

Transcript of audio tracks relating to Beuys' sculpture *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*

Track 1: Introduction and Instructions

Narrator: Shaman, performer, teacher and political activist, the German artist Joseph Beuys called himself a sculptor. But in his life-long programme of what he called "social sculpture", he redefined what it meant to work as a sculptor. He believed that the artist's responsibilities extended far beyond the production of art objects, to social, political and spiritual concerns. He famously declared that, "Everybody is an artist", and that art itself was intrinsically revolutionary. "The revolution is us", he wrote, and the whole of society could be transformed by its power. His works range in scale from the hugely ambitious and political to the small and intimate. His largest project was a partly realised plan to plant 7,000 oak trees around the world. While his smallest works were sometimes made of found objects such as feathers, lumps of peat, batteries and even toenail clippings. Beuys was one of the co-founders of the German Green Party, and in the 1970s and 1980s he staged art performances in some of Europe's most troubled regions, including Northern Ireland. He was hugely influential as a teacher of art, as a tutor at the Dusseldorf Academy and in the many marathon lectures he gave to students all over the world. Joseph Beuys and his installation *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* are the subjects of this audio point. The numerous elements of this piece are cast in bronze or aluminium and range in size from the massive six metre lightning flash, to the hand-sized sausage shapes on the floor. The different tracks on this audio point will tell you about the mythical meaning that these elements had for the artist. You can also listen to people who knew and worked with Beuys, who have been inspired by him, and from Beuys himself talking about his work.

Track 2: Life and art

Narrator: Joseph Beuys's extraordinary life, which was transformed into his own personal myth, was fundamental to his work.

Born in Germany in 1921 Beuys's teenage years were overshadowed by the rise to power of the National Socialist party. As he later said: "Everyone went to church, and everyone went to the Hitler Youth." Books deemed 'unsuitable' by the authorities were burned in his schoolyard. Eighteen when the Second World War began, Beuys was drafted into the Luftwaffe where he served as a radio operator. He later described how he had been shot down over the Crimea and rescued by nomadic Tartars, who nursed him back to health by rubbing fat into his body and wrapping him in felt.

After the war and a nervous breakdown he re-invented himself as an artist – beginning his lifelong mission to heal society as he himself had been healed during the war.

Beuys made himself into a work of art. For his entire career he dressed in his trademark outfit of jeans – a clean pair every day – a white shirt, a fishing vest covered in useful pockets, and a felt trilby hat from Lock and Co of St James, London. The wool-felt material of the hat had a practical use: it insulated the two metal plates that Beuys had in his skull, as a result of his wartime injuries, from the painful extremes of hot and cold. He was rarely seen without the trilby, joking to his collaborator and friend Caroline Tisdall: "the hat could do it on its own."

Track 3: Antony Gormley

Narrator: In the audiences for Joseph Beuys's many lectures and performances of the 1970s and '80s, were students who have gone on to become some of the most successful of today's artists. Sculptor Antony Gormley, a great Beuys fan, first saw him at a lecture at the ICA in 1974 but didn't pluck up the courage to talk to him until they met again, at a Beuys exhibition in London, in 1982:

AG: "As a man he was just naturally engaging and generous. He gave you his entire attention. There was no sense of having to rush even though the room was full of people. I don't remember at all exactly what he said, I just got a sense of encouragement. And I think unlike most artists where I think there's always a sense of territory, a sense of rivalry, distrust, suspicion, none of were present. He had extraordinary eyes. He pierced you with his eyes but it wasn't quite like that because they were very liquid at the same time so you got lost in them as much as being witnessed by them. And there was this sense of someone that had suffered a lot but had somehow gained through that suffering. I think he realized that art was about in a way understanding who we are, by understanding our roots. And he saw that he had huge therefore responsibility to in some way understand his own past and understand the past of his culture. The other aspect of his work is its call for the spiritual...that in some way we only understand who we are through the making of these otherwise useless objects that in someone chart our passage through time."

Track 4: The mythology of Lightning with Stag in its Glare

Narrator: In this work a flash of lightning illuminates a group of half-formed creatures. This could be a scene from a mythical pre-history or a nightmare from a post-apocalyptic future. The 'stag' of the title – originally made from an ironing board – is cast in aluminium to suggest the brightness of the huge triangular lightning flash, itself cast in bronze and suspended from the ceiling. The cart here represents a goat – a humbler beast than the majestic stag. And the sausage-shaped 'squirts' of bronze on the floor are primordial creatures – blind and worm-like. The box and a small compass, mounted on a tripod is called 'Boothia Felix' after the location of the north magnetic pole in the Canadian arctic – another reference, with the lightning flash itself, to the natural energies of the earth.

The stag was a particularly powerful symbol for Beuys. He wrote that it appeared "in times of distress and danger" bringing "the warm positive element of life." He concurred with earlier Christian myths that it was "endowed with spiritual powers and insight." One of the hallmarks of Beuys's work is its reliance on his distinctive set of symbols and the different elements in this work relate to his major themes and narratives – the natural world, sources of energy, human and animal life, and spirituality. His work was also driven by the interest he'd had since childhood in northern European mythology, and the animal characters in these stories. The stag, the hare, the elk and the swan all appear in many of his works.

In post-war Germany such myths had become taboo as the Nazis had used some of these traditional stories and images to bolster their political philosophy. Beuys refused to ignore these associations and instead sought to rehabilitate and reclaim the art of

storytelling using emblematic characters. Because of this, Beuys has been credited with having given Germany back its imagination as well as forcing his peers to confront the horrors committed by their generation.

Track 5: Beuys speaks from the archive

Narrator: In this work, the huge, suspended, cast-bronze triangle embodies the energy of a powerful flash of lightning.

Energy was one of the essential concepts of Beuys's work, and many of his sculptures were made using materials such as fat, felt, wax, honey, copper, bronze, batteries or torches - all substances that either generated, stored or transmitted what Beuys called 'the universal energy of the world.'

Beuys often said that his fascination with fat and felt dated back to the Second World War, when he worked as a radio operator in Stuka bombers. Shot down over the Crimea, so the story went, his life had been saved by nomadic Tartars who'd rubbed his burned and frozen body with fat and wrapped it in felt.

Fat and felt came to symbolise nurture in Beuys's personal mythology as he revealed in an interview included in a BBC film:

Archive "I didn't take these stuffs only as a kind of immediately dramatic stuff because I was in a dramatic situation in the war, no, not at all. I wasn't interested to take such things. But later on, when I built up a kind of theory and a system of sculpture and art and also a system of wider understanding – anthropological understanding of sculpture being related to the social body and to everybody's life and ability - then such materials seemed to be right and effective tools to overcome, one could say, the wound of us."

Track 6: Lightning with Stag in its Glare, Beuys and the Berlin Wall

Narrator: Joseph Beuys died in 1986 before the fall of the Berlin wall – and in fact his entire artistic career was spent in its shadow. He'd satirised the wall in the 1960s by suggesting that it should be raised by 5cm, "for better proportion," as he put it.

This work, *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*, came directly out of an installation that Beuys made in Berlin, in 1982, in the Martin Gropius Bau - notable for its close proximity to the wall and therefore a symbol of divided Germany. Beuys spent a week grouping objects together in the gallery's courtyard, as part of a temporary exhibition called 'Zeitgeist', 'Spirit of the Times'.

Norman Rosenthal, the Exhibitions Secretary of the Royal Academy in London, was one of the curators of the show:

NR: "In the middle of this courtyard he built this huge mountain of clay called the 'Hirschdenkmal' ('The Stag Monument') and round the monument he as it were brought the contents of his studio including several pieces of sculpture and then all sorts of tools that were presented round the gallery in a way that only he could do.

And there was something magic about the way he presented these pieces. He would push things around until they got absolutely right. He was like a great theatre director; he was a great theatrical director of his own sculpture.”

Narrator: Dismantling the piece at the end of the exhibition Beuys decided to make a bronze cast of a vertical section of the huge pile of clay – what’s now the triangular lightning flash in this work, and on its surface you can see the imprints of small lumps of the original clay. Beuys also selected, for casting in aluminium, other elements that you can now see here:

NR: “...including, these rather extraordinary sausage-like objects – what you might call the most basic, either human or animal, dung. I put this rather crudely...it was like making shit beautiful.”

Track 7:

Narrator: Beuys grew up in the small Catholic town of Cleves [Clay-vez] on Germany’s northwestern border with Holland. It was an enclave of the Celtic world in a largely Protestant nation. His early life there gave Beuys a strong interest in the survival of the Celtic spirit in northern Europe and this is largely what brought him to work in Britain and Ireland in the 1970s and ‘80s.

His first visit was in 1970 when he performed at the Edinburgh Festival. The organiser of art events that year was the young art gallery-owner, painter and photographer Richard Demarco. A nervous Demarco had gone to Beuys’s studio in Dusseldorf to lure him to the festival armed only with a pocket-full of postcards of Scotland:

RD: “And so it was that I found myself saying, ‘well when will we meet?’ and he said in his reply, ‘when shall we two meet again in thunder, lightning or in rain...?’ ‘God Almighty’, I thought, ‘he does know his Shakespeare!’ But he also said, ‘I see the land of Macbeth’. So that was enough. I knew he was coming. I brought him to Scotland for a simple reason and that is that Scotland is the land beyond the north wind where Apollo goes I think every year for a little holiday when he gets fed up with the Arcadian world of Greece to the edge of the world to a space where the idea of Europe being all about Mediterranean has to be rethought. When he first came he explored the one thing I needed to show him which was the experience of Scotland and its wilderness. I took him to the Moor of Ranoch (sp?). You have to go through the pass at Glencoe and through, if you’re lucky, storm thunder and lightning until you might find at the other side sunlight and a perfect sunset. And we did in fact find that at Oban with a view of Mull, the mountains of Mull and the idea that just beyond these mountains and the setting sun as you stood beside the fishing fleet at Oban you knew you were in the waters of Fengall (Sp?). It’s the space where the Celtic imagination has, for millennia, taken flight.”

Track 8: The Beuys legacy lives on

Narrator: The art gallery owner, painter and photographer Richard Demarco, first worked with Joseph Beuys in 1970. More than 30 years later he remains impressed by what he sees as the essential message of this work, *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*:

RD: “As soon as I saw this I kept thinking of Red Riding Hood and I kept thinking of what you find in a world where nature is in command. Goodness gracious me! Of course in this work you’re not just looking at bits and pieces strewn across the floor, you’re asked to consider the power of gravity because there’s this great big, dangerous, huge weight maybe able to cause havoc. The whole thing is dangerous and it’s really about you having to look down and up more or less at the same time. But it’s also referring to the animal kingdom and it’s going right back to that part of us which we’re almost forgotten which defines us as hunter-gathers and it’s taking us right back to the cave. It’s taking us right back to the elemental forces which we used to honour and which we now tend to imagine we have complete control over. Every now and then of course Mount Etna erupts and we get worried and there’s an earthquake and Beuys is actually inviting us to consider the weight of things, the mobility of things, the symbolism of things. I’ve only just begun to comprehend the genius of Beuys when I look at this work. It is not obviously beautiful. It is not in any way comforting but it is awe inspiring.

If the Tate has anything remotely like what we used to call a ‘Sanctum sanctorum’ - a holy of holies - this is it. So we’d better be on our guard, we’d better be extremely careful that we get the full measure of the message of this work. Look at this work and you’ll find yourself asking questions about the capacity to really see the nature of the mystery of life.”

Track 9: 'Everybody is an artist': performing a Beuys piece

Narrator: Joseph Beuys is almost as famous for his philosophical statements as his art objects and performances. His most well known is “everybody is an artist” – meaning that living itself is the most creative art form of all.

It was his hope that in coming to see his works visitors would ask themselves, “Why don’t I make something similar?” It’s in this spirit that we asked a group of Londoners to follow the instructions that came with one of Beuys’s small works from 1968, *Evervess II I* [*Evervess Two, One*].

The original *Evervess II I*’s were two bottles of mineral water in a wooden box. On the top of the box Beuys had written “Transmitter begins when II is drunk and the cap is thrown as far away as possible,” presumably a reference to the energy contained in the fizz of the water and the creativity of performing the action.

Vox pops: (adults and children)

“On this Sunday morning you find me very hung-over. I had an evening Wapping which was reminiscent of the film *After Hours*, quite wild, and for some reason I’m standing here with a bottle in my hand and I think I’m supposed to take the top off. [Fizz] And I’m going to throw it into the far distance...”

“Oh it hit a little girl!”

“And it hit a little girl which...now I’m feeling guilt!”

Girl: "If I put the water to my ear, I can hear a slight rippling noise. It's really fizzy, it's like I've got little fireworks in my mouth because it's so fizzy! It is quite art because the throw was quite artistic but it wasn't too artistic because I wasn't really concentrating. And here's my mum and she's going to do exactly the same thing."

MUM: "I spent the morning in the gym. I did a fat-burner class and I came back and I made a roast chicken and we've emptied out the hamster cage and we've put chicken wire over the lily bulbs and I've mopped the floor! Is this my last task before lunch? I hope it is! Here we go...[throws]

Well I was quite please that I didn't do a woosy underarm throw there. The girls have picked it up and I'm off for me dinner now!"

Girl: "Goodbye now, and see you another time!"