

14 Lessons Joseph Beuys Has Taught Me About Art

1. Widen our definition of art

“Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to](#) provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build ‘A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART’... EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who - from his state of freedom - the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand - learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.”

2. Making or doing stuff consciously is art!

"Every sphere of human activity, even peeling a potato can be a work of art as long as it is a conscious act."

3. On being a teacher

To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration. If you want to express yourself you must present something tangible. But after a while this has only the function of a historic document. Objects aren't very important any more. I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it.

4. Art is what makes life possible

Art alone makes life possible - this is how radically I should like to formulate it. I would say that without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms. Even the act of peeling a potato can be an artistic act if it is consciously done.

5. Everyone is creative!

Creativity is not limited to people practising one of the traditional forms of art, and even in the case of artists, creativity is not confined to the exercise of their art. Each one of us has a creative potential, which is hidden by competitiveness and success- aggression. To recognize, explore and develop this potential is the task of the School. Creation - whether it be a painting, sculpture, symphony or novel - involves not merely talent, intuition, powers of imagination and application, but also the ability to shape material that could be expanded to other socially relevant spheres.

6. On sculpture

- THINKING FORMS - how we mold our thoughts
- SPOKEN FORMS - how we shape our thoughts into words
- SOCIAL SCULPTURE - how we mold and shape the world in which we live:

Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist. That is why nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, color changes, delays, drying up. Everything is in a STATE of CHANGE.

7. Be an artist to determine yourself; to define yourself!

QUESTION: A well-known saying of yours asserts that 'Every man is an artist.' If every man is an artist, then why have art academies and art professors at all?

BEUYS: To be sure, 'every man is an artist' in a general sense: one must be an artist for example, to create self-determination. But at a certain stage in his life every man becomes a specialist in a certain way; one studies chemistry, another sculpture or painting, a third becomes doctor, and so on. For this reason we understandably need special schools.

8. Use art to transform society

Art is a kind of vehicle, you know. It's a kind of making, spreading out ideas, that is what I think. It spreads out the idea. You must care for information and I personally try to make information available not only in a written way.. I try also to work with images, with fantasy, with jokes, with humor. It accelerates the discussion of the problem of a new society.. ..so I work coming from the idea of art as the most important means to transform the society.

9. Words produce images

For me it is the WORD that produces all images. It is the key sign for all processes of moulding and organizing. When I use language, I try to induce the impulses of this power.. ..the power of evolution.

But language is not to be understood simply in terms of speech and words. That is our current, drastically reduced, understanding of language.. .Beyond language as verbalization lies a world of sound and form impulses, a language of primary sound without semantic content, but laden with completely different levels of information.

10. Empower every person to create!

This most modern art discipline - Social Sculpture / Social Architecture - will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism.

11. Art can liberate us!

Art is the only power to free humankind from all repression.

Here my idea is to declare that art is the only possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole creativity. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living being is an artist - an artist in the sense that he can develop his own capacity. And therefore it's necessary at first that society cares about the educational system, that equality of opportunity for self-realization is guaranteed.

12. Tree as a symbol of sculpture, of the planet, and life

I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid heartwood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet.

13. Healthy and productive chaos

My intention: healthy chaos, healthy amorphousness in a known medium which consciously warmed a cold, torpid form from the past, a convention of society, and which makes possible future forms.

14. Give me a place to stand, and I can move the earth

Joseph Beuys often quotes Archimedes lever:

Give me a place to stand, and I can move the earth!

What that means is this: once you know what your main source of power/influence/platform is, focus all your energies on that, and you can change the world for the better!