

Conservation of Installation Art:

Joseph Beuys's *Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten*

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Abstract:

Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten (1979) is a crystalline example of installation art by Joseph Beuys: the position of its elements were precisely fixed in space by the artist and well documented. Consisting of objects from two previous performances by Beuys and additions he made at the time of the first installation, the work references three creative moments in the life of the artist. Thus, although Beuys grounded his work in an autobiographical material iconology, the power of *Aus Berlin* lies in its representation of the mythic time that Beuys engaged in during his performances. The quality of light, condition of its walls, and the physical state of its “relics” are communicators of Beuys’s artistic intent, signifying the presence of the artists’s temporal and physical engagement in the making of the installation. This representation has consequences for the conservation and interpretation of the installation.

Qualities inherent in the medium of installation art have expanded the boundaries of art conservation. Just as the viewer apprehends its physical attributes: textures, light, depth and form,¹ so the reinstallation and conservation of it engages the same sensations. As a result, a different set of skills is required of conservators and curators who preserve the variability of installation art:² in addition to understanding the degeneration of materials—often manifold in the disparate elements of one particular work—how to set it up in space needs to be documented.

Even when these two tasks are undertaken with the greatest of care, there still exists a space between the documentation of the first instantiation of the work and its present condition. This space can represent any length of time: days, months or years. Thus, the parameters of ontological authenticity for reinstallation extend as deep as the time passed. Time then is manifested in the layers of meaning that accrue: preservation of these layers is crucial to authentic representation of the artist's intent. Through an intimate look into the history of a particular installation, *Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten* by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) the depths to which these layers can reach and their fragility will be discussed.³

A pivotal figure of post-war German art, Joseph Beuys expanded ideas of materiality and challenged historical models of interpretation. His installation *Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten* (1979) embodies the performative nature of his art. Comprised of objects that he used in two performances as well as additions made during the creation of the installation, the hand of Beuys—indeed his whole body—is seen and felt in it along with the associated meanings of his autobiographical material iconology that he had accrued since the early 1960's. However, the performative aspect of its creation has been stilled within *Aus Berlin*. Beuys's precise documentation of its original manifestation—unlike many of his other installations in which he freely reconfigured them during reinstallation⁴--belies the activity that went into its making.

¹ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (Routledge: New York, 2005) 11.

² Riet de Leeuw observed, "The preserving of and exhibiting of such art work requires far more than simply storing it in a depot, taking out and setting up. It demands knowledge concerning all aspects of the work in question—not only about the material and material condition, but also the possible interpretations which various arrangements of the work provided, how sensitive the work is to being exhibited, and how it triggers an experience in the viewer—sometimes an experience of his/her own perception" in "The Precarious Reconstruction of Installations," *Modern Art Who Cares?* (London: Archetype, 2005) 214.

³ The recent project *Inside Installations* (www.insideinstallations.org) has explored the variegated complexity of installation art, and served as a model for this research.

⁴ See two essays by Lynne Cooke: "Critical Constructions: the Interpretation of the Contemporary Visual Arts," in *Kunst and Museumjournal* (6.5, 1995): 52-57 and "Berlin, Marin-Gropius-Bau, Joseph Beuys," in



Figure 1
Joseph Beuys
Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten, 1979
Dia: Beacon, Beacon, New York
Photo: Courtesy Dia:Beacon

Aus Berlin (figure 1) is tucked into a quiet corner of the spacious Dia:Beacon art museum. It is bounded by three walls: the right wall is red brick, the back and left are smooth and painted white; structural metal bars also painted white cross the ceiling from left to right. Approaching the space of the installation, one is separated from it by a pile of rubble consisting of pieces of plaster, wood, and torn-up fragments of carpet. This barrier, which is higher on the left and gently descends to the right, supports ten thin tree branches each with a miner's lamp affixed to it. On the rubble, in the middle, an arc lamp with its power supply attached shines a diffuse circle of white light onto the back wall of the space. Beyond the rubble wall, the floor is covered with sulfur. The interior space of the installation contains a pile of brown fabric near the center, two piles of old newspapers to the right of the fabric, two gloves, a cane, flashlight, and a musical triangle; there is a pile of hay in the rear left corner; a ruffled fedora hangs on the brick wall (figure 2).

The Burlington Magazine (July 1988). Sean Rainbird also discusses the issues inherent in reinstalling Beuys work in his essay "At The End of the Twentieth Century: Installing After the Act," in Joseph Beuys: actions, vitrines, environments (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2004) 136.



Figure 2
Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten, detail, 1979
 Joseph Beuys
 Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York
 Photo: Aimée Ducey, 2007, courtesy of Dia:Beacon.

First installed at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York in November and December of 1979, *Aus Berlin* was completed by Beuys with the help of Feldman and René Block, both gallery owners who represented him. Its objects are the remnants of two previous performances by Beuys along with additional materials added by him during installation in 1979. The first action from which Beuys took objects was *I Like America and America Likes Me*, performed in May 1974 at the René Block gallery in Manhattan. The second action, entitled *Joseph Beuys—Ja, jetzt brechen wir hier den Scheiss ab—Coyote II*, took place at René Block's gallery in Berlin in September of 1979. The swathes of felt, hat, pile of hay, triangle, flashlight, newspapers, his own hair and toenail clippings, and woven bit of coyote hair all originate from the first performance. The rubble barrier comes from the destruction by Beuys of Block's Berlin gallery, the primary act of the second performance. Beuys accumulated the tree branches, miners' lights, arc lamp, and sulfur⁵ (yellow powder) for the 1979 installation.

Joseph Beuys's artistic persona and his material iconology were both fully formed in 1979 when he created *Aus Berlin*. Born in Krefeld, Germany in 1921, he would attend the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf (1947 -1951). Prior to his art training, Beuys flew as a dive-bomber for the Third Reich. The founding myth of his material iconology

⁵ The sulfur is a reference by Beuys to Paracelsus, the 16th century medicinal chemist who theorized that all mixed bodies were made up of sulfur, salt and mercury. Sulfur represented the soul, salt the body, and mercury the spirit.

took place during World War II when his plane went down in Crimea. As Beuys retold it, Tartars rescued him and tended to his wounds by rubbing him with fat and wrapping him in felt. This experience surfaced in his artwork when, after working with found objects in the late 1950's, he began to work with fat and felt in the 1960's. For Beuys, the act of making art was an energetic process and his materials were iconic of forms of energy: the fat and felt were reservoirs of protective insulation and heat, the two forms of energy that restored him after the plane crash. The use of these materials and his explicit assignment of meaning to them made his art overtly healing, embodying his wartime experience. Beuys sought to bring the visceral experience of creativity into people's lives through the performative aspect of his art⁶ and to heal the wounds of World War II in Germany.⁷ By placing himself at the center of the transmission of the message, Beuys goes beyond the hand of the artist that we associate with the brushstroke and modeling in traditional painting and sculpture. Beuys goes further in his desire to create "social sculpture" and to expand what it means to create art. He stated:

Der totalisierte Kunstbegriff, das ist ja das Prinzip, was ich mit diesen Materialien ausdrücken wollte, der sich letztendlich bezieht auf alles, auf alles Gestalten in der Welt. Und nicht nur auf künstlerisches Gestalten, sondern auch auf soziales Gestalten, oder auf Rechtsgestalten, oder auf Geldgestaltung, oder auf landwirtschaftliche Probleme, oder auch auf andere Gestaltungsfragen und Erziehungsfragen. Alle Fragen der Menschen können nur Fragen der Gestaltung sein, und das ist der totalisierte Kunstbegriff. Er bezieht sich auf jedermanns Möglichkeit, prinzipiell ein schöpferisches Wesen zu sein und auf die Fragen des sozialen Ganzen.⁸

Art historians have traditionally interpreted Beuys's work through this assignment of meaning to materials and his concerted effort to inculcate the public into his philosophy of art. This research will show that another layer can emerge in our understanding of the artist. Still directly connected to Beuys, it allows for an increased perception of the temporality embodied in this installation.

A contemporary review of the first performance related to the installation, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, gave a brief account of the action: "Beuys's performance at René Block was a strange, moving, surreal event. . . . The artist, swathed in the sheets

⁶ Mark Rosenthal's contribution to the catalogue for the exhibition Joseph Beuys: actions, vitrines, environments (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2004) provides a review of Beuys's statements regarding the energetic processes embedded in his choice of materials. See pages 24-26.

⁷ Donald Kuspit discusses Beuys's reification of his biography in his artwork, and notes the widely accepted idea that the artist meant to heal the damaged German people after World War II. "Joseph Beuys: The Body of the Artist," Artforum (Summer, 1991) 82.

⁸ Cited in Beate Elsen, Studien zu den Prinzipien der Installationen von Joseph Beuys: Ein Beitrag zur Gegenstandssicherung (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrichs Universität, 1992). Originally published in Götz Adriana, et. al., Joseph Beuys (Köln: M. Du Mont Schauberg, 1973) 342f. Translation: *The total concept of art, this is the principle that I wanted to express with these materials, which ultimately refers to everything, to every form in the world. And not only artistic forms, but also social forms, or forms of law, or forms of currency, or to agricultural problems, or also to other questions of form and questions of education. All the questions of man can only be questions of form, and this is the total concept of art. It gives to every person possibility, principally a creative way to be and to questions of the social whole.*

of Beuys-brown felt that have become his trademark, with a cane, gloves and flashlight, shambled around a large, caged room with a coyote.”⁹ The title of the performance is an ironic statement by Beuys indicative of his relationship with the United States at the time;¹⁰ strongly opposed to the Vietnam War, Beuys had not visited the United States until that year.¹¹

Descriptions of *I like America and America Likes Me* vary slightly in their details;¹² Caroline Tisdall published the definitive account in 1976 with copious photographs of the event. Beuys, wrapped in felt, arrived from Germany to the airport in New York and was taken to Block’s gallery in an ambulance (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3
I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974
Joseph Beuys
René Block Gallery, Manhattan
Photo published in Tisdall, Caroline. Joseph Beuys: Coyote. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1976.



Figure 4
I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974
Joseph Beuys
René Block Gallery, Manhattan
Photo published in Tisdall, Caroline. Joseph Beuys: Coyote. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1976.

He brought with him objects and elements from his material iconology: the felt, his hat, gloves and cane, a flashlight, a triangle. Then, he lived in the gallery with a coyote for three days; the public observed from behind a caged area at the entrance to the room. Over the course of the three days Beuys interacted with the animal through a sequence of ritualized gestures. He would walk towards a length of the brown felt that was stretched out on the floor, carrying his walking stick and gloves. Pulling on the gloves, he would then wrap himself in the felt completely, until nothing was visible of him— only the crook of the walking stick would protrude from the felt, above his head (figure 5). Striking various poses while thus enveloped, Beuys would follow the movements of the coyote with the cane until at some point he (Beuys) would collapse prostrate to the ground. After a while he would jump to his feet again, discard the felt and strike three

⁹ Thomas B. Hess, “The Germans are Coming! The Germans are Coming” New York Magazine (Spring, 1975) 90.

¹⁰ David Levi Strauss, “American Beuys: I Like America and America Likes Me” in Art Criticism (8.1): 1-12.

¹¹ Earlier that year, before the performance at René Block’s gallery, he had visited the U.S. to engage in a series of public dialogues, invited by Ronald Feldman, in which he presented his *Energy Plan for the Western Man*.

¹² Besides Caroline Tisdall’s account of the action, see Strauss’s article (op. cit.) that documents the three days of the action.

tones on the triangle attached at his waist.¹³ After a 10-second pause, a recorded blast from a turbine engine would sound beyond the audience barrier at which point Beuys discarded his gloves and relaxed for a time before starting the sequence over again. The coyote participated in its own way too, marking each of the objects by pissing on them including fifty copies of the Wall Street Journal that were delivered to the gallery each day.¹⁴



Figure 5
I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974
Joseph Beuys
René Block Gallery, Manhattan
Photo published in Tisdall, Caroline. Joseph Beuys: Coyote. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1976.

This action is a first for Beuys because it is dealing with America's past.¹⁵ A form of enactive knowledge, performance can be used to actualize a lived experience. It may be the individual experience of the performance artist or the re-enactment of a past experience of others.¹⁶ Beuys accomplishes both in *I Like America and America Likes Me*. His interaction with the coyote is directly referencing Native American culture, its reverence for the clever nature of the animal and contrasting it with European culture's fear of it. As Achille Bonito Oliva wrote:

“Animals are the archetype of movement, nature, sentiment and flow, just as mental powers, angelic powers, are forces of refinement, of the ideation of the conceptual universe. However, with this artistic attitude as a demiurge, Beuys restores a bond between the animal world of subterranean, unconscious forces, forces from the depths, and the elevated domain of reason with its higher reaches

¹³ Rosenthal, 42. Beuys spoke of the triangle, and its purpose, with specificity. He said that as opposed to the roar of the turbine noise in the room signifying “undetermined energy . . . the triangle has the contained form of the front plane of “fat corner” . . . an equilateral triangle in which the undetermined nature of the fat is completely integrated with determined, mathematical form.” As Rosenthal observes, “in other words, Beuys’s artistic task was to mold the inchoate into form, literally and figuratively.”

¹⁴ Caroline Tisdall, Joseph Beuys, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1979) 228-232.

¹⁵ Strauss, 9.

¹⁶ Richard Candida Smith, “Performing the Archive” in Art and the Performance of Memory: sounds and gestures of recollection (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) 6.

of ideation, in other words, a permanent exchange between demons and angels, between the depths of the unconscious and the rational side of man.”¹⁷

Beuys’s reference to his personal myth of the Tartars, when he falls prostrate in the action, is a reminder not only of his war experiences but a message that all of us who are wounded can survive too. His repetitive use of materials—fat, felt, copper—and personal accoutrements—cane, hat, vest—were reminders of his individual experience, the Crimea event, and the meanings that he explicitly assigned to the objects. As Tisdall points out, “Beuys metaphorically repeats the past in order to avoid its literal repetition in some future, however remote.”¹⁸ Thus, while he has changed continents and cultures, he is pursuing his overarching artistic intent: to draw people out of the chatter that is our daily survival, to pause, reflect on our past, and change for the better.

The second performance that comprises the installation dates from September 15, 1979 (figure 6) when the Galerie René Block in Berlin closed its doors. Just prior to its closing, the final exhibition by Beuys took place in its rooms. Among the sculptures shown were the remnants of *I Like America and America Likes Me*. A small tome was published on the occasion of the closure:



Figure 6

Joseph Beuys—*Ja, jetzt brechen wir hier den Scheiss ab—Coyote II*, 1979

Joseph Beuys

René Block Gallery, Berlin

Photo published in Tisdall, Caroline. *Joseph Beuys: Coyote*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1976.

And in the room man’s meeting with a coyote was commemorated—stacks of Wall Street Journals dated May 23, 24, and 25, 1974; a pile of hay, scraps of felt, and a stack of felt with a round hole, five centimeters in diameter, leading into it, and in the middle of the room, on the floor, Beuys’s *Braunkreuz* cane, his flashlight, gloves with the thumb bitten off. And there it was again, Beuys’s sweat-stained hat of 1974, below it two toenail pairings from the man and two *Atomic Models*, braided one each of the man’s and the animal’s hair.

¹⁷ Achille Bonito Oliva, “Long Live Joseph Beuys” translated by Catherine Schelbert.

¹⁸ Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, 88.

Beuys' words reverberated outside the gallery, too, where on the tiny front lawn of the building the crates were piled and waiting, crates full of moldings, worn carpets, tangled wiring and chunks of plaster from the gallery walls that bore the marks of many an artist's hand—waiting to be picked up and to be shipped to coyote country—*Kulturexport*.¹⁹

After the show, Beuys tore down the walls of the gallery, ripped up the old carpet, and packed everything into twenty-one plastic bags as part of the performance *Joseph Beuys—Ja, jetzt brechen wir hier den Scheiss ab—Coyote II*. These, along with the *I Like America and America Likes Me* remains, were shipped back to Ronald Feldman in New York to become the installation *Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten*.

As a result of his shamanistic approach to art, critics in the U.S. in the 1980's were particularly opposed to Beuys's idea of social sculpture and his total concept of art.²⁰ One text, after recounting the failings of Beuys's idea of social sculpture wrote "there is no way for it to 'render the concept of politics void' or to blend with it without at the same time identifying itself with this self-propaganda and this self-propagation that was, more than all else, the emblem of the Nazi regime—identifying its political action with artistic activity."²¹ This, in reaction to Beuys's concept of *Gestaltung*: "When I say: 'Everyone an Artist' I do not mean everyone a painter, a sculptor, an architect. I mean people have the ability to work with creativity and freedom in a kind of social sculpture to transform the whole body of society. Which means overcoming politics. You know perhaps this world *Gestaltung*?—bringing things into form."²² One cannot help but feel, given the juxtaposition of these two texts, that the critics that chose to equate Beuys's mission of healing with the Nazi regime is itself taking interpretation to an unfounded extreme. The later falsification of the Crimea story helped to undermine the power of Beuys's art in the minds of these critics.²³

Since Beuys's death in 1986, the interpretive constraints that he wrapped about himself have loosened. Also, the ability of historians to grapple with the issues that Beuys engaged in his work has grown.²⁴ One aspect of this progress is a better understanding of how the physical presence of the artist is manifested in installation art. Martha Buskirk discusses this in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (2005). She writes:

¹⁹ Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, 9-10.

²⁰ In addition to the following citations, Benjamin Buchloh authored two critiques of Beuys's retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1979. He also contributed to a symposium on Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, Gene Ray, ed. (New York: D.A.P. and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001) that included recent investigations into the meanings of fat and felt in Beuys's work and their possible connection with victims of the holocaust. In his essay, Buchloh recants the vehemence of his earlier writings, but remains critical of Beuys's universalizing tendencies. He also provides important reflection on whether or not the evidence of reference to the holocaust by Beuys was intentional by the artist.

²¹ Eric Michaud, "The Ends of Art According to Beuys." Rosalind Krauss, trans. *October 45* (Summer, 1988): 36-46.

²² Quoted in the New York Post, 1979, during the installation of his retrospective at the Whitney Museum.

²³ Rosenthal, 63. The truth of Beuys's Crimea story has been shown to probably be false; there is little documentation of the event, and that which exists does not corroborate the story as Beuys told it.

²⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys: Once Again," *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, Gene Ray, ed. (New York: D.A.P. and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001) 75-90.

“Equally important is the appearance of the body, not as a subject to be represented but as an absent instrument made evident in works of art through mixes of traces, documents, and objects that register the physical presence of the artist. As the traditional notion of the artist’s hand has been deflected into a profusion of different kinds of manifestations, the works thus produced invite the viewer, whether literally or imaginatively, to occupy the positions vacated by the artist. . . . the relationship to the body articulated through a play of presence and absence.”²⁵

Inside *Aus Berlin* Beuys takes the position of an absent instrument to the extreme: it is a sedimentation of three separate performances by Beuys: the physical remains of the two performances and the composition of the installation form a heavy manifestation of the artist’s presence and absence. The physical traces of Beuys’s body—his hair and toenails— as well as his actions— a hole he cut in the felt and the composition in space of the installation—represent the content of the those moments in time. This content reveals a layer of meaning that has been obscured by his stated iconology but remains legible in his performances.²⁶

Beuys engaged the flow of time to express his ideas during his performances. As described above, along with his symbolic accoutrements, Beuys enacted with the coyote a repetitive ritual over the course of three days.²⁷ In so doing, he sought to draw the observer out of the flow of time in which we tend to live life diachronically, expectant of the next predictable shift, whether it be the morning coffee or the evening commute. Through his repetition of brief moments of activity and long dull pauses, which are still never the same, he forces a sense of being on the observer, as opposed to our preoccupation with becoming. By unsettling us from our diachronic existence Beuys affects, as Alain Borer describes it, “our ability to transmute our daily lives, which are chaotic, unstable, hot, material, present, into spirituality, which is perfect, stable, cold,

²⁵ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003) 243.

²⁶ Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, (London: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005) 100. Viñas notes that “objects can be compared to palimpsests, in which texts (information, messages and meanings) are written in succession, each one hiding or modifying the previous ones.”

²⁷ Annie Suquet’s article “Archaic Thought and Ritual in the Work of Joseph Beuys” in *Res* (28 1995) 148-162, explores these ideas in relation to archaic ritual. She observes “archaic thought perpetually dwells on the matter that the world is made of, as does Beuys. It is through matter that what cannot be represented can be experienced. The equilibrium of man’s relation to the world lies in this experience that reveals to us the unrepresentable from which we proceed and that comprises us. Creating the conditions for this revelatory experience—within the of meaning, time, and space—is the aim of many archaic rituals and of Beuys’s work.” She continues, “Beuys’s actions aim at inflicting on chronological time distortions that seem to upset its flow. By means of extreme lengthiness as well as extreme brevity he circumscribes a deliberately paradoxical duration—spread out and stagnant, or repetitive and short—meant to destabilize us and to induce temporal plasticity.” (151-152) Martha Buskirk also remarks on the ritual aspects of his actions in her book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003). She writes “The arrangements of objects in space direct a narrative, but narrative connotes intellect and Beuys was trying to subvert the intellect through a subversion of time and the use of materials which, once their meaning was understood, could anchor the viewer in the space while at the same time, allowing them to disengage from the narrative and experience the physicality of the concepts he invokes through ritual and relic.” 165.

crystalline, celestial, future, in accordance with a polarization matching that of the vital energies, and also our ability to bring bodies back into souls.”²⁸ Or, as Beuys wrote in 1978:

“Most people feel that they are at the mercy of the circumstances in which they find themselves. This leads, in turn, to the destruction of the inner self. These people can no longer see the meaning of life within the destructive processes to which they are subject, in the complex tangle of state and economic power, in the diverting, distracting maneuvers of a cheap entertainment industry.”²⁹



Figure 7
Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten, 1979
Joseph Beuys
Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York
Photo: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery

In the second performance *Joseph Beuys—Ja, jetzt brechen wir hier den Scheiss ab—Coyote II*, Beuys engages time again. After his final exhibition at René Block’s Gallery, he manifests the end of a space that had supported his art for many years by tearing it down. Its remains continue to border the objects of *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Destruction is only a change in the form of energy; the prior space of the gallery walls is still present in the rubble. (figure 7)

An interview with Ronald Feldman³⁰ revealed that Beuys was equally engaged in the process of creating the installation as he was in the performances. From images taken of Beuys as he installed *Aus Berlin*, we are able to see Beuys in a behind the scenes performance. (figure 8) We are also able to understand the precision that Beuys took in determining the placement of each item. Feldman carefully documented Beuys’s spatial arrangement of *Aus Berlin*. This action on Feldman’s part has insured that reinstallations, at least from this fundamental perspective, are consistent with the artist’s intent. Echoes of Beuys’s activity arise from the objects as they were used during the performances; it also dwells in the composition of the installation.

²⁸ Alain Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, Elaine Briggs, trans. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) 22.

²⁹ Joseph Beuys, “Appeal,” *Frankfurter Rundschau* (December, 1978).

³⁰ Aimée Ducey interview with Ronald Feldman, May 2007.



Figure 8
Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten, 1979
Joseph Beuys
Ronald Feldman Gallery, Manhattan
Photo: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery

The shape of the space, it turns out, was a question for Beuys that he discussed with both Feldman and Block at the time of installation. They debated forming a circular enclosure demarcated by the rubble, but instead went with the stage-like configuration seen today, at the behest of the gallerists. Ronald Feldman reflected on this decision in our discussion, saying that he does wonder what *Aus Berlin* would be like today if the decision had gone the other way. He was also sent out by Beuys to find the miner's lamps and to gather some thin tree branches to support them. He was at first concerned about locating such lamps, but then Canal Street was and is a surprising treasure chest of useful objects. The branches were gathered from Feldman's yard by his son; Beuys found them perfect for the task at hand.

The creation of *Aus Berlin* is concerned with three places, three moments in time past. What are we to experience now, looking at *Aus Berlin*? When the artist's biography stops, does his sovereignty over meaning also end? If we consider Beuys's life separate from his own accounts, separate from the interpretations of his contemporaries—admirers and critics—and look at the events stripped bare of those bachelors of history, another significance arises which we can access when we visit *Aus Berlin*. Another history may accumulate, in addition to the those already described, which still is connected to Beuys but speaks of the ability of the cultural context in which his art is now embedded to gain a more nuanced interpretation of the events that formed *Aus Berlin*.³¹

In *The Natural History of Destruction*, W.G. Sebald analyses literary examples of people coping with traumatic experiences. He observes that “for the victims of persecution, however, the thread of chronological time is broken, background and foreground merge, the victim's logical means of support in his existence are suspended. The experience of terror also dislocates time, the most abstract of all humanity's homes. The only fixed points are traumatic scenes recurring with a painful clarity of memory and vision.”³² Beuys undoubtedly experienced terror during his time as *Luftwaffe* pilot, regardless of whether the mythological meeting with the Tartars took place. Indeed, the scars that Beuys and his fellow Germans who fought for the Third Reich bear include being the perpetrators of terror, not the victims. Therefore behind his guise of the selfless transmitter, could be Beuys's own terror, his inability to go back to real time since its thread was broken for him during the war. Mired in a temporal dislocation, Beuys chose to use art to try to make sense of it, and admirably, to help others make sense of it. Sebald goes on to observe that, “The paradox of searching for a time which, to the author's own distress, cannot in the last resort be forgotten entails the quest for a form of language in which experiences paralyzing the power of articulation could be expressed.”³³ This is appropriate to Beuys's work, in which he forms a material iconology to substantiate his unforgettable memories. Mentioned previously, they are the accoutrements of his person: hat, cane, and vest. They are the materials that he repeatedly employs: fat, felt, copper.

While critics have questioned Beuys's universalizing intent, the poetics of his work may not, with the passage of time, lay there. The strength in *Aus Berlin* is the *Kunstwollen* that we can extract and return to time and again when visiting *Aus Berlin*: how Joseph Beuys experienced the world temporally as a result of his wartime experience and the bravery with which he presented that damaged self to the world: the character of his will to make known the desolation of war.³⁴ Not unlike the American Transcendentalists of the 19th century, Joseph Beuys wanted to transform society by forcing us to be aware of time, to engage it, not be helpless to it. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1857:

³¹ See the volume on this concept edited by Arjun Appadurai *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986) Alos, Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* (31.2, 1999) 170.

³² W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Anthea Bell, trans. (New York: Random House, 2003) 150.

³³ Sebald, 150.

³⁴ Alois Riegl, “The Main Characteristics of Late Roman *Kunstwollen*,” in *The Vienna School Reader*, Christopher Woods, ed. and trans. (New York: Zone Books, 2000) 94.

“It is said, the present and the future are always rivals. Animal spirits constitute the power of the present, and their feats are like the structure of a pyramid. Their result is a lord, a general, or a boon-companion. Before these, what a base mendicant is Memory with his leathern badge! But this genial heat is latent in all constitutions, and is disengaged only by the friction of society.”³⁵

Emerson’s prose draws together the play of past and present that Beuys created in *Aus Berlin*. At once the ability of animals, the coyote, to show humans a way of being present that our ability to remember confounds; at once the dual danger of memory: remembrance of our past can rob us of a choate life in the present and forgetting allows us to repeat the very acts that destroy us. Beuys still believed that society could constructively awaken the tension between remembering and forgetting.

Returning to *Aus Berlin*, even with the detailed documentation provided by the artist and gallery, subtle changes can creep into subsequent installations. Some of these changes are within the control of the conservator and curator; some are not. Some are constantly changing and have to be vigilantly adjusted. Most, if neglected, will dim the expression of Beuys’s artistic intent.

Beuys’s careful placement of the arc lamp to cast its light on the pile of felt so that it shines on the back wall like the sun rising behind a mountain is tender reference to *Aus Berlin*. Ronald Feldman noted that Beuys intended to transform the piles of felt into a miniature mountain representing the coyote’s habitat. We are to imagine, Feldman informs us, the coyote coming and going among these hills, guided by the warming energy of the sun. Dia:Beacon is aware of this detail, but the forces of gravity constantly pull on the felt, requiring a regular plumping up of its contours to meet the height of the arc lamp’s beam. Also, the miner’s lamps were lit in the original installation. For reasons of safety and maintenance, they are not currently kept aflame.

Feldman also pointed out that there was an olfactory element to the first installation: the sulfur and the miner’s lamps emitted characteristic odors. He remarked that both faded over the course of the exhibit, and Beuys did not make efforts to force them to remain. Still, it is one intangible part of the first installation that is no longer accessible. Should an effort be made to keep the odor of sulfur in the air?

The tangible objects of the installation are also susceptible to change and loss. Of all of them, the newspapers are perhaps the most at risk from inherent vice. Quickly, the acidity of the newsprint is breaking down the paper fibers; as these are original elements of Beuys’s performance containing traces of him and the coyote, their conservation is essential. In addition, the migration of salts to the surface of the brick wall, which is an exterior wall, could damage the hat, hair and toenails.

After inherent vice and environmental concerns, another consideration is continued reinstallation of the work.³⁶ With each move the objects are handled and

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Society and Solitude*, 1857.

³⁶ In the interval between its first installation in 1979 and its current permanent display at Dia:Beacon, *Aus Berlin* traveled to at least 6 different venues for display. In 1985 it was reinstalled at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden for the 10th Anniversary Exhibition entitled *Content: A Contemporary Focus*. In 1986 Ronald Feldman reinstalled it in his gallery after the death of the artist. The Milwaukee Art Museum along with the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston included the installation in their joint exhibition *Warhol/Beuys/Polke: Three Artists of their Time* in 1987. The installation was then purchased in 1991 by

damage potentially incurred. The rubble wall is at risk because each time it is shoveled in and out of containers for transport, its pieces are breaking down into smaller chunks. This could eventually substantially alter the look and feel of the barrier.



Figure 9
Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten, 1979
Joseph Beuys
Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York
Photo: Aimée Ducey, 2007, courtesy of Dia:Beacon.

Finally, the contingency of the surrounding environment—the move from gallery to museum—needs to be addressed. While Beuys designed the installation for Ronald Feldman’s Gallery, the shape and size are minimally altered in its present installation at Dia:Beacon. Perhaps of greatest concern here again is the level of light, and the brick wall, both of which markedly change the appearance of the work from the original installation. The light in the area of the museum where it is installed is low, and the perfect white cube of the gallery space is nonexistent. However, Beuys was known to reconfigure other installations when they changed venue, working within the parameters of the new space. We cannot know what he would have done with *Aus Berlin* in each new space, but can we feel comfortable that he would have liked the brick surface, reminiscent as it is of Block’s gallery in Berlin? (Figure 9)

Upon his return from America in 1974, Beuys was interviewed in *Die Welt*. During the interview he was asked what impressed him most of all the experiences he had in America. He replied:

the Dia Art Foundation and shown at the Menil Collection in Houston that same year in the exhibition *Joseph Beuys: Works from the Dia Art Foundation*.

“The ice in New York which has such strangely metallic electricity. And the steam which is everywhere rising above the streets. Yes, and the fact that America compared to West Germany is such an old country. I always felt transported back to the twenties, the time of my childhood. One can see so much that is old and undestroyed. It seems that in America much has been preserved where here it has been made kaputt and uprooted by the war, but not only the war. In America too the spiritual for the most part has been buried.”³⁷

Here, Beuys’s memory speaks to its manifestation in his art: a past to which he could not return and a present into which he could not enter.

Through careful excavation of its history and thoughtful and precise preservation of its tangible forms, the richness of meaning in *Aus Berlin: Neues vom Kojoten* will remain. As we have seen, the present caretakers of the installation are preserving it according to the existing documentation, but the space between, 22 years, allows for a deeper interpretation of Beuys’s artistic intent which is still connected to the fragile objects that form it.

³⁷ Willi Bongard, “Art is Not in the Superstructure: Talk with Joseph Beuys after his return from America.” *Die Welt* (February 6, 1974): 52-54.