

Press release

Joseph Beuys

Reservoirs of impulse: drawings, 1950s–1980s

4 September 2023—20 January 2024

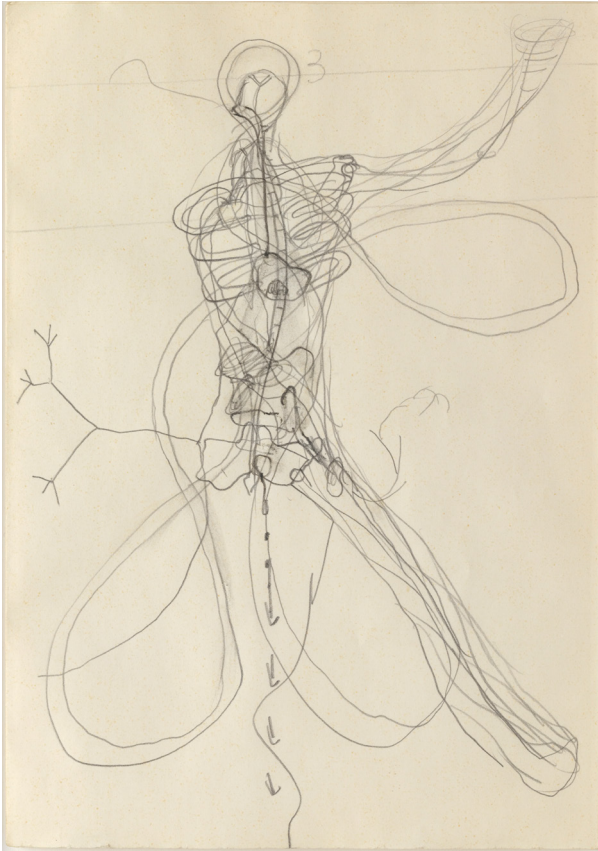
Thaddaeus Ropac
Seoul Fort Hill
1F, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



Joseph Beuys, *Untitled*, 1954. Watercolour on paper, mounted on cardboard with an additional cardboard strip attached to the lower edge. 52.5 x 38 cm (20.67 x 14.96 in). Photo: Eva Herzog

I ask questions, I put forms of language on paper, I also put forms of sensibility, intention and idea on paper, all in order to stimulate thought. And I not only want to stimulate people, I want to provoke them. — Joseph Beuys

Reservoirs of impulse, the inaugural exhibition to take place in the ground-floor gallery of the newly-expanded Thaddaeus Ropac Seoul, is the first presentation in South Korea dedicated solely to Joseph Beuys's drawings.



Joseph Beuys, *Bewegung Rhythmus*, 1962. Part C. Pencil on folded sheet of paper. 21.7 x 15.2 cm (8.54 x 5.98 in). Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi

Carving out his place at the forefront of post-war European art, Beuys understood drawing to underpin all aspects of his multifaceted work as a sculptor, pioneering performance artist, theorist, teacher, environmentalist and political activist.

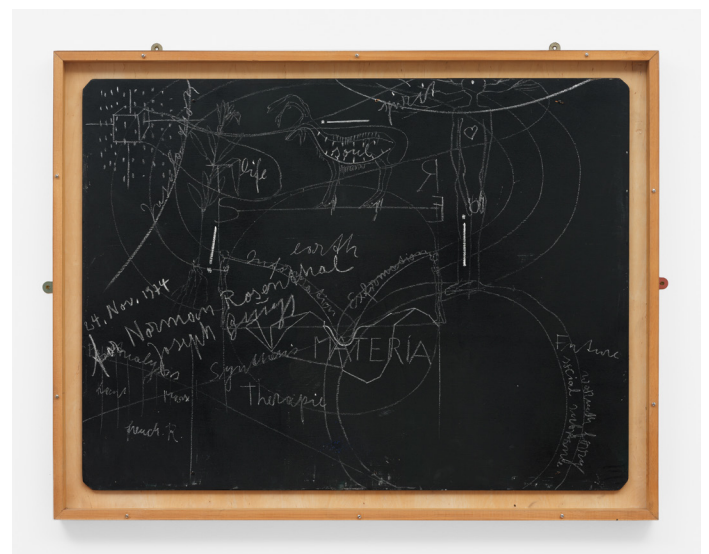
Crucially, he did not conceive of his works on paper as studies or preparatory materials for projects in other mediums. Rather, he experienced the physical act of drawing as the primary means to crystallise his conceptual thinking. As Ann Temkin, art historian and curator at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, writes, '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.'

Spanning four decades of Beuys's creative output, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the works on view in Seoul illustrate major themes that recur throughout the artist's oeuvre. Drawings of animals, plants and landscapes reflect Beuys's lifelong interest in the natural sciences, a passion that almost prompted him to enter a career in medicine. Animals appear as highly coded symbols, referencing Christianity, Germanic

folklore and the artist's own travels. Incorporating leaves, pressed flowers and plant-based pigments into his drawings, Beuys physically enacts the interconnectedness he observed between humans and their environments through the very materiality of his work.

Typically composed using delicate, lyrical lines and pale washes of watercolour, the human body is another prominent subject in Beuys's drawings. Figures assume symbolic and metaphorical functions: female nudes with exaggerated hips, or shown cradling infants, stand as symbols of fertility and social regeneration in the context of post-war Germany, while internal bodily systems picture the processual transmutation of matter and energy through different material states – an idea that finds its parallel in Beuys's desire to shape society through creative acts of transformation.

Works in the exhibition from the 1960s mark a significant shift in Beuys's approach to drawing, when he turned from the representational to the conceptual. Motivated by a renewed commitment to political themes and new modes of artistic activity, he created metaphorical drawings in dialogue with his burgeoning performances, sculptural works and activism. Described by curator Bernice Rose as 'artefacts in motion,' drawings present coded references to other artworks and ideas. In turn, other drawings stand as 'sculptural expressions' in which the artist's self-devised mediums, such as the rust-coloured admixture *Braunkreuz*, are applied to shaped supports as plastic experiments. 'From the drawings concepts have evolved,' explained the artist, 'a plastic theory that returns to the drawings.'

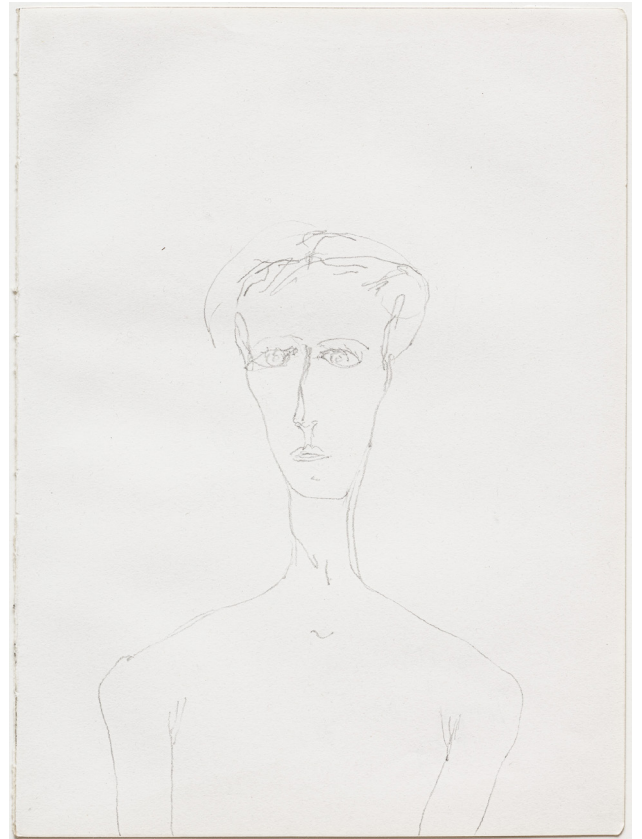


Joseph Beuys, *Untitled*, 1974. Chalk on blackboard. 89 x 120 cm (35.04 x 47.24 in). Photo: Eva Herzog

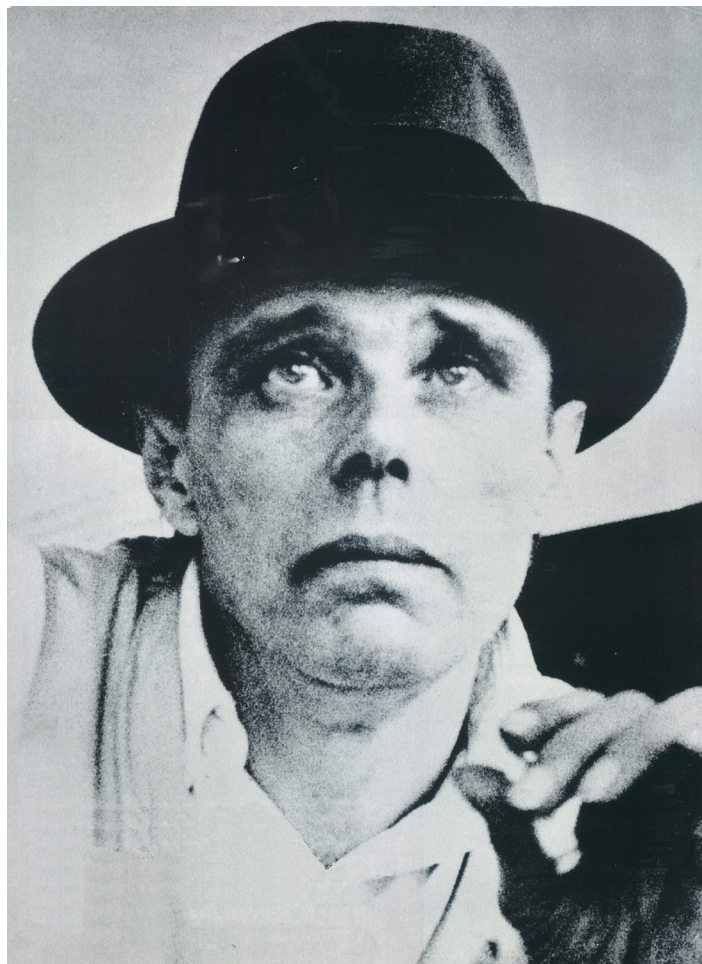
During this period of creative innovation, Beuys also sought to extend the spaces in which the act of drawing might take place, as represented by the blackboards on view. Within the public arena of live lectures, he created a number of these blackboard works as communication tools, believing that graphic systems were able to convey concepts in a mode that transcended the limitations of linguistic expression.

There are a lot of things that I call drawings, nevertheless they are mostly – what is the term? It's not a line, it is a surface, it's a full surface... I call all those things drawings because I do not have such a specialized understanding of drawing, that a drawing mostly exists of line or scribbling or making shadowy effects with the pencil. — Joseph Beuys

Assembling these works from across Beuys's artistic career, the exhibition asserts the function of drawing as a generative domain for the artist's deep thinking about the nature of art. 'My drawings make a kind of reservoir that I can get important impulses from,' said the artist. 'In other words, they're a kind of basic source material that I can draw from again and again... everything is in principle already foreshadowed.'



Joseph Beuys, *Engländerin (Englishwoman)*, 1959. Pencil on paper.
30 x 21.5 cm (11.81 x 8.46 in). Photo: Eva Herzog



Joseph Beuys © Joseph Beuys Estate

About the artist

Joseph Beuys was born in 1921 in Krefeld, Germany. His extensive body of work is grounded in concepts of humanism, social philosophy and anthroposophy, which culminate in his extended definition of art; the idea of life as a participatory social sculpture. In 1961 he was appointed professor of monumental sculpture at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf where he 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.

In 1972 and 1977, he participated in documenta, Kassel, facilitating arenas for public debate and discussion to address issues ranging from human rights to ecology. The monumental retrospective of his work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1979 established the artist's international reputation.

Since his death in 1986, the artist's work has been shown extensively in 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 Beuys's birth.

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