



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.5699/modelangrevi.111.3.0795](https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.111.3.0795)

*Document Version*

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Brady, M. (2016). 'Sich "bildsam" erhalten': The Complex ordinariness of culinary things in Beuys's Gib miR Honig and Handke's 'Warum Eine Küche?'. *Modern Language Review*, 111(3), 795-817.  
<https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.111.3.0795>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

‘SICH “BILDSAM” ERHALTEN...’: THE COMPLEX ORDINARINESS  
OF CULINARY THINGS IN BEUYS’S *GIB MIR HONIG*,  
AND HANDKE’S ‘*WARUM EINE KÜCHE?*’

Nahm dann eilig, was vom Abendessen  
An Kartoffeln mir noch übrig war.

La maman s’arrête d’éplucher une pomme de terre.

Le jour venait où une seule carotte originale serait grosse d’une révolution.<sup>1</sup>

1. Complex ordinariness: ‘There was a kitchen’<sup>2</sup>

This essay explores the complex ordinariness of culinary things, as things (*Dinge*), as images (*Stilleben*), and as language (*Prosa-Stilleben*).<sup>3</sup> The term ‘complex ordinariness’ is

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Die Stille’, in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Günter Mieth, 2 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1970), I, 47; Marguerite Duras, *Ah! Ernesto* (Boissy-St-Léger: Ruy-Vidal-Quist, 1971), [n.p.]; Émile Zola, *L’Œuvre*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le second Empire*, ed. by Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand, 5 vols ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1960-67), IV, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse* (London and New York: Frederick Warne, [1910]), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘Prosa-Stilleben’ is used by Wolfgang Max Faust in his discussion of Gertrude Stein and Cubism: *Bilder werden Worte: Zum Verhältnis von bildender Kunst und Literatur: Vom Kubismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Cologne: Dumont, 1987), p. 84.

inextricably associated with the extraordinary-ordinary buildings of the British architects and pioneers of New Brutalism Alison and Peter Smithson; their preferred expression for their architecture was 'without rhetoric'. In 1967 Alison Smithson published a whimsical essay in *Architectural Design* that extolled the virtues of the domestic spaces in Beatrix Potter's stories for children. By way of example she compared Le Corbusier's *Shodan House* (1956) in Ahmedabad with the house of Mrs Tittlemouse:

In Beatrix Potter's interiors, objects and utensils in daily use are conveniently located, often on individual hooks or nails, and are all the 'decoration' the 'simple' spaces need, or in fact can take. Those things in secondary use or needing long term storage are in special storage cubicles whose forms define the house space proper – as well as being pleasant spaces in themselves. Here then, we find bare necessities raised to a poetic level: the simple life, well done.<sup>4</sup>

Yet can an object, a utensil, a bare necessity be simply itself, 'without rhetoric', or is it always also a likeness for something else? Put another way, can things be detached from meaning? Can they be what Roger Cardinal has termed 'neither informational nor symbolic', or 'real-life objects free of ideas'?<sup>5</sup> In his 1950 lecture 'Das Ding' Heidegger asks '[w]ann und wie kommen Dinge als Dinge?'<sup>6</sup> 'Geht es um die Dinge selbst, wenigstens in erster

---

<sup>4</sup> Alison Smithson, 'Beatrix Potter's Places', in *Alison and Peter Smithson: From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, ed. by Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2004), pp. 212-15 (p. 213).

<sup>5</sup> Roger Cardinal, 'Pausing over Peripheral Detail', *Framework*, 30/31 (1986), 112-30 (pp. 122 and 126).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Das Ding', in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004), pp.

Lesart?’, Harun Farocki muses in his essay film *Stilleben* (1997).

As well as engaging with what is generally termed ‘thing theory’, this essay contends that, as Lesley Stern has put it, ‘words too can be things’.<sup>7</sup> Whilst Siegfried Kracauer famously asserted that it was cinema that could enact a ‘redemption of physical reality’, Francis Ponge claimed that poetry could strive to perform the ‘*rédemption des choses*’.<sup>8</sup> Taking as its starting point Hans Georg Gadamer’s contention that it is ‘*die Sprachlichkeit der Welterfahrung, die sich hinter dem Schein der Vorgängigkeit der Dinge vor ihrer sprachlichen Erscheinung verbirgt*’, this essay will examine the language of food in selected works of Joseph Beuys and Peter Handke.<sup>9</sup> In writing this language, Beuys and Handke are able to demonstrate what Gadamer calls ‘*eine letzte Treue*’ towards things.<sup>10</sup>

Although there is common ground in what follows with contemporary discourses of

---

157-75 (p. 174).

<sup>7</sup> Lesley Stern, ‘Paths that wind through the thicket of things’, in *Things*, ed. by Bill Brown (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), pp. 393-430 (p. 426).

<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Francis Ponge, *La rage de l’expression* in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bernard Beugnot and Gérard Farasse, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1999 and 2002), I, 406. A distinction between ‘objects’ and ‘things’ has been proposed, with reference to Heidegger, by Bill Brown and others: according to Brown, things are the ‘amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject’; ‘We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us’ (‘Thing Theory’, in *Things*, ed. by Brown, pp. 1-22 (pp. 5 and 4)).

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Natur der Sprache und die Sprache der Dinge* (1960), in *Wahrheit und Methode: Ergänzungen, Register* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), pp. 66-76 (p. 73).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

‘new materialism’, the position adopted here is closer to that of Peter Bürger’s critical theory. Theodor W. Adorno functions as a bridge linking the old and new materialisms – Jane Bennett, for example, engages with Adorno at some length in her book *Vibrant Matter* – and his reflections on the Old Testament *Bilderverbot* are of particular relevance to the argument in this essay.<sup>11</sup> Expanding on the assertion in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* that dialectics reveals ‘jedes Bild als Schrift’,<sup>12</sup> Adorno draws the conclusion towards the end of the second section of *Negative Dialektik* that materialism secularises the theological prohibition of images:

Die materialistische Sehnsucht, die Sache zu begreifen, will das Gegenteil: nur bilderlos wäre das volle Objekt zu denken. Solche Bilderlosigkeit konvergiert mit dem theologischen Bilderverbot. Der Materialismus säkularisierte es, indem er nicht gestattete, die Utopie positiv auszumalen; das ist der Gehalt seiner Negativität. Mit der Theologie kommt er dort überein, wo er am materialistischsten ist.<sup>13</sup>

In the works discussed in this essay, language is what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as ‘mehr als ein bloßes Zeichensystem’, a pliable, inscriptive material able to preserve ‘das Recht des Bildes in der treuen Durchführung seines Verbots’.<sup>14</sup>

2. ‘The simplest tasks are by no means the easiest’

---

<sup>11</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 13-17.

<sup>12</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 30.

In an interview with *Frauen und Film* in 1982 Danièle Huillet protested that you can tell when watching Delphine Seyrig peeling potatoes in Chantal Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* that this is not something she would normally do.<sup>15</sup> The riposte by Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub to Seyrig's allegedly fake potato-peeling was to stage a similar scene in their next film, *En rachâchant* (1982), with a non-professional actress who clearly does know how to peel potatoes properly (even if she accidentally drops one on this occasion). Moreover, *En rachâchant* alludes to the wider issue of representation, false gods and even the Biblical prohibition of images in the Second Commandment, the *Bilderverbot*, by a short musical quotation from Schönberg's opera *Moses und Aron*. The extract is from Act 2, Scene 4, in which Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and destroys Aron's Golden Calf with the words 'Vergeh, du Abbild des Unvermögens, das Grenzenlose in ein Bild zu fassen!'<sup>16</sup> In the light of this musical quotation it is clearly Seyrig, the inauthentic potato-peeler, who is the Golden Calf. In what follows *En rachâchant* playfully engages with the question of things and their meanings as Duras's eleven-year-old protagonist refuses to be taught anything he doesn't already know: when interrogated by his teacher he claims that a *vanitas*-like framed butterfly on the classroom wall is a crime and the teacher's globe could be a football, a potato – an addition by Straub-Huillet – or the earth.

This act of competitive potato-peeling prompts further questions: does an ineptly peeled

---

<sup>15</sup> Helge Heberle, Monika Funke Stern, 'Das Feuer im Innern des Berges: Ein Gespräch mit Danièle Huillet', *Frauen und Film*, 32 (1982), 4-12 (p. 11).

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Schönberg, *Moses und Aron: Oper in drei Akten*, ed. by Christian Martin Schmidt (Mainz and Vienna: B. Schott's Söhne and Universal Edition, 1977-78), II, 454-55 (bars 980-82).

potato in a film, or indeed elsewhere, tend towards fiction, towards misrepresentation or metaphor, whilst a convincingly peeled one remains documentary and true, ‘the thing (in) itself’? If so, is this distinction affected by the subsequent cooking of the potato? Béla Tarr’s film *The Turin Horse* (2011), revolves for two and a half hours around scenes of the cooking and eating of potatoes, prompting one reviewer to ponder:

Just because it is an allegory it does not necessarily follow that every image is part of a code that must be cracked. So I would caution against the symbolic interpretation[,] i.e. the potato represent[s] this, the horse represents that. [...] It isn’t what the horse or the potato represents that matters so much as the texture of the horse[’]s coat or the rippling of its muscles, the photographic reality of the act of peeling and eating a single steaming potato.<sup>17</sup>

As Georges Bernanos put it in his 1936 novel *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, filmed fifteen years later by that most ‘materialist’ of filmmakers, Robert Bresson: ‘Mais les besognes simples ne sont pas les plus faciles, au contraire’, which may of course go some way to exonerating Seyrig.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> D.J., ‘[Review] *The Turin Horse* (Béla Tarr)’,

<http://thecinemaunderground.wordpress.com/2011/05/16/review-the-turin-horse-bela-tarr/>.

Accessed 6 January 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Bernanos, *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, in *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 1047. Filmmakers have given us an array of different types of potato peeling since the 1920s: Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* gives us experimental potato-peeling, Straub-Huillet materialist (*En rachâchant*), Marguerite Duras existentialist (*Les Enfants*, 1985), Carl Theodor Dreyer Lutheran (*Master of the House*, 1925), Robert Bresson Catholic

### 3. The potato as a symbol for the non-symbolic

The potato is particularly germane in the present context for two reasons: first, it belongs to a minority of foodstuffs that are inedible, and thus nutritionally worthless, when raw.

Rendering a potato edible through cooking is a transformation analogous (but not equivalent) to the construction of meaning or significance. Second, for all its ubiquity, in kitchens and cinemas, the potato is not – unlike, say, strawberries or rosemary – easily read symbolically. This does not imply, as we shall see in Handke's culinary play *'Warum eine Küche?'*, that it can simply be separated from cultural and personal associations. To cite a further example: the potato's resistance to metaphorisation may explain its conspicuous presence in Gertrude Stein's experiment in realist (or Cubist) writing, *Tender Buttons*, a text in which signifiers are consistently denied their usual connotations through experimental grammar:

POTATOES.

Real potatoes cut in between.<sup>19</sup>

---

(*Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951), Bertolt Brecht Marxist (*Kuhle Wampe, oder: Wem gehört die Welt?*, 1932), Roberto Rossellini Neo-Realist (*Germania anno zero*, 1947), Gerhard Klein Socialist Realist (*Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser*, 1957), Luis Buñuel Surrealist (*Viridiana*, 1961), Agnès Varda auteurist-melancholic (*Sans toit ni loi*, 1985), Béla Tarr slow (*The Turin Horse*, 2011), Walt Disney comic (*Steamboat Willie*, 1928), Gustav Ehmck magical (*Der Räuber Hotzenplotz*, 1974), Werner Krüger ecological (*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2014), p. 51.



According to Peter Schwenger, words in *Tender Buttons* ‘emerge with a material intensity’, thereby undermining the ‘venerable opposition between word and thing’.<sup>20</sup> Schwenger’s affirmation of the ‘materiality of language’, however, prompts the primary question posed at the outset of this essay in reverse: not just whether a thing can be detached from (its) meaning, but also whether meaning can be detached from a thing.<sup>21</sup>

Peter Bürger suggests that this is indeed the case with the materials used by Beuys. The artist may assert that fat and felt represent warmth, energy, protection, and creativity, but to most people, Bürger claims, they look grey and dreary. In his essay on allegory and the everyday, Bürger concludes that Beuys’s sculptures and performances demonstrate a tendency to invest things with allegorical meanings which, for the audience at least, do not straightforwardly adhere to them.<sup>22</sup> This means that these things can emerge from the constraints (and dematerialisation) of the symbolic. Referring to the dichotomy between the affirmative significance afforded to everyday materials by Beuys himself and the negative perception of them as ugly, decayed, and essentially unappealing by the uninitiated, Bürger concludes:

Die allegorische Bedeutung, die Beuys den Stoffen zuspricht, wird überlagert von andern, die sich aus der unmittelbaren Wahrnehmung ergeben. [...] Die emotive Kraft

---

<sup>20</sup> Peter Schwenger, ‘Words and the Murder of the Thing’, in, *Things*, ed. by Brown, pp. 135-49 (pp. 141 and 148).

<sup>21</sup> Schwenger, ‘Words and the Murder of the Thing’, p. 139, quoting Maurice Blanchot’s essay ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort’.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Bürger, ‘Der Alltag, die Allegorie und die Avantgarde’, in *Postmoderne: Alltag, Allegorie und Avantgarde*, ed. by Christa and Peter Bürger (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1987), pp. 196-212.

des Bildes schließt nicht an die allegorische Intention des Autors an, sondern steht quer zu ihr. Beuys sagt uns etwas; aber das, was er sagt, deckt sich nicht mit dem, was er hat sagen wollen.<sup>23</sup>

In this divergence of authorial intention and spectatorial perception Bürger identifies a dynamic and productive interaction between materials and their meanings in which things are not lost in the process of being read, but subsist in a space clear of intention and interpretation. The things Beuys presents emerge unscathed from the conflict of interpretation because the incompatibility of readings reveals the contingency of meaning itself, the fact that it is conditional and disputable. They are, so-to-speak, both raw and cooked.

It could be argued that in Beuys's case this tendency can be traced back to his works from the 1940s, in which pressed botanical specimens are annotated. The drawing 'der Mensch 1 Mensch 2 Menschen' of 1945, for example, consists of a single brown leaf on light grey card with the title written in pencil below.<sup>24</sup> Here, in a very early work, the relationship between object, title, and meaning is clearly being explored. To cite a later example: in 1975 Beuys sent the British art historian and collector Caroline Tisdall a sprig of rosemary accompanied by a hand-written Shakespeare quotation: '(that's for remembrance)'.<sup>25</sup> The quotation is integral to the work as a whole, alluding to the herb's famous figurative meaning, but is detached from the botanical specimen by being written on a separate sheet of paper.

---

<sup>23</sup> Bürger, 'Der Alltag, die Allegorie und die Avantgarde', pp. 206 and 208.

<sup>24</sup> See Joseph Beuys, *Zeichnungen / Drawings*, ed. by C. A. H. Bastian (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2014), pp. 41 and 256.

<sup>25</sup> Illustrated in Caroline Tisdall, *Bits & Pieces: A Collection of Work by Joseph Beuys from 1957-1985: Assembled by Him for Caroline Tisdall* (Edinburgh: Demarco Gallery, 1987), p. 21.

The object is presented both ‘as is’ and *accompanied* by its symbolic meaning (in the form of a literary allusion). This separation of the thing from its symbolic – or, in Peter Bürger’s terminology, allegorical – meaning goes some way to explaining the seemingly surprising claim by Beuys in interview in 1969 that his work was not symbolic: ‘Ich kann den Symbolismus nicht anerkennen und ich arbeite auch nicht mit Symbolen.’<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. *gib mir Honig*

In 1973 Beuys produced a series of multiples in collaboration with the publisher and artist Klaus Staeck – postcards with simple, short texts in Beuys’s handwriting. The first of these simply bears the phrase ‘gib mir Honig’ in blue. Here the thing itself, the primary material, is a 15 x 10.5 cm off-white card bearing three words of text, centred, recto with a standard postcard design, title, attribution, medium (‘offset’), and date verso. Unlike the gift of rosemary to Caroline Tidall, a signifier (the word ‘Honig’), the secondary material so-to-speak, stands in for an absent referent; moreover the imperative address (‘gib mir’) duplicates the absence, implying that the author/enunciator – Beuys himself, as the attribution and signed versions suggest – also lacks, and demands, what is signified.

Honey and wax, and the bees that produce them, feature again and again in the drawings, sculptures, multiples, and installations of Beuys. Initially inspired by the centrality of bees to the thinking of Rudolf Steiner and by their use as a symbol for socialism – ‘nicht ein mechanistischer Staatssozialismus, sondern ein sozialistischer Organismus, in dem alle Teile wie in einem lebendigen Körper funktionieren’<sup>27</sup> – he deployed honey most famously in

---

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Dieter Koeplin, *Joseph Beuys in Basel*, 2 vols (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2003-06), II: *Zeichnungen und Holzschnitte bis 1954*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Joseph Beuys: Die Multiples*, ed. by Jörg Schellmann (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel,

the *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* for documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977, a contraption which pumped 150 kg of the substance around the Fridericianum building, transformed by Beuys for the duration of the exhibition into a forum for the Free International University. The pump and loop of transparent tubes through which the honey flowed functioned as an emblem of the democratic ‘social organism’ promulgated by the FIU as an expanded manifestation of Beuys’s ‘erweiterter Kunstbegriff’:

Dieser Begriff des Wärmehaften verbindet sich auch mit dem Begriff der Brüderlichkeit und des gegenseitigen Zusammenarbeitens, und deswegen haben Sozialisten die Biene genommen als Symbol, weil das im Bienenstock geschieht, die absolute Bereitschaft, sich selbst zurückzustellen und für andere etwas zu tun.<sup>28</sup>

In the much-analysed 1965 performance at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, *wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, Beuys coated his head with honey and gold leaf before explaining the works in his exhibition for over three hours to the eponymous hare. This action not only underscored the centrality of language to Beuys’s expanded concept of art – ‘Mein Weg ging durch die Sprache’ he claimed in his 1985 ‘Rede über das eigene Land’<sup>29</sup> – but more specifically the connection in Beuys’s iconography between honey and language,

---

1997), p. 448.

<sup>28</sup> Heiner Stachelhaus: *Joseph Beuys* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1991), p. 88. Beuys’s engagement with honey later extended – for example in the installation *Wirtschaftswerte* of 1980 – to include ‘Kunsthonig’, industrially produced mock or ‘poor man’s’ honey, better known as invert sugar syrup. The equation ‘Kunst + Honig’ is emblematic.

<sup>29</sup> *Reden über das eigene Land: Deutschland, 3*, ed. by Hans Meyer et al. (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1985), p. 135.

epitomised by the postcard *gib mir Honig*: ‘Mit Honig auf dem Kopf tue ich natürlich etwas, was mit Denken zu tun hat. Die menschliche Fähigkeit ist nicht, Honig abzugeben, sondern zu denken, Ideen abzugeben.’<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the postcard, unlike the installation and performance discussed in this section, the material thing itself, the honey, is disengaged from symbolic connotation through absence: it is signified but not physically present. Language (here as script) stands in for the thing itself. Beuys repeatedly emphasised the fact that script, especially hand-written text, can be a form of sculpture:

Denken ist für mich Plastik. [...] Der Gedanke greift nicht nur bis in die Sprache hinein, sondern der Gedanke wird unter Umständen zum Beispiel Schrift. Um Buchstaben zu machen, muß ich ja handeln, zumindest einen Füllhalter nehmen. Also Schreiben ist schon Plastik durch den Handlungscharakter.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. ‘Das Ding’

---

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys: Leben und Werk* (Cologne: Dumont, 1984), p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> Originally quoted in the catalogue to documenta 5 (Kassel, 1972). Here quoted from Faust, *Bilder werden Worte*, p. 204. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, “‘pure texts’ incorporate visuality quite literally the moment they are written or printed in visible form. [...] the medium of *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the “literal” (letters) and the “figurative” (pictures) on which it depends. Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the “imagetext” incarnate’: *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 95.

In 'Das Ding' Heidegger addresses the question of whether the new media facilitate or preclude imminence:

Allein das hastige Beseitigen aller Entfernungen bringt keine Nähe; denn Nähe besteht nicht im geringen Maß der Entfernung. Was streckenmäßig in der geringsten Entfernung zu uns steht, durch das Bild im Film, durch den Ton im Funk, kann uns fern bleiben.<sup>32</sup>

Heidegger goes on to enquire in his essay about what immanence, 'Nähe', is. His conclusion is that in doing away with 'Abstand', the modern media in fact deny access to the thing 'in itself'. It is only through the attention to distance that things can be understood as such:

Wann und wie kommen Dinge als Dinge? Sie kommen nicht *durch* die Machenschaft des Menschen. Sie kommen aber auch nicht *ohne* die Wachsamkeit der Sterblichen. Der erste Schritt zu solcher Wachsamkeit ist der Schritt zurück aus dem nur vorstellenden, d.h. erklärenden Denken in das andenkende Denken.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Beuys's postcard *gib mir Honig*, and others in the series such as *Laßt Blumen sprechen* (1973), 'Abstand' entails substituting the referent with language, whilst the mechanically-reproduced hand-written text, as an image on a postcard, functions, at least if delivered by post, as both a linguistic and a physical act of communication, and thus 'Nähe'. In effect there is a dialectic here of distance (the linguistic substitution) and proximity (the

---

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, 'Das Ding', p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

delivery of the card). The thing itself is present in its absence.

## 6. 'Weg mit den Hintergedanken'

For decades Peter Handke has been waging a battle against *Hintergedanken* comparable to Beuys's crusade against metaphorisation. Around 1980 he notes in *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*: '*Hintergedanken* und *Seitenblicke* hindern die Phantasie an der Verbindung der Einzelheiten'<sup>34</sup>, they are 'bildschwärzend, unrein'.<sup>35</sup> In *Der Bildverlust*, twenty or so years later, we read: 'Anspielungen und Hintergedanken sind das gerade Gegenteil zum Himmel',<sup>36</sup> and in the journal *Am Felsfenster morgens* we learn that in a story nothing should 'passieren oder vorfallen – alles geschieht nur, ereignet sich. Und es darf auch keine Seitenblicke und Hintergedanken geben.'<sup>37</sup> For Handke, everyday things – and the epiphanies they give rise to – can be embodied in language through inscription, the 'Ding-Bild-Schrift' method propounded in *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* and subsequently described in *Der Bildverlust* as 'aus der Zeichenlosigkeit hervortretende Schriftzeichen'.<sup>38</sup> For Handke, the act of contemplation – 'Anschauen und erscheinen lassen' as it is referred to in *Der Bildverlust*<sup>39</sup> – can translate everyday objects, things, into script: 'Je mehr ich mich vertiefe in einen

---

<sup>34</sup> Peter Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 215.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Handke, *Der Bildverlust oder Durch die Sierra de Gredos* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Handke, *Am Felsfenster morgens* (Munich: dtv, 2000), pp. 21-22.

<sup>38</sup> Handke, *Der Bildverlust*, p. 322.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 574.

Gegenstand, desto mehr nähert er sich dem Schriftzeichen.’<sup>40</sup> This process of translation is, I would suggest, analogous to Beuys’s substitution of text for the thing itself in *gib mir Honig*.

## 7 ‘die Litanei der Phänomene’: Literary and Visual Still Lives

Handke finds a precedent for his own ‘Bilderschrift’ in the prose of Adalbert Stifter, or, to be more precise, in his punctuation:

Die Dinge sind nicht umgeformt durch die Wörter, treten vielmehr mit deren Hilfe in Erscheinung, umrissen von durchsichtigen Wörtern, welche ihnen ihre Kindheitsform geben: eine hellichte und farbige Prozession zusammengehördender Dinge, rhythmisiert durch eine ‘Spezialität’ des Stifterischen Stils, die Weglassung des Komma in der Litanei der Phänomene. [...] Völliger Mangel der Hintergedanken bei Stifter. Keinerlei Doppeldeutigkeiten oder Seitenblicke.<sup>41</sup>

In his reflections on painting in *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, Handke identifies a comparable form of representation in the landscapes of Jacob van Ruisdael and Paul Cézanne. According to Harun Farocki, in the aforementioned film *Stilleben*, the Netherlandish still life of the seventeenth century, contemporaneous with Ruisdael, represents a post-reformation approach to the depiction of objects which strives to downplay allegorical meaning. In attempting to answer the question ‘Geht es um die Dinge selbst, wenigstens in

---

<sup>40</sup> Peter Handke, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 231.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Handke, ‘Einige Bemerkungen zu Stifter’, in *Meine Ortstafeln – Meine Zeittafeln – Essays 1967-2007* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), pp. 111-13 (pp. 111 and 112).



erster Lesart?’ Farocki identifies the tendency of objects to accrue symbolic meaning, at least retrospectively:

Die Malerei, zuerst in Flandern und den Niederlanden, sie wendet sich von den religiösen Motiven ab, um die hohen Dinge nicht herabzusetzen. Die Malerei will das Hohe nicht herabsetzen und kann kaum vermeiden, dabei das Gewöhnliche zu erhöhen. [...] Der Abbildungskunst fällt es schwer den allegorischen oder symbolischen Ausdruck zu vermeiden oder solche Deutung. Noch nach Jahrhunderten werden die Gegenstände auf den Bildern angeschaut, als wären sie die Chiffren einer Geheimschrift. Als wären sie die Chiffren eines verdeckten Code, eines Code also, der nicht als solcher erkannt werden will und dessen Zeichen deshalb als Nicht-Zeichen erscheinen sollen. Ein Trinkgefäß als Trinkgefäß, ein Brot als Brot.<sup>42</sup>

Writing about *Stilleben*, Volker Pantenburg concludes that Farocki’s film, which juxtaposes commentary on seventeenth century still lives with sequences shot in the studios of contemporary advertising photographers, demonstrates the extent to which ‘noch die gegenständlichste Darstellung [...] ihre Allegorisierung durch den Interpreten nicht verhindern [kann]’.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of Heidegger’s discussion of ‘new’ media it is significant that it is not just nineteenth-century realist fiction and landscape and still-life painting that for Handke yield epiphanies of the everyday and the domestic: the materialist cinema of Straub-Huillet has a similar effect.

---

<sup>42</sup> *Stilleben*, dir. by Harun Farocki (1997).

<sup>43</sup> Volker Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie: Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006), p. 112.

## 8. The Redemption of Physical Reality

Handke first wrote of his admiration for Straub-Huillet in 1968, around the time of his first collaboration with Wim Wenders (*3 amerikanische LPs*, 1969) and before he directed his first film, *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse* (1971). He claims that Straub-Huillet's *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968) demonstrated 'die erstaunliche Möglichkeit des Films [...], genaueste und strengste Kalkulation der Einstellungen mit genauester und strengster Anmut zu verbinden'.<sup>44</sup> Having de-familiarised film syntax, Straub-Huillet re-construct film as both self-reflexive and phenomenologically exact, as a redemption of physical reality. The semiotic exactitude and deconstruction of film language in Straub-Huillet's *Chronik* clearly appealed to Handke at a time when he was producing his most linguistically experimental work, the *Sprechstücke*, *Deutsche Gedichte*, and the novel *Der Hausierer* of the late 1960s, and when he was experimenting for the first time with filmmaking. The admiration, however, outlived that early phase of his output.

On 15 January 1999 he sent a postcard to Straub and Huillet extolling their recent film, *Sicilia!* (1999). It consists of an inventory of his favourite images and sounds from the film:

la marche à pied, le manger, les aliments [...], le pain, le vin, le melon d'hiver [...]:  
vous avez découvert, montré et fait exploser dans mon cœur le cinéma, le film,  
comme pour la première fois.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Peter Handke, 'Theater und Film: Das Elend des Vergleichens', in *Prosa Gedichte Theaterstücke Hörspiel Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), pp. 314-26 (p. 321).

<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.unifrance.org/film/15957/sicilia>. Accessed 8 January 2016.

As in his remarks on *Chronik*, it is the framing of everyday things which excites him; ‘es gibt demnach immer noch Filme, wie einst die von Dreyer, von Bresson, welche laufen (und laufen), ohne die inzwischen vampirisch gewordene Magie’, films which envision in the viewer a ‘verjüngte Welt’.<sup>46</sup>

In admiring the authenticity of Straub-Huillet’s method – what Alexander Kluge defined as its ‘strenge, analytische Durchforschung nach Echtheit, Stimmigkeit, Wahrhaftigkeit’<sup>47</sup> – and in attempting to emulate it in his own films and texts, Handke reads their redemption of everyday physical reality entirely against the political grain, stripping it of all ideological *Hintergedanken*: ‘Ich brauche zu meiner Vision die Verpflichtung der Alltäglichkeit’ Handke writes in his journal, ‘Es ist das Alltägliche, das ich als die neue Welt sehe’ claims the mushroom collecting protagonist of the novel *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*: ‘In diesem ständigen Hin und Her ging meine Sehnsucht nur noch auf das Kleinste, das Gewöhnlichste, den Alltag’.<sup>48</sup> For Handke, Straub and Huillet’s method redeems materials, but it does not politicise or indeed metaphorise them.

## 9. An Excursus on Milk and Wholesome Foodstuffs

In Robert Bresson’s film *L’Argent* (1983), based on Tolstoy’s story ‘The Forged Coupon’, a process of de-symbolisation takes place. In the final scenes of the film, in which an old

---

<sup>46</sup> Peter Handke, ‘Kinonacht, Kintiernacht: Vom Antivampirino des Paares Straub/Huillet, aus Anlaß des Films *Antigone*’, in *Meine Ortstafeln*, pp. 555-63 (p. 563).

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Kluge, *Bestandsaufnahme: Utopie Film: Zwanzig Jahre neuer deutscher Film / Mitte 1983* (Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 1983), p. 582.

<sup>48</sup> Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*, p. 120; Peter Handke, *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht* (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 36 and 389.

woman, who has given the murderer-protagonist Yvon shelter, shares food and drink with him, a ritual of giving and receiving marks the arrival of what Bresson terms ‘the forces of Good’,<sup>49</sup> heralded by a substitution of monetary transaction, which is what caused the bloodshed, by the bestowing of material nourishment: a bowl of coffee proffered by the old woman, hazelnuts picked and shared by Yvon. Face, or symbolic, value gives way to non-alienated, substantial value. The wholesome ‘gifts’ exchanged by the couple – the coffee and hazelnuts – are not essentially symbolic. For example, unlike Haneke, Tarkovsky and others, Bresson avoids introducing milk at moments of high dramatic tension. Eschewing overt symbolism is a salient characteristic of materialist realism common to Bresson, Dreyer, and Straub/Huillet. It is also the principle that unites the works of Beuys and Handke discussed in this essay.

A scene in Michael Haneke’s *Benny’s Video* (1992), which is explicitly a homage to Bresson’s *L’Argent*, demonstrates the difference between ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’ sustenance, real things and metaphors. Haneke’s meditation on money and spectacle in *Benny’s Video* is firmly rooted in a symbolic mode which owes as great a debt to German Romanticism – not least the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich – as Bresson does to the late-nineteenth-century realist novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

In his film, Haneke provides the viewer with offers of ‘Heil und Erlösung’, however they are more straightforwardly symbolic than those of Bresson.<sup>50</sup> Shortly after committing a brutal and unpremeditated murder, the film’s teenage protagonist, Benny, spills milk onto a jet black work surface and wipes it away with a cloth. The result is a striking and visually beautiful image, but one in which the objects are more symbolic than material: spilt milk is not, after all, of itself nourishing.

---

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Brian Baxter, ‘L’Argent’, *Films and Filming*, 347 (1983), 27-28 (p. 27).

<sup>50</sup> Haneke in an interview with the present author (ICA Video, 1993).

## 10. Film and the Sacred

What connects Bresson and Haneke's depiction of everyday foodstuffs, however, is a tendency to present things as sacred through the use of close-ups. Etymologically the term 'sacred', – from the Latin *sacrum* meaning both a sacred thing or place, such as a sanctuary, and an act of religious observance – implies not simply that a thing is holy, but also that it is separate or apart from other things. Separation is a key concept in understanding the way a film camera frames its subjects, most obviously in the close-up. It is also something which language makes possible, as evident in Beuys's text pieces, including the postcard *gib mir Honig*, in the 'litany of phenomena' in Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and in Handke's play discussed below.

The origins of cinematic separation through close-ups lie not only in the optical technology of the cinematic apparatus, but also in a tradition which includes the still-life (*nature morte*) and the *vanitas* genre of painting, where it tends to intimate mortality and transience through the depiction of everyday things. According to Kracauer, the film camera is uniquely able to 'redeem reality':

Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world [...]. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 300.

The works of Beuys and Handke discussed in this essay demonstrate that this process of redemption is not the sole prerogative of the technology of cinema, but can also be identified in what could be termed the ‘matterist documentation’ of Beuys and Handke, not least in their shared conception of language as both concrete and revelatory.

11. ‘...: Stilleben, vibrierende –’

In his short play *‘Warum eine Küche?’* (2000), Handke investigates food and food preparation as physical and spiritual nourishment, as repetition, and as memory. The texts were written at the end of the year in which his ecstatic postcard about the portrayal of foodstuffs in *Sicilia!* was posted to Straub and Huillet, which I suggest is no coincidence. Largely ignored by Handke scholarship, it is, perhaps, his most concerted effort to identify the interplay between things and their meanings, ‘das Ding an sich’ and metaphor, the raw ingredient and the ‘art of cooking’. It is divided into nine short blocks of text: two introductory prose pieces, two songs in verse, two prose stories, two litanies, and a concluding section in verse entitled ‘Lied-Litanei-Erzählung-Monolog-Dialog etc. 3’. In the edition published by *Korrespondenzen* the play appears first in German and then in the author’s own French translation. The cover bears a single line of text, ‘unter Verwendung einer Handschrift des Autors’,<sup>52</sup> which reads ‘je réalise que je cherche là quelque chose, mais je ne sais pas quoi’.

This indexical text includes a full inventory of Handke’s well-known obsessions, from language, children, and liminal spaces through to the Balkan conflict. It also includes all his favourite culinary ingredients: mushrooms, oil, herbs and spices, potatoes, and fruit. One of

---

<sup>52</sup> Peter Handke, *‘Warum eine Küche?’* (Wien: *Korrespondenzen*, 2003), p. 4. Further references to this volume are given in the body of the text as *WeK?* with page number.

these – Sicilian capers (*WeK?*, p. 24) – is also mentioned in the postcard to Straub-Huillet. In short, the texts are a set of variations, in poetry and prose, on the theme of ‘das beiläufig Metaphysische, in der Alltäglichkeit’ – a phrase which can also serve as a neat definition of the material, phenomenological cinema of Straub-Huillet.<sup>53</sup>

The unifying physical space here is, obviously, the kitchen itself, with a table at its centre, which became the sole prop in the realisation of the piece by the Théâtre Tattoo under Mladan Materić in 2001. The kitchen is the equivalent, in the domestic sphere, of the town square through which all life passes in Handke’s wordless 1992 play *Die Stunde da wir nichts voneinander wußten*. According to Marguerite Duras, in *La vie matérielle*, it is ‘dans la cuisine’ that everybody ‘se retrouvent’.<sup>54</sup> An alternative creative space to the writer’s study, which we have come to associate with the union of domesticity and creativity in Handke’s texts and films since the late 70s, the kitchen is a *locus vivendi* of memory, inscription, language acquisition, and language itself. It is therefore a place of stillness, of things, but also of movement and transition, a ‘Zwischenraum, eine Passage, ein Ort zum Durchatmen’ (*WeK?*, p. 18). As Handke notes in his ‘erste Bruchstücke’ to the play:

Die großen Augenblicke der Küche, wenn da niemand ist – nichts als die Dinge, die Früchte, das Gemüse, das Licht, das da durchscheint, die wechselnden Farben, die heranwachsenden Vogelrufe, die bombadierenden Flugzeuge ...: Stilleben, vibrierende

---

<sup>53</sup> Peter Handke, *Phantasien der Wiederholung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> Marguerite Duras, *La vie matérielle* (Paris: P.O.L., 1987), p. 67. This book contains a transcription of Duras’s ‘liste des produits qu’il fallait toujours avoir à la maison’ (pp. 56-57), which not only includes potatoes but also reads like a precursor to Handke’s play. The original hand-written list is reproduced in Marguerite Duras, *La Cuisine de Marguerite* (Paris: Benoît Jacob, 1999), p. 65.

– als der Rhythmus für das Küchen-Spektakel; nach jedem Vorkommnis oder Ereignis.

(*WeK?*, p. 9)

Küche und Tod / Küche und Geburt / Küche und Schreiben (Schrift, Schriftzeug, *galam* arab.); Schreibstifte zwischen totem Hasen, Kraut, Äpfeln, und eine Zigeunertrompete.

(*WeK?*, p. 10)

The simplest answer to the question posed by the play's title is that the kitchen is a place without *Hintergedanken* and *Seitenblicke*. As was the case with the use of honey in Beuys's sculptures, installations, and multiples, language in Handke's kitchen is associated directly with food ('Küche und Schreiben') and nourishment.

12. 'Ihr habt die Welt immer nur interpretiert und verändert; aber es kommt darauf an, sie zu *beschreiben*'<sup>55</sup>

Handke's play is not only emphatically descriptive, but also distinctly Stifterian, at least in the terms Handke himself used to describe Stifter's style that I have already quoted: a 'Litanei der Phänomene'. According to Annegret Pelz it celebrates both 'die reine Anwesenheit sinnlicher Dinge' and the 'uncodierte Anspielungsreichtum der Küche'.<sup>56</sup>

Handke's kitchen, she contends:

---

<sup>55</sup> Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*, p. 287.

<sup>56</sup> Annegret Pelz, 'Was sich auf der Tischfläche zeigt. Handke als Szenograph', in *Peter Handke: Poesie der Ränder*, ed. by Klaus Amann, Fabjan Hafner and Karl Wagner (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 2006), pp. 21-34 (p. 25).



gewährt individuelle Erinnerungen an stumme, vorsprachliche Gesten und Bilder und an ein kindliches Sprechen, das die Anschauung vor dem Begriff lernt – sie ist der Raum, in dem sich das Sprechen und die Wahrnehmung den Dingen gegenüber erkenntlich zeigt.<sup>57</sup>

Handke's reference to the genre of the still-life painting is significant in this context. In the Netherlands, towards the end of the seventeenth century, still lives become increasingly difficult to decode; as Gert von der Osten puts it in a short essay on Eduard Manet's late painting *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum): 'So bleibt ferner die allgemeine Ungewißheit darüber, was denn überhaupt die *Nature Morte*, das künstlerische Stilleben will und soll'.<sup>58</sup> In the small, virtually life-size works of Adriaen Coorte, for example (also mentioned by von der Osten), *vanitas* iconography disappears, the pictures lose their explicit religious meaning, and are too small to speak straightforwardly of wealth and status. As Kenneth Bendiner has put it, describing the little painting by Coorte in the Rijksmuseum of a bunch of asparagus, '[r]arely has the significance of the insignificant been so adeptly suggested'.<sup>59</sup> Verisimilitude and the skill to achieve it have become ends in themselves.

A particularly striking example of Coorte's single-object still-lives is his *Still Life with Hazelnuts* of 1696 (Ashmolean, Oxford). Like the walnuts and chestnuts in similarly minimalist compositions of Coorte, these nuts are life-size and arranged on a ledge (which

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid..

<sup>58</sup> Gert von der Osten in *Zur Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts: 24 Bildwerke*, ed. by Götz Czymmek (Cologne: Wallraff-Richartz-Museum, 1980), p. 71.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Bendiner, *Food in Painting: From the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Reaktion, 2004), p. 54.

also bears the artist's signature and the date). There is also a single leaf alongside the seven nuts. 'Was hat es damit auf sich, daß die unbelebten Dinge zur Hauptsache der Bilder werden?', Farocki asks in *Stilleben*; he argues, as we have seen, that Netherlandish still-lives turned from religious subjects to avoid demeaning the divine, but in the process could not avoid exalting the ordinary. What is striking about this painting is that, unlike the precious bundles of asparagus for which Coorte is better known, and the rich arrangements of exotic fruit, game, and flowers typical of the opulent still-lives of the period, its subject is mundane, common, and available at little or no cost. A single blemish (a dark hole) on one of the nuts may be a distant echo of the *vanitas*, but there is little else to suggest a metaphorical reading.

Whilst foodstuffs, both mundane and precious, repeatedly trigger memories of childhood, war, travel, and so on in 'Warum eine Küche?', Handke is more concerned to discover a mimetic language for describing the things, objects, processes, and products of the kitchen, rather as the mycological thingumajigs, the mushrooms, in his fairy-tale *Lucie im Wald mit den Dingsda*, published in the previous year, become embodied in language through inscription, colonizing it transformatively:

'Liebe, reich mir den Sankt-Georgs-Ritterling – ich meine, das Salz – und dort den Juanito de San Juan und den Boletus edulis – will sagen, das Olivenöl und die Kapern. [...] Wie geht es dir, meine Krause Glucke, mein Eichhase, mein Petschurka, mein Hallimasch, mein Amethystling, meine Goldstielige Cantarella, mein Maronenröhrling, meine Rotkappe?'

'Ich heiße Lucie, lieber Vater', wollte sie sagen. Aber sie schwieg.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Peter Handke, *Lucie im Wald mit den Dingsda* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 87-88. A strikingly similar list of names appears in Handke's *Versuch über den Pilznarren* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2013), pp. 145-46, in which hazelnuts and potatoes also feature

13. 'Das Abenteuer Alltäglichkeit': 'Potatoe. Loaves.'<sup>61</sup>

In 'Warum eine Küche?' the colonisation of language by the objects of discourse results in predominantly anti-metaphorical utterances that alternate between naming, tautology, and equivalence:

– Der zerstäubte Safran, gelb wie nur zerstäubter Safran. (*WeK?*, p. 17)

Wenn man die Kartoffeln schält, / ist das Geräusch wie jenes / beim Kämmen des  
Haares eines Kindes. [...] / Wenn man das Brot schneidet, / gibt das manchmal genau  
das Geräusch, / wie wenn man einem Kind in seinen Mantel hilft. (*WeK?*, p. 28-9)

In Werner Krüger's documentary *Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler* (1979) Beuys peels vegetables and explains that this act is a creative one; he had stated in interview in 1969, 'Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.'<sup>62</sup> According to Beuys's friend and collector Hans van der Grinten, he also put it this way: 'Wenn eine Frau, die Kartoffeln schält, sich dabei bewusst ist, dass sie arbeitet wie ein Bildhauer, dann ist die Kartoffel, die sie schält, eine Plastik.'<sup>63</sup> Beuys's potato-peeling brings us back to the problem

---

(p. 202).

<sup>61</sup> Stein, *Tender Buttons*, p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1969. Quoted in *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. by Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), p. 87.

<sup>63</sup> See: <http://www.semantic-error.de/byfang/lebensmittel/kunze.htm> (accessed 21 December

with which this article began: can a thing, such as a potato, be just a thing, or is it always a metaphor? When and how does a potato become a sculpture (and thus a work of art)? How does a thing become script, become inscribed?

In defining film as ‘ein hervorragendes Instrument materialistischer Darstellung’ in ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, Walter Benjamin notes that it is ‘das erste Kunstmittel, das in der Lage ist zu zeigen, wie die Materie dem Menschen mitspielt’.<sup>64</sup> Widely divergent attempts by translators to render Benjamin’s phrase ‘wie die Materie dem Menschen mitspielt’ highlight a conundrum: renderings range from the neutral (‘plays along with’) to the negative (‘mistreats’, ‘misleads’, ‘plays tricks on’). The reciprocal relationship between material (or matter) and language – what Maurizia Boscagli calls the ‘impure traffic between subject and object’<sup>65</sup> – is central to the works of Beuys and Handke discussed in this essay. Moreover, this ‘sensory fullness in which the subject confronts the unmediated, non-symbolic order of the material Real’, as Roger Cardinal defines it, is the explicit subject of a 1980 print by Beuys entitled *Materie*.<sup>66</sup>

This image, part of the cycle *Schwurhand*, consists of a golden blot of stain (‘Beize’)

---

2015). Peter Bürger notes that faced with state-of-the-art artists’ studios in Minneapolis, Beuys suggested the artists should first be offered a potato-peeler and a piece of wood to understand how materials really work: ‘Die Avantgarde, das Material und der Tod: Annäherungen an Joseph Beuys’, in *Joseph Beuys: Die Materialien und ihre Botschaft*, ed. by Barbara Strieder (Kleve: Stiftung Museum Schloss Moyland, 2007), pp. 13-19 (p. 16).

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, in Benjamin, *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 136-69 (p. 153).

<sup>65</sup> Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 271.

<sup>66</sup> Cardinal, ‘Pausing over Peripheral Detail’, p. 127.

with the word 'Materie' in pencil at its centre (reproduced in etching, aquatint, and lithography). The stain is evidently 'matter', as is the paper on which it is printed, and the graphite of the lettering. Beuys had already used the stain and lettering in 1972 as part of the work of the recently-founded Organisation für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung, and the same image (darkish blood-red unlike the later version) appeared on a sheet of printed letter paper for the organisation. As Benjamin Dodenhoff notes, 'the result was that, while the form could no longer be sent as a letter, it was turned into a work of art'.<sup>67</sup> The 1980 version not only differs in colour, but also has a vestige of white material on its surface, as if it bears a trace of its former incarnation as letter paper (the handwritten text, however, is identical). The 1980 version of *Materie* also exists as a postcard, sometimes signed, which, as was the case with *gib mir Honig*, introduces the communicative component eliminated, at least according to Dodenhoff, in the 1972 version.

The signifier here literally overlays what is presumably the referent, the stain, but both remain productively imprecise – the colour change from red (1972) to gold (1980) suggests that the substance is not fixed (or has undergone a transformation), whilst the word 'Materie' is equally, if differently imprecise: it may refer to the stain, as suggested above, but it can also be read as an imprecise or unspecific designation, or indeed as referring to the print/postcard itself. The complexity of the relationship between text and image here supports W. J. T. Mitchell's claim that 'visual representations [...] are already immanent in the words, in the fabric of description, narrative "vision", represented objects and places, metaphor, formal arrangements and distinctions of textual functions, even in typography, paper,

---

<sup>67</sup> Benjamin Dodenhoff, 'vor dem Aufbruch aus Lager 1', in *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes*, ed. by Marion Ackermann and Isabelle Malz (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2010), pp. 259-60 (p. 259).

binding'.<sup>68</sup> As Mitchell claims and Beuys's *Materie* appears to demonstrate, it may be 'difficult to keep visuality out', but it is possible to keep words and images distinct, or at least retain a dialectical friction between them.<sup>69</sup>

#### 14. The Extraordinary Ordinary: Saffron and Gold

Perhaps unexpectedly, at least given the general (but mistaken) association of the everyday with the mundane and ordinary, both Beuys and Handke frequently juxtapose common, inexpensive things (such as potatoes) with more precious and scarce ones: saffron and other delicacies in Handke's play, gold in numerous works by Beuys, including *wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, a number of drawings, and the late installation *Palazzo Regale* (1985). According to Beuys – somewhat paradoxically in the light of his remarks on symbolism quoted above – *Palazzo Regale* is a work in which 'die symbolische Komponente sehr stark [ist]';<sup>70</sup> again, as with the visually allied material honey, he related this substance to cerebral activity and, consequently, also to language: 'Gold and honey indicate a transformation of the head, and therefore, naturally and logically, the brain and our understanding of thought, consciousness.'<sup>71</sup> In these works of Beuys the notion of the ordinary is made complex by its association with materials that are rare and valuable. Interestingly, the architect Peter Smithson also alludes to this paradox, noting that there is no compelling reason why the rough poetry of Brutalism should be associated with austere or

---

<sup>68</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid..

<sup>70</sup> Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 202. Saffron also appears in Beuys's 1967 installation *Barraque D'dull Odde*.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes*, p. 310.

impoverished materials:

Brutalism simply means [...]: The quality of a plaster ceiling is entirely different from a concrete ceiling, in every way. [...] And by analogy: there is a way of handling gold in Brutalist manner and it does not mean rough and cheap, it means: what is its raw quality?<sup>72</sup>

Again we return to the distinction between the raw and the cooked. Handke's linguistic experiments in *'Warum eine Küche?'* attempt to find a culinary, everyday language to represent food and the space it occupies. Whilst Heidegger concluded in *'Das Ding'* that *'Nur was aus Welt gering wird einmal Ding'*<sup>73</sup> – a phrase Hans-Georg Gadamer deemed *'nicht einmal ins Deutsche übersetzbar'*,<sup>74</sup> but which suggests that things are both of and distinct from their primary materiality – Handke's play proposes that language can only signify if it is phenomenologically exact: only an inscription of food can represent food. In *'Warum eine Küche?'* he achieves this by constructing the play as – or rather deconstructing it into – an arrangement of static, fragmentary, disjointed passages of narrative, monolog, dialogue, and verse, and by revisiting the repetitive, metrical structures of his early *Sprechstücke* and poems. The result is a domestic still life in language; concrete poetry that is complexly ordinary and free of pictography, figuration, and the calligraphic.

There is a clear parallel here to Beuys's *gib mir Honig*. A work of the same name (c.

---

<sup>72</sup> Peter Smithson and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Smithson Time: A Dialogue* (Cologne: Walther König, 2004), pp. 17-18.

<sup>73</sup> Heidegger, *'Das Ding'*, p. 175.

<sup>74</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *'Heideggers Wege: Studien zum Spätwerk'* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), p. 115.

1979) consists of a jar of honey with the same phrase on the label,<sup>75</sup> a multiple, also from 1979, consists of an empty metal honey container again bearing the same phrase, and the multiple *Wirtschaftswert Schleuderhonig*, of the same year, is a jar of honey stamped with a cross and labelled by hand '1 Wirtschaftswert', but without any reference to the contents. The postcard, however, consists only of the hand-written text. Together with the golden-brown semi-transparent PVC postcard multiple of 1972 entitled *Honey is Flowing*, lithographically printed with the hand-written, English-language text 'honey is flowing in all directions', these pieces form a corpus of closely-related works engaging with the complex relationship between things, signs, and language. One uses both the material and its name; one uses the material (honey), and indicates its potential for secondary, economic value (*Wirtschaftswert*), but does not label it; one represents it through a visually analogous but entirely unrelated material (the PVC postcard *Honey is Flowing*) and names it; one provides a receptacle in anticipation of collecting the material (the *gib mir Honig* multiple of 1979); and the postcard which has been one of the subjects of this essay consists of a signifier in the form of an imperative indicating material absence, and is thus literally and figuratively free of both referent and representation.

#### 15. Beuys, Goethe, and the ginkgo biloba

Mitchell may be right to claim that 'all media are mixed media',<sup>76</sup> but both Handke and Beuys are determined to retain the material and creative potential of the utmost separation, or, in Beuysian terminology, 'division' of text and image. There is one notable emblem of

---

<sup>75</sup> Norman Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys & Jörg Immendorff: Art Belongs to the People!* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2014), pp. 118-19.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 95.



division – and simultaneously of its antithesis, unity – that appears in the work of both Beuys and Handke: the ginkgo leaf. In *Versuch über den geglückten Tag* Handke offers paradigmatic examples of ‘lichtvolle Augenblicke’ including ‘Der Geruch der Bleistifte. Das Ginkgoblatt auf dem Felsblock im Garten des “Cinema La Pagode”’ and a single, long-stemmed ginkgo leaf also appears in his novel *Die Abwesenheit*.<sup>77</sup> The ginkgo appears both early and late in Beuys’s career, as leaf and tree respectively. As a student of Ewald Mataré he began to experiment with amalgamating motifs from East and West, which included imitating Japanese woodblocks from around 1949. In that year he carved a wood relief of a ginkgo leaf and its name, which was subsequently cast in bronze. Even in this early student work we can see Beuys engaging in a sophisticated formal exercise, setting material off against language. There is a tension between the block’s repetitive geometrical border and the curvilinear, organic form of the leaf which appears to overlay it to the right and bottom. The title, in the less common spelling ‘gingko’, seems to hover in an uncertain space, also overlaying the border (this time to the left) but also uncomfortably straddling the stem, which appears to have extended the gap between the ‘i’ and the ‘n’. It is as if the leaf has slipped to the right and the title to the left in order to interrupt the rectilinear patterning of the decorative frame. The script itself, reminiscent of the ecclesiastical lettering on Beuys’s contemporaneous Christian statuary, is somehow at odds with this most recognisably eastern of leaves – here perhaps one might discern an echo of the west-east dichotomy of Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan*, the collection containing the famous ‘Ginkgo biloba’ poem. The semiotic knottiness is heightened by the enigmatic form itself. In its entirety Beuys’s ginkgo relief resembles a carved block for a woodcut, perhaps a book illustration, especially in the

---

<sup>77</sup> Peter Handke, *Versuch über den geglückten Tag* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 56. Handke’s text also features a ‘still life’ of peeled potatoes on a kitchen window sill (p. 76). Peter Handke, *Die Abwesenheit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 64.

light of his contemporaneous pattern blocks based on oriental models. However this impression is undermined by the lettering, which would, of course, appear reversed if printed. The fact that Beuys reworked the piece as a bronze multiple also belies this interpretation. The bronze version loses the nice paradox of a likeness of part of a tree rendered in its own material – wood.

## 16. *7000 Eichen*

The ginkgo reappears at the very end of Beuys's career, in his most substantial late work, the huge social and ecological sculpture *7000 Eichen*, the *Verwaldung* of Kassel which was begun at documenta 7 in 1982 and completed after his death at documenta 8 in 1987, during which the 7000th tree was ceremonially planted. Despite the project's title (and despite the fact that oaks are traditionally planted in sevens) the project in fact aimed to achieve a degree of bio-diversity, and fifteen other species were added to the signature oaks. In interview Beuys spelled out the criteria according to which the trees were selected:

Bäume, die mit gewissen urbanen Situationen auf jeden Fall fertig werden, wie z.B. der Ginkgo, der ein weiterlebendes Fossil ist, das alle – sagen wir mal – Eiszeiten, alle Vulkanausbrüche, alles, was erdgeschichtlich an Katastrophen über die Natur hinweggegangen ist von der Kreidezeit bis heute, überlebt hat, der mit allem fertig wird. Das ist der Ginkgo. Wir pflanzen ihn auch!<sup>78</sup>

*7000 Eichen* also takes us back once again to the question of language and to honey. To fund

---

<sup>78</sup> *7000 Eichen Joseph Beuys*, ed. by Fernando Groener, Rose-Maria Kandler (Cologne: Walther Koenig, 1987), p. 105.

the project Beuys controversially melted down a replica crown of Ivan the Terrible, remoulding it as a gold hare (*Hase mit Sonne / Hase mit Zubehör*, 1982) to signify a synthesis of ideas (represented by both gold and honey) and spiritual rejuvenation (represented by the hare). The same motif appears in various multiples from 1982, including *Steinhase*, a photograph of a golden hare painted onto one of the basalt blocks erected next to each of the 7,000 trees.<sup>79</sup> Here too, however, we find a division of Beuys's ecological concept into both visual and linguistic signs: as well as the work itself (consisting of trees and basalt blocks) and related multiples (bearing golden hares), the project also exists as a linguistic construction, one which became almost as famous as the project itself: 'Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung'. Perhaps unsurprisingly this maxim also appeared in the form of a postcard.

There is a striking precedent for the division of words and things in the original manuscript of Goethe's poem 'Ginkgo biloba' itself, sent to Marianne von Willemer on 27 September 1815. Here, rather in the manner of Beuys's own works incorporating botanical specimens (not least 'der Mensch 1 Mensch 2 Menschen' referred to above), the two verses are supplemented by a pair of intertwined ginkgo leaves, taped to the bottom of the sheet. The application of real ginkgo leaves to the manuscript illustrates and exemplifies the claim in the poem that the leaf and, by analogy the poet himself, is 'Eins und doppelt'. This paradox of unity and duality, of undividedness and division, is not only central to the *West-östlicher Divan*, and indeed to Goethe's thinking more generally, but is also key to understanding both

---

<sup>79</sup> The print *Junger Hase* from the sequence *Zirkulationszeit*, published by Grafos to help fund the project, also shows a small golden hare. The fact that it is based on a pencil and fat drawing from 1953 demonstrates that the iconography for the *7000 Eichen* project stretches back to the early years of Beuys's career. See *Joseph Beuys: Die Multiples*, p. 483 and *Joseph Beuys: Die späte Druckgraphik*, ed. by Grete and Barbara Bergdolt (Wiesloch: Kunstkreis südliche Bergstraße, 1986).

the relationship between language and things in the works of Beuys and the interplay of text, drawing, photography, and film in those of Peter Handke.

17. 'Von wegen geringer Dinge'<sup>80</sup>

Gadamer's response to Heidegger's gnomic statement quoted above ('Nur was aus Welt gering wird einmal Ding') was a comparably poetic, ecological metaphor: 'Die Sprache aber ist wie ein Acker, auf dem das Verschiedenste aufgehen kann'.<sup>81</sup> Handke's kitchen drama is, I would suggest, both a discourse on food and its preparation *and* a sequence of reflections on a language of substance and sustenance. With *Lucie im Wald mit den Dingsda* and 'Warum eine Küche?', its gastronomic counterpart, Handke comes close to realising the fantasy he had described in his journal *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*:

Die schönste poetische Phantasie wäre jene, in der keine Bilder, Rhythmen, Wortspiele oder Geschichten entstünden, sondern bloß die Sprache sich belebte und die Dinge nennbar machte [...]

Mein Schreiben ist richtig, wenn ich es schaffe, der Welt einfach nachzusprechen<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> This verse fragment by Hölderlin is quoted on a number of occasions by Heidegger. See, for example, *Zollikoner Seminare* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2006), p. 333.

<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, 'Heideggers Wege', p. 115.

<sup>82</sup> Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*, pp. 212 and 233. This section of the journal also contains reflections on Heidegger. In *Versuch über den Pilznarren*, Handke goes so far as to claim that food encourages thought: 'Mithilfe der Speise gut denken' (p. 83).

As noted above, Beuys claimed in the last year of his life that his artistic journey was undertaken ‘durch die Sprache’. *Gib mir Honig* charts this journey paradigmatically: not only is the thing referred to (honey) freed through physical absence from the dematerialising process of metaphorisation, but language is also freed from the weight of materiality and the compulsion to function indicatively as a label or marker.

Peter Bürger engages with the paradox between things and their connotations in Beuys’s work in his essay ‘Die Avantgarde, das Material und der Tod’: the meaning (‘Deutung’) that Beuys ascribes to materials cannot be deduced directly ‘[a]us der unmittelbaren Wahrnehmung’.<sup>83</sup> Bürger characterises Beuys’s method, in which language itself is understood as material – ‘[w]ie er das Geräusch als Material begreift, so auch die Sprache’<sup>84</sup> – and in which primitive mimesis is united with rational principles of construction, as ‘weiches Denken’:

Dieses Denken unterläuft mithin auch den Gegensatz von faktischer und metaphorischer Gleichsetzung. [...] Was Beuys vorschwebt, ist eine Verbindung zweier diametral entgegengesetzter Weisen des Verhaltens, eines mimetischen, die Subjekt-Objekt-Trennung unterlaufenden, das man als archaisch charakterisieren kann, und eines modernen, instrumentalen, das diese Trennung voraussetzt. Die Gedankenfigur findet sich auch in Adornos Theorem, es gelte Mimesis und Rationalität im künstlerischen Produktionsprozess zusammenzuführen.<sup>85</sup>

For Beuys, both materials and ideas are real. This notion is manifest in his approach to honey,

---

<sup>83</sup> Bürger, ‘Die Avantgarde, das Material und der Tod’, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

gold, and language, just as it emerges from the culinary phenomena catalogued in Handke's play. In *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht* Handke claims that a single 'Spruch des alten Goethe', more precisely a single word within it, initiated the project of writing his 1067-page novel:

Wir hätten uns lebendig und bildsam zu erhalten, nach dem Beispiel, mit dem die Natur uns vorgehe. [...] 'bildsam' [...] – ein Wort, das ich jetzt erstmals hinschreibe, obwohl es mich seit dem Beginn dieser Unternehmung begleitet und mir überhaupt weit im voraus deren Richtung anzeigte: ein Zweisilber, ungebräuchlich, der mich auf den Weg für ein ganzes Buch gebracht hat.<sup>86</sup>

The passage cited is a rough paraphrase from Goethe's *Zur Morphologie*:

Das Gebildete wird sogleich wieder umgebildet, und wir haben uns, wenn wir einigermaßen zum lebendigen Anschauen der Natur gelangen wollen, selbst so beweglich und bildsam zu erhalten, nach dem Beispiele mit dem sie uns vorgeht.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Handke, *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*, p. 244. The narrator's interest in botany and the naming of plants provokes the remark that provides this essay with its title, 'Sich "bildsam erhalten"' (p. 410). The term is also used in the context of training the eyes for collecting mushrooms (p. 894), and walking ('um mich, frei nach dem alten Goethe, bildsam zu erhalten', p. 994; 'wenn ein Lehrpfad für die Bildsamkeit, dann ein solcher', p. 995).

<sup>87</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Bildung und Umbildung organischer Naturen', in *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, ed. by Karl Richter et al., 21 vols in 33 (Munich: btb, 2006), XII, 13. There is a parallel here to Stifter's pronouncement in *Nachkommenschaften*: 'Macht nur die Wirklichkeit so wirklich wie sie ist', in Adalbert

‘Bildsamkeit’, in the sense of plasticity and tractability, is the quality which unites the works of Beuys and Handke discussed in this essay. In *gib mir Honig* and ‘*Warum eine Küche?*’ it manifests itself as ‘soft language’. It connects the inventory of Handke’s kitchen, with its potatoes, mushrooms, and saffron, to the inscription of honey on Beuys’s postcard. Handke and Beuys share an ecological awareness which relates their work to current debates surrounding green (or vital) materialism – as Handke puts it in the opening song of his play, neatly eliding an early material memory with an etymological reflection, ‘die Erdäpfel kamen noch aus der Erde’. (*WeK?*, p. 13) The narrator of *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* claims that he is ‘jener entstofflichten und doch materiellen Sprache auf der Spur’, a language which, in Gadamer’s words, ‘so gehört werden will, wie die Dinge sich zur Sprache bringen’.<sup>88</sup> This plastic language enables a material exchange between subjects and things: ‘Now what I really – really should like – would be a little dish of honey!’<sup>89</sup>

---

Stifter, *Bunte Steine und Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1961), pp. 525-86 (p. 562). Goethe also features in Beuys’s *Palazzo Regale* installation: one of its two golden vitrines contains relics from the 1969 action *Iphigenie / Titus Andronicus* which incorporated Goethe texts and in which Beuys ‘demonstrated in various ways that vocal articulation is a sculptural process and that even speech is sculptural in character’: Christine Demele ‘Palazzo Regale’, in *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes*, pp. 309-10 (p. 309). See also Handke’s essay on the performance: Peter Handke, ‘Die Arbeit des Zuschauers’, in *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 88-125 (p. 105).

<sup>88</sup> Handke, *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, p. 58; Gadamer, *Die Natur der Dinge*, p. 76.

<sup>89</sup> Potter, *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*, p. 37.

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

MARTIN BRADY

Dr Martin Brady

German Department

Virginia Woolf Building

22 Kingsway

London WC2B 6NR

[martin.brady@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:martin.brady@kcl.ac.uk)