculpture or the social organism is not a thing that one can perceive, unfortunately not, or thank God not. For if it could be perceived people would die of terror. Because this social organism is so ill that it is absolutely high time to subject it to radical treatment, otherwise humanity will go under. And our social organism exists like a living

being in a condition of the severest illness. Through these activities, undertaken consciously, one can school oneself to perceive this; to perceive the sickness of the social organism as a living being, to perceive its movements – to see what has been formed – in other words, to compare the contemporary shape and form of the social organism with its archetype. This is a sculptural concept, which you arrive at only by practising all this first. Then you perceive sculptural things that are not perceptible with a normal instrument of perception. That is why it is so hard for people to draw up a list of criteria, or express them, or reproduce them in diagrammatic form, or even compile statistics about them, relating to the question: How should human society be structured; what form should it now take? Because they have no sense or perception of the archetype, that is, of the healthy condition of a social organism as it evolves. Clearly, it must be different today from what it was a thousand years ago. And it is often difficult for people to grasp this whole, dynamic context; which is also why they can't grasp the criteria for the need for institutions, for measures that must be taken to attain this state of health. That alone would be ecology if we could grasp this ecological question at its root. Of course it is also very important to take measures to protect the environment; yet people often stop at a certain point and say that they're not interested in such things, they're only interested in the living plant. When they do this they are really saying that the plant is more important to them than the human being, and so they are clearly separating something off. Ecology goes further, reaches further, and relates to the social organism's capacity for life, for this is a living being that we cannot today perceive with our ordinary senses, without practice. When you practise

on substance and substance processes, on what I'd like to call sculptural logic, you perceive this. Suddenly you see it all and you know what to do. And then the concept of social sculpture suddenly has a function, and is tangible and accessible to our senses, is no longer invisible at all. Then you can perceive whether something like this exists at a place of work or not, whether there are small beginnings, or if things have already developed further; and that is a warmth organism, in other words, an evolutionary force.

If I have understood you rightly, and keeping the whole thing in mind, then I have the sense that this therapy of which you spoke before really tends towards, yes, I won't say the perception of archetypes, but perhaps towards an approach to the perception of archetypes; and that one really comes back to the point where one can perceive the spiritual background to these things, where it becomes accessible to perception and experience.

Beuys: Yes, accessible to experience, to the extent that one really pursues things: for instance, if one enters right into, lives into, what this stone must experience or feel as it sits here in the wall, how it formed and from what it arose, and what function it has now taken on. I can spend a long time pondering this. And then one can ask, yes, what is all this here in between; this is one thing and that is something else. This may be too much to ask of people who have to live in quite different spheres of life and have their daily quota of work to complete, but in my view it is indispensable for those who call themselves artists. However, since it is not right to say that only a few people are artists, I can only say that there is a general need for people to learn and practise in this way, unless they have already learned it, and they haven't. After all, our school system is not one that



4. The wall's 'clinker' bricks

teaches this to people from childhood. Children all know this very well, to start with, but the school system drives it out of them. At one time children knew what stone was. But then they lost it, systematically, you might say. Yes, that's how it is. When people come into the world they already know all this since they have already experienced it, and then it's ruined for them. So the teacher basically only needs to make gentle references to this problem, since children already know all about it. Yes, and then one needs to support this process. But because it isn't supported, and something else is supported, these things are lost, and subsequently also the perception of the interrelationships. Ultimately perception of the interconnectedness, of the whole web of interrelationships, is destroyed. So you see these dangers, which are all there, which have already wreaked their terrible damage, have to be counteracted with something. You can call this the political field – but, as I said the con-

cept is inappropriate. It's an overall shaping, forming task.

Within this shaping task each person would really be a recreator of himself, or a recreator of his surroundings, I don't know how one should expand on this.

Beuys: Yes, of himself and his surroundings, that's right. I don't think it can be expressed any more simply or truly. Yes, the very phrase 'He is the creator of himself and his surroundings' expresses the fact that the human being creates the world. It is not presumptuous to say this, because this is what is required of human beings. There have been times when a great deal was given to human beings, by leaders and spiritual mediators; when the collective ethos was dominant, and there were, of course, precepts and rules connected with this, which had to be strictly adhered to. This all had a purpose once upon a time. But because we have emancipated ourselves from this we no longer

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receive all this as credit to start with; we can achieve it through our own powers that we have actually acquired during the course of evolution. And because we *can* do this, it is also required of us. So, we can do it; in principle, we can do it. There is a great deal of misery in the world because things are, how can I put it, very disturbed and overlaid with negative forces, and also wilfully malevolent forces. But basically the human being can do this by, let's say, engaging with what's in front of him, rather than approaching things with prejudice, with all that he is told, or the way propaganda characterizes human beings.

Yes, I don't know whether I have taken this too far now. You are a priest, so you probably know if what I say sounds too strange [laughs].

Perhaps we could still try a little to characterize the difference between the various activities involved in the exercises you've been talking about. When one observes what you yourself have made, on the one hand there is a path you have travelled, one you have clarified to yourself through drawings. So I'd now like to look at the drawings in the sense of them being a continual form of questioning: to what extent can I grasp the interconnections? To what extent, in other words, does the 'warmth sculpture' become tangible? Then you passed slowly from this period of drawing activity into a different activity, shaping things more sculpturally, though less in the sense of actions and more in an object-related sense; and this shifted more and more towards you representing the act of making itself, or doing it together with others rather than alone; until, in recent years, your work has come to consist very much – as you are doing here – in activating things through dialogues, discussions, in conversation, in confrontation, in question and answer; in other words, as a con-

sistent exploration of warmth sculpture. And since I believe that all the things that you have done in sequence could also be done simultaneously, so the drawing, the shaping of objects and the environment, as well as your actions, or conducting discussions, all represent different forms and ways of relating to this path, this search. And perhaps one could characterize this a little for the sake of others' activity; describe the difference between these types of engagement. Because this discussion here is surely also being conducted from the perspective of how one can become more specific and tangible in one's own journeying, searching and finding: that is, how we can be stimulated to work with a pencil or the substances we find, relating them to each other, or doing neither of these but conducting a discussion. In each case, after all, this is a different type of engagement with phenomena and their interrelationships. So perhaps this also relates to your question of how one can make such things more specific and palpable.

Beuys: Yes, I think there's nothing more fundamental than drawing. For instance, if I show someone the way, and draw it on paper, showing him how the roads go, then I'm drawing of course. Drawing is really nothing other than planning: one embodies, represents, gives experiential form to something or a spatial relationship, or just relationships of size. And I think one should remember that we have all drawn a huge, huge amount in our lives. And if we haven't done it on our own initiative then we have been made to do it, for instance drawing geometrical shapes at school. One should approach this in a much less inhibited way, never saying: that's someone who can draw, but I can't. There's no such thing. Everyone can draw. As long as he has hands he can draw of course; and even if he hasn't he can still draw with his feet. And what arises from this awareness, as an exercise or whatever –

naturally *something* arises – is certainly something quite diverse. So drawing is something very fundamental, that everyone can do, although there might be differences in outcome. But one doesn't have to draw, one can, of course, do something else. It is also one-sided to think that everyone ought to go along an artistic path, have an artistic biography, in which one first draws, then makes sculptures or objects, then actions. One can also engage as a doctor, with substances and medical knowledge, with what one was taught at university in a different way; and under certain circumstances drawing could also surface in the process. But it would naturally be one-sided to say that everyone has to draw in order to be creative.

I'm not sure where we're heading now. We're deviating a little from our course. You can see how tricky art is, it's always getting in your way. Suddenly the thought has surfaced that, yes, drawing is really very important and fundamental, and that everyone can draw after a fashion. One can train oneself to draw, or also leave it be. But it is not absolutely necessary: a person has to discover through reflecting and feeling whether it's important for him. But I cannot say that the only way is for everyone to draw. This is due to the fact that I myself have drawn, and through drawing have attempted to get a dialogue going, and, of course, to make drawings that have their own life, that simply exist as constellations; as matrices of forces. Naturally I wanted to bring life out on paper: that's something I wanted, this remarkable life in an artwork, which doesn't live in an actual, physiological sense, and is also not fully active in a spiritual sense, as we saw before with the olive leaf. Of course, I wanted there to be this type of living experience. But I also tried to show that this can be transposed to and accomplished in all possible fields of work, and

doesn't necessarily have to be linked to a drawing, not necessarily.

Wouldn't this already be a prejudice to set up a sequence like this? First drawing, then objects. One would have to go further back than this.

Beuys: Yes, yes, we did go further back, to thinking, at this threshold situation. We spoke about speech; and writing for instance is also drawing. If you just observe a little what the hand does there, these funny squiggles, then you can see it's also drawing. That's why I say that everyone is an artist who draws, since everyone depicts and represents: everyone represents, some more, others less. Of course that's linked to the profession you choose. But in living consciously, drawing probably appears anyway. If I'm a little more conscious about keeping a tight rein on myself, then sometimes I write a sentence; and now and then I look at the imprint I've left in the world, in this case on paper, and then I'll also reflect on large and small, on proportions and suchlike. And then I'll be able to find my way into this, but that doesn't mean I have to become an artist who draws. That has to express itself in my work. In other words I have to invent quite different systems of measurement. As a nurse one can also draw, perhaps noting down all sorts of things, taking notes about what one experiences in the nursing relationship with sick people, also in a spatial sense. I say this without meaning to imply that a nurse ought to be a portrait sketcher, should draw every single patient. I just mean that if one did this, one would probably get a lot more out of a profession. But you can't present this as a prescription for a path to be pursued. Paths vary a great deal. Quite apart from the fact that there are also many different views about drawing; even the notion of a style of drawing is anything but

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positive. So it might really be better to link into something where someone has already made a start or, thank God, has made a mistake; something which one can discuss further.

Perhaps what you've experienced in your drawings is something that one could equally well experience working in the kitchen

Beuys: Yes.

Perhaps by looking at the different types of vegetable and thinking about what distinguishes them from each other, and how one can combine them.

Beuys: Yes, yes, that's right, I was trying to express that. Yes, or setting up the kitchen differently, or getting rid of everything that's really useless in the kitchen; and perhaps also making good use of or converting what you've thrown out. The worst thing nowadays is the way people furnish and equip their dwellings. If you look at all this you feel horrified – it's really bad how people live today, and all that they acquire and buy, everything that's in the daily papers every morning, the brochures from furniture companies. Yes, their sales must be brilliant otherwise they couldn't mount such crazy propaganda. This whole load of garbage that people acquire – it's terrible. How people live, their homes, it's all of such key importance. After all you spend most of your life at home; all the stuff there is terrible: people should have a good look at it, talk about it and really see what's there.

The question about the direction we need to move in is surely also connected with the fact that the everyday can become very significant; that we can live in it and come to see that ultimately there's no area that is not shaped and formed, and that doesn't have artistic value. But this, in itself, doesn't promote evolution. Perhaps for the individual okay, but not more generally, in the way you

spoke of before when you referred to the future, freedom etc.

Beuys: But turning one's conscious attention to the process does already lead one to the form. For example in the kitchen: most stuff in the kitchen nowadays is toxic, we know that. And now one has to see that one absorbs as little poison as possible. That's already, let's say, a confrontation with the times we live in. We have to ask ourselves: What gives rise to all this? It derives from the capitalist system. How did the capitalist system arise? And can you still talk about creativity even when the products for human beings, specifically those from nature, that is from farming, are already so degenerate and ruined? It is not that the whole thing has to be right, but it has to be given a different direction. Actually I'll say that it has started here already, with the head of lettuce, or with the discussion about the floor. For instance, the stones that are lying around here – I don't know why people chopped away at them like this. Why did they do it? I can see that someone made small stones, then larger ones, and also blocks of stone, and the like. But what's the point of it? Complete nonsense [laughs]! I think it's absolute stupidity. At any rate it's a pre-determined view of some kind, an artificial playing with forms, abstract art misunderstood [laughs]. It's the same everywhere; everything can start you on a discussion of the world. And then you come to the question of 'direction', of the impetus, the motivation. Here you see that there's a particular juncture, at the root, where things go wrong. And this juncture is our concept of work. This is connected with the concept of art, but it's no longer imbued with the concept of art, no longer imbued with concepts of creativity, no longer imbued with self-responsibility – this is impossible in the kind of system we live in. Even if someone wishes to, he

can't take real responsibility for his actions since everything is, as it were, done from above downwards. That can all be changed, but you have to work to achieve this, by developing a real interest in putting things right – things that are all so degenerate, so chaotic, that are all wrecking the world. So the fact that these stones are so important to us is actually linked to the question of atomic power stations [laughs]. Yes, that's how I see this. There is some kind of inner connection: a lack of real thought, a desire to flog and sell things; someone was no doubt very interested in selling these stones here. But there was less thought given to whether this is the right form, or whether it had to be these stones – it's all such an automatic process that runs like this: building contractors commission the stone mason, the tilers commission someone else, and so on. One can break through this and then work much more effectively and productively. The concept of economic growth and the concept of capital and all that goes with it, does not really make the world productive. No, the concept of art must replace the degenerate concept of capital. Art is really tangible capital, and people need to become aware of this. Money and capital cannot be an economic value, capital is human dignity and creativity. And so, in keeping with this, we need to develop a concept of money that allows creativity, or art, so to speak, to be capital. Art is capital. This is not some pipe dream; it is a reality. In other words, capital is what art is. Capital is human capacity and what flows from it. So there are only two organs involved here, or two polar relationships: creativity and human intention, from which a product arises. These are the real economic values, nothing else. Money is not. However, we have a concept of capital where an economic value intervenes and wrecks everything, which

therefore makes the economy revolve around profit, exploitation etc. There is only human capacity and what flows from it. And this can continually be discussed and explored in an ongoing dialogue between people, and lead to endless productivity that builds up and rebuilds the world; that under certain circumstances builds up a whole new cosmos and does not destroy it. The current system is not about growth – they just call it growth. It is in fact a process of shrinkage and contraction. Because external growth obviously develops further like a tumour. It is actually a death process. For this reason it's not at all productive, and is also not growth at all either. It's not growth; it's just additive, cancerous proliferation of certain interests that people can no longer control. But we can control them. It depends on us. It's not up to politicians, there's no point in swearing at them. Maybe they don't always have the best motivation, but there are some well-motivated ones amongst them. But they're allowed to do as they like, they're never corrected, or even made to take part in a dialogue. In other words, if something is bad one can only blame oneself, nobody else.

A work develops

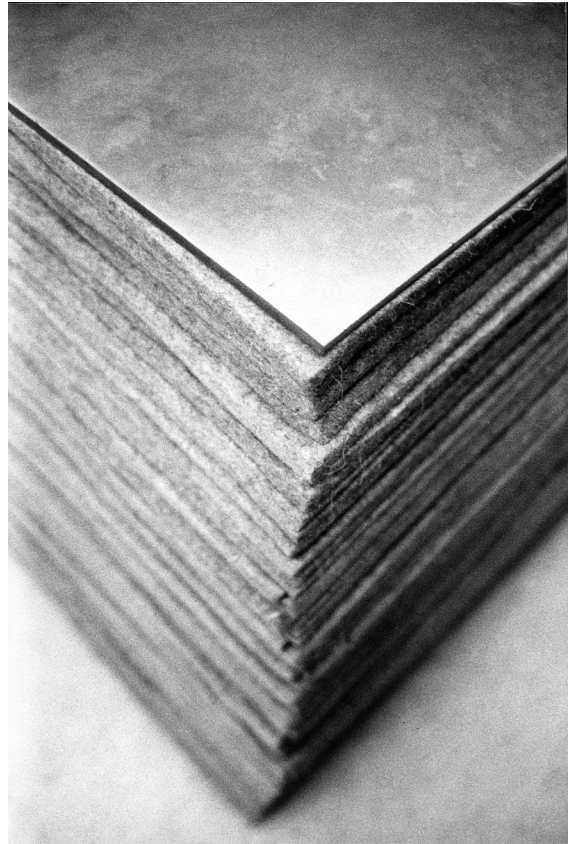
I have a question Herr Beuys. You said before, when you were talking about making your works, that at some point you realize that how it is, is as good as you can get it now, or: somehow that it is right – I no longer recall how you put it. Could you perhaps describe how you perceive this rightness, in other words the web of factors involved in such a relationship, how you experience them, because this isn't so apparent. I could imagine many people saying: What you have done there is not finished at all, or that's not right at all. Could you explain this a bit more?

What is Art?

Beuys: Yes, first of all you have to distinguish between things that have a certain, how shall I put it, thematic intention. For instance one could immediately talk about drawings that include actors, actors in the widest sense, either from nature or also from the animal kingdom, plants or people, or also cosmological actors. One can only assess each thing by identifying what element is still missing. So, quite simply, one could now say: if I decide to make a torso, it's obvious that the head doesn't have to be there. But if I intend to portray a human being, then of course the head element must be there. In such work one must clearly always consider: 'What is still lacking in what has been represented?'

In other things, where the figurative aspect, or hinting at the figurative aspect, does not play such a big part, it often has to be judged from quite different perspectives; for instance, in architecture, according to relationships of size, volume, weight, substance, proportions etc. Again one can only make this convincing when one uses an object, so that, let's say, I have a certain cube, or a certain pile of objects – I have also composed a work using layers – I have a particular idea, that I often research through my work on paper, until I know how high it should be; that it is now at the level it should be. But there is no basic, underlying, objective size, where I can say that a certain organ is missing; instead this must come from the thing itself, from the thing's own dynamic being.

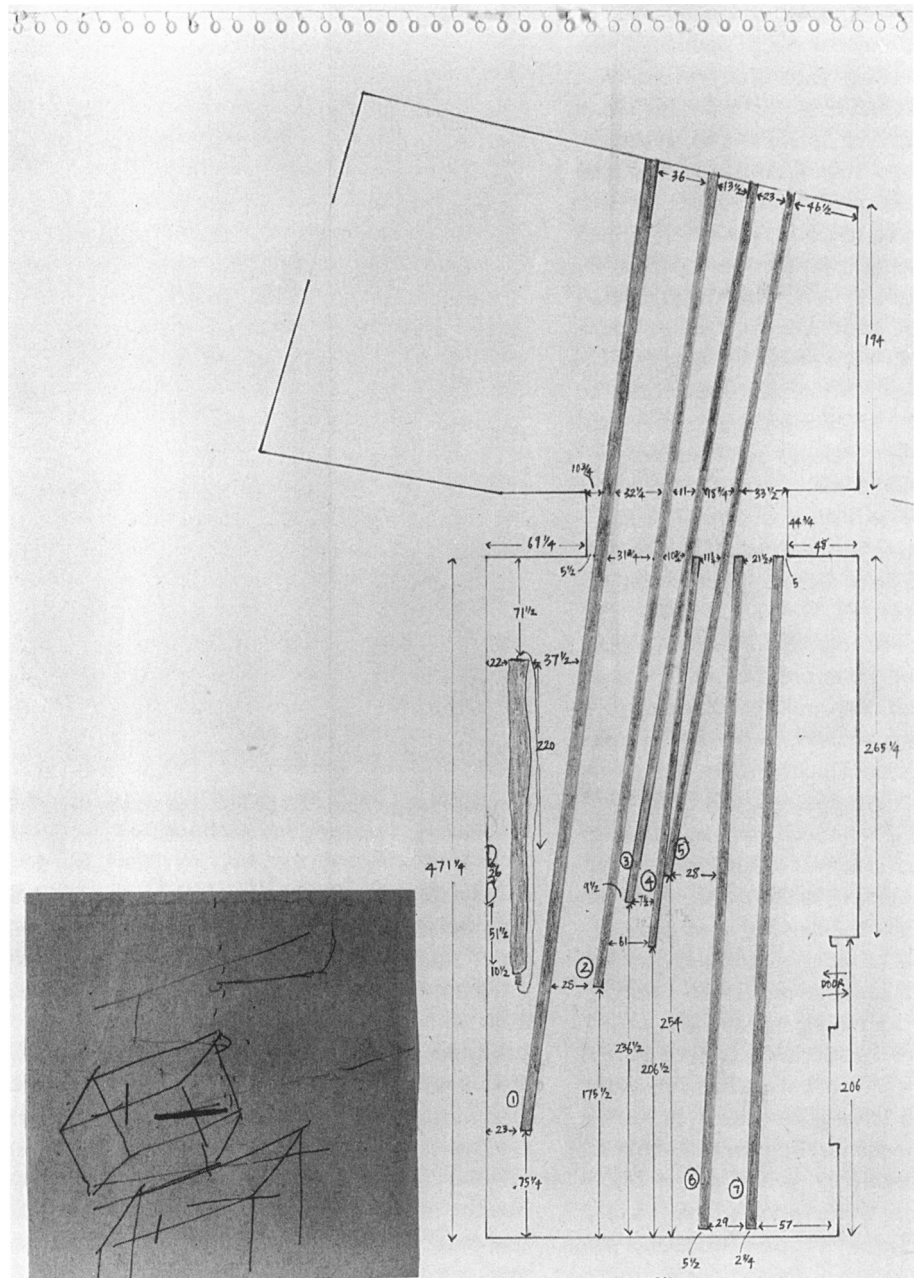
And there is always a decision to be made. For one knows, doesn't one, that one can make a very beautiful, short-legged table, for instance. One can make a beautiful and expressive table that is very convincing, because there is an appropriate relationship between the short legs and the table top and frame; whereas another table, that one makes, say, a week later, has to



5. Joseph Beuys, part of 'Fond III', 1969, copper plate on felt layers, Ströher collection, Darmstadt

have tall legs and a narrow table top, and it has to have all these things; demonstrating an absolute, how shall I put it, perspective on a character, since there are, for instance, also short-legged animals.

There are short-legged animals, which of course would no longer express their intrinsic character if they did not have short legs – for instance a badger couldn't possibly be a badger if it suddenly had deer-length legs. So, one always has to start from the particular character. A table, for example, can always be seen in this way: so, a table can be very expressive if it is short-legged and has particularly awkward



6. Joseph Beuys, 'Streifen vom Haus des Schamanen' ['Strips from the Shaman's House'], 1980: Proportions

proportions. It can sometimes be enormously expressive because it has a character like an animal that has fairly awkward and curtailed limbs, like a badger, for instance. So, taking an image from the whole spectrum of forces and letting it come to life, in a completely non-representative field – this provides a measure. I don't know whether that's an answer to such a question. So the criteria for something, for what's involved here, the criteria as to its quality, can again really only be discussed in direct relation to something, by circling around it a thousand times, looking at it and trying different things out. Above all, it becomes interesting when you've completed something and think it's perfect; and then suddenly see that in fact it's the stupidest thing you've ever done. And then you have to rework it, in other words, correct it, and that's particularly difficult. But it also has the enormous advantage that only now can you draw something out of it which never occurred to you as a possibility before, because it wasn't at all visible. The mistake one makes in the first attempt can turn out to be an extraordinary gift as far as the work is concerned. Having noticed a mistake, something has to be reworked. And then something comes about that seems wholly new. That's how I've often experienced it at any rate. One learns an enormous amount from mistakes in particular, as long as one doesn't tire too easily and say: Oh no, it's no good – I'll leave it and start something new. If one says: This mistake is something that I'm not just going to leave as it is, but I'll make something of this mistake, which is much better than I originally envisaged. This is something I've often done successfully, because I'm then involved with the work for a long time.

But I'm sure this is still not an appropriate answer. It is always difficult to answer such

questions in isolation from the process itself or the material that one actually has to deal with.

Would you, regarding your own work, say: What I have made is now finished for me, or would you say: That's finished, in other words the thing is complete in itself?

Beuys: I never say that it's finished for me, but, when it's finished I say: The table is as it wants to be. So I never say: I declare this thing finished; but rather I wait until the object itself lets me know and says: I am finished [laughs]. Yes, that's definitely how it is. I never decide whether something is finished, but the object has to let me know and say: That's it, I'm finished. I try to realize what lies in the intention, one could say, what the intention wishes to realize; in other words, in the things that emerge and are not quite finished, I try to sense what is needed – what it is that the wood or the stone wants.

Is that also how you come to the themes for your drawings?

Beuys: Yes

...in the case of the drawings there are somehow always recurring themes, quite particular themes...

Beuys: Yes, often, yes.

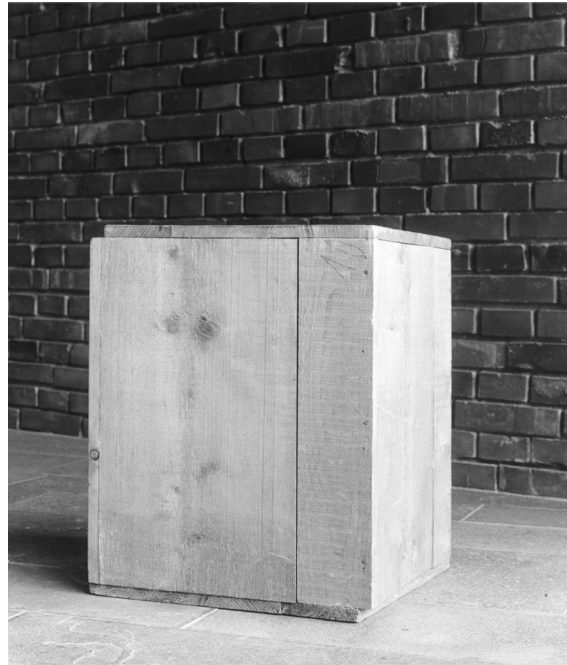
...in fact, that also have a quite specific expressive value.

Beuys: Yes, that's right, that's also the case with the drawings; but I also don't think that's anything special, for sometimes you can create something wonderful, which seems to be one hundred per cent sound, and has also been considered from all perspectives; and you place it there, once it's finished, and you've made the

greatest efforts, and then you suddenly see – what do you see? – yes, people describe this by saying: it just doesn't speak. It simply doesn't communicate. And it's sometimes very difficult to trace why this is, how it can be that a work you've invested so much time in suddenly doesn't speak. A work has to speak, to communicate. Lo and behold, it doesn't speak [laughs], although you invested the greatest effort, and sometimes also a fair amount of money.

For instance I once made a large marble relief. I thought it was really good and thought this will really be something. Once it was finished I thought, okay, now it's finished, I'll put it against the wall and then I saw that it didn't speak, it was nonsense, it wasn't working, it was somehow impossible. And then I reworked it completely.

Yes, and then sometimes there is something – again this sounds as though it were special, but it isn't – for instance this box here. I don't find it at all bad. It actually does speak to me. Whereas the floor doesn't speak to me at all. The floor is the biggest idiocy of the century [laughs]. Yes, it's true that it's laid in an alternating pattern – I already mentioned this – and there are pieces laid together that alternate: I don't know what they call this pattern, Roman Bond or some such name. Yes, but it doesn't work. It is nonsense. While the box does speak to me. These boxes aren't bad at all. The teapot, though, doesn't speak at all. Again that's something that I'd say is just another object. But these boxes have their own distinct quality and intentionality, because there was no pretentiousness involved here, just a basic function. It's simply a box, nailed together well, has a certain surface area, is wholly practical; and that gives it its own power of expression. Absolutely. In other words, these are dignified



7. Box

objects, these boxes, whereas it's hard to find anything else around here that is as good as these three boxes [laughs].

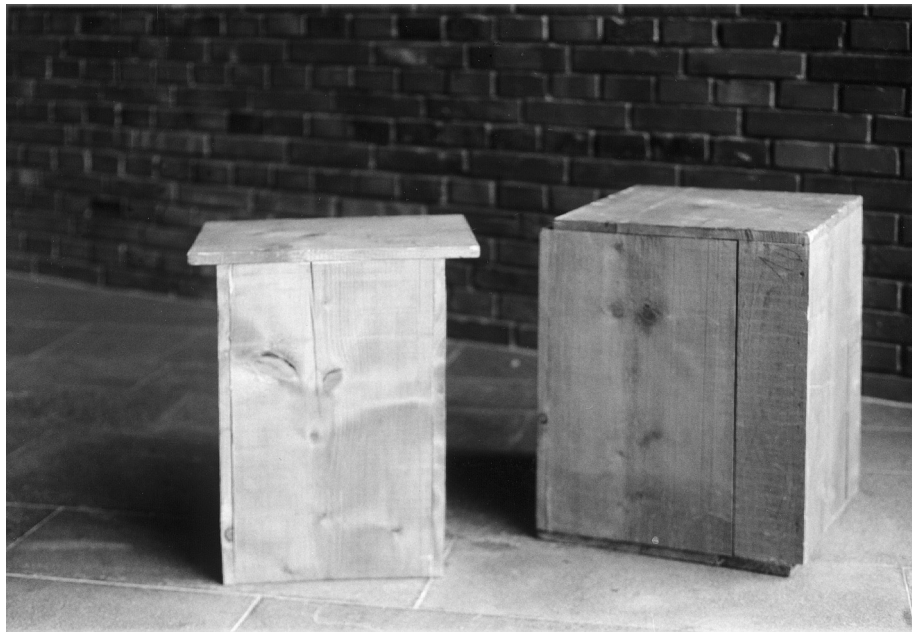
Yes, for instance I think these chairs are a lot worse – my sense of form makes me think one ought really to go back to the natural world to find similar or perhaps even much more highly evolved qualities. You could say that has to do with the simple, primary nature of the thing. Yes, fine, I can go along with that. But one knows, doesn't one, that relating to things in an uninhibited and, what shall I say, primary way, sometimes described as 'primitive', can often be the most highly developed expression of culture. One also knows that there are no poorly made objects to be found during the so-called primitive era, the period of early history. Hand-axes or arrowheads, or simple fishing hooks or suchlike – they're all of very high quality. And that is precisely what is lacking in our time. It's



8. Chair

all been spoiled. Now this has a great deal to do with craft. I don't mean craft as refined ability, using all sorts of machines and highly developed things, but craft as an attitude, as consciousness, in which one can still enter into the intentions of a plank of wood. In fact, it is encouraging to see that these planks were not felled in vain. The wood is not very valuable, in fact, it is probably waste wood, off-cuts, which someone would probably otherwise have burned, if another hadn't come along and made a fine chair, or this kind of base, or a box with it. Also, through the natural materials that have been used, one could say it has its own dignity. But all these are just different criteria. For

example looking at this thing, you might say now that one could have a good discussion about it. Someone could say: it needs another strip of wood here; while I would say: no, that would just be stupid to attach another strip of wood there. On this side [turns the box around], something or other doesn't fit, it's true, but there's something very beautiful here nevertheless, for, to start with, you get a crack, which somehow leads you into a mysterious interior; apart from this, a small strip of wood would be too insubstantial. Things were used for this that people found lying about; here a wide plank of wood, there a narrow one. So you see, you have here a very dynamic proportion between a short piece of wood and a small one. If you were to attach a strip here, it would be like paper. Then you could say: that's wrong, let's rip that out again, there's no real need for it. So the fact that this piece of wood simply peers out above, with the rough grain uppermost, and is not perfect, is the reason why you have to leave it as it is. These are all criteria for something that is good. This one is different again. It's simply been covered over on top and overhangs on the right and left. But here too I would say that it would be narrow-minded if someone came along and said: It overhangs far more on the left than on the right. Yes, I'd even say that if the overhang was equal on both sides, then the simple impulse to just take something and hammer it together would have been lost, and along with it the life of the thing too. That's the reason why this box over here is worse, also because it has been over stained. The material wasn't well handled. You see how something like this ages so beautifully and acquires a lovely tone; while here the staining has spoiled it. This one is therefore much worse. So, there are different levels of criteria, which, in my view, are objective when you look



9. Two boxes

into them. They can be integrated into a broad system of concepts, and applied to the things we make like a catalogue of criteria.

This goes right into the most spiritual territory, for here, this crack that leads into the darkness could clearly even be seen as mythological. It is not at all banal, not at all. I mean you can imagine all sorts of – not associations – but connections to life that are also to be found in nature. If this box were to stand outside, then at some point or other it would certainly become a beehive, for example. Bees would certainly go into it – that opening's exactly the right size – or other animals would live in it. You see, something can breathe in there. But of course it might equally be the case that someone comes along who prevents this happening, and insists that it has to stay empty. This could be achieved by simply covering it over, closing it off, and that's it. The one principle is as valid as the other, and both are underpinned by decisions. The word

'decide' relates to 'decisive' – in other words decisiveness and not vacillation. Doing one thing but not forgetting about the other. For example, it should be crooked and slanted, though not completely slanted. There's a bourgeois narrow-mindedness, however, in so many different forms of art, including craft and architecture, as well as in functional, everyday objects, which have all been reduced to a mediocre norm.

In fact, what I have described, using these two objects, is how I work, and also how I evaluate my work. You can take this a lot further, by sitting down in front of it and working at it, looking at it, sometimes for a very long time, just repeatedly observing it, for instance the differences in height. These are roughly the same height, but not exactly [places boxes next to each other]. Not completely, but both heights have something absolutely illuminating. There is no reason to make this lower or higher. At least, not in this case.



10. Box with crack

Unless one wanted to put something specific on top, of a certain height, to pursue a particular intention; perhaps to use it as a plant stand, it would be nice for a palm.

Beuys: Plant stands, a terrible bourgeois invention [laughs]. Flower holders! Yes, I also experienced them in my childhood [laughs].

But it seems to me that we're approaching the problem of use, that is, that one has to be able to use something as a chair, for example, or a table.

Beuys: The question here is not whether one should use it as a chair, or whether it should be mounted as a sculpture in a museum, that's not the issue here at all. Here the question is about the object itself. If someone puts a flower on top

of it, then so be it. Or if someone sits down here, say, which would be fine, or takes it as a writing desk to make some notes, that's also fine; or if he puts it in the kitchen to chop some vegetables on it, that's also fine. I'm not talking about that; it can be used for all sorts of things, and it is fine and useful and beneficial in any context, because there's no deception being practised here. Here's the truth, nothing concealed, just the plain truth. And so the matter is clear. How one uses it in specific instances is something else, a secondary matter. One can certainly ... yes, as far as I'm concerned, put a flower on top of it. But I don't believe that it would work, making something to put flowers on. I don't think it could ever work – making something to put flowers on; that, I'm sure, wouldn't work.

Why not?

Beuys: Yes, that's an interesting question. I just said it to make a point, and I think I'm right [participants laugh].

No, I'm not looking maliciously at the table [laughs]. Yes, it's to do with how one relates to flowers themselves that it wouldn't work. First of all there is a problem with flowers and plants indoors. So I think they would feel best if one treated it more like an experiment, an attempt, rather than simply misusing them as decoration in a place where the architect failed in some way. Yes, that's what architects do if something is wrong; then you have to bring on the plants, and always these decorative tropical ones with holes in them [participants laugh]. Or those low-maintenance plants that you can leave to go thirsty and hungry, get covered in dust, that still survive in any air-conditioned office – low-maintenance plants that aren't so far from being plastic, or which people have

brought along to endure this environment: that is the overall context.

Nowadays in offices they're actually made of plastic.

Beuys: Yes, I know, that too [laughs]. Now I think I know how to put it. Putting plants on a pedestal like this doesn't mean we are engaging lovingly with them, but is ruled by a different interest, that of decoration. So the plant takes on a wallpaper-like function; or it becomes like furniture, serving a convention, since you just have to have plants etc. That's why it's not right. However, if one wants to bring a plant into a room and really tend it, one can have no objection to that; but then you'll create the right kind of living conditions for it, which don't necessarily require a plinth or pedestal. One can use something or other on which you put the plant, at a certain height, where it has the right light, on a windowsill or something else. These flower stands and plant plinths that you can also get in cast iron, from bourgeois times, which you see pictured on the Mark, all these odd things like three-legged stands, and then a type of bowl on top where you're meant to put the flower pot, they're somehow terribly petit bourgeois. In other words, they're unnecessary objects and actually degrade the plant; at least that's the context of my experience. I just wanted to engage very specifically with the criteria I work with for a moment. It may all sound exaggerated, although I don't think I have a prejudice against such things. I would be open to persuasion if, in spite of all I've said, I were to see a beautiful plant stand [laughs]. I'm not dogmatic, being dogmatic is also wrong; you really shouldn't be dogmatic [participants laugh]. For it is actually possible that someone might succeed in giving a plant stand such a fine quality that for once these views would be

invalid. I could certainly imagine this. You see, the longer I speak about it, the more I almost feel interested in plant stands [laughs].

But, quite apart from the plants and flowers, you said: Here's a box and one can use it for anything, you can put plants on it, cut cabbage on it etc. It's a fact that objects exist and one can use them in many different ways. But can't one, shouldn't one, actually make an object for a very specific purpose? Of course it can be something other than a plant stand – a cupboard for instance or a table: such an object has to fulfil a quite specific purpose.

Beuys: Yes, that sounds true, but it's nevertheless false. . .

Do you mean specifically to do with plants and flowers, or quite generally?

Beuys: No, this is a table after all, and this is also a table. It's only a very small table, but it would certainly do, for example, in a small hut for two people to drink tea at. No, the first requirement of the table is of course as a surface at a certain height for working or sitting at, nothing more is required. And then the very next, important question is whether it is a genuine table, for of course nowadays – you just need to go to a furniture shop – there are any number, thousands, millions of flat surfaces set up at working height, made of glass, with brass feet and marble tops, with all sorts of gimmicks so that you can get your legs up on the marble top [participants laugh], or just one leg, and then with gimmicky things inside too, so that it looks as snazzy as possible, as though the marble top were floating by itself in space, and all that sort of thing. Nevertheless you'll hardly find a table that can be justified by a structural or sculptural idea, never mind the need for such decorative objects. It's all a swindle.