

## JOSEPH BEUYS

## UTOPIA AT THE STAG MONUMENTS

LONDON ELY HOUSE

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## JOSEPH BEUYS: UTOPIA AT THE STAG MONUMENTS

Curated by Norman Rosenthal

Opening: Tuesday 17 April 2018, 6 – 8pm

37 Dover Street, London W1S 4NJ

The most important UK exhibition of Beuys' work in over a decade

Reuniting most of the original elements of Beuys' seminal *Stag Monuments* for the first time since its creation

*In a world that is now more than ever searching for new solutions for basic social and economic problems, a sense of new ways forward might be found in the ideas of societal rebirth that arise from the Stag Monuments.* Norman Rosenthal

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, is pleased to present *Joseph Beuys: Utopia at the Stag Monuments*, the most important UK exhibition of Beuys' work in over a decade. Curated by Norman Rosenthal, who worked with Beuys on many exhibitions from 1970 onwards, the exhibition brings together pivotal works from various stages of the artist's life. The exhibition spans the years 1947-1985 and can be seen through a retrospective lens, featuring major sculptures and rarely seen early works, which cumulatively reveal the extent to which the artist's ideas and idiosyncratic iconography were clearly defined from the very beginning of his career. The show's title originates from *Hirschdenkmäler* (Stag Monuments), the environment Beuys created for the legendary 1982 Berlin exhibition *Zeitgeist*, co-curated by Christos M. Joachimides and Rosenthal himself. Notably, for the first time since its creation most of the original elements of *Stag Monuments*, including *Ofen* (Oven), will be reunited in the Library Gallery at Ely House.

Joseph Beuys famously declared: every man is an artist. The statement refers to Beuys' view of creativity as a universal principle that extended beyond traditional artistic activities into all areas of human production. Beuys believed in the revolutionary power of art to unlock the potential for creativity in everyone and, by extension, to transform society. He subscribed to an interdisciplinary concept, eliminating the barriers between art and life to create the unified concept of 'Social Sculpture'. Beuys' utopian vision of social transformation through individual creativity and self-determination was expressed through his art, but also through Actions, lectures and sustained political activism. These were often elucidated by Beuys on blackboard-artworks, like *Ecology and Socialism*, 1980, relics of the artist's role as instructor. His ideas remain as relevant now as they were radical then and, as Rosenthal argues, 'In a world that is now more than ever searching for new socio-economic solutions, the full significance of Beuys as an artist has barely begun to be investigated'.

For the first showing of *Stag Monuments* in the atrium of the Martin-Gropius-Bau in 1982, Beuys constructed a mountain of clay around which the contents from his Düsseldorf studio, including workbenches and tools, were arranged. One of the artist's last great works before his untimely death in 1986, *Stag Monuments* is emblematic of many of Beuys' fundamental concerns, uniting his belief in Social Sculpture with the powerful symbolism of animals and the reconciliation of opposing forces. Steeped in German folk tradition, the stag assumes particular meaning in Beuys' work as a spiritual being, an 'accompanier of the soul' in Celtic mythology and a signifier of the crucified Christ. The stag is a conventional symbol of masculine virility, but this is united with a feminine aspect in the annual shedding of its antlers that mirrors the cyclical fertility of nature. Following the *Zeitgeist* exhibition, *Stag Monuments* metamorphosed into a related sculptural environment, *Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch* (Lightning with Stag in its Glare), 1958-85, (currently on view at Tate Modern), which is composed from bronze casts of many, but not all, of the original elements. Beuys' works have the character of relics and often appear deliberately primitive. This is true of his early crosses from 1949 installed in the Chapel Gallery, which unite Christian and pagan symbolism by conflating Christ's crown of thorns with the rays of a sunburst, and a defining feature of the rest of his oeuvre. Part of *Stag Monuments*, the *Urtiere* (Primitive Animals) are excremental forms Beuys created by enclosing nearly 40 of his work-tools in clay. Rejecting what he saw as the misguided aspects of aestheticism, Beuys pushed the concept of the primitive to new extremes, whereby clay represented the primordial origin of all things and of all creativity. Thus, his clay-wrapped tools are imbued with renewed creative energy. Animals are key signifiers in Beuys' art, in particular the stag, which features across early engravings, as well as numerous drawings featured in the exhibition. In *Stag Monuments*, *Hirsch* (Stag) incorporates an ironing board that belonged to the artist's mother, whilst *Ziege* (Goat) is created from a wheeled cart and pickaxe; in Beuys' hands, simple objects become highly evocative, transforming the prosaic into the heroic. For the artist, animals represented 'the incarnation of the soul or the earthly form of spiritual beings with access to other regions', and his distinctive menagerie also

includes swans, bees, horses and hares. The latter appears in several sculptures, including *Friedenshase* (Peace Hare), 1982, *Coniglio* (Rabbit), 1984, and *Hasenstein* (Hare Stone), 1982, a roughly hewn basalt stele spray-painted with a golden hare. Beuys also made the primal connection between humans and animals explicit in works like *Tierfrau* (Animal Woman), 1949 (cast 1984), on view in the Chapel Gallery. The notion of generative energy was central to Beuys' iconography, in particular to the invocation of thermal change through his use of felt, fat and copper as sculptural materials. These elements form part of an illuminating constellation of works in the Berkeley Gallery, including *Feldbett* (Campaign Bed), 1982, an electrical accumulator swathed in felt blankets that formed part of the original *Stag Monuments*, shown alongside the copper *Kleines Kraftwerk* (Small Power Station), 1984, and the felt-wrapped musical instrument in *Infiltration-homogen für Cello* (Infiltration-homogenous for Cello), 1966-85. In the same gallery, *Filzanzug* (Felt Suit), 1970, formed part of Beuys' *Isolation Unit* performance at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art in 1971 and would become one of the artist's most important multiples. Felt and fat both had autobiographical significance for Beuys, inextricably linked to his origin story: he recounted being shot down over the Crimea in 1943, while serving as a pilot in the Second World War, and rescued by Tartars who wrapped him in the insulating materials that would later become central to his artistic vocabulary. The works included in *Utopia at the Stag Monuments* are significant, autonomous objects in themselves and, taken together, they represent a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that helps to elucidate Beuys' life and work. As Rosenthal writes in the accompanying catalogue essay, 'contained within each work by Beuys is a miraculous fusion of past and present which also becomes a manifesto of hope for the future'.

Photo: Jochen Littkemann, *Joseph Beuys in der Ausstellung "Zeitgeist", Martin-Gropius-Bau, 1982*

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