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Joseph Beuys at the Kunsthistorisches Institut – A New Focus for the Library’s Collection?

No other country in Europe has aroused such interest among Germans, evoked such enthusiasm and downright longing as Italy. Countless literary and pictorial testimonies have immortalized the often pilgrimage-like journeys made over the centuries. In euphoric tones they often describe landscapes, buildings and works of art, people, customs, music, cuisine, and much more. Not infrequently, the country and its rich culture became a role model for the rapturous Germans, transported into the typical ideal. The founding of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) around 120 years ago took place in the shadow of this ideal when the “uninterrupted contact of German research with the [Renaissance] art of Italy”, “this highest school”, was a prerequisite for the correct assessment of the national art “of the North”. However, just one generation later, in 1927, Wilhelm Waetzoldt, the new chairman of the sponsoring association of the KHI, stated in his book on the ‘Changes in the Longing for Italy’, that the Italy “of which the fathers dreamed” no longer existed: in his opinion, the country had become “too close, too familiar and too related”, and furthermore that the “experience of the journey to Italy had been trivialized”. So, the longing for Italy became nothing more than a fantasy projection, now seen from a historical perspective. Nevertheless, regardless of how the phenomenon is viewed, the encounter with Italy undisputedly had an enormous impact on numerous artists of ‘the North’. Waetzoldt describes this by using an historical synopsis, concerning the period from the late Middle Ages to the 19th century, and subsumes that these “interpretations of Italy” can neither be omitted from the history of European art, nor can there be *the* “only correct one”. In other words, it was less about personal feelings than the need to scientifically classify the findings. If Waetzoldt's writing, or at least his epoch, represents something similar to a turning point in perspective, it also marks a milestone in the history of the KHI's library when the artistic interrelationships between Germany and Italy, however one-sided they might have been, were considered an art-historical phenomenon and thus a research topic. The titles collected to date comprise several thousand volumes, including numerous travelogues.

If, after these preliminary remarks, we now go on to consider Joseph Beuys's role in the library of the KHI, some further explanation is required. First of all, Beuys undoubtedly belongs to the group of German artists who dealt intensively with Italy. Although, he initially came to Italy as a soldier in the Wehrmacht in 1943/44, his letters, full of enthusiasm for “this wonderful country”, and especially for the landscape which he saw above all as a *cultural* landscape shaped by man, reveal that he was entirely rooted in the tradition of the aforementioned admiration for Italy. Far more significant, however, were his encounters with Italy from the 1960s onwards, when Beuys was already teaching as a professor of 'monumental sculpture' at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. At the same time, he became known in Italy not least for attracting, with his art, the

interest of key figures of *Arte Povera*. His friendships with the gallerist Lucio Amelio (Naples) and the patron Baron Durini, and his wife Lucrezia De Domizio (Bolognano), as well as with Bruno Corà and others, would ultimately bind Beuys closely to the south of Italy, both artistically and physically: as documented by numerous exhibitions, (political) actions, longer stays, and surviving anecdotes. Besides these already meaningful reasons to consider the artist as significant within the collection of the KHI, there are more. In fact, in the 1960s the library began to collect art-related literature, focused on Italy, dating from the 20th century to the present day. Therefore, the KHI library has witnessed the growth of an outstanding department, also in terms of quantity, which represents the basis for the corresponding research. Undoubtedly, it is not necessarily appropriate for post-war art to concentrate on one nation. Recent efforts to broaden the perspective can only be selective, nevertheless the successful acquisition of the private collection of literature on Beuys from the estate of Lucrezia De Domizio Durini (over 500 works) in 2017 was a decisive step. Like almost no other artist, Beuys connects different art movements, media, numerous personalities, and several nations. So far, the controversial discussions Beuys initiated concerning art and its relationship to politics and nature have not died, nor lost their relevance. Furthermore, they continuously challenge us to ask new questions and always from different perspectives. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to describe the Beuys Collection at the KHI as a kind of cornerstone, or at least a new focus, in the context of which we expect intensive and diverse research activity to occur. Another fundamental aspect lies in the artist's and his work's extraordinary iconic symbiosis with the medium of photography. By considering long-term research on photography in its historical, medial, and material contexts, anchored at the KHI, Beuys's case and the extensive photographic-documentary tradition in the literature will be of great interest.

With the selected works of Beuys displayed below, we aim to provide a broader public with an initial insight into this collection. The focus remains on books and book-like objects which stand out for their physicality and materiality. In Bärbel Reinhard and Elisa Perretti (Fondazione Studio Marangoni) we have found two professional photographers who, with great commitment and enthusiasm, took on the task of photographing book-objects, some of which are challenging and others stimulate the senses in an unconventional way. We would like to take this opportunity to offer them our sincere thanks for their contribution.