

## Joseph Beuys and the Ever-lasting Effect of Trauma

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### Introduction

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) ranks among the world's most accomplished artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century yet to the casual observer; access to Joseph Beuys' work remains opaque. His art is not easily understood, for it works with materials otherwise unknown to art historians. With felt and fat, Beuys opened a new way to man of looking at the world and beliefs [1-3]. His artistic involvement with archaic materials originates in his own biography, namely in the one key moment, which to him determined all further formative moments. During World War II, Beuys served as aerial gunner and radio operator and was severely wounded several times. The decisive trauma struck him in March 1943 while on a mission over the Crimean peninsula when the dive bomber on which he served crashed. The pilot died in the incident. Beuys lay badly injured in the freezing cold out in the snow. The trauma influenced Beuys' entire artistic work and entered art history as the "Tartar Legend" or "Tartar Myth".

### The Trauma

The actual trauma led to many speculations in Beuysian research. For one, it is of special significance in a "consciously mythologized life about the traumatic experiences of war", others regard it as Beuys' first encounter with shamanism. In the crash of the JU 87 on the Crimea in the winter of 1943, Beuys is jammed underneath the plane's rear. That he survived at all is remarkable, and owes to nomadizing Tartars who, on their wanderings across the Crimea, discovered the plane wreck and the unconscious Beuys in the deep snow. They take him to their camp and tend him, anointing his heavy wounds with animal fat and wrapping his body in felt. Beuys suffered a dual basal skull fracture, has metal splinters all over his body of which later only some can be removed. Ribs, legs, and arms are fractured. The hair is scorched into the roots; his nasal bone is comminuted [4]. When German troops find him after eight days, the Tartars ask him to stay. Thinking for a moment, Beuys decides to see the military hospital. Joseph Beuys authored three different autobiographical accounts on the incident, whereof the first is the most documented.

1. "...I felt, that it went down. I still said, let's all jump out, jump off. But from then on, I don't know anything. The moment I said this, impact probably was only two seconds away. – And this you did not... - No, nothing – and there were others in the plane? – Yes, one more, it was always two. – And the other...he died. – Nothing was left of him. He was atomized. Nothing was found other than little bone pieces, everything else was sludge in the cabin" [5].
2. "...and as they were handling the rubble that lay on top of me... and that they found me and were standing around me and that I then said: woda, i.e. Water, and then I went out cold". "My consciousness returned only after 12 days, when I lay already in a German military hospital. But there all the pictures returned...the tents – they had felt tents – and the habits of these people, the fat, which is anyway...a very common scent in their homes, that which they worked with..." [6].
3. "Had it not been for the Tartars, I would not be alive today. It

was the nomads of the Crimea, which lived in the no man's land between the German and Russian front. They had been known to me already earlier, for I often wandered to their camps and ate with them. Their nomadic lifestyle attracted me, even though their mobility then of course was very limited. Then they found me in the snow after the crash, when the German search posse had already given up. I was still unconscious and came around only after roughly 12 days. My recollection of these events is images that have gone deep. I remember the felt of which they made tents, the sharp scent of cheese, fat, and milk. They anointed my body with fat, so that the heat returned and wrapped me in felt, as felt retains heat" [7].

4. When graduated from state secondary grammar school in 1941 Beuys volunteered for the air force. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1941 he was trained to be radio operator in Posen. He was then stationed in the Crimea and in June 1942, joined in the air battle on the fortress city of Sevastopol. As of May 1943, he was deployed to Königgratz in the former Reich Protectorate as aerial gunner in a dive bomber (stuka) of type Junkers 87. After transfer to the air force headquarters in Croatia in the summer of 1943 he was at the Eastern Adriatic until 1944. From there he at times headed for weapon tests in Foggia [8]. By record of the German office dated February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1995, the crash occurred on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The German Wehrmacht was in retreat, the Crimea by and large reconquered by the Red Army. The crash was located near Freifeld in the Northern Crimea. Beuys injuries are stated as burns of second degree, brain concussion, and laceration above the eyes. Pilot Hans Laurinck died still on the place of the accident. He was buried on the war cemetery Kruman-Kemektschi/Crimea – solitary grave no. 258. The crashed plane was a JU 87. The records state that Beuys was tended in the mobile military hospital 179, Kruman-Kemektschi, from March 17<sup>th</sup> to April 7<sup>th</sup>. The eight to twelve day stay with the Tartars, as held by Stachelhaus and others, hence can only have lasted 24 hours. The kind of injuries and of the rescue has since spurred controversy. Irrespective of whether Beuys account, following new on-site research, is discarded as fiction, or whether a deeper truth of the artist is discovered, the story becomes part of European art history as the "Tartar Legend" or "Tartar Myth". It serves as the basis for the interpretation of fat and felt as artistic means of expression. The front experience occasions Beuysian research to several discussions.

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For one, it is of special significance for a consciously mythologized life about the traumatic experiences of war, for another, it is stated that Beuys first got in touch with shamanism shaping his art vitally [9].

### Myth or Reality?

The Beuysian memory may have been clouded by the trauma, and which visionary appearances Beuys had while unconscious, cannot be reconstructed. Fact is elements of this story run through the artist's thinking and work like a common thread. Beuys himself always emphasized the authenticity. "...which they handle with, that practically went into me; I truly experienced it" [10]. That he hardly confronted sceptics can be easily understood with the astonishment on the question itself which he considered absurd. Independent of whether he made up his stay with the Tartars partly or entirely, one recognized the myth in it. The legend captures in condensed form the subjective experience of the heavy trauma as well as the miracle of salvation which Beuys later denotes time and again as "reincarnation" or "resurrection" [11]. Furthermore, the trauma contains the key to a deeply ingrained change of consciousness connected to the physical and psychological borderline experience. Beuys speaks of "a re-evaluation of life and thinking so far" [12]. In his powerful, plain art works – the visual language of the myth – principally, the entire cosmos of the Beuysian world and anthropology is contained. Sensitized by the personal experience of trauma, Beuys finds that man existentially and contemporarily is "ill", "lethally wounded, in body, spirit, and society" [12]. Just as he in nearly hopeless state was reborn, so man too has "the chance of salvation and remedy, provided he acknowledges his disease" [13]. "DISPLAY YOUR WOUND" (1974-1975) analogously reads one of his later installations. After the experienced trauma, Beuys considers fat and felt to be a material element of his artistic work (Figure 1).

### Fat and Felt

What causes the turn around in the condition of the critically wounded and half-frozen Beuys are generic, archaic materials. Felt provides the required heat for survival, felt especially - consisting of animal hair - to him therefore possesses an essential symbolic function. Heat is one of the most positively associated apprehensions in Beuysian thinking; its often synonymous for life at all. What we urgently require, that is warmth. Man of today must cast off the societal, political and

individual lead chains [14]. Similarly, fat too exerts a fascination in him. Existing in liquid or solid form, he considers it as "the warming principal per se" [15]. Fat alleviated the pain and was apt for the therapy of the wounds inflicted by the crash. "Fat. A little fat. With a little fat anything goes" [14]. The return to life, the rebirth occurred not over medication and medical apparatus, it took place in a context of archaic simplicity. Biographically, Beuys experiences such healing a second time. In 1955, he is taken by severe depression paralyzing his creativity. Beuys calls this phase as a another "dying" [16]. When classical therapy fails to effect healing, the brothers van Grinten, collectors of his art, accommodate him on their farm in Kranenburg and incorporate him in field work and technical activities. After a few months, as he writes in "LIFE COURSE/WORK COURSE", he feels recovered from the condition of depressive exhaustion [6]. Again, it is the structures of archaic life, this time of the peasant, giving him support and orientation. In his art works this reflection is mirrored in the depiction of simple beings, elements, and shapes. Repeatedly it is plants, objects of everyday life, inorganic and metallic substances that are incorporated into a project or are designed independently, such as the Rust Corner (1963). They shall redirect the perspective from the sickening cold of a technical-rational present to the human-adequate, original way of life, in which he not instrumentalize nature, but lives in harmonic unity with it. Influenced by the philosophy of anthropologist Rudolf Steiner, Beuys is not concerned nostalgically with the utopia of an ideal world, but with the future vision of a life reduced to the essentials. "I have always felt as a shepherd", Beuys says looking back [17].

### Joseph Beuys and National Socialism

In August 1944, he was summoned to the Western front despite his trauma, where he was deployed as paratrooper. He attained the rank of sergeant. In 1944, he was awarded the Air Gunner Badge, the Iron Cross Second Class, and the Iron Cross First Class. Because of five woundings he received the Golden Wound Badge. One day after the capitulation of the German Wehrmacht on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Joseph Beuys was taken prisoner in Cuxhafen and transferred to a British incarceration camp which he was allowed to leave on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Sensitized through the crash, the severe trauma, his near-death experience, and his felt "rebirth" from rescue, Beuys' conception of himself, man, and society no longer was what it used to be. Voices of

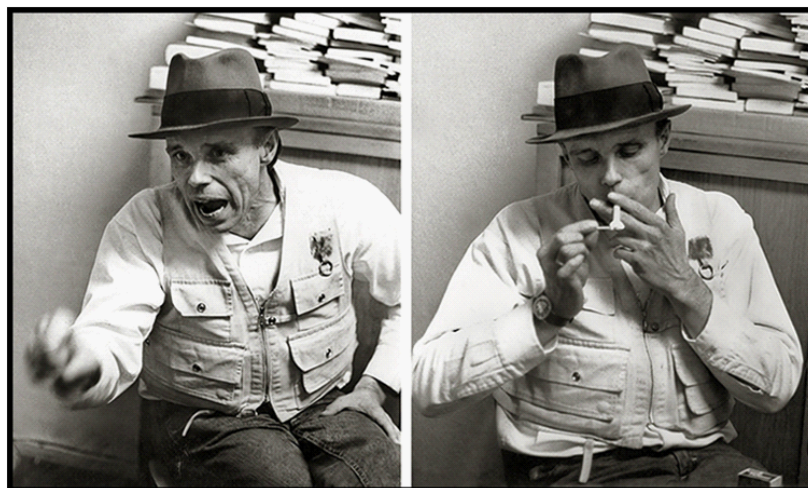


Figure 1: Joseph Beuys 1973 beim Interview: Nie ohne Filzhut, Copyright 2010 Detlef Lampe.

modern Beuys interpretation tend to rectify the experienced taruma and rescue as runaround to a sideshow. Beuys would want to withdraw from the discourse of the actual cause of his accident, his activity in the Wehrmacht, from which he never distanced himself. He submerged from the perpetrator generation to the “comforting” realm of the archaic [18]. In 1985, Beuys saw himself confronted with a new wave of critique. Critique concerning his artistic work had never ceased. Yet the line of fire, Beuys now got into was new. The occasion was given by Beuys substantive review in the Guggenheim museum, the olymp of modern arts. When sculptures of felt and fat had been exhibited in the prominent New York museum, an essay was published in the American arts magazine “Artforum”, titled “Twilight of the Idol”. It was authored by the art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and he asked the question: Which relation did the shaman-acting Beuys actually have to German history? And how much credulity can one ascribe to his self mystification, primarily the legend of the crash in the Crimea in the year 1944? [19]. In 2008, Beat Wyss, a Swiss art historian, even called Beuys an “eternal Hitler youth”, who have processed in his art habit ideals and symbols inoculated into him as a Hitler youth. According to the art historian, contemporary National Socialism saw as paramount an anti-authoritarian youth policy in child education, aiming to deploy children as the phalanx of the system and watchdog against parents and teachers. For the youth under Hitler was more formable and controllable than the parent generation. Indoctrinated by schools and associations it new nothing but the ideology of the Third Reich. The youth was specifically held to come out authoritatively committed towards the new order and against the old and liberal, but also respectlessly towards religious parents. This dual strategy worked: They were recalcitrant against the fascist middle class, yet in thrall to Communist ideology. They were governed by anti-authoritarian authoritarianism. Beuys transferred this ideology to the arts system. [20].

## Joseph Beuys and The Healing of The World

For Joseph Beuys’ artistic performance “the continuous movement” was pivotal, “which for all man must be pointing the way” [15]. Nomadic existence implies change, transformation, dissolution of boundaries, and setting out from the congealed. “I am not as unduly settled from my whole being, the nomadic played a role from the beginning” [21]. And in fact, Beuys transgresses radical boundaries in the context of his times. Beuys points to the finiteness of enlightened and scientific interpretations and advocates in seminars at the chair for monumental sculpture of the Federal Academy of Arts Düsseldorf an alternative apprehension of the “utopian opening of the mind and society” [22]. This manifestation of the breakaway from traditional structures culminates in the year of 1963. Beuys contacts the neo-dadaist movement FLUXUS whose followers aim to surmount traditional apprehensions of society and the academic understanding of art [23]. In the “SIBERIAN SYMPHONY 1st MOVEMENT”, Beuys makes a contribution in which he combines music, objects, and action. The action begins as musical performance of an own composition. He guides a wire from a grand piano to the heart of a rabbit hanging upside down from a slate. The heart eventually is ceremonially taken out. “Movement” is driving force of which Beuys denotes the “plastical process”, namely the transformability of individual materials [16]. It is the plastical quality which give felt and fat its significance. Felt “is especially well able to transform cold into heat, to mitigate the hard, to curb the sharp” [10], exemplified in the installation “SNOW FALL” (1965). Onto a row of little spruce logs fall little by little felt blankets, 32 altogether. The softness of the material alters the squared hardness

of the cut. It arises, in association with the snow, the impression of pretection and silence. Fat too is considered transformable. Of organic origin it alters between solid and liquid form, in corners applied as dice of fat it dissolves the the hardness of the geometrical shape. Yet Beuys does not intend to see the idea of the nomadic constrained to the art-immanent. He demanded the “social sculpture” in which the principal of transformability is transcended to society, culture, and ultimately, politics. Through movement static “order be transformed into lively chaos”, from social cold shall arise interpersonal warmth. In this work every man shall join in their own environment and area of activity. The “social organism can arise, possessing the rank of a piece of work”, focussed in the pithy expression: “everybody is an artist” [24]. Yet what about Beuys great vision of substantial change of man, society, and politics in actuality? Which significance did the large-scale, utopian design of the artist have? Beuys seems to have sensed something just right influenced by his time. “Movement”, in concrete and spiritual sense, has become a formula of modern life: Mobility, flexibility, and globalization are societal key words, yet not only as possibility of a steady, positive expansion of consciousness, as Beuys hoped. Beuys did not take society so far as to delineate a turn around towards the “healing of the world”.

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