

'I DID TAKE THE ROLE OF THE SHAMAN ...'

The artistic rituals of Joseph Beuys

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Abstract

The relationship between the notion of ritual and the work of the German artist Joseph Beuys seems self-evident and questionable at the same time. In this essay, a reflection on the notions of ritual and of theatre/performance art will be followed by a description of the ritualistic allusions in Beuys' work. As an example of 'artistic rituals' I discuss Beuys' performance Celtic +--- which took place in Basel (Switzerland) in 1971.

Thinking about the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and the notion of ritual brings up a paradoxical situation. On the one hand there seems to be a strong connection. Beuys—allegedly rescued by native Tartarians after an air crash in the Second World War—can be seen as the artist who tried to work out a holistic concept of art and life in answer to the crisis that Europe, and particularly Germany, faced after 1945. To this effect he studied Asian worldviews, Celtic myths, and Christian symbols. The concept of ritual appeared both in his reading and in titles for drawings or objects. It also was an obvious model for his performances, where he played with the attitude of the shaman. Hence, many spectators described their experience of Beuys' works in ritualistic terms, or in terms of a 'rite of passage'.

On the other hand, Beuys' concept of art met with harsh criticism from conservative politicians, left-wing art-critics, and well-known colleagues. Especially the American art-historian Benjamin Buchloh elaborately criticized Beuys' idea of the artist as a leader, pointing out that the artist sees himself as a 'privileged being, a seer that provides higher forms of transhistorical knowledge to an audience, that is in deep dependence and need of epiphanic revelations.'¹

Once again, the case of Joseph Beuys seems to bring up the question of art and ritual in a broader sense. What are the reasons to look for rituals as sources for modern performances? To what extent does the notion of ritual influence the image of post-war artists? And how can we describe art forms that are meant to cross the border of theatrical representation through ritualistic practices?

Correspondences and Differences

As recent publications have shown, there is a wide range of definitions to describe and explain rituals.² They can be seen as 'processes of embodiment'³, as 'symbolic actions,'⁴ or as 'cultural performances.'⁵ These divergent concepts overlap in at least two points: rituals are transformative actions, based on traditional patterns.

As transformative actions, rituals generate a natural or social transformation or change. Arnold van Gennep showed in his description of ceremonies surrounding birth, death, and marriage that such rites change the social role and the status of a subject. Even while rituals are cultural mechanisms to overcome a difficulty or a crisis, they do not merely have a stabilizing function. They can unfold transgressive energies and violent conflicts, by triggering a state of 'liminality', i.e., a zone of 'betwixt and between.'⁶

Rituals follow traditional patterns of action, which have to be reiterated in every performance. As modern theories pointed out, these repetitions are always reinventions of a fixed scheme, which can vary to a certain degree. The ludic and playful elements of rituals may include various materials, sounds, gestures, actions, and linguistic signs.

Therefore ritual and theatre have a lot in common. Both are cultural performances, which are linked to the presence of human bodies. In both cases people are taking up certain roles and following a *mise-en-scène*. Both can trigger individual or collective effects.

But while rituals need to be done by authorized persons and in a traditional setting, theatrical performances are open to artistic shifts and different interpretations. In that sense, the performative quality of a ritual differs from that of a theatrical play. While the wedding ceremony in a Christian church (effected by a priest) changes the status of a man and a woman into a couple, the same ceremony played on a theatre stage could not generate a new social reality.

When we look at the history of performance art, it is interesting to note that the theatrical allusions to ritual at the beginning of the twentieth century (as we find in the works of Antonin Artaud, Georg Fuchs, or the Ballets Russes) are inspired by an interest in the ritual's performative quality. Throughout a 'ritualization' of theatre (as Richard Schechner called it) the performance should transform the audience into a community and open it up to spiritual energies. When, during the sixties,

the idea of ritualization re-entered the field of modern art, it was derived from two sources: the artistic desire for strong sensory experiences beyond the domain of traditional art, and the lack of a suitable terminology for the new art forms.

It is remarkable that an artist like Allan Kaprow, commonly known as the 'inventor' of an art form called 'Happening', tried to define it using ritualistic terms. He argued:

Happenings, freed from the restrictions of conventional art materials, have discovered the world at their fingertips, and the intentional results are *quasi-rituals*, never to be repeated.⁷

As much as the idea of an unrepeatable ritual is an oxymoron, Kaprow's Happenings do have affinities with cultural performances such as 'parades, carnivals, games, expeditions ... and secular rituals.'⁸

While Kaprow uses the term 'ritual' or 'quasi-ritual' to describe a formal structure of performance which will no longer be 'staged theatre', his European colleague Joseph Beuys seems to justify the notion of ritual in a different way. Beuys' work appears to be inspired by various mythological traditions, by symbolic elements, and by the idea of shamanism.

Ritualistic Elements in the Actions of Beuys

Beuys rarely uses the term 'ritual' to designate his own work. But his theoretical writings and his art works are full of elements that we know from a ritualistic context. I would like to point at five distinct elements.

- (1) *Mythology*: The Celtic mythology remained an inspiration throughout Beuys' life. It is very prominent in the idea of 'Eurasia' (the name of several performances, films, and objects) as a combination of European and Asian spirituality. By working with a coyote in New York in 1974, on the occasion of the performance entitled *Coyote: I like America, and America likes me*, the artist also tried to bring in the narratives of the Native Americans. Beuys combined these mythological traditions with his own private mythology, in which the crash of his airplane during the Second World War introduced him to the way of life and the culture of the nomadic Tartarians (close to the Mongolian border).
- (2) *Christianity*: The Christian iconography can be seen as another source for the artist's work. He reinterpreted the symbol of the cross by reshaping, splitting

and transposing its beams. Beuys' idea of what he calls the 'Christusimpuls' as an inspirational power which realizes itself through the act of suffering can be seen as a desire to transcend human nature. As we will see later, we can find symbolic actions—like baptism and the washing of feet—as formal elements in his performances.

- (3) *Animality*: One of the very early distinctions between the Fluxus movement and Beuys (who is strongly connected to Fluxus during the sixties) concerns his use of dead or living animals. In the performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* of 1965 (*How to explain pictures to a dead hare*), Beuys was sitting in a gallery with a golden layer of make-up on his head, speaking incomprehensible words to a dead hare on his lap. In the same vein, the living animal from *Coyote* was also supposed to function as a bridge to the forgotten spiritual realm of early America. Lastly, Beuys frequently made use of bones from dead rats, hares, or cows in order to connect to shamanistic rituals, in which remains of animals often play a central role.
- (4) *Transformation*: As much as transformation is the aim of a ritual, it also applies to the artist's work. Transformation means to transfigure objects or actions by revealing their inner energies. Therefore Beuys often employed organic materials (fat, felt, blood, or eggs) that are transformed during the process of decay. Transformation equally refers to changing the spectator or the audience, who should reach a higher state of mind by means of the aesthetic experience. As much as Beuys wanted to trigger an evolutionary process, his notion of 'development' has always been understood as a transformation to higher states of consciousness and existence.
- (5) *Habit*: Finally, there is the idea of Beuys as a leading figure, a 'Hirschführer' (literally: deer leader) or a shaman. Here it becomes evident that the artist functions as a medium, a connection to the transcendent levels of reality. Beuys embodied that role by wearing special clothing (a fur coat, his hat, his waistcoat), which is not merely a costume, but also functions as everyday clothing. It can be seen as a way of self-fashioning (a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt): the creation of a self according to different visual and vestimental standards.

In Beuys' own words, the allusion to shamanistic fashioning and practice gives the possibility to overcome the dissociated world of now:

I did take the role of the shaman. But not in the sense of pointing backwards, in the sense of 'we have to go back', but to express something futuristic/utopian. The shaman symbolises someone who brings materialistic and spiritual relations into a unity.⁹

Taking ancient elements to achieve an utopian state—as Beuys' words suggest here—is characteristic for the re-theatricalization or re-ritualization the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde promoted.¹⁰ Achieving a collective and artistic unity—as the idea of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' suggests—can only be reached by acts of transgression. In this sense, taking the role of a shaman seems to enable the artist to function as a medium between here and there, the perceivable material world and its hidden spiritual forces. Beuys' interest in transgressive actions is always motivated by the search for an 'anthropological art', or an 'organic society'.¹¹ He tries to initiate a 'healing process'.

Critics of these ideas should be aware that a certain distance remains between the performer (artist) and his role (shaman), and between an artistic performance and a true ritual. As Gabriele Brandstetter claimed for Strawinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, reading the performances strictly as a ritual would not justify their complexity, because 'it is not a mise-en-scène of a ritual but rather (...) the staging of a portrayed ritual'.¹²

In order to reveal some of the aesthetic strategies and effects in Beuys' artistic rituals, I would like to discuss his performance *Celtic +~~~*, which took place in Basl (Switzerland) in 1971.

Celtic +~~~

In April 1971, Beuys executed a performance named *Celtic +~~~* in Basl. The so-called 'action' lasted about seven hours and was performed in an air-raid shelter under construction. At that time, the German artist was already quite famous, and so the bare space at the periphery of Basl was temporarily filled with more than 700 people.

During the entire performance, music by the Danish Fluxus composer Henning Christiansen was played. I would like to give a short impression of the performance, which is entirely based on filmed documentaries, photographs, and the book on Beuys' performances by Uwe Schneede.¹³ During most of the performance Beuys moved right through the audience, executing several actions involving various objects and instruments. He started by washing the feet of seven people, then drew symbols and letters on a blackboard he showed to the audience. He pushed his way through the crowd by slipping the blackboard on the ground.



Joseph Beuys, *Celtic +~~~* (Basl, 1971). Beuys acting in the crowd.

Photo by Kurt Wyss, Basl

Then four of Beuys' experimental movies, in which former performances and landscapes were shown, were projected on the concrete walls of the shelter. For more than one hour, Beuys collected small pieces of gelatine from the walls, which he had prepared before, while climbing up a stair and balancing a big plate on his shoulder. After spilling all of the gelatine over his body, he made 'öö'-noises into a microphone, a sound reminding of the bell of a deer. At this time the action had already lasted for six hours, and many of the curious audience members had gone home. Then the artist stood still for about an hour. Holding a tall wooden stick in his right hand, he remained silent, surrounded by some one hundred people in the centre of the shelter. While monotone sounds filled the air, the audience seemed to meditate together with the performer. Suddenly tears ran out of Beuys' eyes—not accounted for by any action of the performer. He finished the performance by kneeling down in a tub, and posing in a gesture of prayer. Henning Christiansen was pouring water over him. Beuys stood up, laughed, and said 'finish'.

I would now like to investigate two aspects of *Celtic +~~~* that relate specifically to its ritualistic dimension, namely, the performance's frame of reference and the different roles the performer takes on.



Joseph Beuys, *Celtic +...* (Basl, 1971). Performing a tableau vivant.
Photo by Kurt Wyss, Basl



Joseph Beuys, *Celtic + ~ ~ ~* (Basl, 1971). Unpredicted interventions.
Photo: Kurt Wyss, Basl

(1) *Framing*. The footwashing scene at the beginning and the baptism scene at the end set the action in a ritual frame. This assumption is supported by the fact that *Celtic +...* took place in the week before Easter. One may suppose that the attentive Basl population recognized the washing of feet and the baptism in the tub as Christian ritual elements. Because Beuys claimed that his action constituted 'eine tiefgreifende Transformation, Metamorphose (...) eine Umwandlung des Begriffes [der Kunst] selbst,'¹⁴ it has been said that *Celtic +...* is itself an initiation ritual.¹⁵ The place of the initiated would then be taken by the concept of art—which cannot exist without a conscious mind thinking of it—or rather by the participants themselves, who have been invited throughout the action to transform the concept of art into a more 'anthropological' notion.

Nonetheless, Beuys' action is not a ritual, because the different action sequences are performed within the framework of an artistic event, which may quote rituals and refer to their meanings and structures, but cannot effect the change of status which is an essential part of ritual as a cultural performance. Ritualistic moments only function within this action as *quotations* of symbolic meaning, and as cultural references.

(2) *Roles*. On a symbolic level, we can identify different roles, such as the figure of Christ (in the baptism and washing sequence), the role of the herdsman/shepherd (walking through the crowds with the wooden stick), the role of an animal (crawling on the floor), the role of a guard (referring to Parsifal), or the role of a collector (during the action where he gathers pieces of gelatine from the walls).

By representing such different roles various religious, mythical and aesthetic contexts are juxtaposed and blended. If we follow this description of personas, we may similarly identify a list of roles adopted by the audience. They are, first, the Apostles or followers of Jesus, or a Christian community witnessing a baptism; next, a herd of sheep; thirdly, a swarm of animals; fourthly, the knights of the Grail, and so forth.

The question remains if the audience had read these roles into the actions, and did consciously adopt them. But even if they did, it was not enough for them to impersonate an attributed role affirmatively. Rather, the participants created and displayed the roles they chose for themselves, such as the role of 'troublemakers' performed by students who disturbed the action and distributed anti-art-leaflets, or the role of an annunciator, performed by a young lady who suddenly climbed the piano, shouting 'Bitte machen Sie Platz, der Herr Beuys kann ja nicht atmen.'¹⁶

The multiple creation of roles turned the relationship between the audience and the artist into a permanent play – or even a struggle.

Conclusion

The performance *Celtic+...* shows diverse modes of action that are reminiscent of the liturgy of the Catholic Mass: the Orans gesture of prayer (baptism sequence)¹⁷ as well as the gesture of demonstration (the blackboard action, and the gelatine sequence). Beuys refers to the repertoire of Christian iconography by sequences of actions, in which he performs distinct and concentrated gestures. Critics have interpreted these acts of the artist as a figuration of Christ. Beuys was dubious about such notions of aesthetic embodiment. For him, it is clear that he did not impersonate Jesus, but that he tried to refer to a 'Christian impulse.' To the extent that Beuys insisted on the very process of doing and of performing—and in relating these to religious acts—we can understand his deeds as a 'profanation.'

As Giorgio Agamben has recently argued, profanations are reinterpretations or inversions of that which has been separated from life.¹⁸ The religious is a prime example of such a separation. A profanation is the playful use of something thus separated as the canon of sacred forms. This playful use frees the sacred object or act from the taboos that surround it, such as touching the sacred object or performing the sacred gesture in an improper context. Thus, the new form of use is reintegrated into the sphere of living coherence. This use is not the same as the utilitarian consumption of goods—it 'does not signify the lack of care (...) but rather a new dimension of usage.'¹⁹

Consequently, only the performative employment can dissolve the traditional sacral contexts of meaning from an object or an act. Profanation may stimulate new modes of perception and interpretation.

Notes

- ¹ BUCHLOH, Benjamin, 'Reconsidering Joseph Beuys: Once Again', in: RAY, Gene, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, D.A.P., New York, 2001, p. 82. Buchloh's first essay on Beuys was entitled: 'Beuys, the Twilight of the Idol: Preliminary notes for a Critique', in: *Artforum*, 18, 5 (January 1980), pp. 35-43.
- ² KREINATH, Jens, SNOEK, Jan, STAUSBERG, Michael, eds., *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, Brill, Leiden, 2006.

- 3 WULF, Christoph and ZIRFAS, Jörg, *Die Kultur des Rituals: Inszenierungen, Praktiken, Symbole*, Fink, München, 2004.
- 4 See Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of ritual as a 'paralanguage' in: LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1955), p. 428-444.
- 5 TURNER, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969.
- 6 VAN GENNEP, Arnold, *Les Rites de passage*, Nourry, Paris, 1909.
- 7 KAPROW, Allan, 'Happenings are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!', 1968, in: KAPROW, Allan, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993, p. 64.
- 8 KAPROW, *idem*, p. 64.
- 9 'Ich habe ja die Figur des Schamanen wirklich angenommen (...). Nun allerdings nicht um zurückzuweisen in dem Sinne, dass wir wieder zurückmüssen (...) sondern um etwas Zukünftiges auszudrücken, weil der Schamane für etwas gestanden hat, was in der Lage war, sowohl materielle als auch spirituelle Zusammenhänge in eine Einheit zu bekommen.' Beuys in SCHNEEDE, Uwe, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1994, p. 336.
- 10 FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Routledge, London 2005.
- 11 BEUYS, Joseph, 'Ich durchsuche Feldcharakter', in: HARLAN, Volker, RAPPMANN, Rainer, SCHATA, Peter, *Soziale Plastik: Materialien zu Joseph Beuys*, Achberger Verlagsanstalt, Achberg, 1984, p. 121.
- 12 BRANDSTETTER, Gabriele, 'Ritual as Scene and Discourse: Art and Science Around 1900 as Exemplified by Le Sacre du printemps', in: *The World of Music*, 40, 1 (1998), p. 37-59, here p. 38.
- 13 SCHNEEDE, *idem*, pp 274-299; A further analysis of the performance is given in: GRONAU, Barbara: Theaterinstallationen. *Performative Räume bei Beuys, Boltanski und Kabakov*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2010.
- 14 'A deep transformation and metamorphosis – a conversion of the art itself'. Beuys in: KRAMER, Mario, *Joseph Beuys: Das Kapital Raum 1970-77*, Staeck, Heidelberg, 1991, p. 10.
- 15 As an example see the article of FEHR, Hans Otto, in *Heidelberger Tageblatt*, 8 Apr. 1971.
- 16 „Please step back, Mister Beuys cannot breathe!' This scene is documented in *Joseph Beuys: Celtic+~::~*, TV documentation directed by Hans Emmerling, 1971, black/white, ca. 35 minutes, Joseph Beuys Medienarchiv, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart Berlin. The image no. 3 by Kurt Wyss shows the interaction between Beuys and the young lady.
- 17 HUBER, Eva, 'Die Aktionsmodi', in: BEUYS, Joseph, CHRISTIANSEN, Henning, *Hauptstrom und Fettraum*, ed. Eva Huber, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1993, pp. 98-109.
- 18 AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *Profanierungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 70-91.
- 19 AGAMBEN 2005, p. 73.