

ARTS

It's redefined, but is it still art?

Joseph Beuys: Graphic Works
Ring House Gallery until Oct. 23

Review By Christine Koch

Joseph Beuys is the first to admit that he is not an artist in the conventional understanding of the term. A large part of his artistic production is aimed at redefining the terms "art" and "artist." The exhibition *Joseph Beuys: Graphic Works* currently showing at Ring House Gallery, accompanied by catalogue and video presentation of Beuys explaining his aesthetic philosophy, offers a fascinating glimpse into this very interesting man and his work.

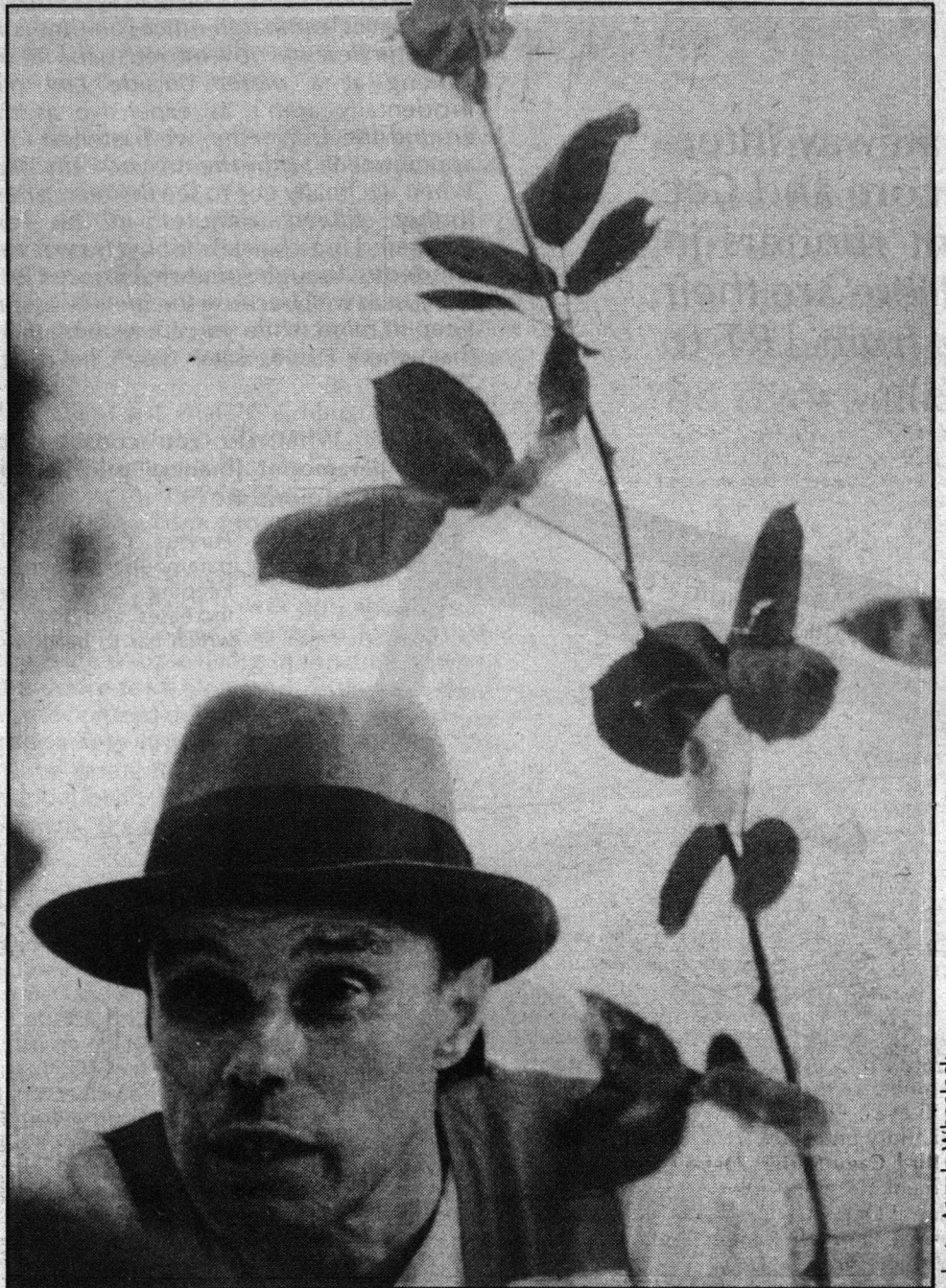
Beuys' approach to art is highly political. His rhetoric is that of a social democrat, but his visions are utopian. To Beuys, art is the means of changing all structures of society. Ideally, art should be directed to the human condition, and should be accessible to everybody. At the same time, the creative process itself is equally important, and because the creative urge is present in everybody

(though often repressed by society), Beuys views every work of human labour, manual or otherwise, as an artistic effort. In this way, he contends, art reaches the needs of everybody, and everybody shares art in the common element of creativity.

In his own work, Beuys attempts to break through the borders prescribed by institutions and academies, which he sees as oppressing creativity and offering an extremely reduced idea of art. (It is worth noting that Beuys was dismissed from his post as professor at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art in 1972.) His work attempts to be omnidirectional. To quote from the catalogue: "each drawing or print edition serves as an antenna connecting such diverse phenomena as animal behavior, geological processes, human social institutions, geography, music, and the nature of materials."

After hearing Beuys on the subject, one expects his own art to be very wonderful indeed. Yet as he is represented here, in lithographs, photoseries, silkscreen, woodcuts, postcards, and slides of his sculpture, there is little to suggest his grand ambitions. What confronts the viewer at first glance are a series of often incomprehensible scribbles, some photographs and postcards of ostensibly political meaning, sculpture which surpasses dadaism in ugliness, and a great deal of ego (Beuys himself is the prominent focus of no less than four photos).

This is not to say that there are not some fine qualities in his work. The coloured lithographic series "Trace 1," for example, features a very pleasing calligraphic, gestural style, and its loosely figurative drawings are reminiscent of the simple yet sophisticated paleolithic art. The two predominant colours, yellow ochre and a blood red, are suggestive of the very organic nature of Beuys' art. Similarly, the woodcut "Stag can" reflects the influence of a more primitive culture. The "Minneapolis Fragments" are framed



Joseph Beuys in a photographic self-portrait.

photo Angela Wheelock

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transcriptions of Beuys' own notes made at a lecture he gave at the University of Minneapolis, and, though largely illegible, exemplify his assertion that every human endeavour may be classed as art. And the photographs, while often thematically obscure or imbued with a personal or political symbolism not immediately apparent, are nevertheless compositionally intriguing.

But on the whole, it is more interesting to listen to the man than to look at his art. It is difficult to correlate Beuys' words with his graphic works, and his obscurantism seems to defeat his primary goal of making art universally accessible. Beuys does better as a political philosopher and rhetorician, than as an artist. Yet this accusation would be acceptable to him, for, as he defines the term "artist," the two are one.

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