



Freedom Relations – Reflections on Sculpture, Space and a Human Being

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Prelude

"I cannot understand the idea of creativity where it is not related to the self-conscious 'I' which stands in the field of inner freedom" (Beuys 1990, p. 54).

Extending our understanding of art through presenting various forms of his philosophy, was a key interest for Joseph Beuys. For Beuys, art was the only "evolutionary-revolutionary power" that

was "capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system" – said system referred to both socialist and capitalist societies (ibid.). *Social sculpture* was – and still is – a conceptual method of regarding the social organism as a work of art. There are many essential concepts relating to the idea of social sculpture, such as freedom, creativity, volition, warmth, thought and – of course, unavoidably – the concept of sculpture itself as a core metaphor.

This essay documents an exhibition called *Freedom Relations*, focusing on several central artworks on the theme of freedom. The exhibition was about human–world interrelationship in general, especially about the concept of freedom and its complex relational nature. More pointedly, the exhibition investigated how space can work as a medium demonstrating freedom as a relation. The exhibition is one of the artistic parts of my arts-based research on Joseph Beuys's social sculpture which took place in April 2016 in Nokia, Finland.

In the text I have chosen to use the word “visitor” instead of “spectator” or “audience”. This is to highlight the role of a person entering the exhibition: not to remain as an outsider but to become involved. Another possible word could have been “experiencer”.





Freedom Cage: Giving and Limiting Freedom

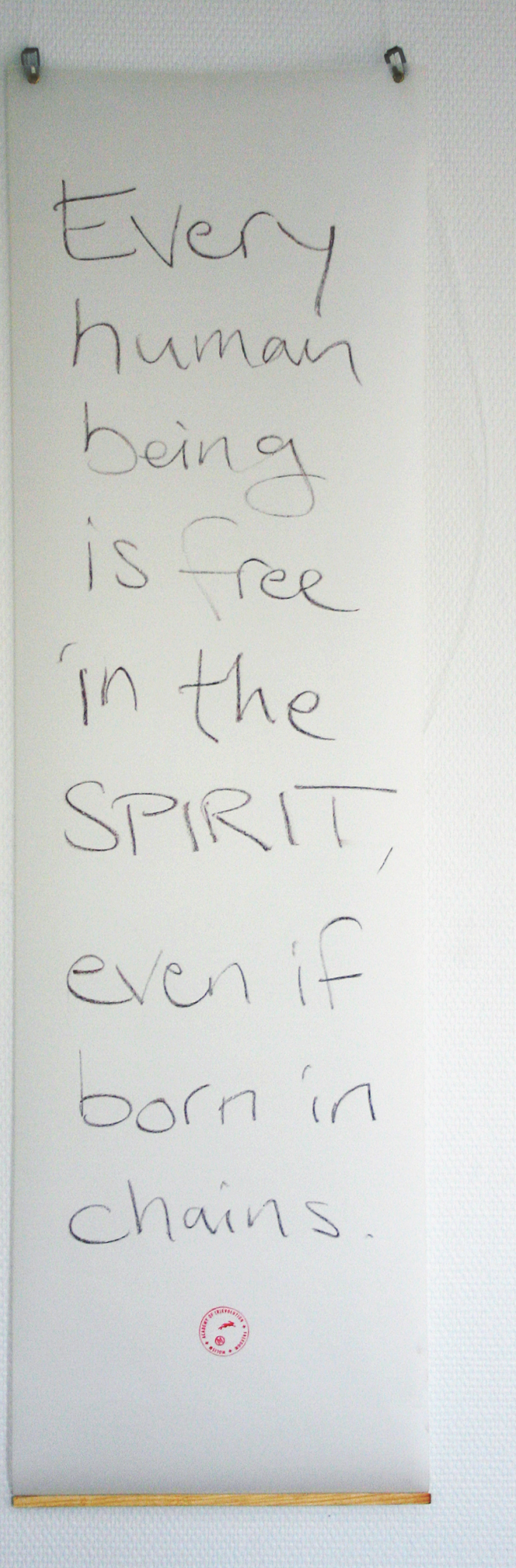
At first glance Freedom Cage gives the illusion of freedom: the visitor can quite freely move in the space and go inside the cage and leave it as (s)he wills. It appears that the cage doesn't limit the freedom of the visitor. But this is not true.

Upon entering the room that the cage inhabits, the visitor is forced into a relationship with the installation. It is impossible for the visitor to avoid having a relationship with the cage. The freedom that is left for the visitor is the freedom of choosing the nature of the relationship: Do I position myself inside or outside the cage, or maybe somewhere in between? And why does one choose this particular relational positioning?

Interlude: Of Space and Mind

I am suggesting that sculptures, and three-dimensional artworks in general, form more clearly and unavoidably a relationship with the spectator because of their spatial nature of existing. Compared to two-dimensional artworks they more easily become "beings" as opposed to "objects". One can pass by a painting without paying any attention to it – that is, without forming relationship – but entering a room where a sculpture exists it is impossible not to have some relationship with it (Mitchell 2010.)

This connects to a notion that has occurred to me recently. It took me a while – and this is obviously not very original – but I have gradually understood to consider the mind as being something that is not limited within our bodily limits. It seems impossible to define the boundaries of the mind – if they even exist. In this regard it is obvious that experiencing a sculpture is inevitable when in the same room with it. This gives an interesting nuance to the concept of social sculpture.



The room where Freedom Cage exists is otherwise almost completely empty. There is only one handwritten text hanging on the wall, offering one more perspective to freedom. The text says: "Every human being is free in the SPIRIT, even if born in chains" – a slogan that I have composed as a synthesis from various Beuys's propositions about freedom. Below the text there is also a small red stamp claiming this text to be connected with "Academy of [R]evolution".

The text sets an existential challenge. The cage shows us, how we are never truly free. But the text indicates we are always free. It is not a paradox, but a change of ontological level or existential position. There is a quality in us that cannot be imprisoned or limited by any external actors. Only we ourselves are capable of limiting the possibilities of our spirit, soul or mind – call it what you will. Here lies our creative potential, our constitutive capacity. It lies in the fact that we have the freedom to form meaningful relations to all other beings, to coexist in and with the more-than-human world. Beuys (1990) says: "[Man] is free in his thinking, and here is the point of origin of sculpture. For me, the formation of the thought is already sculpture" (p. 91). The point of origin of social sculpture is in our spiritual freedom that allows us to choose how we coexist in the world. Through this free creative potential, it is possible for us to change the world, to heal it.





Interlude: The Ultimate Bond

Existing in the world consists of a rhizome of relations. We cannot position ourselves without other beings, and the relations to these other beings form the meanings of our existence. Ultimately, it is quite safe to say that on a very constitutive level we are never absolutely free.

Water is a definitive metaphor for our holistic relation to everything that is alive – at least in the known universe. Contemplating water opens our understanding to realize how we are not the kings of all creation but just a part of something much greater: the more-than-human world (Abram 1996). In this world we are never free of it, but we have the freedom to choose how we exist in and as a part of it. However, I regard that on the existential level we do not have the freedom of not choosing the quality of that relation. If we try to avoid acknowledging the necessity of choosing, it still does not make us free. We become prisoners of not acknowledging, we become empathetically cold and existentially unborn – or dead.

Concept Office: Forge of [R]Evolution

Concept Office: forge of [r]evolution is paraphrasing Beuys's The End of the 20th Century, focusing on the ideas of living sculpture and constant change. Being explicitly unfinished, it aims to evoke in the visitor an urge to act, to do something – maybe clean up the place, or maybe build up something. However, visitors are not allowed to touch the installation, which brings about a tension. This tension aims to exemplify that the formation of the thought is already sculpture (Beuys 1990) and thus generate a [r]evolution of the mind. Optimistically thinking, instead of satisfying urges through the exhibition, the visitors are expected to be moved to action upon leaving the exhibition.





Postlude: Academy of [R]Evolution

Since 1967 Beuys founded or co-founded several political organizations, such as the DSP German Student Party, Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendum, and Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (Beuys 1990). Academy of [R]Evolution, an imaginary organization developed for this exhibition, refers obviously to the Free International University but also to Beuys's notion of art as an evolutionary-revolutionary power. Its ultimate aim is to spark a social sculpture mindset by challenging people to imagine and realize what – within the more-than-human world – is our holistic position and our responsibility to choose our freedom. That is why in the stamp of Academy of [R]Evolution there are words Freedom and Holism.





“Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mold ourselves”
(May 1953, p. 138).

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About the author

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