

Joseph Beuys
7000 Oaks
long-term installation



Dia:Chelsea
548 West 22nd Street New York

Joseph Beuys 7000 Oaks

I believe that planting these oaks is necessary not only in biospheric terms, that is to say, in the context of matter and ecology, but in that it will raise ecological consciousness—raise it increasingly, in the course of the years to come, because we shall never stop planting.¹

Thus, 7000 Oaks is a sculpture referring to peoples' lives, to their everyday work. That is my concept of art, which I call the extended concept or art of the social sculpture.²

I wish to go more and more outside to be among the problems of nature and problems of human beings in their working places. This will be a regenerative activity; it will be a therapy for all of the problems we are standing before. . . . I wished to go completely outside and to make a symbolic start for my enterprise of regenerating the life of humankind within the body of society and to prepare a positive future in this context.

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.³

The planting of seven thousand oak trees is thus only a symbolic beginning. And such a symbolic beginning requires a marker, in this instance a basalt column. The intention of such a tree-planting event is to point up the transformation of all of life, of society, and of the whole ecological system.⁴

They are basalt columns that one can find in the craters of extinct volcanoes, where they become a prismatic, quasi-crystalline shape through a particular cooling process . . . which produces these shapes with five, six, seven, and eight corners. They could, and still can, be found lined up like perfect, beautiful organ pipes in the Eifel region. Today, most of them are protected. But we didn't have to have these particular splendid organ pipes, we just wanted a material with basalt characteristics from the environs of Kassel. So there we found basalt columns which are part crystalline, that is to say, they have sharp corners, but at the same time tend toward amorphousness.⁵

My point with these seven thousand trees was that each would be a monument, consisting of a living part, the live tree, changing all the time, and a crystalline mass, maintaining its shape, size, and weight. This stone can be transformed only by taking from it, when a piece splinters off, say, never by growing. By placing these two objects side by side, the proportionality of the monument's two parts will never be the same. So now we have six- and seven-year-old oaks, and the stone dominates them. In a few years' time, stone and tree will be in balance, and in twenty to thirty years' time we may see that gradually, the stone has become an adjunct at the foot of the oak or whatever tree it may be.⁶

With these statements, Joseph Beuys has provided an unusually extensive and detailed account of the aesthetic and philosophical impetus underlying the realization of his work *7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks)*. This project was inaugurated at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, in 1982, in a plan that called for the planting of seven thousand trees, each paired with a columnar basalt marker measuring approximately four feet above ground, throughout the greater part of the city. Brought from a quarry some thirty kilometers from Kassel, the stones were initially heaped on the lawn in front of the Fredericianum, Documenta's principal exhibition building. That year on March 16, several months prior to the opening of the exhibition, Beuys himself planted the first tree with its accompanying stele.

The action continued over the next five years under the aegis of the Free International University, the diminishing pile of stones in front of the Fredericianum indicating the progress of the project. Planting in public spaces in the inner city was carried out on the basis of site proposals submitted by residents, neighborhood councils, schools, kindergartens, local associations, and others. The result, according to Norbert Scholtz, offered significant opportunities for "occupying and utilizing 'public' open space socially."⁷ At the opening of Documenta 8 in June 1987, some eighteen months after his father's death, Beuys's son Wenzel planted the last tree. While sixty percent of the trees employed in Kassel were oaks of several varieties, fifteen other species were also incorporated, including ash, chestnut, crab, elm, gingko, hawthorn, locust, maple, and walnut.

For most of the first two decades of his career, Beuys's principal activity as an artist was focused on the sites of the art gallery and museum. However, in the 1970s, as he consolidated his philosophy outlining a social revolution effected in part by the transformative powers of art, he increasingly directed his attention toward a broader public. Thus in 1972, for the hundred-day duration of Documenta 5, he engaged in public debate with whomever he encountered in his improvised office for Direct Democracy. Teaching and lecturing continued to preoccupy him throughout the remainder of the decade, often under the auspices of the Free International University or the Organization for Direct Democracy, both institutions he had helped launch. In addition, he became a founding member of the Green Party, whose mandate originally encompassed ecological and environmental issues in an extraparlimentary arena.

While it is appropriate to view Beuys's project *7000 Oaks* primarily in the context of his own work and artistic activity, parallel concerns engaged certain contemporary artists elsewhere. In the United States the so-called Land or Earth Art projects of the late 1960s and '70s had been initiated in part by a wish to reconnect with the larger world outside the urban environment, by a concern to circumvent the mechanisms of the

established art market, and by a desire for greater participation on the part of a broader audience. In different ways, works such as Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977), James Turrell's ongoing project at the Roden Crater, and both Robert Smithson's and Robert Morris's involvements with land reclamation projects on abandoned sites ravaged by strip mining have affinities with Beuys's concurrent activities and interests. Yet, *7000 Oaks* is characteristic of this German artist in that it could both function as a small-scale, intimate project, the outcome of individual initiative, as well as a highly ambitious, potentially vast undertaking meant to be replicated elsewhere. In this regard it accords well with his intensified focus during the 1970s on the production of multiples, that is, objects usually intended to be available at low cost in very large editions. Like such works as *Noiseless Blackboard Eraser* (1974, edition 550), and *Wooden Postcard* (1974, unlimited signed edition), *7000 Oaks* functions not just literally, in practical environmental terms, but symbolically, as "inspirational images."⁹ It embodied, metonymically, Beuys's utopian and poetic metaphysic of a social sculpture designed to effect a revolution in human consciousness, "the human being as a spiritual being."⁹ By means of its permanence and longevity it also sought to render "the world a big forest, making towns and environments forestlike."¹⁰ For Beuys intended the project as realized in Kassel to be only the first stage in an ongoing scheme of tree planting (with or without accompanying markers) to be extended throughout the world. Subsequently, single trees with stones have been placed at strategic sites, including the front of the art academy in Oslo, and at major events, such as the Fifth Biennale of Sydney, Australia.

The Dia Art Foundation provided the initial financing for *7000 Oaks* in Kassel.¹¹ It has continued the project in New York with the planting of several different kinds of trees, each aligned with a basalt stone.

L.C.

notes

1. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Johannes Stüttgen, *Beschreibung eines Kunstwerkes* (Düsseldorf: Free International University, 1982), p. 1.
2. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Norbert Scholz, "Joseph Beuys—7000 Oaks in Kassel," *Anthos* (Switzerland), no. 3 (1986), p. 32.
3. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Richard Demarco, "Conversations with Artists," *Studio International* 195, no. 996 (September 1982), p. 46.
4. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Stüttgen, p. 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Scholtz, p. 34.
8. Heiner Bastian, *7000 Eichen* (Bern: Benteli Verlag, in association with Kunsthalle Tübingen, 1985), n. p.
9. Demarco, p. 47.
10. Demarco, p. 46. Beuys chose the number seven thousand partly because he felt "seven represents a very old rule for planting trees" (and he referenced such towns as Seven Oaks in England and its namesake in the U.S.), and because it coincided with the seventh Documenta. Dismissing seventy and seven hundred as too few to signify the idea, he settled on the number seven thousand as one which will have a "very strong visible result in three hundred years."
11. In addition to the initial funding provided by Dia, further sources included individual tree sponsorships, donations from many other artists, as well as significant contributions by Beuys himself.

selected bibliography

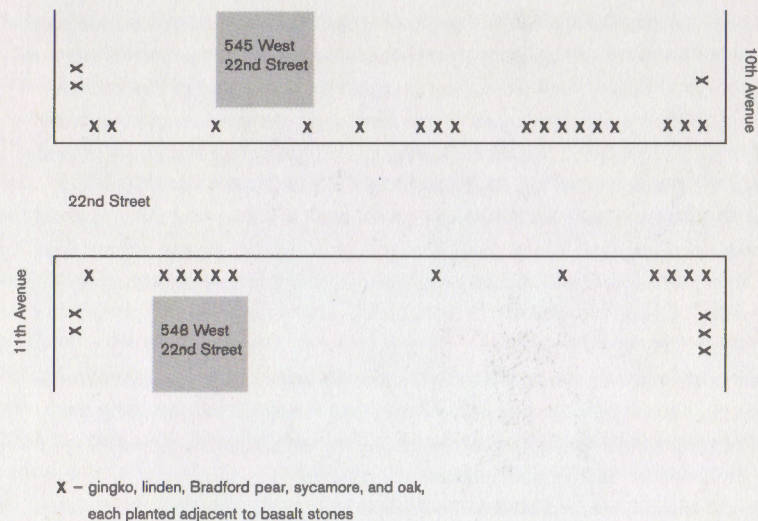
Joseph Beuys. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1987.

Joseph Beuys: Die Multiples. Munich: Edition Schellmann and Schirmer/Mosel Verlag, 1992.

7000 Eichen. Bern: Benteli Verlag, in association with Kunsthalle Tübingen, 1985.

7000 Eichen: Joseph Beuys. Cologne: Walther König, 1987.

site map



Joseph Beuys was born in Kleve, Germany, on May 12, 1921. His first one-person exhibition was held in 1953 in Kranenburg. In 1961 he was appointed professor at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, where he had earlier been a student, and he continued teaching there until 1972 when he was dismissed amidst great controversy, a dismissal that finally, in 1978, was deemed unlawful. From the beginning of the 1970s, he exhibited widely throughout Europe and the United States, representing Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1976. Beuys died January 23, 1986, in Düsseldorf, where he had lived for most of his career. Notable among the many retrospectives of his work are those held in New York in 1979, in Berlin in 1988, and in Zürich, Madrid, and Paris in 1993 through 1994.