

THE NAME GAME / JOSEPH BEUYS

I am drawing even when I sign my name.

J.Beufs (1977)

Few artists have created so distinctive a visual image of themselves that a silhouette would suffice to identify them. Rembrandt was certainly one of them. His beret, moustache and occasional goatee have even served to identify the stereotypical artist down to the present day.

Another was the German artist Joseph Beuys (1920-1986), who for the last thirty years or so of his life sported a fisherman's vest (tailored by his wife, Eva) and a felt porkpie hat. The hat covered scars left by his wartime service as Stuka tail-gunner and the vest was a practical accessory for this highly productive artist and teacher. The whole made for a uniform of sorts and transformed the man into a walking image of urbanity and wildwood wisdom artfully combined. Consistent with his strategy of incorporated identity, Beuys' wife and children always called him "Beuys" at home (*dixit* his biographer, Heiner Stachelhaus).

It will be remembered that he grew up during the reign of Adolf Hitler, a would-be artist who styled his personal image and symbols with a sure sense of design and its effectiveness, turned an entire nation into an operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and went on to practice "sozial Plastik" in the worst sense of the word. As a teenager Beuys joined the Hitler Youth with the enthusiasm of any boy thirsting for adventure free of parental interference, and he was honest enough to admit it in later life. So much for the role models and the need to remodel them.

As far as his name and signature were concerned, evidence of method in his self-awareness is the fact that he signed a very large number of works, especially multiples, some of which consisted only of an object or ready-made graced with his signature. One work from 1977 consists of a signed and dated file card with the handwritten statement (in German): "I am drawing even when I sign my name" (see also entry 35). Further evidence is the characteristic form he gave to the initial letter of his first name.

There are two famous Josephs in the Bible, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New. The former was a shepherd (and folk hero) and the latter a carpenter (and not much else). Although the two figures are related in complex exegetic ways, my guess is that Beuys



identified more with Joseph the shepherd and interpreter of Pharaoh's dreams. This may be seen by the fact that he shaped the initial "J" of his first name like a shepherd's crook, a form all the more unusual for a man whose handwriting still bore traces of the spiky *Deutsche Schreibschrift*, a gothic script used parallel to the italic until 1945. It has since become illegible for postwar generations—as it had always been for non-Germans.

This association is substantiated by the frequent use Beuys made of a cane with a curved handle in his performances. Photographs of the Richtkräfte Aktion (London, November 1974) and I like America and America likes me (New York, May 1974), done at the height of what may be called his "pastoral" phase, show him wielding this cane in many different positions, including from the end and upside down, turning it into another form of "J."

The story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis is a sort of dry run for the Christian epic: Joseph, the favorite of twelve sons—a status marked by the "coat of many colors" given by his father, Jacob—was betrayed by his brothers and cast into a well to die. The coat was used as proof of his disappearance (later in his life, another coat of his was used by Potiphar's wife to frame him for attempted rape). To make a long story short, he rose again, living long enough to turn the tables and forgive his brothers (the founders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel).

Beuys was riding high when his JU-87 dive-bomber was shot down over the wintry steppes of Crimea in 1943. Legend has it that he was found unconscious by passing Tartar nomads (presumably shepherds) and nursed back to health (and further active duty).

Having survived the fall of the national delusion, and switched Testaments, this latter-day Saul turned into Paul and went on to preach the Gospel of Art. But even that proved too narrow for his Messianic scope, and so he expanded it with massive injections of Anthroposophy, then succumbed to the temptation of Direct Democracy, all the while making Ecology a side-dish to Art (instead of the other way around, alas). In any event, his heart and mind were basically in the right place, but, as in his days in the Hitler Youth and then as Stuka gunner, he was caught in historical forces and materials that were beyond his power to control and mold. It was his good fortune as an artist that German culture just happened to need an apostle to redeem and recycle the desolate fragments and figments of its past.

