

Chapter in *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond: Art, Culture and Politics*, published by LIT Verlag, 2011 - part of the European Studies in Culture and Policy series (Series Editors Professor Ullrich Kockel and Professor Máiréad Nic Craith).

Anthropology, Mythology and Art:
Reading Beuys through Heidegger

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Beuys the mythmaker Shaman

Most celebrated artists are as influential artistically as they are critically. Beuys' reception to date, remains controversial and contradictory; his artistic influence is unquestioned but this is not matched by his critical acclaim. In an attempt to address this difficulty with the publication of *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy* (2001), Gene Ray notes that Beuys "inspired, enabled, or enriched important directions of contemporary art production, from what can broadly be called 'history of art' to installation, performance, and environmental art", (Ray 2001: 1). And yet, despite his overwhelming influence in the artistic world, critical reception of Beuys remains somewhat polarised and contentious.

Interestingly, perhaps the most critical essay came in response to Beuys' 1979/80 retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim New York. In his essay "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol" (*Artforum* 1980), Benjamin Buchloh is disturbed by what he sees as "the aesthetic conservatism of Beuys [...] logically complemented by his politically retrograde, not to say reactionary, attitudes" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 23). Buchloh goes on to argue that the root of the problem lies in Beuys' misconception that "politics could become a matter of aesthetics" and he goes on to compare this to Walter Benjamin's critique of fascism as the aesthetisation of politics and war. Buchloh is thus concerned by what he sees as the uncritical reception of Beuys where he is presented as "a national hero of the first order", "a cult figure" and "a figure of worship", with references to Hitler's reception in Germany some years earlier. Though more recently art historians are examining Beuys'

work more carefully and critically, Buchloh's critique is still influential and stands in the way of any attempt to re-examine Beuys' work today.

In his essay "The Ends of Art According to Beuys" published in *October* in 1988, Eric Michaud offers the following helpful comment:

The disturbing element in Beuys' work is not to be found in his drawings, which have their place in public and private collections throughout the world, nor his 'performances', which have their place within the Fluxus movement and within a general investigation of the limits of art. It lies rather, I believe, in the flood of pronouncements testifying to the privilege that he gave, throughout his lifetime, to spoken over plastic language. (Michaud 1988: 36)

Michaud's comment points to two interrelated and closely linked difficulties in the reception of Beuys' work: one regarding the status of Beuys' spoken words and statements, the other regarding the artist's insistence on the prioritisation he allocates to the spoken word and communication through language.

The status of Beuys' spoken statements is perhaps *the* stumbling block for many critics and art historians and Buchloh is a good example. Depending on how they read Beuys' spoken statements, interpreters have offered a range of responses. Buchloh reads such statements as descriptive, explanatory and external to the artwork, though nonetheless explaining the artwork. Hence he is keen to point out that in Germany at the time, those who were seriously involved in radical student politics did not interpret Beuys' spoken statements as "anything more than simple-minded utopian drivel lacking elementary political and educational practicability" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 201). According to Buchloh, a serious avant-garde artist would be expected to offer descriptive and explanatory comments that would show how their artwork also

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operates towards appropriate ethical, social and political goals. Beuys' spoken comments do not operate this way - much of it evokes mysticism and naïve utopianism - and Buchloh is unable to interpret the works beyond a mere return to a-historical mysticism and conservatism demonstrated by works that make references to anthropological mysticism.

For Buchloh, Beuys had not understood the innovation brought about by Duchamp's readymades and as a result, he concludes that there is nothing of artistic innovation and value in Beuys' work. Hence he argues that:

Beuys does not change the state of the object within discourse itself. Quite the contrary, he dilutes and dissolves the conceptual precision of Duchamp's readymade by reintegrating the object into the most traditional and naïve context of representation of meaning, the idealist metaphor: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object. (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 206)

Buchloh insists that whilst Beuys is intrigued by Duchamp, he does not understand the artistic innovation introduced by the latter artist's readymades. Instead, he argues, Beuys offers us a return to notions of the naïve primitive with references to anthropological and ethnographical presentations. We are offered, he says, "withering relics and vestiges of past activities", souvenirs of the past enshrined "in specifically designed glass and wood cases that look like [...] vitrines in Victorian museums of ethnography" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 200). From Buchloh's perspective, Beuys' position is closer to fascism than to any attempt to mourn and seek forgiveness for this past.

For Buchloh, Beuys remains a conservative artist who offers no innovation and has not come to terms with recent artistic history. He offers a quotation from Beuys' comments on his "Bathtub" (1960) as an example:

But it would be wrong to interpret the *bathtub* as a kind of self-reflection. Nor does it have anything to do with the concept of the readymade: quite the opposite, since here the stress is on the meaning of the object. It relates to the reality of being born in such an area and in such circumstances. (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 206)

Buchloh expects "Bathtub" to be a reference to Duchamp and, as such, to make formal references to the readymade; Beuys' emphasis, Buchloh's comment suggests, is on "the meaning of the object". For Buchloh, art that seeks to offer "meaning" also implies that such "meaning" is metaphysical, "spiritual" and a-historical as opposed to social, historical, political and ethical. According to the art historian, then, the "meaning" offered in such work is traditional, whether it is linked to Western religion or anthropological mysticism.

Paul Wood shares Buchloh's suspicions and points out - with reference to Beuys' other works and his accompanying statements - that in contemporary contexts, there are difficulties in establishing "the meaning of an object" understood in terms of symbolic meaning, solely on the basis of the visual:

Erased crosses do not 'mean' the union of East and West any more than dead hares are valid symbols of nomadic freedom from modern materialism. One of the key features of the contemporary social order has been, precisely, the loss of a common symbolic repertoire of the kind more organic cultures collectively invest in religion. (Wood 2004: 307)

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Like Buchloh, Wood is alarmed by any suggestion of mere acceptance of Beuys' statements that imply common symbolic meanings in the way the Christian God operated in Europe for several centuries, or of their re-insertion into contemporary Western culture. For Wood, what characterises modern society is the openness, changes and plurality of possible meanings, in contrast to the closed worlds of traditional and primitive societies which are the objects of anthropological and ethnographical study. Caroline Tisdall, who, from Buchloh's perspective, uncritically reads Beuys' statements as descriptive and explanatory, notes again and again that in Beuys' works art and life are not easily distinguishable and offers the following interpretation of Beuys' "Bathtub":

It is the tub in which he was bathed as a child, extended in meaning through sculptural additions: sticking-plaster and fat-soaked gauze. The plaster indicates the wound, while fat suggests a less physical level, Beuys' metaphor for spirituality and the passage from one state to another. Fat can appear in solid or liquid form, definite in shape or chaotic in flow, according to temperature. Of fat we will hear more later; here it indicates change, transformation and substance - like the act of birth. (Tisdall 1995: 349)

As Tisdall's description makes clear, the "Bathtub" is not an empty tub, it is not a readymade. The tub shows signs of use and wear and as such evokes history. Moreover, it is not empty; inside we find plasters, gauze and fat, and as Tisdall notes, fat is a recurring material used by Beuys and as such calls for our attention. Why is it used here and elsewhere in Beuys' work?

Gene Ray does not offer an interpretative account of the "Bathtub", but he does offer interpretative accounts of other works

by Beuys involving fat and felt. Unlike Buchloh, he pays relatively little attention to the content of Beuys' statements on the grounds that even if Beuys does not offer us enough evidence in his statements that the works could be interpreted as anything other than conservative and naively utopian, primitive, anthropological artworks, they may nonetheless evoke other interpretations on the basis of their materiality. He thus argues that the works offer us enough references to indicate that they should be read as a response to the Holocaust, unbeknownst, perhaps, even to Beuys himself. Beuys' own words and statements, Ray argues, "cannot be taken as infallible guides" because "he may not have been able to know or understand his deepest feelings about the Nazi period" (Ray 2001: 71). Ray proceeds to offer very convincing and tempting interpretations of Beuys' use of fat and felt as references to the Holocaust, admitting that we shall never know whether these were intentional on Beuys' part or simply unconscious.

Ray's account is very tempting in that it offers an interpretation that helps to explain, and more importantly justify, Beuys' remarkable influence, an influence which has inspired, enabled and enriched so much of contemporary art production. And yet, we are left with the awareness that, whilst it is a tempting account, it also leaves too much open to speculation without sufficient evidence. In the observations that follow, I would like to offer evidence that would allow us to both stabilise Ray's line of interpretation and yet keep it open to further evidence and interpretations; the source of which, in this instance, comes from the phenomenology of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and his emphasis on language.

Reading Beuys through Heidegger

I showed earlier that perhaps *the* stumbling block in interpreting Beuys' work is our interpretation of the status of his statements, many of which are highly provocative, utopian or simply too naïve to ring true and sincere. In her Lehman Lecture "The Old and the

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New Initiation Rites: Joseph Beuys and Epiphany", Antje von Graevenitz points out that Beuys did not seek either to speak symbolically or to present work that could be interpreted symbolically: that is, he did not intend each comment, gesture, visual image, or linguistic phrase to hold a symbolic meaning in a similar way to those of priests and shamans. Beuys, she says, stated in 1968, "I do not want to interpret, because then it would seem that the things I do are symbolic, and they are not" (Von Graevenitz in Cook & Kelly 1996: 64). Von Graevenitz goes on to say that in conversation, Beuys said that he wanted to make "apparent only the things that already had meaning in their own right. He wanted to emphasise forgotten things" (von Graevenitz in Cook and Kelly 1996: 64). Beuys, it seems, is attempting to focus our attention on what exists, but is not always visible and seen, not because it is not possible to see it, but because our attention is focused elsewhere. Von Graevenitz goes on to argue that the problem has been a misinterpretation by art historians of the status of both images and real objects in Beuys' work.

In what follows, I would like to show that, through considering Beuys' work in relation to the writings of Heidegger, we can gain a better understanding of the problems art historians face in their attempts to interpret Beuys' work. Phenomenology for Heidegger is not the study of what is visible in our everyday life, but the capacity to allow that which is not otherwise visible - existence as such (Being) - to appear and become visible. For Heidegger the visual is always already interpreted culturally and thus in and through language. The capacity to allow that which is normally "forgotten", hidden from attention in everyday engagement - Being as such - to appear, is in and through language and its grammar. For example, when we say 'this is a woman' or 'this is a man' we highlight 'Being', in our everyday encounters we simply accept this and work with it. But when attention is paid to

language, as in the case of art, we can focus on the 'is', the 'being' of something: man, woman. We claim 'being' for 'man' or 'woman' and thus expose that such meaning could be re-thought. We become aware that these definitions are cultural constructions and could/might be interpreted differently.

I suggested that one clue that an understanding of Heidegger's writings is relevant to understanding Beuys may well be Beuys' insistence on the centrality of language and his prioritisation of the spoken word whilst presenting himself as a visual artist. And yet, a remarkable proportion of his visual work is speech. Tisdall notes that his performance at the Tate in 1972 was a six-and-a-half hour "blend of art, politics, personal charisma, paradox and Utopian propositions" (Tisdall 1995: 339), and this was by no means the longest of his performances. I am proposing that our clue is to be found in Beuys' utilisation of aspects of Heideggerian phenomenology and its emphasis on language, as well as some of Heidegger's ideas and themes, in an attempt to come to terms with the changes he and his generation witnessed in Germany.

Beuys was educated under the Nazi regime, fought in the war, witnessed Germany's defeat, the atrocities it committed and the guilt and responsibility arising from the Holocaust, followed by the American 'occupation'/liberation and economic recovery. Not an easy history to come to terms with, and even more difficult to respond to artistically. Strangely, if Beuys were to have produced works that simply responded to Duchamp, under the above circumstances he would have rightly been seen as conservative, probably even by Buchloh. On the other hand, if Beuys had produced works that sought to mourn those who suffered, they would have been received with equal difficulty, since in some form, he was part of the generation responsible for it all and, as such, implicated.

I am not suggesting that Beuys was a Heidegger scholar, and it is likely that his knowledge of Heidegger's philosophy was very

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sketchy, at best. I have no evidence that Beuys ever read anything by Heidegger. And yet, there is evidence that he was familiar with at least some phrases and some Heideggerian concepts, even if these were second or third hand. There is evidence that Beuys read the works of Rudolf Steiner, who edited Goethe's scientific writings and other theoretical, literary and philosophical works before outlining anthroposophy as an educational and religio-scientific theory. Though Steiner died shortly before the publication of Heidegger's major work, it is likely that his theory incorporated several early Heideggerian themes circulating at the time.

Beuys read Steiner in the 1950s and I am suggesting here that Beuys' interest in Steiner indicates a receptivity to the ideas and arguments of Heidegger which were circulating in Germany at the time. For a generation that had to come to terms with so much, Heidegger offered some form of anchor: he was German, he experienced the same difficult historical changes, he did support the Nazi party, albeit briefly, and was punished by being barred from teaching and only reinstated in the late 1950s when his works became very influential in France, Germany and beyond. Yet he never apologised for or renounced his brief encounter with National Socialism, and as such remains a politically problematic figure, even if philosophically highly influential. There is a similarity between Heidegger's evident philosophical influence – many of his students became prominent philosophers, others used his work as a springboard – and his persona and position as a philosopher in the history of philosophy, and Beuys' artistic influence and problematic reception by art history.

In 1947, Heidegger's essay "Letter on Humanism" was published in French and German, and several other essays followed during the 1950s and 1960s. There is enough textual evidence to suggest

that Beuys was familiar with at least some of Heidegger's linguistic phrases and thus probably more. Tisdall quotes Beuys from his diary and the similarity between Heidegger and Beuys' phrases suggests the artist was at least familiar with the philosopher's work. For example, he says:

The purpose of philosophy is to arrive at materialism. In other words, to move towards death: matter. In order to be able to say anything about life, one has to understand death. (Tisdall 1998: 79)

Whilst this comment in no way paraphrases or explicates Heidegger and could be seen to make references to Steiner, the choice of phrases used – beyond the reference to materialism – cannot be explained without reference to Heidegger. "Letter On Humanism" was written in response to Sartre's reference to Feuerbach's comment that "the question of whether human thought achieves objective truth is not a question of theory but a practical question" (Feuerbach cited in Heidegger 1977b: 90). This is clearly visible in the above comment, but it is also visible in the numerous references made by Beuys regarding theory and practice, in his spoken statements and his performances. But, if we are still in any doubt, the second and third sentences make unmistakable reference to the philosopher's work; the notion of 'being towards death' is a Heideggerian phrase and concept. The statement reflects Heidegger's belief that probably one of the most important aspects of human life is our awareness that we are the sort of 'being' who can also 'not be', that is to say, die. In that sense, Heidegger is sometimes also interpreted as an existentialist, on the basis of his focus on existence articulated as 'Being'. As is famously known, Heidegger distinguished 'being' from 'Being'; the former is a sort of being (man, woman, hammer, stone), the latter is existence. The theme of 'Being', though not articulated as such, is repeated in various guises in Beuys' work, such as death, birth, warmth, appearance, forgetting, language, speech,

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explanations, theory, practice. All are central themes in Heidegger's phenomenology.

Like Beuys, Heidegger suffers from the fact that it is easy to superficially interpret much of his work as mere mysticism, transcendentalism and naïve utopianism. Whilst Heidegger inspired, enabled and/or enriched important directions in philosophy, and his students went on to pursue a variety of philosophical new directions - social policy, political policy, the development of the European Union itself and much else - there remains a strong voice amongst Anglo-American philosophers that insist on interpreting Heidegger's work in terms of the mystical and transcendental.

As has become clear from the discussion so far, seeing Beuys' statements as descriptive and explanatory is not necessarily always helpful in the construction of an interpretation that reflects the importance of Beuys' artworks. We need to look for other strategies in order to achieve this. Like Beuys, Heidegger presents us with what might seem like mystical objects belonging to societies that did share in a common symbolism, societies anthropology is keen to explore. For example, in Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology", we are presented with the example of the chalice, an example Heidegger repeats in other contexts. The chalice is, of course, a religious object invested with a range of mystical meaning, including the imagery and symbolism of drinking, with all the symbolism this evokes in Western Christian culture. Heidegger utilises it in order to re-interpret Aristotle's account of causality (a fourfold causality discussed for example in Aristotle's *Physics* (Aristotle 1957: 165;/*Physics*/198a), where Aristotle offers four causes: material, form, moving force and goal or purpose. Heidegger develops Aristotle's account and offers the chalice (evoking complex

cultural concept and stable object) as an example rather than Aristotle's candle wax or perfume (which point towards less stable substances).

Heidegger's language is strange here; he seeks to make language strange so that our attention will focus on the language as well as what it communicates in order for it to allow that which is not normally visible - Being - to appear. Heidegger says:

The silversmith considers carefully and gathers together the three aforementioned ways of being responsible and indebted [material, form, goal, for the silversmith in this example is the moving force]. To consider carefully is in Greek *legein*, logos. *Legein* is rooted in *apophainesthai*, to bring forward into appearance. The silversmith is co-responsible as that from whence the sacrificial vessel's bringing forth and resting-in-self take and retain their first departure. (Heidegger 1977a: 8)

He goes on to say:

According to our example, they [four causes] are responsible for the silver chalice's lying ready before us as a sacrificial vessel. Lying before and lying ready (*hypokeisthai*) characterises the presencing of something that presences. The four ways of being responsible bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing. (Heidegger 1977a: 9)

For anybody unfamiliar with Heidegger, the above reads as strange, mystical and incomprehensible. We might be forgiven for thinking that this text belongs to a different era or some primitive society, the kind of society that the French anthropologist Marc Augé describes:

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The indigenous fantasy is that of a closed world founded once and for all long ago; one which, strictly speaking, does not have to be understood. Everything there is to know about it is already known: land, forest, springs, notable features, religious places, ... (Augé 1992: 44)

And yet, whilst Heidegger's writing may seem to belong to such a society, this is precisely what he is seeking to open up. For Heidegger, such a society is governed by metaphysics, that is to say: everything is already known and thus closed, for example, the terms 'man' or 'woman' are utilised as if they were fixed and thus have fixed social, political, economic and ethical implications. Heidegger's project is a critique of metaphysics and, as such, it seeks to open up this apparently closed system; it seeks to offer a way in which we need continuously to re-interpret the world. One of the reasons why Heidegger uses Greek terms is in order to propose an archaeology that would uncover how we came to adopt the present meaning of what we now call 'truth'; a term that for us today, he argues, functions like 'God' functioned in earlier Christian societies.

Hence, Heidegger is not seeking to determine what 'truth' is, but to open up to un-concealment as appearance. But how, Heidegger asks, "does bringing-forth happen?" This revealing happens, according to Heidegger, through art and through language. For Heidegger, 'art is the becoming and happening of truth', truth in terms of un-concealment. Moreover, he says:

Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary. Rather, the opening up of the Open, and the clearing of what is, happens only as the openness is projected, sketched out, that makes its advent in thrownness. (Heidegger 1971: 71)

For Heidegger, we are always between birth and death. As such we are forever re-interpreting our own being and the being of what appears visually in art (nature) or through language. Precisely because art can present us with objects or acts we cannot simply understand, art can help us suspend earlier conceptions and see things differently, it allows us to suspend our traditional view and consider that which otherwise we will not consider. Equally, it is precisely when language does not operate smoothly to communicate, when it is strange as such, that the medium of language as such becomes unconcealed and 'shows itself'. In other words, what shows itself is the Being of the medium. Of course, this is a simplification of Heidegger's argument, but for our purposes here it would suffice. At some level at least, this explains the strange archaic and constructed language that Heidegger utilised, and thus we can gain some understanding of Beuys' use of language.

According to Tisdall, Beuys' own version of biography merges art and life and begins with birth: "1921 Cleves: Exhibition of a wound drawn together with plaster". "Bathtub" refers directly to this event, "the wound or trauma experienced by every person" (Tisdall 1995: 349). Though Heidegger talks more about death than birth, trauma, death and birth are central to his ontological account, where he distinguishes 'Being' from non-Being (pre-birth, after death), and where he also distinguishes 'Being' from being – the former is referred to as ontology (being as such) the latter as 'ontic' where the focus is not on the existence of the being but its characteristics in space and time, its substance and its properties. Heidegger's ontological methodology focuses on the 'Being' of beings in order to re-interpret, re-think the being and what we see as its properties. The Being under interpretation is always 'me', the self: a being that requires continual interpretation of Being.

Tisdall goes on to quote Beuys' account of the "Bathtub":

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My intention with this work was to recall my point of departure [...]. It acts as a kind of autobiographical key: an object from the outer world, a solid material thing invested with energy of a spiritual nature. You could call this substance, and it is the transformation of substance that is my concern in art [...]. If creativity relates to the transformation, change and development of substance, then it can be applied to everything in the world, and is no longer restricted to art. (Tisdall 1995: 349)

Viewed through Heidegger, I think it becomes easier to see even the above comments about the “Bathtub” not simply as descriptive and explanatory, but also as an integral part of Beuys’ work. Moreover, the anthropological references and the autobiographical references now become part and parcel of an attempt at transformation, not necessarily metaphysical transformation, but opening up new possible interpretations of one’s own being and the being of other ‘substance’ or beings. Beuys goes on to talk about the fat, “lying there like a moulding or sculpting hand of the kind, which lies behind everything in the world. By this I mean creativity in the anthropological sense, not restricted to artists” (Tisdall 1995: 350). Again, seen through Heidegger, if Beuys is looking for un-concealment, his project can be seen as a less metaphysical one, and as now perhaps even approaching the possibility of coming to terms with Germany’s past and opening the door to possible mourning.

In his essay “Joseph Beuys and the After Auschwitz Sublime”, Ray describes the way in which Beuys’ uses of fat can be seen as references to the Holocaust. The melting of fat on a burner, he argues, “was a blunt allusion to the crematoria of the Holocaust”. The other material repeatedly used by Beuys is felt. As Ray suggests, “the hair of Holocaust victims was shorn and collected at

the killing centres and shipped to German-owned factories, where it was processed into felt" (Ray 2001: 63). Moreover, Ray argues, "the darker resonance of felt and fat needs to be read back into the specific deployment of these materials across the whole of Beuys' oeuvre" (Ray 2001: 64). Read through Heidegger, these references are one possible way in which appearances happen; the material, the substance, allows us to see things anew, not only ontologically, but also ontically: that is not only in relation to the Being of the being, but also to its specific properties as a being.

For Beuys and the generation that was brought up under Nazism who saw the war and witnessed the Holocaust, it was not possible to simply mourn. Something else was necessary before mourning could take place. Beuys may well have attempted to offer this through his mix of art and life, his repeated use of felt and fat, his performances and his use of spoken words as well as his statements. Read in this way, it is also possible to understand why Beuys insists that his "personal history is of interest only in so far as I have attempted to use my life and person as a tool", to bring about new appearances. Equally, Beuys' disturbing statement "every human being is an artist" can be read through Heidegger to simply mean that all human beings are capable of bringing about appearances and re-interpreting their own being in the context of other beings: and thus other beings in the network of connections and interrelations.

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