

Tate Modern Talk: Caroline Tisdall

Joseph Beuys: Bits and Pieces

I understand there are an awful lot of doctors here tonight and so I've chosen the theme of Shamanism and Healing and we'll follow that subject through. The wonderful thing about this collection of Beuys' work is that I could choose quite a number of themes, Beuys and Nature, or the Celtic world and follow that through. Of course everything overlaps because he was intensely interdisciplinary, so any theme would do. We could have Art and Society, or Art and War, or Art and Energy, or Art and Capital - or even Art and Capitalism - or Art and Socialism and it would actually work. Which is what I think keeps me deeply involved. And I can see it in familiar faces around here who have also felt that through the years. Without wanting in any way to cheapen events that have happened in the recent past, in this collection there are images of the World Trade Towers which will become all the more relevant as we go round connected, as they were Cosmas for Beuys, with the Healing Saints, (Cosmas and Damien). We'll talk about that later, and the notion, of how to look at an image which has become terrible in our time, and see through it to mythologies of other times and a healing message.

You probably all know that Beuys put this collection together for me over a number of years from the early 1970s until his death. Sometimes things arrived in the post to my house in Brixton and sometimes he brought them and sometimes when we were doing an exhibition or publication he would just add more items. He called it 'Bits and Pieces'. For many years I thought it was casually meant. Gradually as the years went by I realised he was actually building up a mini-definitive cross-section of his interests which was a fairly overwhelming concept. And fortunately we were able to show it during his lifetime to help an artist you may know called (Paul Neagu) who had a pioneering gallery called the Generative Art Gallery in Shaftsbury Avenue, when the borough of Camden used to give free spaces to artists which I think was before most of you were born. That doesn't happen so much now, does it? Anyway we showed it there to help Paul. Some of the works are in black frames and are catalogued slightly differently because they were in the original Regenerative Art exhibition. After that Beuys continued to add to the collection. And the last thing he gave the collection the stags', skulls called 'Butter Pots' is a very, powerful, sad image, a paradox of life and death.

Beuys regarded himself above all as an individual attempting to deal with healing and his two great phrases about creativity were 'everyone is an artist', which is in itself a great healing phrase, and, perhaps less well known, 'show your wound'. Most of us go through life hiding our wounds or managing as best we can. The idea of 'show your wound' is a devastatingly radical one which lays you open to all sorts of vulnerabilities, obviously. But Beuys regarded 'show your wound' as the secret to being an artist. You weren't showing your magnificence and your wealth of ideas and your huge creativity, you were showing your vulnerability. And it was your vulnerability that people picked up on. the perception of your vulnerability as a person and as an artist that sparked the creativity in other people. For me that is one of the keys to his work. He applied that to the individual. That was how he worked himself, but he was a huge believer in the relationship between the individual and society. Society made up not of an abstract power block, which was his quarrel with Marxism, although that's a grotesque description of Marxism. Please forgive me. But his notion was of society built up of individuals, In the '70s particularly that was quite a difficult idea to put across. Many of the works actually describe this accumulation of individuals, numerical sequences of one; and one and one and one. So you don't say three, you say one and one and one; or three and seven, and so on. And if you analyse that to the whole of society you do have basically a healing technique

Again, if you think of the '70s when a lot of these works were created, it was a time of huge conflict and schisms. There was very old fashioned trade union work going on and a lot of what we would now – thank goodness – call old polarised thinking.

Another sort of healing Beuys was very involved with was the relationship between the individual society, nature and the planet. We all know now that we have to engage on all four of these levels. We are now deeply involved with feeling guilty about all the things we use and waste. You'll find a lot of that in this collection: the awareness of nature, and the awareness of the need to be aware of how much nature needs to be healed or heal herself. There are all sorts of metaphors for that: from the use of honey to the great wonderful tree planting exercise in Kassel with the seven thousand Oaks. There's even a certain anarchic humour in planting seven thousand Oaks in a small town what would happen to the small town if the canopy of all these seven thousand oaks really worked?. And nature in relation to exploding population, countered by reforesting the planet, a concept we now call carbon exchange. He lived long enough to become disillusioned with the Green Party which, once it had its five percent of power tended to become much like any political party. We'll see a little white drawing in the collection called 'Abandon all transitory political parties: your earth is speaking'.

'The Hat for Next Time' is a felt hat from an incredibly elegant and exclusive hat maker, Lockes of St James who are still not aware that they had this very important customer. Locks advise that princes and kings had hats from them. But they don't seem to know that Joseph Beuys hat was world famous. The hat is made of felt. Felt, as you know is a compressed material, it's not woven. It is pressed together from rabbit fur so it gives and moves, it doesn't have a weft and warp Originally the hat had a practical purpose because as you know he had a head injury from the war. As a radio operator in a Stukka plane (not as a pilot, as usually reported) he was shot down in no-mans-land in the Crimea and rescued by nomads. This was his great and shamanistic rebirth story, his rite de passage. He was very badly burnt. Many of his teeth had fallen out, and he had a severe head wound. Nomads found him and to keep in his body heat, because of the extent of the burns, he was wrapped in felt, having first been covered all over with fat. This was mutton fat, sheep fat from the nomadic flocks, herded in the Crimea. So he was healed with fat and felt. And he used that as a key experience, expressed in material form. He used fat and felt in his work and kept the felt forever on his head for the very sensible reason that the metal plate in his head was exruciatingly painful with temperature changes and the felt acted as an insulator. These are materials that occur all the time in his work and concepts too. The filter, the insulator and this marvellously functional way of actually becoming his materials himself, of wearing them on his body and thus becoming totally associated with the concept of warmth.

The hat is titled 'Hat for Next Time'. In this collection there's a lot of humour and it's very important in the history of Beuys that this humour is not forgotten. He laughed a lot, like the Dalai Lama, particularly when he was talking about big important concepts. This hat for example is about reincarnation: next time! It's obviously a big gamble, but you might get reincarnated! He might come back and need it again. Anyway it's a lovely gesture of hope now he's gone, isn't it? Beuys often used to say that in the German equivalent of the tabloid press where he was known as the man with the hat he was not necessary. His hat could do it alone. So in that case the reincarnation is not strictly necessary. We already have it!

Next to the hat is an alchemical sort of object. The '*Sulphur Boots*'. You'll all know the connotation of sulphur in alchemy and even in wine making – It's the great transforming element – sulphur. Beuys filled one boot with sulphur and put sulphur on the sole of the other one. The idea is that these boots therefore become

a sort of survival sledge across the surface of the earth. In a way they are a relic or a reliquary. They're the boots he used when he did the Coyote performance. Again, he intended them as a sort stand-in object. They could manage without him. They might have to manage without him, in fact they are managing without him now!

Now for the theme of the *'Wound in Society'*. There are many works about Ireland in *'Bits and Pieces'* and in *'The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland'* was the collection of drawings which he had kept back, knowing that at some point it would come in incredibly useful. And it became the first major contemporary exhibition of European art to be shown in Ireland, north and south. I organised the show to exert a sort of unifying effect in Ireland. And historically that's important because Beuys very much believed that art could have an effect and that any problem created by human beings could ultimately be solved by human beings. Hence his interest in Ireland.

Here, we have *'I wish energies'* made from peat and coal and butter. Peat, which is a fossil from ages ago, butter, which is an Irish energy, fits Beuys vocabulary perfectly because being a fat it can be liquid or solid and flow in form or solidify. That's the basis of his *'Theory of Sculpture'* warm flow or crystallised solid form. *'Here's Battery'* in a pile of newspapers, the Guardian. I was actually at this time writing for the Guardian and you can see I took a month off to install *'The Secret Block'* in Belfast because the newspapers were thinner then! And when we got back to London after the show, and the lecture tour. Beuys put this together, as a comment on his Northern Irish experience. And as a battery generally. He used to say that if the only thing left of our civilisation were the newspapers you would have a pretty good cross-sectional idea of what went on in our world, in our so-called civilisation. He put them together with this brown pigment which again is one of his key signature materials. He called it *'Braun Kreuz'*. It comes up a lot through the collection. Brown being the colour of dried blood. And brown and dried blood being, anathema: the things the Nazi's had made impossible to even think about, blood and soil – *'Blut und Boden'*. Like the whole of the folksong world of Germany and the old legends, even the oak tree, as we'll see later. All having become taboo, you know, don't talk about it. Don't think about it. Hide it, pretend you never knew about it. Beuys' reasoning, his healing idea told him this was a very unhealthy foundation for a new country in which you can't even think about your past and tell your children any fairy stories, even the Brothers Grim; because of Nazi associations. Forget it! Begin again. His great concern was that modern Germany, post-war Germany was teetering on this really dangerous cusp of materialism, partly because they couldn't draw on their own cultural, spiritual background for fear of the taint of Nazism or neo-Nazism or reusing what the Nazis had used. I think the most useful way to think of that, is to think of whatever your own country happens to be. Then think of any ten most common things associated with it, then try to imagine how stable you would feel in life if you could never think about them or talk to your children about them or sing your songs. So in the German context this was very important, this idea of reclaiming what had become untouchable. I think it's a great tragedy that he didn't live to see the reunification of Germany and that he didn't live to see the strange times we live in where the materialism of the west is now up for questioning in a new way, having been put to the scrutiny and condemnation and a different way of attacking it post September 11th. He was often full of great wisdoms about these things and is sorely missed. I don't know of any intellectual who has replaced his great insight.

For instance in this show case there is a work with a photograph and a piece of masonry called *'Northern Irish Tongue'*. That came from what seemed to be a pretty hopeless set of events. In Belfast, a bomb knocked a piece of masonry off a building where he was giving a lecture. He put it with a photograph, a negative image in Uta Klumbach which it seems he has been shot twice in the forehead. Out

of these rather violent images and violent happenings, he put together this very haunting image, which I think when you look at it you'll see is full of strange hope. I'm sure that comes again from this notion of healing. You take something like the ugliness of bombings in Northern Ireland, in Belfast, and you perceive a piece of masonry and from it you make something beautiful. It's not aestheticizing violence. It's exactly the opposite. It's finding the spiritual out of a sense of despair.

There are works of felt with fat on them – healing things. But here they have toenails on as well. Beuys used to say that was his way of making pocket money, these little artworks which he sold for cash mostly. The toenail represents another kind of fossil, like the rhino horns in the next room, just the same principle. Matter which has grown and become if dead, in the sense that it has got no feeling in it. And so each of us has this magic thing: we have twenty little fossils growing all the time. And Beuys found this way of making artworks with them and a little source of income. Another thing is our own little fossils have a wonderful echo with other fossils. Peat, which is the earth's fossil and leaves preserved in peat as in this work. So you've got time and growth, death, decay, and what remains: the fossil. He was very fascinated by such material sequences.

One of the sculptures in the Strohe collection in Darmstadt that relates to this kind of thinking about what stays in the earth and fossilises was inspired by the discovery of the 'Grauballeman' a body preserved perfectly in the bog. Beuys found this very inspiring, and made a beautiful sculpture, the whole idea of material preserved in the bog in that acid environment was deeply fascinating for Beuys. He perceived bog and the boggy parts of Europe and North America as great healing spaces in our world where very little seems to be going on, perhaps not too perceptible to most eyes. Again we know much more about the ecological significance of bog now than we used to. In such places the slow process of fossilisation, a quiet sort of constant healing was going on.

Beuys was very interested in the behaviour of the Red Deer, the Stag. And he used to regard the call of the stag, 'öö öö', you know 'öö', two 'o's with two umlauts on, as the great call of the wild. He once terrified the rectors of his Dusseldorf academy by giving that as his professional speech; 'öö öö' and that wasn't quite what German academics were used to. That was a great healing call of the wild. And the stag, who appears quite a lot in this collection – I'll tell you why later – obviously has a connection with the bog, but most importantly when he's rutting and making himself feel big and strong and important like men have to sometimes, he always goes into the bog and wallows. Such places are called wallows, and the stag comes out big and black and glistening with this wonderful peat-black blackness. And that was a great image for Beuys.

If you talk about 'Show your Wound' and you mean your vulnerability and you are a very well-known figure wearing a grey hat which could stand in for you, you also have to deal with your own private life. And Beuys' own life, was largely the material of his work. So it went hand in hand. Here with '*Secrets Box*' he made his secrets productive, which is an essential artistic perception. It's very like 'Show your Wound'. 'Make your Secrets Productive'. If you hide your wound and you hide your secrets you become all the more vulnerable in a negative sense. If you show them, use them who knows where it will end?

Here too is a very important principle: the '*Samurai sword*' made with a little piece of blood sausage or 'Blutwurst' as the Germans call it. 'Blutwurst' I think is a truly dreadful word and rather an awful concept. You know, sausage made of blood. Well I like it, but I can understand if you're vegetarian this bit's going to be awful. The Samurai sword, as you know, is tempered and, re tempered, beaten and turned a bit like making puff pastry but a million times more so! Beuys made a number of these. I think they were a kind of pocket money as well, a bit like the

toenails! And if you look at this Blutwurst it's got an absolute cutting edge on it. It never ceases amaze me when I see it! He had a great alchemical saying which was 'If you cut yourself, bandage the knife'. Sorry, I've put half you doctors out of work immediately! And I'm still thinking about that saying, 'if you cut yourself, bandage the knife', sounds even stranger in German. Here in the '*Secret Box*' there's a magic mushroom, some Irish seaweed, there's some fuzzy hair and all sorts of bits of organic material like that. There's also gingerbread hare who's been eaten by weevils so he's just held together by holes now. 'What do you perceive as Creative?. How did the gingerbread hare start, what does he represent? Why is the mushroom magic? There are quite a few hallucinatory substances in this room, by the way. You're all right, they're under glass. You're accompanied by adults so you're all right! The weevils that work in some of these things have all been stopped now. These works have all been fumigated, in the Tates' laboratory so these living works are now stopped in their tracks....

The 'Coyote' is here. The 'Coyote' as you know was that famous performance in New York, and is represented here with a double image. Beuys often did this double image. Most famously with a work called '*Show your Wound*' with two hospital mortuary beds. These double images have to do with mortality and are nearly always shown in black and white. The coyote's fur is grey. An image of death doubled. Life and death, the polarities. They are among the most complex of his works. He was deeply involved with death as a material event. The passage through death to some other sort of material recurs constantly in his work. But in the case of the coyote it was very ambiguous as to whether it was the audience, or the coyote and Beuys, who were in the cage. It was clear by the end that Beuys and the coyote were in a zone of total freedom. Beuys brought in a pile of felt which he was going to use as his own place to sleep in the night, and a pile of straw for the coyote, which is a sensible idea, some rubber gloves – in case the coyote was a bit too friendly, a triangle – a shape that he used a lot, a musical triangle, a most man made shape, with a strike, an acoustic interruption of whatever was going to happen next, and a walking stick to conduct the energy from above to below and back again. The first thing the coyote did was claim the felt, left the straw for Beuys. And being a proper wild animal he peed and shitted on everything he wanted to own: that's mine! Beuys was left with actually nothing but the stick by the end. Coyote never worked out how to do anything with the stick. But what amused the animal most every day was that Beuys had brought in a pile of the day's edition of the Wall Street Journal. And if a newspaper like the Guardian which is a nice liberal newspaper is a cross-section of what happens in society, the Wall Street Journal obviously is a cross-section of capitalism, and what happens every day in capitalism. And the Coyote used to go straight over to this pile and pee and shit all over it. And some of that's on this drawing here. Of course all of that was not stage managed, the animal did it. And Beuys was such a genius at setting things up, and then they would go their own way. He might have been very lucky but as Napoleon said 'You need a lot of luck'. That was the big event of the day; when the Wall Street Journal came in and the wild Coyote did his thing. It was like the revenge of a native animal on and what had happened ever since. Healing process?

'Coyote' was a fantastic provocation at that time, not only because of this business of who's caged but also because this was an animal who, in the context of where he was in New York, urban New York in the United States of America, had always been a scapegoat in a white man's world. And in the Native American world the coyote had been a wise god-like entity full of skills and survival strategies who could turn himself inside out through his arse and that sort of thing. Every Indian tribe has tails about becoming, and surviving with the coyote; he's admired for his great, cunning survival. So Beuys took this representative.

The first time he'd been to the U.S. was after the Vietnam war had ended, and he'd always said he wouldn't go to America while the war was on. When it ended

he went and he gave a lecture tour, presenting his ideas about democracy and the 'Sun State' as he called it, and the healing warmth that should grow from all the things I've been talking about. But this second time he wanted a silent dialogue with a representative of that continent so he chose the coyote. And that became one of the most inspiring dialogues in Art and Nature thinking ever. This was a dialogue with an animal where the animal actually took over the whole space, the timing of the whole event, the rhythm of it and everything. Coyote just went his own way and he took the man with him. When he was hungry everything got very wild and chaotic and he tore up the felt. When he was sleepy, he went to sleep on the felt pile, and the man had to go to sleep on the straw, at the back of the space. Coyote was full centre stage, he just adapted. And at the end of the week Beuys left. The man who owned the coyote, who was a rancher in New Jersey, come in with a big iron bar because this was a very wild and dangerous animal. It was a wonder that the New York health and hygiene hadn't intervened before. He put the animal back into a cage and took it back to ranch in New Jersey. And in the gap between Beuys leaving and his owner coming, the coyote had shown this terrible nervousness for the first time pacing up and down in the empty cage leaving sweat marks with his paws. quite amazing.

There are many botanical references in this collection and we can follow the theme of plants and healing. This is drawing called 'Cosmas and Damien'... this is 'Cosmos and Damien'. Cosmos and Damien were these extraordinary medieval early surgeons who went around fitting black limbs on white people and white limbs on black people, which must have been fairly interesting in those days. But they represented the idea of travelling, healing, warmth, doing, moving on, and they were made saints. Beuys put this wonderful German print together with a plant I grew (it's very easy to grow) called *Dicentra Spectabilis* 'broken heart'. It's a wonderful notion that rather than just being an artist going around exhibiting your work on the international art scene, you are, if not a saint, at least travelling around trying to heal the wounds in society. It's a very attractive and also a very contentious idea.

But it all goes back really from to this object which is a regulation bandage issued to the army (Weermacht) in Germany during the war. And Beuys was born in 1921 so he was called up as a soldier. He was also in the Hitler Youth as a very young man. Interviewed later in America about this he said that everybody went to Sunday school and everybody joined the Hitler Youth. His war was in all sorts of extraordinary places, mostly on the eastern front and in Italy. As we know he was heavily wounded in Crimea. He came back to Germany to Kleve and had a total breakdown which lasted many, many years. He regarded this as his 'season in hell', his rite of passage, all those things which he actually felt artists had to go through. Out of that something would come. But he was in a state of very, very deep despair for many years. And of course all the events were tied up together. He was briefly an English prisoner of war, although he hadn't done anything very terrible he wasn't there for long but he knew what that was like too. And when he was released he learned as Germans did of the full extent of all the terrible things that had happened. The holocaust and the gas ovens and all these things which haunted him tremendously throughout his life and which are reflected in his work or another. I was quite overwhelmed when he added that to the collection. That little reminder which he'd had with him ever since the war.

There's another reference here to Cosmos and Damien, this time put into the context of his own autobiography when he suffered a calamity and had a heart attack. Partly induced from handling huge amounts of felt in an enclosed space. The felt had been treated with all sorts of chemicals to kill the bugs and it certainly aggravated his emphysema, which was one of the causes later of his death. Certainly the direct cause of his heart attack in 1975 after installing *Fond IV/4* in Bruxellois near Brussels was the chemical insecticide with which the felt had been treated.

After his heart attack he stayed for three weeks in a spa in Germany, a spa for people with heart attacks. True to self he found humour in every turn of the route there. The whole notion of being in a town full of heart attack survivors amused him tremendously and then he was fascinated by the treatment to which he was subjected. There's a drawing here listing all his treatments, like mud baths and Kneipbaths and the more brutal methods like EKG, electricity to bang you into again: an amazing combination of straight medicine and alternative medicine. Inhalations of salt and inhalations of lobelia. I don't know if we do that here? Lobelia? Heart attack recovery? As you know Beuys often used writing as drawing as in the descriptions of these treatments.

He was gradually beginning to feel that the old human frame was a sort of temporary and rather wobbly vehicle for all these things in life. And he defined himself in 1975 as gradually a battered tartar. On several occasions he said he'd probably been here long enough in this form and was beginning to feel more like joining a spiritual form, which he felt he had: the hare. The hare can live anywhere, doesn't need a hole, or a burrow or a hive or a nest, it can just survive in a hollow in the ground.

We'll end with the stags' skulls, Beuys called them 'Butterpots'. We all have our notions of death and those of us who can think of death as a humorous paradox and a state from which other energies can be created are very, very brave. Most of us are confronted with the kind of crystalline fact that life stops with our material demise. I like the idea of cells recycled but this work for me is a huge gesture of the will, the spirit. It's called a Butterpots, and you could fill it up at the time with lovely fresh butter. This is the last work he put in the collection, and he knew exactly what was happening. Again for health and safety reasons I'm afraid it's been stopped in its tracks now. There are, according to the Tate analyst, five sorts of mould in there. But they're dead now. Such is the price of being in a public museum.