

JOSEPH BEUYS

IPHIGENIE

PARIS PANTIN

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One of Joseph Beuys' most powerful performances was *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie*, performed on 30 May 1969 in the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt, for Experimenta 3. Wearing a fur coat, Beuys appeared on a darkened stage with a shining white horse. He used the myth and the drama of *Iphigenia* to draw attention to the freedom and the creativity of the individual. Here, William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1589-92), with its excessive violence and cruelty, reminiscent (in the context of this performance) of Nazi crimes, is linked with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1779), in which Iphigenia – the personification of humanity – redeems her brother Orestes through her love and her forgiveness.

Eyewitness Peter Handke wrote in a review for the newspaper *Die Zeit* (issue dated 13 June 1969): "The further the event becomes [...] the more the horse, the man walking around on the stage, and the voices from the loudspeakers become a vivid picture that might be called a desired ideal. In the memory, it seems branded into one's own life, an image that makes one feel nostalgic and want to work on such images for oneself – for it is only as an after-image that it begins to take effect within oneself. An excited calm comes over one, only thinking about it; it stimulates one, it is such a painfully wonderful feeling that it becomes utopian – that is, political."

Beuys' *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie* is unquestionably one of the most iconic works in the recent history of art, created at a time when the genre of performance art was just beginning to emancipate itself from classical theatre. Joseph Beuys was its pioneer. The political spirit of the '68 movement and its tendency towards the proclamatory fostered this dawning of a new age in art history.

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is inaugurating a new space devoted to the performative arts (which will be part of the new building complex of the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Pantin) with an exhibition of works by Joseph Beuys linked to this legendary performance in Frankfurt. The curator is Jörg Schellmann, one of the best-informed experts on Beuys' work and since 1969 director of Edition Schellmann, publishers and international art dealers based in Munich and New York. For many years Schellmann worked closely with Beuys, as producer of his *Multiples* and author of the catalogue raisonné of these objects. The exhibition has been organised in close collaboration with Eva Beuys and the Joseph Beuys Estate in Düsseldorf.

The exhibition is in two parts. The first comprises objects, sculptures, drawings, photographs and documents that provide a fragmentary idea of the action and its emblematic formal vocabulary. The second part is a comprehensive presentation of the *Beuys' universe* by means of works arranged in groups by Jörg Schellmann, to bring alive the basic categories and approaches in Beuys' work.

Two important items in the first part of the exhibition come directly from the Beuys Estate: the vitrine with the original concert cymbals used in the Frankfurt performance, together with an original manuscript (both dating from 1969); and the vitrine with two casts of the legendary sculpture *Kopf* [head] (1961-76).

Kopf, made in 1961, was cast in 1976 for the monument *Strassenbahnhaltestelle* [tram stop], exhibited in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It was created as Beuys' childhood memory of a 17th-century cannon in Cleves (later the tram stop *Eiserner Mann* [iron man]). The cast-iron head, its eyes staring, mouth half-open in pain, sat atop the end of the gun-barrel. Five casts of the sculpture are still in existence. The head is assumed to be a posthumous portrait of the Lower Rhenish baron Anacharsis Cloots (1755-1794) who, having played an important part in the French Revolution as *orateur du genre humain*, served Beuys as a role model. There is also a cast of the head in Beuys' last major installation, *Palazzo regale*, which opened in Naples on 23 December 1985, four weeks before his death. Together with Beuys' fur coat and a bag he carried around for years, the *Kopf* forms a kind of *royal tomb*. Generally speaking, this important sculpture is interpreted as Beuys' symbol of human self-determination, and as such nothing less than the representation of the artist himself. In 1985, Beuys set the head on a child's chair; it is precisely in this context that it is shown here, in combination with a second cast lying on the ground.

This part of the exhibition also contains drawings, selected photographs signed by Beuys, documenting the performance, printed editions of *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie*, and sculptures such as *Honiggefäss* [honey jar] (1977) and Beuys' *Spazierstock/Kupferstock* [walking-stick/copper rod] (1968).

In 2008, Eugen Blume remarked on the form in which the vitrines were presented: "The cabinets and vitrines found frequently in Joseph Beuys' work are to be understood as – amongst other things – a historiographic medium. Beuys used these traditional *vehicles of history* to show various

combinations of relics from performances, sculpture objects, utensils and historical artefacts. The vitrines, most of which came from museums of natural history, were frequently re-adapted, rearranged, and objects added or replaced, to conform to the processuality on which Beuys' concept of history is based."

For the second, the *encyclopaedic*, part of the exhibition, Jörg Schellmann has arranged drawings and unique objects in vitrines, grouped thematically. These deal with the transformative quality of matter (*Bathtub for a Heroine*, 1950/61, etc.), acoustic objects (*Two Fluxus Objects*, 1974, etc.), performance (materials for the action *Flag*, 1974, etc.), double objects (*Irish Object*, 1985, *2 Samurai Swords*, 1983, etc.) photography and light (*Show your Wound*, 1977/1986, etc.) and the confrontation of the materials bronze, copper, zinc and sulphur ("*Bein" mit "Kupferklemmen"* [leg with copper clamps], 1984, etc.).

All the vitrines in the exhibition afford a concentrated insight into the *Beuys universe* – a universe that seems to us at once familiar and enigmatic. Beuys saw meaning in every tiny object and was able to endow it with life; taken as a whole, the works collected here form an archaic 20th-century workshop, experimental arrangements in a spiritual laboratory, bringing us closer to an epoch-making artist.