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Introduction. Economimesis

1.

According to Joseph Beuys, capitalism was scheduled to end in 1987, about a year and a half after what turned out to be the day of his death. Or perhaps, by another of his reckonings, it was to end on May 1, 1984. In a photograph taken in Düsseldorf on March 27, 1981, Beuys sits on the edge of a table, his back to us, with a white phone receiver at his ear (fig. 1). Nothing of his face can be seen. Behind him stands a blackboard on which the number 2277 has been scrubbed out and replaced with the number 1133. With this modification, the sentence on the board now reads *Nur noch 1133 Tage bis zum Ende des Kapitalismus*—“Only 1133 days left until the end of capitalism.” 2277 days from March 27, 1981, would have been June 21, 1987: summer solstice. Beuys died of heart failure on January 23, 1986. By moving the date up a little over three years, he gave himself the pleasure of witnessing capitalism’s downfall in the flesh on International Workers’ Day three years hence.

The countdown began earlier. There is a multiple—that is, an editioned artwork—of his from 1980 titled *Nur noch 2425 Tage ...* (Only 2425 more days ...) (fig. 2). The work consists of a picture frame in which are mounted two prints from a contact sheet. On the left, Beuys appears again in trademark hat and vest. He is gesturing toward a small piece of machinery. On the right is the blackboard we have encountered already, here in an earlier state with a pair of illegible flyers attached. These are probably from the artist’s Free International University (FIU), founded in 1973—one of several pedagogical initiatives that he led in the 1970s. There is no way to be sure of when exactly this photograph was taken. Assuming that it is from 1980, like the multiple of which it is a part (which is by no means certain, since



Fig. 1. Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf, March 27, 1981.

an earlier photograph might easily find its way into a later work; Beuys often did such things), the window for capitalism’s demise would thus fall between August 22, 1986, and August 22, 1987. This leaves an overlap of two months (June 21 to August 22) with the erased nonaccelerated calculation in the photo from March 27, 1981.

The revised schedule—one doubts the choice of May Day in George Orwell’s year was inadvertent—did not wholly supersede the longer time frame. Perhaps the most interesting single manifestation of this series is a work called *Nur noch 2190 Tage bis zum Ende des Kapitalismus* (*Denkmaschine*), or “Only 2190 more days until the end of capitalism (thinking machine),” also from 1981 (fig. 3). These 2190 days equal exactly six years, minus the leap day or two that necessarily would intervene over that period (namely February 29, 1984, if we take 1981 as a starting point). This object is exceptional in Beuys’s oeuvre: he used a computer to generate art. The piece consists of a large stack of folded continuous form paper, recognizable by its distinctive perforated margins, on which are printed programming commands that generate a countdown from 2190 to 0.¹ As displayed, only the first sheet is visible, meaning that viewers must take the rest on faith. The work thus exists in a state of latency that, as we will



Fig. 2.
Joseph Beuys, *Nur noch 2425 Tage ... (Only 2425 days left ...)*, 1980. Offset on cardstock, $27\frac{1}{16} \times 19\frac{1}{8}$ in. (69.7×48.6 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1992.438.

see, is characteristic of much of the artist's materialized thinking about economics, politics, and history. Since we do not know the exact date in 1981 on which the program was run, we again have no choice but to admit the widest potential range. Shifting the window accordingly, we arrive at a possible terminus for capitalism between December 31, 1986, and December 30, 1987. The Berlin Wall was breached on November 9, 1989, a bit over three years and nine months after the artist left this earth.

Beuys living, Beuys dead. Capitalism living, capitalism defunct; socialism in bloom—in the East German media, at least—and socialism gone. At the turn of the 1980s, Beuys had an approximately five-year plan. History turned out differently. The wobbliness of the exact chronology notwithstanding, Beuys's implication, in this series of objects and actions, seems to have been that humanity might not only survive capitalism but also bring it to a punctual conclusion within a living future, though not within his



Fig. 3-

Joseph Beuys, *Nur noch 2190 Tage bis zum Ende des Kapitalismus (Denkmaschine)* (Only 2190 days until the end of capitalism [thinking machine]), 1981. Metal, glass, wood, and paper. Dimensions variable. Galerie Crone, Berlin and Vienna.

own, as things transpired. That is, unless we except the May Day prophecy, which was no more fulfilled than the rest.

It would be cruel to adduce this welter of dates to mock Beuys's naivete or even wring pathos from his optimistic anticapitalism, so foreign as it is to our more recent "capitalist realism" (a term that originated in Beuys's circle: his students Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter coined it for a performance at a furniture store in Düsseldorf in 1963).² Cruel and unwarranted. Beuys lived through at least one of his failed predictions; given that he died early, at the age of sixty-four, he must have hoped to live through the others. To say that the *Nur noch* series cannot have been meant to be taken literally is not to say that it was unserious. What I mean to suggest by starting with this little-known body of work is that Beuys's art and thinking had a direct, practical relation to an imagining of capitalism's end along with its expected replacement by something that he called "free democratic socialism." This is no coinage of mine; the phrase was one the artist's slogans. It remains to be seen what exactly "free democratic socialism" meant and what relation it

had to the staggering multifariousness of his artistic practice, which is often called the most important to have emerged in post-World War II Germany: from the early “actions” that he staged in the orbit of the international Fluxus movement during the 1960s; to his sculptures and installations that incorporate unusual materials such as felt and fat; to his discursive activity as a tirelessly self-theorizing writer and interviewee, by means of which he propagandized his notion of “social sculpture” (an art that takes social relations as its material, or to put it differently, takes social relations as art). The task of this book is to relate the various things that Beuys did and made to a sense of history for which socialism is thinkable. To relate is not to identify. The possibility that what Beuys did sometimes bore little connection with what he claimed to be doing is real.

His premature death from heart failure was a fluke, but it is not by chance that I have introduced Beuys in a way that makes mortality unavoidable. There are few artists of the twentieth century whose work is so saturated with the negative as his. Death is everywhere, as is historical trauma: his drawings and sculptures are littered with decomposing organic matter and fecal-looking stains, and his “actions” pervasively thematize wounding. This is true most notoriously in his many, though mostly indirect, evocations of the National Socialist period, through which he passed as a member of the Hitler Youth and soldier in the Luftwaffe. (He served in the air on the Eastern Front and then in the final months of the war on the ground in the West.) There is no getting around the issue of the “German past,” to employ a euphemism.

Yet my approach to the deathliness of Beuys’s art takes a different tack. The *Nur noch* series is oriented to the future. Beuys, however, imagines this future as an ending, a literal perishing, not of any biological individual—such as the artist himself—but rather of a mode of production. He could only have looked forward to the prospect. Though his terminology was different, Beuys was as relentless in his critique of capitalist modernity as any Marxist revolutionary. The way to free democratic socialism was for him a passage through the valley of death. His utopia is a companion of the negative. The problem is figuring out how. To note that each of his countdowns, whatever their internal inconsistency, all proved equally false, for reasons that go beyond the contingent fact of one man’s lifespan, is to skirt the issue of falsifiability as such. Beuys *did* choose a date, or rather several, for his improbable millenarian event. He thus made the event a material test of his capacity for prognostication. There had to have been

some irony involved. Though sometimes taken for one, Beuys was not a fool, and his statements from the 1980s betray little sense that the overthrow of capitalism might really be imminent.

2.

Matters are weirder. What I want to get across in the chapters that follow is that Beuys's anticapitalism is persistently mediated through an aesthetic figuring of capitalism, or more properly, a mimetic relation to what Karl Marx and his followers call the value form of the commodity—that is, the form in which a thing's material specificity gives way to an abstract representation of itself in the mirror of other commodities, and above all, money, the general equivalent of all commodities. This kind of mimesis is not the same as mimetic representation in its traditional sense—which would be impossible in the case of something so abstract and totalizing; one cannot paint a portrait of capital—nor does it constitute a strategy of subversive “mimetic critique” that simultaneously apes and undermines its target.³ Beuys occasionally seems to instantiate the latter model, as in the signed banknotes of his *Kunst = Kapital* (Art = capital) series, which will appear in this book's second chapter. Yet satire is not the main thrust of his aesthetic politics. The object of mimetic approximation in Beuys's work is not a thing but rather a relation, meaning that the mimesis at stake here is an emergent property of a nonrepresentational alignment between an aesthetic logic and a social form. That is, Beuys's art starts to *behave* like capital instead of looking like it. And since capital totalizes—it tries, at least, to mediate everything in the world—so, too, does Beuys's art. This vast structural mimesis does, however, get concretized in his art's taking on of traits associated with particular moments in capital's process—most important, that of the value form. The value form is the mode of a commodity's being in which it is exchangeable for anything else. I will argue that an analogous universal fungibility is the horizon of Beuys's *erweiterter Kunstbegriff*, or “expanded concept of art.”

This would at first seem to throw us back onto familiar terrain. What could be more familiar than the convergence of commodity and artwork in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, or in Andy Warhol, or any number of other canonical practices? The value form of the commodity is not the same as the commodity as a physical thing, though. Commodities can be mimicked

easily; the value form less so, since it is wholly relational, meaning it has no existence except in the act of exchange and thus is a moment in a process rather than a material thing. Beuys's weirdness has to do with his figuring of value accumulation as process instead of object. What this process does, above all, is to separate things from themselves, to produce nonidentity: the non-identity of a commodity with money, its form of representation; of labor power with its alienated objectification; and of substance with concept or number. In disidentifying things from themselves, commodity exchange at the same time generates the abstract identity of value. We will want to see how this sort of nonidentity is or is not like the nonidentity of a stack of printer paper with the mythos of revolution.

This is to frame the question in a manner that is open to dispute. For one thing, we may seem immediately to contradict ourselves in saying, first, that Beuys aimed to achieve free democratic socialism, and second, that the capital relation was his art's structuring object of mimesis. For how can a body of work be at once anticapitalist and formed in capitalism's image? Indeed, his socialism has often seemed muddled, if not embarrassing. (His interlocutors do not always appear to have known what to make of it. In an interview from 1973, for example, critic and art historian Achille Bonito Oliva abruptly changes the subject—to Duchamp, as it happens—after the artist declares that “socialism means love.”)⁴ Or if not embarrassing, then epiphenomenal. From the present perspective, his anticapitalism may seem less fruitful than his expansion of the concept of art to include abject materiality, bodiliness, performance, and social relations, or his reckoning with the Nazi past, or his invention of an ecological aesthetics.

I think this is not the case, but it will take time to show how. Both the oddness and historically specific conditions of possibility of such a type of socialism are this book's object of study. Hence although the topics just named receive their due in the account that follows, it is the link between the moment of abstract universality in the value form, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the universality of an “expanded” aesthetics that is my keynote, even in the discussion of works that do not appear to foreground economic concerns. To start with, for all that the *Nur noch* series obviously thematizes capitalism, the relevance of value form analysis to it is not immediately evident, at least not as I have presented my examples so far. The same will be true of any number of isolated works. One of the distinctive and arguably problematic aspects of the artist's oeuvre is that its particularities often feel inassimilable to its overweening conceptual

armature; “formal analysis” as art historians like to teach it founders on the mediating step from the individual object to its metaphoric schema. Yet there are some projects—generally larger, culminating statements, as it were, in major public exhibitions—that approach a holistic summary of the work’s structuring logic by, in effect, allegorizing themselves.

So I will have to move on to what, for lack of a better term, must be called the “major” works of the period in which Beuys turned decisively toward political, environmental, and economic themes: the later 1960s through the 1970s. It is arguable that Beuys was “the first artist to address the history of fascism.”⁵ He was, though, much more certainly the first artist not only to make environmentalist concerns an integral part of his practice but also to make his environmentalism inseparable from a total critique of capitalism.⁶ This makes him tremendously important for the present and future. It doesn’t, however, get his interpreters clear of the messier, more disturbing facets of his work and character, even or especially for anyone who shares his fundamental sense of the tasks that face humanity in the present. By the end of this book, it should be evident why I think it is just these contradictions that tell us most about his ecology and politics, and thus something, too, about the possibility of an opposition to capitalism after the breakdown of its classical (that is, socialist) forms. Beuys was a socialist but not a Marxist, for understandable reasons, since Marxism turned out to be so deathly in most of its twentieth-century manifestations. One reading of the *Nur noch* pieces is as a simple parody of Marxism’s romance with the inevitable.

3.

It will take some time to arrive at the coordination of capitalism, utopia, and death that is of concern here. What follows will therefore remain displeasingly abstract until I have developed these claims more concretely through the analysis of particular works of art. So what does this look like in practice? For one thing, it looks like the *Honigpumpe*, or honey pump, that Beuys installed in Kassel, Germany, for the exhibition *documenta 6*, which took place during summer and autumn 1977 (plate 1). *Honigpumpe* is my most important case study—to such an extent that the present book might almost have been a monograph on this installation alone. It is a complex thing, but not so much so that it can’t be summarized in a few sentences.

(I will have more to say about it in chapters 2 and 3 after dealing with different artworks in chapter 1.) Viewers entering the Fridericianum—the museum in which *documenta* was held—first would have seen, or more likely heard, a motor running in the lowest level of the building. This motor pumped honey into the Fridericianum’s exhibition spaces above, where the substance flowed in swags of plastic tubing strung along the curving walls of the museum’s central atrium. Photographs and video of the installation, which no longer exists in its original form, are visually striking, but in a way that does not much resemble art as we usually know it. The machine is loud, messy, not self-contained, industrial looking, and hard to totalize as a gestalt. It probably confused many of its viewers. Over the exhibition’s hundred days, Beuys also organized a series of workshops and panel discussions in these spaces on topics of politics, economics, and aesthetics. It was in a similar pedagogical context that Beuys must have erased the number 2277 a few years later. His intervention in Kassel thus had two components: first, the pump itself, which was a kind of sculpture or installation at the edge of what, even in the wake of postminimalist process art, would not have been recognizable as art at all, and second, an educational program (a textbook example of social sculpture). The work is an economy that integrates or at least juxtaposes thermodynamics with an exchange of signs.

I will say more about *Honigpumpe* later, so here I will just ask a question and respond with a tentative answer. What does honey stand for in this work? To begin with, it stands for blood. The pump is a “heart” that sends liquid coursing through the “body” of the art institution. Beuys made this connection in interviews he gave at the time. The analogy also becomes explicit in a later screen print that diagrams the apparatus (fig. 4). In this print, the motor is labeled *Herz*, or “heart.” Blood, though, is also money. In other statements and writings from the 1970s, Beuys more than once asserted that money is to the economy what blood is to the body: a substance that must circulate if the system is to maintain its existence. (Chapter 2 considers the nuances of this analogy.) Finally, Beuys compared the circulation and accumulation of honey, and by extension blood, to the circulation and accumulation of knowledge in collective learning processes of the sort that he aimed to stage by means of his pedagogical activities in the Fridericianum’s halls. Metaphorically, that is, knowledge moves through society as money moves through the economy and blood moves through the veins. But money *accumulates* in a way that blood and probably knowledge do not. It becomes capital, and by the same measure, profit in the hands of the capitalist class.

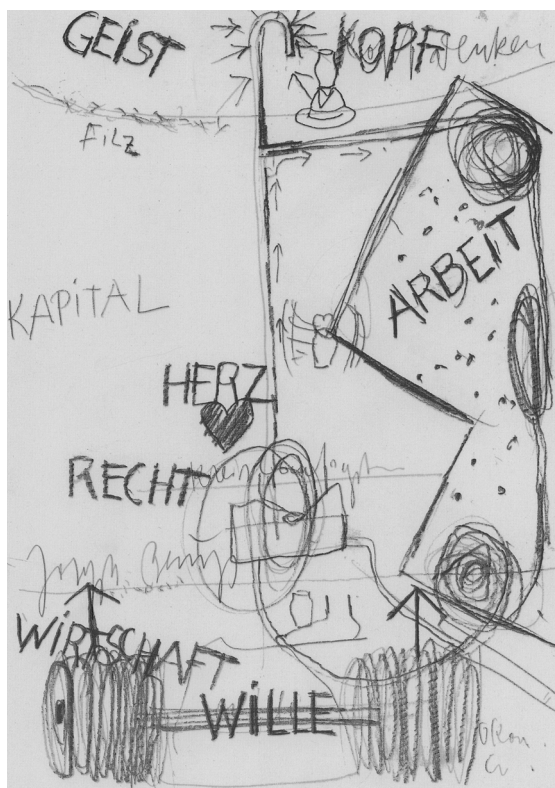


Fig. 4.
Joseph Beuys, *Honigpumpe*
(Honey pump), 1985. Screen
print. 11³/₄ × 8⁵/₁₆ in. (29.8 ×
21.1 cm). Publisher: Spuren -
Zeitschrift für Kunst und
Gesellschaft, Hamburg.
Harvard Art Museums,
Cambridge, MA, 1995.560.2.

To whom does the pedagogical profit of knowledge circulation fall? To Beuys, as pedagogue in chief? And what might be the figurative equivalent of profit in the circulatory system, the realm of blood, which after all seeks homeostasis rather than ever-expanding accumulation?

Beuys overlays his metaphors, and from this blurring emerges disquieting problems around analogy as such. As will be evident even in the above compressed mode of presentation, these problems have to do with economy's relation to nature, pedagogy, politics, and the aesthetic. More pointedly, the question is whether economy, in its capitalist mode, is antagonistic to these other things, to other ways of life or being, or whether some accommodation, if not identity, might be found between them. Everything in this book—I would suggest, of course without being able to prove it, nearly everything in Beuys's oeuvre—has to do with this nexus. I spend more time on *Honigpumpe* than any other artwork because it displays these problems in arguably their most paradigmatic form.

I will not attempt a complete survey of Beuys's production, then. For one thing, he was dauntingly prolific. Most of my core objects of analysis belong to a restricted subset of his work—namely, large sculptural installations dating from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. The materiality and objective persistence of monumental sculpture brings to its highest pitch a contradiction between metaphors of flow and stasis in Beuys's work—and it is this relation that hooks the work onto capital as a social form that at once revolutionizes everything and somehow keeps everything the same.⁷ I use the word “materiality” with some caution because in art discourse, at least, it often seems to describe a certain salience or vehemence of material properties to the disadvantage of social and historical concerns, which is not a precise terminology. A painting with a licked-smooth surface is just as “material” as one with high impasto; it's just material differently. When the notion of “materiality” shows up in this book, it ought to be understood as the counterpart of a tendency in Beuys to subordinate the material to concepts. Materiality, then, is part of an economy of signs and things rather than a property in its own right. By the same measure, “concept” or “meaning” ought to be understood here as an inflection of an economy that needs a material substrate.

This economy is present in works both big and small. Large sculptures, though, do bring to a special pitch the interaction between these poles precisely by stretching them to their limits—by juxtaposing sheer stuff to its metaphoric significance—and will accordingly make for a privileged focus of attention. I will by contrast have relatively less to say about Beuys's early “actions” in the orbit of Fluxus along with his late ecological projects, drawings, or production of multiples (with the exception of the *Kunst = Kapital* series of modified banknotes), and only a little a bit more about his many vitrine sculptures, although I think that my propositions apply to these other bodies of work as well. The reason for zeroing in on this strain of Beuys's oeuvre is that it delivers a particularly concentrated manifestation of the curious superimposition of metaphors with which we are concerned: metaphors of death and life, injury and healing, biology and economics, art and society.

These are abstract words that will make more sense after I have gotten under the skin of the art. Doing so requires clarifying some basic terms that circle around a striking and yet little-understood dynamic in Beuys's work and discourse: the way in which his identification of incommensurables both transgresses the modern boundaries of the aesthetic and proposes

a specifically aesthetic parallel to capitalism's real abstraction. These are not the terms in which twentieth-century art has usually been theorized. Art historians are comfortable with the idea that art might resist, reflect, or acquiesce to capitalism; indeed, the very category of art in modernity perhaps owes its coherence to its exceptionality with respect to capitalist commodity production.⁸ But conversely, there is no adequate existing framework with which to describe how art, in becoming like capital, might try to subsume it—which is what happens with Beuys.

4.

What *is* widely understood, by contrast, is that Beuys was tremendously ambitious, perhaps to the point of megalomania—as the reader may have intuited already. He aimed to totalize the concept of art. He wanted to make it the basis for a total remaking of society, economics, and politics, indeed for a coming form of life, in a mode of aesthetic politics to which we can usefully attach the rich German word *Gestaltung* (design, shaping, or form making). Art can set a date for capitalism's end; a more powerful idea of art's agency is hard to imagine. The reason this might have seemed at least plausible is that for Beuys there was or anyway should be no distinction between collective practice (political practice, for example, but also the tasks of everyday existence) and art making. The doctrine of social sculpture was not so much a technique for making art out of life as for making life into art, everywhere and always. *Honigpumpe* subsumes collective discussion to the artwork of which it was an element. Art is or wants to be the master term here—the term that synthesizes and relates everything else. Art is the *Gestaltung* of everything, potentially.

Yet just such a totalizing relation already existed in Beuys's world. That relation was capital. It was accordingly to the capital relation that Beuys oriented his practice. In a real sense, capital occupied the terrain that he hoped art would conquer; capital did what he hoped art could do, only badly. It was and is what mediates the reproduction of most human life on earth. Of course, no life is possible without nature too—whatever that happens to be. There is no need here to adjudicate the ontological status of “nature,” or for that matter of “art” or any other concept; it's sufficient that the concepts are operative as part of the material and discursive complex that is Beuys's oeuvre, in which paired terms often function as

quasistructural oppositions. One such opposition—the crucial one in this book, as I think it was for Beuys—is that between nature and intentional human practice, with nature understood in this context as autonomous, extrahuman reality, and intentional human practice understood to be, in its highest form, art.

The thrust of a work such as *Honigpumpe* is to overcome this opposition, even as it presupposes it. It does so, remarkably, not by naturalizing art (by restricting art's claim to be distinct from everything else) but instead by totalizing it, such that at its vanishing point or realized utopia, there would be nothing left that art does not touch. A totalized art simply would *be* nature, or rather a second nature; it would lie at the root of everything, as indispensable as the air we breathe or the blood that flows in our veins. But it would also still be what Germans call *Geist*: spirit, mind, or cognition. This insistence on art as art (as human practice) distinguishes Beuys's honey pump from more recent and in some respects rather Beuysian kinds of art that model or (re)produce hybrid biological/semiotic ecosystems. I have in mind contemporary artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Anicka Yi, or Candice Lin, all of whom incorporate volatile organic matter into technical metabolisms that operate in at least partial autonomy from their creators' volition.⁹ There is a clear resonance between such practices and Beuys's conflation of machinery with the circulation of blood in *Honigpumpe*—with the key difference that Beuys insists on human plastic or “shaping” (*gestaltend*) agency in a way that is at odds with the renunciation of anthropocentrism in much current ecological art. From the Beuysian perspective, good ecology does not so much void *Geist* as extend it to the point that it becomes inextricable from the cosmos.

This involved Beuys in intervening at least imaginatively in the basic structures of human life. To repeat, societies have a double root in nature and a mode of production. In capitalism, however, the latter introduces an “irreparable rift in the interdependent processes of social metabolism”—a metabolic rift in the exchange of energy between humans and the earth.¹⁰ Capital modifies that exchange and subsumes it to the needs of its own accumulation, even to the point of making the metabolism break down. Capital indeed comes to look like a kind of incontrovertible nature of its own: money becomes as indispensable as blood. Ongoing debates in the fields of ecosocialism and Marxist ecology, often in dialogue with feminist and decolonial ecological thought, address the problem of capital's immanence to nature and vice versa. A critique of the “Cartesian” division

between nature and society, and indeed of certain interpretations of Marx's own concept of the "metabolic rift," has been a frequent refrain in this discourse.¹¹ If Beuys's work helps us to think about these urgent questions, it does so because his ecology was at the same time a political economy and semiotics. Beuys demonstrates both the oneness of a modern natural/social world system and the grotesqueries that result from nature's subsumption to capital accumulation. Along with capital, nature, too, was an object of Beuysian mimesis. *Honigpumpe* is an image of both the body and, more tenuously, larger natural thermodynamic systems. It likewise figures economy. But the means that Beuys used to construct his metaphor are literally mechanical; it seems that there was a propane motor (fossil fuel) involved in the installation.

This is not an isolated case. Metaphors of circulation and (life) cycles, of natural communities, such as those of the bees that make honey in the first place, recur in work after work, but they are rarely pure, rarely inseparable from something more disturbingly dead. For Beuys, nature was a compelling image of totality. The problem is that in wanting to become at once more like nature and more like capital—more totalized and totalizing, more inextricably woven into the numberless patterns of everyday life—Beuys's art became more and more riven by capital's violence, and thus more and more contradictory with respect to its own ecological telos. The increasingly vast chasms that Beuysian metaphors had to bridge are the index of the concrete problem of holding together a sense of reality in the face of capitalism's contradictoriness. As philosopher Hans Blumenberg argues, metaphor perhaps most essentially emerges in response to the disturbance of a prior homeostasis: "The element that is initially destructive only *becomes* metaphor under the duress of having to repair the imperiled consistency."¹² What is more, to model art on the automatism of either nature or capital was to risk corrupting the central idea of *Gestaltung* given that the latter would seem essentially to involve conscious human control. At Kassel, Beuys and his acolytes produced knowledge by means of intentional collective practice, even as honey/blood/money circulated automatically, mechanistically, to its own inhuman rhythm.¹³ Any interpretation of the piece comes down to figuring out what, if anything, these two processes have to do with each other. What was the point of the work's split presentation (which was, among other things, a literal spatialization of the Marxist base/superstructure metaphor)? Why pair, much less try to reconcile, human self-determination with mechanism at all?

5.

I can put the argument more directly, though still in more abstract terms than I would like. In this book, I intend to prove that the negativity manifest in the art of Beuys resulted from his attempt to reconcile the automatism of capital accumulation with a principle of universalized *Gestaltung* (the free shaping of all social and material relations rather than only those that are usually called aesthetic). This attempt to reconcile irreconcilables depended on a third term: nature. *Honigpumpe*'s contradiction is found in the elided nonidentity between capital—a social form that accumulates—and blood, a natural substance that maintains homeostasis. If honey is blood and blood is money, and if money is also capital, then we are left with the problem of what it could mean to *extract* something from these other systems in the way that capitalists extract profit from labor. The answer may turn out to be dark.

To develop the contradiction, we need to take such inferences seriously, which is to say, literally. Paradoxical as it may sound—although I doubt that he is unique in this regard—making sense of Beuys's art requires us to take metaphors literally. (Blumenberg is useful here too: "It is no rarity to observe that metaphors are 'taken at their word.' In the process, the metaphor is seized from the limited intention of its author, made independent, and extended in a direction that often changes the clarification into an explanation.")¹⁴ More specifically, it requires us to treat a metaphoric economy *as if* it were a real economy. In the case I have been discussing, there are at least two economies involved: that of pedagogy or knowledge production (symbolic exchange), and that of a fossil-powered hydraulic circuit, which Beuys in turn metaphorized as akin to both the circulation of blood and circulation of money. *Honigpumpe* is an artwork, a product of conscious human intentionality. So is knowledge that comes out of a seminar. But the models, both natural and economic, to which *Honigpumpe* mimetically assimilates itself are under nobody's conscious control. Blood pumps without us willing it; money circulates whether we like it or not, and not even the most powerful capitalist in the world controls the whole of the process. Capital, even though a human social form, behaves as if it were an impersonal, natural necessity. *Gestaltung*, or artistic formation, involves contingent human agency even when, as in Beuys's case, it has for its paradigm natural or necessary form.

Beuys tried to make peace between these terms. In a series of case studies—*Honigpumpe* is only the first I have introduced—I will try to show that his most characteristic strategy was a mimesis of capital—not most often, however, of its most concrete instance, the commodity, but rather of the entire circuit of value accumulation, which in returning to itself passes through a series of negations (labor, money, and yes, the commodity too, all objects of Beuys’s mimetic investment in their turn). This was a strange, perhaps singular way of making art. It involved Beuys in leaps across categories that it has been modernity’s work to keep separate. What I call Beuys’s “myth” was a self-reinforcing yet also contradictory complex of metaphors that aimed to graft a cosmology to the real totality of capital, which is a self-reproducing system. Blood’s likeness to money is an instance of Beuysian myth. Mythical totalization is akin to the closure of a capitalist economy in ways that will need to be explored. Like capitalism, though, this closed loop of artistic meaning making generated waste, nonmeaning, and death.

To explain how this works, I have borrowed the term “economimesis” from the philosopher Jacques Derrida, although I use it in a different and usually more straightforward sense than his.¹⁵ Derrida will return in my book’s conclusion, at which point I will hew more closely to what he really means by his neologism. “Economimesis” is meant to sound like an oxymoron since the system of the aesthetic as it attains canonical shape in philosopher Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* would seem to oppose “free” art (mimesis) to “mercenary” art (economics). Derrida, as one might expect, deconstructs this binary opposition and demonstrates the mutual dependency of the two terms. In a methodologically similar vein, my book takes oppositions such as “nature versus culture” as discursive givens that ought to be subjected to a further turn of the screw, rather than as ontologically fixed terms to be either accepted or rejected as is.¹⁶ Language itself already does some of this work, which is why—without ever intending to complicate ordinary language needlessly—I also do not shy away from using some exotic terminology. Neologisms can sometimes illuminate a constellation of ideas that it would otherwise be too laborious to describe sequentially; neologisms are, sometimes, concentrated dialectics.

By writing of “economimesis,” for example, I mean to indicate that Beuys’s practice worked as an economy, or instead, as something like an economy. His art is sticky; it adheres to other things (in the instances that matter here, to another social form); this is what mimesis signifies in the pages to follow. His art posits the uptake of form, even or especially at its

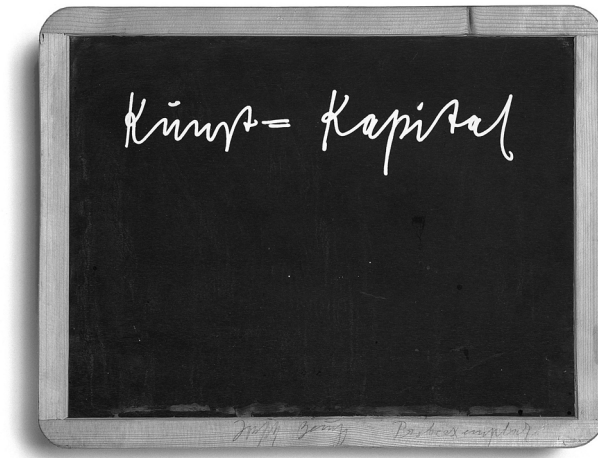


Fig. 5. Joseph Beuys, *Kunst = Kapital*, 1980. Silk screen on blackboard in wooden frame. $13\frac{1}{4} \times 17\frac{3}{16} \times \frac{3}{8}$ in. (33.7 × 43.7 × 1 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1992.191.

most object, into the economy of a signifying system, somewhat as capital enlists what it can to the abstraction called value. This system facilitates a metabolism between form and meaning. Matter emerges from the process charged with spiritual (that is, human) value. At the same time, Beuys structured his practice like an organism, ecosystem, or body—that is, like nature. Growth, death, the circulation of blood, cycles of heat and cold, everything contained in what Beuys called his “theory of warmth” (*Wärmetheorie*): these are the substance of his biological aesthetics and, at the same time, phenomenalizations of his economy.

It is not as if there is a hidden kernel of economic content in these biological tropes. The economic content is quite open. More directly than by insinuation, then, Beuys aimed to identify the one representational level with the other. In the 1970s and 1980s, *Kunst = Kapital* (art = capital) was no less ubiquitous a slogan than his better-known pronouncement that everyone is an artist (*jeder Mensch ein Künstler*) (fig. 5). The difficult thing about these equations is that they are not literally true. Another problem is that *if* true, and if taken together, the two equations imply that everyone is a capitalist as well as an artist; or more precisely, that everyone is a capitalist to the same measure that everyone is an artist. Taking the metaphor literally makes sense of it by rendering it contradictory. A literal reading thus paradoxically puts the mediations back into the totalized metaphors

that sublate them, and in the process, makes us aware of the negativity of the identical (or of what the critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno called *erpresste Versöhnung*, “reconciliation under duress”).¹⁷ It makes the metaphors uncomfortable. Derrida’s economimesis in the end turns out to be a theory of disgust. So it is here too. The queasy-making aspect of Beuys’s system ought to be palpable already and will return with a vengeance in my book’s conclusion, when the indigestible remnants of modern history should start to stick in the reader’s throat. A system that tries to reconcile everything identifies too much, perhaps violently.

My account is largely about the analogy making or semiosis that plays out as a result of this making equivalent of unlike things, which is symmetrical with and inherent to capital’s making unlike of things that were once undivided as they pass through the production/accumulation process (by making labor into value and separating workers from both their means of production and what they make). Art as Beuys understands it has this in common with money: it can mediate anything. The remit of metaphor here is accordingly wider than in most art made during the twentieth century. For Beuys, art is to organism as art is to economy, which in turn implies that economy and organism are themselves homeomorphic. Then comes the crucial move, which at least notionally differentiates Beuys’s totalized art from capital. If organisms and economies are both like art, then—like art—both should be susceptible to conscious human shaping, or what I have been calling *Gestaltung*. Art can write capitalism’s obituary because what we call art is nothing but a valence of form making in general, of which politics (collective decision-making about the way we live) is another. Why shouldn’t art decide that capitalism will end on May 1, 1984? Humans can do anything.

6.

These are tropes of what I will call “socioplasticity,” a concept that I extrapolate from the artist’s own term *Soziale Plastik*, or social sculpture. Socioplasticity is the semiotic field in which figures of the aesthetic mingle with figures of social and historical processes. It overlaps but is not coterminous with what the literary critic Paul de Man called “aesthetic ideology.”¹⁸ Socioplasticity is a way to talk about issues that over the past twenty years have often been discussed under rubrics such as “social practice art,” “new

genre public art,” “socially engaged art,” and so forth (the pedagogical component of *Honigpumpe* is an obvious precursor to these).¹⁹ But it is also a way to articulate such politicized art practices with a political economy that exceeds them and to which they tend to be opposed, or at least imagine themselves opposed. To keep matters most literal and therefore closest to what Beuys meant by *Soziale Plastik*, socioplasticity is a way of conceiving of human collectivity as an object of *Gestaltung*, or more precisely as an identical subject/object since what shapes society is society itself. This is no different from a classical strain in Marxist philosophy, the paradigmatic expression of which is literary theorist and philosopher György Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*.²⁰ The factor that differentiates Beuys is his tendency to privilege art as a model for general social practice in a way that perhaps both overestimates the efficacy of the aesthetic and underestimates the danger of according the artist such an exalted role.

This is the point at which Beuys’s approach both converges and conflicts with my technique as a scholar. I take it as an axiom that works of art can be understood as social relations, not in the indirect sense that artworks “reflect” their context, but in the sense that every work of art produces concrete relations between discourses, materials, signs, and agents. Whether these relations are only or predominantly social, meaning human, or whether we might better understand them in terms of a more capacious relationality that encompasses nonhuman as well as human factors or agents, is a problem that we can leave in suspension. I prefer to use the term “social” because I consider my approach to belong to the methodological lineage of the social history of art. The social history of art is a history of the “concrete transactions” that constitute “the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes,” as art historian T. J. Clark once put it.²¹ It does not strike me that there is any insuperable divide between this sort of materialism and newer materialisms that embed social relations in the “double internality” of “humanity-in-nature/nature-in-humanity,” to quote environmental historian Jason W. Moore—even if the protagonists of various theoretical “turns” in the early twenty-first century have had an interest in maintaining otherwise.²²

To begin with, the making of an artwork rebounds on its maker, subjectivizing them as “artist,” at least in cultures in which that identity is available. In other cultures, representational activities that to us resemble

art may be called “magic” or some other emic term. (Beuys often modeled what he was doing on these other-than-art practices. This is the basis for his problematic identification as a “shaman.”) Every artwork, like everything else, projects a diagram of relations, including art’s self-relation or autonomy; withdrawal or hermeticism is a kind of negative relationality too.²³ These patterns of relation shift over time as forms emerge and disappear in consequence of both objective factors, such as the prevailing mode of production or environmental allowances of the earth, and intentional human practice. The artwork is not an isolated object but rather a node within diagrams of relations that constantly rearrange themselves (which is how I understand the historical process)—all of which are not equal, however, because some relations and some systems are more totalizing than others, or indeed subsume others to their own reproduction (this is how I would describe capital’s relation to human life and the earth).²⁴ A further dereifying step would be to say that there are or ought to be no “nodes,” and hence no networks between them at all, only likenesses and becomings alike.²⁵ I argue that Beuys’s art involves a becoming-like capital. But the point is that this can never exactly succeed for reasons that clarify the peculiar status of art in the modern world.

Beuys is useful for getting at these basic issues because his habit of transgressing categories obliges his interpreters to ask, “How is art like any other thing or practice (or not)? How is it autonomous from these other things and practices (or not)? What impact, if any, might art have on evidently distinct spheres of human practice, such as politics and economy? And what danger might arise when art trespasses on these other spheres?” There are more and less honest ways to answer these questions. Resistance to Beuys has mostly come from a sense that his answers were implausible or duplicitous. From such a point of view, Beuys’s transgression of categories is regressive because it posits a socioplastic effectivity that his art (or perhaps art in general, or perhaps only art in modernity) cannot have. It posits, for example, a *specific* date on which capitalism will die. Art has little power to make this come true. Thus the prophecy exists—as most art does anyway—in the realms of the virtual, metaphor, fiction, nonidentity, or the “*objet ambigu*.”²⁶ This is only a problem if the prophecy is meant to be more than a fiction. And that is the whole difficulty of interpreting Beuys. If fiction, his politics only muddles his art. If prophecy, aesthetics impinges on politics in a manner that, as it has seemed to some, can only issue in the totalitarian annexation of politics to the charismatic authority

of the “genius,” or on the contrary, in a mere parody of art-politics. When working as ideology, then, socioplasticity recognizes the entanglement of the aesthetic with social and historical processes while occluding asymmetries of subsumption, or domination.

Like Duchamp’s ready-made, the notion of social sculpture is a particularly suggestive way to think about art’s entanglement with other practices and things, but it confounds orders of magnitude. Hence there is a great pathos—maybe bathos—in Beuys’s attempt to subsume capitalism under art by analogy making. (I will argue that this is what *Honigpumpe* and by extension Beuys’s practice as a whole aimed to do in the 1970s.) The hypertrophy of metaphor in his work, such that many take it to be overladen with mythological deadweight, is a sign of the contrariness of his way of art making to “metaphoroclasm,” to coin another term that I will use elsewhere in this book. Beuys’s work was an extended battle against the reduction of metaphor to real abstraction, or capitalism’s practical making equivalent of all commodities as exchangeable bearers of value. At the same time, his “metaphoresis” had no other model, no other mimetic object, but this reduction of difference. The real equivalence of all things from capital’s perspective has its shadow in an imagined universalization of art, under which Beuys wanted to subsume literally everything (everyone is an artist and everything is art; honey is blood is money is knowledge). To put it in terms I have already developed, the commodity form is what happens when you take metaphor literally at a general societal level. Commodity exchange is based on acting as if, not merely imagining that, ten yards of linen and a coat are the same thing, even though their use values are qualitatively distinct. Beuys’s *erweiterter Kunstbegriff* (expanded concept of art) makes everything fungible too. Art is the coin of Beuys’s realm; Kunst = Kapital. The purity of poet Friedrich von Schiller’s “aesthetic state,” then, corresponds to the mirage of a capitalism stripped of material friction.²⁷

This is economimesis at work. The aesthetic, in its purity, reproduces or assimilates itself to the logic of economy, even as it remains something else—something subject to *Gestaltung* in a distinctive way. (In Derrida’s terms, which he borrows from Kant, “free” and “mercenary” art, mimesis and *oikonomia*, turn out not to be antithetical; “their relation must be one neither of identity nor of contradiction but must be other.”)²⁸ The above formulations are indebted to Adorno’s observation that the “absolute artwork” and “absolute commodity” converge.²⁹ They do so, for Adorno,

because the absolute artwork and absolute commodity represent two faces of the extreme point of fetishism, or the concealment of labor and production. In the commodity, social relations between people appear as relations between things. The autonomous artwork, in turn, appears to sever itself from its social determinations altogether. In both cases, the product of labor thus appears not as a product at all but rather as a self-grounding, self-moving subject. This is indeed how totalized or “expanded” art functions for Beuys. Art theorist Marina Vishmidt concisely makes this theoretical point that I intend to prove more empirically in the pages that follow:

If we recall . . . that art, like capital, expels labour and declares a formal freedom from it while being just as subordinate to capital as any other form of social production (indeed, because art electively assumes capital’s formal freedom as one of its own laws, we might argue that it is *more* subordinated), we can further say that this is possible because art is mimetic of capital in a very specific way: art mimetically assumes the role of the automatic subject of value.

As Vishmidt continues, “The ability of art to ‘accumulate’ all social phenomena as instances of itself comes to resemble what capital does, in its self-expanding movement as the automatic subject. The nominalist gesture then appears symptomatic of art as a scene of, and vehicle for, the ‘mimetic subsumption’ of all non-value producing sectors.”³⁰ By “nominalist gesture,” Vishmidt means to refer to the Duchampian readymade. The designation of, potentially, any arbitrary thing as a work of art mimetically subsumes nonart phenomena much as capital subsumes concrete particulars under the abstract value form.

Posed in this way, the homology between art and capital might seem straightforward and punctual. Once Duchamp decides to call a urinal *Fountain*, the operation is over; commodity and artwork have been identified. The mimetic convergence with which I am preoccupied in this book, however, is dynamic as opposed to static. The convergence is not between artwork and commodity but rather between a mode of production and a structure of metaphors. Beuys’s transubstantiation of honey into blood and money, for instance, is a figure of capital’s transubstantiation of labor and concrete matter into abstract value, but also a wild (utopian) counterfactual to the same. His logic was that of sympathetic magic, or the affecting

of like by like: an archaism. What makes it distinctive is that he applied it to a mode of production.

7.

The layering of two metaphors (economy and organism) atop a notion of art defined as *Gestaltung* accounts for the difficulty that Beuys has met in reception, especially in the United States. For this same complex of analogies—of economy and society to art and organism—lay at the heart of the twentieth century’s most ambitious and, in practice, most horrific programs of social transformation on the Right as well as Left (fascism and state communism). These programs of socioplasticity had fallen into discredit by the 1970s and 1980s, when Beuys became Germany’s most famous artist. “Neoliberalism” is one name for the ideology that came after, although it is probably correct to see the discourse of neoliberalism not as a driving force but instead as a language in which to justify a more important phenomenon: the restructuring of capitalism in response to a crisis of profitability in the 1970s.³¹ It was at this moment that Beuys found himself in competition with other, more violent historical actors for a vision of the future to hold against the terror of history. My example is the militant Rote Armee Fraktion, or Red Army Faction (RAF), whose last major offensive in autumn 1977 took place at almost exactly the same time that Beuys created two large-scale installations (*Honigpumpe* and *Unschlitt/Tallow*) that are keys to my reading (fig. 6).

Beuys’s art is thus bound to historical catastrophe, though not necessarily in the ways his interpreters often presume. The center of gravity in my account is not the National Socialist period but rather the cresting and decline of Germany’s postwar “economic miracle” in the 1960s and 1970s. This was an era that many of its own subjects, especially on the Left, experienced as a near replay of the earlier disaster. These years also saw the final triumph of the welfare state. So-called *Modell Deutschland*, with its lucrative manufacturing sector along with state-managed coordination between capital and labor, was the backdrop to the development of Beuysian socioplasticity. Free democratic socialism, of which social sculpture was meant to be a premonition, was both an image of and imagined alternative to the German social market economy. The phrase was Beuys’s way





Fig. 6.

Joseph Beuys, *Unschlitt/Tallow* (*Wärmeskulptur auf Zeit hin angelegt*) (Unschlitt/tallow [heat sculpture designed for long-term use]), 1977. Beef suet, paraffin (?), stearin, steel, and electric elements. Cut from a cast measuring $76\frac{1}{8} \times 376 \times 120\frac{1}{2}$ in. ($195 \times 955 \times 306$ cm). Dimensions variable as installed. Installation view, Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster, 1977. Sammlung Marx, Berlin, on long-term loan to the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart.

of describing collective historical self-determination, which remains the horizon of any politics that aims to transcend the “natural history” of the capitalist mode of production.³² His work was an attempt to answer modernity’s most insistent questions: Can humans control their own destiny? And if history can be made, is disaster the inevitable result?

A politics that answers “yes” to the first of these questions and “no” to the second remains difficult to imagine as anything other than what it became in fascism and authoritarian socialism. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the persistence of Nazi personnel and command structures in positions of high governmental as well as economic power deep into the postwar era made Beuys’s imagining of an alternative to liberal democracy and its economic forms difficult except in aesthetic terms. The presence of a socialist German state immediately to the east complicated matters for would-be leftists too. Worse still, Beuys’s unwillingness ever to provide a full account of his participation in the Nazi war of annihilation would seem to invalidate any such attempt a priori. There are affinities with fascist rhetoric and tropes in his language that it seems impossible not to call symptomatic.³³ In the postwar decades, however, the notion that history might be made by those who undergo it had a peculiarly German variant that turned out not to be incompatible with the capital relation. None other than Konrad Adenauer and Ludwig Erhard, the architects of the Federal Republic’s *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, saw the “social market economy” as a third way between the socialism of the Eastern bloc and the unfettered capitalism that many of their contemporaries held responsible for the downfall of the Weimar Republic. So the theory and practice of economic planning—to put it more strongly, economic *Gestaltung*—was a contested object, with one of its more eccentric claimants being Beuys. The point of the sections of this book that veer from art history to economics is to show that even the strangest features of Beuysian theory and practice make an amount of sense within this context.

In what follows, then, I approach the disturbing echoes of the Nazi era in Beuys’s work neither as an involuntary return of the repressed nor as manifestations of a right-wing political program (nor of an orthodoxly leftist one either), but rather as signs of resonance, across thirty years or so, between notions of planning and contingency in human affairs. Without contesting the singularity of the National Socialist regime, I nonetheless

attempt to assess its aftermath during the postwar era—and more particularly in Beuys’s socioplastic imagination—in terms of a longer duration of approaches to the “shaping” (*Gestaltung*) of human society and the relation of such projects to the invisible hand of the market. In Beuys’s time, this constellation was rearranging itself. As I write, it may be rearranging itself again under new ecological and socioeconomic pressures (though the obvious contingency of the present world order has so far not called forth any universalizing counterproject comparable to classical socialism; neither is it clear that it can or ought to). Hence although much of my work is that of contextualization or historicization, the temporality at stake here is complex. It is not as if either the 1930s–40s or 1960s–70s alone explain what Beuys was trying to do. Only a parallax between these moments produces an adequate etiology of his economimetic procedures. Beuys projected a future—it did not come to pass, as hardly needs pointing out—that was an echo of the past as well as an image of what, at the time, was the present: that of West Germany’s capitalist reconstruction.³⁴

Lastly, I aim to show that Beuys’s ecological politics, so easy to describe as an antimodern romanticism, turn out to have capital as their paradigm, thus adumbrating a world in which “ecology” and “nature” are by no means synonymous. In much of Beuys’s work, the terms “nature” and “capital” might as well be interchangeable. Some have called this world that of the Anthropocene, or more to the point, the Capitalocene.³⁵ In the first half of the twenty-first century, socioplasticity’s only noble aim—collective human self-determination on an international scale—has become unimaginable except as care on and for a sick planet. This is what one might by analogy call *ecoplasticity*: the form in which a socialism of the twenty-first century is imaginable, though not necessarily in any comforting way.³⁶ The governability of the cosmos is now at stake in the possibility of ecosocialism, as it was, already and differently, in Beuys’s work and thinking. Whether ecosocialism is either possible or desirable is not really at issue here, though I hope that a look back at the previous century indicates something of the direness and immensity that any planetary ecological politics would involve. Beuys makes a mockery in advance of any notion that “ecological art” could be isolated as a tidy genre alongside installation, performance, and so on. An aspiration of this book is to monstrate the joint where, in art, the desire called socialism meets the disaster called the Capitalocene. One such joint is Beuys.

8.

This book has three chapters. *Honigpumpe* appears mostly in the second and third, although much of what is required for the interpretation appears already in the first, which is dedicated to the function of materials in the artist's early work and the notion of myth. The second chapter is mostly about value, and the third is primarily about history. More exactly, in chapter 1, which is titled "The Matter of Myth," I try to provide an account of Beuys's meaning making and its difference from the contemporaneous practices of minimalists in the United States. To do so, I have to articulate, or rather show Beuys articulating, materials with the symbolic significance they have in the artist's spoken and written utterances—as, for example, the association of the materials of fat and felt with the idea of healing. This may seem like an archaic semiology. Whether it is or isn't, I think it is true to what I have observed in the work. The material/meaning transit turns out to be more complicated than it looks at first since it depends on something that I call "myth." Myth, in this context, is not a synonym for "made-up stories" but rather a mode of external conceptuality that grounds the transit between material form and determinate meaning. This relation turns out to be slippery in practice: a material may not really be what it ought to be according to the system; something that symbolically works as "fat" may be a compound of other waxy substances, for instance.

Myth is war on metaphoroclasm. The danger of it is that it will either regress to forms of knowledge and power that were characteristic of pre-modern as well as regressive modernist political regimes (fascism, most obviously) or assimilate its logic to capital's metaphoresis. Both of these things may have happened, and this is why leftist critics have often regarded Beuys with suspicion. Although I do not yet develop this argument in my opening chapter, establishing the way that Beuysian myth functions as a semiotic regime is important to the articulation of history with capital that I develop in the rest of the book since it turns out that the capital relation, too, is a way of assigning meaning to material things. The meaning at stake in the latter instance, though, turns out to be the empty, quantitative form of economic value as opposed to the "deep" spiritual values with which Beuys hoped to associate his art. So another important theme in my book is the fate of meaning as such under capitalism.

On top of socioplasticity and ecoplasticity, then, we ought to keep in mind the analogous notion of *semi*plasticity: the prospect for remaking

signification in its totality in ways that were characteristic of the modernist avant-gardes, but that Beuys echoes in his project of a new myth. It ought to be evident that the metaphoric totalization involved in semioplastic myth building is dangerous. This accumulation of “-plasticities,” though I derive it from Beuys’s term *Soziale Plastik*, is also meant to resonate with current research on neuroplasticity, or the brain’s ability to restructure its neural networks in response to learning processes, environmental influences, and trauma. The philosopher Catherine Malabou has developed the most robust philosophical interpretation of neuroplasticity. But of these terms, it is only “socioplasticity” that I develop consistently because in effect it subsumes the other two; the realm of collective human action retains its primacy for Beuys. Finally, it is in chapter 1 that I bring on the trope of the wound, which returns in chapter 3.

Chapter 2, “Circulatory Systems,” is meant to show what happens to this structure of meaning when change and thus history enter the picture. This involves a detailed reading of *Honigpumpe* together with a reconstruction of Beuys’s economic doctrines, to which the installation is intimately bound. Beuys has never enjoyed much credit as an economic thinker; his theories seem amateurish and utopian. They may be so, but they were a tool with which to think about the art-like *Gestaltung* of collective human life, and therefore have much to tell us about Beuysian socioplasticity and economimesis. This is so even if few would bother with Beuysian economics if the material work were not compelling on its own merits. If fat was the crucial material in chapter 1, honey takes over here. Honey is in some ways the richer (that is to say, the less “personal”) of the artist’s mythological substances. There is a deep vein of honey and bee lore in the European tradition, and Beuys undoubtedly meant to refer to it. The hive is an image of sociality among the ancient Greeks as much as for Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy and a model for Beuys (Steiner lived from 1861 to 1925). Honey is the hive’s product; thus honey is a figure for the results of social labor. The figurative work that Beuys does with bees in *Honigpumpe* and elsewhere is a textbook instance of “work on myth,” to invoke another of Blumenberg’s key ideas.³⁷

By drawing out Beuys’s apian metaphor, I try to make sense in turn of some of the more puzzling of his statements on economics—for example, that money is or ought to be somehow at once a collective “sculpture,” a circulating substance with the character of a “bloodstream,” and an institution subject to law. Beuys’s economimetic operation here is a deployment

of metaphor to shift money from one category to another—roughly from “economy,” as we usually understand it, to the sphere of *Gestaltung*. If money is an artwork, the economy can be remade. But a twist emerges at this link in the chain of associations. Beuys’s image of *Gestaltung* is the society of bees: an unconscious, inhuman kind of sociality. (Or so it would seem; Beuys in fact more subtly understood apian form making as the result of coevolution with hominids.) Autonomy and automatism again strangely overlap. This balance between control and *laissez-faire* was also the field of postwar German ordoliberalism, which was not so much a foretaste of neoliberalism as we have subsequently come to know it as a final version of a distinctively modern socioplastic ambition. In the last part of the chapter, I accordingly turn to contextual history to indicate how these Beuysian metaphors took shape and perhaps even came to be operative in the Federal Republic of Germany during the postwar decades, in which there was an attempt—but on a vastly larger scale than any artwork—to reconcile a stochastic, self-regulating system (free market capitalism) with collectively determined human aims.

Whether the reconciliation sticks is the question of my book’s third and final chapter, “The Shape of History.” The answer, inevitably, is no. We do not live in free democratic socialism. Yet the model’s failure is not the final word. To start, it’s worth asking whether “failure” is something we can predicate of a metaphoric/aesthetic economy at all. We can if we take it literally, as I have been saying that we should. But reversion to metaphor is fated; this is the oeuvre’s way of living on. I start by introducing two more bodies of work here, the first of which is another large installation from the 1970s: *Arena—Dove sarei arrivato se fossi stato intelligente!* (Arena—Where would I have got if I had been intelligent!) (plate 2). *Arena* is a collection of photographs of Beuys’s own works, including many of his performative “actions.” I then go on to consider his vitrine sculptures, which likewise accumulate existing artworks, or at any rate, things that an artist has modified. In both cases, notions of sociality layer atop notions, or the real fact, of accumulation. The vitrines also highlight the ambivalence of materials in Beuys’s art. They tend to be junky, if not abject, but the form suggests that of a reliquary. A vitrine contains something precious, maybe sacred. Reliquaries are, furthermore, indexes of suffering and death. Over the course of this chapter, I make a case that this distinctive ambivalence has its double root in the commodity form’s exaltation and abjection of matter (commodities are bearers of an ineffable something called “value,”

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