

# JOSEPH BEUYS

## *Mapping the Legacy*



D.A.P.  
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

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## Appendix

### BEUYS: THE TWILIGHT OF THE IDOL Preliminary Notes for a Critique

*The fact that people in Germany deceive themselves concerning Wagner does not surprise me. The reverse would surprise me. The Germans have modeled a Wagner for themselves, whom they can honor: never yet have they been psychologists; they are thankful that they misunderstand. But that people should also deceive themselves concerning Wagner in Paris? Where people are scarcely anything else than psychologists. . . . How intimately related must Wagner be to the entire decadence of Europe for her not to have felt that he was a decadent. He belongs to it: he is its protagonist, its greatest name. . . . All that the world needs most today, is combined in the most seductive manner in his art—the three great stimulants of exhausted people: brutality, artificiality and innocence (idiocy). . . . Wagner est une névrose.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*<sup>1</sup>

**D**URING THESE DAYS OF THE Guggenheim Museum's Beuys exhibition one wonders why that most beautiful building, normally beaming with clarity, warmth and light, is dimly lit in a gray and moody twilight. Is this a theatrical trick, to create a setting of "Northern Romantic" light, meant to obscure? What mental semitrance are we supposed to enter before we are allowed to embark on wandering down the spiral of *24 Stations* (whose martyrrium, whose mysterium)? Perhaps we are prevented from seeing belated automatist drawings on the walls, pompously framed in chthonic iron, and weathered, withering relics

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique" first appeared in *Artforum* in 1980, as a response to Beuys' 1979/80 retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Written at a crucial moment in Beuys' American reception and dominating the critical reviews of the Guggenheim exhibition, Buchloh's text forcefully denounced the mythical foundations of the German artist's public persona while dismissively treating his artistic production. While Buchloh's debunking was perhaps a needed corrective to the uncritical adoration with which the artist was celebrated by some, the essay's impact on this side of the Atlantic was immediate and longlasting. As recently as 1993, Christopher Phillips, writing in *Art in America*, could credit the essay for lingering American curatorial unease with Beuys and the resulting relative scarcity of Beuys' works in American museums. The impression persists to this day that Buchloh's critique has never been successfully answered. It is reprinted here for context, in order to clarify both Buchloh's own reconsiderations and the extent to which the other authors in this volume are still replying to its arguments.—G.R.

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, New York, 1909, pp. 12–14. The idea of seeing Joseph Beuys in the tradition of Richard Wagner was proposed by the late Marcel Broodthaers in his public letter to Joseph Beuys, Düsseldorf, October 3, 1972. Published in book form later as: *Magie-Art et Politique*, by Marcel Broodthaers, Paris, 1973.

and vestiges of past activities, which might be “souvenirs of a life of spectacle, poor dead things. Bereft of the confectioner, the life of his art has vanished.”<sup>2</sup>

The presentation of the souvenirs, however, is most elaborate. Enshrined in specifically designed glass and wood cases that look like a cross between vitrines in Victorian museums of ethnography and display cases in turn-of-the-century boarding schools, the objects, or rather their containers, signal to the viewer: you are entering interior spaces, the realm of archetypal memories, an historic communion. Ahistoricity, that unconscious or deliberate obliviousness toward the specific conditions that determine the reality of an individual's being and work in historical time, is the functional basis on which public and private mythologies can be erected, presuming that a public exists that craves myths in proportion to its lack of comprehension of historic actuality. The ahistoric mythology of fascism, to give an example from *political* history, could only develop and gain credibility as a response to the chiliastic and debauched hopes of the starving and uneducated masses of the German Weimar Republic and postmonarchic Italy. Veneration for leaders grows out of the experiences of severe deficiency.

The private and public mythology of Joseph Beuys, to give an example from *art* history, could only be developed and maintained on the ahistoricity of esthetic production and consumption in postwar Europe. The substantially retarded comprehension of European Dada and Russian Constructivism, and their political as well as their epistemological implications, determined both European and American art up until the late 1950s and served for both producers and recipients as a basis for mythifying subsequent esthetic work. Once put into their proper historic context, these works would lose their mystery and seemingly metaphysical origin and could be judged more appropriately for their actual formal and material, that is, historical, achievements within the situation and the specific point of development of the discourse into which they insert themselves. The public myth of Beuys' life and work, by now having achieved proportions that make any attempt to question it or to put it into historic perspective an almost impossible critical task, is a result of these conditions, just as it tries to perpetuate them by obscuring historical facticity. This very attitude, however, of making the artist a cult figure, historicizes Beuys and aligns him with representatives of his own generation in Europe during the 1950s who were equally grand masters of the public spectacle: figures like Yves Klein and Georges Mathieu. No other artist (with the possible exception of Andy Warhol, who certainly generated a totally different kind of myth) managed—and probably never intended—to puzzle and scandalize his primarily bourgeois art audience to the

<sup>2</sup> This is the way Dore Ashton described her impressions of Yves Klein's work on the occasion of his first retrospective show in New York, 1967, in “Art as Spectacle,” *Arts Magazine*, March 1967, p. 44.

extent that he would become a figure of worship. No other artist also tried and succeeded so systematically in aligning himself at a given time with esthetic and political currents, absorbing them into his myth and work and thereby neutralizing and estheticizing them. Everybody who was seriously involved in radical student politics during 1960s in Germany, for example, and who worked on the development of a new and adequate political theory and practice, laughed at or derided Beuys' public-relations move to found the Grand Student Party, which was supposed to return an air of radicality to the master who was coming of esthetic age. Nobody who understands any contemporary science, politics or esthetics, for that matter, could want to see in Beuys' proposal for an integration of art, science and politics—as his program for the Free International University demands—anything more than simple-minded utopian drivel lacking elementary political and educational practicality. Beuys' existential and ideological followers and admirers, as opposed to his bourgeois collectors and speculators, are blindfolded like cultists by their leader's charisma. As usual with charisma, this seems to be nothing but a psychic interaction between hyperactive unconscious processes at the edge of sanity and the zombielike existence of supposed normality in which individuation has been totally extinguished, so it seems perfectly necessary to become a "follower" of whomever seems to be alive. Ernst Bloch, the German philosopher, when talking about Beuys' philosophical master Rudolf Steiner, gives an exact description of those processes that constitute the mythical figure and the cult, and this portrayal seems to describe Beuys word-for-word:

It is not surprising to meet peculiar dreamers. They are sufficiently disrupted to be open for unconditioned experiences. [The dreamer] tends to remove frontiers of everyday life so that it can cover the unusual with the ordinary, and vice versa. The divided self accumulates a feeling of sin whose power seems almost forgotten and unfathomable. The internalized super-ego, the pride and certainty of mimic messiah that those characters develop, would never be attained by any normal being, even in states of highest mental exaltation. No false Demetrius would maintain himself for long, but a false Jesus among madmen will do well. . . . The occult journalist Rudolf Steiner established himself at the top of the "Cognition of Higher Worlds," a particularly odd case. A mediocre, but unsupportable oddity, yet efficient . . . as though some rotten druids were chatting on newsprint-paper.<sup>3</sup>

As to Beuys, the cult and the myth seem to have become inseparable from the work, and as his confusion of art and life is a deliberate programmatic position, an "integration" to be achieved by everybody, it seems appropriate to take a critical look at some aspects of Beuys' private "myth of origin" before looking at the actual work.

3 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, chapter 53, in his *Collected Work*, Frankfurt, 1959, pp. 1393 ff. (my translation).

Beuys' most spectacular biographic fable convenue, the plane crash in the Crimea, which supposedly brought him into contact with Tartars, has never been questioned, even though it seems as contrived as it is dramatic. The photographic evidence, produced by Beuys, to give credibility to his "myth of origin," turns against itself: in Adriani's Beuys monograph<sup>4</sup> (until the Guggenheim catalogue the most comprehensive documentation of Beuys' life and work, and published in cooperation with the artist) we see Beuys standing beside a JU 87 that is in fairly good shape and flat on the ground. The caption reads: "Joseph Beuys after a forced landing in the Crimea in 1943."<sup>5</sup> The accompanying text reads as follows:

During the capture of the plane over an enemy anti-aircraft site, Beuys was hit by Russian gunfire. He succeeded in bringing his plane behind German lines, only to have the altimeter fail during a sudden snowstorm, consequently the plane could no longer function properly. Tartars discovered Beuys in total wilderness in the bottleneck area of the Crimea, in the wreckage of the JU 87, and they cared for Beuys, who was unconscious, most of the time, for about eight days, until a German search commando effected his transport to a military hospital.<sup>6</sup>

In Caroline Tisdall's Guggenheim catalogue<sup>7</sup> we are presented with three totally different photographs showing a severely damaged and tipped-over plane that under no circumstances can be identical to the one given in Adriani's book. Beuys' own recollection (or updated version of the fable convenue in Tisdall's book) reads as follows:

Had it not been for the Tartars I would not be alive today. . . . Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital. . . . The last thing I remember was that it was too late to jump, too late for the parachute to open. That must have been a couple seconds before hitting the ground. . . . My friend was strapped in and he was atomized by the impact—there was almost nothing to be found of him afterwards. But I must have shot through the windscreen as it flew back at the same speed as the plane hit the ground and that saved me, though I had bad skull and jaw injuries. Then the tail flipped over and I was completely buried in the snow. That's how the Tartars found me days later. I remember voices saying voda (water), then the felt of their tents and the dense pungent smell of cheese, fat and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth, and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep the warmth in.<sup>8</sup>

Who would, or could, pose for photographs after the plane crash, when severely injured? And who took the photographs? The Tartars with their fat-and-felt camera?

Beuys' "myth of origin," like every other individual or collective myth, is an intricate mixture of facts and memory material rearranged according to the

4 Goetz, Adriani, et al., *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, New York, 1979.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

7 Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, New York and London, 1979, p. 17.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

dynamics of the neurotic lie: that myth-creating impulse that cannot accept, for various reasons, the facticity of the individual's autobiographic history as such (a typical example would be the fantasy, more common in the beginning of this century, that a person believes he is the illegitimate child of an alien nobleman, not the simple progeny of a factory worker). As in every retro-projective fantasy, such a narcissistic and slightly pathetic distortion (either dramatization or nobalization) of the factually normal conditions (made either more traumatic or more heroic) of the individual's coming into the world, the story told by the myth's author reveals truths, but they are different from what their author would want them to be. Beuys' story of the messianic bomber pilot, turned plastic artist, rising out of the ashes and shambles of his plane crashed in Siberia, reborn, nurtured and healed by the Tartars with fat and felt, does not necessarily tell us and convince us about the transcendental impact of his artistic work (which is the manifest intention of the fable). What the myth does tell us, however, is how an artist, whose work developed in the middle and late 1950s, and whose intellectual and esthetic formation must have occurred somehow in the preceding decade, tries to come to terms with the period of history marked by German fascism and the war resulting from it, destroying and annihilating cultural memory and continuity for almost two decades and causing a rupture in history that left mental blocks and blanks and severe psychic scars on everybody living in this period and the generations following it. Beuys' individual myth is an attempt to come to terms with those blocks and scars. When he quotes the Tartars as saying "*Du nix njemcky* [you are not German]," they would say, "*du Tartar*," and try to persuade me to join their clan . . ."<sup>9</sup> it is fairly evident that the myth is trying to deny his participation in the German war and his citizenship. But of course, the repressed returns with ever-increasing strength, and the very negation of Beuys' origin in a historic period of German fascism affirms every aspect of his work as being totally dependent on, and deriving from, that period. Here lies, one has also to admit, certainly one of the strongest features of the work, its historic *authenticity* (formally, materially, morphologically). Hardly ever have the characteristic and peculiar traits of the anal-retentive character, which forms the characterological basis of authoritarian fascism (inasmuch as these features once specific to the German petit bourgeois, have by now become dangerously universal), been more acutely and accurately concretized and incorporated into an act of the postwar period.

In the work and public myth of Beuys the new German spirit of the postwar period finds its new identity by pardoning and reconciling itself prematurely with its own reminiscences of a responsibility for one of the most cruel and devastating forms of collective political madness that history has known. As much

9 Ibid., p. 16.

as Richard Wagner's work anticipated and celebrated these collective regressions into Germanic mythology and Teutonic stupor in the realm of music, before they became the actual reality and the nightmare that set out to destroy Europe (what Karl Kraus had anticipated more accurately as the *Last Days of Mankind*), it would be possible to see in Beuys' work the absurd aftermath of that nightmare, a grotesque coda acted out by a perfidious trickster. Speculators in Beuys' work did well: he was bound to become a national hero of the first order, having reinstalled and restored that sense of a—however deranged—national self and historic identity.

Beuys' obsession with fat, wax, felt and a particularly obvious kind of brown paint that at times covers objects totally and at others is used as a liquid for painting and drawing on paper and other materials, and his compulsive interest in accumulating and combining quantities of rejected, dusty old objects of the kind that one finds in rural cellars and stables, are imbued with metaphysical meaning by the artist and his eager exegetes: they could just as easily be read in psychoanalytic terms, and perhaps more convincingly so (which, again, would by no means disqualify the work). Obviously Beuys himself consciously implements materials and forms that have a strong suggestive and associative quality of anality as a particular aspect of the infantile stages of instinct development: "I placed it [the fat] on a chair to emphasize this, since here the chair represents a kind of human anatomy, the area of digestive and excretive warmth processes, sexual organs and interesting chemical change, relating psychologically to will power. In German, the joke compounded as a pun since '*Stuhl*' (chair) is also the polite way of saying 'shit' (stool), and that too is a used and mineralized material with chaotic character, reflected in the cross section of fat."<sup>10</sup> But an outspoken affirmation of one's compulsive inclinations does not necessarily transform or dissolve them, either in one's behavior or in work and object production. Let us quote from a popularized comprehensive study of psychoanalytic theory, published in 1945, when Beuys, aged twenty-four, could easily have started to familiarize himself with recent psychological theories:

If an adult person still has sexual excitability connected with the excretory functions (either with those of his object or autoerotically with his own) he clearly shows that his sexuality is on an infantile level. But in these uses too, the regression serves as a defense against genital wishes, not only in a general way as in any compulsion neurotic but also in a more specific way, the coprophilic fantasies regularly representing attempts to deny the danger of castration. . . . The stressed anality expresses the wish to have sexual pleasure without being reminded of the difference of the sexes, which would mobilize castration fear."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, New York, 1945, p. 349.

