

Deadly Serious

Write what you know, that's what they say, which sounds boring until you realize the point is probably to erase what you know in the doing of it. Right now I'm not in the mood to deeply examine and thereby shatter my illusions about the artists I admire most. If any of them were secret fascists I'd rather not know. Not right now, anyway. A few years ago I'd been listening to Bryan Ferry albums on repeat for some time when I found out he was a massive Tory. He's a defender of fox-hunting! That was a real deal-breaker and quite a shame, although I'm glad I found out before going through with my plan to re-make the cover of his 1974 album *Another Time, Another Place*. In the picture you can't see his bottom half but I had gone far enough in my research to discover that he was definitely wearing red socks with that outfit. I even remember looking for the correct dinner jacket—off-white, big shawl lapel—at a secondhand store in Oxford, a place notorious for its anachronistic dress codes. By the time I discovered that Ferry was a fox-hunter, I was in the early stages of a reasonably self-righteous vegetarianism. I was a year or two further down that path when I encountered Joseph Beuys' humungous chunks of beef tallow at the Hamburger Bahnhof (*Unschlitt* (1977)). Naturally, I thought of the cows. I'm not sure if I was already a vegan when I saw the giant stacks of felt at Dia:Beacon (*Brasilienfond*, *Fond III/3*, and *Fond IV/4* (all 1979)), or when I walked through his claustrophobic and almost anechoic felt-lined rooms at the Centre Pompidou (*Plight* (1985)), but I definitely thought of the sheep. I should say that my sense of chronology is not particularly sound. Travel usually helps by creating memories that can be easily located on one's internal back-calendar, but all sense of linearity goes out the window when I go from place to place and keep seeing artworks by the same artists. Where did I see the felt suit? Was it London? Or on the internet? The internet of course has most things, but I suppose no self-respecting contemporary art museum is lacking a decent Beuys. I have a lot of questions about Beuys, many of which can be answered by Googling. Some of them, however, are less easily resolved. Aside from the animal problem, which is complicated (I much prefer the dead hare to the live coyote) the question that has been rattling around in my head lately is this: was Beuys funny? Just a few weeks ago I was standing in front of another monumental Beuys—actually one I'd seen before—*Lightning*

with Stag in Its Glare (1958–85), at MASS MoCA. I turned to my companion and asked, “don’t they look like turds to you? Surely they’re supposed to be turds.” I was gesturing to the turd-like bronze forms scattered on the floorboards. “No way,” she said, “Beuys doesn’t joke around.” She was right; the museum’s exhibition guide refers to them as “worm-like primordial animals”. But even if I give him a little more credit than that, it doesn’t necessarily answer my question. Let’s say that Beuys intended that these twisted, coiled, brown lumps might be mistaken for—or even understood as—turds. Is he joking around? Or is he still deadly serious? If I giggle at his turd-forms, do I fail to get Beuys? I can’t decide. Somehow I suspect that shit for Joseph Beuys was in another class of organic matter, one unbefitting his own blend of auto-hagiography and utopianism, and one incapable of bearing the philosophical weight he heaved upon his work. I wonder where the wild coyote trapped with him inside *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) shat during the three-day performance, and whether there was somebody else there to clean it up. In any case, Beuys’ anal retentiveness (or carefully disguised anal expulsiveness) is particularly clear to me when his work is shown or discussed alongside that of Dieter Roth, his colleague and artistic rival. For Roth, shit and its precursor, food, opened semiological possibilities that were less mythical (if at times more nihilistic). While Beuys produced numerous signed self-portraits as multiples, Roth editioned busts of himself in chocolate and birdseed, intended to be left outdoors and pecked into destruction. Looking over Beuys’ extensive oeuvre I find plenty of occasions for laughter, but I can’t always be sure of whether I’m laughing at him or with him. For me, it’s Roth who authoritatively answers this question in his multiple *Rabbit-shit-rabbit* (1972), which plainly mocks Beuys’ infuriatingly deadpan performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). Roth’s work (materials description: “straw, rabbit dung etc. formed into the shape of a rabbit”) suggests to me that a serious commitment to form need not be tied to a serious commitment to seriousness. Besides, as everyone knows, rabbits are vegetarians, so this is one pile of shit I can definitely get behind.

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