



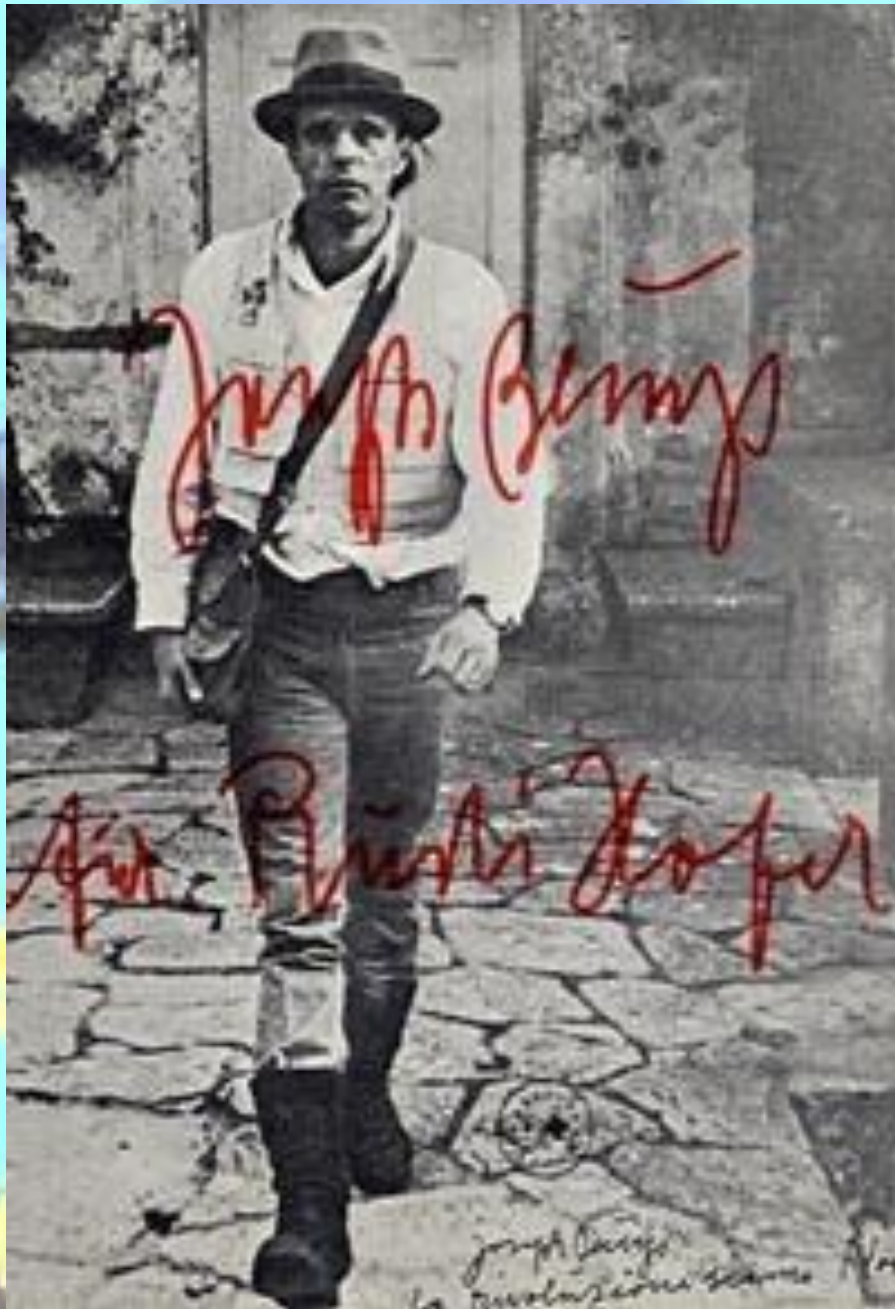
Wolfgang Wildgen  
**Dimensions of Meaning in the  
Artwork of Beuys**

Conference given at the Symposium:  
What are Artworks and How Do we  
Experience Them?

Aarhus, 28th of January 2012

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**Serigraphy by Andy Warhol**

# Context and development of Beuys' artwork

- **Joseph Beuys was born in 1921 in Germany**
- **Immediately after his Abitur (graduation) in 1940 he became soldier (radioman in a plane until 1945).**
- **After the prisoner camp (1947) he studied at the art academy in Düsseldorf (mainly sculpture).**
- **In 1961 he was appointed Professor of monumental sculpture at the Academy of Düsseldorf.**
- **In 1963 he organized the “International Festum Fluxus Fluxorum” and developed his techniques of performance art after 1964.**
- **In 1972 he was fired by the minister Johannes Rau, because he occupied with students the office of student inscriptions.**
- **International activities: participation in the Documenta in Kassel, foundation of an International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, political activities, provocative actions in New York, Edinburgh, Basel and many other places.**
- **Beuys died in Düsseldorf 1986.**

# Materials and techniques in Beuys' artwork

- As a student of Mataré (1885-1962) he mainly produced sculptures in stone and iron (sepulchral and religious art).
- In 1952 he produced a fountain in steel (commanded but not accepted by the steel-company in Krefeld). It became in 1984 part of the installation "Barraque D'Dull Odde").
- Very soon he added organic material (plants and animals):
  - Deer, elk, sheep, hares; bees;
- Products of animals:
  - Wax, honey (from bees)
  - Grease (derived from animal fat)
  - Felt (derived from fur and hair of sheep)

- **In the further course of his artistic development the materials became more numerous (complex) and more dynamic. Performances became the centre of his activities.**
  - **In 1965 Beuys explained his drawing to a dead hare, his head was painted with honey.**
  - **In 1974 he lived three days on stage in a New York gallery together with a coyote.**
  - **In 1982 he began to plant 7000 oak trees in Kassel each one accompanied by a basalt stone.**



**New York performance: I like America and America likes me**



**Beuys explains his drawings to a dead hare**

# Artwork as social sculpture ("soziale Plastik")

- **The materials are not only of organic and animal origin, they are social and political (society).**
- **In summary one can say that Beuys enlarged or even totalized the type of materials for "sculpture":**
  - **From stone, steel to "warm" materials (wax, honey, grease, animals)**
  - **From symbolic individuals (animals, humans) to social and political dynamics. The ultimate artwork is a (future) society or even humanity.**



# Visual artwork and language

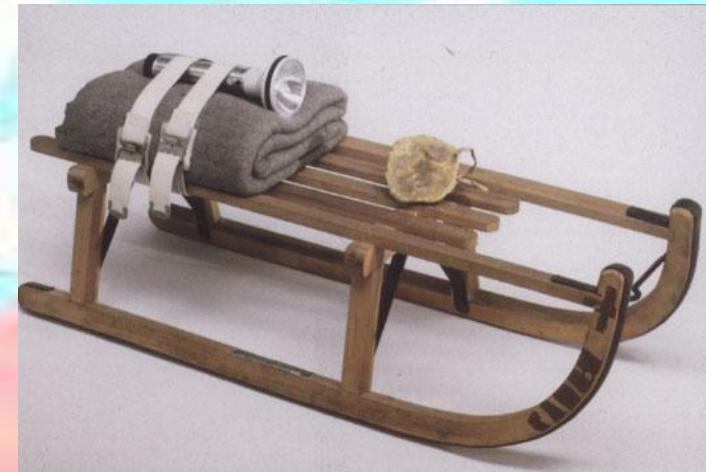
- **Complementary to the vanishing relevance of figurative art and the preponderance of reflective processes, gestures and a minimalist attitude (cf. Arte Povera, Informel, Minimal Art) conceptual backgrounds of artwork became more important.**
- **This approached visual artwork to linguistic thinking: Beuys said in an interview 1985: “My way was going through language, although this seems strange, it did not start from artistic talents” ....” It led me to a concept of sculpture, which starts already when we speak and think ... shaping our feeling and intention. ”**
- **But speaking as artwork was for Beuys conceptual Innovation (play) and the creation of new social meaning. Rigid rules, the established lexicon had to be transformed.**

# Examples from different periods



**Kreuzigung  
(crucifixion) 1962/63**

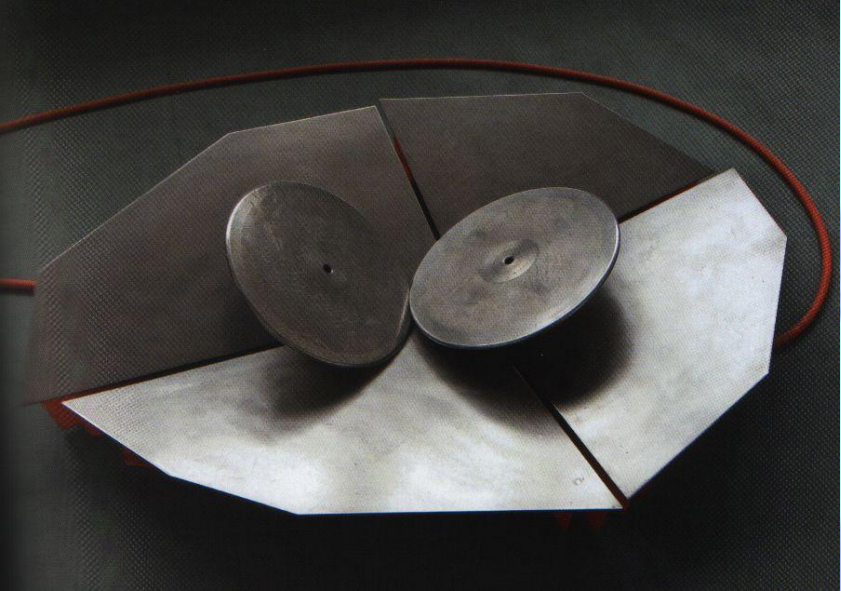
**“Fettstuhl” (fat-chair,  
1963, Landesmuseum  
Darmstadt)**



**Slate with equipment for  
rescue (multiple  
produced by the edition  
Block, New York in 1969,  
one item sold for  
450.000\$ in 2010)**

- **Artwork is therefore a **conceptual** procedure (operating with concrete forms, visual or spoken) which gives access to an invisible, not perceivable space. The techniques of visual artwork are multiple:**
  - **Graphical signs on surfaces**
  - **Diagrams (cf. next section), writing,**
  - **Sculptures (including interiors, installations),**
  - **Performances with gestures, happenings and video documentation (including music).**

**With the shift to performances, a difference between **actuality** (in time and space) of performed art and the artefacts conserved (stocked) in a museum (i.e. **memory**) became evident.**



**Fountain, Krefeld, 1952**



**Barraque D'Dull Odde, 1961-1967, Krefeld**



**Setting up the "Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein" sculpture, 1958-1985 (bronze formed on a clay mount)**

- In an interview Beuys said:  
“For me the WORD generates all pictures. It is the key-sign all formative and isolating processes”
- In his use of words and the associated concepts he uses two techniques of innovation:
  - **Empty** the meaning space either by reducing words to sounds (cf. Dada) or by speaking to a dead animal (non audible to the public).
  - “**Play rock’ and roll**” with words, throwing them in the round (“ um sich werfen”).
  - **Deconstructing** the rigid lexicon and letting new meanings emerge in context.

# Language as a topic in his visual artwork

- **Spoken language is like smoke from the chimney of a factory (cf. next slide).**
- **It is a series of vocal positions as exemplified by the pronunciation of IPHIGENIE.**
- **Language as a sound sculpture.**
- **The voice apparatus is also a bifurcation point in a more general dynamic field encompassing human will, human motion, and consciousness (“bewusstes Seelenleben”).**



# Diagrammatic style in Beuys' political art

- In his diagrams performed on blackboards or on the floor Beuys combined figurative drawings with graphical symbols (lines, circles, arrows) and written words. He relates this style to Leonardo's codices.
- In another diagram of the same period (1972) he uses logical oppositions (an Aristotelian style):
  - Chaos – Ordnung; Geburt – Tod; Wärme – Kälte; Willen – Gefühl – Denken





## Another drawing alludes to mathematical forms and concepts in the natural sciences:

- Regular solids (in Leonardo's and Dürer's tradition),
- Crystallization as a inorganic process,
- Embryology (compare Thom's morphogenesis, 1972).
- Energy flow and thermodynamics (warmth).

## A very complex diagram named "Evolution" combines even more categories:

- Human body, a deer, plants, crystals, water, the sun,
- Social scales: Bürger – Künstler – Arbeiter; Geistesleben – Rechtsleben – Wirtschaftsleben.
- Names of philosophers on a historical scale: Plato/ Aristoteles, Newton /Kant/Helmholtz, Marx. The extremes are marked by Christus.
- The dominating drawing at the right is based on the sun and its rays (warmth) and supports pictures of the human body, the structure of a plant (cf. Goethe) and the deer (symbol of the soul).



# The aesthetic “value” of artwork. Some questions in the case of Beuys

My answers can only be preliminary, because the process of evaluation and re-evaluation is still going on 25 years after Beuys' death.

1. As in other pieces of modern art the material value is often low (simple, cheap materials are used).
2. The permanence of the artwork is rather low, i.e. the evaluation concerns an artwork in its enaction, in a specific situation or in a restricted period of existence (e.g. the two months of the Biennale in Venice etc.). The resulting pieces stocked in a museum or sold as multiple in art auctions cannot be the primary object of aesthetic evaluation although they define the economic value (the price) of artwork.
3. Many pieces of artwork by Beuys have biographical memory values. The question is then: Do these biographical memory values (concerning situations in his life) have an aesthetic value for the larger public, which does not share these memories.
4. Beuys' art typically reflects a “Zeitgeist” , i.e. insofar as it catches this “Zeitgeist” it has a value for some community (e.g. Germany or Europe) in this period (e.g. the sixties). How does this value evolve over time, does it possibly fade away? This is also a criterion for the evaluation of his artwork as “social sculpture”.
5. Finally the investment of personal life in the artwork is a criterion. The value of Beuys' installations and performances depend essentially on his bodily presence. How did this value change after his death?

# Beuys and modern semiotics: some afterthoughts

- **Beyond the reference to Leonardo and Dürer Beuys reflective and diagrammatic art can point to the Bauhaus-tradition (and similar European traditions), more specifically to the work of Paul Klee (in the field of painting not sculpture).**
- **But one can also compare his diagrammatic style with the theoretical thinking by Charles Sanders Peirce (in his diagrammatic logic and in his agapism) and to René Thom (in his topological and morphogenetic thinking).**

# Comparison with Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

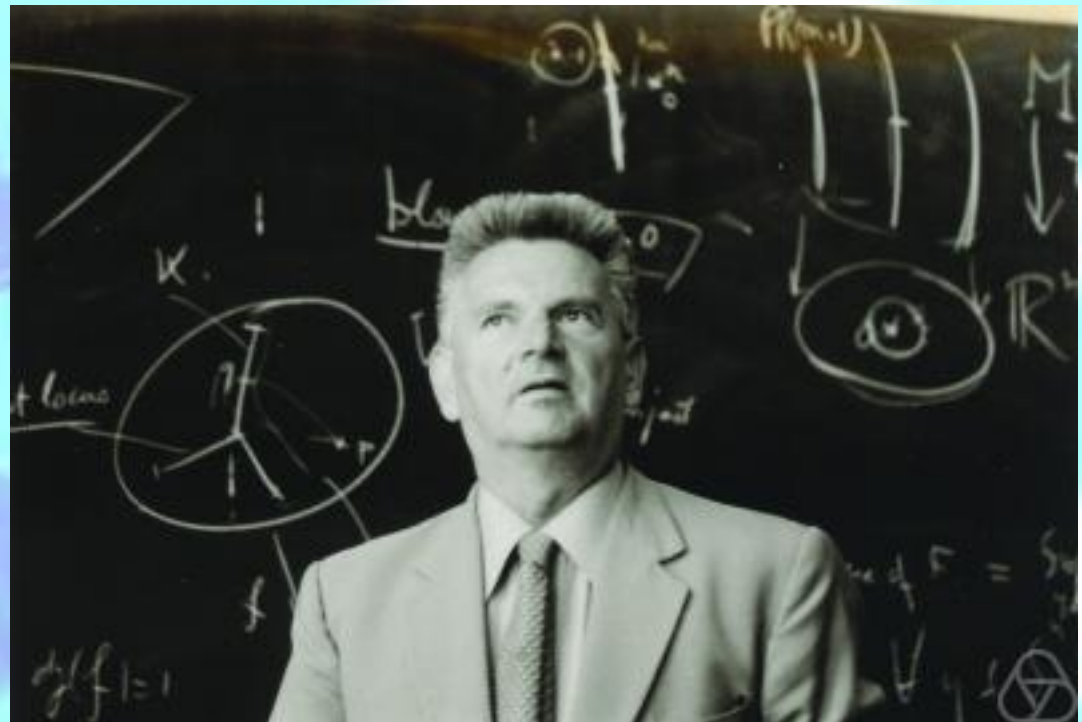
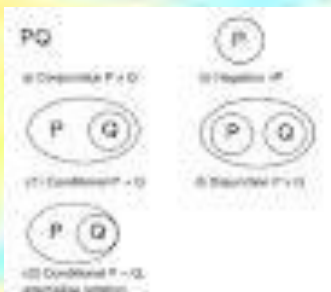
Peirce's diagrammatic logic and Beuys' diagrams only share the appeal to vision and visual cognition. The deductive power of Peirce's diagrammatic logic has no parallel in Beuys' diagrams, they are mainly suggestive or metaphorical devices.

In an article on **Kepler** Peirce distinguishes Kepler's imagination which enables "a mental diagram of a complicated state of facts" from a poet's imagination which "riots in ornaments and accessories".

- **Kepler** looks at the world "with an eye of sadness, without tears, yet without illusion".
- **Beuys'** diagrams corresponds to a poet's imagination, although they represent the result of a complex consideration of relevant forces. The transition could be smooth; but the characters are different. Beuys is a utopian optimist.

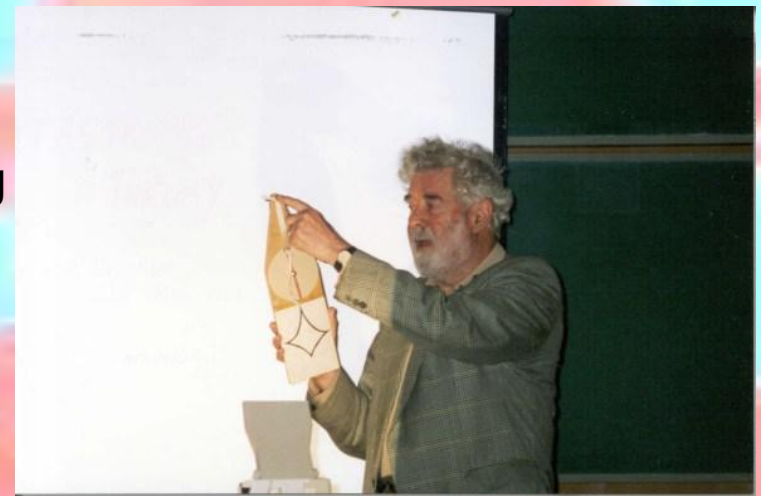


**Charles Sanders Peirce**



**René Thom (1930-2002)**

**Zeeman  
demonstrating  
his  
„catastrophe  
machine“**



# Agapism in Peirce and Beuys

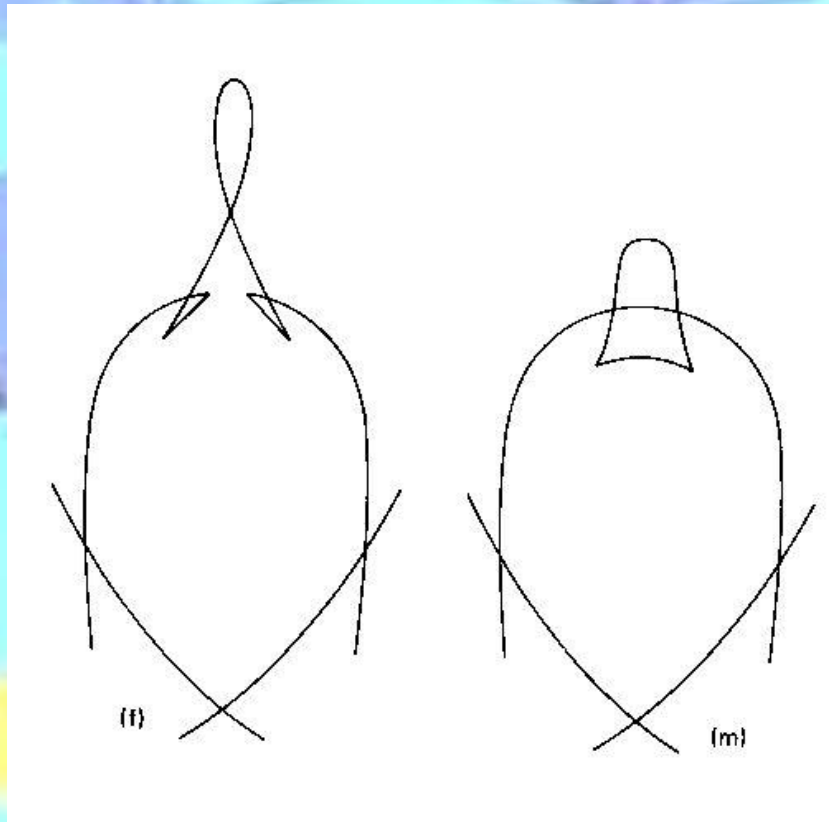
- **Agapism** in Peirce has to do with social warmth. Its basic force is love (eros) and not greed (which Peirce associates with social Darwinism). Peirce sees agapism as a basic force in the evolution of mankind (and the universe in general).
- This idea is also represented in the warm materials preferred by Beuys: milk (butter), honey, wax produced by animals and shaped in his sculptures. Both share a Christian (religious) background based on **love and mutual help**.



# Comparison with René Thom (1923 - 2002)

- The mathematician and philosopher of science René Thom applied his mathematical insights far beyond normal applications: in biology, semiotics, linguistics and he shares a universalistic intention with Beuys.
- Coming from differential topology (geometry) he also shares the **visual mode** of thinking with the visual artist Beuys.
- His applications are often a kind of **re-semantization** of abstract drawings (derived from mathematical theorems). I shall discuss two examples.

# The embryological differentiation of sexual organs

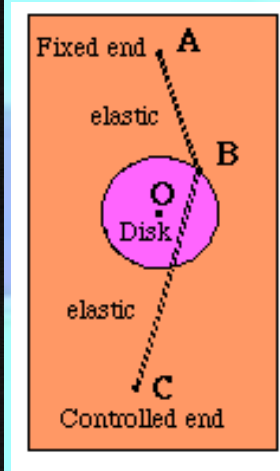
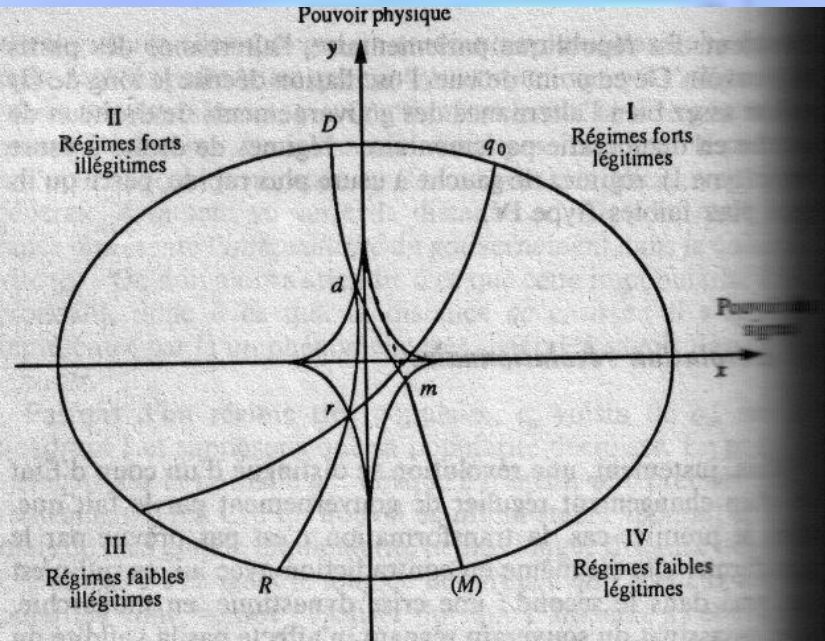


- Based on the unfolding of the catastrophe called “parabolic umbilic” Thom shows (in 1972) a sequence of pictures which are related to the formation of a penis (f) and a vagina (m).
- As long as the mathematical formula is not part of a formalized biological theory, such an interpretation is purely schematic, i.e. it tells us that further investigation in this direction may be rewarding; it is kind of scientific utopia.

**Phases in the unfolding of the catastrophe called parabolic umbilic**

**F= extrusion (male); intrusion (female)**

# Revolutions or social “catastrophes”



- In an article (written in 1985, published in 1990) Thom uses the model of a “catastrophe machine” devised by Zeeman to describe political revolutions. His argument is based on six countries and revolutions which took place after 1649 (England, Commonwealth). The two axes are: (x) military power and (y) semiotic (ideological) power. Such models were criticised in Applied Mathematics as not explicit (Sussman, 1978). They are again rather a sketch for the design of a future theory. In this sense they are utopian like Beuys’ political diagrams.

**Bifurcation plane (asteroid): pathes:**  
**R=revolution; critical at r, end at d; dD**  
**appearance of the strong man; Ddm =slow**  
**loss of his power; M = restoration**

# Artwork versus Science or both?

## Is there a specific phenomenology of aesthetic experience?

- In Beuys' slogan: "Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler" (some students added: as long as he doesn't study arts) he denies such a specificity but his eccentric **personality** and the success of his performances demonstrate that he is not *everybody* and thus contradicts his dictum.
- In an other dictum "Kapital = erweiterter Kunstbegriff" he refers first to the human creative (artistic) capacity which is a **capital** for humanity and second (in relation to Marx) he says that the products themselves exchanged for money have become the new medium (money this became the object of exchange). As a medium the (industrial) products are like art a means of communication and embedded in the money market. This could be the germ of a theory of the market.
- The inability of scientific theories of the market to bring about a global change and to avoid imminent catastrophes leaves the artist with the duty to shape the future society (as a social sculpture). Art becomes a **political thought experiment**.