



The Son's Coming Home: Narrative Economies of Joseph Beuys' Art

By Margaret Tali

Abstract

This article deals with the narration of Joseph Beuys' art in Germany. My focus is set on the ways that particular curatorial strategies have been applied to Beuys' artistic practice in the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. I contextualize the readings in the interests of different stakeholders involved in the rescaling of the artist's heritage. Beuys' framing in the two recent retrospective exhibitions in Berlin and Düsseldorf and the regular display of his works in the Hamburger Bahnhof leads me to argue that private collectors have become closely involved in the process of curating in novel ways, which in turn requires a new critical reading of exhibition practices. Narrative economy is a concept proposed for understanding these interests and their articulations in exhibition curation.

Keywords: art museums, private collectors, retrospective exhibitions, narrative economy, curating, Hamburger Bahnhof, Joseph Beuys.

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Introduction

Whose interests do exhibitions serve? What exactly is the role of narratives? And what do exhibitions have to do with economy? In this article I will answer these questions by focusing on the figure of Joseph Beuys (1921–1986). Particularly, I am interested in the way that one of the largest contemporary art museums of Europe, the Hamburger Bahnhof narrates the role of Beuys' art. It would be difficult to dispute Beuys' eminence in the late twentieth century European art. However, interestingly the Hamburger Bahnhof positions the artist as being crucial even for understanding the twenty first century global art practice. Why and how is this justified?

Although Beuys became known in the West German cultural scene during the 1970s, in this article I suggest that the process of building his heritage to new prominence dates to the specific political climate surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. The first retrospective of Beuys' work in Germany that sought to revise this role was held in the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart (Museum for Contemporary Art) in Berlin in the summer of 2009. This exhibition awarded an overwhelming presence to the artist: Beuys' figure filled both literally and figuratively almost half of the museum. In order to understand the operation of the economy in relation to the construction of a narrative, I will analyze the processes of reframing Beuys into prominence in the Hamburger Bahnhof via the collection display and an autobiographical exhibition. The latter will be compared to another retrospective in Düsseldorf.

By 'narrative economy' I refer to the way artistic heritage is treated by contemporary art museums as a means of canon building that can alter the way this heritage is understood and interpreted. Inspired by cultural theory and social geography, according to this notion, museums become an arena for the exchange of stories via exhibitions. Although the belief that signs and symbols involve an economy has been widely legitimated by the advertising industry, it has been less considered in case of exhibitions, that supposedly pursue a neutral and objective perspective. Attributing an economy to exhibition narratives, however, allows us to understand what exactly exhibitions *do*, what kind of work they perform and which contributions they make to existing knowledge (Hoskins 2010: 260–61). Furthermore, narrative economy mediates and creates a social dynamic by using alignments that involve the labor of imagining some people as *us*, while others are defined as *them*. Thus, exhibition narratives work as significant capital that via public circulation can be used to maintain and accumulate particular values and beliefs. This approach to curation situates it within a neoliberal art world in which public museums are increasingly dependent on private collectors. It is through exchange that narratives acquire value and the capital that prestigious galleries offer for this is closely intertwined with the writing of art history. Curatorial

narratives of Beuys' figure offer a complex case-study through which to explore the importance of narration as a particular capital in the arts and to consider its dependencies.

During his lifetime, Beuys' work underwent considerable changes and developments. Born into a middle-class family in 1921, Beuys was raised in Kleve, a small town on the Dutch–German border. Like other youngsters, he served during his teenage years in the Hitler Youth and later joined the National Socialist Air Force as a volunteer, participating in the Second World War. For the artist who consciously used his life story in a large part of his work, this story became a source for a much-disputed mythology: his rescue from a plane crash by a tribe of Tatars in the Crimea. According to the artist, the nomadic tribe cured him by wrapping his body in fat and felt, until he was taken to the military hospital. This myth remained legitimate for decades (Riegel 2013: 11), as Beuys' public personas, such as self-proclaimed healer, shaman and military man, became part of his performances and activism, granting him a particular role in the cultural landscape. The dubious grounds of his story of a mythic rescue, recounted by the artist in numerous interviews, were only confirmed a decade after the artist's death by German journalists Frank Gieseke and Albert Markert in their biography *Flieger, Filz und Vaterland* (1996). They investigated Beuys' life story using various archives and convincingly argued that the British forces had in fact imprisoned Beuys for three months towards the end of the war. Gieseke and Markert complicate Beuys' romantic narrative of nomadic and rural Tatar tribes in Crimea by contextualizing his mythical images and placing them among other minority groups during the War years, which turned Beuys' account of his life story—10 years after his death—into a shameless myth (Gieseke & Markert 1996: 94–95). However, does this change the weight of his artistic work, and if yes, how is it to be reviewed in this light?

Beuys himself had turned his life story into an important component of his art; he came to enact multiple public personas in his performances. One can argue whether this was a reflection of capitalist individualism or a means to transmit his messages to a wider audience, but he did use it to voice several important social and political concerns, such as environmentalism, the bottom-up organization of society, the need to rethink capitalism and its values and the necessity to heal one's traumas by commencing with 'showing one's wounds'. The artist never openly discussed his own war-time traumas that led him to years of depression during the 1950s. Nevertheless, his clothes, such as a military vest and a felt hat, made a reference to his military past and recovery. Art historian Gottfried Boehm later argued that it was through this self-image of the soldier that Beuys was able to address themes of guilt and trauma, which enabled him to use them productively in his work (Boehm 2011: 322).

Beuys' involvement in politics since the 1970s was often considered controversial in the art field as well as in politics. Yet he ran as a candidate for the Bundestag on several occasions, was a founding member of the Green Party and used these public occasions for spreading his ideas about the importance of creativity and the interconnectedness of life and art. He initiated several platforms to bring people together, including the German Student Party (1967) and the Free International University (1974, with Heinrich Böll), and he organized artistic and activist workshops. His expulsion from the Düsseldorf Arts Academy—where he had worked as a professor of monumental sculpture from 1961 to 1972—caused an uproar, which the artist used to advocate everyone's right to participate in his lectures, thereby denying the bureaucratic admission policies imposed by the education system. The discrepancy between Beuys' standpoint and the academic policies had been the main motivation to expel him. His artistic creations include an array of installations, performances, action art and political activism.

While Beuys' public persona, the man with a felt hat, continued to communicate between different worlds—that of students, museums, collectors and the art audience—and was well known to German audiences during these decades, the first-hand memories of his life have gradually faded from public consciousness. His persona is actively shaped anew by museums, especially for younger generations and audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds and communities. The past decades have brought significant population change, with many more cultural communities present in German cities. The particular economies of knowledge about Beuys and the mechanisms of its creation in curatorial narratives are the object of my interrogation in this article. I will firstly critically consider the relationship between curatorial narration and an economy that it implicitly embeds, and secondly, rethink Beuys' narrative in the light of a changing demographic in Germany. This article unfolds in two parts. I begin by comparing the retrospective exhibition, *Joseph Beuys: Die Revolution sind wir* (2008–09) in the Hamburger Bahnhof, with *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes* (2010) produced by Düsseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, in order to underline the narrative strategies employed by the first museum. In the second part, I examine further the ways of narrating Beuys' work in the Hamburger Bahnhof as a part of the permanent display.¹ In doing so I focus on the particular framing of his installation *Tramstop. A Monument to the Future* (1976). Its reception in West Germany during the mid-1970s assists me in contextualizing the mechanisms of the artist's posthumous narrations. While the Hamburger Bahnhof remains the key focus in my analysis, the comparison with Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20) supports some of the key elements in the practice of canonizing the artist in Berlin.

Reclaiming Beuys in Berlin and Düsseldorf

The recent narratives of Beuys' art indicate that the meanings of his art are anything but settled. I will compare two different narratives of Beuys' works in Germany in order to understand the process of meaning creation around his oeuvre and trace its principal agents. The two eminent narratives that I will focus on here, realized in Berlin and Düsseldorf within the timespan of three years, differed both in their starting points and aims. The Hamburger Bahnhof's exhibition concept for *Joseph Beuys: Die Revolution sind wir* (3.10.2008–25.1.2009) was developed by curators Eugen Blume and Catherine Nichols. The exhibition couples several monumental works with numerous videos of the artist's public performances following a thematic narration defined by the curators. In Düsseldorf the exhibition *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes* (11.9.2010–16.1.2011), curated by Marion Ackermann and Isabelle Malz, was enhanced by extensive public preparation and research that gathered memories from Beuys' colleagues and students in Düsseldorf. The preparation included a series of lectures and public discussions entitled *To Exhibit Beuys?* This program publicly posed the questions how could and should Beuys be exhibited and what should be prioritized: iconography, aesthetics or experiencing the art? The exhibition concluded with a conference that brought together recent scholarly work on the artist. I will now take a closer look at the contingencies embodied in the different narrative aims these two exhibitions presented.

Die Revolution sind wir filled nearly half of the Hamburger Bahnhof, stretching through two wings on two floors and the spacious area of the former station's waiting hall. Beuys' work in different formats was organized along 15 different themes, for which the extended concept of art acted as its overarching topic (Weiss, Schuster et al. 2008: 6). All of these themes were titled with statements by Beuys. While walking around the exhibition one could follow Beuys' works alongside the 15 quotations by the artist. For instance, proclamations such as *Death keeps me awake; I am interested in transformation; Show your wound; Make the secrets productive; Everyone is an artist; Give me honey; and I advise to lift the Wall 15 cm* served as titles introducing different thematically organized aspects of his work.² Interestingly, the adopted curatorial narrative chose to 'speak' with the voice of the artist.

An institutional decision to speak with the voice of an individual who is no longer among the living is a significant move. Although it may be commonly used for older art, for contemporary art it is still fairly novel, which instead of translating Beuys' work to the contemporary context, seems to suggest the particular presence of the artist in the museum. In fact, this act embeds even more than that—it includes a curatorial promise to enter the artist's mind. With the first-person speech, the museum space was turned into an autobiographical space, where the artist talked with the audience in 'his own words'. I suggest that the

curators chose this narrative strategy as a means to persuasively pursue a claim to canonize and re-animate Beuys' heritage, particularly in Berlin.

According to Blume, one of the curatorial starting points was to create a deliberate contrast with the earlier 1988 Beuys retrospective, which had been the last of its kind in Germany. This exhibition was organized in the Martin Gropius Bau by Heiner Bastian under the title *Joseph Beuys Sculptures and Objects*. It took place as a part of Berlin's program as that year's European Capital of Culture. During the course of its creation, the exhibition generated much criticism. One of the important points of criticism was the fact that its narrative entirely disregarded Beuys' political activism and his performances and solely focused on installations and objects. The second point was the controversial role of its curator, Heiner Bastian. In particular, Bastian was accused of a conflict of interests after it was revealed that some of the works were being sold on the art market while being shown in the exhibition (*Joseph Beuys Ausstellung Presseberichte* 1989).

To correct the mischief, Blume added extensive performance documentation and recordings of Beuys' TV and radio presentations to his 2009 retrospective exhibition. The show involved a total of about 270 works. Next to object-based artworks, over 50 videos were screened during the exhibition, including talk shows that featured Beuys, his audio performances and documentation of his actions. Many of the videos were screened on large walls.

While walking in the museum the visitor could *hear* the artist's voice, *see* Beuys' own figure in every exhibition space and *read* his statements from the wall, under which the primary sources were cited in much smaller letters. This narrative strategy reflected Blume's interest in bringing Beuys' voice and figure back into the exhibition space. The same aim had led him to start the Joseph Beuys Media Archive in 1993 as a collection of documents, audio and video recordings involving the artist's public speeches and performances. Blume later wrote about the archive: "The films give us an awareness about his looks, habitus, gestures, and an idea about the effect, for which once the strong presence of the artist used to stand out" (Blume 2007a: 136).

The curatorial positions of Blume and Nichols presented a combination of the known and unknown: based on his collaboration with the artist during the early 1980s, Blume is an important mediator,³ while the position of Nichols presented, as she called it, a non-expert gaze (conversation with Catherine Nichols). Their reanimation of the artist by using different media and stressing the multiple senses of the visitor, figuratively brought Beuys back to life from the dead and resituated him within the walls of the museum.

The exhibition title *Joseph Beuys: Die Revolution sind wir* frames the artist as a revolutionary. The nature of the revolution that he had set the ground for, however, remains ambiguous. The foreword of the catalogue attests that the

ideals of revolution had been a daily motto of the 1960s student movements in West-Germany (Weiss, Schuster et al. 2008: 6). 'Beuys' revolution could only be characterized in plural, the curators proclaim in the narrative framing. In line with this, Blume proposes seeing the biography of the artist itself as 'a revolutionary act'. Furthermore, he grants a particular role to Beuys' death (Blume 2008: 19–20) by drawing an etymological parallel between the words 'death' and 'act' (in German respectively 'Tod' and 'Tat'), and thereby reading Beuys' death as a symbolic act, rendering it a form of 'living' (Blume 2008: 136). With this conceptual twist his whole life cycle is rendered ambiguous by the curator, which in combination with the walls that speak with his voice does the work of justifying the creation of the new supra-presence of the artist in the museum.

When we keep in mind that Beuys was narrated into a new prominence within a temporal context of reconstructing Berlin's identity in the reunited country, this ambiguity can be seen as strategic. One of the important aspects of posthumous ambiguity, according to anthropologist Kathrine Verdery, is to render the illusion that a person has had *only one* significance. Verdery's readings in her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999) are based on analysis of reburials of dead people in different politically charged contexts. In reality, she attests that the meanings surrounding a person will continue to remain contested for his/her contemporaries (Verdery 1999: 29). The curators take advantage of this ambiguity in order to connect Beuys with revolution. In my conversation with Nichols, she also admitted that as a part of the response to the exhibition, several people had mentioned that they could not recognize the artist via the image created by the exhibition. In order to transmit a particular form of German cultural identity, one of the catalogue texts by Peter-Klaus Schuster compared Beuys' figure with that of Albrecht Dürer (Schuster 2009: 325). This narrative strategy worked hand in hand with the spatial narration that recaptured Beuys as a revolutionary and the use of the artist's voice employed a powerful combination of rhetoric and spatial tools for his institutional canonization.

In comparison with the retrospective in Berlin, Düsseldorf's *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes* was more moderate and problematizing in its claims. The narrative introduced Beuys foremost as an artist, a teacher and a fellow citizen, who stood out for his ideas and their enactment in public (Ackermann and Malz 2010). As opposed to Berlin, the curators of K20 claimed the artist's heritage based on the grounds of his personal history and relationship with the city. In line with this aim, the exhibition narrative followed a linear principle in which works were grouped into five different periods in Beuys' career, 1958–61, 1968–72, 1973–78, 1979–83 and 1984–86, which were divided into different spatial sections in the museum.

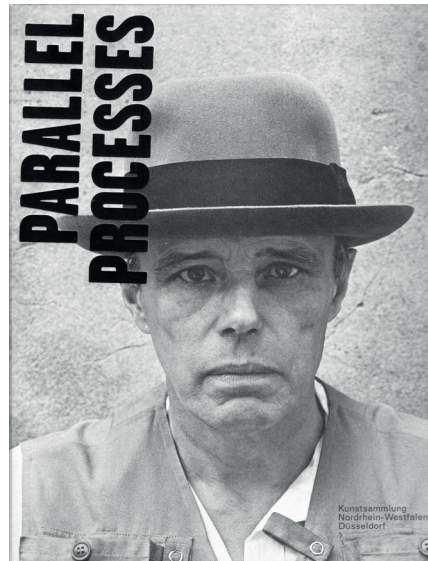
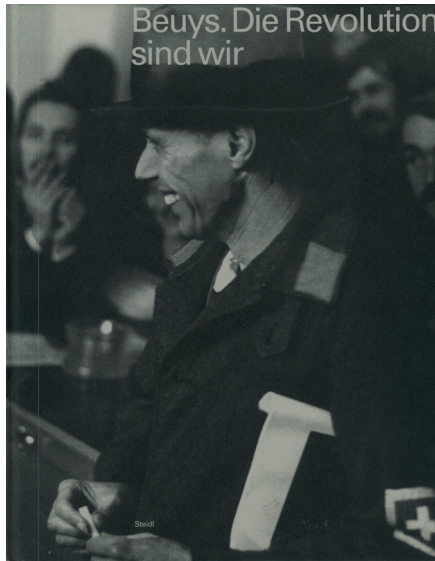
The subtitle *Parallel Processes* captured the problematizing approach of the curators to his body of work, as a part of which they decided to keep his life at a moderate distance from his work in order to mark a problematic translatability between them, in the light of the conflict between Beuys' autobiographic narrative and the research by Gieseke and Markert. The approach thus adopted a sensitive take on Beuys' personal traumas and their later narration.

Compared to the Hamburger Bahnhof's display, voice was employed in *Parallel Processes* in a very different way. Compared to the first exhibition, the latter practically excluded wall texts in the gallery spaces. Instead, the curators used the multiple voices of Beuys' colleagues, students and early curators and collectors of his work in their construction of a narrative; their stories were transmitted to the audience via headphones. The curators called this practice of gathering opinions and stories an archaeological approach—although the narrative included a narrator, the artworks and their author came to life via the multiple perspectives on his work. Its narrative also exposed this process of negotiation and research using audio guides. From the openly posed question about how Beuys' art could be exhibited, the curators chose the viewers' relationship with it as the point around which the exhibition design was also focused.

The two retrospective narratives acted as competitive ventures aimed to appropriate Beuys' heritage and turn him into a sign in the cultural landscapes of the two cities, Berlin and Düsseldorf. Leaving aside their radically different use of voice as a curatorial strategy, the shows also presented a competition in plain numbers. The Berlin exhibition consisted of 270 artworks displayed over 5000 square meters; 300 artworks were put on display in Düsseldorf, exhibited over 3000 square meters. Figure 1 depicts the two impressively sized hard-cover catalogues published for the occasion of the exhibitions, which also echo the competitive narratives. Both are printed in black-and-white, but the Berlin catalogue consists of 408 pages and the one from Düsseldorf weighs in at 432 pages. Their rhetoric gives away their ambition to define and conclude, in order to provide Beuys a place in cultural history. The canonical form is supported by the black-and-white print, serving especially in the Berlin narrative to detach and eternalize Beuys, rather than embed his practice within his era. Public emotions evoked by the two narrative frames and commodities available in the museum shops, such as felt keyrings with the message 'Heimat' or T-shirts with 'Wir sind die Revolution', all participated in expanding the narrative of the posthumous revival of the artist.

The stakes of narrating the artist were high because the competition was simultaneously between two cities and two regions, as well as two institutions, both of them seeking to raise the cult of the artist as a part of their public image and significance. With its sheer scale of 5000 square meters dedicated to the reanimation of the artist, the Hamburger Bahnhof claims to be the final station

on the long journey of Beuys' ideas. Metaphorically, the museum enacted the homecoming of the artist, welcoming him to the capital 20 years later, not only as a son but also as a revolutionary. The Düsseldorf retrospective was symbolically finished on the date marking the 25th anniversary of the artist's death, recalling the



Figures 1–2. Two catalogue cover reproductions. On the left, *Beuys: Die Revolution sind wir* (2008). On the right, *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes* (2011).

end of his life and stressing the role of the city in his life story.

If set in historical perspective, the roots of these competitive claims can be traced back to the shifting urban and regional power prevalent in Germany following the end of the Cold War. Several Western German cities such as Cologne, Munich, Darmstadt and Bonn had profited from the rapid developments of the so-called 'social market economy'; although the latter phenomenon has later been problematized by many scholars. These cities achieved a new prominence during the 1970s and 1980s, with their cultural infrastructures supporting this change of position and private collections often carrying an important role in its realization. With the reacquisition of its status as the capital of Germany in 1990, Berlin too needed to redefine its representative position as the capital of the reunited country. I will next analyze the process of narrating Beuys in respect to the particular mechanisms that connect the artist's display with the collection of his art by focusing on the Hamburger Bahnhof in the capital of Germany.

Spatial reanimations of Beuys in the Hamburger Bahnhof

In the Hamburger Bahnhof, Beuys' work is displayed in a separate wing, called the West wing, on an ongoing basis. The artist's work was intended to play a crucial role in the museum from the outset; it opened its doors to the public in 1996 with a mission to introduce and collect art practices from the 1960s onwards. The museum was founded by the City of Berlin as the newest branch of the Berlin National Gallery with the proceeds of the private collection of the real estate businessman Erich Marx (born 1921). The director of the National Gallery, Dieter Honisch, wrote two years before the museum's opening that: 'The West Wing will be dedicated entirely to Joseph Beuys. [...] His extended concept of art will define the overall presentation [of art in the museum]' (Honisch 1994: 48). Although much criticism targeted the central role that Marx's private collection was granted in the new museum, the building was nevertheless restored with the needs of this particular private collection in mind. As Marx collected new works, they became available for the museum as well. Two private collections have since been added, the latter of which led to further museum extensions. During the past decade the area of its location, Berlin Mitte (Center), has seen a particularly active building boom, which functions as a background for understanding the economies of narrating Beuys' art and their attached meanings.

In 2010, the display of Beuys' works was contextualized within the museum with artworks by the Fluxus movement and Viennese Actionism.⁴ Both movements aimed at transgressing the boundaries of modernist art since the 1960s and recycled the ephemeral and perishable as their object of study. They functioned as an introduction to Beuys' work in the museum in at least two ways: firstly, they served to establish the context of his international Western contemporaries from the 1960s and 1970s, and secondly, they equipped the visitor with a visual apparatus for approaching Beuys' work in the following spaces. The choices of artworks shown in the West wing communicated a particular image of the artist. When walking further along the West wing one cannot help but notice the singular artistic position that is granted to Beuys, despite the collective nature of several of his works. For instance, one of the first works presented was the video-performance *Soziale Plastik* (1967), which depicts a black-and-white close-up of Beuys' face with his deep, penetrating gaze directed at the viewer; at the end of the same space the visitor encounters Beuys' voice in a sound performance *Ja ja ja ja ja, Ne ne ne ne ne* (1968). Like *Soziale Plastik*, many of the works displayed in this wing present Beuys' practice as well as different aspects of his figure, thus echoing Blume's aim to bring the artist's voice and figure into the display space. This also points to the particular vulnerability of performance and sound art towards later displays due to its ambivalence and multiple layers of interpretation. When performance and sound art are redisplayed, crucial aspects

such as the viewers' perspective, as well as the historical and political context, become the playground for particular curatorial ambitions. They can be effectively stretched into any format—retrospective exhibitions can be curated into various dimensions—thereby turning the role of the curator into a point of intersection between different interests.

Most of the 35 artworks displayed in this wing originate from two sources—the private collection of Erich Marx and the Joseph Beuys Media Archive. I will explain the economies at work in this wing by focusing on one of the monumental installations that is shown there. This work, *Tramstop. A Monument for the Future (Strassenbahnhaltestelle. Monument zu der Zukunft)*, is set at the center of the Hamburger Bahnhof's display of Beuys' work and serves as my case-study in order to further open the ways that Beuys' singularity in space has been created and sustained, but also as a way of articulating the particular tensions involved in the competitive narratives that are at work in narrating Beuys. This installation was created for the 1976 Venice Biennale and was exhibited in the pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany (hereafter West Germany). What we encounter in the West wing today are iron objects that appear as remnants. But remnants of what, and what exactly are the associations of this work? In order to answer, I will return to the initial spatial context of the work in the Venice Biennale. This context itself is not only significant for understanding the installation's later display, but also for situating it within its current temporal context.

The pavilion where Beuys' *Tramstop* was mounted carried with it the burden of Germany's Nazi-era history. Constructed as the pavilion of Bavaria in 1909, the space was redesigned following the plans of Hitler's exhibition architect Ernst Haiger in 1938. A colonnaded portico, swastika and eagles communicating the Third Reich ideology were added to frame its main entrance. These Nazi symbols were removed after the War, but the building continued to serve its representative function for West Germany.⁵ Beuys created an installation for this symbolically loaded space after his first visit to Venice in the spring of 1975.

The installation *Tramstop* consisted of a four-meter-long structure stretching out in the main pavilion space, with four seats set around it. At the top of the central structure a human head emerges from a canon. The mouth of the head is open as if attempting to scream. What we see is an iron cry, which is meant to have no sound. Next to the installation there was a heap of soil, as a reminder of the installation works.

The work was conceived as a spatial environment intended to entice viewers to take a meaningful pause, to reflect on the neglected memories from the recent past and reconsider their place in the future. As such, the space, through its architecture and historical layers, functioned as an essential component of the environment that Beuys created. The palimpsestic memory of the space was made

visible by leaving it shabby, unrepaired and with paint peeling off the walls. This symbolic space created continuity between past and present, representing a silent scream surrounded by the scars left in the space.

In the curatorial framing the installation was narrated simply as an 'environment for remembering' (Gallwitz 1976: 3), but no open references were made to either the Nazi regime or Beuys' experiences of serving in the Nazi army during the war. The 'difficulty' of memory only occurs as a suggestion in this framing; it is hinted at but unarticulated. This lack of attention was repeated in the public discourse.⁶ One critic, Gottfried Sello, problematized further the meaning of 'environment', which according to him was left unexplained by the curatorial framing (Sello 1976). He saw it as an art form involving interior design and 'the space of experiences', in which participation became essential through active engagement with the viewer. The architectural context of the pavilion, however, was left unmentioned in the article, leaving the matter absent from the discourse.

The artist's version of the genesis of *Tramstop* was based on a childhood memory from his hometown Kleve (Haenlein 1990: 203–4). The inclusion in the exhibition catalogue of black-and-white photos recording the act of taking a plaster cast of the upturned canon war monument by Baron Moritz von Nessau in Kleve (1652) served as visual evidence for the latter. Beuys later complemented it with a previously molded head, which one can see at the top of the canon. While perceiving the work as a process, instead of the process of audience engagement and participation, it became a process of *reproducing* the monument by the artist in discourses of criticism (Scholten, Mönig et al 2000: 209–13). This can be seen as a pattern, since Beuys' vocabulary and explanations were often repeated in the discourses of critics, curators and collectors, often leaving the artist unmentioned as their source.

When this work was exhibited in the 1970s, the artist's open and articulate combination of visual art with politics and real life was far from accepted by the German media and art world. Questions over the status of his work as 'art', which followed Beuys throughout his career, are also traceable in the criticism of his exhibit in Venice. Kleve was recalled by the critics on several occasions, but the monument's object of remembering remained unnamed. Traumatic memories were suppressed in the reception of the work. Allegory too, according to Mieke Bal, can function as a form of escapism (Bal 1998: 96), in this case the experience being openly avoided through its usage is the trauma of war and the experience of being complicit. Cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen analyzed the memory discourse in Germany and its reflections in the cityscapes in his book *Present Pasts*. Huyssen argued that changes in public discourse concerning the Nazi heritage in Germany came about only during the first decade of the twenty first century, through the assistance of neoliberal market forces. This created a constellation that he calls the memory market (Huyssen 2003), with images, spectacles and events constituting part of its mechanisms.

The Tramstop displayed in the Hamburger Bahnhof, with its deformed and ruined shape appears strikingly different compared to its earlier appearance in Venice. Although there are several ways to explain the artist's motivation for 'breaking' the work's verticality, this act of rupture marks a clear change in which it no longer stands for commemoration but acquires the status of a vehicle for displaying a set of *altered* meanings. During the 1976 Venice Biennale Beuys sold his installation to the Kröller-Müller museum in the Netherlands. Erich Marx, who visited the Biennale, was interested in owning the same work and so received another version that Beuys agreed to make for him.



Figures 3–4. Two versions of the *Tramstop*. The first one on the left belongs to Kröller-Müller Museum, on the right the second version of the installation belongs to Erich Marx and is exhibited in the Hamburger Bahnhof. Fig. 3. Courtesy of the Kröller-Müller museum.

Marx later recounted the story of ‘knowing he had to have it’ when he visited the German pavilion on several occasions (for instance see, Marx 1997a: 9). The second version slightly differs from the first: instead of one rail fixing the work in the swampy Venice soil, we see a rail-track that separates at one end.

The curators frame Marx’s version of *Tramstop* at the Hamburger Bahnhof in the following way:

As a schoolboy in his hometown Kleve, Beuys had often waited at the bus stop next to the 17th-century monument ‘Eisener Man’ (Iron Man). For the Venice Biennale he had the remnants of this monument, composed out of military equipment, cast into iron. He supplemented it with a human head rising out of the canon barrel. In addition a hole was drilled from the exhibition hall to the bottom of the lagoon out of which rose iron rods, the material excavated from the gleaming, bent tram rail. In the second version in the Marx Collection, Beuys added a rail switch and canon barrel horizontally across the mortars to create an archaic-looking vehicle. The rail switch signals the necessity to decide which path humanity will take in the future.

The secondary nature of the displayed installation is used here to emphasize the work’s ownership, its belonging to the collector Marx. Interestingly, the changes that the artist made to the work function as a guarantee of its authenticity. It is telling how the curatorial reference to the future ‘path of humanity’ chosen in the framing transfers a message about the importance of the work. Contrary to what Huyssen suggests about the market forces assisting the reappearance of the Nazi heritage, the absence of the Nazi-era history’s relation to Beuys’ work is repeated by the curators even here, 30 years after its creation. Although in its original context *Tramstop* involved a well-documented performative action of its installation, including a series of encounters with the audience that opened a space to reflect upon the Nazi-era memory, in the course of its later displays they seem to be forgotten. This absence is repeated in both retrospectives. In Düsseldorf the work is framed as “a monument to the future and home” and it was claimed that it recalled “the importance of childhood experiences and the need of taking them seriously”. Beuys’ figure was thus repatriated to the Rhine region through personal relationships and his life-story. The absence of this framing was repeated in Berlin, where the work was displayed under the broader theme of transformation, connected to the energetic potentials of healing. It was shown alongside installations such as *The Chief* (1964) and *Show Your Wound* (1974–75).

Contrary to this, Hal Foster, Yves Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloch interpret Beuys’ performances, especially those engaging with scandal

and shock, in the context of an emerging culture of spectacle that sought to magnify the artist whose social role ensued from that (2011: 526). They frame Beuys' role in twentieth century art history primarily in his issuing of the subject of the Holocaust in his early work and public statements, which, as they observe, problematized the impossibility of representing the Holocaust adequately (2011, 528–29).

I suggest that this particular framing of Beuys' work in the museum involves different agencies that are related to its ownership and its continuous origins in the collection of Erich Marx. In order to understand their operation, I will mobilize the concept of the 'exhibitionary complex' proposed by cultural theorist Tony Bennett. Bennett analyzed the relationship of display to power and surveillance in his book *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995) and linked it to the process of producing knowledge under hegemonic social relations. With the exhibitionary complex, Bennett refers to the transfer of objects from private domains into public arenas, through which they become vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power (Bennett 1995: 60–61). When objects are set on public display, they continue to transmit messages about their ownership. The exhibitionary complex, therefore, enables me to open up the invisible or hidden power relationships that the display of Beuys' work from the Marx collection conveys.

Marx had built a collection based on four artists' works: Joseph Beuys, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg—work by Anselm Kiefer was added later. All of these artists, originating from West Germany and America, were already well known in the 1970s when Marx started collecting, and so their fame and the price of their work on the art market presented a secure investment for the collector. For the collector they reflected 'the changed spirit and a new awareness of life after the Second World War' (Marx 1997b: 24). Marx's interest in his collection being presented in the National Gallery is related to a certain visibility, status and recognition that this enables and his economic gains should not be neglected either. Making Berlin the final destination for his collection was linked with his personal history; while the post-war reconstruction of the city was a principal source of his wealth as a property developer, displaying his collection in the city provided an opportunity to exchange art for a visibility that real estate could never accomplish.

Although Marx had developed plans for a private museum in Berlin during the 1980s, he subsequently dropped the idea and provided his collection to the National Gallery as a loan (Honisch 2001). Housing his private collection in a shrine that was restored in order to keep it physically in Berlin, outweighed the prospect of creating a private Marx museum. While the collector could continue displaying and collecting, the museum was opened entirely at public expense.

The motivation for the Berlin National Gallery to display the Marx collection was related to its monumentalism and geography, which were important to an institution that promotes itself as one of the largest contemporary art museums in Europe.⁷ The choices of the collector in building up his private collection could be turned into a basis for consolidating Germany's position in the 20th-century Western narrative while also relating it to the United States. It determined a new position for Beuys' artistic heritage and established its dominance within the German cultural canon. This canonization is managed by displaying Marx's collection in a spatially distinct area within the Hamburger Bahnhof; it is exhibited in two wings, the West wing dedicated solely to Beuys, and the Kliehues Gallery, which focuses on other dominantly male artists works that Marx owns.

The symbolic economy behind the National Gallery's decision to establish a separate 'wing of Beuys', as the staff informally calls it, deserves more attention. This economy is spatially defined by the particular exhibitionary complex in which the museum operates. In my conversation with Eugen Blume, he linked this decision with the immobility of one of Beuys' installations that consists of fat blocks (Tallow, 1977) (conversation with Eugen Blume). Although the work has indeed been exhibited in the same space since the museum's opening in 1996, in 1979 it was shipped to New York for the artist's retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. Rather than being defined by one work's location, this decision is a conceptual one guided by the museum's agreement with the collector. The separate space further assists the creation of singularity for the artist that the museum pursues with particular persistence. The spatial politics in which Beuys is re-narrated in reference to twenty first century history aims to free him from the Nazi-era heritage, which is equally in the interest of the collector seeking to associate his name with positive values rather than the country's difficult past. Critical engagement with Beuys' reframing asks for a development of new methods for analyzing the complex forms of privatization within public museums and their impacts on contemporary curating.

In comparison with other artists in other parts of the museum, Beuys is omnipresent in the 'Beuys wing' through the constant reappearance of his figure in photographs, video documentation and voice recordings. Through this narrative strategy the artist is represented as simultaneously unique and universal, his work is framed within the future rather than the past. For instance, no photographs of the making of any of the large-scale installations are exhibited. I suggest that we are not shown the process of their making because it would threaten to destroy the singular image of Beuys that was aimed at by the curators in the retrospective *Joseph Beuys: Die Revolution sind wir* as well as in the collection display.⁸ The contexts of Fluxus and Viennese Actionism serve to situate his practice within the Western cultural canon precisely by playing out their *contrast* with Beuys in order to stress

his particularism, which is closely tied in the museum with the figure of Erich Marx and his collection. Criticizing the mechanisms of art history writing, Benjamin Buchloh has noted that like Beuys, artists such as Piero Manzoni, Arman and Yves Klein had also advocated the extended notion of art (Buchloh 1980: 39), but these comparisons that would propel the landscapes of visual art after the Second World War into a completely different perspective, are discarded. Their possibility might also be hindered by an implicit nationalism in the museum's collection of art from the 1960s and 1970s. The Hamburger Bahnhof's narrative excludes any practices too similar to those of Beuys, and in order to stress and recreate his eminence Beuys' strong media image is used as a resource. New media, which allows the images to be expanded, effectively enables transmission of an affective bodily experience that acts as a tool for this monumental singularity—as a consequence of which the visitor is constantly surrounded by Beuys' work. Although the media of narration has largely changed, the prominence of Beuys that was envisioned by Honisch prior to the museum opening has remained largely intact and his work stands out both spatially and contextually.

In Conclusion

I have argued in this article that museum exhibitions enhance an economy of interests and thereby embed an economy in their narratives. This economy is invisible, but via close reading narrative frames and spatial displays it can be traced back to particular interests involved in narrations. A set of meanings attached to Beuys' art was legitimated in German museums in the course of their display. The narratives of Beuys that I analyzed embedded interests of collectors and cities, which metamorphosed into particular framing of art works in retrospective exhibitions and the display of his body of work at Hamburger Bahnhof. These metamorphoses also tend to turn exhibition narratives more conservative, for instance by preferring single artist positions over collective ones, and favouring objects over immaterial art such as actions.

While telling stories via retrospective exhibitions offers both creative and critical potentials, the modernist tendency to present the artist as a genius was repeated in the two displays of the Hamburger Bahnhof that I analysed. In the Düsseldorf retrospective this could be dissolved by linking many more voices to the narrative as a way of actively integrating the aspect of memory and showing the plurality of memories about Beuys. While the first retrospective *Die Revolution sind wir* consciously shed more light on Beuys' activism, thus presenting new and previously undiscussed aspects of his body of work, the second, *Parallel Processes*, focused further on object-based work yet found a way to engage more voices in the narration of his work by including quotes extracts by colleagues, students,

collectors and others who knew the artist. Nevertheless, in Hamburger Bahnhof's later collection display, objects and performance props continue to be positioned centrally and Beuys' activist work is introduced as a way of underlining his singularity instead of critically investigating his alliances and conflicts. This also touches upon a new question for museums at a time when activism has become a prominent activity for many artists: how is activism to be exhibited within the white gallery walls? An important difference between the two retrospectives, in K20 and Hamburger Bahnhof, that conceptualizing the economy of exhibitions implicitly embedded in their aims allowed me to consider was their competitive attempt to "repatriate" Beuys, respectively claiming the artist's heritage within the two institutions, the cities and regions. Whereas the childhood was turned into a resource for this at K20 in framing his installation *Tramstop*, Hamburger Bahnhof emphasized on the artist's ambitions and his relationship with collector Erich Marx.

In 2012, the Hamburger Bahnhof's Beuys retrospective travelled to the Museum of Modern Art in Moscow, where it was displayed under the name *Joseph Beuys: Appeal for an Alternative*. With this trajectory, it thus continued to transmit the narrative of the artist produced in Berlin and enhanced its symbolic economy on an international plane. Art historian Carol Duncan's discussion of the voracious demand for 'great' artists in recently opened museums supported by art historians and gallerists who operate as part of a growing industry (Duncan 1996: 32) is a poignantly valid one in the museums of 21st century. Attributing a new prominence to Beuys is part of the narrative economization of his figure as a starting-point for a global art history with universal spirits, in which Erich Marx shares similar interests as the Hamburger Bahnhof. It is through narrative techniques of framing and rescaling with the help of new media that the contemporary exhibition industry and the curatorial enterprise enact these interests by turning Beuys' figure into an important symbolic resource for articulating a form of dominant belonging with respect to the cultural and linguistic communities populating contemporary Germany.

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Notes

¹ I have analysed the permanent display as it was exhibited in February 2011

² Respectively, in German: *Der Tod Hält Mich Wach*; *Mich interessiert Transformation*; *Zeige deine Wunde*; *Mache die Geheimnisse Produktiv*; *Jeder Mensch ist Künstler*; *Gib Mir Honig*; and *Ich advisere einen vierten Zustand*.

³ In 1983 Eugen Blume had realized a performance-action 'Sender-Receiver' together with Beuys (Blume 2007b: 313–14).

⁴ I documented the permanent display of Hamburger Bahnhof on 21st May 2010.

⁵ In the 1950s construction of a new pavilion had also been discussed, but these plans were abandoned due to a lack of funding.

⁶ I have used Venice Biennale catalogue texts and press coverage in Germany, which was gathered into the catalogue *Strassenbahnhaltestelle. Ein Monument für die Zukunft* (Scholten, Mönig et al. 2000).

⁷ The former train station to which the museum owes its name was renovated for this purpose. During the Cold War, after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the building had been trapped in the zone between East and West Berlin that marked the division of Germany.

⁸ TV-recordings, performances and exhibition posters that are exhibited originate from Beuys' solo exhibitions or other performative ventures featuring the artist as the principal character.

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Conversations

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