

JOSEPH BEUYS

Mapping the Legacy



D.A.P.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

Gene Ray

4} JOSEPH BEUYS AND
THE AFTER-AUSCHWITZ SUBLIME

IN ONE OF HIS LAST MAJOR PUBLIC addresses, delivered at the Münchner Kammerspiele in November, 1985, as part of a lecture series entitled "Talking About One's Own Country," Joseph Beuys reflected on his decision to become an artist. After beginning studies in the natural sciences, he concluded that his "possibility" would not be realized within the confines of a narrow scientific specialty. His "gift" was "to initiate all-embracingly with respect to the task that the people had." He turned to art and developed a notion of sculpture that began with language and concepts, because that enabled him to produce "forward-looking images." But his decision had also to do, he continued, with his realization that such an art, linked to the German language and to the people who speak it, "was also the only way to overcome all the still racially-driven machinations, terrible sins, and not-for-describing black marks, without losing sight of them for even a moment."¹

The project, which for two decades was both the subject and the asserted goal of Beuys' public discourse, and which is now firmly associated with his name, combined an ambitiously programmatic "expanded concept of art" with a deep engagement with the cultural tradition. While the first part of the project, striving for social transformation, was purported by Beuys to be "the end of moder-

¹ Joseph Beuys, "Reden über das eigene Land" in Hans Mayer, *Joseph Beuys, Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielson, Albrecht Schönherr. Reden über das eigene Land: Deutschland 3* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1985) and reissued as Joseph Beuys, *Sprechen über Deutschland* (Wangen/Allgäu: FIU-Verlag, 1995), pp. 10-11: "Daß dieses auch der einzige Weg sei, um alle noch im Rassistischen treibenden Umtriebe, schrecklichen Sünden, nicht zu beschreibenden schwarzen Male zu überwinden, ohne sie auch nur einen Augenblick aus dem Blickfeld zu verlieren, ließ mich entscheiden für die Kunst."

In this context, "*schwarze Male*" carries the additional possible meaning "black/dark/dirty times." There would also seem to be a subtle difference between "*unbeschreiblich*" ("indescribable/enormous/staggering") and "*nicht zu beschreibenden*" (literally, "not-for-describing/not-to-be-described"). Taking into account the semantic possibilities which the German holds open, Beuys

seems to imply, or acknowledge, that these "black marks," related to "still racially-driven machinations" and "terrible sins" are not to be talked about among the German people, or at least can only be referenced indirectly. Hence, as strong as the wording is, neither the Jews nor the Holocaust is named. And yet it is clear that this "*überwinden*" ("overcoming"), without losing sight of, belongs to the "*Aufgabe*" ("task") of the German people.

Cf. Timothy Nevill's English trans. in Joseph Beuys, "Talking about One's Own Country: Germany" in Wilfried Wiegand et al., *In Memoriam Joseph Beuys: Obituaries, Essays, Speeches* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1986), p. 37.

- 2 Beuys, *Sprechen über Deutschland*, p.13; "Talking about One's Own Country: Germany," p. 38.

- 3 What is called "life" here can only be the sum of Beuys' public postures and utterances, including self-interpretations and his own account of his intentions. In general, both admirers and denigrators have accepted or rejected Beuys' life and art together, in an all-or-nothing approach. The number of critics who have acknowledged a disjunction, or the possibility of one, between the works and Beuys' words about them remains small. I count Edit de Ak and Walter Robinson, "Beuys: Art Encagé," *Art in America* (Nov./Dec. 1974): 78; Kim Levin, "Joseph Beuys: The New Order," *Arts Magazine* (April 1980) and reprinted in Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the 70s and 80s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 176; Thierry de Duve, "Le dernier des prolétaires," *Art Studio 4*, Special Issue (1987) and trans. as "Joseph Beuys, or The Last of the Proletarians," *October* 45 (Summer 1988): 58–59; and Armin Zweite, *Joseph Beuys: Natur Materie Form* (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen; Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1992), pp. 37–39.

In so far as the objects bear words and the actions include speech, one cannot always distinguish clearly between Beuys' art and his discourse. Still, the distinction is a crucial one. At the very least, any artist's self-interpretations must be tested against the

nity, the end of all traditions,"² the second would seem to have rehearsed, in accordance with Ezra Pound's famous dictum, well-established modernist strategies for "making it new." The tension between the pull of tradition and the need to break with it fueled an enormous material production: drawings, sculpture, multiples, monumental installations. Beuys' objects are relics of his utopian program—of the public persona, the unceasing pronouncements and provocations, the lectures and actions, the challenging exhortations to create a new social order. But they are also relics of a conflicted relationship between the two parts of the project. Arguing for a conception of art that would take society and the whole world as the materials of a vast collaborative *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he nevertheless supplied the better known art world institutions with a highly individualized and stylistically coherent body of objects. The much-repeated claim that Beuys' life was his art, or at least that the two are inseparable, assumes that Beuys' stated intentions were always successfully realized in the works. As a few critics have noted, the reality is more complicated.³

As if that were not enough, there is alongside the "announced" project another one which the artist for the most part left unacknowledged. This parallel project's gaze was fixed somberly on the catastrophe and genocide of the Nazi period and encoded the production with another, grimmer level of meaning. Evoking and avowing the Holocaust through various strategies, Beuys' pieces and actions can also be read as objects and gestures of mourning. As the cited passage makes clear, it would be wrong to say that Beuys never acknowledged this other project.⁴ But he never emphatically asserted it as a project per se, in the way he did tirelessly on behalf of the "expanded concept of art." It is clear from his words that he preferred to speak of the future and of the "forward-looking" aspect of his activities. However, on this occasion at least, Beuys acknowledged that the "task, which the people had (*die Aufgabe, die das Volk hätte*)," was inextricably linked to the legacy of the war years. But if his art—perhaps, as he implied, through the role the German language—carried the capacity to "overcome (*überwinden*)" "terrible sins (*schrecklichen Sünden*)" and "not-for-describing black marks (*nicht zu beschreibenden schwarzen Male*)," Beuys nevertheless chose in this regard to let the objects speak for themselves.⁵

This choice has proven fateful to Beuys' reception as an artist. Critics have focused on the announced project—on the expanded concept of art and the engagement with tradition—to the virtual exclusion of the second. Kim Levin had already remarked on this state of affairs in her perceptive review of Beuys' first Guggenheim retrospective. "There is," she wrote, "a secret narrative in Beuys, of which no one dares speak. Autobiography is now an accepted content for art;

the atrocities of Nazi Germany are not."⁶ She went on to suggest that many of the pieces installed by Beuys as "stations" descending the Guggenheim's spiral ramps could be seen as allusions to the Holocaust, and in a later essay, she suggested that this "secret narrative" had been uncovered and accepted in the wake of the retrospective exhibition.⁷ In fact, the analysis of Holocaust references in Beuys which she implicitly called for has never materialized. If Beuys' second project—the project of mourning—has any place at all in the literature, it is a marginal one, unsupported by any systematic reading of the works as a whole.

The reasons for this are complex and in America perhaps were exacerbated by widespread critical unease in the wake of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's rhetorically forceful attack on the mythical foundations of Beuys' public persona.⁸ In focusing on Beuys' asserted project and in accepting the purported unity of his life and work, critics have restricted themselves to a general dependence on Beuys' own discourse and self-interpretations. Such sources are of course primary for art historians seeking to reconstruct Beuys' intention or the genesis of particular works. But critics, too, whether discussing an action, interpreting an installation, or analyzing Beuys' theory of social sculpture, have followed the leads and borrowed the terms provided by the artist himself. "One is almost helpless," Rosalind Krauss bemoaned in 1980, "without the explanations supplied by the artist."⁹ This is to say that the contexts by which the works are explained have been the biographical and the art-historical: private history and art history.

The Holocaust dimension of Beuys' work only becomes visible, however, in the light of a different context: that of major or public history, and in particular the massively-traumatic public history of the years from 1933 to 1945. Indeed, only by bracketing the distractions of the artist's still-charismatic afterimage and of art world lineages and rivalries do Beuys' avowal and evocation of the genocide emerge. One needs to look not to the story of the Crimean plane crash or to Beuys' personal wounds and war experiences, but to the shared, publicly-available facts and images circulating around that time.¹⁰ Beuys' words alone do not suffice to establish the existence of a project of mourning. Any capacity for a "mourning effect" will have to be found in the objects and actions themselves. But if one works one's way through Beuys' oeuvre attentive to this dimension, then what I have called a "second" project will come compellingly into view. Once it has, it may be impossible to look at Beuys in the same way again.

This is not at all to imply that the announced project is unimportant, or that Beuys' objects do not mean what he and critics after him have said they mean. Uncovering the project of mourning as it is coded into Beuys' art will not negate the established interpretive approaches so much as deepen them. It gives

production itself. Ultimately at stake here are issues of intentionality and the generation of meaning which are, within a general shift in intellectual focus from production to reception, still much-contested.

- 4 Numerous published statements and interviews evince Beuys' usual reluctance to speak of the Holocaust and his tendency to deflect direct questions about it into discussions of the present or future. See, for example, his discussions with Caroline Tisdall included in the catalog to the Guggenheim's 1979/80 Beuys' retrospective: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), pp. 21–23. The few important exceptions will be discussed at the end of the essay.
- 5 Beuys, *Sprechen über Deutschland*, p. 10. See also note 1 above. Alain Borer concludes from this that the Jews represent a "*dimension spirituelle absente*" in Beuys' thinking: Borer, "Déploration de Joseph Beuys," in Fabrice Hergott and Marion Hohlfeldt, eds. *Joseph Beuys* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1994), p. 29. Borer's essay for the Centre Pompidou's 1994 Beuys catalog has now been trans., with some modifications, as "Beweinung des Joseph Beuys" in Lothar Schirmer, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Eine Werkübersicht, 1945–1985* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1996) and in English as "A Lament for Joseph Beuys," in Lothar Schirmer, ed., *The Essential Joseph Beuys* (Cambridge: MIT, 1997). See p. 29, both editions.
- 6 Levin, op. cit., p. 176.
- 7 Levin, "Introduction" in Carin Kuoni, ed., *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), p. 2.
- 8 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique," *Artforum* (Jan. 1980) and reprinted in this volume, pp. 199. On the influence of this text in America, see Christopher Phillips, "Back to Beuys," *Art in America* (Sept. 1993): 90; and David Levi Strauss, "American Beuys: 'I Like America and America Likes Me,'" *Parkett* 26 (Dec. 1990): 124. Buchloh's essay also looms large behind the structure of the Tate Gallery

Liverpool's 1994 critical forum on Beuys. See David Thistlewood, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1995).

- 9 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 17.
- 10 Interpretations attempting to put Beuys "on the couch" in order to argue that his art enacts a personal catharsis of the war years have been, in my opinion, mere speculation, reckless more often than not, and of very slight value. Cf. Donald Kuspit, "Joseph Beuys: The Body of the Artist," *Artforum* (Summer, 1991) and reprinted in Thistlewood, ed., op. cit., pp. 95-105.
- 11 In Western aesthetics, the sublime has traditionally been associated with four names: Pseudo-Longinus, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. My phrase "after-Auschwitz sublime" marks the return to this tradition in postwar continental thought and theory, especially in the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-François Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek, and links that return to the critical reflections, more familiar in this context, of Theodor Adorno. For an orienting discussion, with citations, of this trend and its relation to Beuys and postwar art, see the "Introduction" and "Conclusion" to my "The Use and Abuse of the Sublime: Joseph Beuys and Art after Auschwitz," Dissertation (Coral Gables, Florida, 1997).
- 12 For the generally-accepted chronology, see Götz Adriani, Winifried Konnertz and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys* (Cologne: Dumont, 1994). The challenge to Beuys' account of the war years began with Buchloh's 1980 *Artforum* essay, already cited. For the latest version of that challenge, see Frank Gieseke and Albert Markert, *Flieger, Filz, und Vaterland: Eine Erweiterte Beuys Biographie* (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1996).

us, furthermore, an explanation for the force of Beuys' major works. At its best, Beuys' material production—the objects and installations that have outlived the artist himself—retains a power to strike, astonish and disturb us for which the biographical and art-historical explanations cannot account. In the history of aesthetics, there is a name for these effects: the sublime.¹¹

In what follows, I will review what can be called Beuys' structural relation to public history, and then turn to the small number of works and episodes which deal explicitly, through content or title, with the Holocaust.



THE GENERAL SHAPE OF Beuys' biography is well known. Only a few major markers of its chronology need be reviewed here, in order to establish Beuys' position in relation to public, (as opposed to private) history. Born in Krefeld in 1921, Beuys grew up there and in Kleve and was twelve in the year Hitler came to power. After 1936, he belonged to the Hitlerjugend and, after the outbreak of war, was trained as a radioman, gunner and later as a pilot for the Luftwaffe. Beuys flew combat missions on the eastern front and was wounded numerous times. Late in the war, he was transferred to a paratroop division on the western front. After incarceration in a British internment camp at war's end, he returned to Kleve and in 1947 began formal studies at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. The precise details of Beuys' war career have been the subject of much speculation and dispute.¹² But there is no contesting the fact that Beuys belonged to what some cultural critics have called the "perpetrating generation."

That is to say that as far as we know, he played no direct role in and did not personally benefit from the Holocaust, but did nothing either to actively resist it. How much Beuys may have known about the genocide at the time, or what options would have been open to a twenty-one year old airman in the Luftwaffe, do not effect the basic relation to the Holocaust which history imposed upon him. Without knowing what Beuys felt or thought about the Holocaust at the time or in retrospect, it is perfectly clear that he, like every German veteran of his generation, had an inescapable relation with that catastrophe. Structurally, it makes no difference at all whether Beuys acknowledged this relation or was even fully aware of it. Nor did that relation change when Beuys became an artist. He remained that which public history had marked him: a veteran of the military forces of the Nazi regime. Issues of intention aside, then, his artistic production necessarily and inescapably relates to the massively traumatic events of that time. Whatever their relation to Beuys' private history may have been, his art actions and objects also

relate to the Holocaust. Even if they did not refer to the Holocaust at all, they would still, so to speak, refer to the Holocaust. They must by virtue of the fact that their maker had served in the Luftwaffe while Jews and others were systematically murdered in Europe.

Reviewing that brutal fact will give no pleasure to many. But it does Beuys no credit to pretend that the situation is otherwise. If I have seemed to labor this point, it is only because the analysis of Beuys' project of mourning cannot get usefully underway until that relation has been formulated in the clearest possible language. Having done that, it can be seen that what Beuys personally knew, thought and felt about the Holocaust and to what extent he consciously, deliberately made it a theme of his art are questions that raise further issues. What is plain from the basic fact of his association with the Nazi period, is that we, as spectators and critics, are right to look in his art for such a content. We are justified in asking, are perhaps obligated to ask: what do these objects have to say about the Holocaust?

It can be quickly answered that they say a great deal. Beuys' strategy for evoking and avowing the Holocaust became one of indirection. The strongest works function through formal resemblance, material affinity, and allegory, rather than through direct representation or confrontation. But there were, early on, projects and actions which were explicitly concerned with the Holocaust and its place in public history; others alluded to the genocide bluntly and unmistakably. The analysis of the project of mourning must begin here.



IN 1957 AND 1958, Beuys participated in the first round of an international competition for a memorial on the site of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau killing center, west of Krakow. Although mention of Beuys' participation in this juried competition can be found in the literature,¹³ a fuller picture of the episode has only begun to emerge in the last few years. Two works on paper relating to Beuys' proposal, now in Schloß Moyland, were published with a text by Franz Joseph van der Grinten in 1995.¹⁴ One of those was exhibited with eight more related drawings in Berlin in 1997.¹⁵ Another work on paper and two wooden models can be found in the Beuys Block in Darmstadt.¹⁶ The work on paper, a fold-out, panoramic photograph of the Auschwitz camp complex over-drawn by Beuys, was originally part of the application materials for the memorial competition. It is now in the vitrine *Auschwitz Demonstration 1956-1964*, in the company of thirteen other separately titled and dated objects, including a portable stove used by Beuys in his action at the 1964 Festival of New Art in Aachen. In a valuable and insightful

13 See, for example, Tisdall, op. cit., p. 21.

14 *Monument for Auschwitz* (1958) and *Design for Auschwitz Memorial* (1957), in Franz Joseph van der Grinten, "Beuys Beitrag zum Wettbewerb für das Auschwitzmonument," in Inge Lorenz, ed., *Joseph Beuys Symposium Kranenburg 1995* (Basel: Museum Schloß Moyland and Weise Verlag, 1995), pp. 199-203. The first had been published previously as fig. 71 in Franz Joseph and Hans van der Grinten, *Joseph Beuys: Wasserfarben/Watercolours, 1936-1963* (Frankfurt/Main, 1975), pp. 48-49; and as fig. 31 in Tisdall, op. cit., p. 22.

15 Figs. 279a-f, 280, 281 and 282 in the exhibition catalog: Eckhart Gillen, ed., *Deutschlandbilder: Kunst aus einem geteilten Land* (Cologne: Dumont, 1997), simultaneously in English as *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country* (Cologne: Dumont, 1997), pp. 272-273.

16 In the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt: *Auschwitz* (1957), an over-drawn brochure fragment, now in *Auschwitz Demonstration* (Vitrine 4, Room 5); *Transformation Sign* (1957), a pine construction now in Vitrine 1, Room 5; and Title Unknown, a smaller nutwood construction, now part of the cabinet assemblage *Scene from the Stag Hunt 1961* in Room 2. See Eva Wenzel and Jessyka Beuys, *Joseph Beuys Block Beuys* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1990), pp. 182-185, 158-161 and 40-73, respectively. A third model, of pewter and zinc, *Untitled (Table with Crystal)*, is in a private collection but is reproduced as fig. 18 in *Transit Joseph Beuys: Plastische Arbeiten 1947-1985* (Krefeld: Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, 1991), p. 54.

17 Mario Kramer, "Art Nourishes Life—Joseph Beuys: Auschwitz Demonstration, 1956–1964," in Gillen, ed., op. cit., pp. 261–271. The debt my discussion owes at this point to Kramer's careful essay, originally a lecture given at the 1995 Beuys symposium at The New School in New York, will be obvious. His essay should be read in parallel with my abbreviated account here. As will be seen, however, I part from Kramer's conclusions that Beuys' position with respect to the Nazi period is "very clear and unambiguous" (p. 270) and that Beuys' early work can unproblematically be read as "a type of catharsis" (p. 261).

18 The winning design—a stark, pierced granite ramp by a team of Polish sculptors and architects led by Oskar and Zofia Hansen—was not accepted by the Committee and was never built. A compromise monument was dedicated in 1967. Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present* (New Haven/London: Yale, 1996), pp. 375–378 and Jochen Spielmann, "Auschwitz Is Debated in Oswiecim: The Topography of Remembrance," in James E. Young, *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (Munich: Prestel; New York: The Jewish Museum, 1944), pp. 169–173. Cf. Adriani, op. cit., p. 42; Kramer, op. cit., pp. 261–262; Schirmer, ed., op. cit., p. 230; Van der Grinten, op. cit., p. 199.

Four documents relating to Beuys' participation are now in the archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum: the registration of his entry, dated 15 March 1958; official confirmation of its receipt, dated 15 April 1958; a technical description of the proposal; and a photograph, marked "K283," of the two models, one of wood and one of pewter and zinc, submitted with the entry package.

19 "Wahrzeichen," in the written text accompanying Beuys' proposal, quoted in Van der Grinten, op. cit., p. 200.

20 Ibid. Franz van der Grinten has noted the relation of the bowl-form to the *Berglamp* drawings and sculptures (op. cit., pp. 200–201).

21 Kramer, op. cit., p. 261.

22 The corresponding titles (trans.) and dates are: *Fish*, 1956; *Storage*

essay on this vitrine, Mario Kramer neatly establishes the chronology and relations between these objects and events, thereby clearing up incomplete and sometimes conflicting accounts in the literature.¹⁷

The juried competition for the Auschwitz memorial was announced in 1957 by an association of Holocaust survivors calling itself the "Comité international d'Auschwitz." The British sculptor Henry Moore chaired the jury, and the Austrian resistance fighter Hermann Langbein acted as secretary for the committee from Vienna. Beuys was one of 426 artists who submitted proposals before the March, 1958, deadline.¹⁸ His design consisted of a series of three elevated geometric forms—"landmarks," Beuys called them¹⁹—tracing the way from the camp's main entry gate to the site of the gas chambers and crematoria. There, a polished silver bowl-form would have been positioned to catch and reflect the sunlight. The three landmarks, each repeating the same slab-like, asymmetrical quadrangle in diminishing scale and each elevated on two pillars, were meant to function as additional gates along the infamous railway and ramps to the silver "monstrance."²⁰ According to Kramer, Beuys produced some two dozen sketches and reworked photographs, in addition to two wooden models and one pewter and zinc model, in the process of developing his proposal.²¹

The Darmstadt vitrine *Auschwitz Demonstration* included sculptural objects acquired by Karl Ströher and was arranged by Beuys in its present configuration in 1968. In addition to the overdrawn fold-out pages from the competition materials already mentioned, the vitrine contains a bronze or brass plate, cast from a delicate wood relief; a corroded and discolored metal disc with a blood sausage and sausage fragments tied with string; the two-burner portable stove used in the Aachen action and two cast wax blocks; two straw-filled wooden tubs, one containing a mummified rat or field mouse and the other, a manipulated folding carpenter's ruler; a crucifix modeled from clay and an old wafer or biscuit in a shallow soup bowl; a pencil drawing of a traumatized girl; four rings of shriveled, discolored blood sausage; and a centrally-positioned object group consisting of two medicine phials, a third bottle, a pair of sun lamp goggles and an aluminum tag on a string.²² Kramer has ably discussed these objects, and in his essay in this volume, Max Reithmann offers additional insights into the related pieces in the Darmstadt Beuys Block.

Three other early and unambiguous references to the Holocaust complement the objects in *Auschwitz Demonstration*. *Death and the Maiden*, now in the Ludwig Rinn collection, is a 1957 sketch in thinned paint on the back of a manila envelope.²³ The envelope bears two ink stamps, prominently visible to the right of the girl's head: one reads "Comité international d'Auschwitz"; the other,



FIGURE 4.1

Joseph Beuys

KZ= Essen 2, KZ=Essen 1, 1963 (1998 vitrine installation view)Plaster, painted can (*KZ=Essen 2*); painted porcelain dish, fingernail brush (*KZ=Essen 1*), c. 6 x 10 cm (*KZ=Essen 2*); c. 4 x 21 cm (*KZ=Essen 1*).

Neue Galerie, Staatliche Museen, Kassel

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"Hermann Langbein, Wien 10, Weigandhof 5." As Kramer notes, the stamps from the Auschwitz memorial competition mark this watercolor as much more than the recycling of an old art-historical figure. Finally, two spare object groups now in Kassel echo the Last Supper in the Konzentrationslager theme from *Auschwitz Demonstration*. *KZ = Essen 1* and *KZ = Essen 2*, both from 1963, gather together a shallow bowl, a nail brush, a bit of plaster and a painted tin can.²⁴

These pieces, then, represent a consensual core of works for which the Holocaust is accepted, for reasons of title or indisputable documentary evidence, as the primary referent. But while the directness of their titles may be unique in Beuys' oeuvre, the strategies by which the objects themselves evoke the catastrophe are not. Working from the linkages and material codes established here, general rules for reading such strategies across the rest of Beuys' oeuvre will soon be drawn. First, though, it is necessary to turn to the portable stove from Beuys' July 1964 action.



BEUYS' PART IN THE FLUXUS-INSPIRED Festival of New Art in the Audi-Max at the Technische Hochschule Aachen marks a crucial point in Beuys' emer-

Battery (Sausage), 1963; *Heat Sculpture*, 1964; *First Rat*, 1957; *Lightning*, 1964; *Cross*, 1957; *Sick Girl with Ambulance in Background*, 1957; + - *Sausage*, 1964; *Bottle with Fat (Solid)*, 1962; *Bottle with Fat (Liquid)*, 1962; *Iodine (Bottle)*, 1962; *Sun Lamp Goggles*, 1964; *Non-Identification Tag (Aluminum)*, 1960. Eva Beuys, op. cit., pp. 182-187; and Kramer, op. cit.

23 Pl. 40 in Ann Temkin and Bernice Rose, *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), p. 150; pl. 48 in Schirmer, ed., op. cit.; and pl. 59/cat. 151 in Zweite, op. cit.

24 In the Staatliche Museen, Kassel, and pls. 72, 73 in Schirmer, ed., op. cit. In general usage, which Beuys has followed, as well as in wartime SS documents, "*Konzentrationslager*" is a blanket term encompassing what historians have come to distinguish as two different kinds of camps: prison/labor camps, *Konzentrationslager* in the strict sense, and killing centers, or *Vernichtungslager*—literally, "extermination camps." I leave this title in the German because *essen* does not force a choice between its three possibilities: "food," "meal" and, more actively, "eating."

gence as an artist.²⁵ It is the occasion of the first appearance of his "Life Course/Work Course," the textual self-presentation that would become the basic document of his public persona. And it resulted in the famous Heinrich Riebesehl photograph of Beuys with blood streaming from his nose which, widely published in the press, transformed the struggling artist into a media personality. Yet for all its importance, the event is only now emerging from clouds of confusion. The measure of that confusion can be taken by noting that although the event took place on the twentieth anniversary of the failed July 20th attempt on Hitler's life, the participating artists themselves have publicly disagreed about whether that timing was intentional or accidental.²⁶

The event began with a performance by Bazon Brock, which included the repetition, at high volume, of the pre-recorded rhetorical question from Joseph Goebbels's infamous 1943 "Do you want total war?" speech at the Berliner Sportpalast. Reportedly, the mostly-student audience of about 800 immediately became loud and abusive. Beuys then began the first sequence of his action, a progressively distorted piano accompaniment, while Brock was still on stage. Beuys ritually revealed and displayed a number of objects that night, but what concerns us here is his use of the portable stove. During the *Kukei* sequence of his action, he activated the stove's two burners and mimed the increasing heat with open hands. By his own account, he then melted some blocks of fat and warmed a zinc *Fat Box*.²⁷ During another sequence with a felt wrapped copper staff some time later, a flask containing acid was knocked over, apparently by audience members who had stormed the stage. One, claiming his suit had been splattered, attacked Beuys and struck him in the face.

Both the July 20th context of the action and the knee-jerk response of the audience suggest that the melting of fat on the burner was a blunt allusion to the crematoria of the Holocaust. Beuys' later inclusion of the stove and two blocks of fat/wax in *Auschwitz Demonstration* confirms this view. In the artist's own self-interpretations, fat and felt are ambiguous, but ultimately benign and redemptive materials. They are discussed in the literature as the reportedly life-saving substances with which he was rescued by Tartars after the Crimean plane crash—the episode Peter Nisbet, in his remarks here, has aptly called "the Story." Sculpturally, fat is said to signify its capacity to change its form in response to changes in temperature. The fat corners and boxes, introduced in July of the previous year, enact this passage back and forth between solid and liquid, form and formlessness. But it must be said unequivocally that fat first of all refers to the body and to the vulnerability of the body to fire. Beuys could have demonstrated the sculptural principle by simply using wax. There was no

25 The long title of Beuys' action, indicating its planned component sequences, is *Kukei, akopee-Nein!, Brown Cross, Fat Corners, Model Fat Corners*. The clearest account of the Aachen event is now Adam Oeller's "Fluxus at the Border: Aachen, July 20, 1964," in Gillen, ed., op. cit., pp. 200–207. The standard account of Beuys' action remains Uwe M. Schneede, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen* (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1994), action 4, pp. 42–56.

26 The event was not originally conceived to take place on that date, but early on the date's significance was seized upon by student organizers. The eleven participating artists were informed well ahead of time, and several of them "consciously integrated aspects relatable to July 20 in their works." Oeller, op. cit., p. 200. Cf. Schneede, op. cit., p. 42.

27 Adriani, op. cit., p. 62. Cf. Oeller, op. cit., p. 203: "Beuys took a packet of Rama margarine from one of his boxes of materials and dropped it into the partially filled, already warmed box of fat." See also Schneede, op. cit., p. 47, who emphasizes the miming of heat rather than the actual melting, and Heiner Stachelhaus, who in *Joseph Beuys* (Düsseldorf: ECON, 1991), pp. 165–166, has Beuys melt the fat while Brock recites the text of Goebbels's speech.



FIGURE 4.2
Joseph Beuys
Mein und meiner Lieben verlassener Schlaf (My and My Loved Ones' Abandoned Sleep), 1965
(installation view)
Wooden rack and felt sheets, 150 x 152 x 62 cm
Beuys Block, Room 2, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt
© 1999 Artists Rights Society (ARS), NYNG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

need at all to use or name fat and involve the inevitable links to the body. That fat marks not just the body but the body of the holocaustal sacrifice is clear enough, but the implications have not been drawn in the literature.²⁸

Felt has an even more specific historical referent that has nothing to do with the plane crash. It is a gruesome and unpleasant fact, but one that is not acknowledged in the published Beuys reception, that after 1942 the hair of Holocaust victims was shorn and collected at the killing centers and shipped to German-owned factories, where it was processed into felt.²⁹ This felt was used

²⁸ I cannot agree at all with Caroline Tisdall that the juxtaposition of fat with the burner in *Auschwitz Demonstration* is "ambiguous." (Tisdall, op. cit., p. 21.) Holocaust historian Andrzej Strzelecki tells us more than we would wish to know about fat and the Auschwitz crematoria: "The fat that dripped from the bodies burned in pits or on pyres was collected in ditches dug for that purpose near the incineration sites, then used as fuel for the fires that burned the bodies. This practice was especially common on rainy days. From time to time, the bodies of new arrivals were thrown into the crematoria with the bodies of emaciated veteran prisoners so that body fat from the healthier new arrivals made the burning process more efficient." Andrzej Strzelecki, "The Plunder of Victims and Their Corpses," in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana UP; Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), pp. 261–262.

²⁹ To my knowledge it is mentioned just once: Geiseke's and Markert's brief 1996 discussion (op. cit., p. 63), however, is tucked into the margins of a still-untranslated book that has been largely ignored by mainstream Beuys scholarship. There has been no discussion of the hair-felt link as far as I know in the published English-language reception.

30 Strzelecki, op. cit., pp. 259-261. Copies of numerous SS documents reporting the quantities, destinations and uses are on display in Block 4, Room 5 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. SS instructions and directives to the camps, dating from 1942 and 1943, have been published as Nuremberg documents 511-USSR and 3680-PS. A 1943 report of quantities shipped from Auschwitz has been published as Nuremberg document 1257 and trans. in John Mendelsohn, ed., *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, vol. 12 (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 197-200. I thank Steven Luckert for his timely help with these source materials.

31 Beuys himself came very near to fingering this link in a 1970 interview with Bernd Klüser and Jörg Schellmann. Asked why he works mainly with "anomalous, gray materials," Beuys launched into a defense of the colorlessness of felt, in the course of which he made an unprompted, albeit vague, reference to the Holocaust: "People are very short-sighted when they argue that way, when they say: Beuys makes everything with felt, he's trying to say something about the concentration camps. Nobody bothers to ask whether I might not be more interested in evoking a very colorful anti-image [*Gegenbild*] inside people with the help of this element, felt." Jörg Schellmann, ed., *Joseph Beuys Multiples: Catalogue Raisonné of Multiples and Prints, 1965-1985* (Munich: Edition Schellmann, 1985) and now issued in English as *Joseph Beuys: The Multiples* (Cambridge: Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; Munich-New York: Edition Schellmann, 1997), p. 11. As suggestive as this utterance is, one must conclude from the context that Beuys refers to the lack of color and hope associated with the camps, rather than the link of hair.

32 *Mein und meiner Lieben verlassener Schlaf*, in Eva Beuys, op. cit., pp. 90-91; and pl. 74 in Schirmer, op. cit.

33 In Block 5 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.



FIGURE 4.3
Photograph taken shortly after the liberation of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, showing seven tons of human hair packed for shipment to factories for processing into felt. Collection of Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland.

for a range of wartime products, including slippers for U-boat crews and stockings for railway workers. Seven tons of human hair, packed and ready for shipment, were discovered at Auschwitz when the camp was liberated in 1945.³⁰ Whatever Beuys' personal experience of this pressed material may have been, and whatever its sculptural properties may be, felt has a place in the history of the Holocaust that cannot be erased or avoided.³¹



BY THIS POINT IT SHOULD be clear that a new and reoriented reading of Beuys is both possible and necessary. The darker resonance of felt and fat needs to be read back into the specific deployments of these materials across the whole of Beuys' oeuvre. Both materials are used extensively in Darmstadt. Felt is especially prominent in Room 2, where *Scene from the Stag Hunt* is kept company by felt piles and rolls, empty felt skins and suits, and felt-wrapped rods and angle beams. Near the center of the configured room, *My and My Loved Ones' Abandoned Sleep*, from 1965, is a five-tiered rack bed constructed of crude wooden boards and filled with layered sheets of felt.³² No one who has walked through the block houses of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum will fail to think immediately of the squalid racks where the prisoners of the work brigades slept under thin gray blankets. If felt and copper can function, as Beuys' self-



FIGURE 4.4
Recreated prisoners' room on exhibit in the surviving block houses at the Auschwitz I camp (1998 installation view).
Collection of Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland.

interpretations would have it, as generators or batteries of energy, that energy is not simply benign. Indeed, the dominant tone of the Darmstadt installations is that of desolation.

In Room 5, in which *Auschwitz Demonstration* is the only titled vitrine, the barrage of glass cases full of groupings of scarred, impoverished, quietly auratic objects powerfully evokes the museum exhibits now on view at the former site of Auschwitz I. There, similar glass cases display similar and even identical objects as evidence of "terrible crimes." Whatever the particular history and significance of the objects in Beuys' vitrines, they must evoke, for anyone who has visited the site of the Auschwitz camp (or the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.), the countless bowls, brushes, leather shoes, suitcases and plundered personal effects from the so-called "Canada" warehouses at the killing center.³³ These tokens, each eloquent in its particularity, powerfully evoke their murdered owners through that mode of remembrance that Kant referred to as "negative presentation"³⁴: in the presence of these personal traces, the absent victims are called to mind by the very fact of their absence. Beuys and others after him, like Christian Boltanski, would use this "negative" strategy of evocation to forceful effect, but the direct precedent and models for it have been sitting in the museum at Auschwitz since its establishment in 1947. Beuys' vitrines have been usefully compared to those of anthropological and natural history museums. To our understanding of the

34 Kant's notion of "negative *Darstellung*" is in the "General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments," in the "Analytic of the Sublime" of the 1790–3 *Critique of Judgment*. There, he makes the famous reference to the *Bilderverbot* of Jewish Law. Theodor Adorno implicitly pointed to this notion as the basis for an ethics of representation as early as 1961. See his "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" in *Notes to Literature* Volume One, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 249 and *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum), p. 380. In another context, Jean-François Lyotard has also indicated the rich potential of this notion. See his "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," (1984) and "Newman: The Instant," (1985) both in Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).



FIGURE 4.5
Reconstructed gas chamber at Auschwitz I. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland.

Darmstadt “Beuys Block,” however, we now need to add the real glass cases of the prison blocks at Oswiecim.

Ranging further, one is struck by the frequency with which Beuys wrapped himself in felt or wore it on his feet in his actions. *THE CHIEF Fluxus Song*, from 1964, and *I Like America and America Likes Me*, from 1974, are only the two best-known examples. Again, the standard interpretation has been that Beuys is rehearsing, with these gestures, his rescue by the Tartars. I would suggest that they have as much to do with the old Christian ascetic tradition of donning a hair shirt to mortify the body and atone for sins. This is the sense as well of the

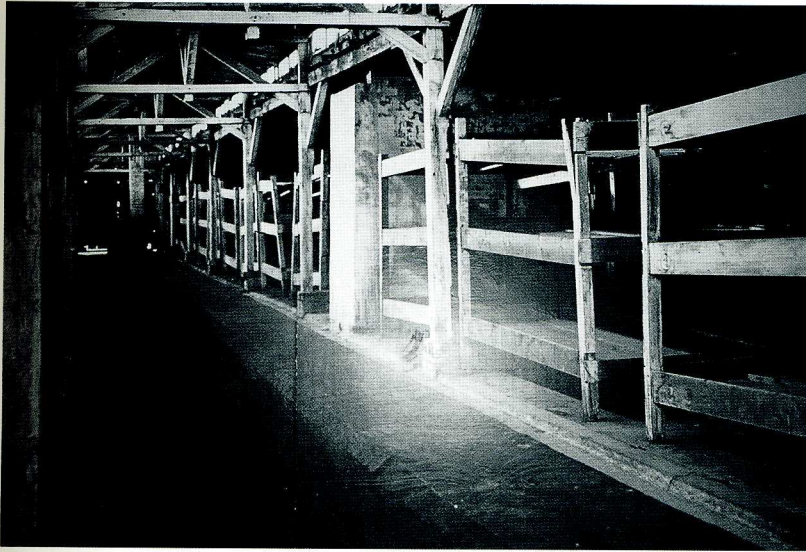


FIGURE 4.6

Rack beds in prisoners block houses on the site of the former Auschwitz II-Birkenau killing center. Collection of Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland.

famous *Felt Suits* of 1970. And in Block 6 of the museum at Auschwitz, the gray suits of the prisoners are displayed high on the wall, just as Beuys often hung his *Felt Suits*.³⁵ In his 1978 installation *Hearth II*, in Basel, Beuys piled more than sixty felt suits, most of them worn by members of the “Alti Richtig” club during carnival in the same year, directly on the gallery floor. This gesture, which evokes the mountains of confiscated clothes at the killing centers, reverberates through the whole double installation *Hearth I* (1968–74) and *Hearth II*. For seen in the context of the Holocaust, the numerous rods and small wagon of *Hearth I* visually echo the small wheeled car on rails which fed the bodies to the ovens in the crematoria.³⁶ This sense is only reinforced by the German title of Beuys’ piece: *Feuerstätte*, which literally means, place or scene of a fire.

The full force of *Plight*, the great 1985 felt environment now in Paris, can finally be mapped. There, stacked columns of felt line the walls, floor to ceiling, of two rooms connected in an “L”-shape. In the dead end of one, a thermometer and an empty chalkboard marked for musical notation lay on top of a closed concert piano. The feeling in the silenced rooms is densely funereal and claustrophobic. Ranked along the walls, the felt columns place the two interior spaces under a kind of intense surveillance. This surveillance can now be named as the haunting of victims evoked by negative presentation. Should there be any doubt of that, there is in Block 4 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State

35 In the 1970 interview Klüser and Schellmann cited above, Beuys scornfully evaded direct questions about the resemblance between the *Felt Suit* and “convicts” uniforms. Whatever else the suits may denote, the evasion was far from successful. Schellmann, ed., op. cit., p. 16.

36 One is painfully reminded of this scene at the reconstructed crematorium on the site of the Auschwitz I camp. Moreover, walking into the gas chamber there, lit darkly by bare hanging bulbs, one thinks of the dark, leaden space of Beuys’ 1983 environment *Pain Room* (pl. 146 in Schrimmer, ed., op. cit.).

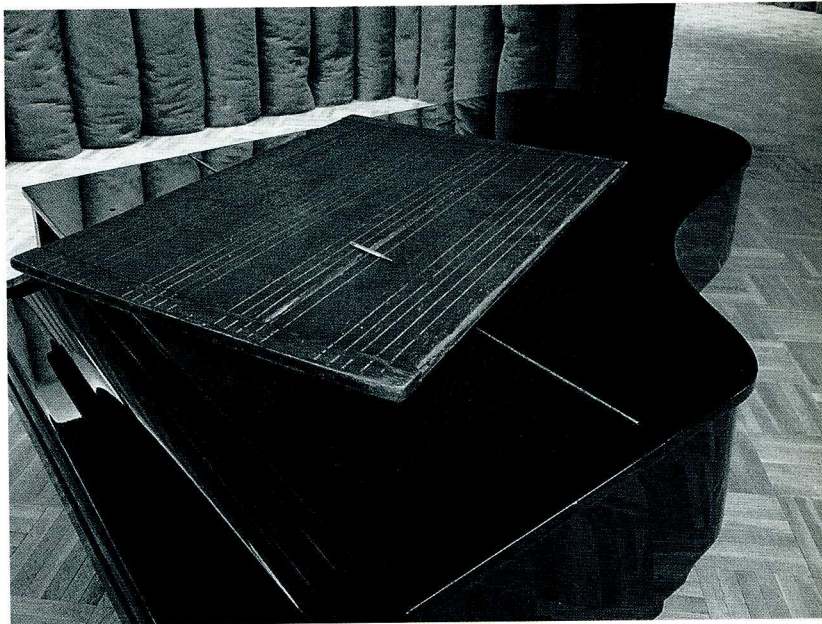


FIGURE 4.7

Joseph Beuys

Plight, 1985 (detail, 1990 installation view)

284 felt columns, piano, blackboard, thermometer, total dimensions 310 x 890 x 1813 cm.

Collections Mnam/Cci, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Photo: Photothèque des collections du Mnam/Cci

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37 The Soviets filmed the room of hair to use as evidence in the coming war crimes trials. The SS did not, in this case, have time to destroy the hair, which was ready for shipment to factories. An enlargement of the photograph can be seen in Room 5, Block 4.

38 Fabrice Hergott has counted 284 in the Paris installation (Hergott and Hohlfeldt, eds., op. cit., p. 233). Anthony d'Offay, in whose London gallery the piece was first installed, has written that forty-three groups of seven columns were used, which would have put the total number of columns at 301. *Joseph Beuys: Ideas and Actions*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Hirsch & Adler Modern, 1988), pp. 104–105

39 The silencing of music, from early objects recalling broken phonographs to the felt-wrapped pianos and cellos, constitutes a line of its own within Beuys' oeuvre. That line leads directly to *Plight*.

Museum, a blown-up photograph of a storage room taken shortly after the camp was liberated. It shows the seven tons of human hair packed tightly into 293 column-shaped sacks strikingly near in size and form to the felt columns of *Plight*.³⁷ (The total number of felt columns used by Beuys has been variously given as 284 and 301.³⁸) The silenced piano encountered under the relentless gaze of the columns, and under the weight of the thermometer alluding to the crematoria, asserts the impossibility of conventional human art, even in that most abstract medium of music, to represent this catastrophe for mourning and remembrance.³⁹ Beuys' piece becomes a staggering allegory of ineffability that responds to Theodor Adorno's famous 1951 dictum: after Auschwitz, no more poetry. An art that would offer itself as an object or gesture of mourning, even more the art of a German of Beuys' generation, must refuse both the beautiful and the direct or "positive" modes of traditional representation. It must, like Beuys' art at its strongest, produce its effects according to different rules—those of the sublime. Only an art in that register, an art which evokes and avows, which strikes, hits and hollows, can hope to honor the major trauma of the historical referent. The link between ethics and aesthetics is

confirmed in the English title: "plight," as most commentators have remarked, signifies a danger or risk as well as a duty.



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EVOCATIVE strategies at work in *Plight* can be traced from numerous other works roughly contemporaneous with *Auschwitz Demonstration* through to their most forceful and effective forms in the major sculptural installations of Beuys' last decade. Here, I can only indicate, in an all too cursory manner, some recurrent motifs and vehicles of allusion and negative presentation. Together, they constitute the lines of a symbolic and allegorical network that hovers grimly over this body of work.

Fat is shaped, melted, rubbed, flung, and spread across Beuys' oeuvre. The relation to the victims' bodies and the crematoria established in the Aachen action and acknowledged in the Darmstadt vitrine resounds through allusive sculptural forms which generate meaning through visual metaphor and metonymy. In the famous 1963 *Chair with Fat*, the seated human figure which the chair's form so strongly evokes is absent, but reappears stubbornly, in a kind of ghastly afterimage, in and through the wedge of fat Beuys has substituted for it. The mammoth, block-like forms of *Tallow*, cast in Münster in 1977 and now in Berlin, recall, through several degrees of abstraction, the forms of the trains and unloading ramps of the killing centers. {See Plate 4.1} The resemblance emerged from Beuys' configuration of the piece as "Station 23" at the bottom of the spiral in the 1979/80 Guggenheim retrospective. It is clearly, if startlingly, visible in published photographs of the installation, the effect intensified by proximity to *Tram Stop*.⁴⁰ And if the familiar fat, felt and flashlights on sleds of *The Pack (das Rudel)*⁴¹ have been seen as so many rescue or care packages, they must also be read, as they spill out of the back of the "car of the German people," as the multiplying funeral sleds of the victims themselves, damned to the night and ice of oblivion.

The fires of the crematoria are evoked in numerous objects. The small 1948 bronze *Torso* was combined unmistakably with a 1950 work called *Oven*.⁴² Another *Oven*, now in a private collection in Munich, was made in 1970.⁴³ This direction culminates in the two versions of the great installation and object group *Tram Stop*, created for the 1976 Venice Biennale. {See Plate 4.2} There, in the German pavilion rededicated with Nazi regalia in 1938 by Hitler himself, Beuys actually gives us an abstracted model of a functioning killing center. There is the railway to bring in the victims, there are the camp buildings dominated by the smokestack, through the opening of which the pained head of the

40 See, for example Hergott and Hohlfeldt, eds., p. 345.

41 From 1969, now in Kassel, pl. 107 in Schirmer, ed., op. cit. A single example of the sled-pack is in Vitrine 8, Room 7, in Darmstadt, strikingly juxtaposed to an object group titled *Bathtub*, 1961, and consisting of a small tub with electric immersion coil and a large fist of fat on a sheet of felt. Eva Beuys, op. cit., pp. 266–267.

42 Now in a private collection, but reproduced in Eva Beuys, op. cit., p. 357. The same assemblage, cast in bronze and combined with a small tub-form and an electric immersion coil, becomes the 1984 bronze *Bathtub for a Heroine*: ibid., p. 387; and pl. 20/cat. 55 in Zweite, op. cit. That these and other "ovens" can convincingly be read as representations of the alchemical crucible does not effect the holocaustal dimension of allusion.

43 Pl. 198/cat. 392 in Zweite, op. cit.

44 Pl. 130 in Schirmer, ed., op. cit. It must be said that Kim Levin, in a line tucked into her review of the 1979/80 Guggenheim retrospective, hit the nail right on the head: "Besides the purely autobiographical childhood memories mentioned in the catalog, *Tram Stop*—with a head protruding from the end of the cannon—suggests the end of the line at the concentration camps." Indeed, Levin, "Joseph Beuys: The New Order," p. 176. Cf. Tisdall, op. cit., pp. 242–247; and Rieja Brouns, *Joseph Beuys: Strassenbahnhaltstelle* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1994). If the Venice version avows, subsequent configurations, now in Otterlo and Berlin, in which the cast iron canon has been uprooted and razed to the horizontal, continue to commemorate.

45 Now in Room 3 of the Beuys Block in Darmstadt. See Eva Beuys, op. cit., pp. 106–107.

46 Now in Vitrine 4, Room 7 in Darmstadt. Ibid., pp. 256–259.

47 *Torso*, dated 1949–51, discussed as fig. 2 in Pamela Kort, *Lehmbruck/Beuys* (Cologne and New York: Michael Werner, 1997), n.p.

48 Pls. 144, 145 in Schirmer, ed., op. cit.

49 Of the four versions, one is in Frankfurt and another is in Philadelphia. Cf. Mark Rosenthal, *Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch* (Frankfurt/Main: Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1990), p. 32.

50 In Berlin, Düsseldorf, London and Munich.

51 "In seinem positiven Gegenbilde" in the original German Ms. transcription, trans. as "une contre-image positive." Max Reithmann, *Joseph Beuys: Par la présente, je n'appartiens plus à l'art* (Paris: L'Arche, 1982), p. 121–122. This is the place for a special thanks to Max Reithmann, whose helpful suggestions and ongoing meditations on Beuys have been invaluable to me.

52 "Also insofern ist diese Auschwitzvitrine eigentlich ein Spielzeug," trans. as "C'est pourquoi 'la vitrine d'Auschwitz' n'est en réalité qu'un jouet." Ibid., p. 122.

victim is squeezed, exhaled as ash through the dragon's teeth and thrown, as Paul Celan put it, "to a grave on the breezes."⁴⁴

The maidens, girls, stags and hares which are wounded, hunted or killed repeatedly in Beuys' work constitute a targeted community the fate of which echoes the wartime genocide. Notably, hare fur is also commonly used to make felt. From the dismembered body of the 1961 teakwood sculpture *Virgin*⁴⁵ to the fantastically threatening hare in the rifle sights of a toy soldier in *The Unconquerable*, from 1963,⁴⁶ to the famous actions with dead hares, the process by which these symbols of innocence are transformed into hated alien objects is reenacted. If *Tram Stop* evokes a killing center, *Stag Memorials*, created in the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin as part of the 1982/83 exhibition *Zeitgeist*, recalls the forced labor camps. Around the looming central slag heap, the violent potential of the pliers, hammers and numerous other work tools was evinced by the dismembered torso-form of an abstracted female body held in a vise.⁴⁷ A spindly wooden pole overlooking the scene sported not a flag but a blood sausage of the type used in the Darmstadt vitrine.⁴⁸ The cast bronze and aluminum elements of the spin-off object group *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* relate to the folding carpenter's rule from the same vitrine.⁴⁹

Beuys' ability to find precisely resonant sculptural materials and to embed them in intensely evocative forms and visual allegories is forcefully at work in the four versions of *The End of the Twentieth Century*, from 1983.⁵⁰ {See Plate 4.3} The manipulated basalt columns evoke the human body by their scale and resemblance to stone sarcophagi and portrait mummies, and they recall disastrous human history by their resemblance to the fallen columns of a ruined classical temple. The funereal piece executed in the traditional medium of remembrance allegorizes the genocidal catastrophe at the same time that it counters the pompous monumentality of traditional history art.



THE FIRST ISSUE POSED by a reoriented reading of Beuys concerns the status of what I call a "project of mourning." Confirmation of such a project in Beuys' own words is, as evidenced here, somewhat slim. In addition to the 1985 Munich address, three statements by the artist can be read as acknowledgment of a project parallel to and bound up with, yet importantly distinct from, the aims expressed by the "expanded concept of art." In a much-cited 1982 interview with Max Reithmann, Beuys asserted that the horror denoted by the place-name "Auschwitz" cannot be "represented in an image." Thus, he never sought to represent that horror in his art, but to "remember" it through what he called "its positive counter image."⁵¹ This

notion is far from clear, but can be read as a refusal of direct, positive representations in favor of what I have called negative presentation and other strategies of evocation and avowal. However, both Beuys' conclusion that *Auschwitz Demonstration* may therefore be seen as a kind of "toy"⁵² and his glib suggestion that consumer capitalism must be seen as a contemporary Auschwitz⁵³ seem to me disturbing and regrettable; they simply subvert the gravity of his other statements.

In earlier discussions with Caroline Tisdall, Beuys again explained that the objects *KZ=Essen* are not meant to "represent catastrophe," but to explore "the content and meaning of catastrophe."⁵⁴ He implied that they could function therapeutically, by "healing like with like" in a homeopathic healing process. But here as elsewhere there is a rapid shift to the present tense, with an assertion that "the human condition is Auschwitz." In a less-cited 1980 interview published in *Penthouse*, Beuys acknowledged the deep personal shock which came with his first realization, after the end of the war, of the full extent of the genocide. That shock, he said, "is my primary experience, my fundamental experience, which led me to begin to really go into art."⁵⁵ Together, these statements are as near as Beuys was willing to go toward an unambiguous acknowledgment of a project of mourning. In themselves, they would hardly be enough. But as confirmation of what can be read in the objects themselves, they suffice. Indeed, the consistent pattern of visual and material linkages I have pointed to does not need any confirmation at all from the artist: the links are there for anyone to see, trace and feel. At this point, the argument makes contact with an ongoing and still-contested contemporary analysis of the role of artistic intention.

We cannot know what Beuys actually felt and believed about the Holocaust. We simply do not have access to that knowledge. Moreover, Beuys himself may not have been able to know or understand his own deepest feelings about the Nazi period. In this sense, Beuys' own words cannot be taken as infallible guides. Given Beuys' relation to that time, we would expect that a personal confrontation with it would have been acutely painful, but we cannot know for sure if that confrontation took place or, if it did, how deeply it probed and with what effect. Further, we do not know for certain whether Beuys intentionally coded his objects with Holocaust references or whether that encoding was largely unconscious. Beyond that, claims by way of answer to this dilemma devolve into speculation. What we can say is that the objects do evoke and avow. When viewed in the correct context, they indeed generate such meanings. We can also say it was entirely possible that Beuys knew of the relevant facts and images pertaining to that context. He may have first encountered them while doing research for his 1958 proposal for an Auschwitz memorial. Kramer has noted that a major war crimes trial in Frankfurt in 1963 and

53 Beuys may have been alluding to Theodor Adorno, who linked Auschwitz to the logic of identity universalized under late capitalism, most famously at the end of the 1966 *Negative Dialectics*. But what has force and authority within a sustained and complexly nuanced philosophical critique became, in a few careless words from a German who fought for the Third Reich, painfully inappropriate.

54 Tisdall, op. cit., pp. 21–23.

55 "Joseph Beuys," in *Penthouse* 106 (1980): 98; and cited in Kramer, op. cit., p. 261.

1964 had created, at a crucial time in the development of Beuys' art and persona, the first public occasion since the war and the Nuremberg trials for Germans to confront and discuss among themselves details about the mechanics and logistics of the killing centers.⁵⁶ Beuys could at that time have come into contact with additional information about, for example, the use of human hair. He could have been shown or been exposed to the relevant images—photos, for example, taken by a visitor to the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. In the strictest sense, the facts and images had been in public circulation since Nuremberg. One does not need to be an uncritical Freudian (with respect to the unconscious) or a missionary Derridean (with respect to intention and iterability) to realize that Beuys' works could function at one level as objects and gestures of mourning with or without Beuys' clear intention or full apprehension.

There are, then, two possibilities. Beuys may not have grasped how consistently and intensely his objects oriented themselves toward the Holocaust. That, though improbable, would most simply explain the relative paucity of clearer statements from the artist himself. Alternatively, Beuys may have known perfectly well what he was doing, in which case the pronounced evasiveness of his statements on the subject was no accident. That is, he may have wanted to avoid the association of his art with the too-facile "art about Auschwitz" label. He may have wanted to preserve for the objects and actions an opportunity to have their effects without the interference of such assumptions and expectations. There would have been good reason to do so; the effects of the sublime depend in large part on a certain openness or vulnerability on the part of the spectator. The expectation that one was about to view "Auschwitz art" would have functioned for many as a protective shield or barrier against the hit of the sublime. It would also have blocked any reflection on the "expanded concept of art." That would have been a major concern, since Beuys clearly did not want the spectator's reflection to end with or come to rest at Auschwitz. The issue is finally undecidable, but if the public evasions in fact reflect Beuys' deliberate strategy, then it must be said that the strategy worked too well. The myriad autobiographical banalities were readily seized on as iconographic certainties, and the "expanded concept of art" construed as the primary content of his work. Auschwitz was moved to the margins, where it has remained.

The question then becomes one of the effectiveness of the project of mourning. Much has been made of a purported German "inability to mourn." Instead of confronting and working-through national guilt for Nazi crimes, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich have argued, Germans of the perpetrating generation threw themselves into the less-painful labor of economic recovery.⁵⁷ While there is perhaps

56 Kramer, op. cit., pp. 262, 269.

57 The basic elements of this thesis were advanced by Theodor Adorno in *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1959), trans. by T. Bahti and G. Hartman as "What Does Coming To Terms with the Past Mean?," in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), pp. 114-129. The thesis was developed and elaborated along more technically Freudian lines by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern, Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967), trans. by B. Placzek as *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove, 1975).

some truth to this analysis, anyone who has spent time in contemporary Germany will recognize it as a broad and problematic generalization. Working-through the Holocaust and mourning its victims is a slow, ongoing process that takes place across generations and on many levels. The Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek has made the point that the weakness of the major discursive analyses of Nazism carried out by Frankfurt School and poststructuralist theorists is that their focus on the levels of imaginary and symbolic identification misses the deep, “pre-symbolic enjoyment” which the Nazi fantasy activated. Merely rational critiques of Nazi fantasies of purity and omnipotence are ultimately ineffective in so far as they leave this deeper level of enjoyment untouched. To “go through the fantasy” is only possible at the end of a movement which first reenacts it, which puts its symbols back into play in order to call back and confront that deepest and most persistent level of support.⁵⁸

Beuys may have intuited something similar, or have been on his way toward such an intuition. This may well be what he meant by his talk of a “homeopathic process.” We can at any rate observe that after 1964 he avoided the kind of directly confrontational allusions to the Holocaust that are still more likely than not to provoke reflexive and unproductively defensive reactions. Whether he knew it or not, Beuys found a way to evoke and avow the genocide by means of subtler strategies of indirection, opening up the way to what Žižek calls the “traumatic kernel.” And as one nears the irreducible kernel of catastrophe, one is exposed to the sharp and disturbing punch of the sublime. An occasion for mourning and working-through is created. There is no guarantee that Beuys’ works will have this effect. One may argue that whatever their potential, the history of Beuys’ reception indicates that they did not. I am not so sure. My own experience is that the force of the late installations is quite palpable.

The risk of the sublime is always that its hit not be followed by an adequate interpretation. An adequate interpretation, in the case of Beuys, would include the patient establishment of links to the Holocaust. That is the task of the critic. Only in the clarity of such links can one grasp Beuys’ importance as a postwar European artist at the cutting edge of a new mode of history art. With respect to the project of mourning, only through such diligent linking can the “terrible sins, and not-for-describing black marks” be kept in view and not lost sight of “even for a moment.”

The greatness of Beuys’ work comes from its strong, simultaneous engagement with both the past and the future. The way out of the transgressive and traumatic past is the way into the redemptive future. Healing enables the creation of a better world. But it is no overstatement to say that the very dignity of Beuys’ message of hope hangs upon the struggle and hard work implied in the posture of perpetual remembrance. Without that, the message—in all its ethi-

58 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 87–128. Žižek is inflecting terms, such as “jouissance” and “the Real” from Lacan’s 1964 seminar, first published in 1973 and later in English as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Also useful in this regard are Žižek’s *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991); *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke, 1993) and his defense of the “post-punk” group Laibach in a 1994 interview trans. and ed. by Andrew Herscher in *Assemblage* 33 (Aug. 1997):60–63.

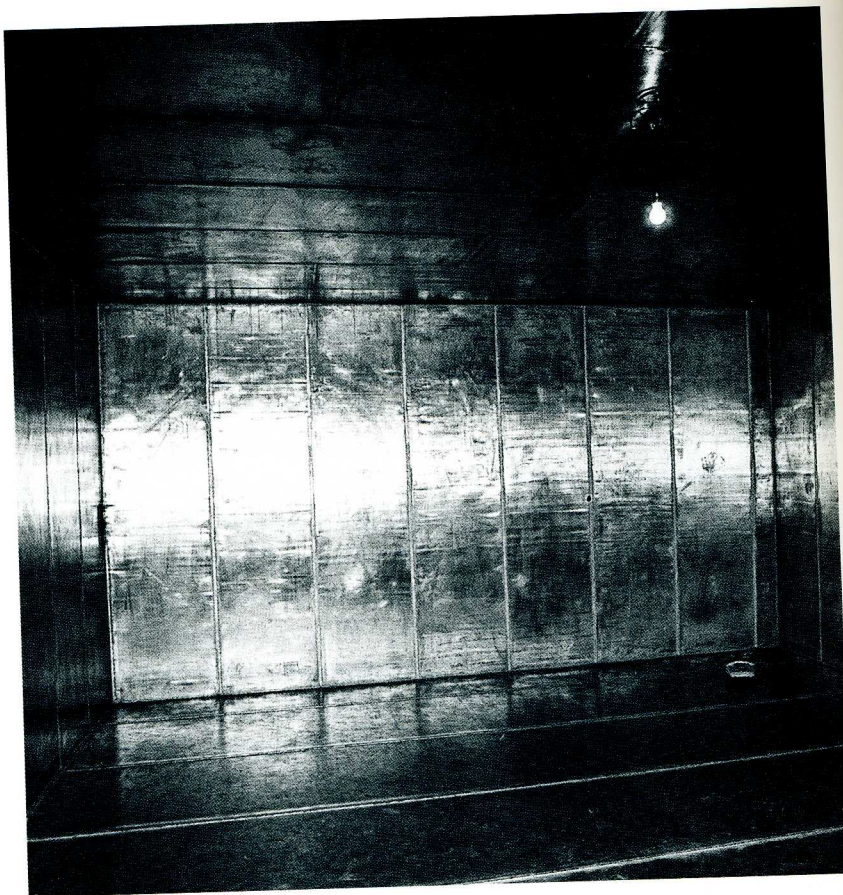


FIGURE 4.8

Joseph Beuys

Hinter dem Knochen wird gezählt/SCHMERZRAUM (Behind the bone will be counted/PAIN ROOM), 1983

Sheet lead lining free-standing construction of steel girders and sheet metal, two silver rings, light bulb, 545 x 735 x 295 cm

Collection of Contemporary Art Fundació "la Caixa", Barcelona

Photo courtesy of Dorothee Fischer, Konrad Fischer Galerie

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cal and political dimensions—becomes less convincing. If the sins and marks Beuys spoke of seem to have slipped from view in the published reception, the corrective is available. As Beuys seems to have implied, it may have been too early, even in 1985, to “talk about one’s own country” directly, with clear words and place names. It may have been too early to make the more brutal linkages I have made here. One trusts it is not still so.