

BOOK REVIEW:
*RUDOLF STEINER - ALCHEMY OF THE
EVERYDAY*

Mateo Kries, Alexander von Vegesack & Julia Althaus (editors), Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, 2010. ISBN 978-3931936860, 336 pp., hardcover, English version, €79.90

In the nineteenth century a future of chemical farming was imagined by chemistry advocates (e.g. Liebig, 1840; & Riddle, 1868). It was Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch with their 1909 process for capturing atmospheric nitrogen that ushered in the era of synthetic fertilizer and chemical agriculture. In 1924 Rudolf Steiner raised a contrarian voice to the chemicalization of agriculture and he proposed a differentiated agriculture (Paull, 2011a; Steiner, 1924). But who was Rudolf Steiner?

Rudolf Steiner - Alchemy of the Everyday aims to present an overview of Steiner's life work. This is a timely retrospective tome whose appearance coincides with the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Steiner's birth. *Alchemy* accompanies a travelling exhibition, of the same name, curated by Germany's Vitra Design Museum.

Rudolf Steiner was a pioneer of New Age thinking. He displayed a prodigious appetite for work, and his output was prolific as well as diverse. He presented over 5105 lectures (Stewart, 2012) and he is the author of 354 books (SteinerBooks, 2012), so that any overview of Steiner is destined to be challenging.

Alchemy is first and foremost a visual feast showcasing the life and mind of Steiner. It illustrates the diversity and novelty of Steiner's personal work as it touched the 'everyday' and as it manifested across a multitude of fields. Those fields include architecture, furniture, art, painting, sculpture, dance, jewellery, typography, medicine, education, and agriculture. *Alchemy* encapsulates Steiner's oeuvre within the space of 336 pages.

Alchemy, the book, is a comprehensive record of *Alchemy*, the exhibition. The book is a 'coffee table size' (215 x 290 mm) hardcover which is lavishly illustrated in colour throughout. There are over 500 illustrations, 16 essays, and a biographical timeline of Steiner's life (1861-1925). The book provides exhibition visitors with an enduring record of the experience and of the exhibits (Paull, 2011c). For those unable to attend the exhibition, *Alchemy* offers the rare opportunity, and a rich experience, within the span of a single volume, to grasp the breadth and depth of Steiner's life work.

The Foreword states that: "Rudolf Steiner was one of the most influential - yet most controversial - reformers of the 20th century" (Vegesack & Kries, in Kries et al., 2010, p. 18). In the nearly nine decades since his departure, the influence of Steiner has not subsided and nor has the contestation of his ideas. As Frath states: "Rudolf Steiner wanted a new spirituality to counter the prevailing zeitgeist, a spirituality which would find expression in art and design and again influence the life and inner essence of human beings" (in Kries et al., 2010, p.135).

Alchemy opens with a full page reproduction of Huschke's finely crafted oil painting of Steiner, 1906. The book moves on to the apogee of Steiner's architecture, the two Goetheanum buildings. The first Goetheanum was destroyed by fire on New Year's eve, 1923. The present Goetheanum is a masterpiece of design executed in reinforced concrete. These and other of Steiner's buildings appear in *Alchemy* as plans, models, construction photos, and completed projects. As Frath points out: "Rudolf Steiner issued this challenge to his colleagues: 'Let us work on making our building ... so that those who come to look at it are unconsciously transported into the sphere of love with which it was constructed'" (in Kries et al., 2010, p.136).

A strength of *Alchemy* reflects the strength of Vitra's own collection of anthroposophic furniture. For a design museum located within fifteen kilometres of Anthroposophy's headquarters at Dornach, Switzerland, anthroposophic furniture offers attractive opportunities for collection and exhibition of 'the everyday'. *Alchemy* presents Steiner's own, and anthroposophically-inspired, furniture including chairs, desks, cabinets, wardrobes, a bed, and a dressing table.

Alchemy states that: "Steiner is regarded as one of the pioneers of organic farming" (Gogos, in Kries et al., 2010, p.274). Agriculture appears towards the end of *Alchemy*, and is less well represented than one might wish, but that is perhaps understandable given the book's design museum provenance, and the context of agriculture within Steiner's life work. The subject of agriculture comprised just eight Steiner lectures delivered over a ten day period, and this was out of an oeuvre of more than 5000 lectures over four decades. The terms 'biodynamic agriculture' and 'organic farming' both derive from Steiner's characterization of the farm as an organism, although he himself neither coined, used nor heard either term (Paull, 2011b). Shortly after presenting his Agriculture Course in the summer of 1924, Steiner retired from public life in the September of the same year, and he died in March 1925. *Alchemy* includes images of one of Steiner's colourful Agriculture Course blackboard drawings, of the first German edition of his *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus* (Agriculture Course), and of Demeter farmers stirring biodynamic preparations. In an unfortunate turn of phrase, Gogos refers to "the organic fad" (p.272). He observes that "Steiner's originality ... lay in the cross-disciplinary synthesis of disconnected fields" (p.273). When referring to "Steiner's direct successors" (p. 275) and the crystallization process, it is an oversight not to acknowledge the preeminent successor and developer, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (Paull, 2011d; Pfeiffer, 1936, 1938).

Alchemy is an unparalleled opportunity to consider Rudolf Steiner in the context of a life lived intensely and with purpose. The organic sector is but a single strand of his diverse and enduring legacy. Released simultaneously, and complementing *Alchemy*, are two new books, *Rudolf Steiner in Stuttgart* (Neider & Schukraft, 2011) and *Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art* (Brüderlin & Groos, 2010).

Previous generations have been, variously, baffled and bewildered, enthralled and intrigued, endeared and enraged by Rudolf Steiner. As *Alchemy* bears witness, Steiner was a remarkable man and this major retrospective is a celebration of his difference. *Rudolf Steiner - Alchemy of the Everyday* is a delightful book that belongs in every serious Steiner collection and library.

John Paull PhD
Email: john.paull@mail.com

References

- Brüderlin, M., & Groos, U. (Eds.). (2010). *Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art*. Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag.
- Kries, M., Vegesack, A. v., & Althaus, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Rudolf Steiner - Alchemy of the Everyday*. Weil am Rhein, Germany: Vitra Design Museum.
- Liebig, J. (1840). To the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In L. Playfair, *Chemistry in its Application to Agriculture and Physiology* (1847, pp. iii-iv). Philadelphia, PA: T. B. Peterson.
- Neider, A., & Schukraft, H. (2011). *Rudolf Steiner in Stuttgart*. Stuttgart: Belser Gesellschaft.
- Paul, J. (2011a). Attending the First Organic Agriculture Course: Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course at Koberwitz, 1924. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 21(1), 64-70.
- Paul, J. (2011b). The Betteshanger Summer School: Missing link between biodynamic agriculture and organic farming. *Journal of Organic Systems*, 6(2), 13-26.
- Paul, J. (2011c). A Postcard from Stuttgart: Rudolf Steiner's 150th anniversary exhibition 'Kosmos'. *Journal of Bio-Dynamics Tasmania*, 103(Sept.), 8-11.
- Paul, J. (2011d). The secrets of Koberwitz: The diffusion of Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course and the founding of Biodynamic Agriculture. *Journal of Social Research & Policy*, 2(1), 19-29.
- Pfeiffer, E. (1936). *Formative Forces in Crystallization*. London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co.
- Pfeiffer, E. (1938). *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening: Soil Fertility Renewal and Preservation* (F. Heckel, Trans.). New York: Anthroposophic Press.
- Riddle, J. A. (1868). *Sterility is Laid, Prof. Ville's New System of Agriculture*. Manchester, NH: Charles F. Livingston.
- Steiner, R. (1924). *Agriculture Course* ("Printed for private circulation only"; 1929, first English language edition; George Kaufmann Trans). Dornach, Switzerland: Goetheanum.
- SteinerBooks. (2012). *The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner* (1 July). Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks Anthroposophic Press.
- Stewart, J. (2012). *Chronological Listing of Lectures* (29 January). Fremont, MI: Rudolf Steiner Archive.