

## 2 THE IMPACT OF 1968 ON EUROPEAN ART

Just as the United States was traumatized by political events in the late 1960s, so was Europe—by the student uprisings that occurred in 1968 in many of its major cities. And just as the Vietnam War was the catalyst for violent demonstrations in the United States so, too, it was in Europe. There was also widespread alienation—and at a time of unprecedented prosperity and cultural tolerance. As philosopher Jürgen Habermas observed, the student riots constituted “the first bourgeois revolt against the principles of a bourgeois society that is almost successfully functioning according to its own standards.”<sup>1</sup>

During the academic year 1967–68, demonstrations and takeovers occurred in twenty-six of Italy’s thirty-three universities; in March an estimated half a million students were on strike. On March 17 in London, some twenty-five thousand demonstrated against the Vietnam War at the American embassy. In May the French government was temporarily paralyzed by striking students, joined by millions of workers. The uprising reflected the rise of a counterculture, exemplified in the graffiti scrawled on Parisian walls. THE IMAGINATION TAKES POWER / TAKE YOUR DESIRES FOR REALITY / IT IS FORBIDDEN TO FORBID.

The chronicler of the rebellion, David Caute, asked:

What were [the students]—courageous visionaries or romantic utopians? Genuine revolutionaries or posturing spoiled brats? An authentic resistance movement or a frivolous carnival by kids who had never known poverty and the fear of unemployment? An idealistic challenge to imperialism or a pantomime of rhetorical gestures? A rebirth of the critical intelligence or a long, drugged “trip” into fashionable incoherence?<sup>2</sup>

If a collective personality could be defined, it would probably encompass all these stances to some degree. But there was no denying that an entire generation was sorely wounded by the events of 1968—and that the wounds would fester. All those involved were gripped by an attitude criti-

cal of established values, an iconoclastic perspective that would continue to shape their outlook on life, society, and, above all, culture. But there was a positive side to this rebellion, as art critic Germano Celant remarked, an "explosive rejection of a philistine culture. . . . People spoke of a revolutionary imagination . . . and a universal renewal. . . . It opened up to multiplicity, no longer categorizing itself as painting or sculpture; it went into the streets. . . . It was a period of feverish experimentation, which liberalized the creative processes."<sup>3</sup>

The leading European artists who emerged at this time—Joseph Beuys in Germany; Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis of the Arte Povera group in Italy; Marcel Broodthaers in Belgium; and Daniel Buren in France—were profoundly influenced by the student uprising of 1968. They were quickly hailed by the European art world as the equals of the American pop artists, minimalists, and postminimalists. European art, it was alleged, had come into its own.

However, widespread acceptance by art professionals in New York—most of whom persisted in believing that only what happened there was significant—was slow in coming. There were exceptions, for example, Lucy Lippard, who commented as early as 1969 that Europe "may be more fertile for new ideas and new ways of disseminating art than the United States."<sup>4</sup> On the whole, though, as Elizabeth Baker recalled, European art in the seventies was "invisible,"<sup>5</sup> despite occasional sightings, as in Jennifer Licht's *Eight Contemporary Artists* (1974)—five of whom were European—at New York City's Museum of Modern Art.<sup>6</sup>

In 1967 Joseph Beuys, a professor of sculpture at the prestigious Düsseldorf Academy of Art, founded the politically dissident German Student Party and in the following year aligned himself with the rioting students, who strongly influenced his attitudes to art and politics. Beuys, who remained committed to social change to the end of his life, founded (among other organizations) the Organization of Non-Voters/Free Referendum Information Point in 1970 and the Organization for Direct Democracy Through Referendum in 1971. He also waged war against hidebound art education.<sup>7</sup> Beuys summed up his countercultural stance in 1979: "Young people—the hippies in the '60s, the punks today—are struggling to find new ways of defining the culture they live in. They, not money, are the capital of society."<sup>8</sup>

More than any of his contemporaries, Beuys sought to confront the social situation of a physically and psychologically devastated Germany and, by extension, Europe. Facing up to German history and culture—the Nazi period and its antecedents—he said that he would assume the shamanistic role of exorcising past horrors, "indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process."<sup>9</sup> He also believed that the imaginative powers of art could change life and bring about a personal and national rebirth. His ideas appealed to the European art world, because

they seemed peculiarly European and—equally important—because they were expressed in an advanced visual language. Beuys achieved widespread recognition in 1968 and, in the 1970s, became the most important and influential artist in Europe.

Beuys proposed his art as an alternative to contemporary American art—which to him meant pop art, exemplified by Warhol, and minimalism.<sup>10</sup> He overlooked the fact that many American postminimalists were also reacting against pop art and minimalism and were, like him, moving into performance and installation art. And they were as affected by the Vietnam War and America's social evils as he had been by the Nazi horror, the Holocaust, the student uprisings of 1968—and Vietnam. (But he convinced a significant number of European artists and art professionals that his misreading of American and European art was the correct interpretation, in large measure because they wanted to believe it.)

Beuys's artistic roots were in Dada-inspired fluxus, which had been at the center of the German avant-garde in the early 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Attracted by its use of performance to break down barriers between art and life, he joined the group. In February 1963 he hosted an international fluxus festival, *Festum Fluxorum Fluxus* at the Düsseldorf Academy.<sup>12</sup> On that occasion he performed the first of his "actions," as he called his theatrical pieces, titled *Siberian Symphony*. Fluxus artists, who generally favored simple, short, often outrageous and funny sound-producing events, found Beuys's performance too complex and metaphorical for their taste. But much as he diverged aesthetically from the fluxus group, he always maintained his identification with it—and its iconoclastic, antiestablishment image.

Beuys based his mature work on what he claimed was the most consequential event of his life: the alleged shooting down of his fighter plane in the snows of the Crimea during World War II and his miraculous rescue by nomadic Tatars. Claiming that they had resuscitated his frozen body by wrapping him in fat and felt, he later made fat and felt his trademark materials. He also introduced related images and objects: red crosses, medical tubing, ambulance sleds, and the like. The theme of the artist-hero, fallen out of the sky to his painful near death and subsequent resurrection, would be reenacted obsessively in Beuys's work.<sup>13</sup> He then layered this personal myth of wartime survival with references to nature; national consciousness; German history, culture, and mythology; the interaction between East and West; and messianic social prophecy. Finally he formulated a political program and became an activist.

To be effective Beuys had to attract the attention of the media. To this end he fashioned a memorable—a trademark—persona that featured a felt hat (atop his sallow, hollow-cheeked face), an apple green fisherman's vest, jeans, heavy shoes, fur-lined overcoat, and knapsack. In appearance, he was a kind of Teutonic counterpart of the palefaced and silvery-gray-bewigged Warhol.

Performance was central to Beuys's art. For his best-known "action," *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), he covered his head with honey and gold leaf and lectured a dead hare cradled in his arms. He said that he took it "to the pictures. . . . I let him touch the pictures with his paws and meanwhile talked to him about them."<sup>14</sup> Animals also appear in Beuys's later performances. In *Iphigenie/Titus Andronicus* (1969) a glowing white stallion pawed while Beuys clashed cymbals and an amplified voice intoned the words "death" and "die." His intention, as he said, was to tie man "from below with the animals, the plants, with nature, and in the same way tie him with the heights with the angels or spirits."<sup>15</sup>

Art-as-action was more important to Beuys than art-as-object. Though his works of art were generally not conceived as autonomous (most were the relics of performances or lectures), they nonetheless manifested a masterful sculptural sensibility. A number of the best-known were conceived as discrete objects. For example, in *Fat Chair* a wedge of fat sits on a chair like a person. Writers have likened the fat to the remains of the millions of people who were melted down in Nazi death camps. References to the Holocaust are also inescapable in *Auschwitz*, which consists of a two-burner hotplate with a chunk of fat on each. But fat was also interpreted as a symbol of life-giving warmth, doubly so because it was insulated by felt. Beuys commented that fat was meant to heat and dissolve the "frozen and rigid forms of the past [so that] future form becomes possible." Its malleability, its ready change from liquid to solid, was a metaphor for change, for the remolding of society.<sup>16</sup> The transitional nature of Beuys's materials, not only fat but the energy that flows through the recurring batteries, transmitters, receivers, insulators, and conductors in his work, also suggested alchemical processes [31].

Reacting against formalist criticism, which they identified as American, European critics and curators often read specific and elaborate symbolic meanings into Beuys's materials and images. But his work seemed to elicit such readings. For example, Troels Andersen reported that in *Eurasia*, 1966, the kneeling Beuys "slowly pushed two small crosses which were lying on the floor towards a blackboard; on each cross was a watch with an adjusted alarm. On the board he drew a cross which he then half erased; underneath he wrote 'Eurasia.'" Then Andersen commented: "The symbols are completely clear and they are all translatable. The division of the cross is the split between East and West, Rome and Byzantium. The half cross is the United Europe and Asia," and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Americans, too, focused on iconography. In writing about *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) [32], an "action" in which Beuys lived with a coyote, David Levi Strauss recounted how the coyote emigrated from Eurasia to America, carrying



31. Joseph Beuys, *Untitled*, 1974–79. (Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

paleo-Asiatic shamanistic knowledge with him, spreading it throughout the North American West and into Mesoamerica. [In the nineteenth century] the coyote became the prime scapegoat in the West. He symbolized the wild and untamed, an unacceptable threat to husbandry, domesticity, and law & order. . . . Like the American Indian, he was the Other in our midst, and we did everything we could to eliminate them both.

When Beuys arrived in the United States, he had himself transported from the airport to the gallery in an ambulance marked with red crosses. Strauss went on:

Wrapped in a felt cocoon inside the ambulance, Beuys recalled his own myth of origin. . . .





32. Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, performance at René Block Gallery, New York, May 23–25, 1974. (Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; photograph by Caroline Tisdall)

Upon arrival in the room with the coyote, Beuys began an orchestrated sequence of actions to be repeated over and over in the next three days. [To] begin the sequence [a] triangle that Beuys wears [as a] pendant around his neck . . . the alchemical sign for fire [is struck] three times. [Then] a recording of loud turbine engine noise is played outside the enclosure, signifying “indetermined energy.” At this point, Beuys pulls on his gloves, reminiscent of the traditional bear-claw gloves worn by “masters of animals” shamans . . . and gets into his fur pelt/felt, wrapping it around himself so that he disappears into it with the flashlight. He then extends the crook of his staff out from the opening at the top of the felt wrap, as an energy conductor and receptor, antenna or lightning rod. . . .

Beuys . . . follows the movements of the coyote around the room, keeping the receptor/staff pointed in the coyote’s direction at all times. . . .

There is a pile of straw, another piece of felt, and stacks of each day's *Wall Street Journal* in the room. Beuys sleeps on the coyote's straw; the coyote sleeps on Beuys' felt. The copies of the *Wall Street Journal* arrive each day from outside (like the engine noise) and enter into the dialogue as evidence . . . of materialistic thinking.<sup>18</sup>

The American trauma, as Beuys summed it up, was "the Red Man." To cure it "a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted."<sup>19</sup>

Beuys thought of his art, even at its most autobiographical, as political. In his performances he assumed the role of shaman—that is, one who makes a private experience public for the purpose of healing society. In a sense he extended his thinking from his own body in action to the body politic; that is, he moved to sculpting society as his art. With this in mind, Beuys performed an "action" titled *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated* (1964), calling into question Duchamp's detachment from social affairs and his antiart stance.<sup>20</sup>

In 1971 Beuys rented a store in Düsseldorf, in which he invited his fellow citizens to participate in political discussions. From this time on his major activity, which he designated as his "art," became lecturing and talking to people. He often used a blackboard to demonstrate his theories, objects that were preserved as "drawings" and, when assembled, as "sculptures." When art critic Achille Bonito Oliva said to Beuys: "It seems to me that your work is the extending of a kind of 'Socratic space' in which the works are no more than a pretext for dialogue with the individual," Beuys responded: "This is the most important side of my work. The rest—objects, drawings, actions—all take second place. . . . Art interests me only in so far as it gives me the possibility of a dialogue with individuals."<sup>21</sup>

Beuys's message—or his "theory of social sculpture," as he termed it, was that society could be transformed only by art, but first the concept of art would have to be enlarged to include every kind of creativity. From this point of view, everybody was a potential artist.<sup>22</sup> When the people became aware of their creative power, they would join together to reform society, according to their desires.<sup>23</sup> The political process that Beuys advocated was direct democracy through plebiscite on the economy, education, ecology. Free and self-determining people would create communal organizations and rule by "direct action."

Beuys's libertarian antistatist and antibureaucratic politics were much the same as those of the protesting students in 1968. As David Caute wrote:

The New Left rejected political and economic concentrations of power in favor of a decentralized society with power vested at the local level among producers, community associations, and student unions. . . . This may prove to be the most enduring legacy of the

New Left and the counterculture: the project of an "alternative" society composed of grassroots, "counter institutions" designed both to challenge the bureaucratic structures of official society and to endow common people with an awakening sense of their own capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Just as Beuys believed that humanity had to be regenerated, so he believed that the environment had to be renewed. Consequently he was a cofounder of the ecopolitical Green Party. In 1979 Beuys ran for a seat in the European Community Parliament; he received just 3.5 percent of the vote, but that did not seem to faze him. He said: "Getting elected is not all that matters. . . . Elections are also a time to educate."<sup>25</sup>

Beuys was a controversial figure to the end of his life in 1986.<sup>26</sup> His opponents claimed that his politics were simple-minded and self-serving. Why else did he confer on the artist the leading political role? Furthermore, no matter how fervently he proselytized for individual self-determination and public dialogue, he assumed the egotistical role of the "good" leader, the Christlike savior who transformed his suffering into his art and through it would bind a war-torn society's wounds.<sup>27</sup> In the wake of the Hitler period, his Führer-like stance was worrisome. A charismatic figure, he attracted a considerable number of disciples and acolytes, some of whom dressed in a kind of Beuysian uniform. Critics also viewed Beuys's self-mythification as his primary enterprise. They claimed that, like Warhol, his greatest work was his own dramatization. His pedagogical and political activities were all components of that self-aggrandizing performance.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, so was his life; anything that Beuys did was considered to be part of his art. The props of his "actions," life, and lectures were offered as relics, to be venerated by the faithful.

But Beuys was also esteemed by many artists and others who believed in a social art, and he influenced both performance and installation artists, and painters, such as his students Anselm Kiefer and Jörg Immendorff, as well as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, who studied at the school in which he taught. His influence was strongest in Europe, but it was also felt in the United States, trying to awake from the nightmare of Vietnam.<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of the 1968 uprisings Marcel Broodthaers undertook a critique of the context of art, focusing on the museum, the institution that most authoritatively establishes art in art history by accumulating and categorizing it. He believed that the museum, more than any other art-world agency, determined the livelihood of artists and the fate of their art and, consequently, was more significant than anything it housed. Indeed, by being put in a museum context, even nonart could be established as art, as in the case of Duchamp's readymades. With an eye to Duchamp, Broodthaers proposed to take the museum-as-frame-of-art and put it within the frame of *his* art, making the deconstruction of the



museum his subject and content—and he did so with a sly and devastating irony.

Broodthaers did not become an artist until 1964, after a long, non-lucrative career as a poet. He had been interested in the visual arts and had occasionally written art criticism. In 1962 he saw an exhibition of Piero Manzoni's work that included cans of the artist's excrement. What impressed Broodthaers was that the cans were for sale, suggesting that art whose idea it was to subvert the art market could be merchandised.<sup>30</sup> In 1963, he was "strongly impressed by the image that the American pop artists had to offer" in shows he saw at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris.<sup>31</sup> He was also familiar with the French *nouveau réalisme* of Arman, Christo, and Yves Klein.

Broodthaers began to make art by sticking the fifty remaining copies of his most recent volume of poems into plaster, together with two plastic spheres. He exhibited this object and several others that incorporated readymades in a one-person show in Brussels just seven months later. He wrote in the announcement: "I, too, wondered if I couldn't sell something and succeed in life. For quite a while I had been good for nothing. I am forty years old. . . . The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind, and I set to work at once."<sup>32</sup>

Broodthaers soon began to use kitchen pots and household furniture, and foodstuffs, such as eggshells and Belgium's ubiquitous mussel shells. In 1965 he wrote: "I make Pop. . . . What dreams! What maneuvers! How have I succeeded? Easily, I have just followed the footprints left in the artistic sands by René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp and those new ones of George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg."<sup>33</sup>

In 1968 there were demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins in Brussels, as there were in Amsterdam, Berlin, Nanterre, Milan, and Paris, names Broodthaers embossed on a plaque titled *Illimite* (1969). A critical question posed by the radical students was who would control cultural institutions. In Belgium the only major public venue devoted to contemporary art was the Palais des Beaux-Arts. After prolonged debate, artists occupied it. Four of the instigators, including Broodthaers, were chosen to negotiate with the authorities. However, Broodthaers was ambiguous about the protest and his role in it. He had helped to formulate the manifesto, which condemned "the commercialization of all forms of art considered as objects of consumption." But he had also begun to produce art in the first place in order to earn money.

Broodthaers resigned from the committee and wrote a letter "To my friends," which declared: "A fundamental gesture has been made here that throws a vivid light on culture and on the ambitions of certain people who aspire to control it one way or another: what this means is that culture is an obedient material." He too confessed to a desire "to control the *meaning/direction* . . . of culture," but "I have no material demands to present except that I surfeit myself with cabbage soup." He concluded this sardonic letter with: "My friends, with you I cry for ANDY

WARHOL." And in a 1970 statement, he made it clear why he invoked the name of the exemplary business artist: "The aim of all art is commercial. My aim is equally commercial."<sup>34</sup> Later, as if to prove this statement, he acquired a gold ingot and stamped it with an eagle—his signature sign. He proposed to sell a number of such bars at double the market price of gold, the markup denoting their monetary value as art.

Broodthaers repeatedly called attention to the commodification of art. In 1975 he said: "I doubt, in fact, that it is possible to give a serious definition of Art, unless we examine the question in terms of . . . the transformation of Art into merchandise. This process is accelerated nowadays to the point where artistic and commercial values have become superimposed."<sup>35</sup> He would remain obsessed with the question of who and what defined art and ascribed aesthetic and monetary value to it—and to what end.

The desire to control culture, or at least the cultural context of his own work, and to deconstruct the art-world power structure led Broodthaers to use culture as his material and to invent his own "fictional" museum. In the fall of 1968 he opened his *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Section of the Nineteenth Century* on the ground floor of his house. It consisted of empty packing cases for works of art, postcards of famous French paintings, slide projections, and—visible through a window—an empty moving van outside the house. The *Museum* opened, as museums do, with a press conference and a party of art-world dignitaries and friends, at which Broodthaers gave the inaugural speech. In what can be considered a "conceptual performance," he not only usurped the role of museum director and curator but that of press agent and caterer as well. For the next four years, Broodthaers's main activity was curating "museum" shows in which he mixed art objects and commonplace artifacts, calling into question the museum as a realm of transcendent and timeless high culture, spiritual values, and philosophical truths. His art, then, was a parody of artistic packaging.

In 1972 Broodthaers installed in Düsseldorf another "wing" of his *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*, this one the *Section of Figures (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present)*. It included three hundred images of eagles, culled from imperial kitsch, advertisements, comics, and the like, and borrowed from museums in Europe and abroad (including his own)—all of which were treated as equals. Many of the objects were displayed in vitrines like those found in museums of natural history and Beuys's works. Slides of additional representations were projected, and a two-volume catalog was issued. All the objects were carefully labeled and numbered but cataloged not by medium, style, or chronology, as was customary museum practice, but alphabetically, according to the city from which they were borrowed. Both in categorization and presentation, Broodthaers mimicked and spoofed museums' conventional method of classifying art objects, revealing it as arbitrary.<sup>36</sup> Each item bore a label that read "This is not a work of art!" providing a gloss on Magritte's "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" and reversing

Duchamp's readymades, withdrawing from—rather than adding to the work—an aesthetic dimension.

Broodthaers closed his *Museum of Modern Art* with two installations in *Documenta 5* (1972). In one, *Section of Modern Art*, he displayed photographs, documents, catalogs, empty frames, and plastic plaques. In the other, *Personal Mythologies*, he stenciled labels on the walls and windows of a room, painted a black square on the floor, printed "private property" on it in white (in three languages), and roped it off with stanchions and chains. This gesture, a satire on the identification of art with private property, also expropriated the artistic power of Harald Szeemann, the director of *Documenta*. Broodthaers's main aim was, as he wrote, "to carry out a subversion of the organizational scheme of [the] exhibition."<sup>37</sup> While the exhibition was in progress, he replaced *Section of Modern Art* with *Museum of Ancient Art, Twentieth Century Gallery*, changing the texts on both floor and walls. That was the final installation of the *Museum of Modern Art*. The reason he gave was that despite his resistance to art officialdom, *Documenta 5* had "established" his *Museum* and subverted its reason for being.

Later Broodthaers began to curate retrospectives of his own work, titled *Décors* [33]. He often repackaged and revised earlier works to show

33. Marcel Broodthaers, installation view, November 1984. (Marian Goodman Gallery, New York)



how different contexts altered their meanings. He also increasingly made paintings, but his imagery was frequently printed or stenciled lettering, recalling a comment he had made in 1968: "The language of forms must be reunited with that of words."<sup>38</sup>

Broodthaers's deconstruction of the definition and commodification of art, the role of the museum, and the social interests being served is only one aspect of his work. There are also multiple dimensions, often paradoxical and contradictory, more metaphysical than social—for example, the interfaces between nature and culture; between the verbal and the visual; and between language and reality.<sup>39</sup> A case in point is the complex role played by the simple mussel [34]. Representing the "national" food of Belgium, the shell is at once a metaphor for the museum as a shell of art and an expression of its emptiness, as he said.<sup>40</sup> The mussel (*la moule*) secretes its shell or mold (*le moule*), literally creating itself. Or, as Broodthaers, who dubbed himself "the King of Mussels," wrote in a poem "The Mussel": "This trickster has avoided the mold of society / by casting itself into its own proper mold. / Therefore it is perfect."<sup>41</sup>

The complexity of Broodthaers's work is exemplified in *Sculpture* (1974), a suitcase of bricks with the word "sculpture" painted on it.<sup>42</sup> But what is the sculpture? The contained? The container? The label? All of



34. Marcel Broodthaers, *Moules Casserole*, 1968. (Marian Goodman Gallery, New York)