

Press release

# Joseph Beuys

## 40 Years of Drawing

Presented concurrently with:

### *SENSE: Beuys / Gormley* *A conversation through drawing*

19 January—22 March 2023  
Opening Wednesday 18 January 2023, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac  
London Ely House  
37 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NJ



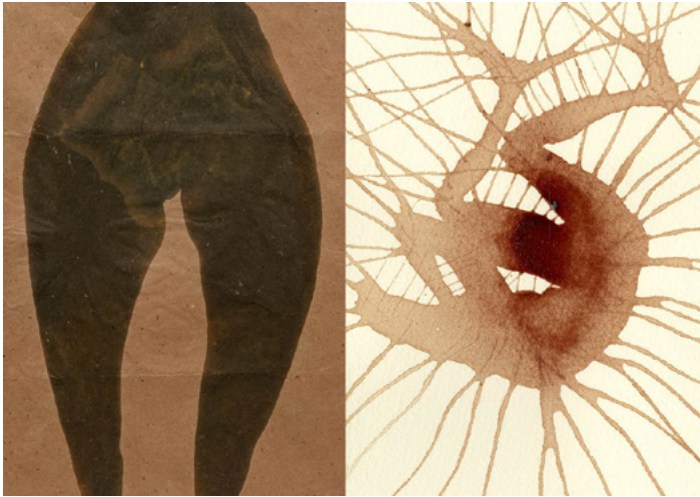
Joseph Beuys, *Untitled (Honey Pot)*, 1949. Pencil on torn envelope, mounted on paper coated with ferrous watercolour or Beize. Sheet: 29.5 x 21 cm (11.61 x 8.27 in) © Joseph Beuys Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

Presenting almost 100 works on paper from the Joseph Beuys family for the first time in the UK, *Joseph Beuys: 40 Years of Drawing* is the first major exhibition dedicated solely to the artist's drawings to take place in London for 20 years. The drawings on view span the four decades of Beuys's creative output; from the early representational works of the 1940s and 1950s to the conceptual sketches created from the mid-1960s that reflect the radical shift in his practice when drawings became integral devices related to the performances and sculptures he produced in the 1970s and 1980s.

To mark the exhibition, Antony Gormley has been invited to curate a standalone room of Beuys's drawings, which are placed in conversation with his own works on paper. Titled *SENSE: Beuys / Gormley*, this presentation highlights the continuing influence of Beuys's legacy on many artists working today.

*Beuys and I found in drawing a fertile ground, which runs parallel to those actions that we have found necessary to make on and with the world.*

— Antony Gormley



LEFT: Joseph Beuys, *Untitled*, 1954. Watercolour on brown paper. 35 x 24.5 cm (13.77 x 9.64 in). © Joseph Beuys Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. RIGHT: Antony Gormley, *20TH BLOOD FIELD I*, 2021. Blood on paper. 19 x 14 cm (7.48 x 5.51 in). © the artist

Crucially, Beuys did not conceive of his works on paper as studies or preparatory material for projects in other mediums. Instead, he experienced the physical act of drawing as the primary means through which to crystallise his conceptual thinking. Gormley, who has developed a strong personal relationship with Beuys's work, similarly describes drawing as a 'form of physical thinking' fundamental to his wider process of artistic creation, stating that, for him, 'a day without drawing is a day lost.'

Carving out his place at the forefront of post-war art, Beuys understood drawing to underpin all aspects of his multifaceted practice, encompassing his work as a sculptor, pioneering performance artist, theorist, teacher, environmentalist and political activist. He experimented with drawing, collage and watercolour to give physical form to his ideas. At the time of the foundational 1993 exhibition dedicated to the artist's drawings at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, co-curator Ann Temkin recounted, 'Beuys has been described by those who knew him as constantly drawing; he drew while travelling, while watching TV, while in private discussion, while in performance. Beuys's attitude towards drawing implied it to be as intrinsic to him as breathing.'

*Drawing is the first visible form in my works... the first visible thing of the form of the thought, the changing point from the invisible powers to the visible thing... It's really a special kind of thought, brought down onto a surface, be it flat or be it rounded, be it a solid support like a blackboard or be it a flexible thing like paper or leather or parchment, or whatever kind of surface. — Joseph Beuys (1984)*

Executed in diverse mediums – including pencil, watercolour, collaged organic matter and the artist's signature rust-brown pigment, Braunkreuz – the group of drawings presented in the exhibition exemplifies Beuys's employment of nontraditional materials in his artmaking. Just as felt and fat accrue rich symbolic meaning in his sculptural works, the substances incorporated in his drawings generate meaning through their tangible materiality. Pigments enriched with iron compounds symbolise fertility with their connection to blood, while gold-coloured watercolour paint relates to alchemical transformation. In turn, *Braunkreuz* was understood by Beuys not solely as a colour but a 'sculptural expression', connecting different aspects of his practice.

*Joseph Beuys: 40 Years of Drawing* explores the evolving role of drawing across the artist's long period of artistic creation, beginning in the mid-1940s when he enrolled at the prestigious Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf and concluding with works made just before his death in 1986. Drawings and plant collages from the 1940s illustrate the artist's early interest in the deep interrelationships between humans, animals and the natural environment. Animals – including stags, elks, seals and bees – appear as highly coded symbols related to Christianity, Celtic folklore, German Romanticism and the natural sciences, and have been understood as spiritual antidotes to Beuys's experience of the personal and national traumas of the Second World War.



Joseph Beuys, *Untitled*, undated. Pencil and opaque watercolour, yellow abrasion. Paper: 23 x 16.5 cm (9.06 x 6.5 in). © Joseph Beuys Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

In the 1950s, Beuys continued his investigation into spiritual forms of post-war reconstruction through the theme of the female nude. Archetypal female figures, articulated using sparse lines of pencil and thin washes of watercolour, spring across sheets of paper, functioning as bridges between spiritual and earthly realms. Depersonalised and with their bodies routinely cropped by the dynamic compositions of the works, these figures are often depicted either holding children or next to amphora-like vessels that echo the shape of their exaggerated hips, characterising the women as symbols of fertility and regeneration.

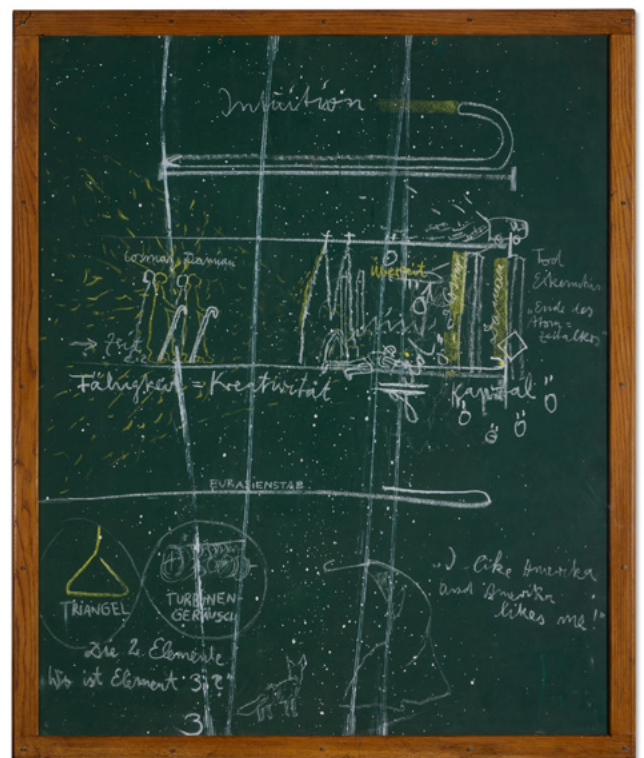


Joseph Beuys, *Untitled (Girl)*, 1956. Pencil on paper. 29.7 x 21 cm (11.69 x 8.27 in). © Joseph Beuys Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

The 1960s marked a significant shift in Beuys's approach to drawing, along with a renewed commitment to political themes. Actively engaging with the interdisciplinary Fluxus movement, he produced 'scores' (conceptual sketches) connected to his burgeoning performance practice. Responding to the context of a divided Germany, the earliest of these performances, also referred to as 'Actions', frequently centred on the theme of Eurasia: the

continental landmass invoked as a utopian borderless state in Beuys's project of political and spiritual reform.

Undertaken in 1967, the drawing *Untitled (Score for Eurasienstab)* relates to the Action of the same name (performed in Vienna, 1967; Antwerp, 1968) in which Beuys symbolically united the four corners of the supercontinent using a staff (*stab*). A hooked rod connects an outline of Germany to Asia, while crosses constructed from further iterations of the staff echo crucifixes, serving as symbols of rebirth. These elements recur in Beuys's sustained exploration of the theme, which includes the important sculptural work *Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963* (1966) held in MoMA's permanent collection. This assemblage of objects features a blackboard inscribed with the name of the supercontinent and an image of a truncated cross, situating the visual language of the Eurasian theme within his wider modes of artistic production.



Joseph Beuys, *Is It About A Bicycle? III*, 1982. Chalk and paint on blackboard. 150 x 122 cm (59.06 x 48.03 in). © Joseph Beuys Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

Beuys continued to embrace innovation within his drawing practice throughout his career. In the 1970s, he extended the space in which the creative act could take place to the public arena, as represented by the blackboards featured in the exhibition. The

blackboards were tools employed by the artist during the lectures he delivered to live audiences. As he spoke, Beuys drew on the boards with white chalk in a process he termed 'auditive drawing', demonstrating his belief that concepts could be conveyed in graphic forms that transcended linguistic expression.

In the final decade of his artistic career, Beuys returned to his earlier themes, reimagining them within the context of his later work. This cyclical aspect of his practice is epitomised by an untitled collage shown in the exhibition, which features a 1949 drawing of the head and neck of an antlered elk on a sheet torn from a spiral notebook. In 1981, the image was translated into a lithograph edition. Beuys then attached the sketch to a larger sheet of paper and overlaid it with a dried leaf from a tulip tree, evoking his early plant collages. The second life of the original work demonstrates Beuys's conviction that 'drawing holds a special meaning for me, because in the early drawings... everything is in principle already foreshadowed.'

Considered together, the works presented in *Joseph Beuys: 40 Years of Drawing* demonstrate how themes, materials and techniques recur and are reimagined by the artist throughout his oeuvre, asserting the primacy of drawing in his pioneering approach to artmaking.



## About the artists

### Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys's extensive body of work is grounded in concepts of humanism, social philosophy and anthroposophy, which culminated in his 'extended definition of art'; the idea of life as a participatory 'social sculpture' or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Beuys emerged as an artist in the midst of post-war German reconstruction. He understood art to be essential in the spiritual renewal of society and preservation of the environment, functioning in opposition to the materialistic and economic propositions of the government. He saw art as an antidote to society's ills: a generative, healing force that could awaken individual creativity, activate political awareness and stimulate social change.

Beuys used a wide range of highly symbolic materials – such as felt, animal fat and honey – which were closely related to the shamanic aspects of his practice, including performances, lectures and educational Actions. His interest in the generation, storage and transmission of energy was the product of an extensive reflection on the forces of nature and his sustained commitment to environmental causes. Teaching was an essential element of his artistic practice and his anti-bureaucratic philosophical outlook prompted him to foster debates and acts of political activism to effect social change through democratic discussion. In 1972 and 1977, he brought politics into the traditional realm of art through his participation at documenta; he transformed his presentation spaces into arenas for public debate and discussion, addressing issues ranging from human rights to ecology.

Beuys was born in 1921 in Krefeld, Germany. In 1961 he was appointed professor of monumental sculpture at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he was a charismatic figure that inspired an emerging generation of German artists. During this period, he became a member of the newly founded Fluxus movement, an international network of artists based in nearby Wuppertal. In the late 1960s, his activities became explicitly politicised. He founded the Free International University (FIU) for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in 1973, the year after he established the Organisation for Direct Democracy through Referendum, and he later became involved with the German Green Party. His monumental retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1979 established Beuys's international reputation.

Since the artist's death in 1986, his work has been shown in numerous museum exhibitions worldwide, including at the

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. In 2021, a varied international programme of exhibitions, performances, lectures and events was held in major institutions to mark the centenary of the artist's birth.

### Antony Gormley

Antony Gormley is widely acclaimed for his sculptures, installations and public artworks that investigate the relationship of the human body to space. Since the 1960s, his work has developed the potential of sculpture through a critical engagement with both his own body and those of others to confront fundamental questions about the relationship of humans to nature and the cosmos. Gormley identifies the space of art as a place of becoming in which new behaviours, thoughts and feelings can arise. Gormley's work has been widely exhibited throughout the UK and internationally with exhibitions at venues including the Lehmbrock Museum, Duisburg (2022); Voorlinden Museum, Wassenaar (2022); M+, Hong Kong (2021); Royal Academy of Arts, London (2019); Delos, Greece (2019); Uffizi Gallery, Florence (2019); Philadelphia Museum of Art (2019); Long Museum, Shanghai (2017); Forte di Belvedere, Florence (2015); Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland (2014); Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília (2012); Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (2012); The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg (2011); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2010); Hayward Gallery, London (2007); Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (1993); and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (1989). Permanent public works include the Angel of the North (Gateshead, UK); Another Place (Crosby Beach, UK); Inside Australia (Lake Ballard, Western Australia); Exposure (Lelystad, Netherlands); and Chord (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA). Gormley was awarded the Turner Prize in 1994, the South Bank Prize for Visual Art in 1999, the Bernhard Heiliger Award for Sculpture in 2007, the Obayashi Prize in 2012 and the Praemium Imperiale in 2013. He was made an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) in 1997 and was knighted in the New Year's Honours list in 2014. He is an honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an honorary doctor of the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Trinity and Jesus Colleges, Cambridge. Gormley has been a Royal Academician since 2003.

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