

The Janus-Faced Legacy of Joseph Beuys
Review of *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*
Claudia Mesch and Viola Michely, eds.
MIT Press, October 2007, 352 pp.

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Beuys said: “If we don’t reach to the stars, we won’t do anything.” He spoke about the necessity to do the impossible—“and it is interesting precisely because it is difficult.” Claudia Mesch and Viola Michely have tried to do exactly this. By editing and compiling *Joseph Beuys: The Reader* they reached to the stars and one can only imagine all the effort and care that went into this collection of criticism. First published in the United Kingdom by I.B. Tauris, MIT Press has now released this book that comes with the high claim of being the primary critical book on Joseph Beuys (May 12, 1921- January 23, 1986). With a foreword by Arthur Danto and a thorough introduction by the editors, the compilation contains twenty essays, most from the ‘80s and ‘90s by renowned authors (some of them classics or newly translated), and is divided into six sections, concentrating on the reception of Beuys in the United States.

One must understand the background and motivation for this book in order to comprehend its content, because *The Reader* has been generated out of a defense. The editors’ intention is “to move beyond the sometimes dismissive readings of Beuys’ art that may have squashed further debate.” They are alluding to the first nonexistent then disastrous reception of Beuys in America. *The Reader* includes the legendary essay by Benjamin Buchloh on the occasion of Beuys’ exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1979 that gives a taste of the highly emotional discourse around this controversial artist, whose work, but even more whose person, seems to push many buttons. Taking an event from Beuys’ life, a widely discussed plane crash in the Crimea in 1943, Buchloh positions Beuys’ art as a case of the German suppression of their National Socialist past. Beuys offered enough space for such speculations by interpreting his life as a precondition for the development of his ideas; and thereby was often more fictional (in the literary sense) than factual in

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his accounts. Following Buchloh's highly influential voice, Beuys' affirmation of an archaic iconography—Christian symbols or references to Celtic or Nordic mythology, the use of poor materials such as felt, fat, finger nails, bones, blood, honey, or copper—was subsequently and predominantly viewed by American critics against the background of Nazi Germany. Even though Buchloh revisited his viewpoint twenty years later (see Gene Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*), the American reception of Beuys was, and is, strained if not damaged.

The goal of Mesch and Michely's book is precisely an attempt to counter such simplified biographical Beuys interpretations and to give a broader picture by providing a complex net of various critical voices. *The Reader* includes texts by art historians and critics such as Antje von Graevenitz, Stefan Germer, and Peter Bürger (with two corresponding essays), indicating the editors' awareness of establishing the book's structure. There is also a roundtable discussion on Beuys and Surrealism. Further discussed are Beuys and other artists like Marcel Broodthaers; or James Lee Byars by co-editor Viola Michely; or Beuys in the context of German political and cultural life for which co-editor Claudia Mesch gives an excellent overview. Unfortunately, this contextualization only appears two-thirds into the book, with a comprehensive account of American reviews of Beuys by Dirk Luckow almost at the end. This positioning makes sense within the systematical approach (from critical-emotional to retrospective views), but the risk of structuring this heavily theoretical handbook in this way is to lose its lay readers along the way.

This is not a reference book for those who want to become familiar with Beuys' work. Detailed descriptions of artworks are rare, and a closer reading of Beuys' endeavors such as the one by Theodora Vischer (who wrote her Ph.D. on Beuys in 1990), or the essay by Barbara Lange concentrating on one single artwork, are overpowered by intellectual theorizing. Only in one instance does one really have the chance to discover Beuys' authentic voice: in a transcribed recording of dialogues that took place in the Office for Direct Democracy that Beuys maintained at *documenta 5* in 1972.

However, it is stated explicitly in the foreword: "We do not claim to offer a complete survey of Beuys' oeuvre, nor an all-inclusive collection of critical writing." And the focus is to present Beuys "through more diverse and recent methodologies of art history." By trying to re-position Beuys within the American art historical discourse, the editors are setting a counter-point to subjective impressions—"We did not want to privilege biography and its limitations in this book"—thus ending up quite on the opposite side of the spectrum. At one point, the knowledgeable translator Claudia Mesch, who also adds information when needed for the American

audience, turns the “New York Jewish Museum of Art” in the German original (Luckow) into “the Jewish Museum.” The omission of the city’s name, whether by intention or oversight, is telling in regard to the targeted audience.

Beuys’ life and work are tricky territory (he wrote his own *Life Course/Work Course*) and seem to polarize people to either perceive him as a guru or a charlatan. Mesch and Michely want to foster the voice of reason and promote the theory that “Beuys was one of the last western artists to take up the lineage of the engaged modernist avant-garde; this position had become most unfashionable, even taboo, within postmodern art production in the USA.” The argument’s starting point and driving force is their observation that, “[T]he disciplinary apparatus of art history in the USA has been hesitant to take up Beuys’ direct connection with the engaged tradition of the modernist avant-garde.” Many of the book’s essays circle around this discussion. For those who love philosophical discourse this might be *the* reader; for novices it might be only one. Granted, a biography and timeline of Beuys are offered at the end “for those readers who desire a more basic introduction.” Very basic though, 2 and 1/2 pages, with nowhere close to a list of all works and performances. (And the danger of simplification is inaccuracy: Beuys received the Lehmbbruck Prize in 1986, eleven days before his death, not in 1985.) It is a difficult undertaking to separate Beuys the artist and Beuys the charismatic teacher, particularly for an artist who believed: “To be a teacher is my greatest work of art.” An appendix with bibliographical information on each of the authors would have helped to evaluate and position their different voices.

Joseph Beuys. The Reader is, as emphasized, “an initial step in reopening an international discussion on Joseph Beuys and his art.” Such a reinvigorated debate seems much needed. For example, there was not a single artwork by Beuys to be found at the last two Art Basel expos in Miami Beach. And the editors already have promised a second volume with Beuys as “a sacred artist.” The book is well researched and expertly edited, and its compilation clearly springs from the editors’ commitment to pointing out Beuys’ potential. May it help to keep the legacy of this enigmatic artist alive—an artist who continues to provoke fascination and bewilderment. To quote Beuys: “The world is full of riddles for which only man is the solution. Man as solution for these riddles—I venture to say, I must say: as the carrier of love.”