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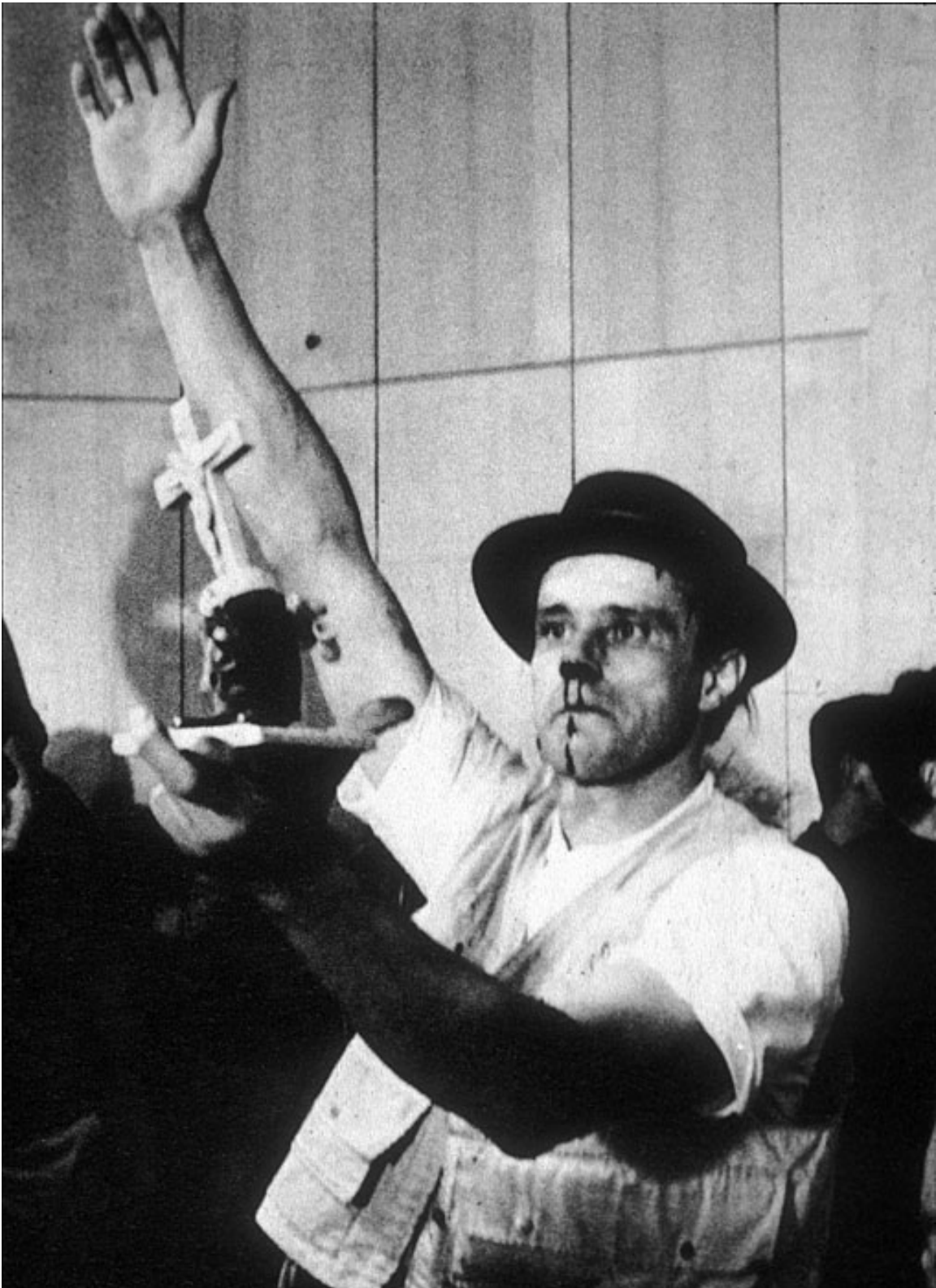
# The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image

To be certain, art offers answers. Its strength, however, often lies in its unresolved problems. In his statements about his own work, Joseph Beuys absolutely inundated his listeners and readers with answers. As a consequence, the inner tensions and unanswered questions at the heart of his oeuvre are scarcely recognized. An unconditional acceptance of Beuys' interpretive authority over his own practice has caused the discourse surrounding the oeuvre to fail to touch on a central unresolved question within it: *the question of authority itself*. In order to understand the significance of Beuys' work in the context of the artistic and political debates of the 1960s and 1970s, however, it is crucial to grasp the inner conflicts and unresolved contradictions that run through it, as well as the way Beuys publicly performed the role of the artist with regard to this question of authority. On the one hand he incessantly attacked traditional notions of the authority of the work, the artist, and the art professor, with his radical, liberating, and humorous opening up of the concept of art with regard to what a work, an artist, or a teacher could still be and do beyond the functions established by tradition, office, and title. On the other hand, however, it seems that in the presentation of his own interpretative discourse, Beuys regularly fell back on the very tradition of staging artistic authority with which he was trying to break.



*I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. Photo Copyright Caroline Tisdall / Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

While he abolished the common understanding of the artist's role and demonstrated in his own practice that an artist could be not only a sculptor or painter but also a performer, politician, philosopher, historian, ethnologist, musician, and so on, he nonetheless had recourse to a traditionally established role model when projecting an image of himself to the public through the role of a visionary, spiritual authority or healer in full agreement with the modern myth of the artist as a messianic figure.



*Kukei, akopee – Nein!*, 1964. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

While at one moment he provoked free and open debate through perplexing, if not deliberately absurd, actions that left himself open to attack as an artist, at the next moment he would bring a discussion on the meaning of these provocations back to orderly paths by seeking the seamlessly organized worldview of anthroposophy as an ideological justification for his art practice. On the one hand, he gambled on everything that traditionally secured the value, claim to validity, and hence authority of art and artists, while on the other hand he assumed the traditional patriarchal position of the messianic proclaimer of ultimate truths.

That Beuys sought such a role is affirmed in the artist's own words. The style and content of his programmatic statements – the ceaseless explanation of his art, the world, its problems, and their solutions – appear to be consistent with the image he projects of himself as a shamanistic healer: he speaks with the authority of a man who knows all the answers, and in doing so consolidates his auratic authority as an artist with his message of salvation. Orthodox interpretations of Beuys' work accept this authority without reservations, and this makes a critical understanding of his work more difficult, if not impossible. In the following section, I will use the example of one such orthodox interpretation to delineate the artistic and political impasse that inevitably results from such an understanding of Beuys' oeuvre. In contrast to this, I will subsequently try to develop an approach to understanding the problem of auratic authority in Beuys' work and self-image through a close reading of selected works. Using several performances as examples, I intend to argue that the artistic quality and historical significance of Beuys' work are not, as the common view would have it, based upon a realizing of his declared intentions, but rather upon his staging of an unresolved conflict between the urge to demolish authoritarian definitions of what artists are traditionally supposed to be and the need to recoup certain aspects of fascination with the auratic authority of the artistic act and the artist's role.

### 1. The Questionable Authority of the Artist as Healer

One revealing example of an art historical interpretation of Beuys' oeuvre that is wholly under the spell of the artist's authority is found in *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist* by the American critic Donald Kuspit.<sup>1</sup> Kuspit reads Beuys' entire practice through the image of the shamanistic healer that Beuys projected to the public, portraying him as the last representative of the venerable tradition of avant-garde artists who believed their task to be one of helping

humanity to heal the alienation of modern life (in Kuspit's view, Warhol's consent to alienation sealed the decline of that tradition). As evidence for this interpretation, Kuspit quotes two programmatic statements by Beuys: "My intention: healthy chaos, healthy amorphousness in a known medium which consciously warmed a cold, torpid form from the past, a convention of society, and which makes possible future forms."<sup>2</sup> And in conclusion: "This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic."<sup>3</sup> Now, the concept of healing raises a series of questions: whom does Beuys claim to heal? And of what? By what means, and by whose authority? Kuspit answers these questions succinctly: the Germans, of the trauma of national collapse, and through the healing energy of an original, pagan creativity that he taps, for them, by virtue of his authority as healer.

Kuspit then proceeds to interpret National Socialism as an expression of exaggerated faith in technocratic rationality (and hence as an exemplary symptom of modern alienation), arriving at the conclusion that recovery from the pathologies of this strain of rationalism can only be achieved by liberating a Dionysian creativity of the very sort Beuys claimed to have released. Kuspit writes: "The Germans had to be cured of their pathological belief in the authority of reason, which they readily put before life itself."<sup>4</sup> Beuys, the shamanistic healer, is thereafter portrayed as the antithesis of Hitler, the technocratic dictator: "Beuys was warm where Hitler was cold."<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is bizarre. Nevertheless, it unfolds the logical implications of the concept of healing that Beuys established. The figure of the healer is messianic in nature, and is therefore of the same ilk as the messianic leader of men. A direct comparison therefore seems obvious. On somewhat closer inspection, however, this juxtaposition necessarily leads to a result that directly contradicts Kuspit's interpretation. The messianic goal of healing modern man of his alienation by tapping primordial forces does not distinguish Beuys from Hitler but links them. The assertion that the German people could be cured of the maladies caused by the decline and decadence of modern culture through the rediscovery of their mythical, pagan (allegedly "Aryan") creative powers was, after all, the core of the ideology by which the National Socialists justified their claim to power. The motto "*Am Deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen*" (The German spirit shall heal the world) was taken to articulate the association of the idea of healing with just such an ideology.<sup>6</sup>

However, the fact that, in the course of history, the idea of healing came to be associated with this particular ideology does not discredit Beuys' approach to it per se. The motif of mythical healing – the notion that a rediscovery of a mythical creativity would offer a cure to the alienations of modern society – has occupied a central position in modern social criticism since early Romanticism (at the latest).<sup>7</sup> In this form and function the motif can be found in the work of many modern thinkers artists, including (as Rüdiger Sünner has shown) Friedrich Schlegel and Nietzsche, as well as Helena Blavatsky (one of the key figures of modern occultism, the founder of theosophy, and an inspiration for Rudolf Steiner).<sup>8</sup> If Beuys was enthusiastic about Celtic myth, for example, and saw James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* to be the expression of the buried mythical, spiritual creativity of – as he literally says – “Indo-Aryan” culture, it is certainly reasonable to assume that his use of the term stems from authors such as Blavatsky.<sup>9</sup> Channeled through authors such as Adolf Lanz and Guido von List, Blavatsky's teachings were, however, also a source of inspiration for Hitler and Himmler, who developed the racial doctrine implicit to some extent in theosophy into a justification for their “völkisch” (racist and nationalist) doctrine of national recuperation.<sup>10</sup> One application of the concept of healing cannot be directly reduced to the other. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, seen in the context of the history of ideas, the idea of modern culture's return to the supposedly mythical powers of a premodern culture was the impulse behind both Romantic projects to reform life and National Socialist ideology. That this ideological aspect is never really questioned or even acknowledged by Beuys and his orthodox interpreters (such as Kuspit) exposes the limits of the interpretive discourse Beuys established: he never submitted his own key concepts to a critical, historical analysis.

While he frequently dipped into the history of ideas for his discourse, Beuys did not apparently feel compelled to consider the fact that ideas have specific histories – ones that, in certain instances, might make it necessary to reject them, and the traditions they have come to stand for. In his artistic practice, however, the critical reconsideration of traditional forms was at the heart of his approach. The postcard work *Manifest* (Manifesto, 1985) offers a poignant slogan for this. In handwriting it reads: “Manifesto the error already begins when someone is about to buy a stretcher and canvas. Joseph Beuys, November 1, 1985.” The absence of a similarly critical approach to tradition in Beuys' use of theoretical concepts may not ultimately be that problematic in terms of the

content of the particular ideas he cites. What does have a significant bearing on the politics of Beuys' overall practice is his adoption of a speaking position that is inextricably bound to the articulation of certain ideas precisely because this position is traditionally justified by these ideas: the position of the messianic speaker whose mythical authority is justified and authenticated by the invocation of the idea of primordial healing powers. The use of the concept of healing is thus synonymous with the creation of an unquestioned – and, by virtue of its superior justification, also unquestionable – position of power. However, if Beuys' liberating approach to conventions of sculpture and to the possibility of art in general is understood as evidence of a critical attitude, it seems only fair to assume that the creation of such an unquestionable power position can hardly have been his primary concern. In positioning himself as a speaker, then, it would even appear integral to Beuys' practice to distance himself from the power mechanisms at play.

No doubt, the desire for healing was an important motif in Beuys' oeuvre. The question is whether the specific way in which he dealt with this desire in his work does indeed have a considerable artistic and historical significance, not because Beuys succeeded in being or becoming the healer he purported to be, but precisely because he (whether consciously or not is hard to say) allowed the inherent contradictions of the concept of messianic healing to become manifest within his work. One example to start with is Beuys' complex interpretation of the motif of the Messiah in *Zeige Deine Wunde* (Show Your Wounds, 1976). In the Christian tradition, the act of showing the wounds is the gesture by which Christ reveals himself to his disciples as the resurrected Messiah. Strictly speaking, therefore, there can only be one person who is entitled to show his wounds: the Savior himself. The title of the work, however, is an appeal addressed to another person. Beuys here effectively changes the monologue of messianic revelation into a dialogue and thus multiplies the available speaking positions: anyone who feels addressed by the appeal is here invited to adopt the messianic position. This moment of multiplication is in fact also the primary formal characteristic of the installation. All of its elements are doubled. The central elements in the work are two stretchers on wheels, underneath each of which a zinc box and an empty glass vessel are placed. Anyone who encounters death or healing here does not do so alone. Death or convalescence is presented as an existential experience in which our lives come to mirror each other. The claim to uniqueness

associated with the role of the Messiah is thus eroded linguistically in the title and literally in the space of the installation.

## 2. The Problematic Reversal of the Roles of Perpetrator and Victim

Admittedly, there may not be many more examples of Beuys so openly breaking away from the exclusive singularity of the Messianic role. Still, the way in which he deals with the notion of the Messianic in his artworks never lacks complexity. In fact, he continued to dwell on one particularly irresolvable ambiguity at the heart of the Messianic: to the extent that the Messiah of the Christian tradition redeems humanity by taking its suffering upon himself, he becomes both victim and savior, both sufferer and healer. It was precisely this double role that Beuys took on in the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* of 1974. The performance began (if the reports are to be believed) with Beuys being picked up at the airport in New York by an ambulance and transported to the René Block Gallery. There he spent three days with a coyote and, wrapped in a felt blanket and holding a walking stick upside down like a shepherd's crook, played the shamanistic healer and messianic shepherd. As the patient or victim of an unspecified accident, he had arranged to have himself delivered to a space where he would then turn himself into the healer.



*I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. Photo Copyright Caroline Tisdall / Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Again, the crucial question is: who is claiming to heal whom of what (and by virtue of what authority)? Since patient and healer are the same person, one obvious way to understand the performance is as an attempt at self-healing. In this sense, Kuspit's interpretation of Beuys trying, as a German, to heal German culture by tapping mythical sources of energy (represented here by the coyote) would seem justified.

However, the highly problematic question that this interpretation leaves unanswered is: by what right does this German claim to be not only healer, but also patient and sufferer (if not even victim)? Victim of whom? Why would a German – in the historical wake of Germany's responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust and its instigation of two world wars – ever be entitled to play that role on an international stage? Beuys' statements on the performance are no help: "I believe I made contact with the psychological trauma point of the United States' energy constellation: the whole American trauma with the Indian, the Red Man."<sup>11</sup> (The symptoms of the American trauma, according to Beuys, manifest themselves in the alienated culture of capitalism, represented in the performance by issues of *The Wall Street Journal* spread out on the floor on which, as he recounts, the coyote urinated now and again.) Despite the change of geographical context the problem with this scenario of trauma and healing remains the same. By interpreting the trauma of the genocide committed *against* the Native American population as a trauma *for* the modern United States caused by this genocide, Beuys essentially declares perpetrators to be victims. In this picture, the supposedly painful alienation of the United States from its roots is given the same status as the suffering of the victims of genocide, which fall out of the picture entirely. Though surely unintentional (and nevertheless effective), murder is equated with a regrettable destruction of nature. The historical victims have no voice here. The coyote cannot complain.

Almost inescapably, one feels compelled to read this constellation as a parable of the German situation and the exchange of roles as the expression of Beuys' notoriously unclear position in relation to the historic role and guilt of his own generation. Benjamin Buchloh articulated this criticism with all possible harshness. In his essay "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol," Buchloh in principle accused Beuys of deliberately blurring the historical facts by mythologizing the concepts of suffering and healing, thus of avoiding the question of responsibility.<sup>12</sup> The evidence that Buchloh offers of Beuys reversing the role of perpetrator and victim is a particular passage from Beuys' often-cited wartime anecdote in which he describes his rescue by Tartars after his bomber had been shot down over the Crimea in winter 1943. Canonical interpretations of this story focus on the detail that, as Beuys recounts, the Tartars rubbed him with fat and wrapped him in felt to warm him, and therefore these materials (and warmth in general) came to stand for the mythical principle of healing found in his work. However, a crucial turn in this narrative that Buchloh concentrates





*I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. Photo Copyright Caroline Tisdall / Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

on is the Tartars' proposal that Beuys remain with them: "*Du nix njemcky*" [You not German] they would say, '*du Tartar*' [you Tartar] and persuade me to join their clan," Beuys reported.<sup>13</sup> In this story, Beuys not only changes his identity from being a bomber pilot to a victim of the war; part of his healing is the *absolution* from his origin offered by the members of a mythical people. Buchloh reads this scenario of absolution as the symptomatic expression of a certain emotional condition in postwar Germany, namely the need of the German people to acquit themselves of their recent crimes and of an unscrupulous readiness to do just that: "In the work and public myth of Beuys the new German spirit of the postwar period finds its new identity by pardoning and reconciling itself prematurely with its own reminiscences of a responsibility for one of the most cruel and devastating forms of collective political madness that history has known."<sup>14</sup>

If we take the messianic role adopted by Beuys at face value, this criticism touches a sore spot. Surely, one could object that both Buchloh and Kuspit assume Beuys was acting as a representative for an entire nation, whereas for many years his actions de facto stood in crass contradiction to the dominant cultural climate in Germany, which was aggressively hostile towards him. This objection, however, would immediately have to be countered by observing that, when he adopted the messianic role, Beuys simply conferred on himself the mandate to express collective needs. This position was affirmed first (as Kuspit's book demonstrates) by his international reception as an exemplary German artist (which also consolidated after some time in German academia). Against this backdrop, it would indeed seem justified to see Beuys' oeuvre and the way he chose to play the role of an exemplary German artist in public as indicative of a struggle to come to terms with German identity. It remains nonetheless problematic that neither Buchloh nor Kuspit makes any distinction between his public image and his oeuvre, considering Beuys' position instead as an integrated whole. They do not take into consideration, however, that more often than not in his work Beuys fails to fulfill the programmatic claims that he asserts in his commentaries, as his works always remain, in their crude material specificity and inner tensions, at least partially resistant to conclusive interpretations. This specific failure is so crucial because it makes clear (if one is prepared to see it) that Beuys did more in his art than simply illustrate, and thus consolidate, preexisting ideologies.

*I Like America and America Likes Me* stands as an example of such a failure. Upon closer inspection, one would have to admit (despite

Beuys' own statement that he successfully touched on a point of trauma) that his ritual of healing has carnivalesque, exaggerated features. The old European is delivered to a New York gallery incognito and proceeds to emphatically perform obscure ceremonial gestures, posing as a pagan sorcerer wrapped in felt as if wearing a complete carnival outfit. Meanwhile, the coyote, unmoved, just does as coyotes do – Beuys' meaningful posing does not concern him; he inhabits a different world. This clearly delimits the allegorical meaning of the performance. Through everything he does, the coyote demonstrates his utter indifference to the artistic allegory being constructed around him and, in doing so, destabilizes it. The photographic documentation of the performance is somewhat misleading in that it makes the animal look as if it were an integral part of one single overarching allegory. If, however, the performance is understood as a performance – that is, as a process that unfolds in space and time – then this picture falls apart. It is only then that the particular fascination and comedic quality of the coyote's presence during the performance begins to emerge. The comedy lies in the situation: two unequal characters, for whom communication constantly fails, somehow find a way to deal with each other and with the failure of their communication simply because they live together in close proximity. Anglo-American sitcoms about modern family life function in much the same way. This comedy of living with the failure of communication, however, also has its tragic aspects. It demonstrates the impossibility of a symmetrical exchange between two divided worlds of experience. Yet still, a trace of utopia resides in the pragmatism of the arrangement: what collective violence destroys, one person alone cannot heal. At best, one small thing or another may be resolved on the level of daily coexistence, but only if one side is prepared to face and live with unclarified conditions.

The fact that Beuys exposed himself to, or provoked, such unclarified situations could be understood in this sense to be precisely what makes up the quality of his art, irrespective of its program. The fact that the boundaries between the role of the perpetrator and the victim also remain unclarified is impossible to deny. Yet, if one is prepared to see this confusion not simply as a desperate attempt at self-vindication, it could in fact also be read as a sign of the times. Consider for example the complex implications of the iconic pose Beuys adopted at the end of the out-of-control action *Kukei, akopee – Nein!* (Kukei, akopee, no! recorded in an eponymously titled photograph by H. Riebesehl): during the Festival der Neuen Kunst in the auditorium of the

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Technische Hochschule Aachen on July 20, 1964, a group of students (whom Caroline Tisdall has described as right-wing) stormed the stage to put a violent end to the Fluxus performance Beuys was engaged in; during the ensuing scuffle Beuys received a bloody nose. His reaction to the violence was to strike a pose in which he provocatively embodied both victim and perpetrator. With a defiant stare and bloody nose, he holds up a small crucifix to the audience in his left hand while he extends his right arm in a Roman salute. It is not necessary, though possible, to see this gesture as a variant on the Nazi salute.

In one sense, Beuys' pose has an accusatory character: he holds a mirror up to the students, interprets their violence as tendentially fascist, and presents himself as their victim. In another sense, however, the pose is also clearly triumphant. In combination with the Roman salute and the defiant gaze, the crucifix in his outstretched arm conveys the message that Christ shall be victorious. In the end, the martyr, here embodied by the bleeding artist, will prevail. Beuys thus intuitively drew on several registers of body language at the same time to produce an impromptu pose of auratic authority, presenting himself as accuser, victor, and martyr all at once. The impromptu character of the pose, in turn, shows how Beuys, through free improvisation, managed to orchestrate the chaos that he had himself provoked. The example of the events in Aachen thus demonstrates impressively the extent to which Beuys' artistic practice is based on his intuitive ability to *improvise* freely in unclarified situations, to *absorb* the energies released in the situation, and *manifest* them in strong – if contradictory – gestures. Yet, the example also shows that the gestures he uses to manifest the absorbed tensions are taken from a repertoire of postures for the staging of auratic authority. One possible explanation of this may be that, when improvising, Beuys intuitively fell back on familiar gestures of authority that enabled him to control the situation for the moment. If, however, we take into account the observation that Beuys was not just displaying his own emotions but in fact reflecting the tensions inherent in a given situation, this suggests another conclusion: namely, that Beuys channeled the violent energies of collective conflict over the foundation of authority that was in the air at the moment.

The art of provocation lies in forcefully bringing about a debate over the legitimation of authority. Fluxus cultivated this art of provocation as a method. So did the incipient culture of student protest in its successful attempts to expose and dismantle the

authoritarian structures on which the National Socialists based their power, and which had not really disappeared from daily life after the collapse of the regime. The conflicts at the Fluxus festival in Aachen thus marked a historical juncture in which particular artistic tendencies coincided with general political developments. The contestation of the legitimacy of traditional structures of authority and the question of the origin of fascist power were on people's minds. In a commentary on the event in the *Aachener Prisma* newspaper that year titled "Eine gutgemeinte Panne" (A well-meant mishap), the author Dorothea Solle accordingly interpreted the events as a flaring up of fascist violence brought on not only by the rampaging students, but equally by the aggressive irrationality of Fluxus performers' actions.<sup>15</sup> Still, it would be too simplistic to interpret the outbreak of violence as a moment of cathartic release. This interpretation would suggest that something had been resolved in the situation when, ultimately, the reverse seems to have been the case. After the festival had ended, Beuys apparently discussed what had taken place with students until two in the morning.<sup>16</sup> It seems unlikely that they arrived at a conclusion. Nevertheless, a collective experience had been articulated. On the one hand, Beuys' actions therefore need to be seen in the context of the critique of dominant structures of authority that the Fluxus performers gathered at the festival put into practice by destroying the conventions of authoritative (in the sense of being awe-inspiring) musical stage performances. On the other hand, Beuys' martial poses also reflected the desire of the rioting students to see authority restored. They got the Führer-savior they wanted, if only in the form of a reflexive, inherently contradictory theatrical pose.

If one takes the Fluxus festival in Aachen as exemplary, one could argue that the manner in which Beuys made his contribution to the historically powerful critique of traditional structures of authority was more intuitive and improvisational than most. The quality of this contribution could then be understood to lie precisely in his capacity to improvise in unclarified situations and, in this process, to evoke, absorb, and manifest the prevailing tensions. This surely is not an excuse for his mythmaking and the afore-cited confused statement concerning the trauma of the perpetrators (in the North-American context). Still, it might help to explain the role Beuys may have played for his generation by articulating in a similarly improvisational way its collective experience of not being able to determine the relationship between their own share in the blame and their trauma suffered during the war.



Beuys was equally incapable of resolving this problem. Whether it has ever been resolved, or if it can be resolved at all, remains doubtful. One might actually go so far as to argue, with Buchloh, that not only was the mythologizing of war trauma an expression of the desire to grant oneself absolution, but that, *mutatis mutandis*, the German postwar intelligentsia's emphatically conscientious manner of reckoning with the past may have equally been such a technique, as if serious reckoning would enable one to make a clean break with the past and switch from the side of the accused to that of the accusers. A real effort to grapple with the experience of the victims of the crimes this is not. In general, it worth exploring at what point exactly German artists and intellectuals began to go beyond self-criticism and self-mirroring and instead actively confronted the outside perception and critical assessment of German history and identity in other countries. Beuys' later travels and discussion workshops in Europe and America may have offered a forum for precisely that. But whether he listened long enough to others in these discussions to absorb their experience or simply propagated his own truths is a different question altogether.

### 3. The Strategic Debate over Interpretive Authority on the Threshold of a New Understanding of Art

Seen in its historical context, Beuys' position marked a crucial threshold precisely because of its inner contradictions: politically, Beuys found inspiration in the incipient culture of student protest to challenge the attitude of his own generation and to attack the structures of mythical authority that made Nazi Germany possible, though without being able to overcome them entirely. Artistically, he also stood at an epochal threshold that he was never really able to fully cross. Buchloh describes this set of problems very accurately as well. In "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol," he locates Beuys' work in the context of the decisive artistic developments of the 1960s – by incorporating everyday objects and industrial materials into his repertoire, Beuys, parallel to Minimal and Pop art, took a step toward the radical materialist aesthetic that would influence contemporary art from the 1960s onward. At the same time, however, as Buchloh convincingly demonstrates, Beuys did not draw the same consequences from this step that his contemporaries did. In finally realizing the implications of Marcel Duchamp's use of the readymade, Buchloh argues, Minimal and Pop art contributed, in the spirit of a critically reductionist positivism of Anglo-American provenance, to the disenchantment of the work of art and dismantling of myths – myths that, in

the tradition of Old Europe, had ensured art's aura. Yet it was precisely this tradition that Beuys revived by tapping its mythologies in order to provide his art and persona with their magic. About to cross the threshold to the present, Beuys, it seems, turned his back to the future and stepped back into the lost past of Old Europe.

Buchloh thus takes the nature of Beuys' self-interpretations as evidence of a reactionary position within the framework of the artistic developments of the 1960s: instead of developing a contemporary analytical understanding (based on Duchamp's findings) of how artifacts obtain significance in art via the context of their presentation, intertextual cross-references, and the open play of their interpretation, Beuys, according to Buchloh, restored the traditional one-dimensional model of the authoritative attribution of meaning through the declaration of the artist's intention: "[Beuys] dilutes and dissolves the conceptual precision of Duchamp's readymade by reintegrating the object into the most traditional and naive context of representation of meaning, the idealist metaphor: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object."<sup>17</sup>

This criticism of Beuys' interpretive discourse is no doubt completely justified. Again, however, the question remains: to what extent does the problematic character of Beuys' self-interpretations truly affect his artistic practice? One could even go so far as to accuse Buchloh's own critique of clinging, in a sense, to the very same one-dimensional model that he attributes to Beuys. After all, Buchloh himself also presumes an identity of intention and artwork when he dismisses the work in the name of Beuys' stated intentions rather than subjecting the work to a more precise reading irrespective of what the artist may have said.

This is by no means an isolated problem. In relation to the artistic practices of the 1960s, the relationship between artists' statements about their work and the actual work has generally not been investigated as critically as it probably should be. Beuys is far from being the only artist who intentionally sought to impose a certain meaning on his work. In fact, particularly in the context of early conceptual art, artists aggressively used interpretation as a strategy. The interpretative practice of Art & Language and the artist Joseph Kosuth, who was for a time associated with the group, is symptomatic in this regard. The performative contradiction between the content of their statements and the way they relate them to their work is even more flagrant than it is in Beuys' own practice. Kosuth and Art & Language legitimized their work and imbued it

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with an awe-inspiring air of authority by citing not myths, but the entire tradition of analytical philosophy (of language), only to declare – in utter contradiction with the complex semantic models that this tradition offers – a one-to-one correspondence between this philosophical content and their art's meaning.<sup>18</sup> They identified critical theory with the literal meaning and the content of conceptual art with the same naïveté that Buchloh detects in Beuys' discourse.

If anything, the crude Neo-Platonism that Kosuth propagates when he claims in his essay "intension(s)" that conceptual art can make an artist's intentions immediately transparent can certainly be considered naïve.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the insistence on the authority of the artist to determine the meaning of his or her work is, for Kosuth, part and parcel of a critical reflection on the power politics of interpreting art. He identifies the practice of artists making statements about their own work as a strategic practice geared towards disputing the interpretive authority of critics and historians and shifting the power balance in the artist's favor. Kosuth writes: "art historians and critics play an important role in the struggle of the work's 'coming to meaning' in the world. But that is the point: they represent the world. That is

why a defining part of the creative process depends on the artists to assert their intentions in that struggle. One of the greatest lessons defending the primacy of the intention of the artist, and the increasing importance of writing by artists on their work, is provided by this period of the sixties."<sup>20</sup>

Motivated by power politics, the main reason for artists to offer their own interpretations would thus be in the interest of eliminating the middleman. In this spirit, Kosuth quotes one of his own statements about the work of Art & Language in the journal *Art-Language* from 1970: "This art both annexes the function of the critic, and makes a middleman unnecessary."<sup>21</sup> It seems fair to assume that Beuys – perhaps less consciously, but all the more effectively for that reason – realized the historical opportunity which Kosuth articulates to use the propagation of his own interpretations as a means to reinforce his own position of authority vis-à-vis critics and historians. The increasing media interest in (his) art offered him (and not only him) an excellent platform for that.

Against this backdrop, viewing Beuys' practice of interpreting his own work as a strategic gesture can perhaps enable us to more accurately describe its function in relation to his

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*I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974 (arrival by stretcher). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

other artistic activities – namely, as a praxis in its own right. As such, it is not situated on some meta-level but on the very same level as the other manifestations of Beuys' work – as a parallel practice. In this context, Beuys' participation in the founding of various political initiatives and utopian institutions, such as the Free International University he cofounded with Heinrich Böll in 1971, for instance, could equally be seen as a gesture that matters in its own right – as an expansion of the concrete possibilities of artistic practice irrespective of any ideological program.<sup>22</sup> Founding institutions thus becomes one artistic medium among others. Seen in this light, Beuys' practice of speaking publicly should be treated not as a metadiscourse *on* his art but as an artistic medium *sui generis*. Beuys' statements could therefore be regarded as having the status of material that he produced in parallel with other material. The chalkboards with scribbled lecture notes strewn on a stage constructed of wooden pallets in the installation *Richtkräfte* (Directional forces, 1974–77) offer a graphic example of this. Discourse becomes material, loads of material. And, because of the sheer number of chalkboards and the simple fact that some boards cover others in the pile, the sheer accumulation of material makes it partially illegible. The fascination with the material then could be seen to lie less in its ideological content than in the immanent tension between its legibility and its opacity *as* material.

Of course, this defense of the installation contradicts Beuys' own interpretative discourse and declared intentions in its application of a concept of material derived from the school of Anglo-American criticism. Against the backdrop of Kosuth's reflections, this interpretation could surely also be read as a critic's strategic attempt to reclaim some ground in the battle for the authority to interpret a work. If interpretation is understood as an antagonistic practice, then indeed no speaker's position within this field is neutral. It therefore seems necessary to explicate, if it is not already obvious, the position from which the author of this essay speaks: in contrast to the apodictic gesture of Beuys' own statements (and the statements of his orthodox defenders and intimate enemies), the gesture of this essay is probably more that of unfolding a form of reflexivity from a position of historical and rhetorical distance. In terms of style, this reflexive speaking position may be typical of a (my) generation, whose experience of the patriarchal artistic gestures of Beuys' generation is already mediated by the intervening generation's struggle with the same gestures. In other words, a more distanced reflection seems possible today because the need and necessity to position oneself "with–alongside–against"<sup>23</sup>

Beuys is no longer as strongly felt as it may have been by the previous generation, which was immediately confronted with his persona. Buchloh belongs to the latter generation, as does my father, Walter Verwoert, who was one of Beuys' first students. While Buchloh seems to have experienced Beuys' manner of embodying the role of the (German) artist in the international art world as unbearably reactionary, my father describes his experience with Beuys as a teacher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the early 1960s as radically liberating in artistic, personal, and political terms. The reasoning in this essay is born out of a desire to reflect on these opposed positions rather than from a need to take one side or the other.

The freedom in approaching his work created by the distance of one generation is of a peculiar nature. You could liken it to the situation of the coyote in *I Like America and America Likes Me*: Beuys is present. That is undeniable. But because the horizon of a common language has disappeared, there is no prescribed protocol for engaging with that presence. In this situation, critique could perhaps be a medium for creatively developing a certain form of conviviality – that is, a way to live in the present with the spectral presence of a figure who contributed decisively to shaping this present but did so without ever fully entering it. This form of conviviality need neither be peaceful nor intimate. Photographs of the action show the coyote biting Beuys' felt robe and tearing at it in one moment, only to accept his presence in the room and return to going about his own business in the next. Perhaps this could serve as a model for the further reception of Beuys' work.

#### 4. The Still Unresolved Question of Authority in Artistic Practice: The Boss

Independent of this experience of historical distance, however, certain unresolved questions in Beuys' work have not lost their relevance, and neither have the artistic means through which Beuys channeled these questions and manifested their problematic implications. The questions concern the foundation for authority itself: have we ever fully understood what generated the fascination with the auratic authority of the messianic leader that made fascism possible in its various manifestations in Germany, Austria, Italy, and Spain? To what extent have we succeeded in distancing ourselves from a fascination that endures despite all we have learned since? This is a thorny issue not only in art but very much also in intellectual discourse. It could be argued that in this field (even, or perhaps especially, in the tradition of leftist political engagement), the ability to project a certain auratic authority is a

basic prerequisite for making your voice heard in the public debate. To the extent that the claim not only to act and speak in one's own name but to also hope to act and speak for others is a condition of artistic practice and intellectual discourse, this form of practice and discourse as such will necessarily generate an aura of exemplary action or speech. The question of why – by virtue of what authority – someone could legitimately hope to act or speak on behalf of others (on behalf of the general public or simply on behalf of an unknown number of people who perhaps have similar feelings) is therefore a question that persistently haunts artistic practice and intellectual discourse – especially since certain catastrophes of modernity called the legitimacy of auratic authority into question. On a *constitutive* level, the justification for one's own practice and discourse as an artist and intellectual is challenged by this unresolved question.

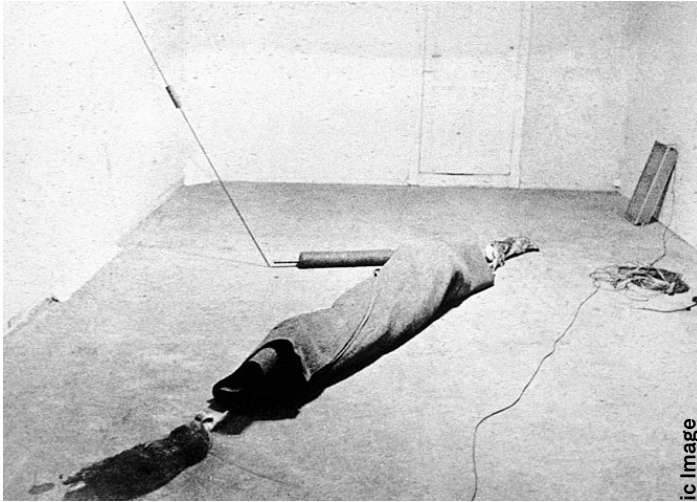
With particularly pointed humor, Beuys acknowledged the implications of this question in the performance *ÖÖ-Programm* (1967). At an orientation event at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, he welcomed the new students by taking a stand at the microphone, an ax in his hand, uttering inarticulate sounds for minutes. On the following day the *Düsseldorfer Express* titled its report on the event “Professor bellt ins Mikrofon” (Professor Barks into the Microphone).<sup>24</sup> Short and succinct, that describes the situation.<sup>25</sup> By turning the official occasion of an address by the academy staff into an absurd event, Beuys deliberately subjected not only himself but also the office and authoritative speaking position of the professor to mockery. At the same time, however, he also exposed the foundation of this authority: as a professor it was within his power to do such things. By carrying an ax, he intensified this ambiguity even further. If one recognizes the ax as an attribute of power, it is impossible not to see the parallel to the axes wrapped in rods that the lictors (the bodyguards of Roman consuls) carried as a symbol of their authority. The name for these rods – *fascies* – is considered to be one possible origin of the term fascism. If we also take “barking into the microphone” to be an expression that describes the style of Hitler's public addresses conspicuously well, Beuys' action could indeed also be understood as a caricature of the dictator. Rather than deny the structural authority that accrued in his role as professor (for example, by appearing as an emphatically liberal pedagogue), Beuys exposes this structural authority in a deliberately exaggerated way and demonstrates its complicity with forms of mythical authority. Given the obvious absurdity of the presentation,

it seems fair to assume that he did it with the idea of pushing his authority to its limits and thus instigate resistance – for example, by provoking laughter.

As its title makes unmistakably clear, the performance *Der Chef* (*Fluxus Gesang*) (The Chief [Fluxus song], 1964), was another occasion on which Beuys openly addressed the question of authority, here adding a particular twist. The length of the performance was specified to equal the duration of an ordinary workday, and over the course of eight hours from 4 p.m. to midnight he performed the job of embodying authority. He appeared, rolled up in a felt blanket, in one of the exhibition spaces of the Galerie René Block in Berlin. The space could be looked into, but not entered, from the adjoining room. Hidden inside the blanket, Beuys could not be seen, only heard. He had a microphone with him, and at irregular intervals would make inarticulate sounds that were amplified via a PA system. This noise performance was interrupted periodically by a composition by Henning Christiansen and Eric Andersen played from tape. Two dead hares lay at either end of the rolled up felt blanket. Other props from Beuys' repertoire (copper rod, fat corner, fingernails, etc.) were placed all over the room to identify it as a space for ceremonial activities. In the announcement for the event, Beuys stated that Robert Morris would carry out the same performance simultaneously in New York. To my knowledge, it has never been confirmed that this actually happened. The announcement may well have been a joke made at Morris' expense, since Morris' own elegantly sober, analytically self-reflexive use of felt was certainly being undercut here by Beuys, who subjected the same material to a protracted, wearisome, and on the whole not very elegant process.

In accordance with Beuys' own mythology, the performance could certainly be interpreted as an attempt to relive the experience of his healing on the Crimea. Yet this interpretation neither accounts for the title of the action, nor its time limit based on a workday, nor the central role that the PA system plays in the performance. If we take into consideration the historical resonance that the act of “barking into the microphone” had in the action *ÖÖ-Programm*, it is perhaps not too farfetched to see a parallel in *Der Chef*: the performance is centered around the experience of loudspeakers giving the guttural voice of an unseen speaker an uncanny physical presence in a room. This experience effectively resembles that of hearing propaganda speeches on the so-called *Volksempfänger*, the “people's radio,” introduced into the German family home by the Nazis, the novelty of which very likely made for a formative media

experience for an entire generation. If we assume that the distortion of the speeches by poor radio reception would have been a regular feature of that experience, then the indistinct muffled noises from the PA system (and its irregular interruption by music) would be, phenomenologically speaking, an echo of this experience. The “Chef” is in that sense also the “Führer.”



*Der Chef*, 1964. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

In a grotesque and highly pointed manner, Beuys thus frames the experience of the auratic. Walter Benjamin characterized this experience as one of “proximity with simultaneous distance.” It is precisely this fascinating contradiction that Beuys foregrounds on several levels in his performance: his voice filled the room, while the source was nowhere to be found. The artist was the focus of attention, yet remained invisible, rolled up in a felt blanket throughout the duration of the event. Due to his previous appearances in the media, the *Der Chef* performance brought a number of visitors to the gallery, according to contemporaneous reports.<sup>26</sup> For the duration of the exhibition, these visitors were, however, forced to stay in the neighboring room. They could see what was happening but remained barred from direct physical access to the event. The partial closing-off of the performance space from the space for the audience created distance, and at the same time increased the attraction of the artist’s presence. He was present acoustically and physically as part of a piece of sculpture, but he was also absent, invisible, untouchable, and this staging of simultaneous presence and absence made his stage presence particularly auratic.

The title further reinforced this ambiguity of proximity and distance. On the one hand, it designates the leader at the top of a hierarchy. On the other hand, however, in colloquial German

the word *Chef* – like *jefe* in Spanish and *boss* in American English – is equally used to jovially address a coworker. This double entendre lent a humorous quality to the title. Still, it did not really deflate the authority associated with the term *Chef* but, when seen in conjunction with the performance, rather *auraticized* it: on the one hand, Beuys was the highlighted artistic personality, art professor, and incipient media star who could only be perceived from afar. On the other, he was also the “coworker” who “did his job” for eight hours and made it known through moaning and groaning noises how hard he was “slaving away.” That was bound to create sympathy and proximity. This simultaneity of distance and proximity gave the artist his auratic authority in his role as “Chef.” Political leaders traditionally create an aura – that is, the appearance of absolute credibility – in an analogous way by presenting themselves as idealized, powerful paternal figures and simultaneously as approachable “men of the people.”

The crucial thing, however, is that Beuys did not simply produce an aura of authority but that he also exhibited the material conditions of its production in all their crudity, and exposed the contradictions inherent in this process in all their obvious absurdity. In this way, Beuys simultaneously constructed and dismantled an aura of authority. The performance constituted an event. Its eventful qualities were, however, simultaneously also reduced to a minimum – not much happened. A man lay wrapped in a blanket between two dead hares and made strange noises for hours. The scaling down of the performance to an activity that could scarcely be perceived as an activity at all, the stretching and expanding of time, the death rattles from under the blanket, and the overall gravity of the *mise-en-scène* in general creates a peculiar regressive atmosphere. Very much in line with the analysis of auratic authority that Werner Herzog developed in his films, Beuys here too foregrounds the peculiar regressive pull (Freudians would call it the “death drive”) inherent in the peculiar *gravitas* of auratic authority – a pull that equally also creates its limitation, in that its own weightiness sooner or later weights auratic authority down and brings it to the point of collapse. And indeed, in *Der Chef* Beuys staged the mechanisms producing this auratic authority together with the event of its slow collapse.

*Der Chef* could thus be understood to expose *and* exorcize, in a pointed manner, the fascination with auratic authority that constituted a crucial historical condition for the possibility of fascism. Admittedly, Beuys did not perform this act of exposing and exorcizing from

a distanced position. Rather, he lived through it physically and thus, in a symptomatic way, manifested its unresolved contradictions. Beyond the discussion of historical conditions, however, the fact that Beuys chose an immanent position from which to work through the problems of auratic authority brings us back to the question raised earlier, namely, whether certain structures and contradictions of the auratic are not structurally inherent to artistic practice. A structural feature of art practice, for instance, that Beuys deals with in *Der Chef*, is not only the adoption of the position of an auratic speaker but also the ascription of that position to the artist through the expectations of the audience: Beuys came to Berlin and people expected an event. By appearing in public, but making himself invisible, Beuys both satisfied and frustrated their expectations. The aura that Beuys generated around himself by virtue of this strategy became a means as well as a medium to both protect himself against and play with these expectations: to throw them into relief and change them.

The fact that this attempt to renegotiate the relationship between artist and audience is, moreover, formalized as an eight-hour workday, potentially turns the performance into a parable of the constitutive tensions between the private and public that define artistic or creative work in general. As is a form of work that traditionally takes shape under conditions marked by extremes of self-isolation (in the studio, at a desk, in nature) and the act of making oneself public (in exhibitions, actions, publications), certainly there are other approaches to art practice based on participation. But experience shows that they too require a certain moment of isolation and concentration that allows for collective action to be planned and forces to be gathered. A fascinating aspect of *Der Chef* is that Beuys does not in fact treat isolation and publicness as polar opposites, but as inseparable qualities of a single action. The self-isolation inside the felt roll takes place in public. Kept at bay spatially on the one hand, and addressed through the loudspeakers on the other hand, the public is simultaneously excluded and included. In this situation, the microphone and PA system become the medium that establishes the relation between isolation and a publicness. In this sense, *Der Chef* can be read as a parable of cultural work in a public medium. The authority of those who dare – or are so bold as – to speak publicly results from the fact that they isolate themselves from the gaze of the public, under the gaze of the public, in order to still address it in indirect speech, relayed through a medium. What is constituted in this ceremony is authority in the sense of

authorship, in the sense of a public voice. In *Der Chef*, Beuys stages the creation of such a public voice as an event that is as dramatic as it is absurd. He thus asserts the emergence of such a voice as an event. At the same time, however, he also undermines this assertion through the lamentably powerless form by which this voice is produced: in emitting half-smothered inarticulate sounds that would have remained inaudible without electronic amplification. This performance offers no answers. But it articulates the unresolved crux of a question that deeply concerns both art and politics: by virtue of what authority is it possible to embody a voice in the public and for the public?

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e-flux journal #1 — december 2008 Jan Verwoert  
The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image



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- 1  
Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 2  
Ibid., 93.
- 3  
Ibid., 95.
- 4  
Ibid., 89.
- 5  
Ibid., 81.
- 6  
The motto comes from a line in the poem "Deutschlands Beruf" (1861) by the Romantic poet Emanuel Geibel (1815-1884). Geibel invokes here the spirit of German rationalism as a mediating force he believes can create peace and political stability in Europe. In its later, more notorious application, however, the phrase came to be associated with German colonialism and with the Nazi ideology of racial superiority.
- 7  
The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes very pointedly this modern design for self-healing by tapping a supposedly sovereign creativity of myth formation:  
  
Romanticism itself could be defined as the invention of the scene of the founding myth, as the simultaneous awareness of the loss of the power of this myth, and as the desire or the will to regain this living power of the origin and, at the same time, the origin of this power.... This formulation in fact defines, beyond romanticism and even beyond romanticism in its Nietzschean form, a whole modernity: the whole of that very broad modernity embracing, in a strange, grimacing alliance, both the poetico-ethnological nostalgia for an initial *mything* humanity and the wish to regenerate the old European humanity by resurrecting its most ancient myths, including the relentless staging of these myths: I am referring, of course, to Nazi myth.  
Jean-Luc Nancy, "Myth Interrupted," in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 45-46. See 43-70.
- 8  
Rüdiger Sünner, *Schwarze Sonne: Entfesselung und Missbrauch der Mythen in Nationalsozialismus und rechter Esoterik* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Spektrum, 1999), 34-35.

- 9  
See Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Work* (New York: Barron's, 1979), 29.
- 10  
Sünner, *Schwarze Sonne*, 36n7.
- 11  
Quoted in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 228.
- 12  
Benjamin Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol," originally published in *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (1980): 35-43; quoted here from *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: D.A.P., 2001), 199-211.
- 13  
Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, 17n10.
- 14  
Buchloh, "Beuys," 203n11.
- 15  
*Aachener Prisma* 13, no. 1 (November 1964): 16-17, quoted in Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, 112n8.
- 16  
Ibid., 111.
- 17  
Buchloh, "Beuys," 206n11.
- 18  
A perfect example of this is to be found in Kosuth's text "Art after Philosophy" (1969), in which Kosuth, in the best Hegelian manner, declared his art to be the historically necessary endpoint of the history of philosophy since Kant, and his works to be direct, transparent illustrations of these lines of thought; see Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After; Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
- 19  
Joseph Kosuth, "intention(s)," originally published in *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 3 (September 1996): 407-12; quoted here from *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 460-68.
- 20  
Ibid., 462.
- 21  
Ibid., 464.
- 22  
These included the Deutsche Studentenpartei (German Students' Party, 1967), the Organisation für Nichtwähler, freie Volksabstimmung (Organization for Nonvoters, Free Plebiscite, 1970), the Organisation für Direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung (Organization for Direct Democracy by Plebiscite, 1971), the Free International University (1971) cofounded with Heinrich Böll, and his participation in the

discussions of the founding of the German Green Party (1979).

23

“Mit-Neben-Gegen” (With-Alongside-Against) was the title of an exhibition of works by Beuys’ students at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 1976.

24

*Express* (Düsseldorf) December 1, 1967; quoted from Barbara Lange, *Joseph Beuys: Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Reimer, 1999), n. p., fig. 3.

25

After a lecture on the present topic, a Beuys disciple instructed me (with an authority that tolerated no dissent) that the action *ÖÖ-Programm* was not in fact about the question of authority but rather, as Beuys himself had said, a demonstration of (if I remember correctly) a Mongolian technique for articulation, and at the same time an illustration of the creative process of forming the quintessentially unformed by articulating the still unformed. The only reaction that occurred to me was a standard line by the Rhenish cabaret artist Jürgen Becker: “Well, you know more than I do there.”

26

See Wolf Vostel’s description of the action in Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, 120n8. Among other things, Beuys’s provocative statement that the Berlin Wall would have to be raised five centimeters to improve its proportions had certainly made him a media figure by this time. When he left the room at the end of the performance, that statement was apparently the subject of the first question posed by someone in the audience.

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