

Joseph Beuys An Appeal for an Alternative//1982

This appeal is directed to all people belonging to the European cultural sphere and civilization. The breakthrough to a new social future will be successful if, in the European zones, a movement emerges which tears down the walls between East and West and closes the rift between North and South by its power for renewal. We maintain that a start would be made if the Middle Europeans decide to act in accordance with this appeal. If we in Middle Europe begin today to follow a path responding to the demands of the time for co-existence and co-operation in our states and societies, this would have a strong influence on every other place in the world.

Before we ask WHAT CAN WE DO? we have first to consider the question HOW MUST WE THINK? so that the usual approach to the highest ideals of humanity, limited to phrases proclaimed by all party programmes today, does not continue to spread as an expression of its flagrant contradiction of what we actually do in practice in our economic, political and cultural dealings in real life.

We warn, however, against a thoughtless turnabout. Let us begin with SELF-REFLECTION. Let us first look for the grounds which call for our turning away from the prevailing state of things. Let us seek the ideas which point in the direction of a change.

Let us examine our concepts according to which we have shaped conditions in East and West. Let us reflect whether these concepts have benefited our social organism and its interactions with the natural order, whether they have led to the appearances of a healthy existence or made humanity sick, inflicted wounds on it, brought disaster over it and put its present survival in jeopardy.

Let us examine, through careful scrutiny of our needs, whether the concepts of Western capitalism and Eastern communism are open enough to perceive what emerges ever more distinctly from the stream of development of our modern age as the central impulse in the soul of humanity, and which expresses itself as the will to a concrete personal responsibility. And that means, not to be harnessed any more to relations involving command and subjection, power and privileges.

I have occupied myself for many years with this question. Without the help of many other people whom I encountered in my research and experiences, I certainly would not have arrived at the answers that I would like to communicate in this appeal. And this is why these answers are not 'my opinion', but that which numerous others have also recognized to be true.

These are still too few to accomplish instant change. The number of those

having the proper insights has to grow. If we should succeed in giving a compact political and organizational form to what we call into being herewith and in applying it finally in a CONCENTRATED NON-PARLIAMENTARY-PARLIAMENTARY ACTION, then this appeal has reached its goal. What is at stake is a NON-VIOLENT REVOLUTION, an alternative which is designed to remain open towards the future.

The Symptoms of the Crisis

The problems that give us every reason to turn away from the prevailing conditions we assume to be well-known. It suffices here to call to mind the most decisive factors of the total predicament, in a summary ordered by key phrases.

The Military Threat

Even without the actual aggressive intentions of the superpowers, there is the danger of the world's atomic destruction. The military technology and the type of weapon stockpiling which has been preposterously increased no longer admits any control over the total apparatus, already impossible to survey. In spite of the stockpiled potential for the destruction of the Earth a hundred times over, behind the backdrops of so-called disarmament negotiations the arms race intensifies with every year.

The result of this collective madness is an enormous wastage of energy and raw materials and a gigantic waste of the creative faculties of millions of people.

The Ecological Crisis

Our relation to nature is characterized by its having become thoroughly disturbed. There is the threat of total destruction of our fundamental natural basis. We are doing exactly what it takes to destroy this natural basis by putting into action an economic system which consists in its unscrupulous exploitation. It has to be clearly spelled out that in this regard the capitalist economic system of the West is basically no different to that of the state capitalism of the East. The destruction is implemented on a worldwide scale.

Between the mine and the garbage dump extends the one-way street of modern industrial civilization, to whose expansive growth more and more lifelines and life cycles of the ecological systems are sacrificed.

The Economic Crisis

This manifests itself in a great number of symptoms that fill the newspapers and media broadcasts daily. Strikes and lock-outs. Billions of people, if counted on a world scale, are unemployed and cannot put their faculties into use for the common good. In order not to slaughter that holy cow 'the laws of marketing', giant amounts of the most valuable food products which accumulate in

subsidized overproduction are destroyed, without the batting of an eyelid, while at the same time in other areas of the world thousands are dying of hunger daily.

What we see here is not the concern to produce in response to the demands of consumers but the skilfully disguised wastage of goods.

This kind of business method surrenders humanity ever more into the power of a clique of multinational corporations that decide the fate of us all at their conference tables, with the top functionaries of communist state monopolism.

Let us leave out any more characterization of what is constantly delivered free of charge into our homes – in the names of 'the monetary crisis', 'the crisis of democracy', 'the crisis of education', 'the legitimization crisis of the state', etc. – and in conclusion discuss briefly:

The Crisis of Consciousness and Meaning

Most people feel helplessly at the mercy of surrounding conditions. In the destructive processes they are subjected to, in the impenetrable tangle of political and economic power, in the distractions and diversionary strategies of a cheap entertainment industry, they cannot find any existential meaning.

Especially the young fall in growing numbers victim to alcoholism, become addicted to drugs, commit suicide. Hundreds of thousands of them are victimized by fanatics under the guise of religion. There is a boom of escapism. As a pendant to this loss of personal identity and depersonalization we see the slogan 'after me the deluge!', the reckless pursuit of the pleasure principle, the complete accommodation of the attempt to get from the total meaninglessness of life, as long as it lasts, all there is to get, without any consideration for those whose account is being overdrawn for the difference.

This difference is one which our environment, our fellow men and posterity will have to pay. It is time to supersede the systems of 'organized irresponsibility' (Rudolf Bahro), by an alternative of equalization and solidarity. [...]

In the outline of the alternative, that is, of the **THIRD WAY**, of which the communist party first and now the PCI [Partito Comunista Italiano] also speaks positively, we think of man first. He is the builder of the **SOCIAL SCULPTURE** and according to his dimensions and intentions the social organism must be formed.

In accordance with the feeling for and the recognition of human dignity, three basic needs are held by man today as pre-eminent:

1. He wants to **DEVELOP FREELY** his faculties and his personality and to put to use his capacities, jointly with the capacities of his fellow men, **FREELY** for a purpose which he has recognized to be **MEANINGFUL**.

2. He views every kind of privilege as an unbearable violation of the legitimate democratic right for equality. He has the need, as a person of age in respect to all rights and duties – be they in an economic, social or cultural

context – to be recognized as **AN EQUAL AMONG EQUALS** and to have a say in the democratic process on all levels and in all areas of society.

3. He wants to **GIVE SOLIDARITY AND TO CLAIM SOLIDARITY**. Perhaps it will be doubted that this expresses a pre-eminent basic need of man today, because egoism is by far the predominant motive today in individuals' behaviour. But conscientious scrutiny reveals a different situation. Egoism certainly may be in the foreground and determine one's behaviour. However, it is not a need, nor a sought-for ideal. It is a drive which rules and dominates. Yet what is wished for is **MUTUAL HELP GIVEN BY FREE CHOICE**.

When the impulse of solidarity is felt as a human ideal and the ideal of humanity, then the task is posed, to change those mechanisms which activate the egotistical drive through the social structures, in such a way that they do not oppose inner human intentions. [...]

What can we do now for the realization of the Alternative?

Anyone who envisages this evolutionary alternative has a clear understanding of the **SOCIAL SCULPTURE** which **MAN AS AN ARTIST** is helping to build.

Anyone who says there has to be change but skips over the 'Revolution of concepts' and charges up against only the external embodiments of ideologies, is going to fail. He will either give up, be satisfied with reforms, or enter the blind alley of terrorism. All three are forms of victory for the strategies of the systems.

If we finally ask the question: **WHAT CAN WE DO?** so as to reach the goal of the new reorganization, starting at the fundamentals, then we have to realize: there is only one way of transforming the established order, but it requires a wide range of different measures.

This only way is **NON-VIOLENT TRANSFORMATION**. Non-violent, not because violence does not seem to promise success in the moment, or for other specific reasons. No. Non-violence must be based on human, spiritual and moral, social and political grounds.

On one hand, the dignity of man is inextricably bound up with the inviolability of the person, and whoever disregards this, leaves the plane of being human. On the other hand, the systems which need to be changed are built on violence of every imaginable kind. Therefore, every way of using violence is an expression of conformity, which thus consolidates that which it wants to dissolve.

This appeal aims to encourage the adoption of the way of non-violent transformation. To those who have been passive until now, though filled with discomfort and dissatisfaction, goes our call: **BECOME ACTIVE!** Your activity is perhaps the only thing which could lead those who are active but flirt with the use of violence or already are using violence, back to the way of non-violent action.

Although the indicated 'Revolution of concepts' is the core of the method of change presented here, it does not absolutely have to come at the beginning of

all stages. Absolute claims are foreign to it as well. Anyone who is robust enough to examine thoroughly the theories of Marxism, liberalism, the Christian social ethic, down to their final conclusions, will find that they arrive at the same results as we do.

This examining of historic trends down to their final conclusions is necessary today. Where it has courageously been achieved, one notices how the fronts are shifting. There [eco-socialist philosopher] Bahro stands nearer to [Free Democratic Party members] Karl-Hermann Flach and William Bonn than these stand to their party friend [minister for economic affairs] Otto Graf Lambsdorff, and to those of their comrades who took him prisoner and found him guilty [in the Flick corporation bribery scandal].

The process of recasting hardened concepts and theoretical attempts is under way. It has to lead to a BIG DIALOGUE, to a communication between factions, disciplines and nations on the alternative models for a solution. The FREE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY (Free University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research) is the permanent bid to organize and develop this communication.

'Against the combined interests of the powerful, only an electrifying idea has a chance at least as strong as that of Humanism in the last and that of Christianity of the first centuries of our era' (Herbert Gruhl [a founder of the German Green Party]). In order to penetrate to this 'electrifying idea' across the different beginnings alive in the new social movement, we need a constant and all-embracing dialogue. The FREE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY as a place for organization also includes all the groups and live cells in our society in which people have banded together to think through the questions of the future of our society together. The greater the numbers who collect together for this work, the stronger and more effective the alternative ideas will be. Here then, is our appeal: Let us create jobs at the FREE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, the university of the people.

But this alone is not enough. Wherever possible, we should commit ourselves to the PRACTICE of an alternative mode of living and working. Many have made a beginning already in small areas and special fields. An ALLIANCE of alternative economic and cultural enterprises is the CONSTRUCTIVE INITIATIVE ACTION THIRD WAY (union of enterprises, foundation, members organization). Individual groups or enterprises that want to add actions to their alternative ideas are called upon to support this project.

A final relevant aspect. Perhaps the most important and decisive one for the way of the non-violent transformation. How can the NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT achieve a POLITICAL DIMENSION?

This poses the question, at least for the context of the Western democracies, concerning the possibility of parliamentary action. If we choose this way, then we are right in following it only if we develop a NEW STYLE of political work and

political organization. Only if we get practice in this new style, will we be able to overcome the obstacles which are put in the way of alternative development in the form of restrictive clauses and the like.

It really is necessary that from the side of the parliaments as well, alternative models for solutions are advanced, noticeable to the general public. For this to happen, those people who have developed such models have to get into the parliaments. How do they get in? By concentrating their whole energy in a JOINT ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

For the success of such an attempt it is crucial how the whole alternative movement is viewed. This consists of a true abundance of different currents, initiatives, organizations, institutions, etc. They have only one chance for success, that of moving jointly.

However, joint election campaign does not mean party organization, party programme, party debates in the old style. The needed unity can only be UNITY IN PLURALITY.

The movement of citizens' initiatives, the ecological movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the movement of models for practice, the movement for a democratic socialism, a humanistic liberalism, the Third Way, the anthroposophical movement and the different Christian denominationally oriented movements, the movement for civil rights and the Third World movement have to realize that they are indispensable ingredients of a general alternative movement, parts which do not exclude or contradict, but which supplement each other.

The reality is that there are Marxist, Catholic, Lutheran, liberal, anthroposophical, ecological, etc. alternative concepts and initiatives. In many essential points there already is a high degree of agreement amongst them. This is the basis of collectivity in unity. In other points there is a lack of agreement. This is the basis of freedom in unity.

A joint election campaign of the general alternative movement is viable only as an ALLIANCE of many autonomous groups, which shape their reciprocal relations and those to the general public in the spirit of ACTIVE TOLERANCE. Our parliaments need the liberating spirit and life of such an union, the UNION FOR THE NEW DEMOCRACY.

The vehicles embarking on this new course are thus ready. They offer room and work for everyone. [...]

Joseph Beuys, extracts from 'An Appeal for an Alternative', in *Art into Society/Society into Art: Seven German Artists* [Albrecht D., Joseph Beuys, K.P. Brehmewr, Hans Haacke, Dieter Hacker, Gustav Metzger, Klaus Staack] (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1974) 370-71. © DACS 2009