

J O S E P H B E U Y S

the doors of perception

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In the year of 2001 Joseph Beuys would be eighty years old.

Twenty years before, Beuys alerted for the fact that the forests of the world had been almost decimated with violence without precedent.

Seven thousand oaks to start a planetary reforestation.

A moment of action.

A social, political and cosmic turning point.

Beuys believed that fifty years later, after that date, the world population would be more conscious about the importance of the environment.

When people asked him why he choose the oak and not any other tree, insinuating some link to a Germanism, Beuys replied defending that, contrarily to what it was considered for some time, the oak was a typical tree in Anglo-Saxon countries and not native to Germanic ones.

Beuys said with clear admiration about the fact that the oak has been not only profoundly characteristic in the culture of most different societies both in north and south Europe, along more than two thousand years, but it also was the central symbol of the Celtic Druid culture.

But, to Beuys, a symbol was always articulated inside a dynamic network of other symbols, all in action. Contrarily to what some people could suppose, unique or exclusive things didn't exist to him. In his mind, everything was coined under the sign of diversity.

Twenty years passed.

At the beginning of the third millennium, all over the world, there are about six hundred million cars in circulation and more than seven hundred million telephones. In such context, more than a half part of the world population lives in absolute misery.

Despite all this, in general, people seem to have become a little more alerted to environment issues—at least when we are speaking about environment as a physical thing.

The recycled garbage, that about thirty or forty years ago was considered a utopian proposal by Beuys, is nowadays a reality in practically all countries of the called First World.

What I would like to focus here, in this moment, is a little different thing.

Firstly, the fact that Beuys was an artist. Then, that in this moment we are dealing with a reflection on art – on art history, on contemporary art. That we are speaking about aesthetics, but also about power, ethics and religion.

Everything simultaneously.

We are not talking about some material thing, about some thing which could be physically touched.

This curious and fascinating *looking glass* – aesthetics, power, ethics and religion took in a single breath; and the absence of materiality, the dematerialization of material culture – is a thing that seems to me essential in Joseph Beuys *work-thought*.

Very roughly, we can bundle up those four elements into a single synthesis: the sacred.

I've a good reason to indicate here the number *four*. When Beuys thought on Nature, number *four* was a very first reference: four principles, four alive beings, four vegetables, four cardinal points, four doors of perception.

In Ancient Egypt, four elements distinguished the world of the death and the world of the alive, the west and the east, the evening and the morning – all crossing the two sides of the Nile.

Such cosmic and ecological vision of Beuys articulated the rosemary, the laurel, the olive tree and the oak. Four doors, four worlds: love, communication, creativity and human values.

Who will visit Bolognana and the piazza dedicated to Beuys, which was elaborated by Lucrezia De Domizio, will be able to identify these four doors. But, to do it, it is necessary to *know*, to be aware.

This is one of Beuys' messages: be immersed in the marvellous fabric of knowledge.

The word *symbol* launches its roots in the Greek *symbolon*, which means to *coincide*, to *fall together*. Or, in other words, it is about complex relations.

The symbol operates in the domain of reason, and there is no symbol without a complex network of knowledge, of meanings, of contents.

In logical terms the number *four* cannot be simply reduced to the number *two* – like light and darkness, the yes and no. Neither it is predication, attribute par excellence of the number *three*.

The number *four* is permanent rotation.

Changing.

Dynamic and turbulent strategy.

There are four *action symbols* coining a synergetic network of relations.

Rosemary, since immemorial times, is identified with the zodiacal signs of Capricorn and Gemini. In the Ancient Egypt, because its always green leaves, rosemary was considered the symbol of immortality. Much later, in France, Louis XIV classified rosemary as a true source of youth.

Immortality... ideas passing from one to another generation. Something surviving to our narrow, precarious and provisory bodies – something transcending our individual knowledge.

A true transgression of time space through communication.

When we think on the laurel, how could we avoid a marvellous, oneiric and magic trip to Ovide's world in his *Metamorphosis*?

Apollo had in Daphne his first love – Ovideo starts the story. After a hard dispute with Cupid, making use of a traitorous trick, Apollo wins his opponent in a duel of arcs. Daphne still doesn't know what love is. Victorious, Apollo dives inside the forest. Soon, from the sky, Cupid shot two arrows, destined to different ends: one puts in escape the love, the other provokes it. With the latter Apollo is wounded, with the other, Daphne. And she runs, running away from Apollo, who is at all moment near to reach her, he is closer and closer, with extended snout; she, in doubt, imagines being caught, escapes from the dog's gears and from the mouth that touches her. Thus, the god and the virgin, he full of hope and she of fear. ...touching the back of the fugitive, near the neck, hair that his blow agitates. Exhausted, Daphne implores to her father, Prometheus, and a strong torpor invades her members – her delicate chest is covered by a thin hull; the hair is changed into leaves; the feet, that until then ran so quick, now are roots.

Cruel metamorphosis, she becomes a laurel.

Apollo, desperate, takes its leaves as an eternal symbol of that profound moment.

Love and soul have a vital link. In Greek, *psyche* means *mind, spirit, blow, life and soul*.

All these meanings fill the name of the Greek goddess who was of a ravishing beauty. Venus, conquered by jealousy, decides to kill the young Psyche. Thus, she called the son, Cupid, and destined him to such terrible mission.

Following his mother's orders Cupid goes but, suddenly, as soon as he sees Psyche, he deeply falls in love.

Without knowing what to do, very confused, Cupid goes to Apollo searching for help – exactly who he had wounded with the arrow of love.

In the beginning, annoyed but impressed by the profound love manifested by Cupid, Apollo finally decided to help him.

Through an oracle, Apollo orders Psyche's family to abandon her, dressed like a dead, on the top of a mountain.

Desperate, lost in the abandon, Psyche enters in a deep sleep. When woke-up, she was no longer in the mountain, but in a wonderful valley. There she went inside a magnificent palace with infinite doors: doors of perception.

Life that rebirths from the abandon, from the rejection.

Penetrating the wonderful palace she found in each new room new enchanting surprises – everything involved by mysterious invisible voices informing her to be servants.

In the night, indistinguishable from the shadows, to her bed comes the husband – mysterious, invisible and delicate.

To see him it would mean disgrace to both.

She is dead, but also alive.

Venus and Cupid are satisfied, because nothing can be *saw*.

Some time later, days, perhaps months or even years, in one of the most passionate nights, she secrets him the wish to be again with her sisters. He, cautious, tells her about the tremendous danger. She implores.

Everything is allowed and Psyche travels back to see her sisters. Pure, naive, she tells them everything about the inextricable fortune prepared by fate. Hate disguised by false lips smiles, paralysed by the poison of envy, the sisters convinced her to break the accorded with her husband and, finally, to see that mysterious being.

After all, he could be a monster!

He could be a monster prepared to devour her delicate body during the silent calm of the nocturnal darkness!

Back to the palace, in quiet night, the mysterious being is in profound sleep. Step by step, carefully, Psyche enlightens him with an oil lamp and what she sees is the most beautiful being she never could imagine. Moved, touched by her own treason, confused steps, vacillating, no air, trembling hands and from the lamp a small drop of olive oil burns Cupid... who is disintegrated for her presence.

All these histories seem to unveil a permanent relation between life and death, conjunctions and disjunctions.

But there still is the phoenix's history: a fabulous magic bird from Ethiopia, legend that is generously confused with Horus.

A gigantic eagle made of all colours, symbol of death and resurrection. Unique species that alone generates its own offspring. It looks for myrrh, laurel, rosemary, olives, and with them the bird makes a nest on the top of an oak. The nest burns and the bird dies, to rebirth from its own ashes.

To each one of its life cycles, a new era of Humanity is born.

How many images had passed through Beuys' life!

How many discoveries, how many surprises had printed his soul!

Four.

Rosemary, laurel, olive tree and oak: love, communication, creativity and human values.

Aesthetics, power, ethics and religion.

Eternal rotation.

Changing.

Everything structured in a system for which the stereotype is no longer possible.

The network of symbols, of coincidences of all its elements, is so deeply interactive that all relations appear, a priori, to be possible.

This is the potentiality that characterises the poetical work.

A thing known as *virtus* in Middle Age.

The foundation of the sacred is exactly the negation of the stereotype. It is the virtual: the potentiality of all relations.

When Joseph Beuys projects a worldwide process to recover forests, he makes it while mind transformation, having the planet as a complex dynamic network of ideas in permanent mutation.

What we call *civilisation* it is not *competition* while permanent *concurrency*, but yes the capacity of contemplation, of reflection. Without such capacity we are not human.

The *environment* Beuys alerted is not restricted to the physical plan, but a complex approach to what we vulgarly call *intelligence* because, as himself considered, creativity and knowledge, the *human capacity* are the true capital of Humanity.

The environment is all us.

A thing that puts us face to face with William Blake when he argued that «if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to human as it is: infinite».