

# Fat, Felt and Fascism: The Case of Joseph Beuys

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This paper does not discuss Beuys from the point of view of art history or art criticism, as my primary interest in him does not stem from his artistic production but from his aesthetic and political thought. My interest in Beuys comes more from my interest in a certain type of critical reaction to his work than from any aspect of the work itself. I will be dealing with some readings of Beuys' work which hold that his call for an 'expanded concept of art' is politically dangerous. Specifically, I will look at two articles (one by the American art historian Benjamin Buchloh,<sup>1</sup> the other by the French philosopher of art Eric Michaud),<sup>2</sup> which try to establish a connection between Beuys' call for an expansion of the concept of art into the political realm, and German and Italian fascism of the 1930s. These arguments suggest that any such expansion brings with it an inherent danger of fascist politics. This suggestion is particularly interesting when applied in this context because of the peculiarities of Beuys' biography: Beuys was a member of Hitler Youth in his home town of Rindern in the 1930s, he later became a dive bomber pilot in the Luftwaffe, and, in his last public appearance,<sup>3</sup> he spoke of Germany's mission to humanity and of 'the power of resurrection' which resides within the German language and people. From the late 1950s until his death in 1986, however, Beuys was also involved in numerous radical left political initiatives such as the Organisation for Direct Democracy and the Free International University. Whether we should conclude from these facts that Beuys, in the post-war era, left behind all vestiges of his involvement with Nazism, or that (as Buchloh holds) his politics always were regressive, reactionary and potentially fascist, is a question which, again, will not be the focus of my paper. My aim is not to pass judgment on Beuys' political inclinations, or on the possible political ramifications of his thought. I want to show that even if Beuys' aesthetico-political thought does share some significant characteristics with fascism (and I think it might), nevertheless, the arguments which Buchloh and Michaud use to establish this point are based on a misconception of the nature of the relation between fascism and aesthetic activity.

Furthermore, I think it is clear that, at least in the case of Michaud, the argument is motivated more by anxiety about the possible escape of art from the aesthetic realm than by a concern to understand the specific way in which fascism mobilises aesthetic activity. This anxiety, about the political danger of expanding the concept of art, is one which, in its many forms, has had a pervasive presence in modern western thought. It has been extensively mobilised, for instance, in critical reaction to the avant-garde project of bringing down the barriers between art and life. One has only to think, for example, of Habermas' characterisation of the avant-garde as a dangerous and foolish experiment which may lead to barbarism and 'terroristic practices'.<sup>4</sup> There is also the American cultural critic Russell Berman who argues that there is a direct connection between the 'aestheticisation of everyday life' and the contemporary increase in 'social aggression' and 'nationalism'.<sup>5</sup> I should also mention the much more sophisticated argument of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who, in his book on Heidegger's relation to Nazism,<sup>6</sup> suggests that the idea of the politician as plastic artist of the state—an idea which stretches from Plato to Goebbels and beyond—embodies or illustrates the essence of fascism. As a final example, there is the essay by Walter Benjamin on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',<sup>7</sup> which has been an important source of inspiration for many of the above writers—although we will return later to the question of whether it really is expressing the same position. What I want to do in this paper, then, is to use some aspects of the critical reception of Beuys in order to show how arguments based on this anxiety lead to an unjustifiable blanket condemnation of any attempt to think of politics in terms of aesthetic activity. I will try to show that if Beuys' thought is indeed in some sense fascist, this is not so much a result of the fact that he expands the concept of art, as a result of the concept of art which he expands. Against the blanket condemnations of Michaud and Buchloh, I would like to propose a way of distinguishing between potentially fascist and non-fascist forms of what Benjamin calls the 'aestheticisation of politics'. Before considering the arguments of Michaud and Buchloh, however, I will give a brief survey of Beuys' work and thought.

The most striking feature of the work and public discourse of Beuys, is that it exhibits an unusual combination of two diametrically opposed positions—that is, it combines the modern humanist belief in the artist as self-creating creative individual<sup>8</sup> with the avant-garde

concern to undermine not only the division between art and life, but the distinction between artist and non-artist. Indeed, with regard to the former trait, one could say that the greatest 'work' which Beuys undertook was his own life, or rather the myth of that life, while, with regard to the latter trait, Beuys deliberately founded his life's work on the principle that 'everyone is an artist'.<sup>9</sup> One might think that this much-quoted statement was intended to resolve these conflicting positions by proposing that everyone possesses and shares equally the creative powers which, at least since the end of the eighteenth century, have been allowed only to the artist. This would be to misunderstand Beuys' project, because his intention is not simply to revive the avant-garde project by effecting a simple expansion either of the category 'artist', or of the category 'artwork'. Rather, Beuys' aim is nothing less than to facilitate the healing of the social organism by allowing us to experience, through his work, the transformative capacities of all material reality. In this process, 'everyone' certainly is 'an artist', but the artist is very far from being a latter day 'everyman'. In fact, the artist fills the role of shaman, a facilitator of communication between the human and animal world (see, for instance, Beuys' 1972 Action, *Coyote, I like America, America likes me*) and a facilitator of the retrieval of the lost knowledge of the true nature of the material world. So, it is the artist, or to be more specific, it is Beuys, who channels the creative energy of individual members of society into the work of healing and restructuring the social organism. It should be clear that the difference between this position and that of the historical avant-garde lies in this attribution by Beuys of quasi-mythical powers to the person of the artist. This is also, no doubt, the reason for the cult status of Beuys in Germany in the 1960s and 70s and, as we shall see, it forms the basis for Buchloh's attack on the 'Beuys myth'.

During the period from the early 1960s, when he held his first major exhibition (Kleve, 1961), up until his death in 1986, Beuys' work revolved around questions of the nature of society, the possibilities of social change and the role of art in that process. His work in sculpture and his performance pieces—which he called Actions—must all be understood in terms of the answers which Beuys found for these questions. The first point to be made with regard to this work is that, at both a social and a personal level, Beuys considered trauma to be the founding experience of late twentieth-century society. No doubt this belief springs partly from his own knowledge of Nazi Germany and also from the subsequent division of Europe during the

Cold War, but it also includes two much more general beliefs, firstly about the nature of modern capitalist societies and secondly about the human condition in general. For Beuys, it is precisely the hypostatised 'materialism' of capitalism (especially that of the post-war economic miracle in West Germany) which has alienated Western humanity from the true nature of 'material', that is, of the transformative possibilities of substance. As a society, then, we participate in impoverished forms of life, while as individuals our entry into the world not only involves 'wounding' the person who gives us life but also involves the trauma of the first contact with what Beuys calls 'the hard material conditions of the world'.<sup>10</sup> This theme appears, for instance, in the document entitled *Life Course/ Work Course*.<sup>11</sup> This is Beuys' own version of his biography—an account which blends art and life, myth and reality. Its first entry, for the year of Beuys' birth, reads '1921; Cleves Exhibition of a wound drawn together with plaster'. The theme of personal trauma appears also in works such as *Bathtub* (1960)—literally, the bath in which Beuys was bathed as a child, to which he has added plasters and fat-soaked gauze—and also in the 'environment' *Show Your Wound* (1976)—a work which combined the ideas of personal illness and social decay by arranging objects such as pathology laboratory tables in a desolate pedestrian underpass in the city of Munich.

Beuys' work, however, is more than a simple representation of the traumas of twentieth-century society; his aim is not just to represent, but to change; his interest in art, he says, is 'therapeutic'.<sup>12</sup> So, for instance, the work *Bathtub* represents the wound precisely by that which will heal—the plasters, the gauze and the fat (always a symbol of life and warmth for Beuys). Similarly, in the work *Show Your Wound*, the possibility of healing is represented by the presence of thermometers in the two boxes of fat which are positioned underneath the tables. Again, however, it is not just a question of representing the possibility of healing; rather, for Beuys, art itself can possess curative properties, the function of art is to heal. This idea is encapsulated in the work entitled *The Art Pill* (1963)—a simple, round tablet made of felt. This is a work which is very far from suggesting that art can function as some sort of pain-killing drug which would reconcile us to our conditions of existence; rather, for Beuys, it suggests the possibility of the emergence of the 'healing by-products' of art: as he says, 'art to rub in in the form of ointment, art in sausage form to slice off'. (Perhaps one has to be German to understand the curative properties of *Blutwurst!* However, it is an



element that recurs throughout Beuys' work.)

In order to understand fully Beuys' belief in the possibility of the therapeutic powers of art, we need to look at what is perhaps the central element in his view of aesthetic practice; that is, the so-called 'Theory of Sculpture'. In its most simple and most general form, this theory expresses the belief that all processes, both in the human and the natural world, involve a potentially continuous movement between the poles of chaos and order, or between undetermined and determined states. At the human level, chaos is the state of unchannelled will-power, movement is brought about under the sign of the heart, or feeling, and order is the state of intellectualised theory. It is a question, then, of a form-giving movement which transforms an undetermined, warm, raw material into a cold, crystalline product. However, for Beuys (and in this he follows Rudolf Steiner, from whose work he originally developed the theory),<sup>13</sup> the ideal is to maintain a state of balance between heat and cold, the organic and the crystalline at both the individual and the social level. In other words, in the terms of nineteenth-century Romanticism, the aim is to achieve a harmony of willing, feeling and thinking. For both Beuys and Steiner<sup>14</sup> the symbol of this ideal state is the beehive, in which an organic balance is achieved between the crystalline form of the wax comb and the warm, fluid form of the honey. Indeed, at the Documenta 6 exhibition in 1977, Beuys installed a work called *Honey Pump* which circulated two tons of honey through plastic tubing for 100 days around the room in which a group from his Free International University<sup>15</sup> held open discussions with exhibition visitors. Similarly, in one of Beuys' best known 'actions', *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* (1965), he smeared his head with honey and gold leaf to suggest the possibility that death-like human thinking could again take on the characteristics of a warm, living substance.

It is the materials fat and felt, however, which more than any others are connected to Beuys' development of this theory. Beuys' sculptural use of these materials begins in the early 1960s with a series of *Fat Corners* (1960–62) and *Felt Corners* (1961–63) and also with the better known *Fat Chair* (1964). The most obvious reason for the choice of these materials goes back to Beuys' self-constructed myth of origin. According to this myth, Beuys' life was saved by Crimean Tartars when his plane crashed in 1943. Finding him lying unconscious in the snow where he had supposedly lain for several days, they covered his body with fat and wrapped it in felt in order to regenerate his body warmth. In the work of the 1960s,

however, while the materials maintain this connotation of regenerative life-giving warmth, they primarily function as elements which will both illustrate and provoke discussion of the all-important Theory of Sculpture. For Beuys they are ideal illustrations of the theory because, to take the case of fat, they demonstrate the transformative power of substance; fat can exist as a physical example of both extremes of the opposition determined-undetermined and it moves between these states by virtue of temperature changes, and so illustrates the third element, warmth. So, for example, in the *Fat Corners* Beuys is exploring the paradoxes of substance and transformation by placing the most malleable of materials—fat—in the most constricting of geometrical forms—a right-angled corner. On the other hand, in *Fat Chair*, Beuys wished to demonstrate the chaotic, human-related potential of the material. Here a connection with human organic processes is made through the pun in the German title of the work, *Fettstuhl*, where the German *stuhl* (as the English ‘stool’) functions also as a polite term for excrement. As for Beuys’ use of felt, its significance is much the same as that of fat. Felt is a material which, like fat, can be moulded into an infinite number of forms; it is associated with warmth because of its insulative properties and, being built up of layers of animal hair, it combines organic features with structure and order. Examples of his use of felt are the *Felt Suit* of 1970, the *Felt TV* of 1968 and, of course, the felt hat, without which he was rarely seen in public.

Returning to the question of social therapy and healing, we can say something about the role which Beuys ascribed to art in that process. For Beuys, the lesson to be taken from the Theory of Sculpture is that society is capable of transformation if individuals recognise that it, as much as any ‘natural’ material, is subject to form-giving processes; hence the idea of the expansion of the idea of artistic activity or, as Beuys says, ‘sculpture’, to all areas of life. In his ‘Introduction’ to Caroline Tisdall’s book on his work,<sup>16</sup> Beuys says of his works that:

They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture *can* be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone;

*Thinking Forms*—

how we mould our thoughts or

*Spoken Forms*—

how we shape our thoughts into words or

*SOCIAL SCULPTURE* —

how we mould and shape the world in which we live;

*Sculpture as an evolutionary process;  
everyone as an artist.*



For Beuys then, in the first place art is a metaphor for the principle of movement which ensures that neither the state of chaos nor the state of order become hypostatized. More importantly, however, it is also that which provokes individuals, firstly to recognise that society can be transformed and secondly to recognise that they, as creative beings, can and must participate in that process. In relation to the activity of the artist then, Beuys adopts what he calls an 'anthropological' definition of art; artistic activity is what he calls 'a sort of science of freedom', it is an 'essential characteristic', a capacity which is shared by all humans.<sup>17</sup> So, the principle that 'everyone is an artist' obviously doesn't mean that everybody is potentially, say, a painter, sculptor or musician; it simply means (although there is nothing 'simple' about this) that every individual can be 'the creator of himself and of his environment'.<sup>18</sup> As Beuys says in another interview;

If the concept of art becomes anthropological it is totalised and really does refer to human creativity, to human work and not simply the work of artists. Why anyway should the term art refer to the work of painters and sculptors? That is simply a restriction that never existed before.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, in relation to the work of art, as opposed to the activity of the artist, Beuys is not interested in producing works which would be 'pleasing' to the eye. As he says, the plastic arts have traditionally been conceived in 'retinal' terms, they are considered from the point of view of form and are only apprehended by the eye.<sup>20</sup> In order to by-pass this formalism, however, his artworks are intended to explore the nature of substances, substances which are already in themselves 'spiritual processes'. When Beuys speaks of social sculpture, then, he does not mean that society should be moulded to achieve certain aesthetic effects; rather, he means that the social and political realm, as much as the aesthetic realm, should be a site of experiment, transformation and creative production. Hence, only this type of activity, in other words, only the expanded concept of art, can lead to a healing of the social trauma and a regeneration of the social organism. It should be clear now that, for Beuys, the concept of art expands to such a degree as to colonise the hitherto separate realms of science and politics. For example, he claims that one of the conclusions of his 'totally primary concept of art' is that even 'the scientific was originally contained in the artistic'.<sup>21</sup> Politics, too, is now subsumed under the aesthetic category; it comes to be based on a new principle, 'the possibility to mould the world, to design the world, to sculpture the world'.<sup>22</sup> Hence, politics becomes a question

of giving form to society. 'I am really convinced', Beuys says, 'that humankind will not survive without having realised the social body, the social order, into a kind of artwork'.<sup>23</sup>

It is this theme in particular, the theme of society as an artwork and politics as an aesthetic activity, which critics such as Michaud and Buchloh find disconcerting and dangerous. Each critic, however, has a different reason for denouncing this attempt to base politics upon art. Turning firstly to Michaud, we can say that his argument against Beuys' expansion of the concept of art is based on a general critique, or at least distrust, of all fabricative, productive activity. Speaking of the centrality of form-giving in Beuys' view of politics, Michaud insists that this productive and transformative energy, 'makes of every object in the world the simple instrument or means of its own activity';<sup>24</sup> indeed, it even does so to the extent of 'making itself the instrument of its own perpetuation'.<sup>25</sup> And what is this productive energy, Michaud asks, if not artistic activity itself? Hence, for Michaud, all artistic activity is characterised by a self-perpetuating drive to instrumentalise the material upon which it works; in so doing, it has, by definition, no regard whatsoever for the material *per se*. Michaud's concern, then, is that if such a model of activity were applied in the field of politics, it would inevitably lead, as he says, to 'the subjugation of the real world and real men'.<sup>26</sup> What is more, this identification of political activity with artistic activity cannot be considered in isolation from the same identification which was 'the emblem of the Nazi regime'. In other words, any attempt to think of political action in terms of artistic activity is tainted by, and may lead to, Nazi political practices; and Beuys is no exception to this general rule. Michaud concludes, 'this is why it matters that artistic activity maintain its reserve'.

It seems to me that this argument is inadequate, both in regard to the nature of artistic activity, and in regard to the nature of fascism. Briefly, in order to support his claims about the instrumentalising nature of art, Michaud brings forward a discussion by Hannah Arendt in which she suggests that classical antiquity was generally hostile to fabricative activity. In her essay 'The Crisis in Culture',<sup>27</sup> Arendt argues that the ancient Greeks, while they could admire things of beauty, nevertheless maintained a healthy 'contempt for those who actually produced the beautiful'.<sup>28</sup> This was so, she says, because they recognised that the attitude which makes possible the production of beautiful objects is itself profoundly utilitarian and means-ends



directed—fabrication is 'utilitarian by its very nature'.<sup>29</sup> In short, the artist, she claims, is the primary 'philistine'. However, to suggest, as Arendt does, that this hostility springs from a genuine concern to keep means-ends rationality out of the political sphere, is perhaps a little naive. If we look, for example, at Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*<sup>30</sup> (a text which, more than likely, is one of Arendt's unnamed sources), a rather different explanation for this 'contempt' becomes possible. Here, Plutarch is concerned to contrast the admiration one might have for the great deeds of a great man with one's admiration for the great works of a great artist. The young man of 'good breeding and high ideals' (*Pericles*, Ch.2), he says, would not be so foolish as to emulate, say, Pheidias merely because he admired his work; whereas, an admiration for the 'virtue in action' of, say, a Pericles would indeed justify a desire to emulate the doer of these great deeds. The crucial difference between these two cases, of course, is not that Pheidias is 'utilitarian' while Pericles is concerned with the good of the polis. Rather, the difference is that Pheidias belongs to that class of 'uncouth persons who follow a mean occupation' (*Pericles*, Ch.1)—that is, in Arendt's terms, 'fabricators'—while Pericles is a man of 'good breeding and high ideals'. Hence, Pheidias is the 'workman' who makes mere artefacts, while Pericles is the statesman whose realm of action is politics, and who, consequently, is one of the *aristoi* who moulds the polis as a whole. The problem with Arendt's argument, then, is that it fails to take into account, or even to recognise, the thoroughly aristocratic provenance of ancient Greek political thought. We might also note in passing that ancient Greece's most hostile critic of artists actually based his hostility on an analysis which is diametrically opposed to that of Arendt and her nameless 'ancients'. In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato argues that not only is the artist at three removes from reality, but he is also at three removes from a knowledge of utility. In Plato's scheme, the person who uses an object *knows* its utility, the person who produces the object only has an opinion of its utility, while the artist is totally ignorant of, and unconcerned with, utility.<sup>31</sup>

Turning away from the Greek experience, however, it is more important that we question the theory of art which is implicit in Michaud's view. At the basis of both Michaud's and Arendt's accounts (not to mention that of Plato), is the view that artistic activity is a matter of representing reality through the manipulation of material—whether that be bronze, marble, paint or language. On this account, it is, perhaps, easy to maintain that the artist has no concern for his/her

material, but wishes only to produce an effect, at any cost. Even Schiller, in the Fourth of his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*,<sup>32</sup> assumes that when the artisan or artist lays hands on his material, he has 'no scruple in doing it violence'. Hence, for Schiller, the problem was to conceive of a 'political artist' who would act with a sense of respect for his material—which is, after all, individual members of society. However, this whole problematic would lose its tenure if we were to recognise the limited applicability of this theory of art; if we were to recognise, for instance, the fact that the artist can have, and indeed often does have, a very different relation to his material. We could mention, for example, the very ancient idea that the statue is already present within the block of marble, and that the work of the artist is simply (and skilfully) to allow it to manifest itself. A similar observation could be made about certain forms of literary practice which, rather than using words as means to an end, attempt to elucidate what is always silently present in language. How, for example, could one explain the Surrealist practice of automatic writing as the subjugation of language to a pre-defined end. As Heidegger says (but not, of course, about Surrealism), in his 'The Origin of the Work of Art',<sup>33</sup> 'to create is to let something emerge as a thing that has been brought forth'. All I have wanted to do here, then, is to suggest, rather than prove, that Michaud's position, in so far as it involves a theory of artistic production, is seriously inadequate.

I would also like to suggest that Michaud's characterisation of fascism is highly questionable. He implies that because Nazism understood itself, to some extent, as a work of political art, one must therefore reject any such concept as at least potentially fascist. This implication stands or falls on the question of whether or not this particular characteristic is a necessary and sufficient condition of fascism. While certain observers, such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe,<sup>34</sup> do try to make this connection, I think it should be fairly obvious that the fact that Goebbels, for example, thought of himself as an artist of the state is in no way sufficient to explain the phenomena of xenophobia, racial hatred, aggression towards the other and identification with the leader which characterised German fascism of the 1930s. In fact, given the durability and diversity of this tradition in political thought, any suggestion such as that of Michaud is analogous to holding that, for instance, anyone who uses the work of Nietzsche is in some sense 'fascist'. In other words, the fact that Nazism used certain discourses probably says more about Nazism than about the modes of thought which they borrowed. Michaud's

argument about the inherent fascism of Beuys' thought is inadequate, firstly because it is based on a limited and questionable conception of artistic practice, and secondly because it is based on an even more limited characterisation of fascism. In short, in this case, the equation 'politics as art' equals 'fascism' simply does not work.

The argument presented in Benjamin Buchloh's essay on Beuys is more successful than that of Michaud because Buchloh has a much more precise understanding, both of Beuys' work and of the relation between fascism and the idea of politics as art. In his consideration of the latter question, Buchloh bases his argument on Walter Benjamin's essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. However, while Buchloh uses this essay to suggest that all infringements of the aesthetic into politics lead to fascism, I think that a closer reading of Benjamin will allow us to delineate with more precision which kinds of mobilisation of the aesthetic in politics really are potentially fascist.

Buchloh's article proceeds from the perhaps justified task of exposing the fictional nature of Beuys' myth of origin, to the less than justifiable denunciation of Beuys' politics as 'simple-minded utopian drivel',<sup>35</sup> and finally, to the description of his work as an authentic incorporation of 'the characteristic and peculiar traits of the anal-retentive character, which forms the characterological basis of authoritarian fascism'.<sup>36</sup> In the discussion of the Beuys myth, with which he begins his article, Buchloh draws a parallel between the 'ahistoricity' of Beuys' self-presentation and the 'ahistoricity' of the mythology of German fascism. In so doing he suggests that Beuys is presenting himself to his public as an object of identification, in much the same way as Hitler did in the 1930s. Buchloh then proceeds to supply the antidote to this ahistoricity—that is, an account of Beuys' indebtedness to the sculptural practice of the historical avant-garde. He reminds us that, for instance, Beuys' use of non-traditional materials, such as fat and felt, has historical antecedents in the practices of, say, Vladimir Tatlin, Kurt Schwitters, and Umberto Boccioni. However, having made this legitimate connection with the avant-garde in general, Buchloh goes on, in his consideration of Beuys' political thought, to reduce Beuys' antecedents from what was Constructivism, Dada and Futurism, to Futurism alone. The significance of this is that Buchloh can now draw a simple parallel between Beuys' approach to politics as art and the approach which, to a large degree, was shared by fascism and Futurism. This approach, which was described for perhaps the first time in Benjamin's essay



on the work of art, is characterised by the desire to transform the public or political realm into an object of aesthetic satisfaction, that is, what Benjamin calls the 'aestheticisation of politics'.

We need to look more closely at Benjamin's argument than Buchloh in fact does. In his essay, Benjamin argues that art, in the age of its mechanical reproducibility, is in the process of losing its traditional dependence upon the effect of 'aura', an effect which takes its force from the artwork's origin as sacred and ritual object. Today, Benjamin argues, the mechanical reproduction of art takes the object to meet the viewer halfway, and thus literally erases the sacred distance of the art object. For Benjamin, this destruction of aura leads to a change in the function of art in society; freed from its 'parasitical dependence on ritual', art 'begins to be based on another practice—politics'.<sup>37</sup> It was crucial to Benjamin's understanding of history, that any epoch which experiences such a 'shattering of tradition',<sup>38</sup> would also experience a contrary movement towards a 'renewal' of tradition. In the present case there is no doubt that in Benjamin's view the primary contemporary force which favours ritualisation is fascism. This being the case, we are faced with a choice; either we respond ritually by joining this force for the aestheticisation of politics, or we respond politically by opposing it with a politicisation of art. However, we should bear in mind that this opposition, between 'aestheticised politics' and 'politicised art', is to an extent false. In fact, it is the tendency to ritualisation, or the production of 'aura', to which Benjamin is opposed, and ritualisation can, of course, occur in politics just as easily as in art. By 'politicised art' then, Benjamin would mean an art which resists ritualisation and the imposition of aura, not an art which is pressed into the service of a political regime. Similarly, by 'aestheticised politics', he would mean a politics—such as fascism—which functions precisely through the ritualisation of political life, whether that be through the use of 'artistic' means (e.g. propaganda films), or, for example, the promotion of a Führer cult. The choice with which we are faced, therefore, is between ritualising both politics and art (i.e. fascism), or de-ritualising them both (i.e. communism).

The interest of this argument for Buchloh, is that Benjamin sees Italian Futurism as just this form of attempt to ritualise both politics and art. Benjamin quotes Marinetti's slogan *Fiat ars, pereat mundus* ('Make art, let the world perish') and argues that Futurism, just like fascism, urges us to experience our own destruction (in war) as 'an aesthetic pleasure of the first order'.<sup>39</sup> Combining this argument with

the observations which many have made of the fascist tendency to identify the state as a work of art, one is able to present the view that fascism results, let us say, from a misapplication of the aesthetic attitude. In other words, one can conclude that aesthetic pleasure may only be legitimately and safely indulged in within the confines of the aesthetic realm, and that any attempt to expand this pleasure beyond these confines can be denounced as 'crypto-fascist'. As Buchloh concludes, Beuys' 'misconception that politics could become a matter of aesthetics' fulfils the criteria for 'the totalitarian in art'.<sup>40</sup>

It is, of course, very easy to read Benjamin as saying that any confusion between art and politics is potentially fascist. However, we should remember, in the first place, that Benjamin's antidote to fascism's aestheticisation of politics is, in fact, another such 'confusion' of politics and the aesthetic, that is, the politicisation of art. In order, therefore, to map out more clearly these various forms of 'confusion', it might help to consider them in the following way. Fascism, for Benjamin, is a form of politics which, to a significant degree, is 'based on' a practice and a series of concepts which spring from traditional 'auratic' art. As he says, the 'uncontrolled application' of 'outmoded concepts such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery' leads to a 'processing of data in a fascist sense'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the basing of politics upon a particular model of art leads to fascism. On the other hand, Benjamin suggests that Communism responds to this threat by basing a new form of non-traditional (that is, non-ritualising) art upon the practice of politics.

There is indeed a strong case to be made that, in Benjamin's terms, the concept of artistic practice which Beuys wishes to expand into politics is still dependent on these concepts of 'creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery'. In the first place, Beuys' mythic construction of himself would indeed seem to exhibit some, if not all, of these elements. And, especially in the light of Beuys' last writings, I think that one could be legitimately concerned about the nature of his political discourse. In fact, in his discourse about the German language, soil and people (although not 'race', he insists) leading western humanity in the work of healing the social organism, what else is Beuys doing, if not using his artistic practice to conjure an image of a healthy social organism which would be imbued with the values of creativity, genius and mystery? It is arguably the case, therefore, that, in his wish to base political activity on art, Beuys does indeed understand art as the production of ritual values; in other words, he does seem to apply Benjamin's 'outmoded concepts' to the political realm.

As I stated at the outset, however, the question of whether or not Beuys' aesthetico-political discourse can be shown to be in some sense fascist has not been my central concern here. Rather, what I have wanted to show, is that not every attempt to think of the political in terms of the aesthetic can be condemned as fascist. So, I conclude by saying that I think Benjamin's analysis shows that only a politics based on a traditional concept of artistic practice is open to that charge. And, in this context, we should bear in mind that 'traditional' really means that concept of art which developed in the eighteenth century and was dominant in the Western tradition at least until the advent of the avant-garde. My point then, is that philosophical anxiety about the limits of artistic activity should not prevent us from trying to conceive of a type of politics which would be based on a non-'traditional' concept of aesthetic activity: a concept, for example, which would privilege aesthesis over meaning and the open process of 'work' over the closed form of the product. Such a politics, I believe, would avoid fascist ritualisation precisely by rejecting the drive to generate 'aura', either in a political leader, in a particular race, or in some conception of the social organism.

#### Notes

- 1 Benjamin D. Buchloh, 'Beuys: The Twilight of The Idol', *Artforum* (Jan.1980): 35-43.
- 2 Eric Michaud, 'The Ends of Art according to Beuys', *October* 45 (1988): 37-46.
- 3 'Talking about one's own country: Germany', in *In Memoriam Joseph Beuys: Obituaries, Essays, Speeches*, Bonn, 1986.
- 4 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity—an Incomplete Project', in H. Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, London, 1985, pp.11-12.
- 5 Russell Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory*, Madison, 1989, p.52.
- 6 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. C. Turner, Oxford, 1989.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, London, 1973.
- 8 For a discussion of Beuys in relation to this tradition (esp. Dürer's self-portrait of 1500) see Peter-Klaus Schuster, 'Man as His Own Creator', in *In Memoriam*.
- 9 This phrase appears in Beuys' Introduction to Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, London and New York, 1979, p.7.
- 10 Cited in Tisdall, p.10.
- 11 See, for instance, the version which appears in Tisdall, p.9.
- 12 Beuys makes this comment in an interview with Volker Harlan. It was



- originally published in German, but I have only been able to consult the French translation, Joseph Beuys, Volker Harlan, *Qu'est-ce que l'art?*, Paris, 1992, p.32.
- 13 On the Beuys and Steiner connection, see John Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art*, Ann Arbor, 1988, Chap. 5.
  - 14 See, for example, Beuys' works *Queen Bee I, II and III* (1947–52), and Steiner's *Nine Lectures on Bees*, Anthroposophic Association., New York, 1975.
  - 15 Founded by Beuys and Heinrich Böll, see 'Manifesto' in C. Kuoni, *Energy Plan for the Western Man; Joseph Beuys in America*, New York, 1990, pp.149–53.
  - 16 Tisdall, p.7.
  - 17 Interview with Volker Harlan, p.20, my translation.
  - 18 Interview with Volker Harlan, p.47, my translation.
  - 19 Interview published in English in J. Schellman and B. Kluser, eds, *Joseph Beuys: Multiples; Catalogue Raisonné*, Munich, 1977.
  - 20 Interview with Volker Harlan, p.30, my translation.
  - 21 Cited in A. Gotz, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, New York, 1979, p.66.
  - 22 Speech in C. Kuoni, ed., p.55.
  - 23 Cited in A. Temkin and B. Rose eds, *Thinking is Form; The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, London, 1993, p.114.
  - 24 Michaud, p.46.
  - 25 Michaud, p.46.
  - 26 Michaud, p.46.
  - 27 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, London, 1961.
  - 28 Arendt, p.215.
  - 29 Arendt, p.215.
  - 30 Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, trans. I. Scott-Kilvert, Harmondsworth, 1960, pp.165–206.
  - 31 *Republic*, Book X, 601a–602a.
  - 32 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. E. Wilkinson, L. Willoughby, Oxford, 1967, Letter IV.4, pp.19–20.
  - 33 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, rev. edn, London, 1993, p.185.
  - 34 Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*.
  - 35 Buchloh, p.36.
  - 36 Buchloh, p.38.
  - 37 Benjamin, p.226.
  - 38 Benjamin, p.223.
  - 39 Benjamin, p.244.
  - 40 Buchloh, p.43.
  - 41 Benjamin, p.220.