

Moths

An important function of museums – part of their *raison d'être* – is to protect and preserve the objects in their collections. Teams of conservators, art handlers and registrars work to achieve this goal on a daily basis, following established codes and procedures, and developing new ways of securing the future life of objects in their care. But even the best-laid plans can be tested by the unforeseen or by bad luck.

Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* was produced in an edition of 100 in 1970. Beuys wore the original suit – based on one of his own but with the sleeves and legs lengthened – in an anti-war performance in Düsseldorf in 1970. He authorised the making of an edition of the suit shortly afterwards as a means of reaching a broader audience. The suit became one of Beuys's best-known 'multiples' and in 1981 Tate bought number 45 in the edition. In 1989, however, it was discovered that the suit had been irreparably damaged by clothes moths; and what is left is now kept in storage.

Felt was a signature material for Beuys. According to the story he told about his experience as a pilot during the Second World War, he had been shot down over Crimea and was nursed back to health by Tartar tribesmen who covered his body with animal fat and felt as insulation against the cold. The account was later shown to be untrue but the myth provided a powerful allegory to help explain the symbolic value of felt in his work. For Beuys, felt generally signified the need for human beings to conserve warmth – seen as both a type of energy and a spiritual quality – against forces that diminished and drained vitality and creativity. In one of his more famous early sculptures, *Infiltration Homogen for Grand Piano* 1966, a piano was concealed by a tailored covering made of grey felt, with a red cross. Here the felt suggested the need to protect – and the danger of muffling – the piano's potential for communication, its quality of 'warmth'. Blurring the boundary between art and artist, Beuys chose to wear a grey felt hat, incorporating his signature art material into his everyday appearance.

Appointed Professor in the Monumental Sculpture Department of the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1961, Beuys became an important figure within the loose-knit artists' group Fluxus. He promoted what he called a revolutionary form of 'living art' that aspired to make an active intervention into society. He was soon drawn to performance, or 'actions', as a means of achieving this social engagement, and as the sole performer, he himself became integral to his art and its meaning.

In 1970 American artist Terry Fox asked Beuys's help in finding a venue for an action in Düsseldorf to protest against the Vietnam War. Beuys suggested the Art Academy's basement, a former coal cellar with bare brick walls. The day before the planned action

Beuys proposed that they collaborate. Fox recalled: 'He showed me a mouse, that had lived for a month under his bed. He had fed the mouse with pieces of bread. The previous night, the mouse had died. He suggested we do the action together ... he suggested a kind of funeral for the mouse.' At 7pm on 24 November 1970, Fox and Beuys began their action *Isolation Unit*. On the basis of statements by the artists and spectators, art historian Uwe Scheede later reconstructed the following sequence of events:

Using a gasoline fuel he had renamed 'Napalm', Fox painted a cross on the cellar floor and set it alight. Moving to a small bowl of soap and water he began washing himself, the sound of the circular motions of the soap amplified by loudspeakers, captured on a two reel tape recorder. On the other side of the room, Beuys – dressed in his oversized grey felt suit – held the dead mouse in the palm of his hand and proceeded to show it to the spectators, before placing it on the turning spools of the tape recorder. As Fox used two iron pipes to smash the glass from an old window frame, Beuys began to eat a halved passion fruit, as one witness recalled, 'with his face, with his whole body ... he ate like an animal'. Fox began to strike his iron pipes against the floor; in time with this striking, Beuys spat the seeds of the fruit into a small silver bowl placed on the floor before him, the ringing of the silver bowl chiming against the dull thud of the pipes.

When the fruit was consumed, the action came to an end. In all, it lasted around an hour.

With the aggressive striking of iron and glass and reference to napalm, the inflammable substance widely used by the American military in Vietnam, the anti-war message of Terry Fox's *Isolation Unit* was clear. Beuys was also opposed to the war – he refused to travel to America until 1974 – but his contribution broadened Fox's message. Focusing on the small scale and the personal (the single dead mouse, the consumption of the fruit with its tiny seeds), Beuys made a more general statement about death and survival. It was perhaps a desire to avoid too specific a political statement which saw Beuys shortly afterwards rename his contribution *Action the dead mouse*, distancing himself from Fox's concept.

During *Action the dead mouse* Beuys wore not only his usual felt hat but also a felt suit based on one of his own but with lengthened sleeves and legs. He later stressed that the felt in the suit should be seen as an extension of its use in his sculptures. 'The felt suit was an attempt to express two principles that were very important for my actions', he said. 'On the one hand, it's a house, a cave that isolates a person from everybody else. On the other, it is a symbol of the isolation of human beings in our era. Felt plays the part of an insulator.'

Shortly after the performance Beuys's dealer René Block produced an edition of one hundred suits based on the one the artist had worn. The suit had no buttonholes and, as Beuys acknowledged, would have been difficult to wear. 'The suit is meant to be an object which one is precisely not supposed to wear. One can wear it, but in a relatively

Joseph Beuys 1921–1986

Felt Suit 1970

Felt, 188 x 76 cm

Number 45 in an edition of 100

short time it'll lose its shape because felt is not a material which holds a form. Felt isn't woven. It's pressed together usually from hare or rabbit hair. It's precisely that, and it isn't suited for buttonholes and the like.'

Although he was well aware the material was fragile, he did not have particular views as to how the work should be displayed. In 1970 he said, 'I don't care. You can nail the suit to the wall. You can also hang it on a hanger, ad libitum! But you can also wear it or throw it into a chest'. The museums and galleries that acquired examples typically chose to hang them on clothes hangers high on a wall. In 1981 Tate acquired one of the edition, described in an internal memo as 'a must – a classic, archetypal Beuys image'. Conservators flagged the piece as an 'unusually vulnerable item', and arranged for it be stored with chemical pesticide in a specially made storage bag.

Unpacked in order to be shown in a gallery display, the suit was discovered to be infested with moths in February 1989. How this had happened was unclear: dormant eggs may have been in the suit at the time of purchase, or a moth may have laid eggs in the suit when it had been on display (museums are not immune to moths). More frequent monitoring of vulnerable materials was instigated but there was nothing that could be done for the suit. A conservation report noted:

The infestation was severe ... the shoulders were the most severely damaged ... the felt in the body of the suit was copiously penetrated with small holes ... the felt has been weakened to such an extent that it could no longer support its own weight without tearing.

Conservators concluded that any repair of the suit would not only be prohibitively expensive, but would fundamentally alter the colour and texture of the suit. However, the museum was reluctant to discard the signature piece, and after fumigation it was kept in storage.

The story of the loss of Tate's *Felt Suit* became widely known and inspired Canadian artist Jana Sterbak in 1995 to create a work in which she imagined herself as a moth eating her way through all one hundred examples of Beuys' iconic work. *Absorption: Work in Progress* shows her with what appears to be a giant chrysalis-like structure. An accompanying text explains that, as an artist who was well known for her dress-like sculptures, she had become 'bothered' by Beuys's felt suits. In an act of revenge or homage, the fictional artist/moth had determined to devour these precedents.

In 1970, nine years before my first wearable pieces, Joseph Beuys created the first of his felt suits. I became aware of this in 1986 and its existence has bothered me ever since ... At the beginning of the nineties I conceived of a solution: the absorption of the suit.

To this end I have metamorphosed myself into a moth, and proceeded systematically to eat, one after another, the 100 suits Beuys sold to private and public collections around the world. In some cases my activity was temporarily disrupted by misguided conservation efforts.

Nevertheless, it would not be immodest or inaccurate to state that I have already put more than one suit of its exhibition condition. My work is not easy, but it's not without reward, and, what is most important, it continues.

Planning to show *Absorption* at Tate, Sterbak wanted to include Beuys's moth-damaged suit alongside her new work. However, Beuys's estate ruled that the deteriorated suit should never be publicly shown. Accordingly, Tate deaccessioned the work from its collection and another example was shown with Sterbak's piece in the exhibition. In 2005, reviewing the status of the suit's remnants, still stored by the museum, conservator Rachel Barker and art historian Alison Bracker wrote: 'Seemingly, as a work of art, the piece is defunct physically and conceptually. Nevertheless, Tate staff remain disinclined to declare it altogether dead.' At the time the decision to keep the suit's remnants was influenced by the hope that a way might be found to restore the piece in the future. It perhaps also reflected the museum's instinctive desire to protect and preserve what was left of a valued artwork. However, Tate's purchase in 1998 of another suit from the edition as a replacement made the already distant prospect of the original suit having a future function seem even more remote. But despite its apparent redundancy, the suit is still routinely monitored to ensure that there is no further degradation, though it is not made available for the public to see.

Beuys regarded the conservation of materials as a flawed enterprise in that all matter is destined to turn into dust, but also believed that an artwork had an indestructible 'spiritual substance'. He might have appreciated these attempts to preserve the remnants of the artwork, and with them the story of its destruction, if only as a salutary warning about the fragile status of objects even within the seemingly safe confines of a modern museum.

Text—
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