

“If it Weren’t for These Pictures . . .” – Joseph Beuys

The Pre- and Perinatal Aspects and Their Transformation in “Lebenslauf/Werklauf” – An Approach

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Abstract: Nearly ten years after Joseph Beuys died there are increasing efforts in reception of his work. He seems to evoke essential themes of our existence. Plastic self-description is the central motive. He tries to connect himself to the biography of world and evolution. This opens access to his work, Autobiographic selection and conclusion like “Lebenslauf/Werklauf” 1921–1986, “a secret block for a secret person in Ireland” 1945–1976 and “4 books of project Westmensch” 1958 show that especially in his early-work, the artist is trying to find new visions for present and future in going back to very early stages of evolution. In a concretistic manner he is engaged in placenta- and umbilical-symbolics, in their nutritive and circulatory phenomena, including birth and femininity. These pictures changed in later years in using his typical materials, kind of performances and social transformation. The significance of pre/perinatal symbolism in Beuys-reception of today is nearly undeveloped.

Zusammenfassung: *“Wenn ich diese Bilder nicht hätte . . .” – Joseph Beuys. Prä- und perinatale Bezüge und ihre Umformung im Lebenslauf/Werklauf – eine Annäherung.* Bald zehn Jahre nach dem Tod von Joseph Beuys, werden zunehmend Anstrengungen zur Rezeption seines Werkes unternommen. Seine Arbeiten scheinen wesentliche Themen unserer momentanen Existenz anzusprechen. Die exemplarische Autobiographie, der Anreiz zur plastischen Selbst-Beschreibung und -Umformung, ist das zentrale Motiv bei Joseph Beuys. Bezugnehmend auf dieses “Lebensnetz”, soll, insbesondere an Beispielen aus dem Frühwerk, gezeigt werden, wie der Künstler versucht, durch Rück-Wege, Rück-Führungen auf frühe Entwicklungsinhalte, neue Sehmöglichkeiten des Gegenwärtigen zu schaffen. Hieraus ergibt sich eine für Joseph Beuys typische Um-Formung seiner Bilder durch Veränderung von Darstellungsform und Materialausgestaltung bis hin zur sozialen Trans-

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formation. In besonders konkreter Form finden sich gerade im Frühwerk Auseinandersetzungen des Künstlers mit Plazenta- und Nabelschnur-Symbolik sowie mit deren nutritiven und zirkulatorischen Phänomenen, eingebettet in Themen der Geburt und des Weiblichen. Diese Bereiche werden von Beuys in oft ambivalenter Weise dargestellt. Ihre Bedeutung in der heutigen Beuys-Rezeption ist noch weitgehend unerschlossen.

* * *

I would like to begin my talk with two quotations that outline our topic and that also serve to provide me with a point of reference.

Beuys: “If it weren’t for these pictures, I would express these things in a quite different way today. The drawings are reflected in an elementary way in my language and in my thinking. Without these pictures, my language wouldn’t have changed. There is a major break between these two areas.” Pictures and language, the individual and society.

Karl Bohrmann: “It is remarkable that, after 90 years of modern art, artists are still searching for elements, preconditions, for beginnings. They are not searching for words, sentences or images. They are searching for energy, often despairingly – drilling for oil. Making their way forward slowly and hesitantly, trying to find their way back to the point at which something broke off. A painful point. Thus art can never be completely beautiful, never completely be ‘fine art’; the most it can be is painfully fine art. Why bother to create pictures then? Why not let things pass by as situations and states? Do we want to recognise pictures, to see primeval inner images again? Do we want to capture all this fortuitousness and transience in pictures? Do we want to save ourselves in these pictures?”

Why Beuys?

Beuys: “I think that people come to me because they feel that something important is taking place here.” Beuys would probably have smiled if he had known he was going to end up here in this society in Heidelberg as well. He would have liked the topic of the congress at any rate.

The Beginning or Picture 1*: “How To Explain the Pictures to the Dead Hare” (1965)

In order to really say something, it is sometimes necessary to start right from the beginning.

I have been studying Beuys since the retrospective of his work last year in Zürich. I thought I had an inkling of him somewhere, and Heribert Schulz’ comments on placenta symbolism in the work of Joseph Beuys confirmed my belief. Six months ago, Ludwig Janus asked me if I would give a talk at the congress on “how he explains the pictures to the dead hare”. The time came. I had to get a grasp on him, to capture him and make a talk out of him.

* The pictures are included in the German version of this article (see pp. 89–110 of this issue)

During the past six months, he has slipped increasingly further from my grasp. He would say that he had expanded. He was everywhere and yet nowhere. Diffuse and yet at the same time bulky. My pile of notes was growing daily. The money I spent on books – which in the eyes of my family was by no means money well spent – reached new records.

Beuys was present and expanding. Not only in my bookcase. A month ago I wanted to summarise everything. A convolution arose from fragments of people and images, from my own sketches, drafts, from painting over pictures, from discarded attempts. A convolution of biographies, analyses, interpretation, quotations and speculations.

What remained were pictures. My own pictures. The pictures of him that I had created, the ideas I had got of him. He had disappeared from the scene, his wise head enveloped in gold. I only had a bitter taste of the sweet honey. Reluctantly I had to awake and prick up my ears – and be careful about what I say about him.

Biography (Picture 2)

Right from the beginning, Beuys regarded biography as a public affair. "My life is a work of art. Every life is a work of art." From 1964 on he defined *Lebenslauf/Werklauf* (1921–1986) as the basis of his biography.

Another of his autobiographical works is *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, a collection of about 400 drawings from 1945–1976, a secret "diary". Difficult for outsiders to understand. Questions and uncertainties. Exploration of a path. At the same time he is in contact with an interlocuter in a distant place at which history begins. Finally, a third work of biographical content: *Four Books on "Projekt Westmensch"* (1958).

Beuys: "In drawing I found a new biography, beginning in 1958." In *Secret Block*, Beuys explores new ground. *Projekt Westmensch* is a book of notes in which he records the results of *Werk/Lebensprozeß*. "Biographical events have moulded things into a certain form." *Projekt Westmensch* (1958) is a new beginning after a crisis. A radical change in his thinking, one which is difficult for him. "It seems that transformation and heightening my consciousness go completely against the grain."

Crisis

Picture 3: "Skeleton of a Sheep" (1949)

It's 1954. Beuys is 33 years old. He has left the Academy of Arts and set up his own studio. His fiancée leaves him. He suffers from deep depression and receives psychiatric treatment on several occasions.

He locks himself away for weeks on end in a totally darkened room. He wanted to dissolve into nothingness. He smeared a box with tar. It was supposed to be an empty, isolated room in which investigations took place and new experiences were made. He felt the urge to get into this box, no longer to exist, to simply discontinue life. This went on for two years.

Beuys: "Basically, something had to die. I have reorganised myself totally. I had been carrying a body around for too long . . . and would have perished if I have

stopped there.” One of his central themes at this time: “Grave with a Dead Person Crouching”.

Birth

Picture 4: “Bathtub” (1960 = 1921)

He begins his *Lebenslauf* with the work entitled: “1921 Kleve. Exhibition of a wound closed up with sticking plaster.”

This work is a kind of autobiographical and artistic key to his work as a whole.

Beuys: “It is taken from the outer world, a solid material object equipped with energy. Transformation of substance is my artistic goal.”

On the inside of the bathtub there is a copper wire fixed with strips of plaster: an umbilical cord. On the bottom of the tub lies a placenta made of gauze and fat. The work refers to something beyond itself, to a person who was born there, but at the same time it draws attention to itself, to the material that is present. The observer constantly switches between the idea and the object, without being able to feel exactly what is “real”. In the end, the observer has to give up trying to orientate himself by external criteria. Questions arise. Joseph Beuys’ place of birth is Krefeld, not Kleve. The family doctor didn’t want the mother to give birth at home, because he feared there might be complications. He sent her to the clinic in Krefeld to give birth.

Childhood

“My relationship with my parents was not an intimate one. On the contrary. I had to take care of myself from a very early age. It was a difficult period and seemed awfully threatening and depressing to me as a child.”

“Names like ‘Stag leader’ can be interpreted psychologically as primary experiences.”

“During childhood things seem quite picturesque and vivid.”

“I walked around with a staff, similar to the way I used one later on. I was a shepherd exploring everything in my environment.” (Picture 5)

War

1942 “Exhibition While Intercepting a Ju 87”.

Beuys was wounded several times during the war. “Tartars found me in the wilds at the bottleneck of the Crimea.” His plane was shot down during “snow-fall”. The Tartars nursed him back to health using household remedies, materials he later used in his work, such as fat, felt, warmth and milk.

Beuys received a medal awarded to those wounded in the war. Was he searching for all that? He later referred to his war experiences as educational travel.

Picture 6: “The Parents” (1958)

The end of the crisis. It’s 1958. His father dies. His mother dies in 1974. Two worlds, the woman on the left and the man on the right. Top and bottom. The

horizontal borderline passes through the ears of the two. The mother's body, indicated by lines, is connected to the world beneath and receives information from it in both ears. The father can only participate passively. His information source begins in the region of the woman's heart and runs to his right ear. Stag tracks run from the pile of bones right at the bottom up to the point of intersection with the horizontal on the man's side of the vertical borderline.

Division of worlds. Impossible to overcome these borders. The stag is the animal to be killed. Its footprints, however, are still visible. An animal that goes to its limits, that appears in times of danger, moving forward and bringing change. The stag as a creature of transition.

Picture 7: "Stag Leader" (1949)

Taking the initiative, assuming responsibility? Trying to be a leader where before there was alienation and pathlessness? Trying to unite the different parental radii after all? Labyrinth of the forefathers? Vain attempts at fusion?

Beuys didn't want to go back to mothers.

Beuys: "Biography is more than a purely personal affair. By biography I understand the development of all things."

Picture 8: "Stag with Human Head" (1955)

Man remains the prisoner of his own animality. Moreover, between his broad antlers, he is dependent on nutritional rhythms and receives pulsating currents. His only chance lies in the wedge next to his heart. A wedge for penetrating, drilling, turning, changing. "For Beuys, drawing is a description to go with his lifeline, an extracorporeal flow of energy that was never cut off." Right from the very beginning.

Picture 9: "Stag Leader" (1948)

This is one of Beuys' earliest images of the placenta. A spiral is running vertically from the placenta through a sun/moon symbol to a cross and from this to a crystal altar. There is a triple figuration in between. A stag with two figures beside it. The ellipse round the placenta is reminiscent of a dividing spindle. A situation of separation. From the spiral and placenta zone, a curved line runs to the stag's antlers and through the figure on the left back to the spiral.

The picture is reminiscent of "The Parents", a drawing which he did not do until 10 years later. For Beuys, the spiral stands for borderline experiences and for listening closely. It points to a place where everything began and where everything will lead to. Listening to processes of evolution. The antlers as a symbol of dependency on unconscious placental cycles. The cross as a symbol of cutting off what has gone before and indicating a new starting point.

The stag is everything that is left over. Ambivalent substance. Here, too, the crystal in the shape of a wedge. A symbol of clarity, sharpness and hardness. What was fluid before is now compact. The whole picture is behind a falling veil. "Light from the crystal points in the opposite direction. It illuminates these aspects."

Question marks. An offering. For what? The leader. For whom? The receiver/transmitter. Question marks. “At this very dead point of the crystal altar, the conditions are reversed”, as Dieter Koeplin remarks, and new energy arises.

The stag leader who is delivered, who has “come to the world”. An initiator of “evolution”, as this drawing is referred to elsewhere. Birth and being born as a possible beginning of history and stories.

I will return to this process of reversal at the end of this paper.

Picture 10: “The Sea” (1949) and Picture 11: “Inner Fjords” (1950)

These drawings announce something in the making. Pulsating currents and waves that turn in on a border area and then out again. Something new is forming out of a mussel-like placenta. The early stages of an organism, embedded in a “primary fluid”. Here, too, there is movement in the opposite direction. Spaces, cavities, lacunas which are connected to one another. Liquid, flowing, collecting. Sources of food and growth.

Picture 12: “Ocean” (no date)

Here, too, the structures are reminiscent of intraplacental vessels, intervillous spaces, villi and lacunas.

Picture 13: “Before Birth” (1949)

New life begins delicately and in seclusion; the lines of the drawing can barely be made out. Food streams flow down and collect in cavities with fetuses lying inside.

In numerous later performances, installations and drawings by Joseph Beuys, elements can be found that are reminiscent of different forms of placenta in animals and humans. The “ring” or “belt” placenta in his performances involving wrapping, e.g. “The Boss”, “Eurasia”, “Coyote”. The “labyrinth” placenta, arranged according to the principle of opposing flow of maternal and fetal circulation, possibly recurs in his spirals. A symbol of the experience of borderline situations.

In the human “pot” placenta, there is no such regular organisation. Pot-, sack- and basket-like containers are frequent in Beuys’ work – as the “altar” in “Stag Leader”, in “Horn Pot” (in *Secret Block*) or in “Sculpture of Receiver”. They are filled with strange contents, often painted with colours containing iron or even with blood.

In this human “full placenta”, the embryo penetrates deep into the maternal tissue, immersing itself as it were in her blood. This type of placenta is only formed by the child (“Plastic Art = Everything”). During the separation from the maternal tissue at birth, these blood lakes are opened up.

Because of this, and due to the fact that the human birth channel is narrower and more winding than in animals, birth involves a greater risk for humans than for animals. Consequently, in the course of evolution, humans have probably arrived at the most complicated and most dangerous way of “coming to the world”.

Picture 14: "Before Birth" (1950)

The Earth, a mountain, a cave; the inside as a placenta. Two umbilical cords separated from one another. Blood vessels leading to and away from the inside. Information flow? Transmitter/receiver? A double entity?

The colours are also twofold. The close, earthy, substantial brown and the distant, watery, rather spatial dark blue. It is here that the range of Joseph Beuys' artistic abilities become evident. By choosing a collage, he combines several levels of motifs. In the way in which the format and colours are arranged, a painting is created that draws the observer into the material used in the work. It is impossible to say where the boundary is between reality and illusion. There is no definite boundary between the two.

This primary isolation is not illuminated until the "state of being embedded" is disrupted. Separation and perception of a dark space. This is presented by the top sheet, which is torn off at the bottom edge, and by a dark blue one beneath.

The shock of this duality, this no longer being a unity, is lessened by the fluid transition to the sheet at the back, a primeval background in an earthy grey-brown colour.

Anticipation of a third entity brings clarity and rounds off the picture, and there is something conciliatory in the animation of its transitions.

Beuys: "Borderlines are the origins of life."

Picture 15: Drawing for Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" (1959)

With the idea of connecting the water cycles of the mountains with the (blood) circulation of women and with prenatal life, Joseph Beuys elaborates the ideas of Leonardo da Vinci.

He made the sketches for the examination work of his wife, Eva Beuys, with the significant title "The Landscapes in the Backgrounds of Leonardo da Vinci's Paintings". Keeping in mind Mona Lisa's smile, when we see what Beuys inserts instead of it, we cannot refrain from a little irony: it makes me think of his information model of the transmitter (here a woman) and the receiver (here the artist).

Beuys didn't want to go back to mothers, but "he hadn't cut off the umbilical cord of memory". It was here that he saw a chance of making progress. All the representations that flow into art are ramifications of a knowledge supplied from the very beginning.

Picture 16: "Stag Monuments in Snowland" (1954)

The landscapes in Beuys' work are not Mediterranean ones. They are characterised by cold and barrenness and have a rather existential liveliness. They are about surviving. Here, too, a spiral passes through a narrow space flanked again by wedges. The spiral is reminiscent of the floating tangle of space in Grözinger's book about children's drawings, perhaps a way of expressing the experience of intrauterine existence.

Picture 17: “Untitled” (1956)

Change of landscape, the scene of dramatic changes. Being thrown and washed ashore. Landing on slanting ground, into what is coming. Glacial area. A cool fact. The cross as the point of intersection between two changing forms of existence. “Notation”. Held on. Enlarged. The circle of the Irish cross. According to Beuys, transmission of this moment to the past and the future. Biography and history.

Picture 18: “Nature” (1947)

Rugged nature and motherly tenderness. Confrontation, but also support. Yielding. The urge to connect and penetrate. Something dark and strong-willed in contact with delicate sensation takes shape.

I will come back to the confrontation between man and nature at the end.

Picture 19: “Incarnation – Four Mountain Ranges Broken Open – Female Guardians of Birth” (1950)

A solidified state of nature being broken open. Constricting mountains. A doorway to past and future life. Chunks of chocolate. A “Beuys block” as well. The fractured elements face inwards, towards the state of origin. What was once fluid – be it stone, chocolate or life – solidified and broken off. Why? By what? For what purpose? The solidified as a casting. Energy in compressed form. Form as an idea of will. Also the will to throw light on these aspects (“mountain lamps” on the left). Light and, with it, warmth. To melt what has solidified. Melting down again. Transforming. Into new associations.

Picture 20: “Me” (1960)

Birth and identity. Transmission and emergence of prenatal moods – Beuys would probably say “tones” – within one’s own personality and on different levels of being. Continuity. Experience of self. Contact and exchange.

Picture 21: “Bathtub” (1960 = 1921)

Is evolution thus the continued history of acceptance and endurance of our own personal smallness and, consequently, our vulnerability?

Beuys: “The phenomenon, as it was, has a justification in itself . . . It means exactly what is present . . . Its specific form is a correct answer to the problem of its time.”

Picture 22: “Cutting the Umbilical Cord” (1974)

To cut off and take leave of megalofantasies and expectations that all that flows will keep on flowing? Just for us? We have come to a junction in our evolution, and we have to come to a decision.

Picture 23: "Back Support for a Man of Slender Build (Hare Type) of the 20th Century a.d." (1972)

Our decision will depend on our leaning for support on old forms of (over)sensitivity, which we feel particularly in places we have paid little attention to up to now. Changing old forms of (over)sensitivity into a new kind of sensitiveness.

Picture 24: Blackboard drawing "Letter from London" (1977)

Steps of analysis are steps of evolution. On the left again the placenta symbol above a mythological circle, an ancient cover. The symbol of the cut umbilical cord in between. Breaking away from illusory traditions, however, can only happen after a progressive revival of one's own personal history. By going back to our own origins, new ways of viewing the present are created. In the centre, a figure is taking shape that indicates the appropriate direction. Dimensions. Information means acknowledging our own substance, but also our transience. Synthesis means assuming responsibility ourselves for "new covers" and "circles".

Picture 25: "The End of the 20th Century" (1983)

Self-description as a necessary condition for working with existing material exemplifies 20th-century art. At the end of the 20th century, perhaps the end of art itself, Beuys once again broadens one of the central points of this concept of art.

It becomes clear that, with his principle of plastic art, he does not merely want to create a symbolic form of expression, and certainly not a memorial. He wants to set something in motion. A form of energy that has always been present.

In the following, I will mainly take up the ideas of Johannes Stüttgen, which seem to me to be important in this context.

Each basalt pillar was milled into a cone. This new shape was then put back into its original material, with the interface lined with felt and loam, thus allowing independence and freedom of movement of the new shape embedded in its old form. Both are made of the same material. "The boulders are like individuals, with eyes, that can see something that we cannot yet see. They know what they see, and it is extremely heavy." They have been laid down, unfinished and questioning. What can be done with them? Their massiveness is imposing. You cannot get away from them. They are there. They come from far away, from the distant "origins of evolution". Their final state, cooled down and hardened, way back in time a fluid energy mass in a volcanic cone. "Warmth" energy transformed into "cold" energy. The cause lies in the past. Something has been done with them. They have been broken off, separated, cut into shape and used. Now they are here. "It is not the end of the Earth that is meant, but the end of an era". A caesura.

"Cutting into the very depths, right into our foundations, into matter." And the stones know it. "The Earth as a whole is involved, and of course humans as well."

"Two forms of energy are colliding at the end of the 20th century, critically intensified, that of 'nature' and that of 'antinature', of humans. The two forms of energy combine in the concept of 'plastic art', for Beuys the only possible solution."

Picture 26: “Reversal”

Beuys: “All of nature will be made by humans.” Humans as the subject of history. The basalt pillars as “plastic art”. As energy from the inside of the Earth to the outside. The pieces of cone as “sculptures”. Elaborated from the outside to the inside, but with the impetus in this case coming from the inside of a human being.

“In this way, the contact that takes place between nature and humans sets something in motion, a movement that at first points back to its place of origin. In order to act, humans have to join up again with the will that created them.”
Overtones of Otto Rank.

Picture 27: “The End”

As a result of these explanations, we can see, as *Beuys* said, that “the artist doesn’t have to invent anything, but has to discover interrelations”. “The question marks are the titles.” “To understand all of this is a grave misunderstanding. In art there is absolutely nothing to be understood. Nothing at all. The only sign appropriate to art is the question mark. Understanding can at the most mean going to stand somewhere else.”

The pictures cannot be explained to the dead hare any more than they can be explained to the dead stone. He can only be brought to life by the liveliness of whoever is with him. *Joseph Beuys* did not take up the placenta motif again until 1985, only a few weeks before his death, in his herbarium drawings entitled “Ombelico di Venere. Cotyledon umbilicus veneris”. At the beginning of this congress he would have been 74 years old.

“If it weren’t for these pictures, I would express these things in a quite different way.” You can, of course, understand all of this quite differently. You can get anywhere with words. My notes for this paper are still in the books. Tomorrow I could make a quite different story out of it.

Beuys: “Plastic art has to be like a footprint in the sand.” *Beuys* leaves and with him his art. We are left and have to make our own sense out of all this.

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