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## Joseph Beuys: From Artistic Theories to Socio-Political Activism

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to introduce the figure of Joseph Beuys to scholars of political science and administration and to explain the ideas promoted by this German activist, politician, and artist. The article focuses on analyzing Joseph Beuys' concepts in the context of their significance for contemporary political science reflection. As an "activist," Beuys redefined the boundaries of art, treating it as a tool for social and political transformation. The author examines key aspects of Beuys' concepts and activities, such as the idea of social sculpture, his involvement in the creation of social and political organizations, and his ecological initiatives, to better understand the methods and tools he used to achieve social and political goals. The key research question is as follows: Can Joseph Beuys' concepts and actions be of interest from a political science perspective?

**Key words:** activism, art, politics, political science and administration, Beuys

### Introduction

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), one of the most iconic artists of the 20th century, transcended not only the traditional but also the avant-garde boundaries of art in his work. He revolutionized the way art was conceived by redefining its limits and societal role. His activist concepts, which integrated art with social and political engagement, charted new directions for the dialogue between artistic practice and public life (cf.: Tryka, 2014, pp. 75–76; *Prawda jest konkretna...*, 2018, pp. 12–25, 40–41, 220–227, 229–230; Wołodzko, 2017). These approaches also offer a unique reference point for reflection on the role of mechanisms and tools traditionally associated with the art world in the public sphere<sup>1</sup>. With his motto "Everyone is an artist" (*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*)

<sup>1</sup> The theoretical concepts and artistic-activist practices of Joseph Beuys serve as a source of inspiration for numerous contemporary groups and artists whose artistic activities can be understood as forms of civic, ecological, or political intervention. Among them are:

- a) *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* (ZPS) – a German art-activist group that combines art, politics, and activism, aiming to provoke social change through shocking and symbolic interventions. Their actions often elicit polarizing reactions but significantly contribute to the revitalization of political debate in Germany and Europe;
- b) *Peng! Collective* – a Berlin-based activist collective known for its provocative performative actions, which highlight issues related to climate change, labor rights, and other social concerns.
- c) *Guerrilla Girls* – an international feminist collective known for its anonymous artistic interventions that expose gender and racial inequalities in the art world;
- d) *Collective Zapatista* – an artistic collective inspired by the Zapatista movement in Mexico. It engages in advocacy for human rights and resistance against global capitalism;
- e) *WochenKlausur* – a Vienna-based group of artists that has been involved in social projects since the 1990s, using art as a tool for tangible social transformation. Their activities include projects related to homelessness, education, and social integration;

*stler*), Beuys proposed a radical understanding of creativity and artistic production that extended beyond artistic actions to encompass educational, social, ecological, and political processes. According to his perspective, every person possesses the capacity to creatively shape reality, not only in the artistic, but also in the social and political dimensions. His ideas emphasized the need for societal transformation through art understood as a broadly conceived form of social practice. The author of this article analyzes the core assumptions of Beuys' conceptual framework, including his involvement in the founding of political parties, ecological initiatives, and the development of the concept of "social sculpture" (Ottomann, Stollwerck, Maier, Gatty, Muehlberger, 2010, pp. 96–97).<sup>2</sup> Examining these elements will allow for a deeper understanding of how Beuys redefined the role of art as an instrument of social change. For him, art was not an end in itself but a tool for building a better world. He believed that art, through its distinctive forms and mechanisms – such as performance or happening – could draw attention to numerous global crises, ranging from the crisis of liberal democracy to the climate crisis. Beuys was thus one of the pioneers of the real and practical influence of art on public affairs and civic life. Through both his theoretical premises and their implementation, he demonstrated the generative potential of art, more precisely, the generative power of language, tools, and working mechanisms specific to the world of contemporary art, that can be effectively applied in the social domain. The aim of this article is therefore to introduce the figure of Joseph Beuys to scholars in political science and public administration and to explicate the ideas propagated by this German activist, politician, and artist. The key research question posed is: To what extent can the concepts and activities of Joseph Beuys be of interest from a political science perspective? It should be emphasized that both the figure of Joseph Beuys and his theoretical contributions, while well known in Polish and international art discourse, have remained largely unrecognized within the social sciences, particularly in political science and administrative studies. In most of the publications reviewed by the author, Beuys is primarily presented as an artist. His social, political, educational, and ecological activities are indeed discussed, but mainly as consequences of his artistic practice. However, the author argues as noted above, that for Beuys, art was primarily a means to achieve social aims. By employing mechanisms specific to the contemporary art world (e.g., performance, happening, etc.), Beuys sought

- f) *Laboratoire de Déberlinisation* – a French artistic group focused on the decolonization of culture and history, drawing attention to the legacy of colonialism and its impact on contemporary societies;
- g) *Platform London* – an art-activist collective operating at the intersection of art, politics, and environmental protection, often addressing issues related to the oil industry and social justice.

<sup>2</sup> As he repeatedly stated, crucial to his artistic practice were the experiences of his childhood spent in the border region between the Netherlands and Germany, his wartime experiences, and his studies in the natural sciences, which deepened Beuys's sensitivity to issues concerning the natural environment. He suffered injuries as a result of an aircraft crash in which he was involved as a German pilot during the Second World War. The plane went down over Crimea. Beuys claimed that he was found and rescued by local inhabitants who treated him using traditional remedies they covered him in animal fat and wrapped him in felt. These materials appeared repeatedly in his later work. In art history, this narrative is known as the "Tatar Legend" or "Tatar Myth." The distinctive felt hat, which became a trademark of Beuys, was allegedly used to conceal a large scar left from the injury sustained in the crash. There has been speculation regarding the veracity of these personal accounts. Some scholars argue that Beuys deliberately constructed these narratives in order to lend greater credibility to his artistic-activist practices.

to draw attention to numerous global crises and to demonstrate how art could serve as a powerful tool for social intervention. The core research problem has been formulated as follows: How can the concept of “social sculpture” be interpreted in terms of political theory, particularly in relation to contemporary models of deliberative and participatory democracy? The working hypothesis assumes that Joseph Beuys’s ideas anticipate contemporary currents in participatory democracy theory, promoting dialogue, cooperation, and bottom-up forms of citizen co-decision in political processes.

The article employs qualitative content analysis and adopts a hermeneutic approach that integrates the interpretation of symbolic meanings with the socio-political context in which the artist’s concepts emerged. The selection of materials was based on the criteria of political relevance, source value, and temporal scope. The analysis encompassed both primary sources (manifestos, speeches, interviews, artistic projects) and scholarly studies interpreting Beuys’s practice, covering the period from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. The research procedure included an examination of the main theoretical premises of Beuys’s work as well as an interpretation of his activist practice-understood as a form of socially engaged artistic activity. This allowed for the identification of interrelations between the conceptual layer and the practical dimension of implementing the idea of “social sculpture” within a political science framework. Furthermore, motifs and concepts of socio-political significance were identified and categorized with reference to key domains of political science, including democracy and civic participation, political education, power and leadership, environmental politics and civil society.

### The main theoretical assumptions and activist practice

Beuys regarded art as a transformative force capable of shaping social, cultural, and political reality. In his artistic practice and “philosophy,” the theory of social sculpture<sup>3</sup> occupies a central position. This theory derives from the plastic theory<sup>4</sup> (*plastische Theorie*), which is based on a general schema of the process from chaos through movement to form, and represents a consequence of the expanded concept of art (*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*) (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 24–25; Beyus, 1998; Harlan, Rappmann, Schata, 1976).<sup>5</sup> Katarzyna Niziołek explains the idea of the expanded concept of art in practice as follows: “Not everyone is capable of painting the Mona Lisa or sculpting David, not everyone can place a ready-made in a gallery, but anyone can, for example, plant a tree. In contemporary art, planting trees is as legitimate a creative strategy as painting pictures or sculpting. Beuys himself realized the project 7000 Oaks [1982], in which trees (oaks)

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as social sculpture (*soziale Plastik*), social architecture (*soziale Architektur*), social art (*soziale Kunst*) or social sculpture of warmth (*soziale Wärmeskulptur*).

<sup>4</sup> In 1998, the methodology of social sculpture was formally adopted at Oxford Brookes University with the establishment of the Social Sculpture Research Unit (SSRU). Social Sculpture Research Unit, <http://www.social-sculpture.org/>, 30.12.2024.

<sup>5</sup> Beuys also employed synonymous terms such as the totalized concept of art (*totalisierter Kunstbegriff*), the social concept of art (*sozialer Kunstbegriff*), and the anthropological concept of art (*anthropologischer Kunstbegriff*).

planted in Kassel by the artist and other participants in the action constituted the main means of expression" (Niziołek, 2015, p. 27).

Starting from the theory of sculpture in visual arts, where the artist, through creativity, processes material and shapes a form, Joseph Beuys developed the concept of social sculpture. In this framework, free individuals co-shape the social organism through their conscious actions, while maintaining a sense of responsibility for the collective work, as well as dignity and respect toward themselves and their surroundings. According to Beuys, everyone is called to exercise creativity within their respective domain of activity, contributing to the transformation of the external world through everyday labor, be it the work of a factory worker, a housewife, a scientist or a politician (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 31, 133–134; Mesch, 2017, pp. 51–72). As Kalina Kukiełko-Rogozińska notes: "A sculptor creating a sculpture may use materials such as stone or wood. For individuals living in a society, the social sphere constitutes the material that can be creatively transformed" (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 144; Beuys, 1990, pp. 44–49). This idea served as the starting point for an expansive artistic-social project, which, in Beuys's view, could improve the functioning of societies globally. Beuys placed particular emphasis on education and the expansion of civic awareness regarding the necessity of societal transformation. He put forward the thesis that every human action could be a creative act, leading to the reconfiguration of social structures. Society, in his view, is a dynamic, living organism constantly evolving, full of energy, but also susceptible to stagnation and phases of decline. To ensure its effective functioning, it requires ongoing care and intentional intervention, allowing it to develop into a harmoniously operating mechanism (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 145). Beuys employed provocative artistic means such as performance, installation, and sculpture to draw attention to ecological, social, and political issues. His public engagement included co-founding the German Green Party, initiating environmental projects, and advocating for educational initiatives. As previously mentioned, Beuys famously claimed that "everyone is an artist" not necessarily in the traditional sense of producing artworks for aesthetic purposes, but in the sense of possessing creative potential, independent thinking, and the capacity to consciously shape one's environment. This idea became a kind of manifesto central to his practice. Beuys's work extended far beyond the conventional boundaries of museums and galleries, entering the sphere of public life. His artistic activity functioned both as a form of protest and as a proposal for alternative models of social organization, grounded in values such as solidarity, cooperation, and ecological responsibility. His commitment to provoking social change was inseparable from his respect for, and love of, nature. A notable example of this is the aforementioned "7000 Oaks" project (1982), which not only transformed the urban landscape of Kassel but also served as a powerful symbol of long-term ecological engagement (cf.: Zimmermann, 1994, pp. 13).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It was a form of "social sculpture" that encouraged citizens to participate in the urban revitalization process, while also engaging artists, gardeners, ecologists, and urban planners in the creation of the common good. The planting of oak trees aimed to compensate for the loss of greenery in the city caused by the destruction of World War II. The project was carried out between 1982 and 1987. It was initiated as part of *documenta 7* (1981) and concluded five years later, during *documenta 8*, already after the artist's death. "7000 Oaks" can be regarded as the essence of Beuys' philosophy. It integrated participation in social transformation, individual creativity, and collaboration, along with the pursuit of balance

In his artistic practices, Beuys introduced innovative concepts that merged theoretical assumptions about the transformative potential of art with the use of unconventional materials imbued with strong symbolic meaning. He frequently employed felt, fat, and metal materials that held personal significance for him due to his traumatic experiences during World War II, but that also functioned as symbols of protection, vital energy, and transformation. Beuys asserted that the essence of his works lay in their openness the indeterminate final form, shaped by multiple interacting factors. As such, the same installation, exhibited in different locations, would always appear differently. His artworks, composed of materials such as animal fat, beeswax, felt, water, or wood, exemplified processuality: they were subject to change induced by time, temperature, and light. Natural processes like melting, fermentation or scent transformation became integral to his works, pointing to their open form in which the final outcome depended on external conditions. This artistic approach reflected the core tenets of the social sculpture concept (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 145–146). In the analyzed artistic practices, technical mastery or recognition within the institutional art world was not considered central. Instead, the emphasis was placed on creative thinking and the function of action within its broader social, political, and cultural dimensions. Creativity was conceptualized not as a manual skill but as an intellectual and activating process one that opens up spaces for agency both at the individual and collective levels. Art, in this sense, serves as an interdisciplinary medium that integrates diverse perspectives in order to forge new models of public life. This reflects Beuys's expanded concept of art, which – as Katarzyna Niziołek emphasizes – “transformed art into a tool of democratic, civic participation – equally in the hands of a trained artist and a creative citizen.” (Niziołek, 2015, pp. 27).

One of Joseph Beuys's most emblematic works was the installation “Honey Pump at the Workplace”, presented in 1977 during *documenta*<sup>7</sup> in Kassel. The project employed approximately two tons of honey and 100 kilograms of margarine, circulating in a closed loop system via a network of pipes and pumps. The installation was designed to operate continuously for 100 days, simulating the circulation of blood within a living organism. This mechanism symbolized the flow of ideas and energy within the social fabric, while honey – as an organic substance – served as a metaphor for the intellectual and emotional impulses generated during the seminars and lectures conducted by the artist. The work highlighted the capacity of art to initiate social processes that spread like neural networks and contribute to long-term transformation (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 145–146). As previously mentioned, Beuys emphasized the universal creative potential inherent in every individual. For him, creativity was not only a source of innovation across various fields – such as education, medicine, and law – but also a spiritual and economic force. From a socio-economic perspective, Beuys regarded creativity as a form of fundamental

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in the human–nature relationship. It is also important to note that the project was implemented after the formation of the Green Party, from which Beuys gradually distanced himself, eventually returning to the realization of his own conceptual visions. Website of *documenta*, link to *documenta 7*, [https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta\\_7](https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_7), 30.12.2024.

<sup>7</sup> *Documenta* is one of the world's most significant contemporary art exhibitions – a kind of festival – held every five years in the German city of Kassel and lasting 100 days. The first edition of *documenta* took place in 1955. Website of *documenta*, link to *documenta 6*, [https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta\\_6](https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_6), 30.12.2024.

social capital. Creativity, in his view, was an emancipatory force, enabling individuals to overcome limitations, reclaim their freedom, subjectivity, and agency. He argued that only through the liberation of individual creative potential could a truly free society be established one in which morality and responsibility serve as the foundation for collective cooperation. On a spiritual level, Beuys identified Christ as an archetype of creativity ("Christ substance;" *Christussubstanz*). Although he rejected institutionalized religion, his theological thinking drew heavily on the Christian concept of divine presence within both humanity and the world (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 145–146; Gotz, Winifried, Karin, 1979, pp. 43–44; Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 24–25; 133–134; Mesch, 2017, pp. 51–72).

Beuys was a critic of the prevailing socio-political systems of his time. He lived in a Europe deeply divided between two dominant political blocs, both of which he rigorously criticized. He perceived the possibility of overcoming this dichotomy solely through the creative efforts of imaginative individuals. His pursuit centered on envisioning an alternative model of participatory social development. He maintained that in order to achieve a preferred societal order, it was necessary to educate and cultivate creative and self-aware individuals, capable of assuming responsibility for the future. Politically, Beuys envisioned this future as a form of popular governance, that is, direct democracy. He referred to his ideal political system as "real socialism," conceived as an intermediary state between Western capitalism and Eastern socialism. Among the key structural reforms he advocated were: the implementation of a council-based system and the dismantling of centralized government (while still supporting grassroots institution-building, which, paradoxically, would eventually result in the emergence of central bodies); the use of referenda in major socio-political decisions; the establishment of workplace self-governance; and the creation of free and independent institutions, immune to any external pressure or coercive influence (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 133–134; Mesch, 2017, pp. 51–72).

In addition to his artistic and educational activities – which included lectures, journal articles, interviews, public meetings, and conferences – Beuys engaged in concrete socio-political action. He ran as a candidate for the European Parliament on behalf of the Green Party, of which he was a co-founder, and also stood for election to the Bundestag representing the Community for Independent Germans' Action (*Gemeinschaft für unabhängige Deutsche Aktion*). Beuys was the initiator and co-founder of various social, political, and educational organizations, including the German Student Party (*Deutsche Studentenpartei*<sup>8</sup>; Klimke, Scharloth, 2008, pp. 97–110; Jordan, 2016); the Organization for Non-Voters, Free Referendum (*Organisation für Nichtwähler, Freies Volksbegehren*); the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum (*Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung*<sup>9</sup>; Gotz, Winifried, Karin, 1979, pp. 88–89.);

<sup>8</sup> The *Deutsche Studenten Partei* (DSP) was founded in 1967. Closely affiliated with the student movements in West Germany, the party was established as a form of protest against nuclear armament and the Vietnam War. It also aimed to promote educational reform and the development of ecological awareness.

<sup>9</sup> In 1970, Beuys founded the *Organisation für Direkte Demokratie* (ODD), whose mission was to support citizens in promoting new legislation, thereby offering an alternative to the dominant system of political parties. A participatory process was established to encourage open dialogue and discussion

and the Free International University (*Freie Internationale Universität*<sup>10</sup>; Jordan, 2016; Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 134; Mesch, 2017, pp. 93–114.).

The German activist also articulated the symptoms of the crisis characteristic of his time. He identified four key dimensions that, in his view, contributed to the emergence and intensification of this crisis:

- military threats – the arms race; the existential danger posed by the potential annihilation of humanity through the use of nuclear weapons; the squandering of human potential on the production of weapons of mass destruction;
- ecological crisis – the artist criticized both Eastern and Western economic systems for contributing to the destruction of the natural environment through the ruthless exploitation of natural resources without replenishment, pollution of air, water, and soil, and the disruption of natural life cycles of plants and animals;
- economic crisis – characterized by excessive and wasteful production; accompanied by a critique of market-driven principles and neoliberal ideology;
- crisis of consciousness and meaning – a crisis of values, a breakdown of the educational system and formative processes (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 40–44; Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 147–148; Beuys, 1979).

According to Beuys, money and state control over society were responsible for the post-war crisis of consciousness and meaning, as well as for the ecological crisis. He argued that power belongs to those who control money (in capitalist systems) and/or the state (in socialist systems). In his view, the most effective tool for overcoming such crises is art, understood as a vehicle for creativity which, according to Beuys, represents the most significant form of social capital (Kukiełko-Rogozińska, 2012, pp. 148). Art, he claimed, could serve as a powerful political instrument, while education was a means to cultivate wise and conscious citizens capable of shaping the world around them (Harlan, 2004). Beuys advocated for individuals to discover and nurture their capacities for renewal rather than conquest, for discovery rather than invention, for improvement rather than replacement. These ideas were closely linked to ecological concerns and environ-

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groups aimed at promoting referenda on various issues related to social and environmental rights. As part of *documenta 5* in 1972, Beuys proposed *Boxkampffür direkte Demokratie* a boxing match in defense of direct democracy. Website of *documenta*, link to *documenta 5*, [https://www.documenta.de/en-retrospective/documenta\\_5](https://www.documenta.de/en-retrospective/documenta_5), 30.12.204.

<sup>10</sup> The Manifesto of the Free International University (FIU) was published by Joseph Beuys and novelist Heinrich Böll in 1972. The FIU advocated for the expression of creativity by linking individual human potential and talent to broader social challenges. Beuys envisioned the FIU as an open platform for public debate and discourse on political and social issues. He had already begun testing this concept through the establishment of the *Deutsche Studenten Partei* (DSP) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf. The FIU's activities focused on creating an alternative pedagogical and educational system one that prioritized the development of creativity over the acquisition of skills, and that operated independently of state control. This "school" was intended to foster human creative potential through a mobile teaching system, organizing courses in various national and international locations, and involving educators from diverse academic disciplines. Workshops conducted under the FIU umbrella were held, among others, in connection with Beuys' installation "Honey Pump at the Workplace," and addressed a range of topics, including nuclear disarmament, media manipulation and alternatives, human rights, labor and unemployment, and migration. These sessions brought together hundreds of participants from around the world and across professions, embodying the principle of "unity in diversity," later championed by Beuys and other founders of the West German Green movement.

mental education. Both the German Student Party and the Free International University demonstrated a clear interest in ecology and its political implications. According to art historian David Adams, Beuys was a pioneer in exploring the role of art in constructing radical ecological paradigms for the relationship between humans and the natural environment. By “radical,” Adams referred not only to ecological systems within nature, but also to their connections with broader patterns of human life: the structure of social order; economic theories, practices, and interests; history; political and administrative processes; media control; and the cultural obsessions of Western civilization (Adams, 1992, pp. 26–34). The destruction wrought by advancing industrialization, fears of nuclear escalation, and the rise of student movements contributed to a growing interest in environmental issues. Under the auspices of the Free International University, this interest led to the formation of *Die Grünen* (the Greens or the Green Party). The formal establishment of the electoral alliance occurred at a convention in Frankfurt on March 17–18, 1979, ahead of the European Parliament elections. At that time, the group was called *Sonstige Politische Vereinigung/Die Grünen*. The formation of the Greens brought together various activist groups not only concerned with environmental protection but also engaged in the defense of human rights, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, civil liberties and initiatives, and social economy. In the 1979 election, the party received 3.2% of the vote (approximately 900,000 votes), which was insufficient for parliamentary representation but met the threshold for campaign reimbursement and public funding. In 1980, the movement was formally transformed into a political party. During this period, Germany witnessed a surge in anti-nuclear protests and demonstrations, in which the Greens actively participated, gaining growing public support. This culminated in 1983 when, under the leadership of Petra Kelly, the Greens surpassed the electoral threshold for the Bundestag for the first time, obtaining 5.6% of the vote and securing 27 seats. Beuys’s direct political engagement was particularly evident in 1979, when he ran as a candidate for the European Parliament on behalf of the Greens, and later in regional elections in North Rhine-Westphalia. Despite his overt political involvement, Beuys never fully endorsed any singular ideology and remained resistant to electoral strategies. Although he initially collaborated with Green politicians, the party’s increasing integration into the institutional, parliamentary system and its adoption of a more structured organization eventually led Beuys to gradually distance himself from its activities (Monagnino, 2018).

### **Joseph Beuys’s ideas as a source of inspiration for political scientists**

The author of this article has identified several key dimensions that demonstrate the value of Joseph Beuys’ ideas as a potential source of inspiration for contemporary political science reflection.

#### **1. Art as a tool for social change and civic participation**

From the perspective of political science and public administration, which includes the study of social movements and processes of social transformation, Beuys’ concept of art can serve as a valuable model for analyzing the influence of cultural and symbolic

actions on institutional change and the evolution of social norms and values. Beuys' artistic practice illustrates how art can function as an instrument of social integration, the formation of civil society, and the cultivation of the common good. In this context, political scientists may explore the role of culture and art as factors contributing to the development of social capital and their significance in fostering inclusive and diversity-embracing societies<sup>11</sup>. Beuys did not regard art as an autonomous realm of aesthetic expression, but rather as a dynamic process in which every individual can participate as a co-creator of a new social order.

## 2. Social sculpture as an inspiration for alternative forms of democracy and civic participation

As previously mentioned, Beuys was an advocate of radical democracy and promoted broad participation in political processes and decision-making. He opposed traditional and hierarchical structures of political power. His concepts therefore inspire a rethinking of the citizen's role within political systems and support the implementation of mechanisms that enhance civic engagement. The notion of social sculpture can serve as a conceptual framework for research on civic activity, expanding the traditional understanding of political action to include everyday forms of social involvement – such as volunteering or local initiatives – that are often not recognized as political in the conventional sense, yet fall within the scope of civil society studies and participatory models of public governance. Beuys' actions and ideas can also serve as a reference point for examining alternative forms of democracy – such as deliberative, direct, or participatory democracy – which are based on the premise that citizens are not passive recipients of political decisions, but active co-creators of these decisions. This perspective finds contemporary expression in mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, and public consultations. In this view, democracy is no longer merely a system of political institutions, but a process through which social needs and aspirations are articulated and realized.

## 3. The role of symbols and rituals in the political sphere

Beuys employed symbols and rituals in his artistic practice, imbuing them with profound social and political significance. Political scientists may examine, for instance, the impact of symbolic and performative actions on social mobilization and the formation of political identities, as well as the ways in which rituals are utilized to reinforce a sense of community and belonging particularly in contexts such as electoral campaigns.

<sup>11</sup> At this point, it is also worth introducing the concept of cultural education, which is based on the use of elements of culture and art as educational tools. It does not treat art as an end in itself, nor does it uphold divisions between high and low art, or between professional and amateur practices. Instead, it is conceived as a means of deepening the capacity to understand reality. The goal of educational processes is not merely to cultivate culturally refined individuals (cultural education) or to teach the skills required to produce art (art education). The term cultural education signals that the fundamental issue in society is not limited to low levels of reading or the use of inappropriate language. Rather, the primary dilemma lies in the lack of ability to participate meaningfully in the life of one's community. This stems from deficits in communication, a lack of trust in others, and a limited awareness of cooperation and the benefits it can yield.

#### 4. Sustainable development policy, ecological awareness and participation

As an ecological activist, Beuys engaged in projects that emphasized the interconnections between art and environmental protection. His belief in the necessity of preserving natural resources and fostering cooperation with nature may serve as a source of inspiration for research on environmental policy and on mechanisms for citizen engagement in the pursuit of sustainable development. His commitment to environmental protection and grassroots democracy played a formative role in shaping the core values of the Green Party in West Germany. Beuys' concepts may thus provide a valuable reference point for theoretical frameworks such as climate justice, post-growth, and green politics.

#### 5. Education as the foundation of conscious civic activity (education policy)

Beuys regarded education as a process capable of unlocking the creative potential of the individual. From a political science perspective, this may be understood as a key factor in the development of civil society. An educated and self-aware citizenry is better equipped to make responsible decisions and to actively participate in public discourse. Beuys's vision of education can thus be applied to the design of innovative educational programs, both within formal education systems and in complementary or alternative learning environments. A compelling example of Beuys's educational ideals is the aforementioned Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, which aimed to establish an educational-activist platform where individuals could cultivate their talents and engage in public life. This initiative served as a critique of the rigid structures of traditional educational and political systems. His interdisciplinary approach resonates with contemporary initiatives that seek to empower citizens through alternative educational and community-based projects, thereby promoting the democratization of knowledge and fostering participatory democratic practices.<sup>12</sup>

#### 6. Power and leadership: from domination to dialogue

Joseph Beuys advocated for a redefinition of power and leadership, proposing their enactment not as instruments of control and domination, but as processes grounded in participation, collaboration, and the co-creation of the public and political sphere. This perspective may therefore serve as a valuable inspiration for the analysis of alternative leadership models that emphasize openness and cooperation over hierarchical dominance. Beuys's conceptualization of power supports the promotion of leadership paradigms centered on dialogue and collective engagement as fundamental mechanisms for shaping political reality.

#### 7. Critique of consumerism and capitalism

In his artistic and theoretical work, Joseph Beuys articulated a critique of capitalism as a system that constrains individual creativity and suppresses the social potential of human beings. His opposition to market mechanisms was rooted in the belief that the dominant

<sup>12</sup> He worked as a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf; however, his teaching methods were, at the time, so innovative and controversial that they failed to gain the approval of the institution's authorities. Beuys admitted all individuals who expressed a desire to study, believing that art education should be accessible to everyone and should enable individuals to discover their own creative potential.

economic model prioritizes capital accumulation at the expense of social values, while consumerism reduces individuals to passive recipients of goods and services, rather than engaging them in the active co-creation of social reality. Beuys proposed an alternative conception of the economy – one in which the ultimate value is not profit maximization, but rather social development, participation, and the common good. He rejected the reductionist paradigm of economics based on the model of homo economicus. His vision resonates with contemporary critiques of capitalism, such as circular economy and the sharing economy, which emphasize the need for sustainable development, equitable resource distribution, and economic models that integrate social and ecological values. Thus, Beuys's thought remains a relevant point of reference in contemporary debates about the future of capitalism, potential directions for its reform, and the redefinition of value within economic systems.

#### 8. References to key categories in political theory

Beuys's concepts fit into a sociocentric (broad) understanding of the political, which posits that politics is not confined to the domain of state institutions, political parties, or formal mechanisms of power, but encompasses a wide spectrum of social interactions and power structures present within society. Within this framework, art may function as a socially and politically engaged medium, and artistic practice can serve as a form of civic participation and a means of articulating communal needs. Beuys rejected traditional, centralized models of politics, advocating instead for participation and direct social engagement. Through his activities – such as founding social organizations, promoting political education, and engaging in ecological activism – he sought to empower citizens and transform societal structures from the bottom up. Accordingly, in Beuys's view, the political was not the exclusive domain of state power, but an expression of society's capacity for self-determination and the creation of alternative forms of public organization. His practice also drew on fundamental categories such as freedom, social justice, solidarity, and equality, framing them as essential components of a reimagined public and political life.

#### 9. Culture as a determinant of politics

Beuys's activity may also serve as a starting point for analyzing the relationship between culture and politics. Culture plays a crucial role in shaping political life by influencing the functioning of institutions, mechanisms of power, and citizens' attitudes. It is a broad concept encompassing values, norms, traditions, religions, symbolism, and social practices all of which profoundly shape political processes.

### Conclusion

The conducted analysis made it possible to formulate conclusions indicating that Joseph Beuys's creative output and concepts can be interpreted as a model of civic engagement and a practice of grassroots political agency, in which art becomes an instrument of social change. In response to the research question: to what extent can the concepts and activities of Joseph Beuys be of interest from a political science perspective?, the

analysis demonstrated that they possess significant theoretical and practical potential for examining the relationships between culture, art, and politics. With regard to the research problem (How can the concept of “social sculpture” be interpreted in terms of political theory, particularly in relation to contemporary models of deliberative and participatory democracy?), it was found that this notion may be understood as a metaphor for the communal co-creation of public space and the decision-making process. Thus, the research hypothesis was confirmed: Beuys’s ideas anticipated contemporary trends in participatory democracy theory, promoting dialogue, cooperation, and bottom-up forms of citizen co-decision-making.

The analysis of Joseph Beuys’s ideas within the framework of political science therefore reveals the broad applicability of his concepts in research on democracy, civic participation, civil society, and alternative models of power and social organization. He warned against the challenges of the twenty-first century, and his creative and social activities transcended the traditional boundaries of art, becoming an integral part of reflection on political agency, the role of symbols and rituals in social mobilization, and the functioning of the public sphere. By redefining the boundaries between politics and art, Beuys provided a rich source of inspiration for debates on the democratization of public space, the strengthening of social capital, and the development of new forms of civic engagement. His concept of social sculpture aligns with contemporary discussions surrounding deliberative and participatory forms of democracy, emphasizing the importance of grassroots engagement and institutions that are open to dialogue and collaboration. Beuys’s critique of capitalism and consumerism, as well as his calls for sustainable development and social justice, offer valuable reference points for research in ecopolitics, post-growth theory, and new economic models grounded in resource sharing and communal ethics. Contemporary crises – such as the erosion of representative democracy, increasing social inequalities, environmental degradation, and the decline of public trust in institutions – underscore the need to rethink traditional political and social frameworks. Beuys’s conviction that education is the foundation of a conscious civil society further highlights the importance of political and cultural education in shaping active and responsible communities. His legacy thus remains a valuable analytical tool for addressing today’s pressing political and societal issues and for imagining alternative futures rooted in cooperation, creativity and democratic renewal.

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### Joseph Beuys: od teorii artystycznych do aktywizmu społeczno-politycznego

#### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przybliżenie postaci Josepha Beuysa przedstawicielom nauk o polityce i administracji oraz wyjaśnienie idei propagowanych przez tego niemieckiego aktywistę, polityka i artystę. Artykuł koncentruje się na analizie koncepcji Josepha Beuysa w kontekście ich znaczenia dla współczesnej refleksji politologicznej. Beuys, jako artysta redefiniował granice sztuki, traktując ją jako narzędzie transformacji społecznej i politycznej. Autorka artykułu przeanalizowała kluczowe aspekty koncepcji i działalności Beuysa, takie jak idea rzeźby społecznej, jego zaangażowanie w tworzenie organizacji społecznych i politycznych oraz inicjatywy ekologiczne, aby lepiej zrozumieć sposoby i narzędzia, jakie artysta wykorzystywał do realizacji celów społecznych i politycznych. Kluczowe pytanie badawcze brzmi następująco: Czy koncepcje i działania Josepha Beuysa mogą być interesujące z perspektywy politologicznej?

**Slowa kluczowe:** aktywizm, sztuka, polityka, nauki o polityce i administracji, Beuys

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