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The Material Metaphysics of Felt

The Hat

A man, with his upper body exposed, is gazing at the viewer with an intensity that is hard to forget (fig. 1). The features of the man portrayed seem familiar, but it is difficult to put a name to his face, especially as his pointed ears also lend his visage a Mephistophelian air. The reason for this mixture of familiarity and uncertainty is that this head lacks that prop with which it seems to have grown together (fig. 2). It was taken by the photographer Charles Wilp, a friend of Joseph Beuys, on a working vacation in Kenya in 1975.[1] The characteristic hat, as part of the artist's identity, represented a kind of trademark, without which his appearance seemed incomplete and unfamiliar.

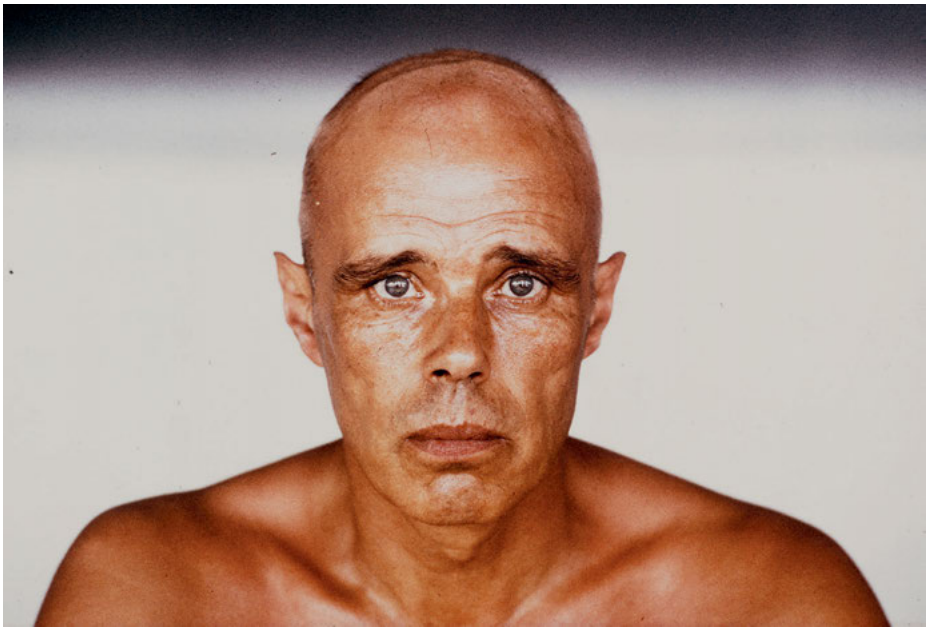

Fig. 1: Joseph Beuys, photograph by Charles Wilp, Kenya, 1975, published by Qumran Verlag, Frankfurt, untitled, from the portfolio "Nature Experiences in Africa."

1 See Franz-Joachim Verspohl, "Joseph Beuys – Das ist erst einmal dieser Hut," *Kritische Berichte* 14, no. 4 (1986): 77.

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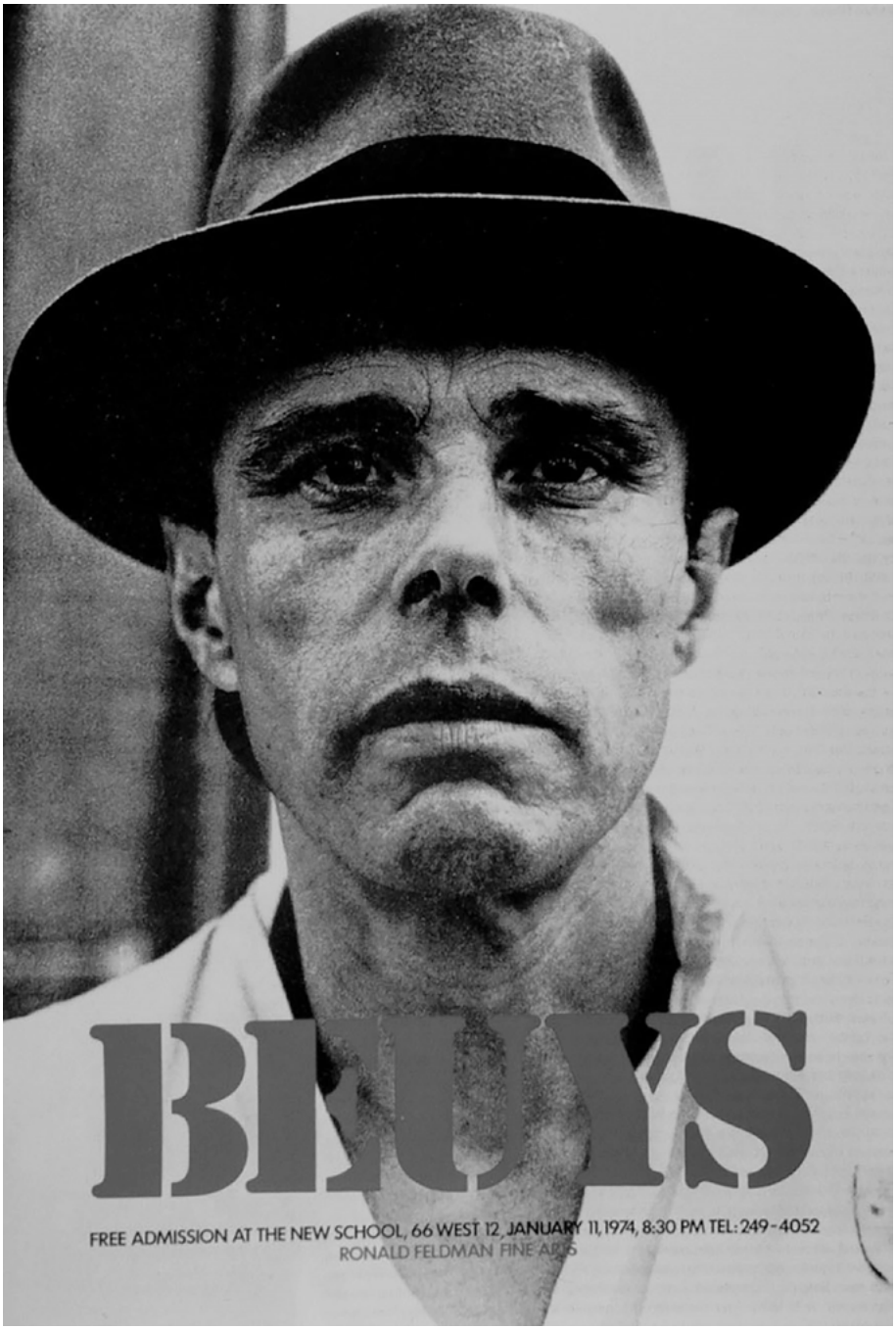

Fig. 2: Joseph Beuys poster for the US lecture tour *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, organized by Ronald Feldman, offset print, 1974.

In 1980, Andy Warhol produced a portrait of Beuys, in which by inverting the colors he emphasized the hat and, here especially, the hat band as the artist's insignia.[2] This is probably the most accurate portrait of Beuys ever made. The hat is irrevocably associated with the artist. He almost never took it off, not even in moments of extreme challenge. I experienced an enigmatic confirmation of this *habitus* myself as a young student on February 22, 1969, at the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts) in Berlin, during an hours-long political brawl. Firehoses were activated, flooding the stage so that those present cowered or moved away. Beuys, by contrast, never removed his hat (fig. 3).[3] On a superficial level, keeping his hat on would have been connected to protection from the water; like a compact umbrella, something a hat always is, and the reason head coverings were invented. An additional meaning resulted automatically, however, associating this mechanical shield from water with an aura of inviolability.

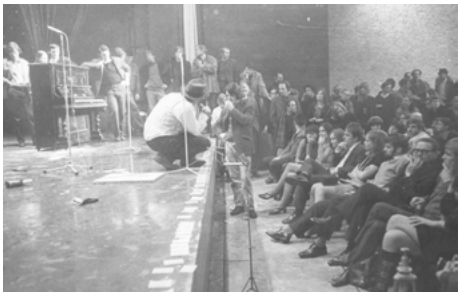

Fig. 3: Josef Beuys, *Wasserstrahl* performance, February 27, 1969.

Felt

That was precisely what was intended. The hat is made of firm felt, whose thick weave works like a wall, defending against outside influences. That is because the hairs and remnants of fat from the skin get tangled up and combine to form a weave so tight that it does not let water penetrate, yet remains soft and elastic and, above all, conveys an animal warmth. This material has been given the name "felt." It is a combination of materials taken from dead animals and therefore conventionally regarded as equally material per se. Thanks to its quality of providing warmth, however, felt preserves

2 See Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Joseph Beuys* from 1980, in exh. cat. *Andy Warhol: Rétrospective* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1990), 329; Verspohl, "Joseph Beuys," 81, fig. 3; Michael Groblewski, "'. . . eine Art Ikonographie im Bilde': Joseph Beuys—von der Kunstfigur zur Kultfigur?" in *Kultfigur und Mythenbildung: Das Bild vom Künstler und sein Werk in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Michael Groblewski and Oskar Bethmann (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 43–44, fig. 4.

3 See Horst Bredekamp, "Beuys als Mitstreiter der Form," in *Joseph Beuys: Parallelprozesse: Archäologie einer künstlerischen Praxis*, ed. Ulrich Müller (Munich: Hirmer, 2012), 23–41.

the living quality of its origin, and for that reason an aura of vitality is attributed to it. This may go back to the prehistory of humankind.[4]

The Italian historian of science and founder of an important publishing house Leo Olschki unfolded a concise history of this pseudo-alive material and its overarching semantics from Mongolia to Europe, playing a special role in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a talk delivered in 1947, which became a small but highly influential book published in 1949.[5] The Arte Povera movement was very much inspired by this. The combination of materiality and the metaphysical semantics directly associated with felt can be seen as a motto for the question of the material's own activity, which in our Cluster is being raised with the concept of "active matter." This formulation has three components—matter, space, and image—and all three are associated with felt. For that reason, this material can be understood as a ferment for various areas of the Cluster and here, of course, especially for the section on weaving and that on symbolic material.

Artists of all eras have regarded the fact that materials take on a life of their own when they are shaped as a prerequisite for their own activity. Joseph Beuys was possessed—if not obsessed—by this assumption like few others, and felt played a special role here too. For him, this determination of the activity of the formed material had a particular and, as he emphasized again and again, almost existentially dimensioned significance. In World War II, he was the radio operator of a bomber that crashed while flying over the Crimea in March 1944. Beuys survived, with severe head injuries. According to his account of this event, Beuys would not have survived if Tatars had not rescued him, brought him into a tent, and taken care of him; one of the vital components of his healing process was said to have been wrapping him in felt blankets. The story cannot have happened in this manner; it should be ranked with the series of myths about artists that are no less relevant than the events they are transcending.[6] Beuys connected the warmth of the felt to an energy that benefitted and crucially promoted his healing. With this story, and thanks to this material his felt hat was for Beuys a proof of his identity. Felt, which is made from the hair of sheep, hares, and all animals with thick fur, is strikingly transferred as a material into the design of works of art.[7]

Fourteen years after that event, Beuys began, with the so-called *Eurasier* (*Eurasian*) of 1958, to shape this context into works of art (fig. 4).[8] That work consists of a

4 See Monika Wagner, Dietmar Rübel, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt, ed., *Lexikon des künstlerischen Materials: Werkstoffe der modernen Kunst von Abfall bis Zinn* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 97–101.

5 See Leonardo Olschki, *The Myth of Felt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949).

6 See Philip Ursprung, *Joseph Beuys: Kunst Kapital Revolution* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2021), 15–23; in general, Werner Busch, *Die Künstler Anekdote: 1760–1960: Künstlerleben und Bildinterpretation* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020).

7 See Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001), 214–17.

8 See Klaus-Dieter Pohl, "Eurasier 1958," in *Joseph Beuys: Eurasienstab*, ed. Birgit Stöckmann (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 10–11.

thick felt mat whose dark shade is clearly distinguished from a looming form wrapped in gauze but nevertheless established a connection to the felt floor via its material. A small bent metal staff rises up out of this figure and takes the form of a shepherd's crook. Without question, it is a kind of self-portrait, as Beuys put it in a taped interview from 1972: "I can still remember that for years I behaved like a shepherd. I went around with a staff, a sort of 'Eurasian staff,' which later appeared in my works, and I always had an imaginary herd gathered around me. I was really a shepherd who explained everything that happened in the vicinity. I felt very comfortable in this role."[9] The gauze as a trace of a protection for a wound, the shepherd's or bishop's crook, the felt as the basis for a warming and healing materiality, to which according to his own words he owed his survival, and finally the anthropological linking of cultures that were separated by an impenetrable wall during the Cold War[10]—all this has taken form in this self-portrait installation, which surrounds the almost breathing materiality with the space of its unfolding and with an aura that has become an image.

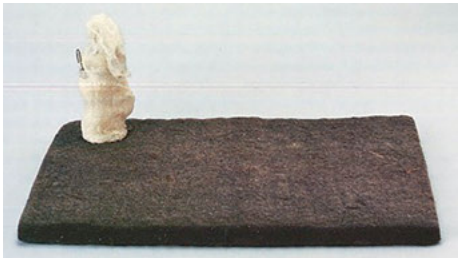

Fig. 4: Joseph Beuys, *Eurasier*, 1958, felt, gauze, metal, 14 × 33.5 × 16.5 cm. Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, in Joseph Beuys, *Eurasienstab*, no. V of the series "Joseph Beuys Medien-Archiv," ed. Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 10.

Seven years later, Beuys expanded this iconology of materials into a large installation titled *Ein Mal 90 Grad Filzwinkel* (One Ninety-Degree Felt Angle) and *Zwei 90 Grad Filzwinkel* (Two Ninety-Degree Felt Angles), clearly taking up the thread of El Lissitzky's *Proun Room*, that presented a dynamic installation of a chamber in which a large felt mat lying on tree trunks is the central object.[11] Here, the entire room is connected to felt props, so that the iconology of this material has now become the main person of an entity that determines the surroundings.

Around the same time, in one of his first and most impressive Fluxus actions, *Der Chef: Fluxus Gesang* (The Chief: Fluxus Singing), Beuys associated felt with himself in

9 See Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys, Life and Works* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1979), 12.

10 See Ursprung, *Joseph Beuys*, 100–05.

11 See Birgit Stöckmann, ed., *Eurasienstab*, 23–24.

such a way that he assimilated his own physiognomy.[12] In this presentation Beuys tried to make it understandable how seemingly dead objects and beings preserve a quasi-electrical energy that can be measurably accessed via the material. He rolled himself up completely in a felt blanket so that his figure could only be surmised from the bulge from his shoulders.[13] His feet were turned toward the viewers, and his head was connected by a rope lying on the axis of his body to a microphone into which he made guttural animal sounds, which were supposed to be identified with the sounds of stag. Draped in the axis of this orientation were two dead hares, whose pelts defined the still unworked, natural, organic field, which was then reshaped and semantically prepared in the felt. For Beuys, following the tradition of European iconography, hares were symbols of vitality and fertility.

Seen from the line of the hares, their form transitioned directly into that of the artist, who was lying on the floor completely wrapped in felt and remained in this position of absolute motionlessness, merely making noises for sixteen to twenty-four hours, in order to embody, on the one hand, the stability of lifelessness and, on the other, the vitality of the dead (fig. 5).[14]

The Critique of Felt

This was continued in the form of the action *I Like America and America Likes Me* in New York in 1974, which was one of the most impressive, most cryptic, and perhaps also most problematic actions the artist ever carried out.[15] Wrapped in felt, he had an ambulance pick him up at the airport in New York and bring him to the René Block Gallery on East Broadway without ever coming into contact with the urban space of New York and Manhattan.[16]

The goal was the encounter with a creature in the gallery that in the supposed mindset of the American settlers represented the lowest, ugliest, and shiftiest animal: the coyote. For three days in a row, Beuys, wrapped in felt and fitted out with a triangle, a flashlight, and a walking stick, entered a space separated by bars to spend the entire day with the animal (fig. 6). It had been difficult to bring the coyote to New York, especially as the animal in question was considered aggressive and could be tamed by its keepers only with difficulty.

In Beuys's case, however, it was the felt that clearly introduced a harmony into the encounter, so that while the meeting was not without risk, at no point did it require intervention by outsiders. It resulted in harmony and synergy between the movements

12 See Uwe M. Schneede, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen. Kommentiertes Werkverzeichnis mit fotografischen Dokumentationen* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1993), 68–79.

13 See ibid., 76.

14 See ibid., 78.

15 See ibid., 330–53.

16 See ibid., 342.

Fig. 5: Joseph Beuys, *Der Chef / The Chief: Fluxus Gesang*, August 30, 1964, Billedhuggersalen Charlottenborg, Copenhagen and December 1, 1964, René Block Gallery, Berlin, in ed. Uwe M. Schneede, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen: Kommentiertes Werkverzeichnis mit fotografischen Dokumentationen* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1994), 78.

of the felt man and the coyote (fig. 7). When the former was still, the animal was also prepared to calm down; when the felt moved, the coyote reacted as well, sniffing the material, making it his by urinating on it, and tearing it to pieces and making a kind of cave with it.

In a unique—and perhaps revealing—way, the coyote viewed the pieces of felt that had been released or torn away as his property, on which he rested and even slept, whereby the straw that had been brought into the gallery space especially for him did not interest him (fig. 8). He only ever went over to the straw when Beuys had lain down on it.

This action at the Block Gallery was politically symbolic in that a European protected himself with felt and arrived as if through a tunnel at a gallery where an ostracized animal of the American prairie awaited him. The animal's reaction could not be predicted, but in essence it behaved exactly as the artist had hoped. By way of felt he established an empathetic relationship with the animal that ultimately resulted in a kind of friendship. On the third day, the coyote was already expecting his roommate to enter that morning.

Through felt and the calmness and self-confidence of his movements, Beuys transformed himself into some form of projection of a Native American who was trying to

Fig. 6: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, May 23 – 25, 1974, René Block Gallery, New York, in *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen*, 343.

Fig. 7: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, May 23 – 25, 1974, René Block Gallery, New York, in *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen*, 344.

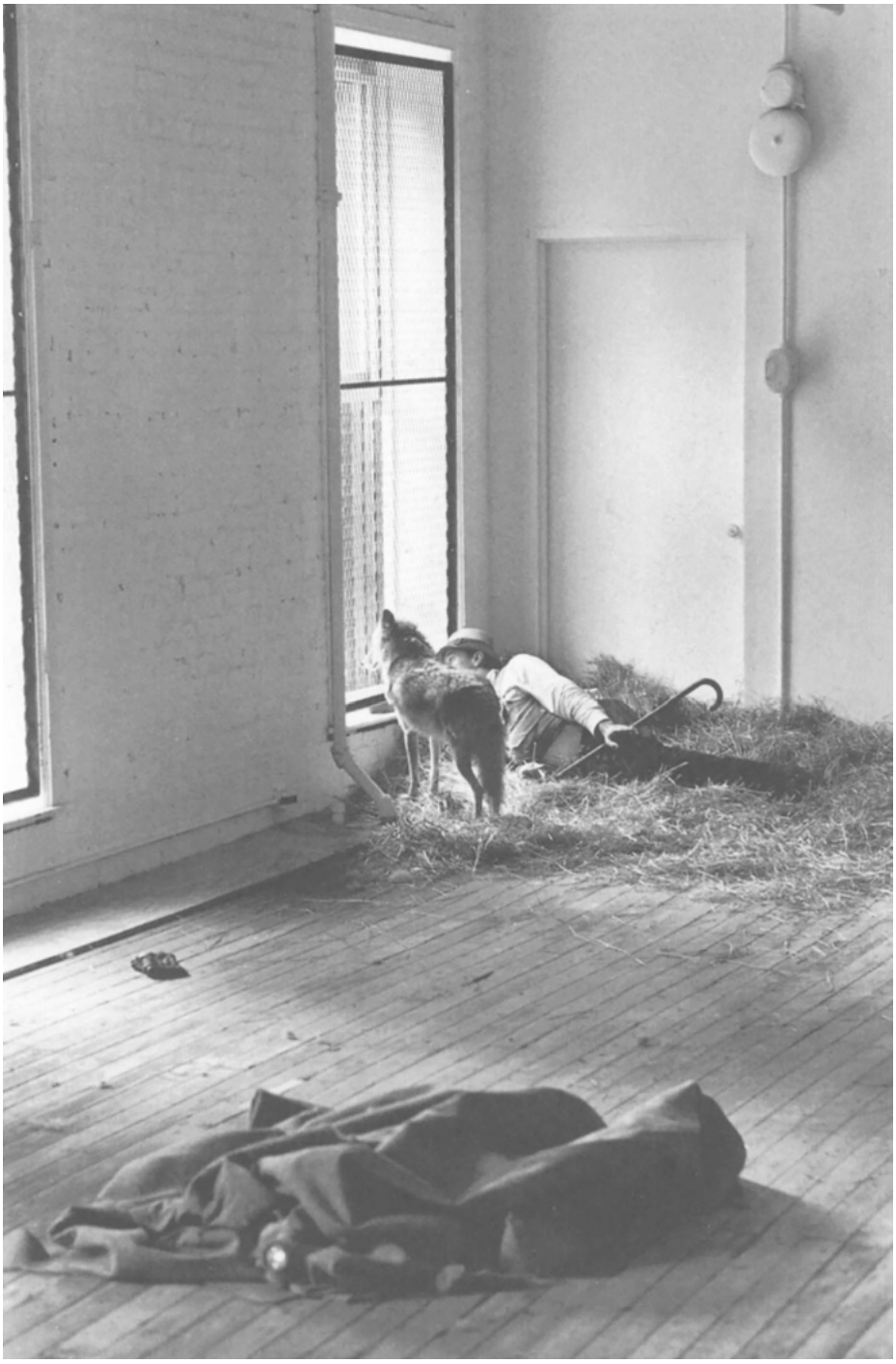

Fig. 8: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, May 23 – 25, 1974, René Block Gallery, in *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen*, 351.

live in harmony with nature. The space played a crucial role as an actor in that the white cube was reversed into the landscape of a prairie in which human being and animal met via matter without fighting.

The Felt Hat as Talisman of Liberty

All these characteristics remained preserved in Beuys's felt hat. Concentrated in it was a spatial, physical, and cultural autonomy that made him immune to authorities, as in a conversation with politician Heinz Kühn after a debate in the state chancellery in Düsseldorf.[17] In this way, the hat and with it the felt had become a symbol of independence and freedom as a result of the protection that the material had to offer in both physical and metaphysical ways.

Fig. 9: Aureus of Marcus Aurelius Julianus, 284–285 CE. British Museum, Reg. Nr. 1864, 1128.294.

This side of felt has its own history, which is part of the foundations of the political iconology of Europe. Its origins have not been clarified, but it is reasonable to assume that the materiality of felt—that is, the combination of individual hairs tangled together to produce a new, inseparable whole—stood for the community formed not by one individual but by the collective working together. As a materiality that does not permit individual strands to be emphasized and in which every single fiber vouches for autonomy within the whole, felt was considered the fabric of a form of society in which no single individual can rule the whole. For that reason, a felt hat, the pileus, became the sign of the freedom of the Roman citizen of antiquity. Already in the second century BCE, a denarius was minted on which the personification of liberty holds out the pileus as a sign of a free community (fig. 9). Over the centuries, this felt cap

17 See Charles Wilp, *Heinz Kühn und Joseph Beuys*, 1975, photograph, in Verspohl, "Joseph Beuys," 84, fig. 7.

signifying freedom was retained on the coins of the Roman empire; the pileus was still regarded as a sign of the freedom of the Roman citizen, and so in the legal act in which a slave was granted the rights of a citizen, he was handed the pileus.

This act took on a combative component when Marcus Junius Brutus and his group of coconspirators murdered Julius Caesar on March 15, 44 BCE, by stabbing him twenty-three times. He had his deed legitimized by a portrait medallion, on the obverse of which the pileus of freedom is framed by two daggers (fig. 10). Ever since, felt in combination with daggers has been considered the icon of tyrannicide and of the struggle against autocracy.

Fig. 10: Denar of Marcus Junius Brutus, 43–42 CE. British Museum, Reg. Nr. 1860, 0328.124.

In the sixteenth century, this motif became topical again when the Republic of Florence was transformed into an absolutist form of government. One of the first and probably also most incompetent protagonists of that process was Alessandro de' Medici, who was stabbed to death as a tyrant in 1537 by Lorenzino de' Medici, a republican-minded member of the family. The new Brutus had a medal of honor coined, in parallel with the ancient denarius of Marcus Junius Brutus, with the felt hat of liberty flanked by two daggers pointed downward (fig. 11). As the iconological handbook of Cesare Ripa demonstrates, the felt hat of freedom has existed in the world ever since—both in the form of a cap and as a broad-brimmed hat, never again to disappear (fig. 12).

It was joined by a third motif of the felt hat in the form of the Phrygian cap. An alternative tradition associated the act of liberating a slave not with the pileus but with the felt cap with its peak drawn back as worn by the Phrygians. This symbolic form of felt is probably the basis of the most successful political iconology because the protagonists of the French Revolution identified themselves with this symbol. A sign of liberty and overthrow, along with bringing down all previous authorities and

Fig. 11: Giovanni Cavino (attributed), bronze medal of Lorenzino de' Medici, 1537, in Horst Bredekamp, *Michelangelo* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2021), 558, fig. 31.

the signs that represented them, within a few years the Phrygian cap became the emblem of the Reign of Terror.[18]

But this felt hat of liberty remained an icon of the positive destiny of the revolution. As such it was depicted in combination with the rebellious "Marianne" personifying the entire country with the spring cap in the mythical painting by Delacroix—perhaps the most successful image in all political iconology.[19]

The Felt Hat of Artists

In the 1540s, Michelangelo Buonarroti was one of the Republican-minded Florentines living in exile in Rome after the autocracy of the Medici had been established in Florence. At the beginning of that decade, he created, in an obvious allusion to the assassin Alessandro de' Medici, a marble bust of Brutus, in which the assassin was characterized in a mysterious way as both a hero and a violent criminal. Michelangelo was a republican, yet he rejected introducing freedom with an act of murder.[20]

But this only made him identify more strongly with the felt hat of freedom. He reportedly confessed to the Portuguese artist Francisco de Holanda: "Sometimes, I may tell you, my important duties have given me so much license that when, as I am talking to the Pope, I put this old felt hat nonchalantly on my head, and talk to him very frankly."[21] The Portuguese seasoned these words with a rather clumsy portrait of Michelan-

18 See "Libertà," in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologica*, 1611; Würtenberger, *Symbole der Freiheit*, 145, fig. 74.

19 See Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Die Freiheit führt das Volk von Eugène Delacroix: Sinn und Gegensinn* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1991).

20 See Bredekamp, *Michelangelo*, 559–65.

21 See Francisco de Holanda, "Three Dialogues," in Charles Holroyd, *Michael Angelo Buonarroti*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1911), 229–80, esp. 237.

Fig. 12: Libertà, in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologica*, 1611. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, 4 L.eleg.m, in Thomas Würtenberger, *Symbole der Freiheit: Zu den Wurzeln westlicher politischer Kultur* (Vienna et al.: Böhlau Verlag, 2017), 48, fig. 9.

gelo, in which the felt hat testifying to freedom dominates the scene (fig. 13).[22] Before the highest authority of his age, Michelangelo used the felt hat to embody his independence.

Fig. 13: Francisco de Hollanda, Michelangelo, miniature portrait, engraving, in Franciso de Hollanda, *Os Desenhos da Antiqualhas*, ca. 1540, Library of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial Biblioteca del Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo, Ms. 28-I-20.

Michelangelo also claimed for himself the original forms of the pileus, the cap. One of his most impressive portraits is a drawing that his fellow artist Fra Bartolomeo made of him (fig. 14).[23] The already aged face is clearly characterized by the pressed in box-

22 See Francisco de Holanda, *Album dos Desenhos das Antigualhas*, ed. José da Felicidade Aves (Lisbon: Livros Horizonte, 1989), 7v (24); Verspohl, "Joseph Beuys," 84, fig. 6.
23 See Bredekamp, *Michelangelo*, 685, fig. 2.

er's nose, and the felt cap of the liberation of the slave and the right of the free citizen looks merely like a streak of light, so that its color stands out particularly well. The Beuys scholar Franz Joachim Verspohl, to whose study I owe much, has impressively shown that the bust that the sculptor Walther Brüx made of Beuys in 1947, in obvious allusion to that portrayal of Michelangelo, presents Joseph Beuys wearing the pileus, which as a felt hat combined protection, life, and liberty (fig. 15).

The comparison to the felt-armed Michelangelo can be extended to Beuys's Manhattan action. In Michelangelo's lifetime, his fellow artist Leone Leoni had created an extraordinary medallion on which he characterized his friend as a shepherd holding out his shepherd's crook.[24] It is equally to be taken as a blind man's staff, because the man portrayed, completely confident in his actions and views, no longer needs external orientation. He is accompanied by a dog, the symbol of absolute fidelity, who is sniffing out the surroundings for him. On his head, Michelangelo wears the felt hat as symbol of freedom in the version of the Phrygian cap.

When Beuys, transforming himself into a felt persona, and once again acting as a shepherd, tried to establish a similar relationship with a canine creature, he was not just following a momentary insight but rather uniting in himself the entire iconography of felt as an emblem of freedom, of protection, of warmth, and of life (fig. 6). If there is one symbolic fabric that deserves the name of a living articulation of the material, it is felt. The issue of justifying one's own material, spatial, and visual activity is rendered particularly powerful by this material. A constructivist perspective would indubitably try to demonstrate that the felt's attributed vitalist semantic variations were mere projections. Yet, a perspective of material and image activity is hopefully able to approach it as a phenomenon resonance between the symbolic production of an active material, the form, the artist, and the user and viewer. Perhaps the question of the *agens* cannot be answered satisfactorily. But the existence of this open question fuels the mystery that determines our design and perception of the world. In that spirit, I hope that I have shown that material iconology has at its disposal an essential aspect that constitutes this Cluster in the very best sense of the noun "felt."

24 See Horst Bredekamp, "Im Zeichen der Freiheit. Zwei Bildnisse Michelangelos," in *Contactzone: Ein Prinzip "der guten Nachbarschaft,"* ed. Sarah Hübscher and Christopher Kreutchen (Dortmund: Kettler, 2021), 366–70.

Fig.14: Fra Bartolomeo (Bartolomeo-Domenico di Paolo del Fattorino, Baccio della Porta), portrait of Michelangelo Buonarroti, circa 1516–1517. Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Fig. 15: Walther Brüx, Joseph Beuys, 1947, bronze, Museum Kurhaus Kleve, in Verspohl, "Joseph Beuys," fig. 4.