



On display in the Bell Gallery are small, reproducible and speciously functional objects created by Joseph Beuys, one of the artists who gave the 20th century the concept of “art-damaged.” The twentieth anniversary of the German artist’s death has brought from various New England galleries a retrospective of his multiples—industrially reproducible items meant in their own, very special way for mass consumption or appreciation. Although the collection touches on Beuys’ celebrity and his mad, utopian ideals about art, the pieces on display under glass at the Bell are earth-toned, small, and contemplative. Any hope for bizarre spectacle, the more obvious source of Beuys’ popularity, should be abandoned.

Despite his outsized reputation, Joseph Beuys is so intertwined with Germany that he may be unfamiliar to many Americans. His production of sculptures and performance was almost entirely limited to Europe. There is the notable exception of the sarcastic but dedicated 1974 performance piece entitled *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*. This action, as he called his performances after working with the radical art group Fluxus, consisted of his first trip to the United States. Beuys was flown into an airport, wrapped completely in felt, strapped into a gurney and taken via ambulance to the René Block Gallery in New York. There Beuys was unwrapped and placed in a caged room to live for days with a coyote. The two squabbled and, according to some reports, befriended each other, possibly over the fact that the coyote urinated on copies of the *Wall Street Journal*. After three days Beuys was again wrapped up in felt, escorted to an airport and flown back to Europe having only seen America from a plane and the windows of the New York gallery.

Instead of photos, video, or detailed descriptions of Beuys’ actions, the Bell has decided to let the multiples Beuys produced, as well as his reputation, speak for themselves. The result is that the List lobby is a display of posters and postcards hyping long past exhibitions of Beuys, and the Bell gallery filled with felt-covered sculptures and prints. There are postcards behind glass shaped like chalkboards, or made of wood, felt, and a magnet respectively. Several suites of drawings and engravings feature animals, their skulls, and dancing naked women. Many of the sculptures possess a simplicity evocative of found art. A piece entitled *Ja Ja Ja Ja, Nee Nee Nee Nee* consists of a tape recorder with the potential to play fake “granny gossip” encased in felt. A broken samurai sword is wrapped in felt. A complete medicine cabinet is signed Joseph Beuys, as well as a functional hatchet.

As random as his work may at first appear, it revolves about a personal mythology rooted deeply in Beuys’ claim of the artist as the artist-shaman. Much of the continuity in his work involves his fantastical personal narrative. According to Beuys, as a German radio operator in World War II, the dive-bomber he was aboard crashed in Crimea. He was found in the snow by nomadic Tartars, who kept him alive for a week by covering his body with fat and honey, then wrapping him head to toe in felt. Emphasizing the healing and rebirth aspects of this story, Beuys incorporated this into his artwork in his continued use of fat, honey and felt, while also exploiting the mystic persona his story created by promoting his “expanded concept of art.” He believed that art contains an inherent healing power brought on by the release of creative energy, a quality inherent in “social sculpture,” whereby every person can create meaningful art through their actions. This idealistic aspect of his work was accompanied by Beuys’ social activism, such as helping to start the Green Party in Germany.

Felt me up

Beuys’ artwork, in its particular use of personal symbols, subject matter and material, is highly original. He evokes a lost mysticism or an alleged personal history by employing felt, fat, honey, alchemic metals and blood. Certain subject matter also continuously appears in his work, such as the possibility of objects of healing as art, interconnected life processes, and a Christ complex involving crosses, death and resurrection, and washing people’s feet. Certain animals manifest themselves often in Beuys’ work, each with its own mystic attachments. For example the hare, which for reasons such as its amazing skill at reproduction Beuys describes as an external organ of the human body. Beuys also uses his own image in his artwork, such as completely felt reproductions of his dorky explorer suit and characteristic hat.

Given Beuys’ reputation for remarkable creations based on these repeated themes, what the Bell Gallery offers underwhelms. The prints and objects, like *Capri Battery*, one of his final works, reflect the humor and fascinating imagination of Beuys. Like a child’s science project, *Capri Battery* consists of a yellow lightbulb creating an electric current by being directly attached to a lemon. This piece, relatively small (think lemon-sized) is presented in the Bell inside of a giant glass case, alone. Beuys’ intent was for the piece to be mass-produced. Now it sits dwarfed in a huge case like a holy relic, being described with rhetoric such as “apotheosis.”

A further frustration is the repeated hint of marvelous events or exhibitions in the past. Most of the works relate in some way or another to a grander past work. For example, *Sled #1* is a single sled that was included in *The Pack*, an “environment” in which a Volkswagen bus led 32 sleds, each complete with their own survival kit including a hunk of fat. All alone it looks like a small, isolated sled with a yellowish mass and a blanket on top. *Mirror Piece*, which includes a bottle full of crystal iodide, a topical healing solution fatal if ingested, and a card reading “How to explain the iodide bottle to the hares,” also recalls another work. It alludes to his famous 1965 action, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*,

How to Explain the Iodide Bottle to the Hares Joseph Beuys at the Bell

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where in a well-attended gallery he covered his head in honey and gold leaf and talked to a dead hare in his arms.

To see these objects all without the possibility of Joseph Beuys ever enacting the performances or installations that inspired them is disappointing. While immensely creative, they seem to be merely the reproducible detritus of fantastic past occurrences. In the gallery there is the feeling, as in most retrospectives, of having missed the revolution. Beuys will never again fill galleries with viscous fat in chairs and corners, construct a huge honey-transporting apparatus out of piping and electric motors, or lecture furiously and draw incomprehensible graphs on blackboard after blackboard after blackboard. All the blood (mostly from animals, hopefully) grew crusty and dry on the objects in the Bell Gallery a long time ago.

“The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated”

As nostalgic for things before my time as the exhibit makes me, it may in fact give a better idea of the more essential legacies of Beuys. His association-driven objects come off as composed and familiar as almost anything else in a gallery, even after 20 years. Nothing seems completely foreign and nothing seems as shocking as it once may have been. Strange to a point, Beuys’ style of the relic-object seems to have become a staple of modern sculpture. It is his work uniquely, and the exhibit is designed to remind the audience of this, right down to the scrawling of “Joseph Beuys” on the surface of every piece. Even the posters rabidly proclaiming past installations and actions are signed by the artist.

Beuys left behind a vast amount of rhetoric on the significance and necessity of art for society, and a boiled-down approximation of these tenets can be found on the walls of the Bell Gallery. Currently out of fashion, Beuys makes these ideas appear to me, while quaint, possible. This may be a respect of the dedication of a man who could harshly criticize Duchamp’s assertion of art’s uselessness in a televised action or live with a coyote for three days. For those hoping to see documentary proof of the latter, the RISD Museum will be screening a video of Beuys’ action *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* starting Tuesday, February 14. For those interested in seeing his material output, the Bell has a few rooms full of felt-covered, quasi-functional objects, collections of rare prints and a funky yellow lemon light in a big glass case. These pieces exhibit Beuys’ creative restructuring of the world, if only by enigmatic little proxies.

Galen Broderick B’09 doesn’t even need a thousand words.

