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Secrecy, Surveillance and a Dead Joseph Beuys: Marc Blumthal's SuperCuts
An Essay by Kelly Montana



In November 1965, the artist Joseph Beuys presented an exhibition of his drawings at Galerie Alfred Schmela in Dusseldorf. On opening night, he covered his face in honey and gold leaf, sat in the center of the gallery and cradled a dead hare in his arms. As the evening continued, Beuys gently spoke to the hare as he carried it around the space from drawing to drawing. Visitors arrived to find the gallery door locked, their only view through the front window. He called the performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*.

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In *SuperCuts*, Marc Blumthal allows visitors into the gallery, but only to part of it. Blumthal has built a wall, blocking off a significant portion of the gallery. Directly referencing the drawings in Beuys' 1965 performance, collages by Blumthal hang in the enclosed space. The collages are only viewable via a live feed from a surveillance camera inside the enclosed space to a video monitor in the accessible section of the gallery.

Surveillance is understood to be in the employ of persons or institutions in power – think security surveillance, government surveillance. As the surveillance is done without the explicit awareness of the public, there is an assumption that watching through a camera grants a degree of knowledge and authority over those being watched. It is a one-way exchange where the surveyor has control of the recorded image. In seeing this exhibition through a surveillance camera, the viewer is placed into the curious and disorienting role of a surveyor who is denied access and information. Blumthal suggests that the camera can shroud recorded images in secrecy and confusion. The camera can hide as easily as it can reveal.



Untitled (Portrait #2). 2014. Acrylic and Collage on Archival Photograph, 30" x 20"

These inaccessible “off-view” collages are from Blumthal’s series *Untitled Portraits*. In these works, Blumthal uses a buildup of acrylic and collage to obscure the central figure in an archival photograph. The history of portraiture began under the conceit that individuals can be understood - can be truly known- through a rendering of their image. Blumthal denies this possibility entirely. His de-individualization of the portrait is a sweepingly democratic gesture, universalizing the images. The works emphasize that portraits can never be trusted to convey accurate information about their subject. Blumthal doubles down on this notion by forcibly prohibiting any access to the viewing space. Without access to the physical space, any attempt to guess what type of person the abstracted figure may be is futile.

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Beuys also cultivated this sense of secrecy in his works, intentionally obscuring details in hopes of connecting viewers to a less rational part of themselves; Beuys saw secrecy as a way to empower humanity. He wanted to refuse intellectual understanding of his work and instead wanted to encourage intuition and imagination. This is particularly true of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. As Beuys guided the hare around the gallery, he whispered to the dead animal his thought and reasoning behind each of the displayed drawings. He put information about his art into the world but gave no one access to it. Beuys masked his features with the honey and gold leaf so that he could be better understood as a shamanic figure acting as an intermediary between the living world and the spiritual world inhabited by the dead.



Caption: Glove. 2015. Latex. 48" x 24" x 3"

Blumthall extends his re-interpretation of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* by presenting the performance *How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Joseph Beuys* on the opening night of the exhibition. In a darkly humorous twist, Blumthall's performance transposes the role of artist and hare. Inside the closed exhibition space, a performer dressed as a hare will lead around a latex sculpture of dead Joseph Beuys. The sculpture is filled with a soft batting that makes it as limp and disconcertingly animated as Beuys' dead hare. Blumthall has crafted similar objects before; his soft sculpture *Glove* was on display at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts earlier this year. Future performances by the hare during the run of the exhibition will include readings from poet TJ Ghose's *lyrical wars* project (a collection of poems Ghose commits to writing daily and performed by MOUTH) and two musical performances by F.X. Messerschmidt Project.



Caption: Still from the video footage of *Untitled Portrait (Protect Me From What I Want)*, 2015
Closed circuit camera and billy club, dimensions variable

Blumthall nods to Beuys and he adapts the artist's legacy to speak to contemporary anxieties surrounding secrecy and surveillance. Surveillance has become an ongoing theme in Blumthall's work, most notably with his piece *Untitled Portrait (Protect Me From What I Want)* in a 2015 exhibition at the Center for Art in Wood. For this work, Blumthall placed a police billy club inside a vitrine of opaque glass. The object could only be seen via a closed circuit camera, playing a delayed recording of the object's hidden presence. Like *SuperCuts*, the mood of this piece is playful when the visitor's attempt to view the piece is foiled, only to turn into a downright eerie outlook on contemporary society after longer consideration.

Throughout Beuys' work, there is an insistence that a priori of knowledge is not required to understand his objects and performances; that a simple willingness to connect and commune with art will be sufficient despite his concerted effort to cloak the work in secrecy. However, Beuys' outlook circumvents one important detail – that secrets, including spaces and information that are off limits, have always delineated who has power in a society, in a community, or in a relationship. Secrets themselves have never been open access or egalitarian. Who is keeping a secret and why one chooses to reveal it is a testament to the power secrets possess. *SuperCuts* brings this tension to the foreground by reminding us that artworks can have the same kind of enigmatic presence.

About the Author:

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