



Joseph Beuys on Art and Capital

Selected Quotations

“Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being. I demand an artistic involvement in all realms of life. At the moment art is taught as a special field which demands the production of documents in the form of artworks; whereas I advocate an aesthetic involvement from science, from economics, from politics, from religion – every sphere of human activity. Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.”

(1969, interview with Willoughby Sharp, in Carin Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America* [New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990], p. 87)

“There is no point even talking about culture as long as everyone remains dependent upon the economies and the production methods that exist in the capitalistic system on the one hand and the communist system on the other. All we really need to talk about are these economic systems and these production

methods. . . . What we have to do now is take the next step and change direction.”

(1984, discussion in Pescara, Italy, in Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys: The Art of Cooking* [Milan: Charta, 1999], pp. 137-138)

“... I stress the necessity to find clear epistemological reasons to go on with art, which begin in humankind’s thinking powers to mold, and to bring up the quality of what traditionally appears as the form of a thing, to impulse the world with a radical, other understanding of culture.

“... so when I speak about art, I can only say that there are two kinds of art: the traditional art, which is unable . . . to change anything in society or in the ability and the joy for life; and then, there is another kind of art, which is related to everybody’s needs and the problems existing in society. This kind of art has to be worked out at the beginning; it has to start from the molding power of thought as a sculptural means. If this sculptural agent is not active in the beginning, . . . the physical form will only be pollution for the world and will only enrich the whole rubbish of production we already have.”

(1980, interview with Kate Horsefield, in in Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 75)

“Art is, then, a genuinely human medium for revolutionary change in the sense of completing the transformation from a sick world to a healthy one. . . . it is logical that at a certain point we also abandon the physical edifice which represents so to speak the ‘modern’ and turn instead to the spot where men at their place of work and in their homes represent the basis of this expanded concept of art. This means that every man is an artist or must be considered as such since Man’s creativity is the real capital of a society. Following this argument, capitalism and communism, both retrograde and antiquated concepts of capital, must be transformed into a notion which firmly recognizes that humanity’s real capital consists of human capacity.”

(1982, public dialogue, Bonn, in Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, pp. 94-95, 99)

“... the wider understanding of art is related to everybody’s creative ability. It makes it very clear and understandable to everybody that the capital of the world is not money as we understand it, but capital is the human ability for creativity, freedom and self-determination in all their working places. . . . This idea would lead to a neutralization of capital and would mean that money is no longer a commodity in the economy. Money

is a bill for law, for rights and duties you know . . . it will be as real and will lead to a democratic bank system. . . . It will organically prohibit every kind of unemployment, and organically it will stop inflation and deflation. This is because it deals with the rules of organic money-flow. This makes clear that all these interpretations of the future . . . have a lot to do with a new understanding of the human being as a spiritual being.”
(1982, interview with Richard Demarco, in Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 115)

“But in enlarging this understanding of art, we are in the process of the totalization of the idea of art. We see that the totalization of art is now no longer related to the activities of artists and specialists in their insulated, isolated field of so-called cultural freedom. In reality this field is not free, it is only a free place where you can do what you want without rules and without responsibility. We can see that a totalized idea of art would ameliorate the possibilities in this field too. We see that the economical ideas are to be molded and sculpted according to this idea of totalized freedom, and that the totalized understanding of art totalizes the understanding of economy. No longer can the idea of production and enterprise be restricted in a field where only a physical production operates. All productions are now invested with the idea of a new anthropological declaration of human individual freedom and the enterprise which results from freedom. This is to declare that a spiritual being has therefore firstly the need for spiritual goods.”
(1976, Speech upon receiving an honorary doctorate degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, in in Kuoni, comp., *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 56)

“... we can look forward to the establishment of a social reality that is equipped with a new and different system of credit and finance. The idea of capital will undergo a radical change and will be understood from an anthropological point of view. People will no longer think, for instance, that capital consists of money or various means of production; they will understand that the only real form of capital that humankind possesses is our capacity to produce, and our individual creativity. A truly anthropological understanding of capital teaches us that capital and the human spirit are one and the same thing. The use of our abilities in the different areas of work that exist in society requires social credit, which means credit from a truly democratic banking system that operates in tandem with the elementary process of creativity and the products that derive from it. From this point of view, the only economic value that needs to be recognized is that of human creativity and what it produces. The primary economic value is creativity, which means the spirit and the ability of individual human beings, each of whom have their own dignity, and what results from this dignity is the quality of what the people who possess it produce. In such a system, there is no such thing as profit, there is no possibility of abusing and denying the dignity of the individual in his or her workplace in order to create a profit for a minority. This is the only option for a future social order.”
(1984, discussion in Pescara, Italy, in Durini, *Joseph Beuys*, pp. 140-141)

“I come more and more to the understanding that the relevant problem for today’s time is to be sought in the economic area, not in the cultural area; this means in the production area, where the manufacture, circulation, and consumption of products takes place. The cultural area must be organically integrated with this process of circulation. Unfortunately, however, economy and culture today are split far from each other.

“Today we are absolutely unaware of what employment means and what purpose it serves. When one recognizes that the production of goods must perform a higher duty than only a satisfaction of biological needs and a raising of the material standard of living, then one will also link the cultural area with the economic area. Art would then open the possibilities of breaking into a free cultural area within the now dominating system of production. . . .

“Organic circulation between economy and culture would mean the abolition of capitalism, which through its accumulation of money and production disturbs the flow of this circulation of economy to culture. This is also the reason for human alienation and the lack of spiritual nourishment, and this lack can be remedied when the economic area and cultural area begin an organic cooperation.

(1973, answer to a question, in Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works* [New York: Barron’s, 1979], p. 268)