Book Review: Victoria Walters, *Joseph Beuys and the Celtic Wor(l)d: A Language of Healing*

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What is This?
Books


Beuys’ work has been widely written about, but both the artist and his work somehow still resist incorporation into dominant art theoretical narratives. Focusing her study on Beuys’ work in Scotland and Ireland in the 1970s – a period when Beuys not only exhibited there, but made a number of works in situ – Victoria Walters takes an interesting and refreshing journey that considers the artist’s work in this period as a language practice. Making valuable use of archives and interviews with people who worked with Beuys, Walters’ interdisciplinary approach triangulates the themes of Celtivity, language and healing, and proposes an anthropological element to the work in a way that is lucid and original.

The book begins with a visit to Beuys’ Tate Modern retrospective in 2005, with Walters describing an emotionally intense and synaesthetic experience that connected to a therapeutic intention in the work. This moment of experiencing the work beyond rationality leads Walters towards considerations of its cathartic and anthropological aspects, and to her indication that for Beuys, language is the site on which (social as well as individual) healing begins. Taking from Beuys’ fascination with the Celts, their spiritual worldview and relationship to the environment, Walters carefully follows the artist’s personal interpretations of Celtivity and examines the ways in which it fed into the expanded language of his practice. Walters makes interesting observations about Beuys’ reconceptualising of language artistically as a reflection of the inadequacy of theoretical language at the time.

Connections between structuralist and post-structuralist thought and the work of Beuys are not new ones, but Walters’ in-depth analysis of his work ‘Fat Chair’ (Düsseldorf, 1964) is comprehensive and enlightening. She regards the work as an action as well as a sculpture, having been created for live witnesses in a pedagogic context. This, for Walters, leads us to take into account the work’s anthropological dimension, and Beuys’ use of materials.
both for their own transformative qualities and for their power to teach or initiate human change. In this way, we begin to see more clearly Beuys’ interest in an expanded ‘primary language’ – understood beyond simply words or speech, to encompass sound and form – and in myth – alternative versions of science rooted in particular environmental contexts.

Walters goes on to draw from phenomenology in order to gain useful insights into Beuys’ performances ‘Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony’ (Edinburgh, 1970) and ‘Celtic + ~~~~’ (Basel, 1971), and to explore ‘whether [the artist’s] practice could be said to draw from notions of Celticity in order to forge a phenomenological approach to language’ (p. 71). Referring to interviews with Beuys, Walters draws attention to the artist’s interest in finding the essence of things: animals, landscape, and human beings’ relation to landscape and to the associated experiences of need, vulnerability, awe and creativity. Her examination of the two ‘Celtic’ performances (created in collaboration with Danish sculptor and composer Henning Christiansen) is detailed and considered, and draws out the relation of Beuys’ material use of language and landscape, and what Walters describes as the ‘holistic aspect of Beuys’ person’ (p. 93). Considering not only his magnetic charisma but also the ‘sculptural quality of his physical person’ (p. 92), she analyses Beuys’ relationship to the audience in these works, to moments of intimate ritual (e.g. foot washing) as well as to periods of sculptural performance (e.g. standing silently for an hour, holding a spear) that engender spectators in a ‘phenomenological meditation’ (p. 107). She goes on to reflect on Beuys’ use of blackboards in the two performances, and to the problematising nature of the transient images marked upon them and their way of bringing us back to the world of process and transformation.

This transformative or curative impulse in Beuys’ development of social sculpture has most often been drawn in the context of post-War Germany, so Walters’ turn to his work in Northern Ireland – specifically here a blackboard lecture action undertaken at the Ulster Museum in Belfast in 1974 – at the height of ‘the troubles’ is an interesting one. She considers the work in relation to theory from the Frankfurt School and a language of social critique that renegotiated the conventional relationship between theory and practice. Positing Beuys’ lecture action beyond the purely didactic, Walters addresses points of divergence between the artist’s practice and critical theory, reasserting his concern (following Steiner) that people would not find spiritual succour or a means of creative transformation within Marxist ideology (p. 209). Walters reiterates Beuys’ connection between the political and the archaic, tacking through discussion of hermeneutics and the artist’s use of (Celtic) symbols and archetypes, of myths and metaphor.

Considerations of Beuys’ social sculpture inevitably lead us to discussions of the artist’s engagement with shamanism. Walters focuses on connections Beuys drew between shamanism and the Celtic world, on the artist’s adoption of the position of shaman in certain of his artworks, and argues for an understanding of shamanism as a ‘methodology of import’ (p. 279). As such, she presents Beuys’ engagement with the work of the shaman
– bringing together visionary processes, transformations of ‘substance’ and reconceptualisations of death – as part of his expanded language practice. This practice makes manifest a non-dualistic notion of language and brings about an understanding of material that can be sensed, known and shaped through both rational thought and spiritual energy.

Although facets of Beuys’ work and of thematic commentary on it – the language aspect, Beuys’ notions of Celticity, his work’s cathartic function – have been regarded with suspicion, Walters engages with these trickier subjects in a study that is comprehensive and rigorous. Her study is built upon a strong theoretical grounding as well as a tangible personal engagement with Beuys’ work and gives an insight into the holistic nature of his project. Walters shows how Beuys established a new position on the relationship between theory and practice, and makes considerations of his work as a form of anthropology. Her positioning of the book in relation to anthropology, ethnology and visual culture presents not only an interesting and dynamic dialogue between disciplines, but offers ways in which they may think, feel and will a position in which materiality is not separate from spirit. In demonstrating the richness of Beuys’ legacy – not only in his work, but in those who encountered him and those who preserve his work in an abundance of archives and resources – Walters communicates some of the artist’s urgent and inspiring lessons for all of us, about ‘the full capabilities of people in relation to the world’ (p. 367).

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