JOSEPH BEUYS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL



Tate Modern London.

I am still reading today's Arts section of the Guardian – this time Adrian Searle's preview of the Tate Modern's new exhibition of Joseph Beuys [Link]

Beuys wasn't being mischievous or disingenuous when he said there was nothing to understand (in his work). He may have been wrong to believe everyone could be an artist, but everyone can be a spectator. The mind wanders; connections come to us if we let them, and if we work at them, if we engage. But engagement comes at a price. The whole of his art is about coming to grips with something unmanageable. He once opened a talk with the following: "Good day, ladies and gentlemen. Once

again, I should like to start with the wound.” And what wound might that be, Herr Beuys? The lecture was titled: “Talking about one’s country: Germany.”

Beuys and the history of 20th-century Germany are inextricable. One of his best-known works here, The End of the 20th Century, is a gallery filled with large, roughly hewn basalt stones, each about the size of a man. They lie strewn about, like so many bodies. Some attempt at order and alignment has been made, but it is kind of half-hearted. Some stones have fallen on to others, and have been left where they fell. Each stone has had a cone dug out of it, the missing part reinserted, the gaps plugged with felt and clay. An attempt at reanimation, then; a botched job, for all the effort.

It might be tempting to see Beuys as something of a Renaissance man: Beuys the utopian, Beuys the dandy, Beuys the self-mythologist, the performer, the spell-binding teacher, the green politician; Beuys the Hitler youth, the twice-wounded Luftwaffe volunteer, with two Iron Crosses to his name; Beuys the great German artist. His artistic and intellectual development was born out of disaster, and Beuys himself was deeply

complicated, as well as implicated, like millions of other German servicemen and women of his generation (Beuys was born in 1921). He was open about his past, even if he mythologised it, often in darkly humorous ways, and unbelievable ways. His art, his intellectual and political stance and his serious depression in the mid-1950s are all evidence of how he came to terms with personal as well as national guilt.

How else to see the muck and the detritus and the filth-rimed tins, the bones and the agglomerations of unnamable objects in certain of Beuy’s vitrines, which are arranged in angled rows and little groups in one large room? There are things here like amputated limbs, bound in string; clods of earth and roots that, much as they might lead us to think of Albrecht Durer’s clumps of grass, might also make us think of blown-up German soil. Here is congealed hare’s blood, rancid batteries, lumps of fat, a cloth apron-pocket of hardened wax and tallow that sags like some wretched udder, iron and sulphur and razor blades, a little model house with missing walls and stairs leading nowhere, fat-spattered cardboard boxes, a bit of hardened blood-sausage like a lump of old shit. Everything here – the sutures, the

coffee spoons, the crate of old beer bottles – is arranged with consummate care in these negative still-lives. Like the poetry of Paul Celan, this is what art comes to after Auschwitz.

A fabulous depiction of the archaeological. In all its political ramifications.

