

## **Expanded Practice and Curation: five positions:**

### **Position two: Beuys part 2**

In 1993 Gerhard Theewen described 53 vitrines, curated and assembled by Joseph Beuys in the last 25 years of his life, between 1960 and 1985 (Beuys died in January 1986).<sup>1</sup> Some of the vitrines were assembled over one or two years, some of them over two decades. Some of them refer directly to Beuys' *Aktions* or events, many, like his sculpture, provide the potential for a slower, accrued meaning and contribute to Beuys' larger aesthetic proposals. One example of these works, *Vitrine 28* (1962-80)<sup>2</sup>, may begin to indicate their importance as a curatorial position. The catalogue description I have used was developed from a crude translation.<sup>3</sup>

*Vitrine 28* contains three groups of objects. On the left and in the middle are two metal containers, on the right a drinking glass. On the left a zinc metal box stands on its shorter side. Its internal base is open to view and on the bottom can be seen a glued, almost square, grey painted, thin sheet of paper, which could just as plausibly be a square of lead foil. In front of this upright box, a small cylindrical rod located on the floor of the display case. The cut side of this rod, which faces the viewer, has been smeared with white paint. In the centre of the vitrine display case is a folded sheet-iron box, with obviously age-related signs of use. This box is filled to the brim with fat, the surface shows no traces of a process, but there is an allusion to a work made previously inscribed

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<sup>1</sup> Theewen, Gerhard (1993) *Joseph Beuys Die Vitrinen, ein verzeichnis*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Beuys, 1962-1980, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *Vitrine 28* is now captioned, *Untitled (Vitrine with Four Objects/Plateau Central)*, 1962-1983.

<sup>3</sup> I do not have German and used a Google translator in sight of a photograph of the vitrine being described.

and titled *Plateau Central* (which has these two words inscribed into the fat).<sup>4</sup> Between the vitrine back wall and the right display wall, in the middle of the floor, somewhat closer to the front than the boxes, is a water glass. Inside this there are emphatic traces of white paint, chemicals and what could be soot. On the outer side of the glass and facing the viewer, Beuys' emblem stamp has been applied, but because of the difficulty of applying this (in view of the curve of the surface) this emblem has been traced in black ink. Inside the glass, towards its front edge, leaning and slightly superior to the top of the glass, rests an untreated cylindrical rod. The diameter is smaller than the rod that lies before the zinc box.

In this vitrine there are thus three different 'sensitive material containers', different sizes and different meanings put together. The left shows the container with the utmost frankness, an almost untreated state. The middle box in the centre has a lid, which is open, and the fat fills this box to its brim. The glass on the right seems, at least initially, only superficially linked with the boxes to its left. Theewen's description then notes that this is a mystery and ends, 'Alles fließt . . .' (Everything flows ...) (1993: 80)

All viable artefacts that lead to efficacious and significant aesthetic reception rely on the combination of patterns of connectedness and imperfect fit. Three 'object groups' have been curated, that is brought together, by Joseph Beuys into one vitrine, one spacetime for speculation regarding their connectedness. The object groups are spaced out so that they give the impression that the proportions of their spacing can be read as based on the Golden Section, with the smaller section occupied by the larger box and its space and the larger part occupied by the horizontal box, the glass and their spaces; but this is speculative approximation and no exact measurement is evident. What is clear is that redundant symmetry has been avoided. The cylindrical rod lying

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<sup>4</sup> The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, who now house this vitrine by Joseph Beuys, describes the work as: *Untitled (Vitrine with Four Objects/Plateau Central)*, 1962-1983; mixed media in painted wood, steel, and glass vitrine; 81 1/8 in. x 19 11/16 in. x 86 5/8 in. The University of Sunderland library describes one of its slides as: 'Plateau central; 1962; Joseph Beuys, Statement of Responsibility: Sheet iron box galvanised with zinc, glass top containing small sheet of lead foil over iron mesh and iron frame.'

horizontally in front of the zinc box on the left is visually related to the almost vertical rod in the cylindrical drinking glass on the right. This relationship connects the two processes of the containers, relates the zinc box, which contains a grey painted square of paper or a square of lead foil, to the drinking glass, which contains, 'white paint, chemicals or soot'. The visual and thus speculative connection, is through the small chest of fat in the centre of the vitrine floor. Meanings might be initiated through understanding the substances and their relation to energy, but some of the chemistry has not been named. So the viewer must approach this as a difficulty and with difficulty.

The smear of white paint on the cut cylinder on the left relates to the cylinder in the glass, which includes traces of white paint. The soot in the glass and the 'chemicals' might allude to spent energies and burning. Indeed the three object groups appear, overall, to allude to an electromagnetic activity, even an early type of battery, a device that can assist the conversion of stored chemical energy into electrical energy. Zinc-carbon dry cells or batteries are packaged in zinc-cans that serve as both containers and negative terminals. These dry cells were developed from the wet cell patented by Georges Leclanché in 1866. The positive terminal, represented standing in the glass and its contents, is a carbon rod surrounded by a mixture of manganese dioxide and carbon powder. The electrolyte used in Leclanché's batteries was a paste of zinc chloride and ammonium chloride dissolved in water. The Leclanché cell was used for telegraphy and signalling and is the forerunner of the modern dry battery.

Part of the title of Beuys' work is now notated *Plateau Central*, described in 2011 by the San Francisco MoMA, who acquired the vitrine via a donation. The notation 'Plateau Central' is the label given to an object, a photographic slide of which is in the library at University of Sunderland, which shows a box of fat.<sup>5</sup> The Tate Gallery, in discussion of a different work, refers to 'Plateau Central' as '... an old-fashioned biscuit box, has a sliding lid, which is half open. The inside is filled with tallow from mutton. It was called 'Depression' by Beuys, who called it 'a kind of landscape in a

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<sup>5</sup> See previous footnotes.

box'. It relates, in particular, to *Plateau Central* 1962 (reproduced Tisdall 1979: 206)<sup>6</sup>. 'The flat level of the tallow is to emphasize the depression.'<sup>7</sup> The use of fat provides one of the groups of significant signals and patterns in Beuys' work and connects readily to his theory of sculpture. Beuys explaining this choice of material, notes:

'my initial intention in using fat was to stimulate discussion. The flexibility of the material appealed to me particularly in its reactions to temperature changes. This flexibility is psychologically effective - people instinctively feel it relates to inner processes and feelings. The discussion I wanted was what language is about, what human production and creativity are about. So I took an extreme position in sculpture, and a material that was very basic to life and not associated with art.' (Tisdall 1979: 72).

The metal box of fat illustrated in Tisdall and the image on the slide at the University of Sunderland and elsewhere, has a profile-plan of a square and is without a lid. Across the surface Beuys has inscribed 'Plateau Central'. This could be thought of as alluding to the land in Tibet linking east to west, between China and western Asia, but the allusion can just as easily be proprioceptive and engaged in an ecological ethics.

*Vitrine 28*, now titled *Untitled (Vitrine with Four Objects/Plateau Central)*, becomes a metonym for a kind of sustained energy resulting from the activities of the simulated battery's electrolysis, but this as readily becomes electrical brain activity, through and across the surface of the plateau between neurons or even the cerebrum, and in both potentials as a result of each side and initiating a chemical reaction.

In neuron activity there is a gap 'where each axon meets a dendrite. This gap is called a synapse. In order for the current to cross the synapse each axon secretes chemicals, called neurotransmitters, that are released into the space when the cell is suitably fired up. These chemicals trigger the neighbouring cell to fire, too, and the resultant chain effect produces simultaneous

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<sup>6</sup> Tisdall, Caroline (1979) *Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames & Hudson.

<sup>7</sup> Tate Collection description.

activity in millions of connected cells'<sup>8</sup> (1998: 14); 'a pattern of connectedness'. As Rita Carter later notes, 'At the very back of the main mass of brain, tucked under its tail and partly fused to it, lies the cerebellum – the 'little brain'. Aeons ago, this was our mammalian ancestors' main brain but now it has been superseded by the larger area, the cerebrum.' (1998: 15)

In Beuys' work the meaning could extend to include social ideas and the psyche; imagine the self, not in a sentimental and conventional state of clarity, but in a perpetual state of construction from an aesthetic and thus ethical dilemma, communicating patterns of connectedness between action and stasis, between construction of the self and the local community, and then between the self and the State and in support of sustained resilience against the State's monstrous machine. This is of course the aesthetics of an imperfect fit and would thus encourage visiting the artefact again.

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<sup>8</sup> Carter, Rita (1998) *Mapping the Mind*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.