

Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys was born May 12, 1921, in Krefeld, Germany. During his school years in Kleve, Beuys was exposed to the work of Achilles Moortgat, whose studio he often visited, and was inspired by the sculptures of Wilhelm Lehmbruck. Beuys began to study medicine in 1940, but his studies were interrupted when he joined the army and served as a fighter pilot. During a mission in 1943, he was badly injured when his plane was shot down over the Crimea. This experience would resonate in all of his later work.



After the war, he decided to dedicate his life to art. In 1947, he registered at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he studied with Joseph Enseling and Ewald Mataré. After Beuys graduated in 1951, the brothers Franz Joseph and Hans van der Grinten began to collect his work. Eventually becoming his most important patrons, they organized his first solo show at their house in Kranenburg in 1953.

Beuys was appointed professor at the State Academy of Art Düsseldorf in 1961. The year after, he began to associate with Fluxus artists, principally Nam June Paik and George Maciunas, and later he met Minimalist artist Robert Morris. He helped to organize the Festum Fluxorum Fluxus at the academy in 1963, and he participated for the first time in Documenta in Kassel in 1964.

In 1967, Beuys founded the German Student Party, one of the numerous political groups that he organized during the next decade. In 1972, he was dismissed from the academy amid great controversy for admitting to his class over 50 students who had previously been rejected. The following year, he founded the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research. He increasingly became involved in political activities and in 1976 ran for the German Bundestag. In 1978, he was made a member of the Academy of Arts, Berlin.

The 1970s were also marked by numerous exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States. Beuys represented Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1976 and 1980. A retrospective of his work was held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1979. He was made a member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Stockholm, in 1980.

During the inauguration of the 1982 Documenta in Kassel, Beuys planted the first of 7,000 oak trees; in other cities, he repeated this tree-planting action several times in the following years. In January 1986, the artist received the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Prize in Duisburg.

On January 23, 1986, Beuys died in Düsseldorf.

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