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Joseph Beuys and Italy: “La rivoluzione siamo Noi”

After the economic upswing, there was renewed interest in Europe in the exchange of contemporary phenomena of the art world from the mid-1960s onwards, which sought to distance themselves from the painterly, expressive and consumerist positions of America. In Germany, Joseph Beuys was one of the central figures. Although he was long regarded as an uncomfortable and eccentric figure with partly utopian ideas, from today’s perspective his positions regarding the role of the artist in society, the expansion of political and ecological perspectives, and the linking of art and science are still highly relevant. The ideas and theories he promoted from his studio apartment in Düsseldorf and from his initial teaching position at the Academy, always in direct contact with people, both students and the general public, spread first in Europe and then from the mid-1970s also in the United States. Italy, however, from 1971 until his death, was certainly the country – along with Germany – in which Beuys found the most fertile ground for his artistic-revolutionary statements and activities. There may have been several reasons for this. Primarily the cultural fascination that had drawn artists and intellectuals from the north to the ‘land of sun and lemons’ since the Renaissance and ensured an intimate exchange between Germany and Italy. Think of the well-known ‘predecessors’ and travellers to Italy such as Albrecht Dürer and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Another reason was certainly his first formative stay during the Second World War, when he was stationed as a soldier in Foggia, Apulia, for several months in early 1943ⁱ. According to letters to his parents, at the age of 22, he was so fascinated by the landscape and culture there that he decided to become an artistⁱⁱ. The third and most central aspect, however, was the beginning of Joseph Beuys’s intensive international collaboration with gallery owners, critics, and collectors, which also paved the way for him to enter the Italian art scene from 1971 onwardsⁱⁱⁱ. A groundbreaking event was the conference on the future of the international art market organized by Klaus Staeck in Heidelberg in September 1971, to which around 30 people were invited. It was here that Beuys first met the Italian gallery owner Lucio Amelio, the critic Germano Celant, and the artists Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis^{iv}. As a direct consequence, Amelio visited Beuys in his studio in Düsseldorf and invited him to Naples, as well as to his villa in Capri. Lucio Amelio became his constant companion and translator^v. During their stay on Capri, in autumn 1971, they planned Beuys’s first series of exhibitions in Italy, the so-called “Neapolitan Tetralogy” (1971 to 1985)^{vi}. The opening took place in the Modern Art Agency gallery in Naples in November 1971, also attended by Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz^{vii}. These two important representatives of Italian Arte Povera, founded in 1969, are also groundbreaking for an artistic exchange that reveals obvious parallels, but also culturally determined differences, with the work of Beuys^{viii}. According to Jannis Kounellis, “everyone had come” to the second opening in Rome in October 1972^{ix}. Along with Lucio Amelio and the critics Achille Bonito Oliva and Germano Celant, Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and Buby Durini in particular were among the central figures who created a forum for Beuys’s numerous artistic and

political actions in Italy^x. In addition, there was the FIU (Free International University), founded in 1973, which also had a presence in Italy from 1979 (with locations in Turin, Pescara, Rome and Palermo). Beuys thus found open-minded comrades-in-arms and supporters who actively promoted his expanded concept of art and the associated environmental commitment (*Difesa della Natura*, *Olivestone*, etc.).

Beuys's concept of social sculpture was groundbreaking due to the influence of artistic concepts in the life of each individual, and in the challenge to preserve nature and the environment. Everyone has the power to bring about change, their own and social change, because "La rivoluzione siamo Noi" (1971). What is decisive is the will. The fact that Beuys is now also being celebrated in great style in Italy on the occasion of his 100th birthday celebrations and, among other things, appears on the front page of the *Giornale dell'Arte* (ed. March 2021) and is compared with Mario Draghi ("Draghi come Beuys"), is therefore a positive and hopeful sign that art might once again be given more weight in politics.

ⁱ Probably from February/March to June 1943. Beuys describes his experiences in retrospect as an insight into the: "Geist und [die] Kultur Italiens, der gegen den Schrecken des Krieges gestellt war". In: Germano Celant: Beuys. *Tracce in Italia*, Ed. Amelio, Neapel 1978, P. 67. He produced numerous works, drawings and sketches of Foggia and the surrounding landscape, such as Monte Gargano.

ⁱⁱ Beuys wanted to "nach dem Krieg den Bildhauerberuf erlernen", in: Joseph Beuys. *Das Geheimnis der Knospe zarter Hülle. Texte von 1941-1986*, hrsg. von Eva Beuys, München 2000, P. 269-271.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the end of the 1960s, in addition to documenta 4, there were other important exhibitions in Europe that traced current phenomena. At Prospect '68 in Düsseldorf, at the *Live in your head: When Attitudes become Form* exhibition in Bern curated by Harald Szeemann, or at the exhibition *Op Losse Schroeven* in Amsterdam (both 1969), a wide variety of terms such as Conceptual Art, Earth-Works, Process Art, Anti-Form, or Land Art circulated alongside Arte Povera. The artists of Arte Povera and Joseph Beuys attended all these events.

^{iv} For more details on the meeting see *Tracce in Italia*, P. 8-9.

^v Amelio spoke fluent German, English and French. He learned German during an extended stay in the former GDR. Beuys spoke only English, his Italian language skills (from wartime in Foggia) were very limited; see Bernd Klüser in conversation with the author, München, 18.9.2006.

^{vi} For a list of activities, see the interview with Lucio Amelio in: Joseph Beuys. *Arena – wo wäre ich hingekommen, wenn ich intelligent gewesen wäre!*, hrsg. von Lynne Cooke u. Karin Kelley, Ostfildern bei Stuttgart 1994, P. 34-51. Achille Bonito Oliva conducted the first interview with Beuys in Italy on Capri. It appeared in December 1971 in the magazine *Domus* under the title *Partitura di Joseph Beuys, la rivoluzione siamo noi*.

^{vii} Beuys arrived by train wearing a lynx-skin coat that he had worn in 1969 in the action "Iphigenie/Titus Andronicus". The title was inspired by Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, which the latter had translated into verse during his Italian journey. Beuys's personal 'Italian Journey' took its course.

^{viii} On the parallels in the work of Joseph Beuys and some representatives of Arte Povera, see Carolin Angerbauer: *Joseph Beuys und die Arte povera. Materialität und Medialität*, Munich 2015 (publication on the dissertation project, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut).

^{ix} Jannis Kounellis in conversation with the author, Niccone, 17.3.2009.

^x The 1978 catalog book "Beuys. *Tracce in Italia*" (1978), on which Beuys himself collaborated, was to become the most important work for the complete record and chronology of his activities in Italy for the period up to 1977.