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Farr, Emma-Victoria. "Beuys and Immendorff at the Ashmolean," *The Oxonian Review*, May 2014.

the Oxonian Review

Beuys and Immendorff at the Ashmolean

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Joseph Beuys and Jörg Immendorff: Art Belongs to the People!
10 April 2014 to 31 August 2014
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Diese Fragen an die Künstler richten - auf Antwort bestehen! , 1972

This collection of works by Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and Jörg Immendorff (1945-2007) is the second in a series of exhibitions of post-war and contemporary art at the Ashmolean, presented in collaboration with the Hall Art Foundation in the United States. Hung in a space normally devoted to ancient art, sculpture, and Assyrian engravings, these provocative twentieth-century German artists provide stark and colourful contrasts for the eye.

Beuys and Immendorff were revolutionaries who felt they could hasten the social change they deemed essential in the German post-war era. As the curator, Sir Norman Rosenthal, remarks, this particular collection "demonstrates the involvement of both artists with contemporary politics and issues of universal human concern, and their belief in the role of art in changing how people think and how they live their lives."

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The exhibition concentrates on works from 1968 onwards, illustrating the atmosphere of student protests across Europe and the United States at the time. Beuys was then a teacher, and Immendorff his student, at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. The former was already established as a leader of the post-war avant-garde, having been part of the international “Fluxus” movement since the early 1960s. Beuys’s provocative statements, and his habit of challenging the way art was presented—with performance pieces and sculptures in felt and animal fat—won him both a devoted following and fervent opposition.



Rose for Direct Democracy, 1973

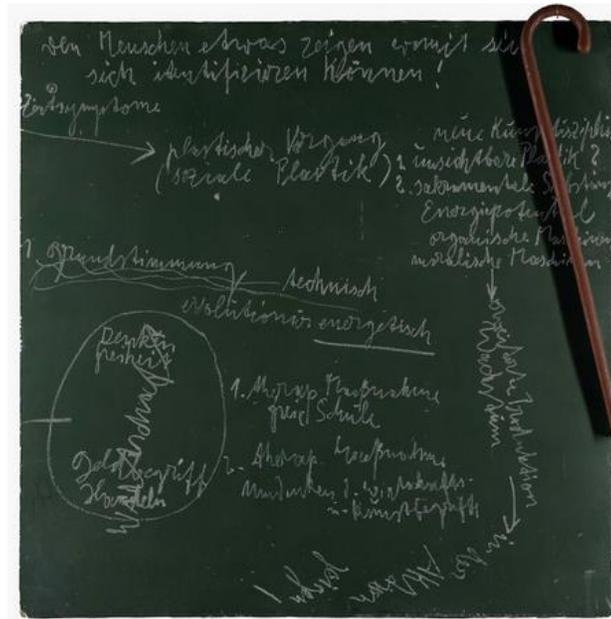
On entering the exhibition space one is immediately confronted with contrasting showcases of Beuys’s work. His *Rose for Direct Democracy* (1973), a graduated glass laboratory cylinder used as a vase with a red rose in it, expresses calm political sentiment when juxtaposed with the nearby and rather unappetising *Horn* (1969), a bronze and plastic tube filled with red pigment and water. However, his piece *How the Dictatorship of the Parties Can Be Overcome* (1971), showing political graphs and charts printed on a polyethylene shopping bag, demonstrates how Beuys tried to elicit real change by reaching out to the people.

Immendorff originally joined the Düsseldorf Academy of Art as a theatre design student in 1963, before choosing to study under Beuys instead. He was involved in international protest movements throughout his career, from anti-Vietnam war rallies to the Green movement, and from the 1970s onwards he actively involved himself in the debate over the division of Germany—themes which are all prevalent in his work.

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Immendorff's paintings complement Beuys's ideas; the images jump out at the viewer with their colourful, poster-like quality, often dense with rousing statements such as: "Gegen Monopoldiktatur – für Volksdemokratie!" (*Against dictatorship by monopoly – for people's democracy!*) or "Sofortiger und bedingungsloser Abzug aller USA- und Marionettentruppen aus Vietnam, Laos und Kambodscha!" (*Immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and puppet regime troops from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia!*) These vibrant pictures, illustrated with jokey caricatures, ape faces and controversial cartoons, are certainly striking and occasionally verge on the surreal.



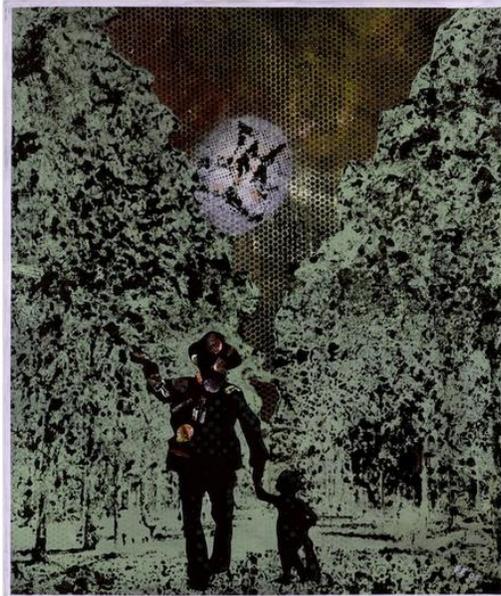
Action Third Way, 1978

The gallery-goer is confronted with a room of around fifty works, dating from 1968 to 2005; each artist's work is interspersed with the other's so as to highlight their exchange of ideas. As Rosenthal comments, "from the moment they met until the end of both of their lives, and in spite of employing different working methods, Beuys and Immendorff were closely engaged with each other's work in what was effectively a permanent dialogue." This close relationship is evident in the similarity of certain artworks, like the annotated classroom chalkboards: Beuys's *Action Third Way* (1978), and Immendorff's *Die Lidlstadt nimmt Gestalt an, Lidlstadtplan IX & X* (1968). The diagrams and scribbles presented here suggest a need to return to education in order to instigate social change. Indeed Immendorff continues this school theme with his four-part oil on canvas *Tischtennisobjekt* (1972).

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Two paintings from Immendorff's renowned *Café Deutschland* series (1983), *Folgen* and *Heuler*, also feature. They depict the artist's view of a divided Germany, exposing an abstract, chaotic and nightmarish turbulence. Their darkness contrasts with the brightness of his earlier works; here we see devilish figures with exposed breasts and can almost hear them wailing ("heulen"). Directly next to this hangs the colossal work *Cyntiana – Geburt Zwiebelmann* (1992), a strange and frightening portrayal of childbirth featuring historical figures like Heinrich Heine in the foreground. As the schoolchildren passing through the gallery put it, "that is scary!" The exhibition is rounded off with one of Immendorff's most recent works, *Untitled* (2005), which displays a totally different technique: it shows the patterned shadow of a father and child in the woodland moonlight, a highly evocative silhouette in dappled dark greens.



Untitled, 2005

While the Ashmolean has put together a bold and unique collection of modern art, I came away feeling slightly discontented. This was partly due to the hanging, which was too cramped and unnecessarily overwhelming as a result. However, my biggest qualm was that there were no translations of the detailed German texts on the images. These artists are hard to understand as it is without substantial historical context, and in order to appreciate them fully, it is necessary to comprehend more than just the image titles. Without an understanding of this textual component to their work, it is difficult to immerse oneself completely in their artistic message.

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