

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*¹

DURING 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.

¹ 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.”²

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

² 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.³

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 monograph⁴ (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."⁵ 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.⁶

In Caroline Tisdall's Guggenheim catalogue⁷ 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.⁸

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 preceeding 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 . . ."⁹ 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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

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

But Beuys, in his general contempt for the specific knowledge of contemporary sciences and in his ridiculous presumptuousness about the idea of a universal synthesis of sciences and art, as late as 1966 phrased his disdain for psychoanalysis in a polemic against the German psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich by calling the discipline “bad shit” (*schlechter Mist*).¹² Apparently he follows the archaic and infantile principle that as long as you do not acknowledge the existence of things in reality that seem to threaten your ideas, they will not concern or affect you.

Functional structures of meaning in art, as in other sign systems, are intricately bound into their historical context. Only inasmuch as they are dynamic and permanently changing their field and form of meaning do they remain functional, initiating cognitive processes. Otherwise they simply become conventions of meaning or clichés. As such, they do, of course, follow different purposes, becoming the object of historically and socially latent interests contradictory to the author’s original aims when trying to develop a meaningful sign. Obviously it is possible to ignore or reject the basic scientific steps that have been taken in twentieth-century science, such as Freudian psychoanalysis or de Saussure’s linguistic and semiotic concepts (to give only the two most prominent examples that Beuys rejects). Obviously it is also possible to ignore or reject the crucial epistemological changes that have occurred in one’s own field of discourse, for example the consequences of Duchamp’s work for art in the second half of the twentieth century. But again, such infantile behavior, hiding one’s eyes and ignoring and negating phenomena that seems to threaten one’s existence in order to make them disappear, is of very limited success; it successfully limits the comprehension of an adult person. By simply making a hypothetical (and obscure) statement like: “The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated” (1964),¹³ the theoretical position of Duchamp and the lasting impact of his work are simply not even understood and, therefore, are not at all rebutted. This misconception and ignorance is evident in Beuys’ own comment on the statement: “This statement on Duchamp is highly ambivalent. It contains a criticism of Duchamp’s Anti-art concept and equally of the cult of his later behavior. . . . Apart from that Duchamp had expressed a very negative opinion of the Fluxus artists claiming that they had no new ideas since he had anticipated it all. . . . Most prominent, though, is the disapproval of Duchamp’s Anti-art concept.”¹⁴

Just as structures of meaning are permanently altered, so also the forms, objects and materials of meaning change within that dynamic process. The designation of a given, industrially produced, readymade object and its intro-

12 Joseph Beuys, *Catalogue Sigmar Polke*, Berlin, 1966, p. 2.

13 Tisdall, p. 92.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

duction and integration into artistic context were viable and relevant primarily as epistemological reflections and decisions within the formal discourse of post-Cubist painting and sculpture. Within this context the “meaning” of these objects is established, and here they fulfill their “function”: they change the state of a formal language according to given historical conditions. Only later, when the original steps become conventionalized, imitated, interpreted, received, misunderstood—as in most Surrealist and Neo-Dada object art, do they enter that field of projective crisscrosses of individual meaning. Only then do they acquire psychological, emotional, metaphysical meaning, and finally they are imbued with myth and magic. Unlike his European peers from the late 1950s—Piero Manzoni, Arman or even Yves Klein—Beuys does not change the state of the object within the discourse itself. Quite to the contrary, he dilutes and dissolves the conceptual precision of Duchamp’s readymade by reintegrating the object into the most traditional and naive context of representation of meaning, the idealist metaphor: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object. Beuys has often affirmed this himself, obviously intrigued by Duchamp but not understanding him, and therefore, not coming to historical terms with him either; as, for example, when talking about his *Bathtub*, 1960: “But it would be wrong to interpret the *Bathtub* as a kind of self-reflection. Nor does it have anything to do with the concept of the readymade: quite the opposite, *since here the stress is on the meaning of the object* [my italics]. It relates to the reality of being born in such an area and in such circumstances”;¹⁵ or, when talking about his *Fat Chair*, 1964: “The presence of the chair has nothing to do with Duchamp’s Readymades, or his combination of a stool with a bicycle wheel, although they share the same initial impact as humorous objects.”¹⁶

The more an esthetic decision, a formal or material procedure, is removed from its functional historical context—which, in the system of art is first of all the esthetic discourse itself—the more the work will be in demand for meaning; it will depend on its generation of projective meaning and will be susceptible to it. The very suggestiveness, the highly associative potential and quasi magic attraction that Beuys’ work seems to exert on many followers and his public, paradoxically enough, results precisely from that state of obsolescence that his works maintain within the discourse of art itself. It seems that the more removed the esthetic discourse is from the cognitive process, the more the necessity and claim for “meaning” develop. Visual ideology (commercial movies and television, advertising and product propaganda) immerses its viewers in “meaning” as much as the discourses of religion and neurosis do: to the extent

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

that literally everything within these belief systems is “meaningful,” reaffirming the individual’s ties to such systems, the actual capacities of individual development are repressed. Beuys keeps insisting on the fact that his art-object and dramatic performance activities have “metaphysical” meaning, transcending their actual visual concretion and material appearance within their proper discourse. He quite outspokenly refers to the antihistoric, religious experience as a major source and focus for his art production: “This is the concept of art that carries within itself the revolutionizing not only of the historic bourgeois concept of knowledge (materialism, positivism) but also of religious activity.” Notably, he does not even attempt to qualify his understanding of “religious activity” in historical terms, which would seem obvious, since Feuerbach, Marx and Freud have differentiated it in a fairly relevant manner that hardly allows for a simplistic concept of “religious activity.” Again it seems inevitable to quote from Nietzsche’s poignant analysis of Wagner’s esthetic position, discovering an amazing congruence with that of Beuys’:

As a matter of fact, his whole life long he [Wagner] did nothing but repeat one proposition: that his music did not mean music alone. But something more! Something immeasurably more! . . . “Music can never be anything else than a ‘means’”: this was his theory; but above all it was the only practice that lay open to him. No musician however thinks in this way. Wagner was in need of literature, in order to persuade the whole world to take his music seriously, profoundly, because it meant an infinity of things.¹⁷

Precisely because of Beuys’ attitudes toward the functions and constructions of meaning in linguistic and visual signs, and his seemingly radical ahistoricity (which is a maneuver to disguise his eclecticism), his work is different from that of some of his European colleagues as well as his American contemporaries. This becomes particularly evident in a comparison of works that seem to be connected by striking morphological similarities: Beuys’ *Fat Corner*, 1960–63(?), and *Felt Corner*, 1963–64(?), with Robert Morris’s *Corner Piece*, 1964, and Richard Serra’s *Lead Antimony*, 1969; Beuys’ *Fat up to this Level*, 1971, with Bruce Nauman’s *Concrete Tape Recorder*, 1968, and Beuys’ *Iron Chest*, 1968; Beuys’ *Site*, 1967, with Carl Andre’s *12 Pieces of Steel* (exhibited in Düsseldorf in 1967).¹⁸ In many instances it seems adequate to speculate about priorities of formal “invention” in these works that seem structurally comparable, as Beuys certainly commands an amazing integration and absorption of principles of formal organization that have been developed in a totally different context, changing them with his private meaning system so that, in fact, they no longer seem comparable in any way. In other cases, such as Beuys’ *Rubberized Box*, 1957, and *Fat Chair*, 1964, there simply

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, p. 30.

18 As in the fable convenue, the dates of Beuys’ crucial works at times seem a little dubious and again the information, given by Beuys himself, is contradictory. In Adriani’s book Beuys is quoted as follows: “The titles are not original; many of them were given later, because exhibitors and buyers felt the need to name these works.” On the evening at the Zwirner Gallery (on the occasion of a lecture by Allan Kaprow, Cologne, 1963) fat actually made its first appearance in the form of a carton of lard (see Adriani, p. 96). Caroline Tisdall mentions in regard to *Fat Chair*, 1964: “*Fat Chair* appeared at the same time as the first *Fat Corners*.” On the following pages of the same catalogue, however, these works, *Fat Corner* and *Filter Fat Corner* are dated 1960 and 1962 (see Tisdall, pp. 72–75). The very same *Filter Fat Corner* is dated 1963 in Adriani’s monograph (see p. 102). *The Felt Corner* is dated 1953 on p. 75 of the Guggenheim catalogue and dated 1964 on p. 125 of the same catalogue, in a slightly different photograph of the same installation.

Caroline Tisdall’s information on Beuys’ work seems unreliable in other regards as well. For example, on p. 271 we are made to believe that Beuys swept up Karl Marx Platz in East Berlin, May Day 1972. Obviously it would be quite spectacular and courageous to perform such an activity under the conditions of the rigid police control of the regime in East Berlin, particularly during the official May Day celebrations of the Communist Party. Unfortunately (or fortunately), however, Beuys did perform his little act in West Berlin, where nobody cares about harmless artistic jokes and where you can express “solidarity with the revolutionary principles through the bright red broom. . . .” (Tisdall p. 271) at any given time.

can be no doubt about Beuys' original vision in introducing into a sculptural discourse issues that became crucial years later in Minimal and post-Minimal art. If we compare Beuys' *Fat Corner*, 1960(?), with Richard Serra's *Splash Piece*, 1968, we discover a comparable concern for the dissolution of a traditional object/construct-oriented conception of sculpture in favor of a more process-bound and architectural understanding of sculptural production and perception. On the other hand, one tends to overestimate Beuys' originality and inventiveness if one forgets about his eclectic selection of historic information and influences absorbed from Futurism, Russian Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism, as well as their American and European successors in Happening and Fluxus activities, plus the Nouveaux Réalistes.

The very beginning of modernist sculpture is marked by a mixture of heterogeneous materials within the sculptural unit: Degas' *Little Dancer of Fourteen*, 1876, assembles wax, cloth and wood. And Medardo Rosso's wax-over-plaster sculptures, which were supposed to "blend with the unity of the world that surrounded them,"¹⁹ should be remembered when Beuys talks about the universally process-oriented nature of sculpture. Rosso's use of beeswax as a sculptural material that can maintain two aggregate states, liquid and solid, has a particularly strong process quality, thanks also to the precision with which it records modeling processes. Further, Beuys' sense for the specific nature of sculptural materials and the wide variety of materials that can be introduced into sculpture, was most obviously informed by the Italian Futurists, who did acknowledge Rosso as one of their precursors. We should recall Boccioni's *Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (1912): "We claim that even twenty different materials can be used in a single work to achieve sculptural emotion. Let us mention only a few: glass, wood, cardboard, horsehair, leather, cloth, mirrors, electric light, etc., etc. . . ."²⁰ Moreover, the sculptural discovery of that crucial point in space, where two planes meet at an angle of ninety degrees, thus constituting a most elementary evidence of spatial volume and, one could argue, a point of transition between sculptural space and architectural space, finds its first clear demarcation in twentieth-century art in Tatlin's *Cubo-Futurist Corner Counter-Reliefs*, 1915, and the explicit use of an inserted triangle shape in Tatlin's and Yakulov's decoration of the Café Pittoresque in Moscow in 1917. Beuys, whenever he might have placed his first triangle into a corner—whether fat or felt—has to be seen as much in that perspective as with respect to Morris's *Corner Piece* and Serra's *Splash Piece*.

That other great German artist who was an eclectic of the first order, and equally knew how to conceal and to transform his sources to the point of almost total unrecognizability, Kurt Schwitters—and who is certainly, within German

19 Margaret Scolari-Barr, *Medardo Rosso*, New York, 1963, p. 21.

20 Umberto Boccioni, *Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (1912), in Umbro Appollonio, ed., *Futuristische Manifeste*, Cologne, 1965, p. 72.

art history of the twentieth century, the focal point of Beuys' references²¹—was equally aware of Italian Futurist notions in sculpture, as well as Russian Cubo-Futurist works. By joining the innovative sense of sculptural materiality of the former with the idea of sculptural expansion into architectural dimensions of the latter, and by merging them with his peculiar brand of German Dadaism, he conceived the *Merzbau* environment. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* that included live guinea pigs as well as collected bottles of urine by his friends, was obviously a structure that attempted to define sculpture as an all-encompassing activity, including even everyday life in the esthetic creation. Beuys' definition of "sculpture as an evolutionary process, everyone as an artist,"²² has its visual/plastic roots here as much as it paraphrases Lautréamont's proto-Surrealist dictum "Poetry must be made by all."

Beuys' problematic attempt to revitalize Dada and Surrealist positions becomes apparent within the concrete materiality and the formal organization of the sculptural work itself. Precisely because of its claims for universal solutions and global validity, the work does not achieve the acuity and impact of some of the seemingly comparable sculptures mentioned above. The historic precision and function within (as it seems) the limits of a formalist tradition and of work growing out of it, such as Serra's, Nauman's or Andre's, is lacking in Beuys' works altogether. Their opulent nebulousness of meaning and their adherence to a conventional understanding of meaning, makes the visual experience of Beuys' work profoundly dissatisfying. His work does not initiate cognitive changes, but reaffirms a conservative position of literary belief systems. The same would become evident in a comparison of Beuys' work with sculptural works done in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Europe. Arman's *Le Plein*, 1960, which filled a gallery space with two truckloads of garbage (expanding Arman's sculptural procedure of "poubelles"—garbage accumulations), still strikes us today as a vital and consequential work (and more complex in its ramifications) exactly because of its self-imposed restriction to function within the discourse of art, first of all. The same is true of Stanley Brouwn's proposal to declare all shoe shops of Amsterdam as his exhibition (in 1960), or for every single work of Piero Manzoni's since 1958. Too bad for Beuys, but it seems that after all Gustave Flaubert was correct when predicting: "The more that art develops, the more scientific it must be, just as science will become esthetic."

Esthetic as well as political truths are concrete phenomena. They manifest themselves in specific reflections and acts, hardly in grandiose gesticulations and global speculations. Beuys' supposedly radical position, as in so many

21 Again in Germany the drawings of Kurt Schwitters would be the key reference for Beuys' drawings. In the drawings around 1919 Schwitters combined the expressionistic drawing with the mechanomorphic "drawing" elements: his rubber stamp impressions that enter abruptly into the seemingly lyrical lines of the drawings. The rubber stamp image as a counterbalance to the scriptural expressionist line figures frequently and prominently in Beuys' drawings.

22 Tisdall, loc. cit., p. 7.

aspects of his activities, is primarily marked by his compulsive self-exposure as the messianic artist (think, for example, of his preposterous offer at a women's liberation gathering in New York: "What can I do for You?"). When called upon in particular commitments within the art world, which is, after all, the prime and final sphere of his operations, he shows an astonishing reluctance to commit himself to anything that might harm his good standing with the existing power structure of cultural institutions.

When, for instance, in 1971, the Guggenheim Museum censored and closed down the show of Hans Haacke, firing its curator Edward Fry, an impressive list of signatures by artists and critics was circulated afterward to support Haacke, a proof of international solidarity and a public condemnation of the oppressive politics of the Guggenheim's director, Thomas Messer. Beuys never signed. Shortly afterward, an international group show, *Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf*, was installed at the Guggenheim. A Belgian artist, the late Marcel Broodthaers, then living and working in Düsseldorf, withdrew his contribution from the show (his work had been originally dedicated to Daniel Buren, whose work had been equally censored at the Guggenheim's international exhibition in the preceding year) to protest the treatment of Haacke's and Fry's work, and published an open letter to Joseph Beuys in a Düsseldorf newspaper. The letter, disguised as a found letter by the German-French composer Jacques Offenbach addressing Richard Wagner, reads as follows:

Your essay "Art and Revolution" discusses magic . . . politics . . . the politics of magic? Of beauty or of ugliness? . . . Messiah . . . I can hardly go along with that contention of yours, and at my rate I wish to register my disagreement if you allow a definition of art to include one of politics . . . and magic. . . . But is not the enthusiasm that His Majesty displays for you motivated by a political choice as well? What ends do you serve, Wagner? Why? How? Miserable artists that we are."²³

The esthetic conservatism of Beuys is logically complemented by his politically retrograde, not to say reactionary, attitudes. Both are inscribed into a seemingly progressive and radical humanitarian program of esthetic and social evolution. The abstract universality of Beuys' vision has its equivalent in the privatistic and deeply subjectivist nature of his actual work. Any attempt on his side to join the two aspects results in curious sectarianism. The roots of Beuys' dilemma lie in the misconception that politics could become a matter of esthetics, as he repeats frequently: "real future political intentions must be artistic. . . ."; or, more outrageously:

How I actually bring it as theory to the totalized concept of art, which means everything. The totalized concept of art, that is the principle that I wanted to express with this material, which in the end refers to everything, to all forms in the world. And not only to artistic forms, but also to social forms or legal forms or economic forms. . . . All questions of man can be only a question of form, and that is the totalized concept of art.

—or, finally, in explicit terms of crypto-fascist Futurism:

I would say that the concept of politics must be eliminated as quickly as possible and must be replaced by the capability of form of human art. *I do not want to carry art into politics, but make politics into art.*²⁴

The Futurist heritage has not only shaped Beuys' sculptural thoughts, but even more so, it seems, his political ideas fulfill the criteria of the totalitarian in art just as they were propounded by Italian Futurism on the eve of European Fascism. It seems that Walter Benjamin's most overquoted essay has still not been understood by all. It ends as follows: "*Fiat ars-pereat mundus*, says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. . . . Mankind has reached such a degree of self-alienation that it can experience its own destruction as an esthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering esthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."

24 Adriani, pp. 227 and 283.