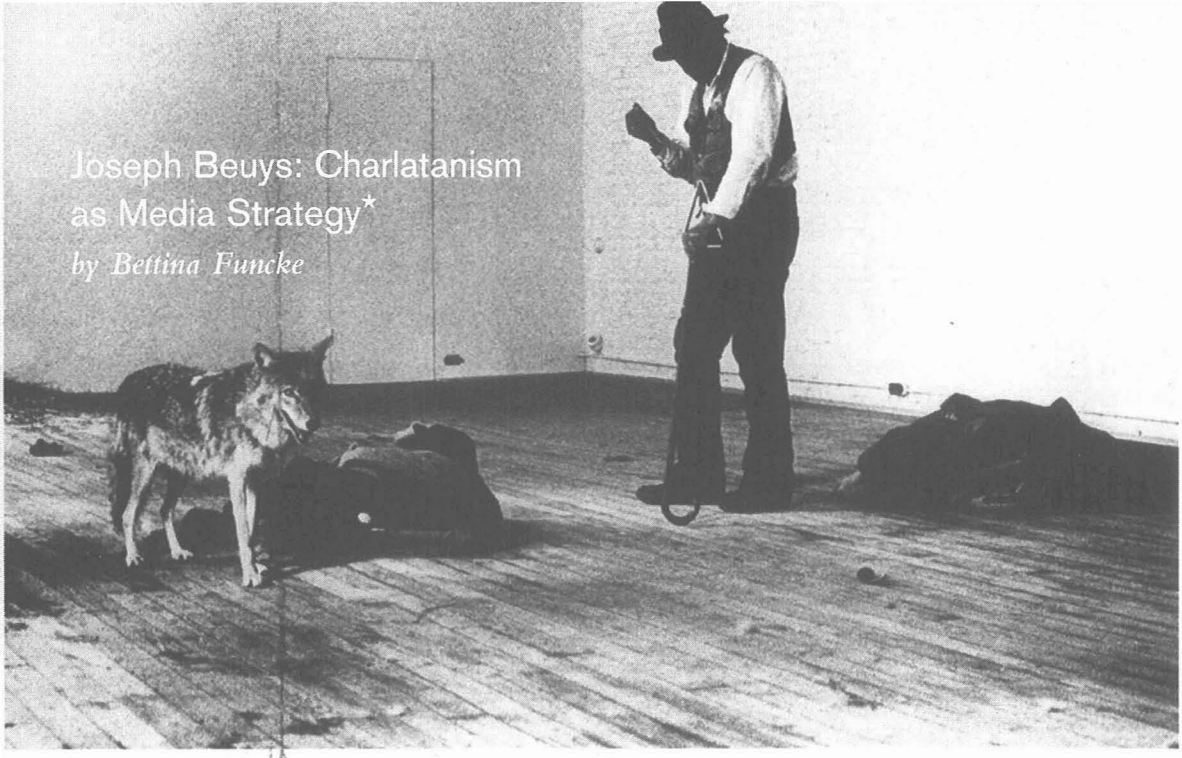
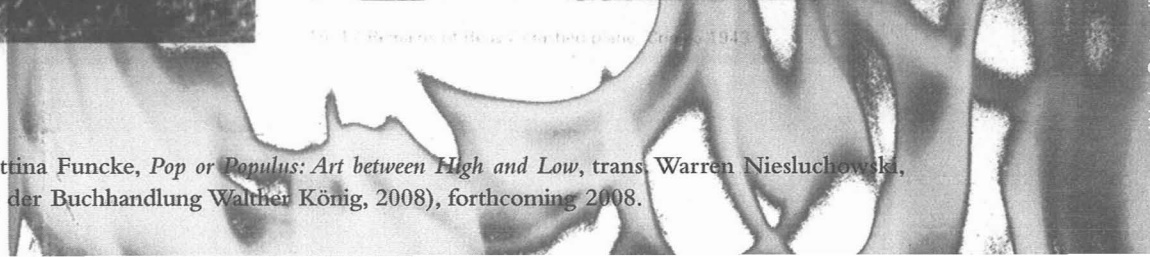
Joseph Beuys: Charlatanism as Media Strategy*

by Bettina Funcke





*Excerpt from Bettina Funcke, *Pop or Populus: Art between High and Low*, trans. Warren Niesluchowski, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008), forthcoming 2008.

I would like to consciously maintain this, as long as it is possible: to play again and again this role and to be everything what is said about me. — *Joseph Beuys*

However large or small, a public must be invented, since one can never assume it already exists. An audience potentially already exists, but one needs to capture its attention. So, one addresses somebody or takes part in an existing debate, reaching out to be heard or seen, or one uses mass media to contact the broader anonymous and heterogeneous public beyond one's physical reach. For artists who enter television and expose themselves as personae,[1] the insurmountable asymmetry between one who speaks or acts—shows one's face publicly, as it were—and a public that cannot be looked in the face, at least figuratively speaking, may produce a "laughing back" that fluctuates somewhere between insecurity, self-reflection, and self-recognition.

The question of how to create a relationship with the public that could go beyond a shared definition of beauty was a central aspect of the project of *soziale Plastik* or "social sculpture," developed by Joseph Beuys, an artist who, throughout his career, was well aware of the asymmetries involved in artists' exposure to broad public reception. The performative "actions" on which his provocative persona was largely based arguably constitute the most significant part of his oeuvre. Still, it is essentially their remains that make up what we see in contemporary museums, once-animated leftovers from his actions, performances, and environments. While carefully preserved as original *objets d'art*, many of these installations, which are often more like landscapes, originally functioned as stages on which the sculptures and other objects were actually used as props, and what are presented today as drawings and diagrams (often on blackboards, to which the chalk was later spray-fixed for longevity by Beuys) originated as sketches and notes during the actions or their preparation. The actions combined elements from various discourses—preaching, performance, or exposition—and encompassed topics ranging from political activism to the visual arts. In the actions, Beuys became a talking medium who assumed, in turn, roles of teacher, shaman, activist, and priest, ever ready for discussion and debate, but one who plays the lead, a star for whom appearing live before a public is the central role. He represents the passage from priest to master of ceremonies for the age of the masses, responding to a historical development Peter Sloterdijk has described as the moment of "birth of the mass politician as show-master and creator of consensus."[2]

Brimming with terminology from religion, science, and socialism, Beuys's variegated positions on the whole now sound rather programmatic, a deliberate strategy of pose, just like the calculated construction and design of his appearance (the hat, vest, and stick, his iconic use of certain materials like felt and fat) and his stock of catch-phrases—"Everybody is an artist" (1975); "Pour changer l'art il faut changer l'homme" (Brussels, 1975); "The Office for Direct Democracy" (Düsseldorf, 1971; Naples, 1971; Kassel, 1972), to cite only a few. It all seems like a kind of armour or uniform, one that carried him and his work through the decades. At the same time, there is something a bit off in his masquerade, something common and not quite pulled off, as if Beuys were playing an itinerant salesman, or making a travesty of the hero or cult figure, possibly even of the Führer. But this oscillation, which also shifts between ongoing debates within the cultural archive engaging with the history of artists' self-presentation and exposure, and a larger debate as to whether art is a construction super-ordinate to everyday life, or a meta-position encompassing both the visionary and the illusory, is intentional and deployed in a deliberately dialectical manner. In the end, Beuys succeeded in discerning and reaching the public he sought, far beyond the art world, far beyond local, even national borders.

Mythologies: Benjamin Buchloh and Joseph Beuys

On the occasion of Joseph Beuys's 1979 Guggenheim retrospective, German émigré art critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh published his notoriously polemical article "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol: Preliminary Notes for a Critique." It opens with a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner,* in which the philosopher portrays the German public as grateful to have been deceived in their reception of Richard Wagner. Buchloh goes on to describe what he sees as a similar relationship between Beuys and his public:

> No other artist (with the possible exception of Andy Warhol, who certainly generated a totally different kind of myth) managed—and probably never intended—to puzzle and scandalize his primarily bourgeois art audience to the extent that he would become a figure of worship. No other artist also tried and succeeded so systematically in aligning himself at a given time with esthetic and political currents, absorbing them into his myth and work and thereby neutralizing and aestheticizing them.[3]

Buchloh describes Beuys as what one might call the artist-charlatan, a role through which he was able to reach his very broad audience. His conclusion, however, that Beuys was somehow exploiting cultural discourse for the sake of self-mythologizing, posited as a betrayal of art itself, is less compelling. One of Beuys's unique achievements was to invent his public, to understand and use it. In his work, Beuys directly engages that public's suspicion that artists may indeed be charlatans, and art mere dissimulation and illusion. Beuys responds to this double-edged ambivalence on the part of the public by performing his art as both convention and deception, exploring and allowing aspects of everything that might be negative, untrustworthy, or suspect. But positive elements like hope, coherency of meaning, or communal responsibility are ever-present in his art. Beuys continuously shifts from a political perspective to an aesthetic one and back again, as if the two cannot be fundamentally distinguished. Buchloh disparages the mythical nature of Beuys's public persona, as well as his fluctuation between the mythological and the political. Although Beuys's attitude is indeed an aestheticizing one, in what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate that this does not lead to neutralization, but results instead in flexibility, an ambiguity perpetually lacking resolution. Engaging this work, however, requires moving between skeptical distance and intimacy, even sincerity.

This shifting approach was masterfully formulated by Søren Kierkegaard in "The Papers of the Aesthete: The Diary of a Seducer," the first volume of *Either/Or*, his first published work.[4] Kierkegaard wrote his books under the shelter of various pseudonyms; *Either/Or* was published under the name Viktor Eremita, which might be translated as "triumphant recluse," perhaps an authorial antecedent of Nietzsche's hermit Zarathustra. This work was composed in an era when the profound, the extraordinary, and the mythic were being transformed into the transparent and enlightened, and thus banal. Industrialization was leaving its first traces: a modern life that itself seemed mass-produced, serial and shallow. It was at this moment that Kierkegaard applied his radical skepticism to observation of the trivial (or, more precisely, the trivialized) and produced, as a companion to this infinite banality, an infinity of suspicion that, beyond the banal, lay hidden profundity.[5] Here, too, the attitude is an aestheticizing one, but in no way neutralizing, for it has the power to move the observed object—and the observer herself—from comfortably firm foundations, calling for a potentially limitless variety of perspectives, a movement that hints at the philosophical deconstructivism to emerge only a century later.

A central idea in Kierkegaard's philosophy is the existential leap, an inner act of decision. It does not put an end to doubt, but manifests and emerges from it, arising from a suspicion that behind banality may lie the extraordinary. For Beuys, the marking of this leap into self-affirmation is achieved through masking. Thus, appearing in the hat and vest he wore at all times is at once a form of reassurance and a negation, an "overcoming" of the self through the uniform. This led to a double-edged self-revelation or exposure, hovering somewhere between charlatanry and shamanism. In his public work, for example, he addressed both the real (the planting of trees as political action, for example) and the mystical (as with his shamanistic syntax of energies and alchemy), on the implicit assumption that each was always and already contained in the other.

This self-mythologizing, the construction of a public persona, was not developed out of ignorance or of ignoring of other artists' positions, as Buchloh seemed to think. On the contrary, it grew out of a precise observation of the artistic field and its historical evolution, out of Beuys's recognition of a culture increasingly based on mediation through television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. He was seeking a position not yet occupied, one that would be socially relevant, yet from which he could also further the development of art itself. His early professional development, beginning in the late 1950s, was marked by the struggle with the momentum, waning though it may have been, of the narcissistic ego of the abstract expressionist epitomized by the specter of Jackson Pollock, and with the absurdist performativity of Fluxus as well as the nascent challenge to authorship by pop art and the early works of the Nouveaux Réalistes.

Beuys's search for that unclaimed position would end not only in embracing that larger public he was so magically able to draw, but, even in his lifetime, in extending his presence over numerous disciplines, professions, generations, and social classes. His wish to achieve both a popular and historically relevant position in the art of the twentieth century, was in keeping with the tradition of precursors like Charles Baudelaire or Salvador Dalí,[6] but it was also marked by the experience of Hitler and Stalin, and their historical manipulation of the masses. Many who experienced Beuys's live performance report a "magical presence" and "radiantly glowing" charisma, a vocabulary similar to that used by witnesses of Hitler's public speeches. But even the also magically charged appearances of the latter seem to have turned on an unresolved oscillation, in this case between the confirmation of widespread expectations that he had

bold and lucid plans for redeeming Germany, and his need for reassurance—perhaps from some self-knowledge that he was also just an Austrian petit-bourgeois artist who failed to be accepted at the art academy in Vienna—in order to mask his self-doubt. Though Buchloh finds fault with Beuys for anointing himself the "Stag *[Hirsch]-Führer* [Leader]," which might be interpreted as aligning the artist too dangerously close to Hitler, at least in his choice of words, it should be pointed out that in light of Beuys's particular private syntax, this term should be read more with regard to the figure of the stag in Eurasian myth.[7] The uniqueness of Beuys's position, along with the unique historical grounding that insured a continuity of cultural discourse in the years following World War II, secured the artist's inclusion in the cultural archive, as well as a voice in the social and political debates of the last thirty years.

The distinctive and pervasive influence Beuys enjoys is rarely seen within contemporary art, whose commentary on the contemporary usually takes place within a small circle of specialists. To create an issue for public debate or generate an entire emotional climate is usually the strength of an overarchingly present mass culture. But for Beuys, it was clear that political content in art unfurls by diffusion into a larger framework and to the extent that it is capable of disrupting the consensus of modes of experience or perception. What mattered to Beuys was establishing new ways of telling stories and histories, finding new forms of visibility, and making them part of the politically possible. Hence, he reverses the usual formulation of the problematic relation between art and politics, demanding instead that various political formulations, propositions, and representations that originated in the realm of art be taken up by politics, and not the other way around.

A Broader Notion of Art and the Broader Public

Beuys took on, in his words, "all institutions that inform or should inform people, namely schools, universities, particularly the media, and mainly television."[8] Through his involvement in the realms of politics and education, areas that in Europe (also to a large degree, though perhaps more indirectly, in the United States) are normally controlled by the state, he was able to intervene in the cultural mechanisms that form that state. In 1961, he began teaching at the art academy in Düsseldorf, where he became known as one of the most charismatic, controversial, and influential teachers of the 1960s and '70s. In 1972, he was fired for his support of radical student activity, among other reasons, although he was later rehired. He remained politically active, standing up for environmental causes and leftist groups that shared his commitment to a socialist alternative, including the Deutsche Studentenpartei (German Student Party, 1967), the Organisation für Direkte Demokratie (Organization for Direct Democracy, 1971), the Aktionsgemeinschaft unabhängiger Deutscher (Active Community of Independent Germans, 1976), and the Organization for the Renewal of Italian Agrarian Culture (1978). He was a co-founder of the Green Party, the association for which he is probably best known. His embrace of an extended notion of art in his "social sculpture" inevitably led to an engagement with the political and the pedagogical, significantly both spaces of manipulation, and with other systems, including religion, socialism, and science, all territories that served him in his attempt to mark society in the most diverse fashion possible.

No artist had ever managed to achieve such social presence and influence, with the exception of Andy Warhol, who was in the same years pursuing his related, though more distinctively American, project. It is telling that in his article, Buchloh mentions Warhol alongside Beuys, who himself had observed the connection: "He is in a way my brother, even if he works with a radically different method."[9] Both The Ideal Academy, which Beuys created within the Düsseldorf art academy, and Warhol's Factory were hybrid spaces of art, production, and pedagogy, artist-invented social structures that deserve closer analysis in their own right.

Like Warhol, Beuys was a proponent of the notion that the most affirmative artist produces the greatest success with the broadest audience, for he affirms the public's latent suspicion of art as well as their hopes, thus meeting all their expectations. At the same time, however, he does not neglect the more specialized dialogue art carries with itself, a double strategy that both Beuys and Warhol continued to develop in different cultural milieus. These two artists can be considered the outstanding pair of post-War artists in the West. Through their work, and the personality cults around them, they managed not only to provide reflection and commentary on society, but to achieve genuine social influence during their lifetimes. In the late twentieth century, such a mediated artist-persona still seems the only form through which one can reach beyond one's own small circle and play a meaningful public role in society, as it had been with the figure of the poet in the nineteenth century and for artists at the beginning of modernity. It is worth noting that both artists' positions resonated with

the more socialist tendencies emerging in the progressive culture of the time. In Beuys's phrase "everybody is an artist," and Warhol's "all the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good,"[10] one hears the voice of that decade, its demands for equality and equal rights—if only in form of the right to be represented—through overcoming social or political oppression. Those beliefs can be observed in the general atmosphere of the era, too, from student revolts and calls to "Make Love not War," to landmark '60s texts like Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* and *War and Peace in the Global Village*; from burgeoning Marxist groups in universities to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.

In his book *Unter Verdacht: Eine Phänomenologie der Medien (Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media)*, Boris Groys, also developing a description of the artist as swindler, puts forth the theoretical figure of suspicion as the elusive but ever-present force that impels the archive, that is, high culture:

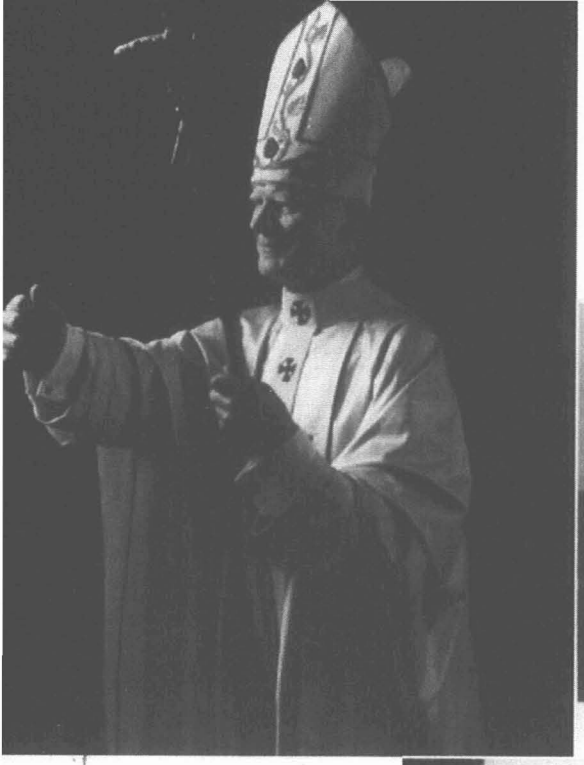
> Anti-modernist propaganda, which has forever represented the modern artist as swindler and manipulator, a fake magician, has simply turned to its own advantage an insight the artist himself conferred on the viewing public. The modern artist, incidentally, only became truly popular as he was coming to be represented as a swindler and manipulator in the mirror of anti-modernist texts... Without a widespread desire to get closer to these great spirits, or even to become co-equal with them, modern art could have never reached its degree of social success. [11]

Maurizio Cattelan is among the more successful examples of the charlatan or trickster artist in more recent contemporary art. He may play on mystical clichés, but makes no demands. Over the last several years, very much in the tradition of Warhol and Beuys, Cattelan has managed to create work that embodies the tension between cultural permanence and mass marketing. His personal debt to Beuys is reflected in *La rivoluzione siamo noi (We Are the Revolution)*, 2000, a title he borrowed from a work by Beuys, produced for a solo exhibition at Zurich's Migros Museum for Contemporary Art. The museum's spacious exhibition hall was left virtually empty. Only in the furthest corner did the viewer encounter a puppet-like figure representing the artist, clothed in a felt suit à la Beuys and suspended from the single hanger on a clothing rack, flaunting a brash or diabolical smile, yet ultimately lonely and helpless in the merciless, demanding spaces of high art.

Cattelan's most successful work to date may be the figure of the fallen pope of *La Nona Ora (The Ninth Hour)*, 1999, a work that directly addresses the many layers of meaning behind an image. Tellingly, this life-sized replica of Pope John Paul II was modelled on a Hiroshi Sugimoto photograph of a waxwork figure of the pope, that is, a representation of a representation of the spiritual leader. In Cattelan's absurd scenario, a meteorite has hurtled through the skylight of the Kunsthalle Basel, knocking the astoundingly realistic effigy of the pontiff, still holding onto his crozier for support, to the ground. The work caused an international sensation, even appearing on the cover of a Latin American newspaper, but turned out to be a particularly effective means of sparking a broader debate around Cattalan in the media, something the artist has actively encouraged by spreading rumors around his artworks. In this vein, he created a 2003 replica of the gigantic Hollywood sign in Los Angeles, which he sited overlooking a dump in Palermo, Sicily (he timed the inauguration of this piece to coincide with the opening of the Venice Biennale, from where he spirited about fifty members of the art world elite in a chartered jet.), or the hyper-realistically designed effigies of hanged children exhibited on a piazza in the centre of Milan. All of these enjoyed a lasting life in the media. *La Nona Ora* catapulted Cattelan's oeuvre to a new level in the art world: the market confirmed, or perhaps instigated, his success when in 2001 one of the two editions of the pope was auctioned for the record price of US$886,000 (which, by 2004 had nearly quadrupled). In the meantime, an installation of this provocative depiction of the Polish Pope in Warsaw's Zacheta Gallery resulted in a public furor and ended in the resignation of Anda Rottenberg, the museum's director, who refused to remove the work even after protests by members of parliament from a Catholic nationalist party, two of whom had visited the exhibition and attempted to succor the pope by picking him up from the ground. Commented Cattelan: "I prefer to be attacked to being ignored," a sentiment one could imagine Beuys sharing.

Shaman—Showman

What artists reveal as art, and as their context for art, is equivalent to what they conceal. Alighiero Boetti was another artist who cultivated the assumption that contemporary art depends on a dialectic of revealing and concealing, a tradition of older cultural practices enveloped in somewhat mystical properties.



4 *Joseph Beuys after a forced landing in the Crimea in 1943*

Shaman–Showman is the title of a 1968 photomontage in which Boetti inserted his own face into an image appropriated from Eliphas Lévi's *History of Magic*. It shows the body of primal man emerging from the divine waters of Creation fully entwined with his own reflection, onto which he is gently blowing. Around the same time, the artist mailed fifty postcards to friends and acquaintances, showing two Boettis hand in hand, like twin brothers, defining and simultaneously nullifying a fictitious symmetry, an opposition that is not transcended but transformed (*Gemelli [Twins]*, 1968). The e ("and"), which Boetti inserted between his Christian and family names in 1972 (henceforth he was to be known as Alighiero e Boetti), indicated a multiplicity within the self, a symbol of the distinction and difference between his two personae, along with their reciprocity, conjunction, and interdependence, marking an additive plus-one as well as a division: a paradox at the very heart of him.

Such strategies may have been a response to an increasingly mediatized society, as artists needed new tools to be heard. In this respect, Beuys and Warhol stand out in post-War Western art. Like Warhol, whom Beuys called "brother," Beuys operated under the assumption that the most affirmative artist, enjoying the greatest success with the broadest audience possible, may then use that success to his own ends. One crucial difference separates them, however, and perhaps leaves Beuys as the last of a line: he made demands, whereas Warhol did not. In that sense, as an artist who had wide influence and used that influence to make concrete demands, was his the last urgent artistic position? One can, of course, point to other art with a sense of political urgency, for example, Act Up, the Guerilla Girls, and other positions associated with the "identity politics" of the 1980s and '90s. That era, however, was different, in that it put an end to mystical naïveté, sincere or otherwise. The "in-the-worldness" of their political activism was no longer countered by a mystical dimension that might draw it back into the realm of art or imagination. Urgent art had become—perhaps out of necessity—pragmatic, but those strategies, in hindsight, seem to have failed in capturing the general imagination.

With these complex doubling images in mind, I would like to re-examine the genesis of Beuys's extraordinary public success more closely. His particular influence did not simply cultivate the assumption that contemporary art is mere charlatanry, but depended on the dialectic of hope and doubt, a double gesture of revealing and concealing. This was a dynamic that recalled the shaman, and Beuys used this connection overtly to play on the public's suspicion that artists might just have access to other worlds. This hope, however, also contains a doubt, a latent cynicism, which denies the artist any possibility of sincerity and thus any real relevance. Taking this ambivalence into account, Beuys positioned his persona between shaman and showman, assuring that he would remain a continuing fascination for the public. As Beuys commented,

> There are still actions today for which the figure of the shaman still seems to be most suitable. However, not in the sense of having to refer back to, in the sense of having to go back to a time where the shaman had its authority because it had been quite a spiritual context. Instead, I use this figure to express something about the future, by saying that the shaman once had stood for something that had been able to create a unity of material as well as spiritual connections. Thus, if we propose this figure in the age of materialism, we refer to something in the future. Therefore, it is only important that I slip into the role of the shaman to express a tendency of regression, that is, to go back to the past, back into the womb, but regression in the sense of progression, the futurological. [12]

In 1965, Düsseldorf's Gallery Schmela closed its doors to visitors for the three-hour duration of the artist's action *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt (How One Explains Images to the Dead Hare)*, which was presented via a closed-circuit television installed in the gallery window.[13] The audience could view the performance only from the street. The course of the performance is described in the 1973 monograph written by Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, in collaboration with the artist:

> Beuys, whose head was covered with honey and gold leaf, is holding a dead hare in his arm. Walking through the exhibition, from image to image, and talking to him, Beuys lets him touch the images with his paws, sits down on a chair, after the tour is finished, and starts to thoroughly explain the images to the hare, "because I do not want to explain them to the people." [14]

These images—of interiority and spiritualization, of meditative dialogue with oneself while in the pose of a Pietà, of the artist conversing with a dead hare that cannot respond and which, under normal circumstances, cannot

understand—demonstrate Beuys's belief in a universal capacity to communicate, but insist on the impossibility of explaining images to people in any direct way. Reminiscent of the gilded grounds of early icons, in which gold was the foundation for the eternal spiritual presence of the represented, a membrane between the worldly and the spiritual, the artist's gilded face can be seen as a reference to the mystic or priest, acting as a seer, a healing medium between the visible and invisible.[15] Despite this belief (and disbelief), Beuys would go on to give countless public lectures, engaging with the public more directly than perhaps any other artist. It may be that this complex and ambivalent relationship to the idea of the audience is as central to his persona as anything else.

One of Beuys's aims was to feed this ambivalence with images and stories that mix the existentialist, real, and seemingly biographical with the invented and artificial. This outraged Buchloh, whose investigation of the artist's mythical origins appears to be the investigation of a crime never committed. What starts out as a fundamental misunderstanding deepens when the critic applies strictly formalist criteria to juxtapose Beuys's work against Robert Morris's *Corner Piece* (1964), Richard Serra's *Lead Antimony* (1969), Bruce Nauman's *Concrete Tape Recorder* (1968), and Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Relief* (1915). Buchloh writes,

> Once put into their proper historic context, these works would lose their mystery and seemingly metaphysical origin and could be judged more appropriately for their actual formal and material, i.e., historical, achievements within the situation and the specific point of development of the discourse into which they insert themselves. The public myth of Joseph Beuys's life and work, by now having achieved proportions that make any attempt to question it or to put it into historic perspective an almost impossible task, is a result of these conditions, just as it tries to perpetuate them by obscuring historical facticity.[16]

Traditionally, the founding myth of Beuys's artistic career begins with his plane crashing in the Crimean Peninsula during a World War II mission. The Tartars who found him unconscious and nearly frozen to death are said to have nursed him to health using, among other things, fat and felt. This fable appears in several different versions, which is not surprising if one considers the deeply ambiguous nature of Beuys's project, in which he repeatedly takes positions at once carefully constructed and somehow authentic.

Buchloh, who reads these transparently false myths as deception rather than as a strategic technique, calls our attention to two different photographs of the plane crash. In the 1973 monograph *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, we see Beuys standing beside a JU-87 that is in fairly good shape, lying flat on the ground. The caption reads, "Joseph Beuys after a forced landing in the Crimea in 1943."[17] The text accompanying the image reads as follows:

> During the capture of the plane over an enemy anti-aircraft site, Beuys was hit by Russian gunfire. He succeeded in bringing his plane behind German lines, only to have the altimeter fail during a sudden snowstorm, consequently the plane could no longer function properly. Tartars discovered Beuys "in total wilderness in the bottleneck area of the Crimea," in the wreckage of the JU-87, and they cared for Beuys, who was unconscious most of the time, for about eight days, until a German search commando effected his transport to a military hospital.18

The catalogue of Beuys's Guggenheim exhibition, edited by Caroline Tisdall, contains three photographs of his plane, but it is severely damaged, overturned, and obviously different from the plane depicted in the early monograph.[19] Beuys's own recollection is reproduced along with the photo:

Had it not been for the Tartars I would not be alive today... Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital... The last thing I remember was that it was too late to jump, too late for the parachutes to open. That must have been a couple of seconds before hitting the ground... My friend was strapped in and he was atomized by the impact—there was almost nothing to be found of him afterwards. But I must have shot through the windscreen as it flew back at the same speed as the plane hit the ground and that saved me, though I had bad skull and jaw injuries. Then the tail flipped over and I was completely buried in the snow. That's how the Tartars found me days later. I remember voices saying "Voda" (water), then the felt of their tents, and the dense pungent smell of cheese, fat, and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth, and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep the warmth in.[20]

Buchloh rightly asks, "Who would, or could, pose for photographers after a plane crash, when severely injured? And who took the photographs? The Tartars with their fat-and-felt camera?"[21] He concludes that Beuys in this way "tries to come to terms with the period of history marked by German fascism and the war resulting from it, destroying and annihilating cultural memory and continuity for almost two decades and causing a rupture in history that left mental blocks and blanks and severe psychic scars on everybody living in this period and the generations following it."[22] As with so much of his essay, it is a hypothesis with which I can only agree, although I would not use it against Beuys.[23] On the contrary, the multiple versions of Beuys's artistic founding myth are evidence of the constructed nature of Beuys's position and persona. The same gesture is behind the variety of dates and titles of individual works (much to the dismay of art historians). His motto, "everybody is an artist," his strategy of a broader public and a broader idea of art are no betrayal of art. This is a game that plays with disinformation, with the stubbornness of facts, with the blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentation. It is a strategy employed by other artists. There are, for example, two versions of Yves Klein's photo work *Leap Into the Void* (1960); Warhol's true birth date was long unclear; and Maurizio Cattelan often accompanies his pieces with stories and rumors that create a parallel narrative of the work's origin or intentions.

In a paper delivered at a Beuys symposium several years ago, Buchloh softened his harsh stance towards the artist. He does retain his critique of what he sees as mystification in the work, a "foregrounding of the artist as a privileged being, a seer that provides deeper or higher forms of trans-historical knowledge to an audience that is in deep dependence and need of epiphanic revelations."[24] Buchloh's reassessment, however, is grounded in a more thoughtful position, one that provides other insights:

> All of Beuys's materials are no doubt derived from the shambles of postwar Germany, in the literal sense of a culture in shambles, a culture of debris... and noticing the spiritual crisis of the Third Reich's disastrous use of mythological material, leading to a present-day secularity of experience, the audience needs to escape the banality of German reconstruction culture and its recently established models of accelerated consumption.[25]

This formulation of a collective, public, psychological condition allows for a deeper understanding of Beuys's historical context. Even as Beuys challenged artistic definitions and pushed the limits of art discourse, his works always remained art, and followed a strategy of agitation from within. He spoke as an artist and always from the terrain of art. He taught at a highly-respected art academy, he exhibited in leading museums throughout the world, and his work found its way into major public and private collections. The factors that made him controversial as well as successful stem largely from his persona and reputation, from a drive to find processes and procedures for engaging the public that do not always qualify as art. But this is what sets his oeuvre apart, for an audience far beyond the art world.

"One must use the means with which one can change something..."
— Joseph Beuys

7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks), a project initiated at Documenta 7 in 1982, similarly refigures the realm of art as a place for public political debate. Over the subsequent years, 7,000 oak trees, each paired with a large basalt stone hand-selected by Beuys, were planted in locations throughout Germany and in New York City. These plantings, during a time of general debate in Europe around acid rain and the death of forests and trees, were accompanied by vehement public discussions that reached thousands of people who encountered the ideas behind the work in the course of their daily routines, either due to protests or discussion in the media. The hundreds of newspaper articles, arguments on the radio, and television news stories propelled Beuys into what was still a young public sphere founded on a technologically based mass-mediation.

A 1980 dialogue with the public at New York's Cooper Union provides an insight into Beuys's methodologies and strategies, particularly the specific artifice that characterized his position: using tools most artists avoid.

Audience member: The many uses of the term artist, implications of art, artwork, artist, have been exploited by you in the recent years of your career. Is your speaking about art, your definition of art, not sensational?

Beuys: It is not only sensational, but it has to be sensational because otherwise it would be of no interest... A lot of artists don't open a dialogue, they just put their pieces down and then leave... How to make politics into art: to bring up a humanitarian project... Everybody is guilty as long as the institutional system exists, but one

has to use the tools given to change... You cannot wait for an un-guilty tool without blood on it because life is short, one has to use the tool with blood on it to clean it.[26]

This exchange demonstrates the degree to which Beuys's self-reflexive irony has a double-edged quality, a trait always present even in his more straightforward explorations of art, politics, and society. On the one hand, the artist exposes himself as a charlatan and a showman, an admission that can only acknowledge and confirm the worst suspicions of the public. At the same time, Beuys, in this moment of self-deconstruction, makes manifest and takes up the challenge every artist must face: how to play the role of artist, which is to say, how to make work that differentiates itself from daily life while still relating to the social and cultural conditions in which it exists. Beuys makes a leap of faith with his complex masking and doubled identity, not ending doubt, but manifesting it. It is an overcoming of the self, even as it combats both the weight of tradition and the harsh reception that greets the new. It represents encouragement and approval, the confidence game and transcendence, defeat and triumph. Ultimately it must be seen as much a form of "care of the self" as a benefit to all art.

NOTES

1 The Latin word *persona* also refers to the actor's mask the Etruscans and Romans inherited from the Greeks, and all the connotations of role-playing, literary figure, or public image continue to resonate in this term.

2 Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III. Schaum* [Spheres III: Foam] (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 616.

3 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol. Preliminary Notes for a Critique," *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955–1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 43. First published in *Artforum*, 18 no. 5 (1980): 35–43.

4 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Allastair Hannay, trans. (London: Penguin Classics, 1992). First published in Danish in 1843.

5 See Boris Groys, "Über Kierkegaard," *Kierkegaard* (Munich: Diederichs Verlag, 1996), 15–48.

6 Charles Baudelaire and Salvador Dalí were eccentrics who also made the cult around their public appearance a part of their work. Walter Benjamin describes, for example, how Baudelaire supposedly took his turtle on a gold chain for a walk through the new arcades of Paris. They were pioneers of what would be continued later by artists such as Andy Warhol, Beuys, and other marketing artists who were playing with strategies of shock, offences of manners, their image, philosophical claims and manipulations, to name just a few tools. "Baudelaire's eccentric individuality was a mask under which he tried to conceal—out of shame, you could say—the supra-individual necessity of his way of life and, to a certain extent his life history" (Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eilend and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 50, 1.

7 See Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys: Once Again," *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (Sarasota, Fl: The Ringling Museum, 2001), 75–89.

8 "Beuys in Conversation with Dieter Koepplin," *Joseph Beuys*, ed. Harald Szeemann (Zurich: Kunsthaus Zürich, 1993), 272. Originally published in *Joseph Beuys* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1977), 22.

9 "Joseph Beuys in Conversation with Louwrien Wijers" (Düsseldorf, 3 June, 1980), *Mythos und Ritual der Kunst der siebziger Jahre* (Zurich: Kunsthaus Zürich, 1981), 75. Beuys comments further on the charisma of Warhol: "For he himself is a spirit, he has spirituality. Maybe that is the only possibility to do it in the United States, to produce a kind of charisma that brings out a longing for these other perceptions and feelings of the idea on the next level of history. Maybe this tabula rasa that Warhol produces, this void and purge of all traditional handwriting, is…something that produces the possibility to let in a radical different history."

10 Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt & Brace Company, 1977), 101. First published in 1975.

11 Groys, *Unter Verdacht*, p. 108.

12 Erika Billeter, "Joseph Beuys," an interview with the artist, *Mythos und Ritual der Kunst der siebziger Jahre* [Myth and Ritual in the Art of the '70s], 89.

13 Action during the opening of the exhibition, "Joseph Beuys ... irgendein Strang ...", Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, 1965.

14 Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys. Leben und Werk* (Cologne: DuMont, 1973), 77; *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, trans. Patricia Lech (New York: Baron's, 1979), in which Joseph Beuys is quoted by Ursula Meyer, "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare," *Artnews* (January 1960): 57).

15 Beuys mentions the hare and the honey in his description of this action, but not the gold leaf: "The hare has a direct relation to birth … For me, the hare is the symbol for incarnation. Because the hare makes that very real, which humans can only do in their thoughts. He buries himself, he buries a hole for himself. He incarnates himself in earth, and that alone is important. This is how it appears in my work. With honey on the head, I obviously do something that has to do with thinking. Human ability is not to emit honey, but to think, to emit ideas. Thus, the thought's character of death becomes alive again. Honey is an alive substance without a doubt. Human thought can be alive, too. But it can also be intellectualizingly deadly, can stay dead, too, can express itself deadly, like in the political field or in pedagogy." Quoted in Hagen Lieberknecht, "Interview mit Joseph Beuys," *Joseph Beuys* (St. Gallen: Collection Lutz Schirmer, Kunstverein Sankt Gallen, 1971). Reprinted in Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, 126.

16 Buchloh, 'Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,' p. 43.

17 Adriani et al., *Joseph Beuys*, 14.

18 Ibid., 16, with a quote by Beuys, from earlier conversations between the authors and the artist.

19 Caroline Tisdall quotes Beuys in *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1980), 17.

20 Tisdall quotes Beuys from her interviews with him from September to October, 1978, in *Joseph Beuys*, 16–7.

21 Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol", 47.

22 Ibid.

23 It is worth noting that some German-speaking authors and artists of this generation also worked with this method of using found photographs or photographs they took themselves, oscillating between documentation and fiction. For example, Alexander Kluge, especially in his epic text-collection *Chronik der Gefühle* [Chronicle of Emotion] or G.W. Sebald, whose novels are based on a writing technique that leans on these photographs.

24 Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys: Once Again," 82.

25 Ibid., 86.

26 Beuys, *Dialogue with the Public* (New York: Cooper Union, 1980), Video courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.