Beuys: 'To be a teacher is my greatest work of art!'

Petra Richter

Appointed Professor of Sculpture at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1961 and dismissed in 1972 after coming into conflict with the academy authorities and their teaching policy, Joseph Beuys (1921-86) is today considered to be among the most significant – and also the most controversial – teachers of art since 1945. Whilst his unconventional teaching methods, his joint actions with his students, and his 'Ringgespräche' (discussions with the students about their work and on philosophical as well as general problems) irritated and annoyed many of his students, they realised at the same time that they were being given a special opportunity to learn. The success of his teaching methods was reflected, on the one hand, in the large number of his students – in the winter semester of 1971/72, for example, as many as 233 attended his class – and, on the other hand, in the many well-known artists who had been taught by him, such as Lothar Baumgarten, Felix Droese, Jörg Immendorff, Imi Knoebel, Ulrike Rosenbach, Katharina Sieverding, Palermo and Reiner Ruthenbeck.

Contrary to frequent accusations that Beuys merely taught his students to imitate their teacher, the very diversity of the artistic approaches of his former students shows that Beuys did in fact succeed in helping his students to develop their own individual artistic identities, quite independently of his own work as an artist. Indeed, Beuys's students knew little about their teacher as an artist, not only on account of his negligible participation in exhibitions until the middle of the Sixties but also because he himself deliberately kept a low profile as regards his own artistic work. Most of Beuys's students at the start of their studies regarded him more as a teacher than as an artist. Although Beuys offered them the opportunity of learning from him 'everything they wanted to learn' within the scope of their own individual abilities, he never on any account attempted to restrict them to his own particular concept of art: 'And I never in any way attempted to force my own idea of art onto people. On the contrary, I always sought those possibilities which are inside every individual one of us.'[1]

I can best visualise the processes of learning and understanding which the

[1] Beuys in conversation with Glozer 1984, p. 200.

students went through in Beuys's class by describing the content of Beuys's curriculum and his methodical approach to teaching during the period from the commencement of his teaching appointment until his dismissal in 1972. I will follow this by showing examples from the works of Imi Knoebel that present his artistic position, which is purist. He wants to free the artefact from all figurative and semantic references, a position that is reinforced by a confrontation with Beuys's mythical and magical world.

The first years from 1961 until the end of the Sixties

Beuys's first two years of teaching at the Academy were a period of extremely concentrated work because of the small number of students attending his class. The decision to study under Joseph Beuys was still a very fortuitous one, for Beuys was hardly known, neither as an artist nor as a teacher at the Academy. From the very beginning, Beuys would spend up to ten hours a day at the Academy. He even taught during the vacations. It was then, said Beuys, that his work with his students was at its most fruitful, for only the 'keenest students' would come along. Like his own teacher, Expressionist sculptor Ewald Mataré (1887-1965), Beuys placed great importance on absolute punctuality and regular attendance. He was extremely offended if any student failed to turn up in his class and would even go so far as to phone the student's parents. By the end of the Sixties, on the other hand, full attendance at any one time had become impossible owing to the large number of students enrolled in Beuys's class.

In 1961, Beuys took over the students of Professor Mages. Beuys's criticism of their work and his unusual teaching methods disconcerted them to such an extent that all of them, with the exception of Hede Bühl, left his class. Even though Beuys's teaching must have been influenced by the experience of his own traditionally oriented studies under Josef Enseling (1886-1957) and Ewald Mataré, his individual style of teaching was already making itself felt, for it differed considerably from the traditional notion of academic study.

Until then, the curriculum had been strictly defined and allowed the student no individual scope whatsoever. Beuys's first students had been accustomed to such didactic teaching methods, obeying strict rules and executing precisely formulated assignments. Beuys, on the other hand, expected his students to work on their own,

motivated by their own enthusiasm. He based his teaching not on a clearly formulated theory or programme but rather on a concept which he developed on the spot, in interactive dialogue with his students. As he did not give his students any specific assignments and, unlike his predecessor Professor Mages, criticised their work with brutal frankness, Hede Bühl and the others soon felt that everything they had learnt up to then was being called into question. The very openness of Beuys's approach to art was hard to take, especially as he refused to provide his students with the kind of framework they had been accustomed to and within which they would have been able to develop their own artistic styles. Consequently, most of them were at a complete loss: 'And so there we were,' Tadeusz recalls, 'sitting in the classroom, none of us having the slightest idea about what we should do, not even Beuys.'

Some of the other students, on the other hand – like Bernd Lohaus – viewed the freedom which Beuys had given them in an altogether positive light, recognising it as an opportunity for individual development: 'From the very start, he set different standards, defined new values and made other things possible; we were taught to call ourselves into question: be aware if you are angry, do whatever you think is necessary. He gave us students a different kind of freedom.'[2]

Looking back in 1974 to his very first class of students, Beuys ascribed their level of expectation to their complete trust in their teacher as a person of unquestioned authority. He was their 'absolute patriarch' and every word he spoke was 'absolute dogma'[3]. Many of them were still fixated on the teaching methods of their former teacher and considered Beuys's corrections and criticism as a 'campaign of destruction'[4] against everything they had learned up to then. What Beuys noticed in particular about his students was their 'superficial notion of art and sculpture': 'Of course they had had all the ideas about craftsmanship drilled into them..., whereby exactly these concepts of craftsmanship were quite vague.'[5] The absence of any critical detachment from their former teachers and from what they had been taught was reflected in their tendency towards stylistic adoption: 'Above all they had been taught that sculpture had to be *something thick*'.[6]

Although he was very much against a strictly defined curriculum, Beuys

[2] Bernd Lohaus in a conversation with the author, 22.04.1994.
[3] Beuys in conversation with Jappe 1973.
[4] Beuys in conversation with Jappe 1973.
[5] Beuys in conversation with Stüttgen, Lueb 1976.
[6] Beuys in conversation with Rywelski 1970.

decided, from the very start, to base his teaching on draughtsmanship, the study of nature and daily life studies before a live model. Two factors influenced this decision: firstly, his experience of the teaching methods of his own teacher, Ewald Mataré, which had likewise been based on draughtsmanship, and secondly, the importance which Beuys himself attached to draughtsmanship with regard to his own work as an artist. Beuys always stressed that drawings were an important reservoir, a source of creative energy, a 'kind of basic material'[7]. Consequently, the training of the students' powers of observation, this being the most important prerequisite for sculpture, and the development of purely objective criteria – 'the mathematical foundation'[8] of their work – took absolute priority. In the beginning, Beuys restricted himself to 'telling them something about proportion and the fundamentals of sculpture, about angled perspective and rhythm'.[9] Whilst he rejected the traditional, academic methods of teaching drawing, Beuys still considered both the learning of basic drawing skills and closeness to nature to be absolutely indispensable. As Gerda Hühn recalls, Beuys regarded 'nature study as a scientific discipline, comparable with the study of anatomy'[10]. But this was as close to the academic tradition as Beuys was prepared to go, for he was not concerned with an anatomically accurate depiction of outward appearances or with a naturalistic copy based 'merely on observation' and intended 'more as an imitation of a given object than anything else'[11]: 'Because then it would be just like stretching a kind of stylistic skin over everything, like a costume, with nothing at all inside.'[12]

Although drawing from plaster casts had aroused much controversy at the Düsseldorf Art Academy around that time, Beuys still considered it an essential aspect of the teaching curriculum. While Beatrix Sassen was working on a drawing of a Greek boy's head, Beuys explained to her 'how the lines of the brow and the chin should flow', also stressing how important it was to show 'how the muscles behave under the skin, what a head looks like from the inside, what function is performed by the nose'[13]. This step-by-step approach to nature was, according to Beuys, the basis

[7] Beuys in conversation with Simmen 1979, p. 32.
[8] Beuys in conversation with Stüttgen, Lueb 1976.
[9] Beuys in conversation with Stüttgen, Lueb 1976.
[10] Gerda Hühn in a conversation with the author, 18.05.1994.
[11] Beuys in conversation with Rinn 1978, p. 3.
[12] Beuys in conversation with Stüttgen, Lueb, 1976.
[13] Beatrix Sassen in a conversation with the author, 04.05.1994.

for transcending the 'optical and physical'[14] perception of the everyday world, thereby recognising its functional and structural principles and making its non-visual aspects visible. In coming to terms with a particular object, the artist should seek to achieve an abstraction of its natural being and, in so doing, to develop new ideas and variations. The physical act of drawing should be extended by the imagination, by the power of intuition. Beuys was interested primarily in finding a characteristic form of expression which would extend the visible image to include the idea behind it. Just as he would refer in his drawings or in his other works to the 'spirituality of the material', so he would teach his students that 'a thing is more than its outer surface leads us to believe'[15].

Despite his liberal attitude towards the course of study and its content, Beuys always insisted that every student model a head in clay at least once before completing their course. But the actual objectives were never so clearly formulated or the decision criteria so narrowly defined as in the case of Beuys's own former teacher, Ewald Mataré. However, whilst Mataré attached little importance to 'individual artistic development',[16] Beuys considered the systematic, regimented teaching of sculptural skills to be far less important than the development of subjective creativity and sensitivity. Beuys's interest was focused on a categorically subjective, largely autobiographical conception of modern art. He encouraged his students to discover their own individual selves. 'Every single one of us,' Bernd Lohaus recalls, 'was expected to go his own way. Beuys always said: "You mustn't look how the others draw, but must discover your own way of drawing."'[17] If one or other of his students failed to make headway with a particular assignment, Beuys did not hesitate to suggest that they seek inspiration in works of art or literature. He would advise his students to 'go into the museum and look at certain paintings, especially if paint application was the problem'[18], or he would tell them to read a book or go back to drawing. Gerda Hühn recalls that Beuys said: 'Then sit down and draw some more nudes. Or go out and draw the plaster figures or the kitchen sink. Or look at the window!'[19]

Compared with the students of today, students in Germany at the beginning of

[14] Paul Klee 1995 (1923), p. 67.
[15] Paul Klee 1995 (1923), p. 68.
[16] Erwin Heerich in a conversation with the author, 01.09.1995.
[17] Bernd Lohaus in a conversation with the author, 21.04.1994.
[18] Beuys in conversation with Jappe 1972.
[19] Gerda Hühn in a conversation with the author, 18.05.1994.

the Sixties were given relatively little information about new developments in art – such as those in the USA, for example, where Pop artists had already been experimenting with new materials for the past several years. Unlike his colleague Karl Otto Götz, who was born in 1914 and taught at the Academy from 1959 till 1979), Beuys hardly touched upon any of the contemporary movements in art during his first years at the Academy, but referred them to Leonardo da Vinci, van Gogh, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Edvard Munch and Brancusi. 'He was forever warning us,' Klaus Beck remembers, 'about adopting new fashions. He was always dead against them, and always treated them with a great deal of scepticism.' However, from 1963 on, Beuys provoked a discourse on contemporary art by inviting Fluxus artists and by his own performance actions. The Fluxus artists' anti-aesthetic approach was interpreted by many as a possible way of breaking with accepted aesthetic standards and conventions. The awareness of new movements and trends in art resulted in the utilisation of found objects and unconventional materials. This process of awareness was partially triggered by Beuys's presentation of his 'Fat Chair' (1964) during the Academy's Open Week at the end of the winter semester in 1964. One of Beuys's students, Klaus Beck, recalls the occasion:

> During the winter semester's Open House Week, Beuys complained that the teachers themselves didn't exhibit any of their own works. He then brought along a kitchen chair and a large quantity of margarine and patted the margarine on the seat of the chair with a wooden paddle so that it sloped like a wedge. We saw nothing unusual in this and none of us realized that we had before us an incunabulum of art. At that time Beuys had told us nothing about his "energy concept" or the like. We simply considered the making of this "fat chair" to be a rather unspectacular action. I was entrusted with the task of painting one of the walls white so that the chair could be hung up on it.[20]

In creating this object, Beuys had visualised a new concept of art and had for the very first time confronted both the students of his class and the students of the Academy in general with his own specific notion of art materials and with the problem of transformation. It symbolised the end of the traditional concept of art,

[20] Klaus Beck in a conversation with the author, 13.10.1993.

although it was not understood by many of his students and seemed to them as enigmatic as Beuys's first action at the Art Academy on the 2nd and 3rd of February 1963, when his 'Siberian Symphony 1st Movement' during the *Festum Fluxorum. Fluxus. Music and Antimusic. The Instrumental Theater*[21] had an explosive effect, not only calling traditional notions of art into question but also changing the artistic approach of his students and their way of working.

The years from 1965 to 1972

Despite these emerging changes, the main emphasis of Beuys's academic course remained the teaching of basic and traditional artistic skills. These however were already yielding to an emphasis on artistic individuality, manifest in the utilisation of unusual materials. From the middle of the Sixties, Beuys's 'Extended Art Concept' and 'Theory of Sculpture' began to play an increasingly important role in his teaching. Because of Beuys's opinion that students should receive an all-around training – he therefore rejected a one-sidedly rational curriculum – he integrated irrational elements into the learning process, through his actions, for example.

The function of providing them with a theoretical framework in their search for their own ideological bearings was later to be assimilated by Beuys into his concept of 'Social Sculpture', by the German Students Party (DSP) founded by Beuys around the end of the Sixties, and by the organisations which developed from it.

Increasing political awareness among the students of the Academy from the middle of the Sixties onwards led to discussions in Beuys's class on such matters as social reality, the concept of freedom and the principle of self-determination and also to such concrete political demands as a reform of the university and college system. These subjects came up mainly during the 'correction discussions' and dealt with such questions as Does art still have any relevance in our society?, or Can art help to revolutionise society? One of the causes of change was seen by Beuys to be the growing social and political awareness of his students against the background of the incipient protest movement and its highly intellectualised concern with the question of

[21] The participants alongside Beuys were, among others, Dick Higgins, Arthur Köpcke, George Maciunas, Mac Low, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Tomas Schmit, Daniel Spoerri, Wolf Vostell, Robert Watts and Emmet Williams. Beuys described the 'Siberian Symphony' as a 'Composition for Piano'; the elements of this composition were improvisations and extracts from Erik Satie's work on the grand piano.

the role and function of art and the artist in society: 'They ask themselves what art means. They have an instinctive urge to become artists. But fermenting inside all students is the moral question of whether it has any meaning for the others, for development, for society.'[22]

The topicality of the themes discussed in Beuys's class attracted not only other students of the Art Academy – such as Sigmar Polke, for example – but also visitors from outside, with the result that Beuys's class soon became a 'Podium and Action Centre of the Extended Art Concept'. These discursive, introspective discussions were altogether in keeping with Beuys's concept of the parallelism of theory and practice and, in 1966, led to the institutionalisation of the so-called 'ring discussions' which, in the final analysis, were to become the 'nucleus' of the political activities of Beuys's students. The 'ring discussions' were concerned primarily with the concept of art and freedom, university and college education policies, the role of the state and democracy, and also with the 'social system as a whole, based on Beuys's art concept and Rudolf Steiner's 'Threefold Social Order'.[23] It was also during these 'ring discussions' that Beuys would explain his 'Theory of Sculpture', the starting point of which he describes as a constellation of three basic driving forces: the 'chaotic energies', a 'crystalline principle of form' and a 'communicating principle of movement'.[24]

The new students in Beuys's class first had to come to terms with the content of the 'ring discussions' and to develop an understanding of Beuys's specific terminology, much of which was borrowed from Steiner's doctrines. As Beuys adhered neither to the philosophical nor to the linguistic meaning of the terminology he used, it was often very difficult to decode what he was saying and to understand what he meant. Some of his students rejected the 'ring discussions' because they cultivated 'the irrational' or were too limited to the self-portrayal of a few. Imi Knoebel, Imi Giese and Norbert Tadeusz saw these endless discussions as

[22] Beuys in conversation with Dienst 1969, p. 60.
[23] Liberty in Spiritual Life / Equality before the Law / Fraternity in Economic Life. Stüttgen 1988b, p. 136.
[24] The movement from the 'negative pole of uncertainty to the positive pole of certainty' results from an idea of energetics and puts the principle of chaos into a state of order, making liquid solidify, as in the case of 'Fat Corners' for example. Applied to the human being, the human will is a disordered, unformed entity that is then shaped by the crystalline principle, that is to say, by rational thought, by the human intellect. The communicating element in this process is conversation, this being marked by an evolutionary and social warmth or energy. The generator of this energy is the human being himself who, through his powers – the power of love being the most important one – is able to set things in motion, and in this respect Beuys's energy concept also has an anthropological element.

undermining art, while the practical and artistic aspects of their art studies were being increasingly ousted by political ones. Indeed, these 'ring discussions' not only changed the content of the teaching curriculum but also affected the working atmosphere and entire organisation of the class. Compared with Beuys's first years at the Art Academy, any concentrated artistic work in class was now virtually impossible. One of the consequences was that Imi Giese and Imi Knoebel took over a whole classroom for themselves, allowing none of the other students inside. Other students, such as Inge Mahn, for example, sought refuge in the Academy's corridors. This situation was further aggravated by the fact that the once rigid organisation of the Academy's art classes was now rapidly disintegrating, with the result that Beuys's class and his 'ring discussions' became a place to go. These 'ring discussions' were frequently accompanied by actions and performances – something at that time quite revolutionary: 'It wasn't unusual,' Erinna König recalls, 'for one student to start a performance in one corner while another worked away quietly or talked to himself in another.'[25]

Since Beuys had, from the very beginning, consistently kept his work as an artist separate from his work as a teacher, it was not until 1967, at the exhibition *Parallel Process* in Mönchengladbach, that his students were first confronted with a comprehensive display of his drawings, sculptures and objects. His use of unusual and often perishable materials, such as food residues, animal carcases, bones, blood, hair and fingernail clippings triggered in many students a process that was to lead to a completely new feeling for materials. It was at this exhibition in Mönchengladbach that they suddenly became aware of Beuys's way of working, his approach to materials, his notion of sculpture and artistic concept, his 'Theory of Sculpture'. By using theses materials Beuys intended to trigger processes of change and consciousness and, at the same time, to elucidate his 'Warmth Theory' and to show how energies relate.

Whilst these semantic references were recognised by some of Beuys's students, though more through intuition than through comprehension, they were little understood by most of them, especially as Beuys never explained his work, actions or materials during his classes. Beuys's theories were better understood by those students who took an active part in the 'ring discussions' or kept track of Beuys's

[25] Erinna König in a conversation with the author, 20.04.1994.

public interviews, which were taking place with increasing frequency. By the same token, Beuys's reference to the holistic thinking of the anthroposophists was better understood by those students who were familiar with the spiritualist doctrine of Rudolf Steiner. As a result of this gradual familiarisation with the Beuys iconography and the simultaneous confrontation with his works towards the end of the Sixties, more and more students in Beuys's class began to work with a diversity of found materials and objects.

This phenomenon was, for conceptual reasons, rejected by such students as Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo and Imi Giese, whilst others regarded it as a challenge or encouragement to explore the use of new materials. As for Imi Knoebel, it confirmed and strengthened his interest in the purism and formal reduction of the Minimal art of the Sixties and in the 'pure art' of Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935).

Imi Knoebel

Klaus Wolf Knoebel, who was born in 1940 in Dessau and grew up near Dresden, studied in Josef Beuys's class from 1965 to 1971. He had begun as an apprenticed window dresser before he, together with his friend Rainer Giese (1942-74), began his studies at the Werkkunstschule in Darmstadt where instruction was in line with the classical principles of the Bauhaus, namely the synthesis of art, craftsmanship and industrial production. As an expression of their friendship and solidarity, Knoebel and Giese took on the name Imi & Imi – onomatopoeia similar to the verbal fabrications of Dadaism.[26] The motive behind the two Imis' decision to transfer to Düsseldorf was the spectacular newspaper report on Beuys's appearance at the Technical University in Aachen for the *Festival of New Art* on 20 July 1964.

The newspaper photos of Beuys made him a symbol for everything shocking and provocative, an expression of a social mood of upheaval, which met their own anti-authoritarian standpoint halfway.

> He was quite different from the people of his generation. We only knew those who were authoritarian and rigid; he was, despite his age, open, rebellious,

[26] Contrary to widespread beliefs, Imi Knoebel declares the story that their names are inspired by the washing powder IMI as 'purely fictional'. 'We had coined the word in Darmstadt; when we said good bye, the word came out somehow, it was more like a sound.' The author's conversation with Imi Knoebel, 14.11.1995.

> truly insubordinate and fresh, questioned things that others of his generation accepted wordlessly. His art was not essential; it hadn't touched me yet. We hadn't yet got that far.[27]

In retrospect, Knoebel describes leaving Darmstadt in tandem with his friend as an important stabilising factor, since neither Rainer Giese nor he would have had the courage to take up their studies with Beuys on their own: 'Imi and I supported each other in the mutual decision to go to Düsseldorf. We wouldn't have gone it alone. At the time we really didn't have the courage to go into fine art… We had in fact decided on a practical profession.'

Even though they had signed up for Walter Breker's class in commercial art for the first two semesters, like many Academy students they often hung around Beuys's class. When the two did finally apply to be admitted to his class, Beuys assented without demanding they first show him a portfolio. Since they feared their work would not be able to stand up to Beuys's demands nor to the criticism of their fellow students, they hesitated: 'We couldn't even draw; Imi only drew dots and I lines.'[28] On the basis of the instruction they had at the Applied Arts School in Darmstadt, above all on the basis of Hanns Hofmann-Lederer's preliminary course that was Bauhaus-oriented, Knoebel experimented with abstract, formal and contrasting relations, orderly autonomous configurations and serial depictions.

Beuys finally accosted them and asked when they were coming: 'He needed us too, in order to articulate. We wanted – and were supposed – to cross swords with him.'[29] Being accepted as a student played a decisive role in Knoebel's self-confidence and his artistic development:

> What was important was being in his class. From my parents I was only used to hearing questions like 'what do you want to be?' Beuys did not ask; he left you in peace; that was quite unusual. I first had to find my way and at the time that kept everything open.

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[27] Unless stated otherwise, all following quotes are taken from the author's conversation with Imi Knoebel, 14.11.1995.
[28] Imi Knoebel, quoted in Stüttgen 1982, p. 94.
[29] Erwin Heerich gives another reason for Beuys taking on the two Imis, in addition to their providing of a fruitful counter-perspective: 'He accepted them because he wanted to adorn himself with contemporary art as well, with their minimalism.' The author's conversation with Erwin Heerich, 01.09.1995.

When the two Imis demanded to be given their own classroom if they transferred to his class, they were thoroughly surprised that Beuys consented and let them have room 19, smaller than the other two classrooms, 13 and 20. At the beginning Palermo also worked in this room, later for a short time also Jörg Immendorff and Katharina Sieverding.[30] Since the two Imis had a key to the room, they only opened it to friends or on Open House days. They did not give up the room until 1969 when the increase in the number of students meant the demand of their colleagues for more space could no longer be resisted. The privilege to be able to work in one's own room had been one of the requirements for the development of an autonomous artistic vocabulary. Another important factor was the discussions Knoebel had with Imi Giese and Palermo: 'Imi was the mathematician, I the constructor, Palermo was the painter.' The two Imis contemptuously drew a line between themselves and figurative painters like Tadeusz and Anatol. And because of their purist colour and form, they also came just as much in conflict with the figurative style of their colleagues who, sympathising with Marxist student groups (like Jörg Immendorff), wanted art to relate to social issues and rejected an isolated aesthetic discourse. Even though the two Imis were present at the founding of the DSP, Knoebel never was a member, nor was he politically committed. At the interdisciplinary 'ring discussions', they both kept to the background, because – as Knoebel said – they didn't know how to express themselves in a corresponding form. But Knoebel not only held back out of a lack of eloquence, but also because, to him, Beuys's idea of 'social sculpture' was less than convincing: 'As for "social sculpture", that wasn't my thing; I would have been lost there. I had once believed in the healing power of art, but by then had already given this up as a belief.'

This dissociation from the others was part of this duo's strategy, as was their artistic concept of setting up purism and reduction against variety. In the same way their room was even superficially different from the two other classrooms. It was a clean and tidy workplace they put together out of an assorted arrangement of hardboard panels. While the other students worked mostly with clay and plaster or with found materials, hardboard was Imi Knoebel's preferred material, an industrial product that was accepted by Beuys, although diametrically opposed to his own

[30] Imi Knoebel married Katharina Sieverding on 02.08.1968; the couple got divorced soon after. He has been married to Carmen Drawe since 1974.

material concept: ‘Beuys had no real access to our things… Normally the professors teach in fairly close analogy to their own art. But Beuys was different; he allowed quite different things to get done.’

Knoebel based his decision to use this material on his rejection of the canvas as being an expression of traditional painting. In his view the hardboard already gives the impression of a ‘finished painting’. The compilation of elementary pieces, hardboard cubes and squares, circular segments, rough canvas stretchers, floor segments and hardboard tiles in their studio room became known as the installation ‘Hardboardroom’ or ‘Room 19’, 1968/92, which Knoebel exhibited for the first time at the Academy’s Open House in the winter semester, and in different forms up to the last time 1997 in Berlin.[31] This installation is always mentioned as a key work, and Knoebel ended by permanently installing it in 1992 at Hessia’s State Museum in Darmstadt. It shows all the essential features of his art, his formal vocabulary that developed over time step-by-step and his precise way of working.

The reduction of forms and the elimination of any individual trademark style as well as a lack of any claim to originality are all reminiscent of Minimal Art,[32] whose reception in Germany began in 1968 with important exhibitions in Düsseldorf, Essen, Cologne and Eindhoven. Knoebel has here taken up the discussion that the artists of Minimal Art began on the relation of the viewer to the room and to the artwork. Whereby the relations of the objects amongst each other and to the room, as well as the relation of the viewer to the object and the room, are decided according to the autonomous design principles of scale, proportion and light. Via optical and haptic perception, the recipient develops an awareness of his or her own physical existence in its relation to space and to the sculpture. However, Imi Knoebel has assembled elements such as a canvas stretcher, moulding and panels that play with the idea of the room as a stand-in for unpainted pictures, and this goes far beyond the intentions of the American Minimalists, who negated any ideas of traditional or abstract painting.

‘Darmstädter Raum’, set up in a dialogue with the ‘Beuys Block’,[33] was

[31] In Hamburg 1968, Lucerne 1969, Cologne 1977, Eindhoven 1982, in Winterthur and Bonn 1983, New York 1987, Maastricht 1989.
[32] The increasing use of industrial materials, such as aluminium, acrylic glass, brass, etc., and of industrial production techniques, implies that art can be mass-produced as well, as Donald Judd declares in ‘Specific Objects’ in 1965. While Beuys, just as Knoebel, in the beginning produced multiples of his work himself in order to preserve their individual ‘touch’, e.g. ‘Intuition’, 1968, he eventually switched over to industrial production.
[33] Installed next to ‘Hartfaserraum’ were ‘Transsibirische Eisenbahn’, 1961/64, ‘Lichamen’, 1967, and two ‘Keilrahmen’.

installed according to Knoebel's instructions as a slightly modified replica of 'Raum 19', through which the viewer had to pass to get into the Beuys suite. While Knoebel himself built the objects in the 'Hardboardroom' and the first installations with striking care – which is evidence of the spirit of the Applied Arts School and its insistence on high quality craftsmanship – the 1992 Darmstadt replica was produced in his studio by carpenters following his instructions. The contrast between the commercially-built forms of the hardboard room and the decaying substances heavy with meaning in Beuys's glass cases makes the different artistic approaches strikingly clear: while Knoebel strives for radical non-representation and the exclusion of any allusion to transcendent meaning, Beuys requires interaction with the viewer that goes beyond sensual perception, including a new understanding of the mythical dimension of life, in order to restore the original unity of man with nature.

While the 'Hardboardroom' goes back to a random arrangement of materials, the principle of layering and stacking the objects and colour panels within different spatial situations evolves into a well thought out procedure. In contrast, in Beuys's installations the consideration of purely proportional dimensions and the relation between work, room and light as constituent elements are all subordinated to the semantic tie-in. Beuys does not simply place the objects behind or next to each other, but according to strictly defined principles such as doubling, polarity, asymmetry and symmetry, or he engenders counterparts derived from the materiality or from the actions framework from which the objects often originate. Beuys deploys rules of design that have come about from his engagement with Fluxus, such as the precise treatment and experience of time and space. All of which flows into the actions,[34] whereby the factor of movement in Beuys always implies the possible consequence of a change in the existing circumstances. Beuys's instinctive approach to the placement of objects and the development of a fully defined feeling for a spatial area is what Knoebel recapitulated when in 1987 he installed Beuys 'Fond' works in New York's Dia Art Foundation:[35] 'You have to know how it works. It is set down. Beuys, too, did it this way… You have to understand his principle; many have difficulty with it.'

Beuys applies the organising method of stacking and storing ideas and

[34] Referring to the performance 'und in uns...unter uns...landunter' in Wuppertal, 1965, which lasted 24 hours, Beuys describes his condition as detached from time and space: 'It is certainly important to disrupt the physical concept of time...' Joseph Beuys, quoted in Tisdall 1979, p. 97.
[35] On view at the exhibition were Knoebel's 'Genter Raum', 1980, juxtaposed with Beuys's 'Doppelfond', 1954/74, 'Fond III/3', 1979, 'Fond IV/4', 1979, 'Brazilian Fond', 1979, and works by Palermo.

conceptions in the felt piles of his 'Fond' works, mostly uniform blocks of gray layers of felt, each of which is covered by a copper plate, as in the 'Fond III' work found in the 'Beuys Block'.[36] In this stacked arrangement, the organic substance of felt is turned into a store and transformer of energy, a battery that is not connected to an electric model. While the issue for Beuys is the warmth generated by energy or emotion, Knoebel's stratifications store new pictures. Thus the forms of 'Odyshade C7', 1995, screwed firmly in place and cut irregularly, or the loosely stacked, coloured woodpiles of 'Genter Raum', 1980,[37] evoke the possibility of an experimental combination of forms, colours and new proportional relationships, and thus the idea of new depictive forms stored in woodpiles, awaiting transformation.

While Beuys, for instance, turns the stereometric forms in 'Vor dem Aufbruch aus Lager I', 1970/80 into metaphors of crystalline thought, the objects in Knoebel's work refer literally to themselves and are not subservient to any non-artistic claim. This is in accordance with Malevich's demand that art 'can only have itself as a theme' and 'not the idea of anything'.[38] Figurative and psychological associations are excluded; the room becomes an area of meditation, the picture a pure object of contemplation. In the monochrome brown colouring of the hardboard panels and the layered, stacked arrangement of the plain squares, cubes and the empty canvas stretchers hanging on the wall, Knoebel links 'principles of sculpture and painting' in a dialogue.[39] Knoebel's canvas stretchers stand in direct correspondence to Beuys's upright canvas stretchers in 'Room 1', which lean against the wall with their backs to the viewer. These recall Beuys's 1985 manifesto: 'The fallacy already begins the moment you set out to buy stretcher and canvas.' This is the articulation of a 1960s standpoint, which questioned the legitimation of the traditional canvas painting and turned the picture into an object of pure contemplation.

While the smooth material of hardboard in his installations 'Raum 19' and 'Genter Raum' have a distancing effect and tend to reject any semantic references, his later works from the early 1980s show that Knoebel went beyond the formal vocabulary of Minimalism and Constructivism. In this assemblage, he has recourse to found materials that are marked by traces of use. The elements of 'Radio Beirut',

[36] The method of stacking occurs starting with 'Fond III', 1969, and is followed through in 'Fond IV/4', 1970-74, 'Brazilian Fond (Fond V)', 1979 and 'Fond VII/2', 1967/84.
[37] This is another key work in Knoebel's oeuvre, permanently installed in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen since 2000.
[38] Malewitsch 1962 (1922), p. 89.
[39] Wechsler 1990, p. 52.

1982,[40] thus named in memory of the beginning of the Israeli siege of the Lebanese capital, are almost exclusively made up of industrial, sawed up, welded and bent building materials such as iron pipes, T-beams and chipboards. The title and the material evoke the destructive image of war and introduce a critical potential to the work. This procedure, which is similar to Beuys's, whose titles and materials strike metaphorical chords and trigger a certain associative potential, is however subordinated to the central theme of non-figurative painting.

Knoebel undertook his first painting experiments in the mid-1960s. In his 'Linienbilder' from 1966 on, he varied the intervals between the lines using a simple numeric principle until the distance between two lines became so large that the picture was monochrome white, creating a homogeneous surface that was seemingly immaterial. The line paintings, in their concentration on the picture's centre point and line, are a demonstration of Knoebel's study of Kasimir Malevich's strict reduction to the purest formal elements, a purist painting brought back to zero, to 'limitless nothing'.[41] Like him, Knoebel wanted to free the artefact of any reference to figuration. Malevich, by declaring the colour black to be the embodiment of all other colours and the square as the elementary form, led painting in his 1915 'Black Square' back to the basics, namely to the relation between figure and ground. After his Darmstadt days, Knoebel – like Imi Giese and Palermo – made Malevich their model. In 1962 they studied in detail the first German publication of Kasimir Malevich's writings, *Suprematism. The World as Non-Objectivity*.[42] The experience of the purely non-objective is described by Malevich as the feeling of being freed 'from the pressure of figurative representation' and from the 'false notions' of a 'utilitarian idea of life'[43] erected on a truth existing under the surface of appearances.

To Imi Knoebel this release seemed to offer the possibility of a new definition of painting. The reverence for Malevich – which the two Imis documented by shaving their heads and wearing long coats – Knoebel expressed in the 1960s by direct

[40] According to the artist, this last work in a series of twelve refers to the bloody massacre 'caused by Lebanese Christian militia under the eyes of the Israeli occupiers… in the Palestinian refugee camps Schatila and Sabra.' Fischer 1983, p. 69.
[41] 'Therefore I think of painting or art as a whole as the first step towards nonrepresentational Suprematism, towards a world of abstraction, towards a liberated nothing, on the way towards a state in which there exists nothing recognisable, not even object-less rhythm.' Malewitsch 1962 (1922), p. 190.
[42] According to Knoebel, the subject of Suprematism was never brought up in Beuys's class, causing him to believe that Beuys had no knowledge of Malevich. According to Franz Joachim Verspohl, however, Beuys owned books on Malevich already at the beginning of the Sixties. See the author's conversation with Franz Joachim Verspohl, 29.11.1995.
[43] Malewitsch 1962 (1922), p. 188 et seq.

paraphrases and quotes such as ‘Weißes Quadrat’, 1968/98, ‘Schwarzes Quadrat’, 1968/96 or ‘Schwarzes Kreuz’, 1968. The homage to Malevich in 1991, ‘Hartfaserquadrat (Ehre an Kasimir Severinovich Malevich)’ as well as the 1995 ‘Jena’ paintings show that his engagement with Malevich is still alive and well. While Malevich did in fact still paint the black cross onto a white canvas and thus did not give up the traditional easel painting, Knoebel applied his plywood forms directly to the wall, forms that take over the function of the picture ground and set up relations to the room. The ‘Weiße Bilder’, which seem to melt into the wall, are a continuation of this by means of light projections. In the series of indoor and outdoor projections at the end of the 1960s, it is projected light that replaces the easel painting and takes over the immaterial function of the colour white. In his repetition of the classic vocabulary of forms, Knoebel is interested in the silence, the meditative components of colour, and not in any kind of critical stocktaking, in taking over or continuing the idealist foundations of Suprematism. Since to him the utopian impetus of the avant-garde seemed exhausted, Knoebel used this formal appropriation as well as an engagement with the metaphysical idea more as a means to fine-tune his own artistic identity, namely the counter-position he took up in Beuys’s class.

If up to the mid-1970s Knoebel, inspired by the ideas of Constructivism and Suprematism, had worked mainly with black and white contrasts, in his first experiments with colour he added Menninge paint to his palette for the so-called ‘Menninge’ paintings. The use of Menninge, a red lead paint, was an idea of Palermo’s: ‘Access to colour took place through Mennige paint, an anti-rust paint that covered everything. Palermo worked with it. I once asked if I could use it. Later I tried out Titan, ferric oxide, etc.’

In 1980, in contrast, the ‘Genter Raum’ documented his first-time effort to master the whole colour spectrum. His study of modular forms and colours and their relations to each other came about in a systematic and experimental way ever since his exhibition *24 Farben für Blinky Palermo*, in 1977. Knoebel painted each of the irregular objects in this series in a different monochrome colour and exhibited them in memory of his friend – who had died in 1974 – at the Galerie Heiner Friedrich. For this series, Knoebel developed a cutting technique: from painted paper sheets he cut forms out freehand with a cutter – a method that recalls Henri Matisse’s ‘papiers découpés’ – and then layered them one on top of the other. His use since the 1970s of

the classic canon of red-yellow-blue[44] (‘Messerschnitt Rot-Gelb-Blau’, 1978/79) allows us to read this as his coming to grips with the abstract-depictive possibilities of ‘Classical Modernism’, especially with the compositions of Piet Mondrian. Knoebel continued this series from the 1990s in the ‘Odyshape’ paintings (‘Odyshape C7’, 1995, ‘DIN XV Ci-C4’, 1995). Works such as ‘Ich nicht’, 2006 are an answer to Barnett Newman’s ‘Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue’, 1966-67 and are the culmination of Knoebel’s occupation with an intense palette, whereby he – in contrast to Newman’s anti-compositional painting – still follows the laws of harmony in composing his colour fields and thus, according to Newman, rejects the experience of transcendence, i.e., that which rises above familiar experience.[45] If Knoebel, similar to Mondrian, balances out the colours in his compositions according to the way they mutually push forward and recede back, ‘Ich nicht VII’ approaches Newman’s demand for a colour-filled painting: yellow is transformed into its own ‘differentiated energy field’.[46]

The evolution Knoebel went through as an artist was carried out within the force field of Beuys’s position, the abstract potential of ‘Classical Modernism’ and the artistic currents of the 1960s. Knoebel saw his interest confirmed in purism and a reduction of the forms by the Minimalism of the Sixties and by the ‘pure art’ of Malevich. Like him Knoebel wanted to free the artefact from any references to figurativeness so as to achieve the spiritual emotion of non-representation. The development in the paintings of these past years, which show an increased tendency to the spiritual emotion of non-representation, point to the ‘initial meaning’[47] that Malevich had assumed for Knoebel. By transforming the real room into the picture world he goes beyond the easel painting, unlike Malevich, and occupies new aesthetic spaces. Knoebel’s feel for spatial situations and references, formal contexts and proportions has been marked to a great extent by the back and forth dialogue with his long-time teacher. In confrontation with the mythical-magical and socially utopian

[44] It was Alexander Rodchenko who had already ‘led painting to its logical end’ when, in 1921, he put a red, a yellow and a blue painting on display, in which each surface was a surface, covered by only one colour up to the margins of the picture plane. Martin Schulz, 1998, p. 132.
[45] Max Imdahl, *Zur Kunst der Moderne. Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Angeli Jahnsen-Vukicevic, 1996, vol. 1, p. 251: ‘Nach Auffassung Newmans werden “wir von den europäischen abstrakten Malern durch schon bekannte Bilder in ihre geistige Welt geführt”, und zwar sei dies ein ‚transzendentaler Akt’, welcher die bisher erfahrene Welt übersteigt (‚With the European abstract painters we are led into their spiritual world through already known images. This is a transcendental act.’).’ The American artist, in contrast, is concerned with ‘the reality of transcendental experience.’
[46] Imdahl 1996, p. 258.
[47] Hogrebe 1996, p. 38.

world of Beuys, his purist concerns were, on the one hand, reinforced as an anti-position. On the other hand, Beuys's way of working and approach inspired him to a new interpretation of the emptied formalist vocabulary of Minimal Art and a critical questioning of the expressive capability of abstract 'Classical Modernism'.[48]

[48] Kuspit sees in Knoebel an artist in whom the opposite poles Beuys vs Malevich are reconciled: 'He establishes a working alliance between and with them, taking a Beuysian approach to nonobjective art..., he symbiotically unites Malevich and Beuys to achieve his own autonomy.' (Kuspit 1987, p. 72). However, Knoebel has repeatedly distanced himself from the utilisation of art for the 'healing' of problems in society, rather than adopting Beuys's concept of 'healing power', as Kuspit claims. Kuspit 1987, p.76/79.