

THE MATERIAL METAPHYSICS OF FELT

1. The Hat

(1)¹ A man, with his upper body exposed, is gazing at the viewer with an intensity that is difficult to forget. 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 something of the diabolical.

(2) The reason for this mixture of familiarity and uncertainty is that this head lacks that prop with which it seems to have grown together. It was taken by the photographer Charles Wilp, a friend of Beuys, on a working vacation in Kenya in 1975. The characteristic hat, as part of the artist's identity, represented a kind of trademark, without which his appearance seemed incomplete and defamiliarized.

(3) 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. This is probably the most accurate portrait of Beuys ever made.

(4) It is the hat as the hat is associated with the artist. He almost never took it off, not even in moments of extreme challenge. I experienced that myself as a young student on February 22, 1969, at the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts) in Berlin, during an hours-long political brawl. During the debates, firehoses were activated, flooding the stage so that those present covered or moved away. Beuys, by contrast, stood upright, like a column, his hat on his head.

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.

2. Felt

(5) 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 organic creatures and must therefore be regarded as dead material per se. Thanks to its quality of providing warmth, however, felt preserves the living quality of its origin, and for that reason an aura of vitality is attributed to it. This goes back to the prehistory of humankind.

(6) The Italian historian of science and founder of an important publishing house Leo Olschki wrote, in a small, highly influential book published in 1949, a concise history

¹ The numbers refer to the slides of the presentation.

of this pseudo-alive material and its overarching semantics from Mongolia to Europe, playing a special role in Dante's Divine Comedy. The Arte Povera movement was very much inspired by this. The combination of materiality and the metaphysical semantics directly associated with felting 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.

(7) 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 bomber that crashed while flying over the Crimea in March 1944. Beuys survived, with severe head injuries. It will surely remain controversial whether the following story actually took place as he always described it or whether it should be ranked with the series of myths about artists. For the fate of the material felt, myth is just as real as actual history. 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 warmth he received from them was said to be connected to an energy that benefitted and crucially promoted his healing. With this story, felt 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.

(8) Fourteen years after that event, Beuys began, with the so-called Eurasier (Eurasian) of 1958, to shape this context into works of art. That work consists of a 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.« The gauze as a trace of a protection for a wound, the shepherd's crook as allusion to the Tatars who took care of him, and whose identity he then associated with himself, the felt as the basis for a warming and healing materiality to which he owed his survival, and finally the anthropological linking of cultures that were separated by an impenetrable wall during the Cold War—all this has taken form in this sculptural self-portrait, which surrounds the almost breathing materiality with the space of its unfolding and with an aura that has become an image.

(9) Seven years later, Beuys expanded this iconology of materials into a large installation titled *Einmal 90 Grad Filzwinkel* (One Ninety-Degree Felt Angle) and *Zwei 90° 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. 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.

(10) Around the same time, in one of his first and most impressive Fluxus actions, Beuys associated felt with himself in such a way that he assimilated his own physiognomy. In this presentation Beuys tried to make it understandable how seemingly dead objects and beings preserve an almost 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. 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.

(11) 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.

3. The Critique of Felt

(12) 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. 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.

(13) The goal was the encounter with a creature in the gallery that in the mindset of the American settlers represented the lowest, ugliest, and shiftest animal: the coyote. 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. 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.

(14) In Beuys's case, however, it was the felt, which 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 an invisible harmony between the

movements of the felt man and the coyote. 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 then tearing it to pieces and making himself a kind of cave with it.

(15) 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. He only ever went over to the straw when Beuys had lain down on it.

This action at the Block Gallery was highly symbolic in that a European who had 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 so that ultimately a kind of friendship resulted. 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 a Native American who was trying to 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.

4. The Felt Hat as Talisman of Liberty

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

(17) 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 not 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 BC, a denarius was minted on which the goddess of victory is holding a laurel wreath over the head of the personification of liberty, whereas Libertas herself, guiding the chariot of a quadriga, holds out the pileus as a sign of a free community.

Over the centuries, this felt cap 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.

(18) This act took on a combative component when Marcus Junius Brutus and his group of coconspirators murdered the Emperor Caesar on March 15, 44 BC, 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. Ever since, felt in combination with daggers has been considered the icon of tyrannicide and of the struggle against autocracy.

(19) 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.

(20) After the uprising failed, the assassin escaped to France, which had been protector of the Florentine Republic. In his eternal struggle with the German-Spanish Habsburg emperor, French king Henry II adopted this motif to motivate the German princes to rise up against Charles V. Henry II had a coin minted with the inscription »Liberty. Defender of the freedom of the Germans,« which once again inverted the felt hat with two daggers, but now pointed upward, in the direction of the word »Liberty.« The hat, in a striking turn, features a brim, so that the pileus could now be understood as a genuine hat. In an open letter to the German princes, the French king placed this symbol at the very top.

(21) 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.

(22) 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 the signs that represented them, within a few years the Phrygian cap became the emblem of the Terror.

But this felt hat of liberty remained an icon of the positive destiny of the Revolution, which it was depicted in combination with the rebellious, wild, beautiful Frenchwoman personifying the entire country with the spring cap in the mythical painting by Delacroix: perhaps the most successful image in all political iconology.

5. The Felt Hat of Artists

(23) 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, but he rejected introducing freedom with an act of murder.

(24) But this only made him identify more strongly with the felt hat of freedom. He confessed to the Portuguese artist Francisco de Hollanda: »Sometimes, I may tell you, my important duties have given me so much licence 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.« The Portuguese seasoned these words with a rather clumsy portrait of Michelangelo, in which the felt hat testifying to freedom dominates the scene. Before the highest authorities of his age, Michelangelo used the felt hat to embody his independence.

(25) 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. The already aged face is clearly characterized by the pressed in boxer'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.

(26) The Beuys scholar Franz Joachim Verspohl, to whose study I owe much, has impressively shown that the bust that the sculptor Walther Brück 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.

(27) The comparison to the felt-armed Michelangelo lasted until the Manhattan action. Michelangelo's fellow artist Leone Leoni created an extraordinary medallion on which he characterized his friend as a shepherd holding out his shepherd's crook. It is at the same time 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.

(28) When Beuys, transforming himself into a felt persona, once again acting as a shepherd, tries to establish a similar relationship with a canine creature, then it becomes clear that he is not just following a momentary insight but rather uniting in himself the entire iconography of felt as emblem of freedom, of protection, of warmth, and of life.

(29) 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 made particularly powerful by this material. A constructivist perspective would demonstrate that vitalist semantic variations were attributed to felt as projections. A variation that is materially and pictorially active sees this rather as a resonance between the symbolic production of the active material, the form, the artist, and the user and viewer. Perhaps the question of the actor will never be

answered. But this question exists, and constitutes the mystery that determines the 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.