

THE NAME GAME / JOSEPH BEUYS

I draw even when I sign my name.

Joseph Beuys (1977)

Few artists have created so distinctive a visual image of themselves that a silhouette, or even an object (a hat), suffices 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 of his life sported a fisherman's vest (tailored by his wife, Eva) and a felt porkpie hat. The hat is supposed to have covered scars left by his wartime service as a Stuka tail-gunner and the vest was a practical accessory for this highly productive artist and teacher. The get-up 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" (according to his biographers, Heiner Stachelhaus and H.P. Riegel).



It will be remembered that he grew up during the reign of Adolf Hitler, a would-be artist turned politician who styled his personal image and symbols with a sure sense of design and its effectiveness, turned an entire nation into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* akin to a Wagnerian opera, and practiced "sozial Plastik" (Social Sculpture) 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 that 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 draw 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, survivor and interpreter of the 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 generally spiky *Deutsche Nationalschrift*, a gothic script used parallel to the italic until 1945. It has since become illegible to postwar generations—as it had always been to non-Germans.

Apart from the fact that one of the rare photos of Beuys as a child shows him holding a cane, this pastoral 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) show him wielding this cane in many different positions, including from the end and upside down, turning it into another "J."

The story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis is sort of a 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. 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, Joseph 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. According to this self-styled legend, he was found unconscious by Tartar nomads (presumably shepherds) and nursed back to health (and further active duty). This imaginary experience entitled him to adopt the role of shaman and healer in his performances and installations.

After surviving the national-socialistic delusion, and switching Testaments, this latter-day Saul-become-Paul went on to preach the Gospel of Art. But even that proved too narrow a scope for his Messianic ambitions, so he expanded his *Kunstbegriff* with massive injections of Anthroposophy, succumbed to the temptation of politics (sound familiar?), and made Ecology a side-dish to Art (instead of the other way around). It was his good fortune as an artist that German culture happened to need an apostle to redeem and recycle the desolate fragments and figments of its recent past.

