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### [Review of: C. Mesch (2017) Joseph Beuys]

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Claudia Mesch. *Joseph Beuys*. Critical Lives. Reaktion, 2017. 152 pp. US\$19.00 (Paperback). ISBN 978-1-7802-3735-0.

Claudia Mesch's *Joseph Beuys* is an intelligent, well-researched, and original contribution to the Critical Lives series of Reaktion Books. It avoids being a dry rehearsal of biographic facts and yet retains a vaguely chronological arrangement. However, the relative scarcity of images of works by Beuys (owing undoubtedly to the high price for reproduction rights) would leave someone unacquainted with his work at a loss, especially when the author presents us with occasionally rather long enumerations of work titles to substantiate her points. Mesch's often original interpretations and connections are not to be verified easily in the pages of this volume alone.

One would be right in arguing, however, that few readers today are uninitiated: Beuys has certainly achieved canonical status, and many biographies already exist, from Heiner Stachelhaus's early work to Reinhard Ermen's more tendentious material accusing Beuys of having been (or having remained) a fascist, as well as Andres Veiel's 2017 cinema success. There seems to be great and sustained interest in Beuys's life and work. In this book with its 126 text pages (few notes and a selected bibliography), Mesch largely manoeuvres certain issues arising from her topic successfully. She identifies one of the problems herself in the conclusion: it lies in the fact that Beuys's "physical artworks are better known in Germany than they are abroad" (115), where his "shamanistic" personality still takes precedence. The reception histories of Beuys and his oeuvre in German and English are vastly different, as Mesch's *Beuys Reader*, her previous edited volume on the artist, has partially traced. But the *Reader's* exclusion of German-speaking scholarship that bases itself on detailed knowledge of Beuys's work, such as Dieter Koepplin's with its many learned footnotes and near-microscopic focus, still generates the impression in the English-speaking world that only a more superficial scholarship existed or was applicable to Beuys. Such a misconception can, of course, not be countered in a short volume like this, but as a result it lingers.

The current book will thus have very differently prepared readerships and thus different expectations to contend with. The choice of thematic focus is born from the need to make oneself understood to an English-language readership that has very little, if any, of the previous biographic material (or first-hand knowledge of the artworks) to rely on. Such readers will likely consult the 1979 Guggenheim catalogue for images and an easily accessible biographic outline, which would have helped here, too. Given the focus of the Critical Lives series, Mesch's focus is necessarily on Beuys's construction of his artist persona and the use of his biography within the practice.

When introducing her arguments, Mesch occasionally makes surprisingly sweeping statements that are then not in keeping with her careful presentation of the case. Fluxus (George Maciunas) is characterized as standing for "an expansion of the role of art in society" (59), and Beuys's attitude (rightly) described as one

on the margins of the movement, distancing himself from the Fluxus circle. To let affairs stand at what one could interpret as a suggestion that Beuys turned away from an expanded concept of art—when he is for many precisely an initiator of such an expanded concept of art—sounds illogical, but this could easily have been remedied by a statement that Beuys had similar aims but pursued them in different ways. When *Tramstop* at the German (Nazi-era) pavilion in Venice is addressed, the reader is led off track somewhat (literally: the installation contains tram rails) when Mesch writes that “a specific moment of conflict is not directly addressed” (68), only to trace that the sites (both of the origin of the objects as well as the exhibition) and the materials point beyond all doubt to recent German (and Italian/pan-European) fascist history (the names of German Jewish scientists, such as Albert Einstein, were still stuck to the walls from the previous Biennale’s installation, by Gerhard Richter, which Beuys had decided to leave in place).

Related to one of her main themes, Beuys in (German) history, Mesch presents a persuasive argument about the artist’s early crisis and the way his attempts to come to terms with society’s (and also his) trauma can be traced in the work. Here, although this is a more conversational than heavily annotated, academic book, she carries on a debate that has ranged from Benjamin Buchloh’s denunciative branding of Beuys as a Nazi to Gene Ray’s and my own treatments of this central question. It is not by coincidence, then, that Mesch is another author on Beuys whose own *Life Course/Work Course* (to borrow Beuys’s own formulation) extends across German- and English-speaking countries. How effectively we communicate across that linguistic and cultural divide, where Beuys has been seen as engaging either too much (initially in Germany) or too little (in the United States in the main) with the role that he played in his past as a German soldier, still remains to be seen. Attempts at bridging the gap are certainly being furthered by this insightful publication.

Mesch’s text succinctly disseminates and continues the most relevant arguments, as Beuys’s attempts at overcoming modernism’s totalitarian and colonial legacy—Mesch uses the term “anti-modern modernism” (126)—are all the more urgent and important today. Beuys was one of the founders of the Green movement in Germany, a campaigner for a basic general income, and a thinker/actor in a field that we would today describe with the word *artivism*, and as such his ideas are exceedingly relevant today. While Mesch knowledgeably traces the origins of his Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research—one of the first (if not the first) of the now proliferating artist-led university projects—the author’s tone is more diplomatic than activist. This means that she expertly manoeuvres the pitfalls of the institutionalization of Beuys’s legacy on the one hand and the spirit of the work and the intentions of the maker on the other. She becomes slightly more outspoken in echoing the consensus among Beuys scholars that the “cleansing” of the Beuys Block at the Darmstadt *Landesmuseum* was not a good idea. In closing with remarks on Marina Abramović’s (similarly) sterile re-performance of Beuys’s canonical *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead*

*Hare*, however, Mesch remains on the art-historically safe side in finding a legacy solely where the name Beuys is mentioned.

The current state of affairs is, however, arguably that Beuys's heirs can be found among younger artists who may shun mentioning his counterproductively auratic name, owing to Beuys's mythic biography-building, which is, of course, evoked and perpetuated here and not only critiqued. Mesch asks whether Beuys's art can "stand on its own merits without being powered by the person Beuys?" (126). She hints at an answer in saying that the trees of the *7000 Oaks* may "ultimately no longer be identifiable as art" (126). Among the strongest heirs, then, are those who organize and institute as activists inside and outside of the category or the spaces of art. This book can, I would argue, enrich even their perspective, although they will wish to rely on a library copy, rather than adding this "battery" (for Beuys, stacks of paper or felt were bearers of energy) to their bookshelves' arsenal, revealing the name Joseph Beuys on the spine.

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