

ARTNEWS

'IT'S THE GHOST OF JOSEPH BEUYS!' A WALKTHROUGH AT MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

BY Hannah Ghorashi

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Opening today, Mitchell-Innes & Nash presents an exhibition of Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys's multiples from the collection of Reinhard Schlegel—the largest collection of Beuys multiples ever shown in New York, featuring over 500 works dated between the early 60s to his death in 1986.

An art theorist and art teacher, Beuys created these small-scale, easily reproducible works so that more people could have the opportunity to experience them. "It's ironic," commented Dr. Eugen Blume, leading Beuys scholar and head of the Hamburger Bahnhof museum in Berlin (which houses many significant Beuys works), who led a walkthrough of the show last Friday. "They're so expensive now."

Left: Filzanzug (Felt Suit), by Joseph Beuys. COURTESY THE TATE

Inventory highlights include: a felt suit (or "human warmth sculpture") hanging high on a wall, a lump of cast beeswax, a 32-minute recording of Beuys alternatively repeating "Ja" and "Nee," a sled equipped with a felt blanket and other "survivor materials," a photograph of half of a metal cross sculpture, a small sculpture made of fried herring bones, a jar of olive oil from East Germany (Beuys was fascinated by the Eastern Bloc), a pair of folded blue jeans. Seeing this assortment of mundane objects elevated behind museum glass is to see them as Beuys did—distinctly significant relics of contemporary

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life. If there is a unifying theme to be found in this assortment of objects, it's their primitively symbolic potential, a convergence of Beuys's Rudolf Steiner-influenced parallel interest in the natural sciences and transcendentalist spirituality.

“One of his spiritual ideas was Jesus Christ—but not the Jesus from church,” explained Dr. Blume. “He said Jesus Christ is a person who lives in each one of us, and you have to develop the Jesus Christ in yourself. You have to be free within yourself. You have to walk with Jesus Christ. And so you can see here the typical figure of Joseph Beuys.” He gestured at an enormous, sepia-toned photo of Beuys striding purposefully towards the camera in an outdoorsy hat, jacket, and jeans. Indiana Jones, with ascetically hollow cheeks and dark, boring eyes.

“He was a figure between a soldier and a revolutionary.”



Behind Beuys's shamanistic mystique—and his recurring use of felt and fat—is a story he often told about his earlier years as a WWII pilot. Describing it as a sort of artistic fairytale, Dr. Blume summarized, “His plane in WWII crashed and he was wounded. He said these nomad people saved him and covered him in felt and fat. He told this story in his sixties, returning to this existential situation that happened he was 23.”

He pointed to an open black suitcase containing a sauce bottle and a paperback book. “This object has a wonderful name—I know no weekend. I'm afraid it is true—because he was in the war and was part of the Lost Generation, he had only 20 years for all of these things.”

Left: Friday Object 1st Class Fried Fish Bones (Herring) (1970), by Joseph Beuys. COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND

I wondered, had he ever met Beuys? He had not. “I was in East Germany at the time...there were technical reasons, you know.” Everyone born before 1989 laughed appreciatively.

“Actually, one of the many ironic things Beuys did was to suggest that increasing the height of the Berlin Wall by five centimeters would improve its proportions,” Dr. Blume segued, leading us towards a photo in a glass case across the room. “And here is Beuys and his family watching Enterprise.”

“He was a Trekkie,” said an audience member, with satisfaction.

He was also a pop singer. A record with the punny title “Sonne Statt Reagan,” translating to “Sun Not Rain/Reagan” (the German word for rain is regen), lay nearby. The title song, written and performed by Beuys in a music video, was, as Beuys specified, an anti-Reagan piece of art. He was not a one-hit wonder.

“Are there any more questions?” Dr. Blume asked.

“I have one for you. I’m a very serious feminist,” warned a gray-haired woman.

“Yes! Please.”

“That is a problem,” she said, pointing at a photo of a sign reading:

“Prof. Joseph Beuys
Institut for Cosmetic Surgery
Speciality: buttocklifting.”

The group, which had been waiting for this, tittered. Dr. Blume left it at, “It’s an example of one of his ironic ideas—that we have to leave our fat cells behind. We have to be a little more intelligent.”



That explanation requires a few mental leaps, but it has the Beuys hallmark. Across the room hangs a screenprint of two hares, medieval symbols of intelligence. And his most famous performance art piece, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, featured Beuys, covered in gold leaf and honey, whispering explanations of his work to a dead hare cradled in his arms.

Or did Beuys have a Warholian foresight? He happened to be fascinated with the Twin Towers; one of his works, titled *Cosmos and Damien*, shows the names of two medieval Arabian figures scribbled on them. “There are some people who think that Beuys knew something about [the 9/11 attacks],” Dr. Blume added.

Left: *Cosmos and Damien* (1974), by Joseph Beuys.
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Someone inquired about a chalkboard drawing of half a cross with the word “Eurasia” underneath it. Mounted on top was none other than a dead hare, a felt triangle attached to one foot.



Dr. Blume said, “This is a piece of performance art. Beuys said that we have half of the cross in West Europe and the other half is in Asia. He put them together as ideas with other ideas, and he founded a [cultural] party called Eurasia in 1963. This name referred to the connection between the East and West. He said it was his last chance to make this connection.”

Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963 (1966), by Joseph Beuys. COURTESY MoMA

Midway through the tour, a chunk of melting ice suddenly fell onto the skylight with a loud crash. Once assured that the multiples were unaffected, Dr. Blume took the opportunity to quip pedantically, “It’s the ghost of Joseph Beuys!” If the felt suit twitched in response, it was imperceptible.

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