

Chalking up social change

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Two important 20th-century thinkers, theorist Rudolf Steiner and artist Joseph Beuys, sought to change the world through their work, writes Robert Nelson.

BLACKBOARDS — A GRIM symbol of education in the industrial age — have never been esteemed for their beauty. Now they're obsolete. They were destined to perish, even before the health scare of chalk dust. First, it was the frictionless corporate whiteboard and finally it was the computer and projector. The digital slide show is cast to an audience of hundreds with professional images; it's uploaded to websites and no one has to decipher the lecturer's miniature scribble. A generation has now grown up scarcely knowing what a blackboard is, much less appreciating its institutional horror, its air of command and authority in school.

How the public will therefore react to an exhibition of these pedagogical antiquities, written in German, is hard to predict. The blackboards in question are from the theorist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and the artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). Steiner gave 5000 public lectures and was persuaded to do his colourful expositions on black paper instead of erasable blackboard. So now you can see them at the NGV International in frames behind glass.

However, the blackboards of Beuys, entitled *Directive Forces (Of a new society)*, lie in an oceanic heap on a large platform, superintended by three easels, also with blackboards. It's as if the classroom has gone ballistic, exploding in a riot of educational missiles. The installation in Melbourne replicates exactly the way the boards were strewn, the one upon the other, in the course of a performance in New York, including an east-west line drawn over the higgledy-piggledy piles after they had settled.

Both sets, from the carefully themed and elegant style of Steiner to the chaotic performative clatter of Beuys, make you appreciate the advantages of blackboard communication over our technologically assisted methods. Today, we give slick presentations in which every move has been prefigured the week before and written out in advance, requiring only a voice-over, sometimes experienced by the audience as gormless or even redundant. But in the days of the blackboard, the teacher formulated the voice and written words or drawings at the same time. It was a demonstrative, organic performance, where gesture and language knit themselves together for developing an idea and vivaciously acting it out.

Though symbolic of much that has changed between Beuys and us, the historical interest in the teaching medium is not the point of the exhibition. The reason for contemplating the esoteric objects lies in the redefinition of art that occurred in the lifespan of these two immensely charismatic men.

As the curator Allison Holland says, "Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner shared more than just a method or a medium — they sought to change the world with their ideas." This agenda, which very few artists share today, permanently redirected art from a celebratory ornament to a philosophical stimulant, a set of sensory cues — with or without aesthetic merit in their own right — which provoke the viewer to enter a discourse.

The biggest discourse concerns freedom. For both Steiner and Beuys, the self-determination and liberty of the individual are cruelled in a bullying society, where people are alienated from their work and conditioned by compulsion. For both men, art is an important part of the antidote. Following the arts and crafts theorist William Morris (who defined art as "joy in labour"), art was considered an especially creative movement of thought. Art or creativity means the best kind of thought, because it indicates thought produced in freedom.

Recognising this gives art immense prestige; but there's a flipside. The priorities of art have to be realigned. For Beuys, you must first establish what you want to do with society and only then do art. He believed that "it is no longer viable to make a handsome artwork, but rather you have to learn to link the gaze to the social whole, and only then will it be possible once again to make a good artwork." He recommended a moratorium on pleasurable production till we tackle the dictatorship of the social contract.

The mission belongs to meetings, co-operatives, forums, seminars; and it's no accident that Beuys made such prolific use of blackboards. His artistic practice tended to verbal communication of abstract ideas. Much of Beuys' work involved teachings, the contents of which also related to the themes pursued by Steiner. The idea of making nice pictures finds its tomb in the blackboard.

As Beuys said, "art can no longer be art today if it does not reach into the heart of our present culture and work transformatively within it that is, an art which cannot mould society — and through this naturally operate upon the core questions of our society — is not art." It's iconoclastic, perhaps doctrinaire, excluding melody, for example, from the category of art. But the great virtue of the present exhibition is that you can begin to identify what these core questions ("Herzfragen") really are. They mostly appeal to the philosophy of Steiner.

The philosophy that Steiner and Beuys share identifies a world outside the physical, a sphere of energy and spirit that is accessed by thought. The discourse is mystical; and to get into it, you have to accept words that we use today as infrequently as we use blackboards. Take Steiner's beautiful but enigmatic sentence: "just as the sun passes through the star signs, the human soul passes through the mind." If you don't see a big distinction between soul and mind (analogous to the difference between sun and star signs) you're likely to find the words mystifying.

But that doesn't mean that it isn't interesting and seductive. A German scholar Wolfgang Iser has written a remarkable book on the parallel between Steiner and Beuys; and it emerges that behind their shared outlook "stands the metaphysical assumption of the primacy of the spirit. The sensory world is seen as the instrument of a higher spiritual world." For both thinkers, the earth is surrounded by a Pneuma, a breath-zone, which is "the placenta of the spiritual world".

So art would be the cord. Steiner has assigned great importance to art in redeveloping society for the sake of freedom: "The significant element in the further development of the humanities will be that philosophy, in its attempt to comprehend art, will itself create an art of comprehension, will enrich thinking with imagery and reality. In the process, the dry and abstract science we know today will move closer to the realm of the arts." Through art, science would find a sacramental dimension — "the laboratory table must become an altar".

Aspects of their philosophy recall Plato, but highly animated with spirits. As Steiner says: "What people in the outside world apprehend as thinking, that's like a shadow of those which live as thought-beings (Gedankenwesen) in the world of spirit (im Geisterlande)." This spirituality is reinforced by Beuys, who declared: "Humans are not an earthly being. They are not made for earthly relations. They are only in one part on this earth, to achieve something quite specific, which then reaches beyond it in a further evolution under other relations, not with this kind of body."

The great invention of Beuys is a kind of communal art, for which he coined the word "social sculpture". In this, the collective energies of artists were focused on social change, seeking — as by Steiner's example — alternatives to capitalism. Beuys' economic and political credentials are best established through his assistance in founding the Green Party and his project "Seven Thousand Oaks", in which he inspired a gang of artists to plant thousands of trees in Germany.

But the left of politics is traditionally based on materialist philosophy; and Beuys, no less than Steiner, found materialism anathema. With affinities rather towards shamanism, Beuys sought transcendence. And art, stripped of its traditional illustrative role, became his liturgical vessel, a way for thought to realise its spiritual home away from the tangible objects of life. For Beuys, thought is an act of creation, almost synonymous with art. According to Iser, this idea was already understood by the German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling. He had "recognised that art, through the creative process of imagination, inspiration and intuition, combined internal and external perceptions." This idea of stepping beyond traditional binaries has powerfully informed contemporary art. So what does it mean?

If I see a wall, it feels as if I'm simply looking at paint or plaster. My eye, like the wall itself, collects incidental light, which may be beautiful, perhaps pitted with imperfections and histories. But when I first gaze upon this surface, before I notice anything about the light, I instantly recognise that it's a wall: it fits with a concept that I've already installed in my memory: a flattish vertical expanse that runs from floor to ceiling. My mind is already loaded with templates for everything that I see. That's how I recognise and interpret things from perception.

For Beuys, there was "a reciprocal effect between perception and concept". Behind every perception stands both the desire to see and the concept that organises perception. But thought can also comprehend perception; the mind can witness its own control of perception and so feel itself both as a subject and an object. Beuys marvels at how "active will within thinking comes into perception. Thought comes to be experienced as power at that moment, as the activity and autonomy of the free self."

This is all good; but the bit that I don't get is why Beuys put an embargo on the kind of art that has a chance of achieving the objective, namely revealing the dynamic between perception and the concepts that organise them. One art-form that can realise this is perceptual painting. In seeking to represent things in the world without a mechanical intermediary, the painter must juggle what is seen and what is known. It's impossible to paint a picture from life otherwise; and some painters, like Cézanne, make the tussle visible, bringing the dichotomy to the consciousness of the viewer.

Painters who consciously square perception with preconceptions also work without the illusion of what Iser champions as a "participatory approach to knowing" in which "the observer becomes united with the observed". Like a lot of ideas around Steiner and Beuys, it sounds good, yet it's a logical impossibility. Any dynamic between the observer and the observed presupposes their separation. They would become null if they were the same. They can't be unified or homogenised; they're either dialectical or nothing at all.

In spite of its enlightened foundation, the spiritualism of Steiner and Beuys approaches absolutes or essentialist hierarchies of thought and spirit. Zumdick explains that Beuys spurns thinking which is "only a reflection, only the unanimated representation of contents." Such thinking is mere illustration. Instead, one must seek a supreme kind of thinking which recognises its point of origin. In many ways, this is a lovely idea; and sure, we want thinking to be reflexive; but you have to ask: what is this "point of origin"?

Philosophically, the idea of a point of origin ("Ursprungspunkt" also expressed in Beuys as "Quellpunkt", the source-point) teeters between conjecture and ghostliness. It's inaccessible, a spooky construct that supposedly underlies what you know, think or feel, but which leaves you owing something, somehow beholden to a larger spiritual order. If you elevate the idea of a point of origin — as opposed to accepting the utterly marvellous wild plurality of ideas that supply the imagination with its liveliness — you're already in a bind. You'll feel empowered if you share the illusion of closeness to the point of origin; and equally, you'll be disempowered if you face the reality that this point of origin is unknowable.

All spiritualisms — even those that seek mental emancipation — struggle to suppress the zeal for intellectual custody and therefore control. There's always an issue of how to think or what to think, a question of correct thinking, valorised thinking. And in the Steiner-Beuys lineage, the kind of thinking that we call scepticism (which calls spirituality into doubt) is denounced and abhorred.

In Beuys, especially, the air of shamanic cult figure in some ways diminishes independent access to reason in the audience and encourages a kind of liturgical hypnotism for cosmic transcendence. It comes out not only in the installation but the wonderful incantational sound-track, a performance in which Beuys chants "Ja ja ja ja ja; nee nee nee nee nee" for hours. From a sensual point of view, it belongs to what Beuys calls "the science of initiation".

The performative element, recalled in the cacophony of tossed-off blackboards, has a demonstrative quality that borders on violence. And so the art fluctuates between charm and intimidation, a powerful combination which is seductive. But how this beguiling legacy — with its hold on art and ideals in "permanent conference" — sits with rationality remains obscure.

Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition is at the NGV International, 180 St Kilda Road, until February 17.

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