

Science in culture

The Pied Piper of Düsseldorf

The artist Joseph Beuys tried to lead his followers into a promised land of transformative imagination.

Martin Kemp

Shaman or charlatan? Genius or joker? The German artist Joseph Beuys polarizes opinions. Sculptor, assembler of things, installation maker, performance artist, teacher and polemicist, Beuys became a kind of Pied Piper for generations of young artists in the final three decades of the twentieth century. Dressed in a sleeveless flak jacket and white shirt, with a wide-brimmed felt hat shading dark-rimmed eyes sunken in gaunt features, he exercised a mesmeric spell. He aspired to lead his followers into a promised land of new human potential and transformative imagination. Modest he was not.

He was determined to rewrite both history and the future. He was fascinated by Leonardo da Vinci, like so many others who have sought to transform our creativity, individually and collectively, by reuniting science and art. In the mid-1970s Beuys created his own set of drawn pages to emulate Leonardo's rediscovered codices in the National Library in Madrid. Leonardo is seen as marking a turning point in the history of Western thought. His creations were still imbued with the spiritual wholeness of medieval thought but showed clear signs of the positivist and materialist character that was to dominate subsequent science and technology and fragment our modern consciousness.

Beuys distrusted, or even hated, the analytical 'coldness' of modern science and the materialist mechanisms of our technological society. Such feelings are a recurrent theme in artists' commentaries. Benjamin Robert Haydon, an English painter of the early nineteenth century, declared that Isaac Newton had "destroyed the poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to its prismatic colours". It is easy to dismiss such views as ignorant and puerile, but Beuys was familiar with science, having had a passion for natural history as a youth and flirting with medicine before training as an artist.

His imagery draws heavily on science and technology, particularly in the diagrammatic organization of philosophical, scientific, economic, political



and social concepts on the blackboards that featured in so many of his performances. His vitrines (works in glass cases), such as *Double Objects*, speak the vocabulary of display in science museums, and regularly exploit substances and objects that involve what might be called a 'humanized technology'. Within the glass case the paired objects, reverentially arrayed, play on recurrent themes in his work. There are typical echoes of the mythologized story of his rescue as a crashed fighter pilot on the Crimean front in 1944. His broken and freezing body was, legend has it, coated in fat, wrapped in felt and revived by Tartars who discovered his wrecked plane.

The battered batteries, blocks of peat, coal, butter and soap speak of energizing, vivifying, warming and cleansing. The telephone, made primitively from double tins, and the Siberian Symphony gramophone records evoke poignant sounds from past times. The enamelled bowls, glass bottles and paired X-ray images together convey medical associations. In Beuys' personal language of symbols, the X-rays and the brown crosses painted on the telephone represent

beneficial qualities, and the doubling of the objects signifies human conjoining and completeness.

What Beuys was striving to assert on the broadest front of social communication was the centrality and unifying power of the warmth and wholeness of the human spirit in all the diverse fields of our activity. Almost 20 years after his death, his agenda can be seen to belong to the long history of utopian visions that are more seductive than realizable. What does remain, and continues to exercise its power, is an uncanny evocation of his personal presence, his tale of near-death and his charismatic life.

His surviving creations, many of which can be seen at Tate Modern in London until 2 May, transform ordinary items and mundane substances into composite entities. They speak of human values that science must address and embody if it is to be integrated and comprehended in our twenty-first century society.

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♦ www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/beuys

body, its need for food and warmth. By implication, she could also overcome those constraints that made her own, female body an almost insurmountable barrier to intellectual achievement. Her descriptions of a self-sacrificing life of the mind had an enduring popular appeal, and biographers writing for the children's market have emphasized Curie's indifference to 'feminine' things of the body (food, clothing, beauty) and her engagement with 'masculine' things of the mind (science, truth, evidence and power).

Goldsmith, an experienced biographer, notes that she was herself seduced as a young

girl by the Curie legend. Like myself, and so many others, she was drawn to the image of the brilliant, tragic, woman scientist, particularly as played by Greer Garson in the 1943 film *Madame Curie*. In one memorable scene, the newly introduced Marie and Pierre begin to discuss their scientific work, but just as the first few technical words are exchanged, the scene suddenly leaps forward in time to the close of their discussion and the last few technical words. The intellectual life that bound Marie and Pierre together apparently had no particular bearing on the love story. Goldsmith's biography is similarly unconcerned

with Curie's scientific contributions. Quinn's 1995 account presents Curie's scientific world in much more detail, but a full-length scientific biography of Curie has yet to appear.

Goldsmith has the sense to refrain from grandiose and dramatic claims, and her tone throughout is quizzical, calm and perceptive. The book provides not new information but a thoughtful perspective on the life of one of the most important scientists of the twentieth century. The author is careful in her extrapolations from available records, and does not assume that she knows anyone's inner feelings unless they have been expressed