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Joseph Beuys, Jorg Immendorff:



Joseph Beuys Jorg Immendorff: Art And Its Revelatory Socio-political Ability

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Art Belongs to the People is the second exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, taken from the collection of the Hall Art Foundation, and is again curated by the Foundation's resident curator Sir Norman Rosenthal. The work of Joseph Beuys has been well represented in UK galleries for over four decades. The artist's work has also been displayed prominently in the Tate Modern collection, and in 'The Secret Block' [For a Secret Person in Ireland] at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1974.

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Beuys re-interpreted how the viewer might respond to the artist as well as the art; as shaman, philosopher, and political and environmental activist; from the artist's performance/intervention 'I Like America and America Likes Me' forming a relationship with the spirit of a natural America through Beuys' physical dialogue with a coyote at the René Block Gallery in New York, also in 1974 – a process that would probably not be allowed today - to the artist's eventual election as European Green Party candidate and the subsequent 'Social Sculpture' of seven thousand oak trees. Beuys was as contentious as his art was transformative to a generation of artist's who copied his formalism without even coming close to understanding its dialectic.

But the German artist, and student of Beuys; Jörg Immendorff is less well known in the United Kingdom and is barely represented in British collections. Yet both artists shared a friendship and a tutelary concern for art and its revelatory and socio-political ability that brought them together in a lifelong friendship.

The exhibition focuses on the year 1968 onwards when Immendorff was a student of Beuys at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art. In the same year the international student protests broke out on either side of the Atlantic caused by the rise of American and Soviet imperialism. This relationship is highlighted by Immendorff's painting 'Die Geschichte der EPAS (The Story of EPAS/Breschnew) 1976, which references the Apollo Soyuz space mission as a cypher for the U.S./Soviet détente after the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Immendorff's paintings are a subjective documentation of the politics of a classic era of 20th century history.

Beuys responded to the political issues of the day with an 'expanded concept of art'. Immendorff would later respond with a Marxist approach; a reaction of many in the post-war middle classes, as an antidote to Germany's fascist past. This was a catharsis for the burden of a national memory. Immendorff was later to be expelled from the Dusseldorf Academy of Art for Maoist political activities. Ironically; the artist would subsequently take up the mantle of his elder; as Immendorff also became a teacher at the Academy.

The artist is remembered for his series of paintings entitled 'Café Deutschland' inspired by the painting 'Caffé Greco' by Marxist painter Renato Gussuto, and are arguably his most notable achievement; in sixteen paintings the Modernist tradition of Manet, Van Gogh, and Toulouse-Lautrec concerning the sordid life of the cafe, is transformed into a political discourse of division and unity, east and west. The paintings were implemented by a dialogue 'across the wall' with artist A.R. Penck who had remained in East Berlin. They featured many familiar faces including Beuys, and a young Norman Rosenthal. The 'Café Deutschland' series seem to anticipate the fall of the Berlin wall with an apparent prescience. A number of these paintings are juxtaposed with the opposing wall of the exhibition on which Beuys' eponymous felt suit hangs along with a number of the artist's photographic pieces. There are also a number of Beuysian vitrines on display, and the artist's work 'Sled, 1969', which is also a noteworthy inclusion from the Hall Collection.

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Whimsical yet notable for its amusement value is the presence of 'La Rivoluzione Siamo Noi (We are the Revolution) 1972', and 'Democracy is Merry, 1973'. These photo works are both images of Beuys in which the artist incidentally carries a bag. This inclusion mimics an Assyrian 'Winged Genie' Relief carved from a slab of gypsum, a minor deity that is a permanent fixture in the gallery and rests between the two images of Beuys; carrying her own bag in sly juxtaposition to the artist's. This light touch is a knowing wink to curating an exhibition in the non white cube space of the museum; but also a reminder of the subjectivity of the iconic in post modernity, as an icon of 20th century art is quietly juxtaposed with an Assyrian God.

Many of the works of Immendorff include images of his 'master'. The likeness of Beuys can be found in works such as 'Untitled, 2005' and the earlier work 'Gyntiana – Geburt Zweibelmann (Gyntania – Birth of Onionman), 1992', along with Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi, and an assortment of other luminaries present as figures in the painting.

It is obvious that Beuys influenced the artist, even if Immendorff's process and output differed greatly from his teacher. But it is also suggested by the exhibition that Immendorff may also have influenced Beuys. The two backboards present in the exhibition 'Die Lidlstadt Nimmt Gestaltdt an Lidlstadtplan (LIDL City Takes Shape, LIDL City Map) 1968, X & IX' were created by Immendorff and pre-date the use of the blackboard by Beuys as a tool and art object. It is a little known fact that the iconic Beuysian blackboard of the master shaman came from the work of his pupil.

Words: Paul Black © Artlyst 2014 Photo: courtesy Ashmolean Museum

Joseph Beuys and Jörg Immendorff – Art Belongs to the People! Ashmolean Museum, Oxford until 31st August 2014.