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Joseph Beuys: through the œuvre

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REFERENCES

Antoine, Jean-Philippe. *La Traversée du XX^e siècle : Joseph Beuys, l'image et le souvenir*, Genève : Mamco ; Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2011

- 1 This richly illustrated and annotated compilation indisputably represents “a major monograph” about the œuvre of Joseph Beuys, even though it is situated this side of a historical analysis, properly so-called, and presents the œuvre from within, based on reading keys set forth in their smallest details, keys peculiar to the author. The philosopher and visual artist Jean-Philippe Antoine in fact here offers us a masterly synthesis of his earlier books and articles devoted to the analysis of image, place and memory in Beuys’s work. Constructed upon a twofold structure—a chronological development bolstered by comings and goings and focused on precise points (key cycles would be how Beuys would have put it), underpinned by a very broad line of thinking about the special and cyclical praxis of certain media (sculptures, drawings, blocks, actions, installations, showcases, machines)—, the book sets its angle of attack right away: biography as the “place *par excellence* of the work” of Beuys and source of a social and political project. In accordingly addressing an informed readership, *La Traversée du XX^e siècle*, as the book’s programmatic title suggests (*The Journey through the 20th Century*), now offers an opportunity to take a good look, through the prism of Beuys, at one or two major theories and lines of thinking dear to the author, and, in a more or less conscious and assertive way, to the artist: Charles Sanders Peirce, Wilhem Worringer, James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp and Gabriel Tarde. In this way, J-P. Antoine analyses more than he sets forth the development of Beuys’s thinking through the development of the quest and by means of a precise and special choice of theoretical themes.
- 2 The publication starts with a long 50-page prologue devoted to Peirce and the question of the sign through which Antoine asserts the indicial quality of the work and puts forward

the idea of shock as constituting the experience and fundamental process of reminiscence which informs Beuys's œuvre from within (just like the book). The chronological development embarked upon in the first part, organized as "Prehistories (I) (II)", for its part revisits Worringer's theses in *Abstraction et Einfühlung* (1908) through the figure of Edwald Mataré, Beuys's professor at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, and then proceeds to the influence of the tutelary figure of Joyce, to whom the whole of the second part is devoted. Paradoxically, the long passage about Mataré versus Worringer does indeed shed useful light on Beuys's "mimetic attraction" in relation to his master and the emergence of a psychic dimension somewhere between expressiveness and abstraction in the "young" artist, but it essentially culminates in the declaration of a resistance and a distancing. Beuys's self-assertion and the resolve of the "years of apprenticeship" take place in the liberating encounter with Joyce's œuvre. Over and above a far-reaching and constructive influence, the affinities between Joyce's œuvre and Beuys's œuvre thus offer an opportunity, for the author, to describe both the hold and process of the construction of myths in this latter, and the possibility of an appropriation of the mythical matter issuing from German Romanticism then "relieved of its ideological complexes". The third part ushers in a new figure, Duchamp, corresponding to the introduction of new procedures (from drawing to actions) which are added to the others: "the use of the same thing" and "the power of the place" (fourth part). But here Duchamp is above all summoned as an exhortation to go beyond and assert a process that is the driving force behind differentiation.

- 3 In this way, J-P. Antoine describes all the aspects which represent Beuys and his œuvre like a constellation, which is to say that he weaves a set of operational links within the diversity of the works, which he presents as inter-connected, with the help of an in-depth investigation of the methods and processes which inform them (individuation, accumulation, transposition, totality, mutations, serialization, etc.). This extraordinary investigative work dissects the genesis of the Œuvre possibly to the detriment of an overall view. Almost half the book is actually devoted to the period of gestation before its public success. Likewise, the contextual considerations appear at a late stage and in a succinct way. In the case of the actions this almost exclusive focus on the processes of the œuvre makes Fluxus, for example, a simple framework. In addition, by examining the works to the detriment of the construction of the discourses which nevertheless form a not inconsiderable part of Beuys's work, J-P. Antoine deliberately does away with whole areas of the work, such as its political activism (the different organizations founded by Beuys and his involvement in the formation of the Greens) and its ideological nature—source, it is true, of a whole host of irritations—in order to "bring out a coherent constellation of ways of doing and thinking" (p. 344). In the end, it is only on page 206 that the author comes to his central thesis: "the question of memory, conceived as a place for constructing experience and basing things social".
- 4 By concealing, among other things, the peripheral contemporary cultural, political and social context, except at the moment of the meeting with Fluxus, which is only briefly mentioned, he reconstructs the figure of the artist Beuys, a solitary shaman and genius whose development seems detached from all outward circumstances. In supplanting an in-depth historical and contextual perspective, J-P. Antoine only gives a partial answer to the central question of the reasons for the institutional and public success of Beuys's œuvre, which was nevertheless announced at the outset. This latter becomes "metamorphosed", throughout the *exposé* determined by the question of memory, into a

personal reflection on the status of art (exemplarity and singularity) through “the individuation of the artistic act” of Joseph Beuys and his publicity/communicability (in the sense of making public). From that time on, the work does indeed represent a “journey through the 20th century”, but in accordance with the extremely rich viewpoint of the author and not of the artist.