

JOSEPH BEUYS
THE ARTIST AS HEALER

Jennifer McLerran
Art History Research Paper
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Joseph Beuys
Stuhl mit Fett (*Chair with Fat*)
1964; 47 × 42 × 100 cm. (18 × 16 × 39 in.)
Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum, coll. Karl Ströher



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"Objection, evasion, distrust, and irony are signs of health. Everything absolute belongs to pathology."

(Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil)

Introduction

The recently deceased German artist, Joseph Beuys (1921-1985), attempted in his sculpture and performance art to elucidate processes of flux and transformation fundamental to the natural world. In so doing, he illuminated the schismatic dualism produced and propagated by contemporary Western culture. The dualisms of mind and body, spiritual and material, man and nature, have resulted from our culture's predominant reliance upon rational, absolute modes of thought. This absolutism has led to abstraction and this abstraction has all too often become a weapon against the individual. Beuys attempted to heal the schism wrought by Western dualism through production of work intended to effect a transformation of the thought processes of the viewer.

In the introductory essay to Paul Radin's study of the trickster, The Trickster, A Study in American Indian Mythology, Stanley Diamond expresses a belief that the dualism of Christianity, most evident in The Book of Job, has caused a dangerous abstraction in our culture. Things and people are perceived as "good" or "evil"

rather than as non-absolute, and this abstraction has become "a weapon against the person."¹ This abstraction has allowed us to go so far as to commit acts of cultural genocide, as in the cases of the European Jews and the American Indians.

Diamond states:

At the beginning of the Book of Job, then, the concrete ambivalence of the human condition is denied, good and evil have a dual rather than a single source as in the complex unity of the primitive consciousness. In the Book of Job integrated acts have been disintegrated into contrasting ideas: human behavior is now seen as representing, and being driven by, principles that are, in the first instance, abstracted from the reality of actual behavior. Actual behavior is never wholly good nor wholly evil: such pristine purity is never encountered, least of all in primitive societies. It is only with the civilized reversal of principles and persons that such an attitude becomes conceivable; the abstraction becomes a weapon against the person.²

Beuys borrowed elements from diverse past and contemporary cultures which embody reconciliation of opposites, hoping to integrate these "foreign" modes of thought and perception with our more accustomed perceptions, affecting a transformation through metaphor. He resurrected more familiar symbols and concepts of western culture as well--elements of our culture which have lain dormant but which, nevertheless, carry enormous transformational power through illumination. Beuys alluded to and borrowed from, among other things, alchemy, psychoanalysis, shamanism, trickster mythology, the sacred as expressed through ritual, and the homeopathic healing process.

Beuys introduced a temporal element to his work in an attempt to facilitate a revelatory process, thereby appropriating a ritual element necessary to experience of the sacred in various cultures.

The temporal element is a necessary constituent of the revelatory process which Beuys attempted to facilitate in the viewer, thereby changing the viewer's thought processes and facilitating an evolutionary process not only in the individual but in the wider culture of which that individual is a member.

Beuys' ultimate goal was to catalyze social change, to heal a culture which has lost its vitality through overreliance upon the rational, through a dualistic removal of man from elements of his environment necessary to integration and wholeness.

The Healing Function of Art

"The Bathtub" (1960), Station 1 in Beuys' 1979 retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, is a metaphor expressive of the wound or trauma of birth. In separation from the mother, the newborn experiences on the physical level the same problematic schism central to Beuys' ideas. Beuys says that "The Bathtub" expresses "the wound or trauma experienced by every person as they come into contact with the hard material conditions of the world through birth."³

Beuys shows consistent concerns with pain and suffering as positive, expansive elements of human experience and the artist's role as facilitator of the healing process necessary to growth and transcendence of the limiting physical conditions of life. His repeated use of materials associated with pain, sickness, birth and death (adhesive bandages, gauze, syringes, x-rays, bones, blood)--all indicating situations of trauma, or chaos--is appropriate to his expressed artistic goal of producing "healthy chaos, healthy amorphousness", necessary to the impetus to reintegration of a sick system.⁴



Bathtub, 1960

This element of chaos is central to Beuys' Theory of Sculpture (which will be discussed more thoroughly below). Beuys explains this connection in reference to a personal experience of physical and mental breakdown:

The positive aspect of this is the start of a new life. The whole thing is a therapeutic process. For me it was a time when I realized the part the artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process. That relates to medicine, or what people call alchemy or shamanism

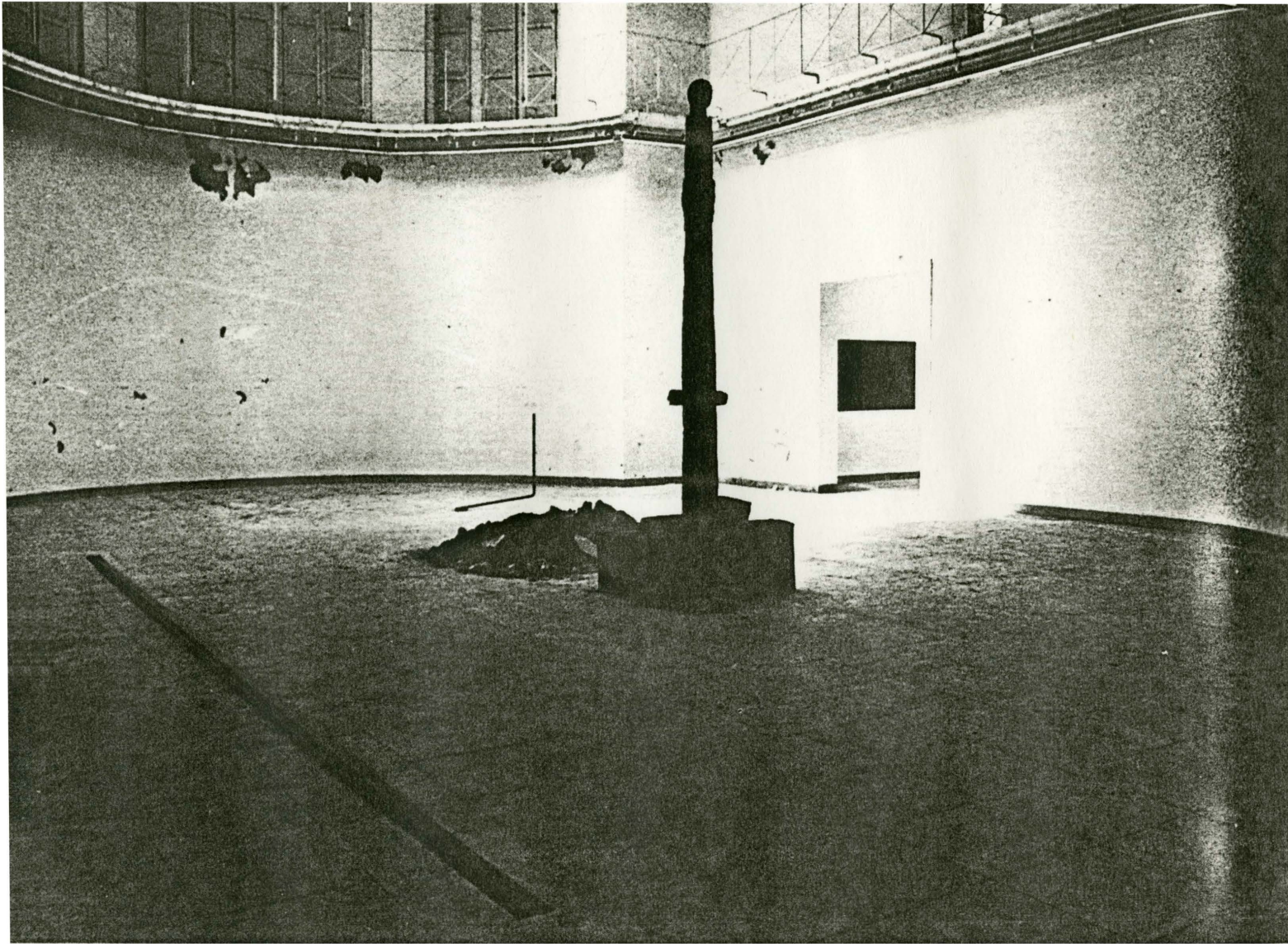
Out of it came the Theory of Sculpture. By that I mean that I saw the relationship between the chaos I had experienced and a sculptural analogy. Chaos can have a healing character, coupled with the idea of open movement which channels the warmth of chaotic energy into order or form.⁵

Beuys views facilitation of the healing process in the individual as the necessary antecedent of an analogous process in the wider culture of which that individual is a part. The collective wound of Western culture which Beuys' work most directly addresses is that inflicted by World War II. Beuys dramatically invokes the traumatic experiences of World War II through imagery associated with Nazi Germany (railroad tracks suggestive of the tracks leading to concentration camps, felt suits referring to the clothing of victims of those camps, tallow referring to their melted-down bodies, bones, blood, etc.). In reference to "Concentration Camp Essen", Beuys states:

This was not a description of the events in the camp but of the content and meaning of catastrophe. That must be the starting point--like a kind of substance--something that surmounts "Concentration Camp Essen". Similia similibus curantur: heal like with like, that is the homeopathic healing process.⁶



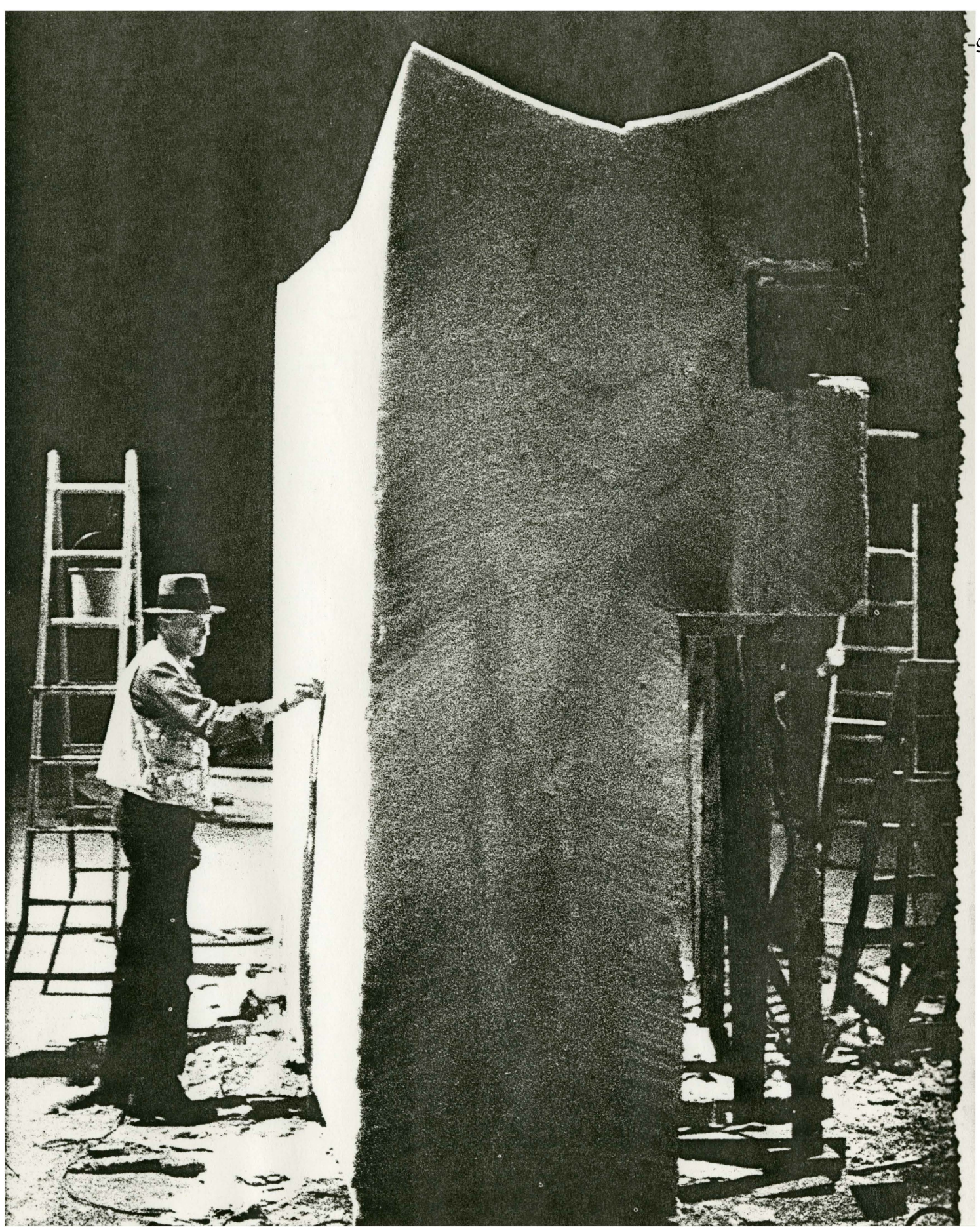
Auschwitz, 1958



△ 421 Tram stop, 1976. installed in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1976



Felt Suit, 1970



Tallow, 1977

The Homeopathic Healing Process

The homeopathic healing process effects a cure through reintroduction, in progressively larger amounts, of the pathological agent. Beuys views dualism as the pathological agent which has led to the disintegration of western culture, and he views World War II and Nazi Germany as among the most dramatic expressions of that pathological dualism.

"The Art Pill" embodies Beuys' view of art as an agent of cure. In reference to this work, Beuys states:

Art as a pill to swallow and digest or as an ointment to rub in . . . healing by-products emerged: art to rub in in the form of ointment, art in sausage form to slice off.

In the course of my sculptural attempts I noticed that usually something emerged in opposition, something that could be encompassed by the concept "death". Something was expressed that had warmth character in opposition to the coldness of death, and which now and then evolved like a constant companion in extremely contracted or tiny forms, in contrast to the warmth forms which have an involuted character. I recognized that warmth and coldness were sculptural principles, on a level above space, which corresponded to expansion and contraction, amorphous and crystalline, chaos and determined form. At the same time I gained a clarified perception of the essence of time, movement and space.

According to Beuys, art yields clarified perception through illumination of opposites, yielding the realization that, in order to be whole, everything must contain its opposite. He agrees with Nietzsche that "everything absolute belongs to pathology."⁸ Attempting to effect a cure, a reintegration of a "sick" culture, the artist appropriates elements of the pathological condition, reintroducing them in a homeopathic manner.



Art as a pill to swallow and digest or as an ointment to rub in

Vehicle Art: The chief of the stagleaders could plug in his energy anywhere in the environment, whether it was in the inner surfaces of a space with flat walls or a round one. Damaged or crumbling spaces too, and even amorphous ones, gave him energy to bake his cakes. He did not despair when at first all he succeeded in producing were flat and inconspicuous fritters which contracted violently in the pan. On the contrary this reinforced his will since he had never lost his conviction of the effectiveness of his ART PILL. After all, healing by-products emerged: art to rub in in the form of ointment, art in sausage form to slice off.

In the course of my sculptural attempts I noticed that usually something emerged in opposition, something that could be encompassed by the concept 'death'. Something was expressed that had warmth character in opposition to the coldness of death, and which now and then evolved like a constant companion in extremely contracted or tiny forms, in contrast to the warmth forms which have an involuted character. I recognized that warmth and coldness were sculptural principles, on a level above space, which corresponded to expansion and contraction, amorphous and crystalline, chaos and determined form. At the same time I gained a clarified perception of the essence of time, movement and space. (HR, 1970.)

136 The Art Pill, 1963, felt

The Psychoanalytic Healing Process

The healing process Beuys hopes to effect can be viewed on another level as analogous to the cure effected by the psychoanalytic process, most specifically by the process of symbolic insight.

In Interpretation of Schizophrenia, Silvano Arieti describes the process of the psychotic breakdown as occurring in several distinct stages: 1) an initial stage of intense anxiety and panic; 2) a period of great confusion in which everything is experienced as bizarre and disorienting, resulting in withdrawal to a "safe" interior world; 3) a period of psychotic insight (explained below) and subsequent deeper withdrawal.⁹ The process is essentially a progressive breakdown of socialization, of the ability to share and communicate with others. This culminates in the psychotic insight, a period of relief from the intense confusion of the preceding phase because things suddenly seem to "make sense". The psychotic has constructed a new, personal symbol system which operates according to its own logic, independent of the external world. The period of relief is brief, however, because the inability of this new mental construction to mesh with the external world is the repeated source of anxiety. Consequently, to protect this construct, to reinforce it and thereby alleviate anxiety, the psychotic draws further into the world of his own construction and further away from the constructs of society. The psychotic often develops and employs verbal or visual symbol systems as a further means of self-reinforcement.

The psychotic develops his own set of symbols, what Arieti terms "paleosymbols" (he uses the prefix "paleo"--meaning old--

because paleosymbols seem to be the production of an older, more "primitive" mode of thought). The symbols of the psychotic's culture come to lack relevance to his personal symbol system, carrying progressively less emotional value. The individual's actions, as well, become desocialized and highly idiosyncratic, thus appearing bizarre to others and furthering the process of separation.

To further facilitate retreat and, thus, further the process of the psychotic break, the individual rejects and projects onto others those aspects of the self originally derived from them. He must reject elements in others that would allow him to identify with those individuals. Through projection, he gives back to others, or figures which he identifies with them (for example, a male authority figure as symbolic of the father) what they originally contributed to his personality. This process of projection results in paranoid delusions of persecution. The newly-formed, fragile self cannot tolerate condemnation; consequently, any self-condemnation felt is projected onto others and those others (rather than the self) are perceived as the sources of condemnation (as the persecutors) and rejected.

The therapist's task is to identify the paleosymbols operative in the psychotic's system of thought. He then presents the individual with culturally-agreed-upon symbols, attempting to mesh them with the psychotic's paleosymbols. The therapist must enter and operate within the psychotic's world while simultaneously retaining enmeshment with the culturally-shared world of symbols within which he normally operates.

The symbol system operative in the culture form which the psychotic has withdrawn is one from which that individual is emotionally removed; however, he can still intellectually understand the meaning of those symbols, even if he perceives no personal relevance in them. The therapist, through the process of "symbolic insight", attempts to connect shared symbols with the psychotic's paleosymbols, restoring the personal relevance of the symbols shared by the individual's culture. The individual is thereby (ideally) drawn out of psychosis and back into society.

The Nazis' rise to power in Germany, resulting in World War II and extermination of the Jews still profoundly affects contemporary German culture on both the individual and collective level. This episode in the history of Western civilization is the psychosis which Beuys' work attempts to cure. The initial stage of the breakdown, typified by intense anxiety and panic, occurred with the defeat of the Germans in World War I, resulting in severe economic depression and castigation by the world community. The rise of the Nazis and their restructuring of German society was the second stage, typified by disorientation and confusion. Hitler's "solution" (the extermination of the Jews and other undesirables and the dominance over all non-Aryans) was the psychotic insight.

This psychotic episode in world history was characterized by an elaborate and highly rigid paleosymbol system, of which the swastika was the most ubiquitous example. The swastika, an ancient symbol found in diverse cultures (usually symbolic of flux and repeated cyclical change), came to possess a unique meaning within

the psychotic "personality" of the German culture. The Nazis encouraged the Germans to perceive themselves as unique, possessing innate qualities which separated them from others. Consequently, Germany withdrew from world culture as the psychotic withdraws from society. The rest of world culture came to be seen as adversarial, threatening to the psychotic's self-constructed world. Paranoid delusion was central to the way in which Nazi Germany perceived itself in relation to the rest of the world and in relation to the Jewish people. The Jews represented that part of German culture which was not indigenous. Since a central aim of the Nazis was to develop an identity wholly Aryan, all aspects of the culture not in accord with this desired identity were projected onto the Jews. The Jews came to be seen as persecutors. The newly forming Germanic identity could not tolerate this element in conflict with the desired identity. Consequently, the Jews had to be rejected, eliminated.

A further behavior developing out of paranoid delusion was seen in the rise of the Nazis. While the psychotic individual rejects and projects onto others undesirable qualities in himself, another process takes place. He feels free to take on the characteristics and identities that he previously wished to attribute to himself but couldn't because of the restrictions of society. He acts out and adopts behaviors which were previously only fantasies. These delusions are able to grow after the unpleasant feelings about himself are eliminated by projection onto others. There are no longer any negative feelings present which

would prevent these delusions of grandeur from being realized. Accordingly, the Nazis had to project onto the Jews undesirable qualities in their culture before carrying out their grand delusional scheme of world dominance.

Even the goose step and the Nazi salute are manifestations of the psychotic experience. They, like the mannerisms developed by schizophrenics, were attempts by the Nazis to facilitate a further rift between themselves and the rest of western culture. They reinforced the Nazis' view of themselves as unique while, at the same time, they served to reinforce the perception of others that they were unlike them.

Attempting to heal the psychosis of German culture, Beuys employs the paleosymbols of Nazi Germany, pairing them with symbols of wider significance. He attempts to facilitate symbolic insight by utilizing myths and symbols which reflect a view of man as integrated with his environment rather than as at an abstracted remove. He attempts to mesh these symbols with the paleosymbols of a sick culture, thereby facilitating a cure.

The use of the psychoanalytic paradigm in an attempt to understand Beuys' work leads us to a realization of the connection and interaction of psychological and physical processes of regeneration. As Donald Kuspit states in "Beuys: Fat, Felt and Alchemy", an article appearing in the May 1980 issue of Art in America: "This idea of inner revolution as the necessary if not sufficient condition of outer revolution is the ultimate justification for the spiritual purpose of artistic alchemy."¹⁰ The psychoanalytic process of symbolic insight is similar to the

homeopathic healing process in that both involve an integration of the agent of sickness with the new healthy system. Neither involves a purging or purification of the system, expelling the offending agent. Both, though utilizing different means to effect a cure, recognize the pathological agent's continued presence as a necessary constituent of the healthy system. Neither advocates the purity of a system based upon an absolute, dualistic system of values.

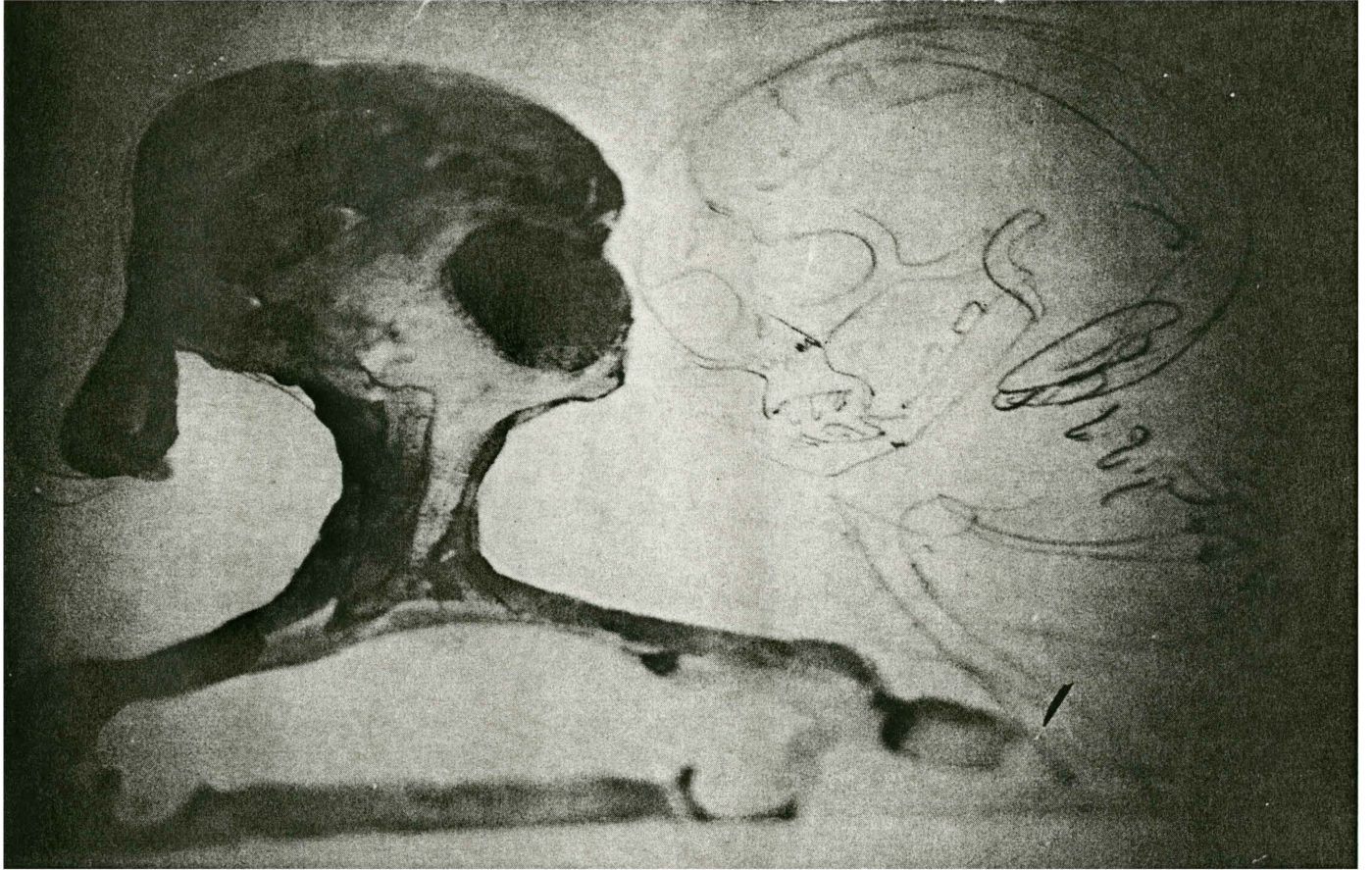
The Alchemical Process

"Death and the Maiden", a traditional Germanic image (one variation of which is presented here) and one of Beuys' frequent images, is an example of an image which can be viewed as a paleo-symbol of German culture but also as an image evocative of another process employed by Beuys as paradigmatic of non-dualism--alchemy. "Death and the Maiden" represents the conjunction of opposing principles--male and female, life and death--uniting seemingly irreconcilable elements. It closely parallels the androgyne, a symbol central to alchemy. The androgyne is a symbol of life and the productive powers of nature made manifest through the reconciliation of opposites.¹¹ Kuspit states: "The sense of the unity of the opposites--the fundamental interrelation--of birth and death is crucial for alchemy, which takes the existential cycle of nature as the metaphor for its own essentializing activity."¹²

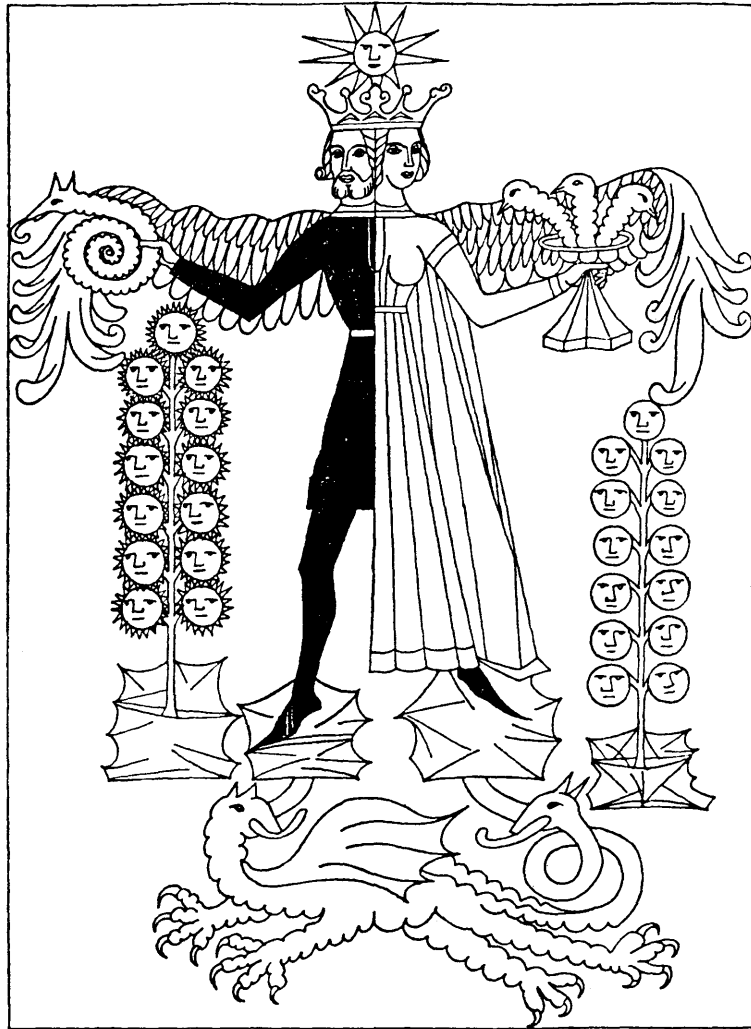
This view of nature as the fundamental source of metaphor for expression of inner states reveals Beuys as an inheritor of the Northern Romantic tradition. Death as the source of vitality is



Figure 5. Hans Baldung, «Death and the Maiden,» c. 1510-11, panel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



86 Death and the Maiden, 1957, drawing



The Hermetic androgyne – king and queen at the same time – stands on the dragon of Nature, between the ‘tree of the sun’ and the ‘tree of the moon’. The androgyne has wings and carries in its right hand a coiled snake and in its left hand a cup with three snakes. Its male half is dressed in red, its female half in white. – From the manuscript of Michael Cochem (ca. 1530) in the Vadian Library, St Gallen.

also a concept identifying Beuys as a descendant of Northern Romanticism. Kuspit explains:

Beuys's art can be regarded as an exploration--one might say a deliberate evocation--of death, as if by letting loose the forces of decay he might effect a rebirth, purging material to make it quintessentially vital. This enterprise has an air of Northern Romanticism about it, the assumption that only the Germanic-Northern spirit (the two are synonymous for Beuys) is sufficiently death-obsessed to be life-renewing.¹³

Paracelsus, the 16th century philosopher and reformer of medicine and pharmacology stated, "Decay is the beginning of all birth . . . it transforms shape and essence, the forces and virtues of nature. Decay is the midwife of very great things! It causes many things to rot, that a noble fruit may be born It brings about a birth and rebirth of forms a thousand times improved."¹⁴

Alchemy utilizes the transformation of base metals to precious metals as a paradigm of the transformation or rebirth of the soul. Titus Burkhardt says: ". . . alchemy may be called the art of the transmutations of the soul."¹⁵ Burkhardt describes further how alchemy regards the soul as a substance: ". . . it looks on the play of the powers of the soul from a purely cosmological point of view, and it treats the soul as a 'substance' which has to be purified, dissolved, and crystallized anew."¹⁶ Paracelsus said that the goal of alchemy is to discover and articulate the inherent nature or power of a thing. This constitutes spiritual revelation of a substance and causes transformation. Beuys, according to Kuspit, sees alchemical art as a "'transmission' of transformation. Transformation is the

'spiritual-divine' element in the 'earthly' material, and art is the demonstration of the spiritual-divine in the earthly, and the earthly form of the spiritual-divine."¹⁷

The Sacred

The transformation of substances as expressive of the spiritual is central to Beuys' work. Beuys uses materials which evidence processes of transformation (his materials will be examined more thoroughly in the context of his Theory of Sculpture below), illuminating flux as a fundamental quality of life. This transformation can only occur through time; hence, a temporal element is necessary to apprehension of the spiritual element in his work. Consequently, materials which change through time and performances, which are temporally-based inherently, are conspicuous elements of Beuys' work.

Beuys' performance pieces are filled with contradictory, seemingly nonsensical images and actions. Kuspit says: "In his performances, Beuys means to live contradiction--to restore contradiction as a source of spiritual change, which alone can generate the power necessary for spiritual development."¹⁸

Francis Huxley, in The Way of the Sacred, sees self-contradictory statements (as Beuys' works are) as the basis of experience of the sacred.¹⁹ He explains it in terms of the oxymoron:

The sacred is by no means a single or simple emotion. It is better understood as what grammarians call an oxymoron--a figure of speech that combines contradictory terms, such as "cruel kindness", or "falsely true". . . . these terms change sign. For the sacred is a process as well as a state--a process which, if it divides, must also unite, but which can unite only if it has previously divided.²⁰

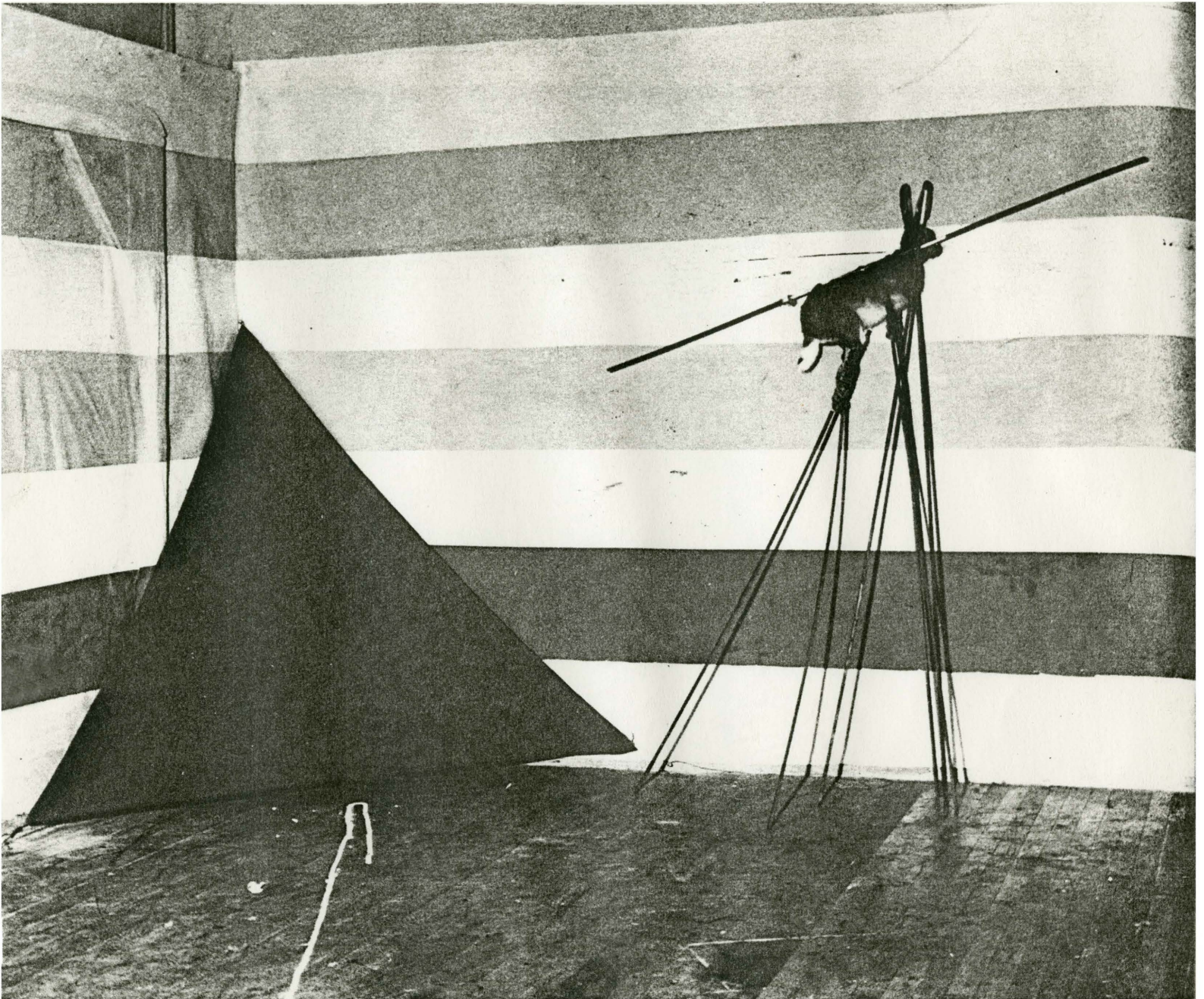
The paradoxical quality of the oxymoron yields the feeling or perception of mystery necessary to the sacred. Beuys' repeated use of the cross can be viewed as a reference to this self-contradictory quality of the sacred. He uses it often as a symbol of the meeting point or interaction of opposites, as what Adriani, et. al. in Joseph Beuys, Life and Works term "the spiritual dialog of two views."²¹ In his performance piece, "Eurasia", Beuys uses the cross specifically as a symbol of Eurasia--the meeting of East and West.

The Trickster

One of the mythological archetypes expressive of non-dualism employed by Beuys is the trickster. Jung describes the typical characteristics of the trickster as found in the alchemical figure of Mercurius:

. . . his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and . . . his approximation to the figure of a saviour.²²

Jung further describes the trickster as "a faithful copy of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level."²³ The trickster, according to this theory, is essentially a personification of an earlier, more "primitive" level of consciousness in man's development. When man developed beyond the stage personified by the trickster to a "higher", more differentiated level of consciousness, the trickster became a myth. Man could, at this more differentiated (and dualistic) level separate and



161 From Eurasia, 1966



163 Eurasia, 1966. The object finished after the action

objectify the trickster element of his psychological make-up. The trickster is simultaneously animal (and consequently "inferior" to man) due to his lack of reason and consciousness and divine (and consequently "superior" to man) due to his super-human qualities.

The trickster possesses a pronounced dark side. He represents the "shadow", apparently harmless on the individual level, yet potentially harmful when activated en masse where the individual is submerged. Jung explains: "As soon as people get together in masses and submerge the individual the shadow is mobilized, and as history shows, may even be personified and incarnated."²⁴ As representative of the savage element in man, the "bad" or "evil" element requiring excision, the trickster element is usually repressed in our culture.

Jung says:

The trickster is a collective shadow figure, an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals. And since the individual shadow is never absent as a component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually. Not always, of course, as a mythological figure, but, in consequence of the increasing repression and neglect of the original mythologems, as a corresponding projection on other social groups and nations.²⁵

Beuys seems to address this tendency, due to repression, to project onto other cultural groups this "collective shadow figure" (similar to the psychotic's projection). His first performance piece in the United States (1974), "I Love America and America Loves Me", consisted of a week-long cohabitation of a

New York gallery with the animal regarded by numerous American Indian tribes as the trickster--the coyote. Beuys stated that the coyote represented Pre-Columbian America (before the dualism of Western thought caused a split of man from nature, a disintegration of the unity experienced by man and animals with the natural environment). Beuys entered the gallery via ambulance on a stretcher, an action symbolic of the trauma caused by western man's invasion of the American Indian culture.

Paul Radin in The Trickster, A Study in American Indian Mythology describes the role of the trickster--manifested in various tribes as Raven, Hare or Coyote--in American Indian culture:

In what must be regarded as its earliest and most archaic form, as found among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.²⁶

As noted earlier, in his introduction to Radin's study, Stanley Diamond contrasts the Indian's perception of human nature with that of his "conquerors". He sees the source of Western man's dualism in Christian theology, specifically in The Book of Job. Beuys provides us with, in the case of the American Indian, a prime example of the danger of dualism. Dualistic thought developed to such a degree of abstraction that, not only did it become a "weapon against the person" (as Diamond phrases it), but it became a weapon against an entire cultural group.



I Love America and America Loves Me, 1974



I Love America and America Loves Me, 1974



I Love America and America Loves Me, 1974

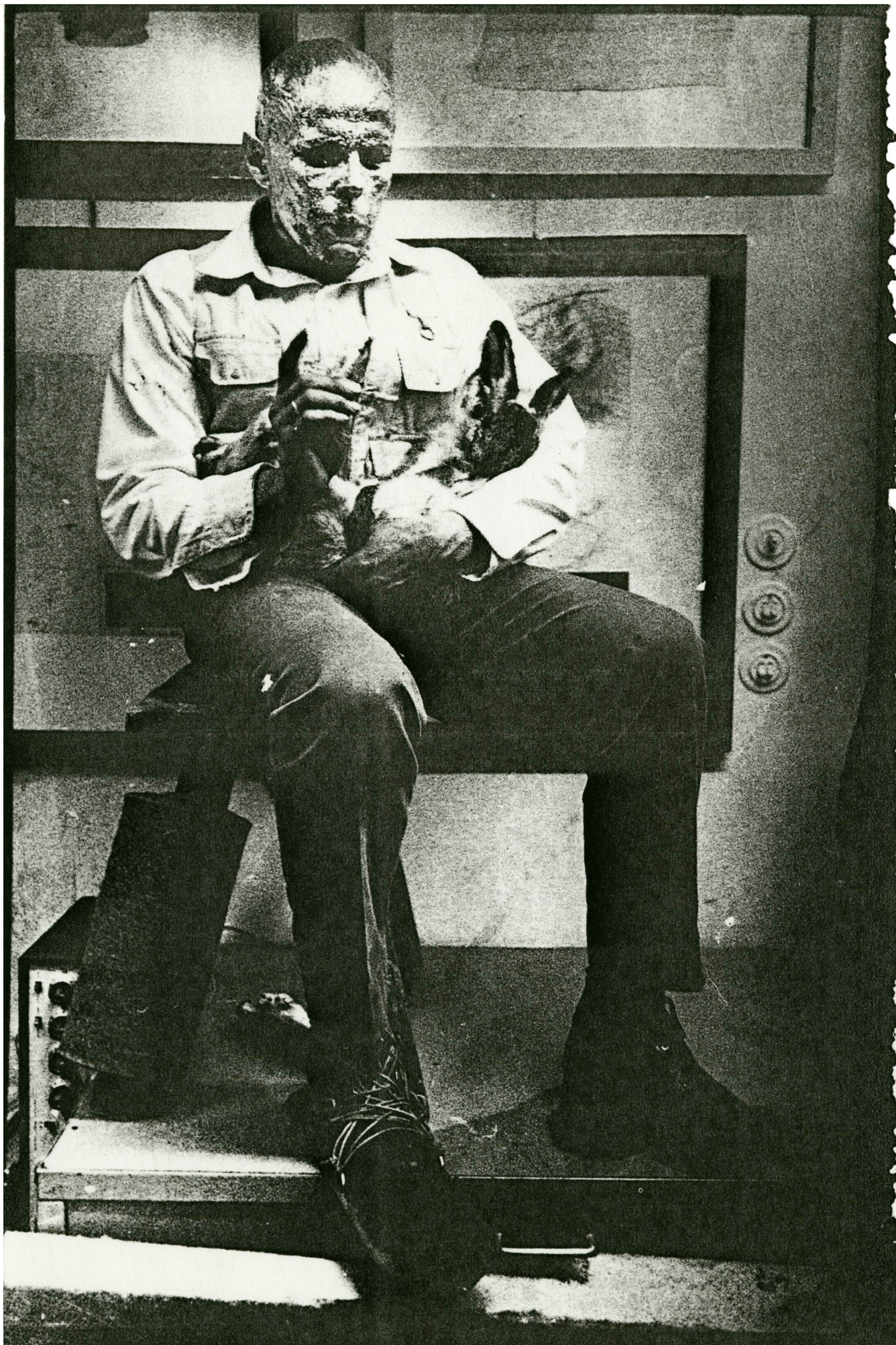


In another performance, "Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare", Beuys utilizes another manifestation and aspect of the trickster--the saviour aspect--in his use of the hare. Beuys stated that the dead, prostrate animal represented "the misunderstanding of Christ and his sacraficial death."²⁷ The dead hare, representative of the trickster, who Beuys symbolically attempts to resurrect through explanation of his artwork to, elucidates an aspect of the trickster explained by Jung. Jung sees the trickster as saviour as "a confirmation of the mythological truth that the wounded wounder is the agent of healing, and that the sufferer takes away suffering."²⁸ The saviour aspect is where the concepts of the trickster and the shaman converge.

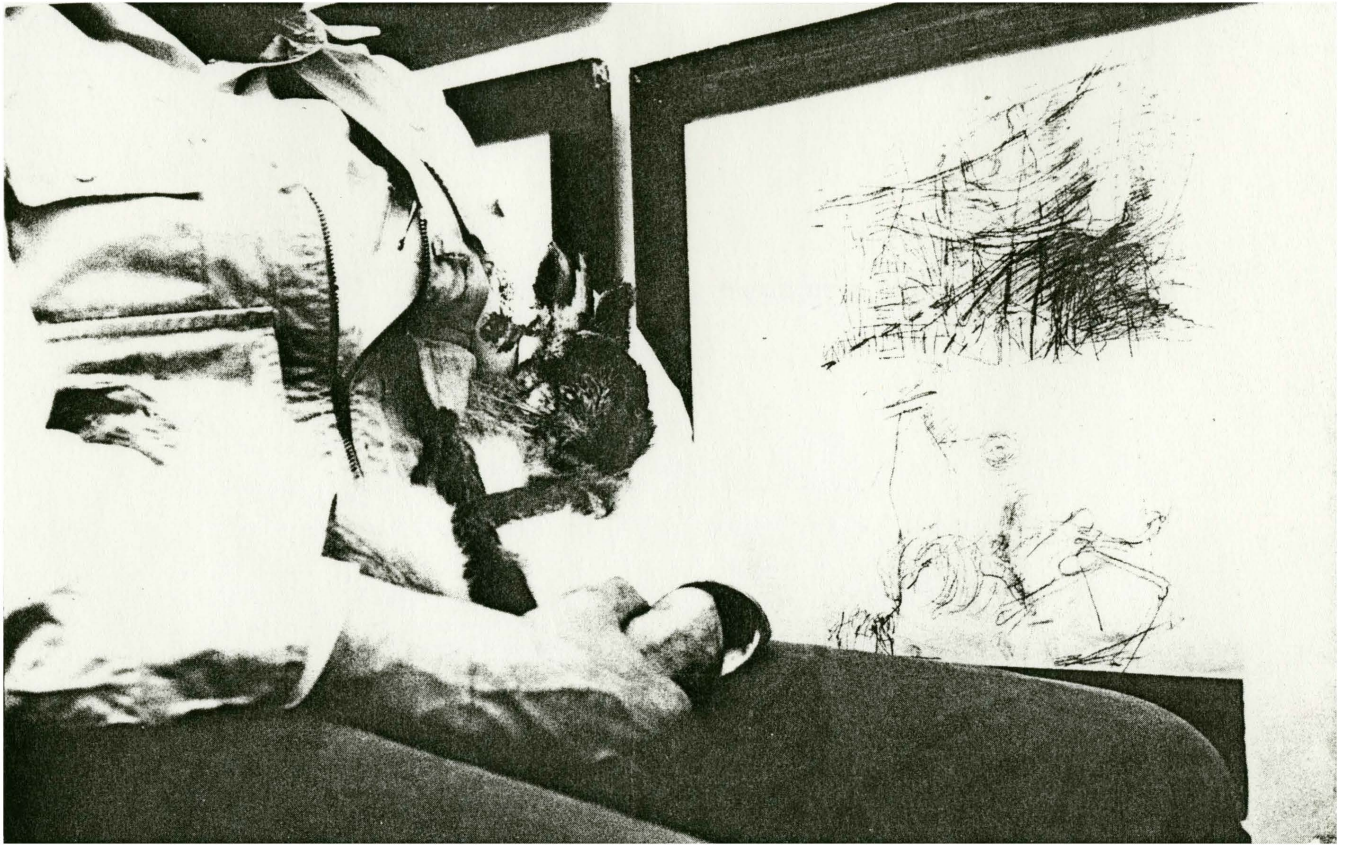
Shamanism

The shaman, another figure common to primitive cultures, is utilized by Beuys to illuminate the failure of dualism. Beuys repeatedly employs animals traditionally regarded as psychopomps (accompaniers of human souls to the underworld). In Shamanism, Archaic Technique of Ecstasy, Mircea Eliade explains the concept of the psychopomp:

From the most distant times all animals have been conceived either as psychopomps that accompany the soul into the beyond, or as the dead person's new form. Whether it is the "ancestor" or the "initiatory master", the animal symbolizes a real and direct connection with the beyond. In a considerable number of myths and legends all over the world the hero is carried into the beyond by an animal . . . among the Siberians and Altaians they can appear in the form of bears, wolves, stags, hares and in all kinds of birds



How to explain pictures to a dead hare, 1965



How to explain pictures to a dead hare. 1965, action



Beuys explains his use of animals traditionally viewed as psychopomps: "The figures of the horse, the stag, the swan and the hare constantly come and go: figures which pass freely from one level of existence to another, which represent the incarnation of the soul or the earthly form of spiritual beings with access to other regions."³⁰ Mercurius or Mercury, discussed earlier as a figure central to alchemy, was regarded as the messenger of the gods and the accompanier of souls to the underworld. Beuys relates the stag to Mercury:

The stag appears in times of distress and danger. It brings a special element: the warm positive element of life. At the same time it is endowed with spiritual powers and insight and is the accompanier of the soul . . . (the mercurial nature of the stag is expressed in its antlers. The flow of blood through them reflects a twelve-month cycle: the mobility of blood, sap, hormones) Antlers show the deep mystery of the bloodstream flowing from the interior and continuing to circulate out on the head. A stag's antlers are the emanation of its entire venous, hormonal and nervous systems throughout a yearly cycle. For me they relate to the inwardness of a feeling being, the soul power, like blood in an artery, represented here by the hare's blood in tubes extended by long copper feelers or antennae.³¹

Shamanism represents for Beuys a directness of experience which we have lost through intellectual abstraction. He views direct contact and involvement with the physical, concrete world as a corrective to the abstraction of experience through dualism. Tisdall says: "For Beuys the principle of shamanism represents a form of corrective, a richness at risk in a materialist world."³²

Beuys explains how he views the shaman as a paradigm of the transformational process affected through art:

I take this form of ancient behaviour as the idea of transformation through concrete processes of life, nature and history. My intention is obviously not to return to such earlier cultures but to stress the idea of transformation and of substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic.

Of course the shaman can operate genuinely only in a society that is still intact because it lies in an earlier stage of development. Our society is far from intact, but this too is a necessary stage. It is the point of crisis that sets in at every stage of history and which we can observe in the past. Once the intactness has gone, a kind of metamorphosis begins. So while shamanism marks a point in the past, it also indicates a possibility for historical development. It could be described as the deepest root of the idea of spiritual life. When people say that shamanistic practice is atavistic and irrational, one might answer that the attitude of contemporary scientists is equally old-fashioned and atavistic, because we should by now be at another stage of development in our relationship to material.

So when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances.³⁵

Beuys' Theory of Sculpture

Beuys' belief in direct involvement with the physical, concrete world as necessary to the transformational capacity of art is reflected in his Theory of Sculpture. His theory is an attempt to resolve, to integrate contradictions or opposing elements--organic/crystalline, warm/cold, amorphous/formed, chaos/order, etc. Beuys states:

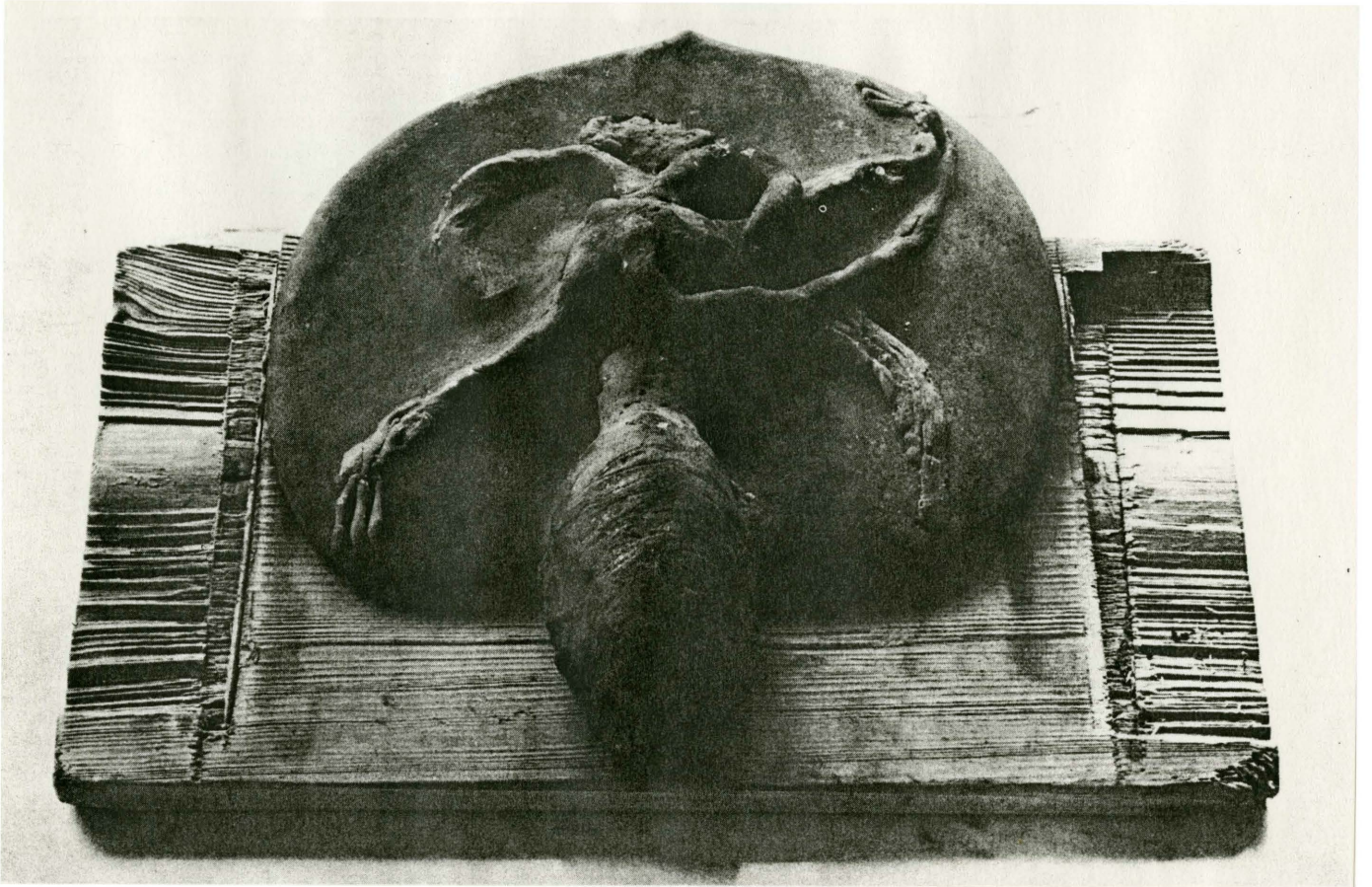
. . . it is the transformation of substance that is my concern in art, rather than the traditional aesthetic understanding of beautiful appearances. If creativity relates to the transformation, change and development of substance, then it can be applied to everything in the world, and is no longer restricted to art.

The idea of contact with material implies this wider concept of art and of human work and activity in general³⁴

Beuys' Theory of Sculpture is based upon processes observed in nature, specifically in processes manifested in bees. Bees store warmth within their bodies and produce wax (an organic, amorphous substance) as a body product which they use to construct a honeycomb (a crystalline, geometric structure) utilized for breeding and storage. The fluid, organic heat process is juxtaposed with the geometric, crystalline process of formation of the honeycomb. Beuys' use of wax and fat enables him to examine the processes manifested by bees, thereby better understanding the fundamental process of transformation from organic to crystallized systems. Beuys explains:

The heat organism of the bee colony is without a doubt the essential element of connection between the wax and fat and the bees. What had interested me about bees, or rather about their life system, is the total heat organization of such an organism and the sculpturally finished forms within this organization. On one hand bees have this element of heat, which is a very strong fluid element, and on the other hand they produce crystalline sculptures; they make regular geometric forms. Here we already find something of sculptural theory, as we do in the corners of fat, which also appear in certain situations in a geometric context. But the actual character of the exiting heat is a fluid element, whereby the fat is affected by the heat and thus flows off. From this undefined element of motion, by way of a diminishing element of movement, surfaces a form which appears in abstract, geometric configurations. This is practiced regularly by bees.³⁵

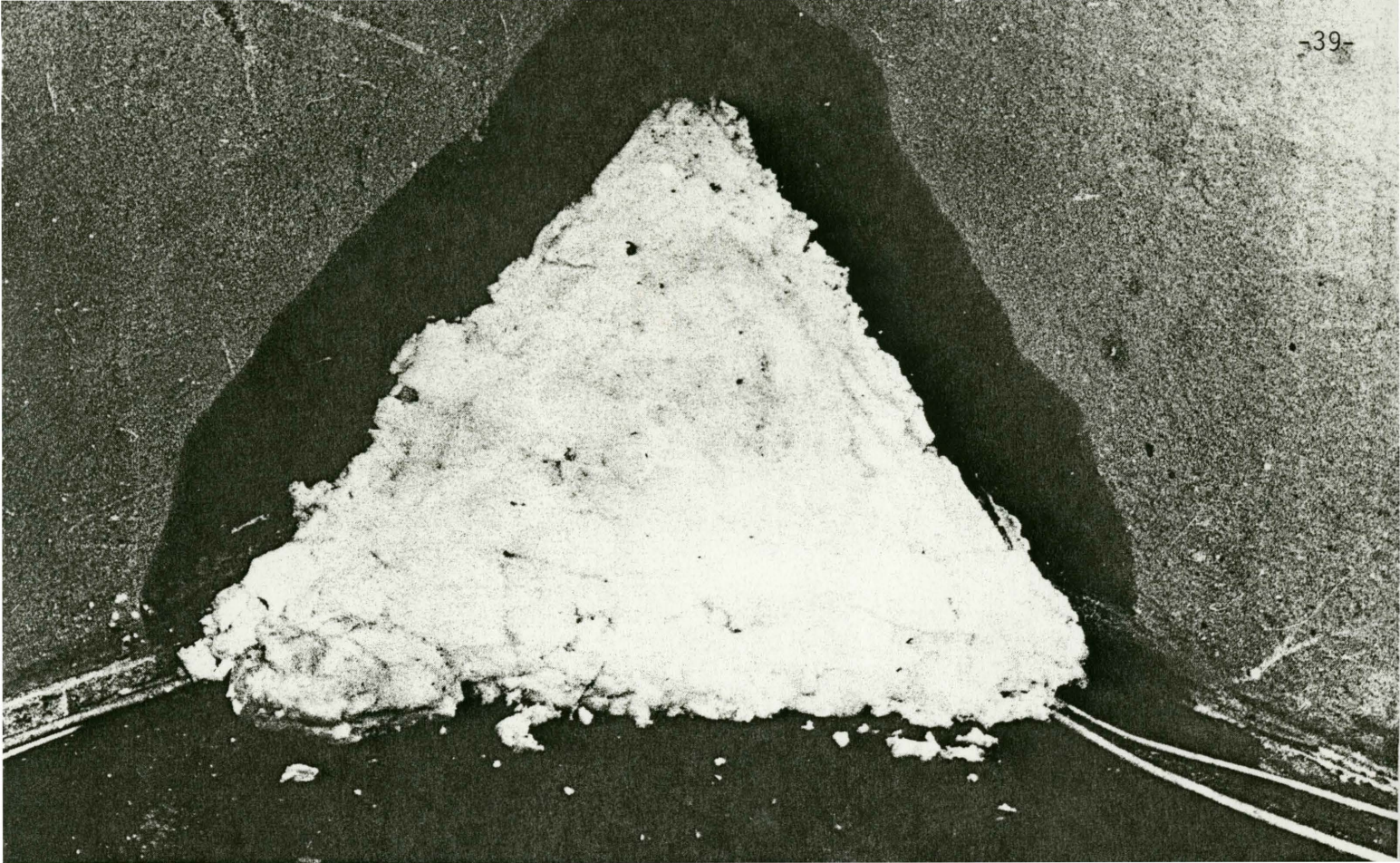
△ 75 Queen bee III, 1952, beeswax on wood, Ströher Collection, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt



In reference to "Queen Bee III", Beuys explains further connections of the bee to mythology, spirituality and social constructs:

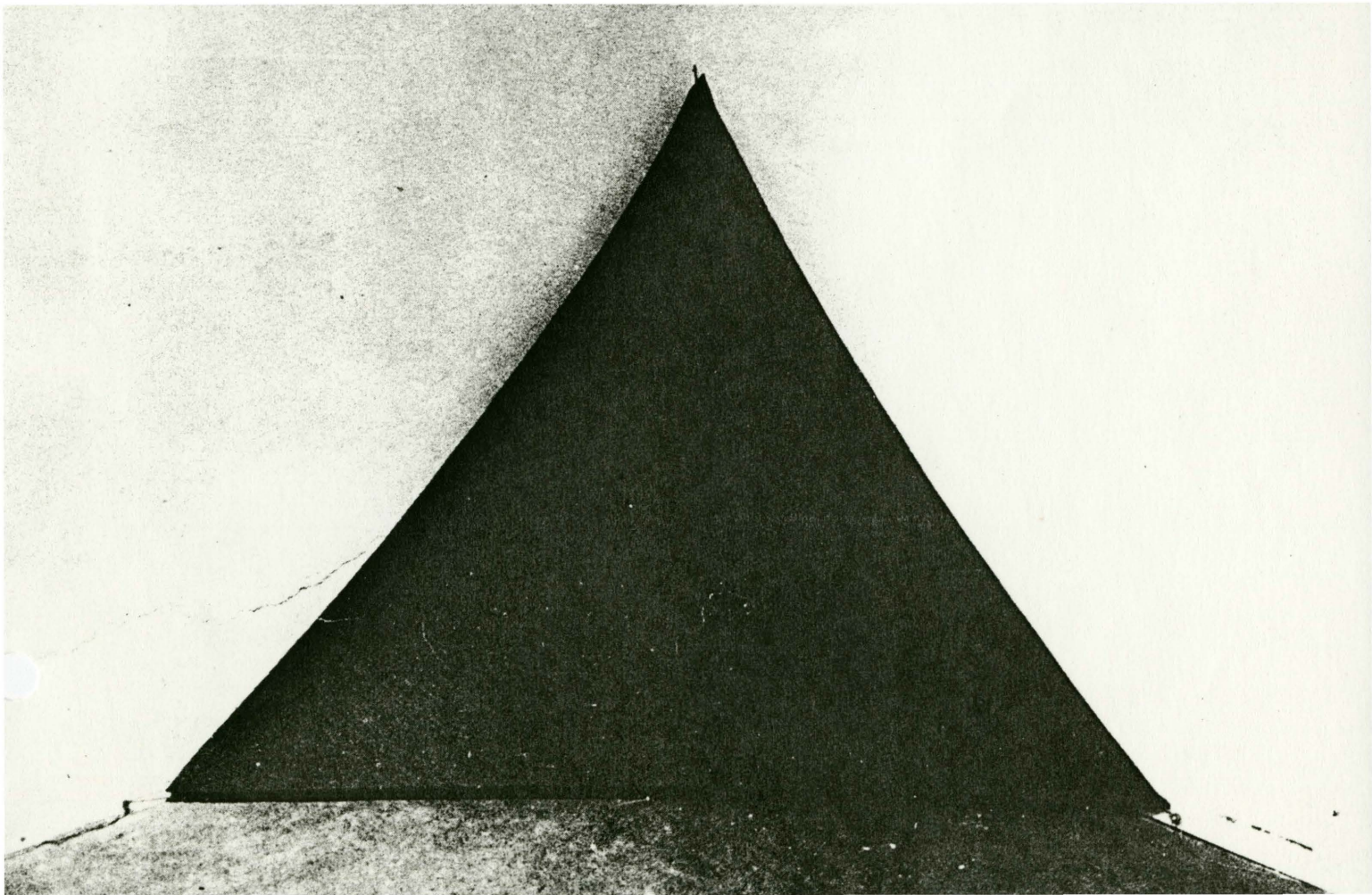
What interested me was the general warmth character, which forms an important part of the Theory of Sculpture and extends even to social and political concepts. This warmth character is to be found in honey, in wax, and even in the pollen and nectar gathered from plants. In mythology honey was regarded as a spiritual substance, and bees were godly. The bee cult is basically a Venus cult This was widespread and influenced by the whole process of honey production as a link between earthly and heavenly levels. The influx of a substance from the whole environment--plants, minerals and sun--was the essence of the bee cult. The allusion is to socialism . . . a socialist organism in which all parts function as in a living body. In physiological terms, this is not hierarchical: the queen bee's place lies between head and heart, and the drones become the cells which are constantly renewed. The whole builds a unity which has to function perfectly, but in a humane warm way through principles of cooperation and brotherhood.³⁶

Beuys repeatedly employs fat and felt as representative of inverse processes. Felt, an amalgamation of diverse fibers, absorbs its environment. Fat, conversely, is absorbed into its environment. A personal experience involving healing through the combined use of these materials representative of inverse processes is the source of Beuys' fascination with these specific materials. Beuys was a German pilot during World War II. His plane was shot down over the Crimea, and, badly injured, he was discovered by Tartars who wrapped his body in felt and fat to effect a cure. Tisdall explains the impact of this experience on Beuys' work: "Without this encounter with the Tartars, and with their ritualistic respect for the healing potential of materials, Beuys would never have turned to fat and felt as the material for sculpture."³⁷



110 Fat corner, 1960

111 Felt corner, 1963



Beuys explains the properties of fat and felt:

Fat infiltrates other materials, is gradually absorbed and brings about a process of INFILTRATION; felt absorbs anything with which it comes into contact--fat, dirt, dust, water or sound--and is therefore quickly integrated into its environment.

FAT expands and soaks into its surroundings.

FELT attracts and absorbs what surrounds it.³⁸

Kuspit explains the appeal of these materials to an artist interested in conveying a non-dualistic conception of the world. He calls fat and felt "empathetic materials, involved with the existence around them. They demonstrate the interminglings, the 'impure, informal' relationships which are the very stuff of existence."³⁹

Beuys feels that chaos can have a healing function. He calls fat "a used and mineralized material with chaotic character", and he calls felt "inert chaos".⁴⁰ He says further: "Chaos can have a healing character, coupled with the idea of open movement which channels the warmth of chaotic energy into order or form."⁴¹

Gauze is another material repeatedly used by Beuys. It embodies opposing processes of inflow and outflow simultaneously--air flows in and fluids flow out. It also relates to healing and, metaphorically, to the process of healing through art.

Beuys is involved with self-transforming materials. The artist (as in Duchamp's ready-mades) merely chooses the material and determines its size and placement. The artist's action, therefore, initiates a therapeutic process, constituting what Kuspit calls a "psychoanalytic action in which people could participate."⁴²

Thought as Sculpture

In alchemical fashion, Beuys extends this interaction of the opposing forces of crystalline and organic in the physical world to inner processes. He perceives rational thought as crystalline or rigid and intuition as organic or fluid.

Beuys regards thought as a sculptural substance. He explains:

It's a process of experiment towards experience. When I speak about thinking I mean it as form. Ideas should be considered in the way the artist considers sculpture: to seek for the forms created by thinking. It's the difference between soft, organic forms and hard, crystallized forms: ⁴³the search is for a solution between these poles.

For Beuys, thinking as sculpture and consciousness on the individual as well as collective level is a sculptural problem. In the performance "Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare", Beuys coats his head with honey and gold leaf in an effort to express the vital, transforming quality of thought. He explains:

Using honey on my head I am naturally doing something that is concerned with thought. The human capacity is not to give honey, but to think--to give ideas. In this way the deathlike character of thought is made living again. Honey is doubtlessly a living substance. Human thought can also be living.⁴⁴ But it can also be deadly intellectually

Beuys's involvement with the performance group Fluxus (whose members included John Cage, Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman) included an involvement with sound as a sculptural element closely related to the concept of thought as sculpture:

The acoustic element and the sculptural quality of sound have always been essential to me in art

. . . there was the use of sound as a sculptural material to enlarge the whole understanding of sculpture from the point of view of using materials. Therefore not

only solid materials like metal, clay, stone, but also sound, noise, melody using language--all become the material of sculpture, and all acquire their form through thought, so thought too is taken as a sculptural means. This is an extreme position, the real, ⁴⁵transcendental position of production in general.

Conclusion

In his concern with the transformational power of art, Beuys, according to Kuspit, "restores the original premise of avant-gardism--now lost with the voluntary assimilation of avant-gardism into commodity materialism--viz., that art is a spiritual transformation of life, leading consciousness to a new wakefulness about what is significant in life, and even leading life to a new identity."⁴⁶ Beuys believes in the possibility of advance through "revolutionary evolution and evolutionary revolution."⁴⁷ In order to accomplish this, he says:

It is important that we do not have too abstract an idea of human evolution or an understanding that is restricted to positivistic and materialist science. Evolution is a dynamic anthropological and morphological biography--⁴⁸biology that needs dynamic images to express it.

In an effort to accomplish this, Beuys presents us with metaphors for the mysterious, fluid connections and interrelationships linking elements of our experience. He views nothing as fixed, absolute; rather, in what could be characterized as an alchemical vision, he views everything as constantly in a state of flux or transformation. He draws us into an awareness of and involvement in this process, hoping to thereby

effect a healing process. As Kuspit says: "As such, the works seem fragments of a titanic effort at social therapy-- the aftermath of a magical attempt at self- and world-renewal."⁴⁹

ENDNOTES

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31. Tisdall, p. 35, 58.
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33. Tisdall, p. 23.
34. Tisdall, p. 10.
35. Adriani, p. 41-42.
36. Tisdall, p. 44.
37. Tisdall, p. 17.
38. Kuspit, p. 84.
39. Kuspit, p. 84.
40. Kuspit, p. 84.
41. Kuspit, p. 84.
42. Kuspit, p. 84.
43. Tisdall, p. 20.
44. Adriani, p. 132.
45. Tisdall, p. 86.

46. Kuspit, p. 81.
47. Kuspit, p. 82.
48. Tisdall, p. 34.
49. Kuspit, p. 81.

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