

Press release
Zurich, 12 May 2011

Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura'

From 13 May to 14 August the Kunsthaus Zürich will be displaying a hitherto unexhibited, comprehensive and multifaceted series of works by the sculptor and action artist Joseph Beuys: 'Difesa della Natura' ('Defence of Nature'). The centrepiece of the presentation, which features over 100 objects, photographs, documents, editions and videos, is 'Olivestone', a magnificent installation by the German artist that is being shown for the first time in the full context of its creation.

For many years Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) made repeated visits to Bolognano, a small mountain village in southern Abruzzo where his friends Baron Buby Durini and his wife Lucrezia De Domizio owned an estate. Beuys' activities there, undertaken together with the Durinis, soon turned into a series of long-term projects united by a motivation that was at once artistic, political, ecological and humanitarian. From 1973 to 1985 Bolognano became a venue for both discussions and agricultural activities which, in their turn, gave rise to sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, tape recordings, blackboard drawings and editions. Thanks to the personal dedication of Baroness Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, these records have been preserved in their entirety. The particular importance of the exhibition lies in the clarity with which it demonstrates that the true goal of Beuys' activities – in both the human and artistic spheres – was ultimately not to produce sculptures as such, but rather to improve society.

SOCIAL SCULPTURE

Beuys expanded the concept of sculpture to encompass as its sole object the whole of human society. His 'plastic' – both sculptural and formative – work must be viewed in a transcendental sense: its aim was to help a western world debilitated by materialism to achieve a new form of social coexistence based on direct democracy and free collaboration between all human beings in a spirit of solidarity, whatever their social, economic, religious, political and social background. This utopian horizon of a new social organism constitutes the true objective of his many and varied activities: Beuys' philosophical concept is the 'social sculpture', the only work of art that enables human beings to improve the existing patterns of social behaviour.

DIFESA DELLA NATURA

Taking as its starting point the masterly 'Olivestone', the exhibition looks back at Beuys' actions and activities in Bolognano. This key work was donated to the Kunsthaus Zürich by the Durinis in 1992. The five stone basins from the early 18th century, which the artist chose himself in the Palazzo Durini, can now be seen once again in the context of their creation, surrounded by numerous items of manifold types that are on loan to the Kunsthaus.

Joseph Beuys' first visit to Abruzzo in October 1972 was followed two years later by the first important discussion, 'Incontro con Beuys', a socio-political action in the course of which blackboard drawings and a sculpture were created. Between December 1976 and February 1978 a number of events and actions took place which centred around the theme of agricultural renewal. These were followed by many more visits and works by Beuys, which together led ultimately to the celebrated action entitled 'Difesa della Natura'. Beuys began planting a 15-hectare plot with 7,000 endangered shrubs and trees, entitling the grove 'Piantagione Paradise' with an eye to both the future and the involvement of people interested in the issues that he raised. On 13 May 1984 Beuys was made an honorary citizen of Bolognano and planted the 'first Italian oak' of his 'Piantagione Paradise' opposite his studio as a symbol of the whole Abruzzo project, and launched a discussion entitled 'Difesa della Natura'. He spoke about creativity and talked in depth about the objectives of his project, promising that it would be continued. The physical utopia of Beuys' 'Difesa della Natura' is transformed into a 'Difesa della Terra' ('Defence of the Earth'). 'Difesa della Natura', then, is not simply a matter of ecological conditions; rather, it asks to be read from a predominantly anthropological perspective: the protection of humankind, the individual, creativity and human values – issues that are as topical today as they were back then.

7000 OAKS, DIARY OF SEYCHELLES, AND MUCH MORE BESIDES

Curator Tobia Bezzola has worked with Lucrezia De Domizio Durini to present this and other projects by the artist. In an area covering more than 900m² in the collection wing of the Kunsthaus, visitors are invited to take part in a human and artistic tour in which every work, however small, is at once a memorial and a document. A small niche displays the 'Rose for Direct Democracy'. Stamps and photographs are drawn from the action '7000 Oaks', which Beuys created at documenta 7 in Kassel in 1982. A separate area is devoted to the 'Diary of Seychelles'. A series of videos provide a record of conferences, performances and documentations, while alongside them are exhibited the editions and publications initiated by Lucrezia De Domizio Durini.

A BROADER CONCEPT OF ART

The exhibition clearly illustrates the way in which, in line with Beuys' social concept of art, even works of a type that have traditionally been regarded as

peripheral are accorded central importance. Beuys himself regarded his 'multiples', over 25 of which he produced with and for Lucrezia De Domizio, as 'condensation nuclei', some of the most important vehicles for the dissemination of his ideas. In them, Beuys paraphrased the content of his actions and his political, social and pedagogical activities; they were designed to act as portable monuments, carrying his ideas out into the world and into the consciousness of human beings.

PUBLICATION: BEUYS VOICE

In association with Electa publishers of Milan the Kunsthaus Zürich has produced 'Beuys Voice', a publication overseen by Lucrezia De Domizio to accompany the exhibition. With 968 pages in length, it includes about 500 illustrations from the De Domizio Durini archive and is available in English, German and Italian for CHF 75 at the museum shop. The book contains contributions and testimonies by numerous celebrated authors (among them Pierre Restany, Harald Szeemann, Felix Baumann and Johannes Stüttgen) who have devoted time to Beuys and the 'Difesa della Natura' project over the years. It includes comprehensive documentation and commentary on Baroness Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and her decades of commitment to promoting the work of Joseph Beuys. In a conversation with Tobia Bezzola, she tells of her long friendship with the artist, the actions they produced together, and her unstinting efforts to document and disseminate his philosophy after his death.

CONCERT FOR PIANO AND VOCALIST

On 13 May at 7 p.m. in the lecture hall of the Kunsthaus Zürich there will be a performance of 'Beuys Voice Nr. 1', a composition by Umberto Petrin for vocalist (Susie Helena Georgiadis) and piano (Umberto Petrin). The texts are based on quotations from Joseph Beuys recorded in Bolognano on 13 May 1984.

Supported by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich.

Open Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m.

For public holiday opening and public guided tours in German (English on request) see www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Admission CHF 16 / CHF 12 (concessions). Visitors 16 and younger free of charge. Registration required for groups and schools.

Advance sales:

SBB RailAway combination ticket, with discount on rail travel and admission: at local stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min. by ground line), www.sbb.ch.

Magasins Fnac: sales points in Switzerland: Rives, Balexert, Lausanne, Fribourg, Pathé Kino Basel, www.fnac.ch; F: Carrefour, Géant, Magasins U, 0 892 68 36 22 (EUR 0.34/min), www.fnac.com; BE: www.fnac.be.

NOTE TO MEDIA

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