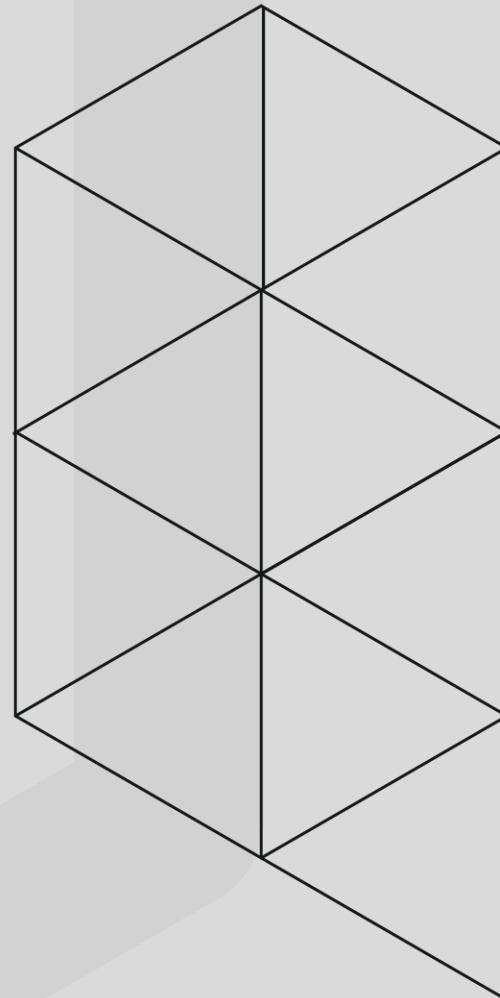


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# Aspect Change, Oscillation, Parallax, Untranslatability: Approaching Inconsistency in Joseph Beuys' Work

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# Aspect Change, Oscillation, Parallax, Untranslatability: Approaching Inconsistency in Joseph Beuys' Work

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Aspect Change, as put forward in the introduction to this publication, has intersected with art history in several exciting ways that I wish to test here, using the work of Joseph Beuys (1921-86). It is a way of approaching the world that is in the first instance visual, but has most profoundly been considered by Ludwig Wittgenstein as related to or thought through language. It is the broadest conceivable ground, therefore, on which we are asked to “compare cultural practices and vocabularies”. Seeing and describing the world partially, yet aiming at deeper understanding, has led Tine Melzer to speak of an “aha-moment”. It is James Joyce’s literature – to both Joseph Beuys and I – that has provided the most sustained investigation of the world as never completely representable and, therefore, as something that demands active engagement of readers (and ideally multiply socialized groups of readers) to make sense of the fragments presented, actively and together. It was Joyce also, in his early work, who used and theorised the aha-moment by secularizing the term epiphany. He gathered snippets of overheard conversations that were more telling about peoples’ motivations, about human life and its struggles than the speakers themselves noticed. He worked these epiphanies into his Bildungsroman entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as thresholds, moments of a character’s maturing.<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco was later, in 1963, to use Joyce’s literature, especially *Finnegans Wake*, to theorise the concept of the Open Work, first placing the emphasis on art’s necessarily active reception.<sup>2</sup>

It is also tempting to think of Wittgenstein in his Irish years as observing the tides and oscillating waves at the edges of the island as something that approximates aspect change, or let him think in this direction. This is at least what Georges Didi-Huberman appears to have done (and what I have described as “island thought” in relation to Rodney Graham’s work): Didi-Huberman let his book *Ce que nous voyons – ce qui nous regarde* begin with a page-long quotation of Joyce’s *Ulysses*,<sup>3</sup> where the writer’s alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, contemplates the water at the beach: the snot-green Irish

sea is at once an immense, life-giving force – and reminds him of the bile that his impoverished, abused and religiously fervent mother used to spit before her untimely death. Continuously approaching and retreating, the sea enables that kind of aspect change that Didi-Huberman recognises as states that are there at all times, but can only be perceived as one or the other in turn. The point that the art historian is making by quoting Joyce at the outset of his book is that contemporary art, minimalism in his case, can be viewed in similarly paradoxical, or better: oscillating, ways. Minimalist boxes are what they are (In Frank Stella's famous dictum "What you see is what you see"). When walking among them, however, they come to relate to the body, they constitute spatial partners at human scale. The aha-moment may then be that the viewers experience themselves as related, as bodies intersecting with these coffins: death as the last and final, the deepest meaning conjured in the simplest sculptural context.

Before I turn to Joseph Beuys, whose sculptural work is usually described as fitting into the minimalist / conceptualist / Fluxus aesthetic, I would like to mention another version of aspect change that has entered cultural discourse and that is also needed to handle not just the formal side of Beuys' practice, but the political one. This position or term is Slavoj Žižek's Parallax View. He sets out by describing any critical academic work in the humanities not as finding something new, but revealing what we know well in a new light, an aha-moment. Resorting to the visual figure of the Moebius strip, he describes certain coexisting elements in cultural history as unthinkable together: Walter Benjamin and Josef Stalin would be one such constellation in the development of the Marxian tradition. For Žižek, it is an illusion to be able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space – although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip. The encounter between Leninist politics and modernist art (exemplified in the fantasy of Lenin meeting Dadaists in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich) cannot structurally take place; more radically, revolutionary politics and revolutionary art move in different temporalities – although they are linked, they are two sides of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet. There is

more than a historical accident in the fact that, in matters of culture, Leninists admired great classical art, while many modernists were political conservatives.<sup>4</sup>

The last point can be confirmed in James Joyce's aesthetic preferences: he liked rather conservative furniture and music. He joins the Leninists in that sense, but some will have noticed that it wasn't the Cabaret Voltaire itself as proposed fictional meeting point of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov and the Dadaists, it is, in Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties* (1975) the Zurich City Library, where Tistan Tzara, James Joyce and Lenin meet. Stoppard's was still a world that championed multiculturalism and hybrids, an easy transition from one aspect to another, at least in the academic space of the library. Žižek and we (I will be so bold as to assume this for the moment), are in no such privileged situation. Žižek, writing in 2006, addresses a much more divided world, where comprehending untranslatability is the order of the day. Sarat Maharaj has theorised this as "perfidious fidelity" and the "untranslatability of the other", based on his own formative experience of James Joyce's works.

Žižek continues:

[...] there is no 'neutral' reality within which gaps occur, within which frames isolate domains of appearances. Every field of 'reality' (every 'world') is always-already enframed [...] The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective.<sup>5</sup>

He brings Giorgio Agamben's homo sacer into the argument, as well as the figure of the Muselmann, whose face will not be recognised as an epiphany of human features.<sup>6</sup> Žižek's readers are those who attempt to make sense of a world in which all ideals, certainly both Communism and Capitalism, have shown their capacity to perpetrate grave inhumanity. He is writing for a world in which populism claims – and he reminds us already Napoleon did – to help any and all sections of society to reach their goals, represent any and all, especially those "unrepresentables", who will not generate a stable image or aspect on that reverse side of the Moebius strip and who, Marx said, were not capable of being subsumed into the working class, thus needing to be represented. I will return to the subaltern.

If Didi-Huberman already aimed at an object tendentially without meaning and the deepest meaning at the same (oscillating) moment and Žižek exploded a reassuring symmetry of aspects, Joseph Beuys' oeuvre and person could not encompass more. A vast store of the most delicate drawings, often made up of natural substances, scents and collaged pieces; a profusion of every-day items that seemingly cannot reasonably exclude any one thing, composed into installations and vitrines that fill many rooms, e.g. in a multi-disciplinary museum like the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. Cast metal or fat; stacked frames of photos of a life- and work course; performances, discussions-cum-lecture-performances; several days with a coyote; 100 days full-time as discussant with Documenta-visitors; a media personality, who wanted to heighten the Berlin Wall by 5 cm; Green movement co-founder; educational reformist; ecological activist and and and. The felt hat and the fishing vest have at least the same recognition value as a hare-and-rabbit image, and the once dismissed Professor of Monumental Sculpture at Dusseldorf Academy is certainly in need of more than two-fold aspect change. His life and work oscillate between more than minimalist form and politics. They remain controversial and have, in his centenary year, received renewed polarising attention with the media coverage: newspapers may possibly mention that (in Anne-Marie Bonnet's words) if we had listened to Beuys (i.e. before his death in 1986), the planet wouldn't be in the ecological state of emergency now that it is. What has attracted more attention are repeated allegations of Fascism against the former Hitler Youth member and German soldier.

Among the many possible "oscillations" in his views and ways of working, I would like to isolate just a few – and then hone into some of the "untranslatabilities", attempting to posit aspect change as a core function of his work, as well as speculate at the status of the subaltern in his thinking – as something that has arguably joined James Joyce's work in pointing out paths for artistic practice after the War: 1957 to around 1960 to be precise, when he lived through a long, depressive crisis and forged a conception of his practice – and art's potential in society.

The time in which Beuys was a publicly visible artist and socio-political commentator and actor, the 1960, 70s and 80s had certain orthodoxies in the artworld and outside. The Cold War called for clear

positioning. Beuys considered both blocs as in need of overcoming. Artists left the graveyards of art, the museums and developed performances and various anti-commodification strategies. Beuys did venture beyond the white cube, but also stayed with the museum as a social space, whose conventions (such as artists' talks) he could build on (or infiltrate and hijack). He presented art that fits with a minimal aesthetic, but also retained figuration. He fought against his employer, against having to send would-be students away – and went on to found his own Free International University. As co-founder of the German Greens, he stood for election, but (disappointed at not having been placed high enough on a State-wide ticket), became disenchanted with the institutions of democracy. He supported an anti-Capitalist stance and yet, when trees for his large-scale reforestation of the once bombed city of Kassel had to be paid (7000 Oaks), he flew to Japan and made a whiskey ad. He was for direct democracy and had a habit of hogging the stage in frontal “lessons” focussed on him. It seems that at every turn, Beuys preferred the “both-and”.

Little wonder he appears inconsistent and contradictory, especially for those who cannot now place his pronouncements in historically differentiating contexts. Indeed, his pronouncements were often far from subtle, “revealing” clear meanings of individual works that, at a closer look, appear far more open, resonant and rich in layers, all to be discovered in independent thinking and engaging – if one were only to get there. Aspect change as an attitude to the work is, therefore, only to be recommended. It may even reveal Beuys' own contradictions more as potentially useful aspect change than incompatibilities. Let's try.

When addressing aspects of Beuys' status in current societal discourse, I am agreeing with the inference that answers to recurring allegations of Fascism are not to be determined by Beuys' stated intentions – if there were any. Instead, I turn to episodes from his reception and propose the term “effects”, preferring it to “influence”. In this choice, I am referring to David Hopkins' 2006 essay “Re-Thinking the ‘Duchamp-Effect’”. Using this argument, I have in the past summarised my own work on artists' responses to James Joyce's literature – with Beuys as a particular focus point – speaking of “Joyce Effects”.<sup>7</sup> Joyce's literature provided Beuys with far more than motifs: a lifeline in crisis, a “path through language” as method – and ways of dealing with (his own and German) history.<sup>8</sup> Effects are

to be understood in the plural, broadly and epistemically, not – and that seems to be at stake in many of the current commentaries – direct and instrumental.<sup>9</sup> Analytical philosophy would deny culture any social efficacy: those in the watchtowers of Auschwitz listened to Mozart after all. Of course, there can now be Beuys works in the collections of neo-Fascists: they are canonical, precious objects. Benjamin Buchloh didn't just take aim at Beuys, but also identified conceptual art, by extension, all art since the 1960s, as something that had bureaucratized.<sup>10</sup>

Escaping Beuys' seduction is not achieved, I would argue, by levelling facile accusations. In line with the both-and thinking already proffered, I propose here to take a more epistemic focus that attempts to include some lessons from decolonial aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> For Beuys, the European philosophical tradition, particularly Friedrich von Schiller, was important: an approach to effect that considers aesthetic education central (e.g. in response to the violence into which the French Revolution's high aims degraded). Thus, effect goes beyond objects, an individual's pronouncements, or personal history: what does an oeuvre do, how does it enable people to think independently and act against the fragmentations and narrowness of their time? And maybe that perspective can be visualised in the way in which Beuys explained his thinking: drawing a chaotic bundle of lines on the left and a crystalline shape on the right, which refers to rationality, and a looped line in between that has (in some versions of this much-repeated diagram) a heart shape in the middle. I am not reading this, like Western, linear thinking, just from left to right. The ideal place, non-binary and probably ultimately unreachable (at least not easily maintainable), is somewhere in the middle, but maybe that's the impossible place: that spot between rabbit and duck, where the oscillating waves break.

In attempting to address the questions of Beuys' centenary year's press coverage, I am acknowledging how important the press was for the artist: he wished to get "out of the feuilleton" and, by inference, into broader societal debates.<sup>12</sup> After what I already outlined, though, the path needs to proceed in somewhat indirect ways.

## **Silence and Engagement**

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Beuys and Joyce, who described his “war effort” as writing Ulysses, are on opposite poles concerning what one today calls “action bias”. Jacques Rancière (in Schiller’s tradition) has critiqued overtly political art for this, making art, in his view, ineffective.<sup>13</sup> Duchamp is known for his “silence”, which could be viewed as revolutionary in the context of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, who “preferred not to” act (or write) – and by extension the human right claimed by Ariella Azoulay (as an Israeli scholar and film-maker) not to be a perpetrator.<sup>14</sup> Doing “nothing” is not what Beuys chose to do. Yet, his drawings are at times nearly not there (“ultravisible”, he called it), making others work instead. And his approach certainly resonated (arguably more than Duchamp’s) with those living behind the Iron Curtain, i.e. in a dictatorial double-bind of not being allowed to say in art what needed to be said, for fear of creating incriminating evidence. Beuys’ strategy of expanding the concept of art (to include every-day activities) proved liberating.<sup>15</sup> Broadly conceptual strategies did so, too, as a piece of paper with language could be smuggled out of the Eastern Bloc better than a sculpture. But words used still had to be indirect, allegorical. Joyce’s work was also handed around and hand-copied by dissidents – and the canonical status of other un-censorable sources proved helpful (such as Schiller, or the Bible).<sup>16</sup> Who can prove that Beuys, in irreverently considering the Berlin Wall aesthetically (as too small), did not help to bring about an understanding of that structure as thought-based, constructed by humans – and thus changeable, as it happened three years after Beuys’ death? Beuys is usually taken to be an advocate of direct action.<sup>17</sup> Maybe considering, as I do here, indirect efficacy, too, and an epistemic trajectory that operates through valuing and promoting aspect change: this might add more perspectives.

Global conceptualisms developed a much more engaged, anti-dogmatic, anti-dictatorial lineage than can be appraised through iconography.<sup>18</sup> Terry Smith is correct in saying that “non-Western” artists’ claims to belong in the conceptual tradition are in many ways an attempt to become contemporary, to be part of art, which means art after Duchamp.<sup>19</sup> But Smith does not account for the conflicted, implicated nature of the contemporary (not just modernity) that decolonial scholars are highlighting.<sup>20</sup> Beuys’ resonance in the East can also be placed in the context of Anthony Gardner’s argument in relation to Thomas Hirschhorn’s practice: clearly founded in the thinking of Beuys, Hirschhorn’s work has deliberately pointed to Eastern European art, such as that by the Kabakovs, so as not to



take capitalist democracy as an uncontested assumption. Hirschhorn exceeds and critiques Beuys.<sup>21</sup> Hirschhorn's position is then – thankfully – an effect, an idiosyncratic updating of the German artist in light of developments following Beuys' death, when democracy (as in the Gulf Wars) provided a rationale for torture and killing. Beuys, one can argue, already treated both East and West as in need of overcoming. And overcoming dogma, de-idealising (as Gardner puts it) values that no longer deliver on their promises is a good way of describing the attitude that I am attempting to pinpoint in this essay's protagonists.

Beuys, e.g. at Documenta 6, 1977 (as centrally in the artworld as possible), inserts the margins: in discussion with Northern Irish artists, Shelley Sacks from South Africa and (Irish) Free International University actors, he enabled connections, a peripheral line of solidarity.<sup>22</sup> This is not too different from what bell hooks has described as the critical affordances of the margins.<sup>23</sup> However, Beuys also held forth in that Documenta 6 discussion: ready-to-be-printed certainties emanated, while allies with lived experience only got relatively little time. In current terms, toxic masculinity is not far from the behaviour of my protagonists. Hélène Cixous was nevertheless convinced that Joyce's writings can, in part, be considered as an "écriture féminine",<sup>24</sup> and I have experienced what Beuys' (institutionally and personally enabling, decolonising) legacy was in Northern Ireland: his canonical status opened doors and left the day-to-day work to empowered others. I would like to be able to square the circle and find ways of including liberating canonical work into the genealogies of decolonial thinking: never in a stable, lifeless way, of course, but as effects in solidarity.<sup>25</sup> But on the way to such a point, implicatedness does need to be addressed more fully.

## Implication

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In that Kassel discussion, 1977, Beuys also said that the overcoming of the Blocs should happen with concepts that were as simple, clear and "unified" ("einheitlich") as capitalism, apparently belying the complexities that he also saw. He pontificated on the FIU's establishment as a bricks-and-mortar institution, which then seemed in immediate reach: the tone was hopeful, but not too different from what can now be heard in neo-liberal universities (including mine). The FIU did not become a brick-and-mortar institution, but a loose

association, which in turn has provided a model for other artists to “institute” otherwise.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, something in Beuys’ conceptualisations and actions was more foresightful for those he enabled than some of his own words: he managed to change his “aspect” from traditional institution to network.

Since Beuys’ death, art has become more used to embracing (art) institutions – and using them to “institute”. Experimental institutionalism, as Charles Esche calls his “useful” museum practice,<sup>27</sup> contains clear nods to Beuys’ both-and approach to the art world: seeking out non-white-cube spaces, opting for traces and (often traumatic) memory, as well as using art infrastructures for their societal affordances. Elsewhere, noting the dearth of social practitioners, who reference Beuys, I have found in Eyal Weizman (an originally Israeli architectural theoretician from the University of London) an academic and artworld worker – with Forensic Architecture – who does consider his highly effective activism “political plastic”.<sup>28</sup> There is merit in referencing the canon (Beuys) and showing embeddedness in both the academy and the democratic, law-based state when holding dictatorial regimes (and implicitly us all) to account.

A “political plastic” could be imagined in yet another way, accounting for Beuys’ multiple, nearly shape-shifting “aspects”: in the sense of the political as agonistic presence of diverse views according to Chantal Mouffe. The constructedness of the here and now comes into view, such as the make-up of institutions, of money as a “mere” agreement between people – and of words, too. Through word play, neologism and multi-lingual creativity, such as is evident in Finnegans Wake, changes in meaning become the norm. Beuys’ origin, the Lower Rhine region, is in this sense a meeting point of several “tectonic plates”: between Dutch and German, traditionally Catholic and governed by Protestants, Celtic and Roman: peripheral. Being part of a movement to forge new meanings must have appeared as not just attainable, but a matter of course. This is how I would see Beuys’ assertion that his path had gone through language and that, according to his dictum, terms will be “corpses” within six months, if one does not feed them with new life. All of this appears to me relevant in terms of aspect change.

Returning to the implicatedness of Beuys’ practice, I must confess that I was shocked when I first read somewhere that the artist had

said in England that they (the English) had “lost the War anyway”. I had been on a pupil’s exchange in Israel and saw tattooed numbers on forearms. There were certain things one did not misrepresent. I consulted with a Beuys scholar and received a wise response: Beuys wanted to be everything to all people, including the yellow press. That wish does bring many tabu-breaking formulations with it – and ends up contradicting other aspects of his work, such as its openness. But does Beuys’ personal contact with his fellow former German soldiers e.g. constitute grounds for an analysis that he and his work are irreparably Fascist?

In interpreting his Ulysses Extension drawings, where the ideas for the sculptural competition at the site of the extermination camp at Auschwitz (1958) can be found, I have concluded that Joyce served Beuys to engage with his and his country’s recent past – in ways that draw transhistorical lines to sites of commemorating the dead from prehistoric times, such as Newgrange. By giving Irish-themed drawings to the museum in Łódź (near Auschwitz) during Martial Law, when liberation from oppression was again at stake, he strengthened this line of thought.<sup>29</sup> Beuys’ is a specific position vis-à-vis the Historikerstreit of the 1980s, where the exceptionality of the Shoah was being discussed. I have come to value the fact that Beuys did not seek to exculpate himself. It is also clear that the reception of his work in the German- and English-speaking worlds were different, bridged by Gene Ray’s research on Beuys’ work as a “project of mourning” (and my own work).<sup>30</sup> Some who witnessed the War were certainly of the opinion that the oeuvre was too close to their experiences, such as seeing the tumulus of Basalt columns for 7000 Oaks, from 1982, in the very place in Kassel, where charred corpses had been piled up after nights of bombings.<sup>31</sup>

This (all well established in the Beuys literature) does not, however, mean that his work does not continue to be re-thought and that subsequent generations cannot come to different conclusions. With a view to recent post- and decolonial work, one of the most important displays of Beuys’ work at Museum Schloss Moyland might deserve a second look. Moyland castle (as can be inferred from the historical display in its basement) has been built with wealth amassed from Dutch colonialism, i.e. exploitation, including enslavement. The castle is attractive: a fairy tale. In the mid-1990s, white marble was considered appropriate for all floors. With its Classical allusions and aspirational connotations of wealth, this is a choice that stresses an

iconography of power and money, which, to me, clashes with the Beuys works displayed there. The artist has developed an aesthetic, paralleling Arte Povera in the 1960s, which critiqued the economic miracle years' amnesia. It is also possible that the manner of display (also elsewhere and with enhanced security features, necessitated by higher insurance values) lets "Beuys" appear differently today: the objects programmatically connect to spaces beyond them, eradicating separations. They are thus open to incorporating unsuitable (at least philosophically incoherent) interventions: this is an effect to be taken seriously, too.

The fairy-tale castle can, indeed, resonate with the "mythical" aspects of Beuys' universe. The artist was not only interested in Nordic myths, but also in Greek and others. What is the politics of referring to Ancient stories then? In current cultural discourse, larger historical lines, rather than teleological histories have more to do with ecological and Anthropocene-directed thinking in connections than with Fascist appropriation. There should be vigilance, though. Myths and symbols need to be selected carefully: Beuys' drawings show an interest in e.g. Celtic crosses, because a peaceful merging of Christianity and pagan rituals can be found there. His intellectual allegiance, when it came to Ireland, was with the irreverent Joyce, not with those who had used Irish mythology as a liberating force from British colonialism, only to render it static and oppressive in the new State's Catholic orthodoxy. Until recently, the "leader of the free world" profited himself as an Anti-Anti-Fascist. Beuys could hardly be found to resemble him – other than in the use of at times tabu-breaking statements: shock in itself, however, also doesn't mean just one thing. Rattling loose dearly held habits of thinking, it can be used for both oppressive and liberating ends – and have both intended and unintended outcomes. Learning to interrogate (fact-check) and coping with changes of "aspect", with complexity might be among the desirable effects.

### **Complexity, Word and Image**

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Maybe the simplicity and coherence of narratives for which Beuys pleaded in the discussion at Documenta 6 is just not to be found, especially between what I called tectonic plates: while the realisation in Germany has grown that Fascism was enabled by, indeed grew out of, Imperialism, Dutch neighbours have thus far comparatively

rather opted to retain their pride in colonial exploits and simplistic assertions of “the Germans” having been at fault, while their statistics of how few Jews survived are the worst in Europe (only ¼). In recent times, “Beuys” side of the Historikerstreit appears to have won: it does appear respectful to victims to investigate connections between dehumanising practices, caste thinking and their legacies in all forms<sup>33</sup>. Perpetrator studies now feature strongly: obviously not to exculpate perpetrators, but, to prevent reoccurrence. It is, therefore, welcome to study Beuys’s War-time role, but it is also apposite that people, whose insights have evolved, share their learning. To suggest that Beuys should not have met with former fellow soldiers would imply that there can be no progressive insight, nor emerging from histories of dehumanisation: no societal change, just statically good and bad – with a focus on “who”, rabbit or duck, not “what”. That is, I hope, not what commentators want.

It is easy to highlight how we are all – and all differently – collectively blind (myself of course included); how “tolerance” and other virtues can be claimed steadfastly, yet turn out to be their opposite. Myth can be both liberating and oppressive, and “enlightenment” paved the way for colonialism’s dehumanisation. “Democracy” has been used for less than benign ends, as already mentioned. Beuys still thought he could better that by supporting direct democracy. Hirschhorn has, however, included this concept among those to be re-thought – as an effect partially of Beuys’ thinking: this time apparently against Beuys’ expressly stated aims. It is, in my view, precisely what Beuys would have wanted: terms need to stay “alive”, agile in terms of aspect change, be tested, mean something. When commentators now thus ask if Beuys was an “enlightening” or “mythical” force,<sup>34</sup> a necessarily impolite answer might be to point to the un-reflected, binary, positivist use of these terms, which appear to have become “corpses”. A preference for the instability of meaning, the need for keeping something (like anti-Fascism) alive, seems to be (always) new and scary, but is already prepared in the earlier 20th century with Joyce, or Beuys: those who share an interest in constructed and contextually shifting concepts, in words and images – as well as a corresponding impetus not to package things in the neat categories of modernity, but see the world (including us onlookers-cum-actors) as in motion and connected.

## **Overcoming Fragmentation**

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I wish to give just one example of how Beuys has indirectly (which is stringent in this context) led to advanced problem-analysis and academic and artistic exchange: *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy*, 1990. Louwrien Wijers' social practice has taken its cue from Beuys, whom she interviewed at length.<sup>35</sup> He suggested she ask the same systemically focused questions of Andy Warhol. He in turn recommended the Dalai Lama, who also agreed and met Beuys at her instigation. She organised panel discussions with many scientists, spiritual leaders and artists in Amsterdam, 1990.

Their analysis and recommendations at that moment of historical change were remarkably aligned, in keeping with Beuys' vision – and are still foresightful. Paraphrasing theoretical physicist David Bohm: fragmentation is the problem. Human thought claims not to affect anything and just to explain. By contrast, it is thought that has led to certain behaviours and problems, such as pollution, which we then, separately, try to solve. Ecology is not the problem: it's our (positivist) thinking. Bohm (mirroring Beuys' and Joyce's etymological interests) also insists that older meanings of terms are helpful to reach back beyond extractive and exploitative thought (since the "enlightened" Francis Bacon): e.g. "economy" literally means "household": the earth is a household and we're all one. We should behave that way. Such wise analyses are what enables the future – partly as art's indirect effects.

### **Re-Reading for Liberating Effect**

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On one level, it does not matter whether this is original thought, or creatively re-discovered life of a term or concept in one's own realm of experience; whether some dead, white male is associated with something or not: effects in discourse exceed this singularity. At the same time, though, what Shannon Jackson says about social (art) practice projects holds true: they need to jump scale.<sup>36</sup> What is meaningful for a community then also needs to be written about to reach further into the future – and for this, a name, a genealogy, specific references and iconographies will matter. Decolonial thought's tendency to discard anything that is canonical brings its own problems with it, I think. While canonical practices are, indeed, likely to (have) be(en) used to preserve a violent status quo and

canonicity stands for petrified, lifeless concepts, a canon of liberating thoughts to be re-read and kept alive may open up avenues of solidarity – and may make responses to the specifics of decolonial thinking (also now canonical) more careful, too.<sup>37</sup>

In this regard, I cannot help but turn to Beuys' library as a site for re-reading: his store of references and genealogies. It remains to be researched systematically, but could for many be part of an "emergency library", as Hirschhorn has called a work of his, in which Beuys features. Without Beuys' library, the effects of his thinking appear somewhat removed from the ground as which he developed it. As an art historian and with the current epistemological focus, I wonder how one could "curate" it. Maybe like another creative, systemic thinker's library: Aby Warburg's books were arranged from Alchemy to Chemistry etc., according to epistemological belief, with a clear correspondence to the diagram with which Beuys explained his conception of art. In Warburg's case, this arrangement was also with an eye to – or heart for – the precarious balancing of the chaotic pole (prejudices, magic) and a scientific, rational ideal. He knew that magical thinking spells danger for potential scapegoats, such as artists, Jews and others in the margins.<sup>38</sup>

Beuys' library could be a wonderful starting point for an interdisciplinary conversation about how the artist managed to "aspect change", to anticipate so many of our only now current concerns, from a basic income to rethinking democracy, open borders, bees and the ecological emergency in general – while assuming, of course, that he did not engage in "copying" or "influence", but let effects emerge. It demands a multi-disciplinary team to identify which positions might have a similar status in current discourse to the ones gathered in Beuys' time by the artist and his wife, an educator. Art(ist) researchers and others, gathering to consider such literature would be enabled – in turn enabling – to think and act further, to effect.

Education (I am implying with reference to the library) clearly plays a major role in leading people to change their thinking and "aspects". The epiphany element to what we are talking about, however, makes "education" unpredictable, contingent on chance and random, experience-induced epistemic maturing. The FIU and Beuys' teaching as a whole are, therefore, an interesting element of considering this case study in the current light. Beuys stressed the



reversibility of the student/teacher relationship, but (as a product of his generation and upbringing) did not, however, fully overcome the thinking in categories of “developing” and “democratizing” those not as yet convinced of his views. Education is also a colonial impetus – hence the inconsistencies and voids here explored.

Let me – to conclude – try to return to the subaltern and propose a link of Beuys’ work to it that has, to my knowledge, not been offered before. The “uncivilizable”, those who cannot be subsumed in class or other categories, those who have aroused Napoleon’s and Marx’s wish (violently) to represent them – and yet who are unrepresentable, i.e. resolutely appear on the other side of aspect change as a scarily void counterpoint of all that is dear and clear to “us”. David Lloyd has asked the question why Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s negative answer to the question whether the subaltern can speak has provoked (and continues to provoke) such visceral reactions from intellectuals, rage or moral outrage. It, of course, has to do with the academic’s assumption that we can account for everything, that our understanding remains outside of nothing.

There are certain conditions that promote aha-moments. Aspect change, especially in the account of Didi-Huberman that I have offered, often has to do with death. Beuys’ war experience involved severe head trauma, bitter cold, the need to burrow oneself into the ground (like a hare), and encouraged advanced knowledge of animals and plants: an attention to the base matter of nature, life and death. There is no doubt that he was near death repeatedly. Under conditions that saw clearly established enemy lines, dogmatic certainty of good and bad, clear and draconically enforced orders and prohibitions, he also encountered Tartars: these nomadic people were not subsumable in either friend or enemy, black or white scheme of the War; they literally could not be pinned down according to any state administration – and they knew how to survive. Beuys’ famous plane-crash, we know, did not involve an extended stay in a yurt, but round, felt-covered spaces that dampen sound, light and cold are, as has been researched, far more conducive to healing a traumatised mind and body than the usual plastic Red Cross tent in today’s refugee camps.<sup>39</sup> One can sense from Beuys’ work, such as the late installation *Plight*, that an encounter happened, however briefly. He did meet the subaltern, at least on an affective and material level. What extent of fictionalization this entailed, then may be relatively unimportant.



Instead of an iconographic or biographic “identification”, what I do want to take away from this encounter, however, is the trace of an aha-moment, revealing a fertile void, an unrepresentability. Beuys hinted that felt (an organic substance made from animal hair) has all colours encompassed in its greyness, that it is the opposite of what it appears as in its dead, biological materiality. Beyond the language games fat/felt / Filz/felt that established the sculptural materials in the oeuvre through drawings and writing in the Ulysses-Extension (1958-62),<sup>40</sup> it is the presence of the material itself that speaks – and arguably in a life-affirming way. Beuys may present it (“to hold up on show” is the translation of the Greek word *epiphanein*), but he doesn’t “represent” it. While its primary material meaning (Beuys preferred the term *epiphany* over *symbol*) is clear, the substance is also just there in its unexplained opacity (to use this term more in Edouard Glissant’s than an art historical way). It is what it is – and simultaneously, in oscillating movement, untranslatable, on the other side of the Moebius strip, it is and remains (whether we want to bear it like Beuys insisted we do through his oeuvre or not) the necessarily inconsistent, paradoxical, the abject other, the void, the irreducible: the aspect of life through death.

## Notes

1. Joyce A Portrait #. This chapter is based, especially in its Beuysian parts on: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, “Future-Oriented Systemic Thinking: Effects of Beuys, Duchamp, Joyce, O’Doherty ... Yours and Mine” in *Beuys & Duchamp: Artists of the Future*, eds. Magdalena Holzhey, Katharina Neuburger, Kornelia Röder ( Exhib.Cat. 8 October 2021-6 Jan 2022, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum Krefeld, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2021), 354-368.
2. In English and devoid of the Joycean part: Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, without place 1989
3. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Was wir sehen blickt uns an: Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*. Markus Sedlaczek, trans. Markus Sedlaczek (Munich: Bild und Text, 1999).
4. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 4.

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5. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 29.
6. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 113
7. C.M.K.E Lerm-Hayes, "'The Joyce Effect': Joyce in the Visual Arts" in *A Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Richard Brown (Malden: Oxford Press, 2007), 318-340.
8. C.M.K.E Lerm-Hayes, "I will re-create Finnegans Wake anyway, Beuys reads Joyce", in *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 17/1 (Fall 2018) 152-180; C.M.K.E Lerm-Hayes, *Post-War Germany and 'Objective Chance': W.G. Sebald, Joseph Beuys and Tacita Dean* (Steidl: Göttingen, 2008); C.M.K.E Lerm-Hayes, *James Joyce als Inspirationsquelle für Joseph Beuys*. (Hildesheim, et al., 2001).
9. As one of the more nuanced voices: Miklas Maak, "Der deutscheste Künstler der Deutschen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.  
[https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/das-joseph-beuys-jahr-hat-begonnen-17194301.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex\\_6](https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/das-joseph-beuys-jahr-hat-begonnen-17194301.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_6) (accessed 15 April 2021)
10. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration", 105-143.
11. Vazquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the end of the contemporary*.
12. Rhea Thönges-Stringaris, *Conversation with the author*, Kassel 2012.
13. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*
14. Van Gelder, "Engaged Visual Art as a Tool for Normative Renewal in International Human Rights: The Case of Arielle Azoulay's Potential History", 461-475.
15. Blume, "Joseph Beuys and the GDR: The Individual as Political".
16. Lerm-Hayes, "Notes on Activist Practices", 332-351.

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17. van den Berg. The Art of Direct Action.
18. See the book in which Lerm Hayes, "Notes on Activist Practices" appeared as a whole: Conceptualism - Intersectional Readings, International Framings: Situating 'Black Artists & Modernism' in Europe.
19. Smith, "One and Three Ideas", 1-17.
20. Vazquez, "Vistas of Modernity".
21. Anthony Gardner, "De-idealizing Democracy".
22. Rainer Pagel's recording of the Migration Workshop, Documenta 6, 1977.
23. hooks, bell, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness".
24. Cixous, The Exile of James Joyce.
25. In addition to my argument in "Notes on Activist Practices", I find Gardner a helpful ally: "by retracing and reengaging prior cultural histories that still have a symbolic authority, and that may spark other ways to imagine art's politics in the supposed aftermath not just of European communism but of socialism internationally," Gardner, "De-idealizing Democracy", p. 61, – maybe even in the context of decolonising thought more broadly?
26. Lerm Hayes, "Beuys's Legacy". See the focus of BAK, Utrecht, on "Propositions for Non-Fascist Living": <https://www.bakonline.org/long-term-project/propositions-for-non-fascist-living/> and "instituting otherwise".
27. Esche, "The Demodernizing Possibility," 212-221.
28. Weizman and Lopez, "Political Plastic," 310-313.
29. Incidentally, these works were shown in Warsaw, when the discussions that enabled 1989 to happen took place. This was one of the points that an exhibition made, which I curated (Golden Thread

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Gallery, Belfast, January 2014): Equilibrium? Royden Rabinowitch:  
Historical Turning Points and Artists' Solidarity.

30. Ray, "Mourning and Cosmopolitics," 22-48.
31. Lerm Hayes, "Post-War Germany".
32. See exhib. cat. Zeichen und Mythen: Orte der Entfaltung. I thank Antje von Graevenitz for her many suggestions. She is making this point in an interview prepared for 12 May 2021 in Der Tagesspiegel.
33. I recommend: Wilkerson, Caste.
34. Maak, "Der deutscheste Künstler der Deutschen."
35. Wijers, Writing as Sculpture. See also:  
<https://aihr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2021/04/art-meets-science.html>
36. Jackson, "Choreographing Infrastructure".
37. Jackson, "Choreographing Infrastructure"; Lerm Hayes, "Notes on Activist Practices"; Gardner: "Underpinning this assertion of resistance, then, is a logic of remobilization: [...]. This has sometimes played out as a critical reevaluation, as with the work of Beuys and Klein, whose utopian idealisms were framed as defeated, [or] implicated within the mantras and trajectories of Democratization that Hirschhorn sought to de-idealize." Gardner, "De-idealizing Democracy," 57-58.
38. Lerm-Hayes, "Das Jüdische Erbe in Aby Warburg," 141-169.
39. I am referring to PhD research by Grazyna Sander, University of Ulster Belfast 2013.
40. See: Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, "'I will re-create Finnegans Wake anyway', Beuys reads Joyce," 152-180.

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