

Selected Bibliography:

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Joseph Beuys, New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979. Text by Caroline Tisdall.

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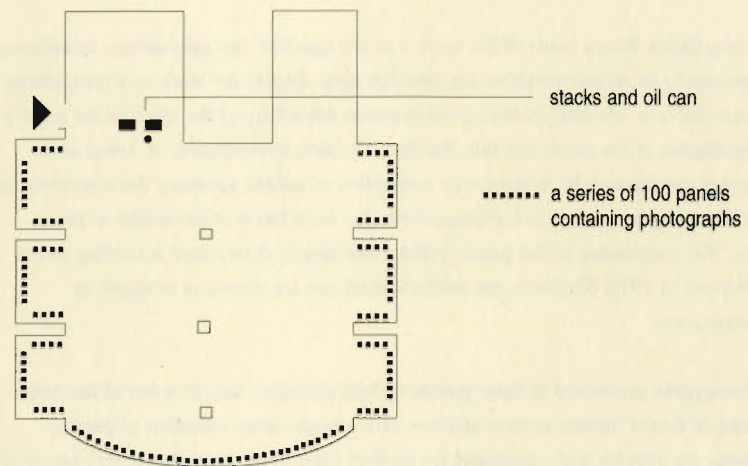
Joseph Beuys: Natur, Materie, Form, Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen, 1991. Text by Armin Zweite.

Joseph Beuys was born in Kleve, Germany, on May 12, 1921, where he grew up. Trained at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, he taught there as a professor of sculpture from 1961 until his controversial dismissal in 1972. In 1951 the van der Grinten Collection of Beuys' sculpture and drawing was first exhibited. In the early sixties he became involved with Fluxus, taking part in a number of concerts as well as devising his own "actions" which soon became his principal aesthetic mode. In 1970 a large collection of his work formed under the artist's own aegis, the Stroher Collection, was installed in the Hessischen Landesmuseum in Darmstadt where it remains not only the single most important public collection of his work but retains the format he devised. Joseph Beuys died in Düsseldorf on January 21, 1986.

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A book with full documentation of *Arena—where would I have got if I had been intelligent!* is forthcoming.

Site Map



Arena—where would I have got if I had been intelligent! 1970-72
Collection of Dia Center for the Arts, New York.

Arena, 1970-72

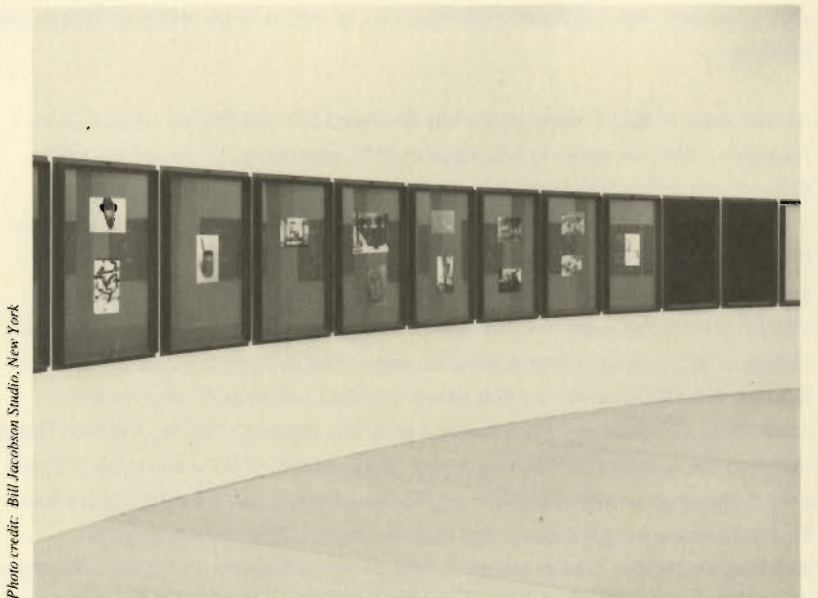


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DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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548 West 22nd Street New York City

JOSEPH BEUYS

Arena—where would I have got if I had been intelligent!, 1970-1972

This large-scale installation by Joseph Beuys comprises one hundred panels with several hundred photographs covering the span of the artist's career up to 1972. Ranging from the late forties to the early seventies, *Arena* constitutes however less an autobiographical statement than an allegorical portrait of Beuys' artistic persona. Favoring evocation over documentation, it functions as an artistic summa drawing together images from the artist's "actions" and collaborative performances, as well as of his sculptural objects and drawings.

As with many of Beuys' works *Arena* was developed and modified over several years. An early version was shown in Edinburgh in 1970, when Beuys performed the action *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony*. In 1972 the panels were framed and increased in number for an exhibition at Lucio Amelio's Modern Art Agency in Naples. On this occasion Beuys accompanied the presentation of the work, whose panels were placed on the floor leaning against the walls, with an action entitled *Vitex agnus castus* after the plant of that name. For four hours the artist lay on the floor, his sole action the rubbing of his oil-covered fingers along the copper slab in the stack of blocks by his side. Running down his back was a cobalt ribbon with the Latin name of the plant known popularly as the chaste tree printed on it; a sprig was attached to his hat. Caroline Tisdall interprets this action in the following terms: "By combining *Vitex agnus castus* with the coldness of cobalt and the warmth of sulphur, then making active manual contact with the female element copper, Beuys was asserting the role of the human being by activating the battery; 'Energy emanates from the two poles, male and female. My action drew them together. I mean a different concept of chastity produced by this reaction and the conflict of elements.' This implies", she concludes, "an active struggle and leads back to the meaning of the arena in which so much of Beuys' life is spent, in discussion, political organization, permanent conference and the circus of the art world."¹

Later that year *Arena* was shown again, by the Galleria Attico in a garage in Rome. On this occasion, with the panels once more arranged along the junction of wall and floor, Beuys performed yet another action, now focusing on the revolutionary figure from Kleve Anacharsis Cloots. In Beuys' youth he had been attracted to Cloots who was then remembered as an infamous heretic; this initial interest was later consolidated by the discovery that Cloots had advocated universal as opposed to nationalist revolution, a discovery which prompted Beuys to read in his action an account of the life of this inspiring forebear from his native town. Late in 1973 *Arena* was included in

Contemporanea, a vast exhibition of contemporary art, held in a car-park in Rome. For this presentation all one hundred panels were installed on temporary walls built for the show, with certain of the elements from the action *Vitex agnus castus*, two piles of copper, iron and wax and fat blocks plus an oil can, presented inside a perspex cube sited at some distance from the photographs.

Every installation Beuys made of his work was site specific; any posthumous installation will necessarily be an interpretative act, one that must display the work in a sympathetic relation to the new site and yet attempt to maintain something of the spirit of the artist's own installation of the piece. For this, the first complete reinstallation of *Arena* since 1973 (other installations have hung only a selection of panels, grouping the remainder in stacks), Beuys' presentation in *Contemporanea* has been taken as the model as far as possible. The sequencing of the panels is therefore largely determined according to the order devised in 1973. Similarly, the stacks and oil can are shown as arranged in *Contemporanea*.

The photographs assembled in these panels include multiple shots of some of the more important of Beuys' former actions and concerts woven across a number of panels, reinforcing the circular and continuous (as distinct from linear or evolutionary) nature of his thinking and activity. Choosing the medium of photography, which captures a moment forever lost, and thus a trace of what were in themselves in many instances ephemeral activities, Beuys then manipulates the print in ways that draw attention to its function as a reproductive medium that, in bearing witness, necessarily interprets and interprets selectively. Many negatives have been bleached, solarized or otherwise manipulated, while the rough printing, reminiscent of an arte povera aesthetic, is coupled with casually torn edges, and the maintenance of the perforations and numbers from the original film strip. Most of the surfaces of the prints are also overworked: often a layer of wax has been added; in some cases fat and a material much favored by Beuys, braunkreuz, have also been applied. For Beuys, materials carried a symbolic resonance within his overall conception of a "social sculpture"; for example, fat and felt were employed repeatedly because they were good insulators, copper was favored as a conductor of energy, iron as a material suggestive of a rootedness to the earth. Drawing on the anthroposophical writings of Rudolph Steiner and on the Fluxus postulate that the interchange of energies is the principal form of art communication Beuys developed a complex idealistic vision in which the role of the artist is akin to that of a shaman and art a means to a social utopia.

Alongside the photographic images in *Arena* Beuys added three monochrome panels which were for him, Caroline Tisdall contends, redolent of "blue sky for the cold clarity of the north...[and] the warm yellow of sulphur and southern sun".² A single found photograph, depicting the Roman theatre at Verona, speaks to his overriding conception of the work as dealing with the "arena of life". As finally realized in 1973 *Arena* has a monumental scale and grand design appropriate to an artistic summa.

L. C.

1. Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979, p. 225.

2. *ibid.*