

Contradictory Modernities: Conceptions of Nature in the Art of Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter

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In this paper, I explore the tension between different intellectual traditions concerning the relationship between nature and modernity as they are manifested in the work of postwar German artists Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter. I show that they represent contrasting intellectual and aesthetic traditions. For Beuys, nature holds innate meanings capable of guiding human thought and action, whereas for Richter, nature is simply a screen onto which we project our own cultural imprints. I conclude that these differing perspectives help to elucidate contemporary intellectual concerns over the relationship between nature-based ideologies and the ecological critique of modernity. By extending our understanding of "social nature" to the cultural arena, we can discern new ways of exploring relations between society and nature. *Key Words:* nature, landscape, aesthetics, modernity, Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter.

In April 1995, I attended a symposium on the German artist Joseph Beuys at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan, New York City.¹ Speaker after speaker conveyed a sense of certainty and optimism surrounding his transformative "social sculpture," and the few voices of dissent were met with a mix of suspicion and disdain. Some fifteen blocks northwest of the New School sits the Dia Centre for the Arts in a gentrified corner of Chelsea just a few yards from the Hudson River. In it was an exhibition of an on-going installation by another German artist, Gerhard Richter, entitled *Atlas*.² This collage of many hundreds of photographs provided a stark contrast with the ideas and images associated with Joseph Beuys. In the place of Beuys's emphasis on natural order lay a sense of isolation and disorientation; instead of timeless quasi-religious certainties there was a chronological sequence of hard-edged images spanning a myriad of themes including Nazism, terrorism, and the mass imagery of consumer capitalism.

This paper has emerged from my response to these two very different aesthetic and intellectual experiences. I have developed the contrast between these artists' work in order to explore the recurring tension between nature and modernity in Western thought.³ By focusing on nature, I am concerned here with the cultural representation of nonhuman nature, in this instance primarily through painting, photography, performance art,

and sculpture. Though a number of scholars have misleadingly placed both Beuys and Richter in the German romantic tradition, simply by virtue of the importance of nature and landscape to their art and ideas, I argue here that there are a series of important differences between their work.⁴ I intend to stress the way in which aesthetic responses to nature inform contrasting conceptions of the interrelation between nature and culture, which in turn permeate political discourse through various discursive strategies for ideological legitimation.

The idea of nature is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, the term is routinely used to encompass a descriptive categorization of physical reality extending from our bodies to the most distant stars and galaxies. This is the knowable realm of objects, the world that has been utterly transformed through the advance of science and the impact of human activity. On the other hand, nature is persistently perceived as something beyond the disclosures of scientific inquiry, a deeper level of reality co-present with the modern world. This is metaphysical nature, the unknown, the essence of something beyond comprehension yet invoked for the justification of worldly belief. This is the nature that is called upon to guide us, to impress order, and to resist the historicity of knowledge. To make sense of contemporary environmental thought, we need to work through some of the tensions and contradictions inherent

in the idea of nature. In this paper, I have focused on the cultural representation of nature in order to expose the interrelationship between the idea of an autonomous aesthetic sphere, separate from wider society, and the relevance of this distinction to the ideological power of nature in environmental thought. I contend that the discourses of nature cannot be neatly demarcated into a series of specialist arenas which restrict us to separate spheres of knowledge and understanding. To fully appreciate the scope and complexity of the changing relationships between society and nature under modernity is to draw these disparate threads together in order to expose the discursive strategies, epistemological weaknesses, and practical implications of environmental discourse.

The paper begins by exploring the ambiguous role of nature-based ideologies in relation to broader critiques of modernity and the exhaustion of Enlightenment rationality. I outline how the extension of geographical analysis into the field of cultural production necessitates an engagement with dialectical approaches to understanding changing relations between society and nature. Examining the work of Joseph Beuys, I then describe how ecological concerns emerged as a central element in Beuys's project for the release of creative energies in society. I focus in detail on a performance piece entitled *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), which provided a point of convergence for several of his central preoccupations as an artist: the search for holistic and interdisciplinary forms of universality, the need for reconciliation and communication with nature as a prerequisite for personal and social healing, and the belief that art should play a didactic and socially transformative role in society. Beuys is a particularly interesting figure for any exploration of the political import of cultural representations of nature because of his close involvement in the emergence of the German Greens in the 1970s and his centrality to the reemergence of romanticism in postwar European culture.

Finally, I contrast the stance of Beuys with that of Gerhard Richter. I suggest that Richter's work is best conceived as stemming from an anthropocentric intellectual tradition, wherein traditional motifs drawn from nature bear an ironic rather than a literal relation to contemporary cultural and political discourse. For Richter, cultural forms exist in a dynamic relation to nature and are rooted in their social and historical context. I

examine his ongoing installation piece *Atlas* (1964 to date) to explore a series of themes developed in his art and writings: the problematic search for aesthetic autonomy within consumer capitalism, the symbolic role of nature and landscape in the recovery of historical memory, and the reworking of traditional aesthetic idioms within the context of radical epistemological doubt.

Nature, Modernity and the Field of Cultural Production

The worsening scale of environmental degradation over the twentieth century has provided a critical focus for geographers struggling to find a rationale for their discipline in the postcolonial era. Yet much of this environmental scholarship remains trapped in a variety of nondialectical and ahistorical research paradigms that are at variance with the social production of nature. Henri Lefebvre (1991:30) reminds us that what we can meaningfully term "(physical) natural space is disappearing," leaving in its wake an ever-expanding horizon of social space. A similar observation is made by Margaret FitzSimmons (1989:106) who laments the very limited application of radical geographical scholarship to what she terms "social Nature," based around an explicit recognition of "the geographical and historical dialectic between societies and their material environments." A dialectical conception of nature can transcend the empty polarity between various social constructivist conceptions of nature and the predominance of purely biophysical and essentialist conceptions of nature that permeate political discourse in wider society.

In this paper, I shall give particular emphasis to the ideological power of essentialist conceptions of nature as reflected in what Pierre Bourdieu (1996) terms the "field of cultural production." Essentialist discourses of nature are distant echoes of a premodern era, yet these mythical strands of meaning persist because of the innate complexity of relations between society and nature under late modernity. Nature is not merely a physical backcloth to human history but also forms part of a psychological metastructure in perpetual tension with the critical and reflexive discourses of modernity. Nature is deeply ingrained in this "cultural unconscious" because of its role in the material reproduction of human societies. It is the widening gulf between environmental knowl-

edge and action that feeds the mystification of social nature and the power of ideology in environmental discourse. Nature-based ideologies have consistently played a powerful role within the cultural discourses of modernity, yet the very concept of ideology is laced with ambiguity ranging from the distinction between “ideas of true and false cognition” to a more dynamic emphasis on the general “function of ideas within social life” (Eagleton 1991:3). We are perhaps better served by John B. Thompson’s understanding of ideology as the way in which “meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (quoted in Eagleton 1991:5). I shall use this meaning of ideology to explore the extent to which Beuys’s “social sculpture” reinforces rather than challenges the dominant structures of power in Western societies by presenting us with an imaginary resolution to the social and ecological malaise of late modernity.

The principal ideological theme I want to explore here is the romantic attachment to various forms of aesthetic autonomy as a means to promote universalist conceptions of nature that obscure the historicity of environmental change.⁵ The idea of aesthetic autonomy is crucial to our understanding of the ideological import of the romantic tradition for contemporary environmental discourse. The notion of some kind of aesthetic autonomy features prominently in a series of on-going debates concerning various kinds of truth in philosophy, the natural sciences, and the arts. A principal theme here is the capacity of art not to disclose “truth” through the mimesis of “higher” orders of truth revealed by the physical and mathematical sciences, but to reveal aspects of reality that would otherwise be overlooked (Bowie 1990). This, in effect, is a call for methodological autonomy from purely cognitive and instrumental forms of reason. The romantic tradition has consistently afforded art a privileged status as a means to access primordial and universalist sources of meaning that shape human existence. This dimension underlies the ideological implications of nature-based art, which lays claim to invariant sources of truth, as we shall see in the case of Beuys’s “social sculpture.” In contrast, if the methodological distinctiveness of art is allied with a recognition of the innate indeterminacy of aesthetic meaning, as suggested by Adorno, then truth is something never to be resolved with any degree of certainty. In this respect, the art of Richter presents us with a very different conception of aesthetic autonomy

that leads to recognition of the provisional and intersubjective dimensions of meaning derived not from higher levels of truth but from an exploration of material themes rooted in intersubjective understandings of ethics and rationality.

Geographical scholarship on relations between society and nature has begun to make significant inroads into the cultural field, enabling a range of new dialogues with other disciplines.⁶ My concern in this paper is not to explore the normative *effect* of art (though this is precisely the rationale for Beuys’s “social sculpture”) but rather to emphasize the unique insights provided by the methodological challenge of art criticism. I use leading examples of late twentieth-century art in order to investigate the problematic place of nature in the crisis of cultural modernism. The subject matter of this paper is undoubtedly somewhat unorthodox for a geographical journal, but the strangest of cultural artifacts can often be the most revealing in promoting new interpretations of social change (Darnton 1984). At a methodological level, I want to explore “theories which are nourished less by purely theoretical confrontation with other theories than by confrontation with fresh empirical objects” (Bourdieu 1996:178). This involves a sensitivity to the richness and heterogeneity of the field of cultural production and entails an abandonment of the kinds of explanation that reduce social reality to the flattened landscapes of pure description, enumeration, and structural determinism.

Joseph Beuys and the Solace of Nature

Joseph Beuys was born in Krefeld, Germany, in 1921. During the Second World War, he served as a German fighter pilot and was shot down and injured in the Crimea—an experience that was to prove central to the postwar development of his art. During the 1940s, Beuys pursued independent scientific studies (the relation between art and science was to be a recurring preoccupation) and also visited the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar, where he studied Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical ideas. In 1947, Beuys enrolled at the Düsseldorf Art Academy and was eventually appointed to a professorship there in 1961. Through much of this period, he developed his art and ideas in relative isolation from wider political and cultural developments. This was to change dramatically, however, in the early 1960s

after Beuys's involvement with Fluxus, an international avant-garde movement led by George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, and others, which sought an anarchic extension to the idea of the art object to encompass everyday materials and situations (Blume 1994; Crow 1996).⁷ The rise of Fluxus and Pop Art more generally in the 1960s was to have crucial significance for Beuys in two respects: first, the opening up of aesthetic discourse to mass culture gave impetus to his insistence on art and creativity as forces dispersed throughout society rather than residing in a cultural elite and its institutions; and second, the shattering of the notional aesthetic autonomy of high modernism was to introduce new possibilities for greater artistic engagement with explicitly political themes.⁸

Beuys placed himself unambiguously at the forefront of these new developments by his promotion of all creative activity as a form of revolutionary political action, thereby dispensing with claims for the aesthetic autonomy of high modernism (see Bonnett 1992; Bürger 1986; Germer 1988). His work has featured prominently in debates over postmodern aesthetics, where his interdisciplinarity and crossing of boundaries have been widely read as indicative of postmodern pluralism (see Duncan 1995; Kuspit 1995).⁹ Scholars have interpreted his work as integral to the dissolution of cultural modernism through its radical reinterpretation of the relationship between art and society:

Every human being is an artist . . . The essence of man is captured in the description 'artist'. All other definitions of this term 'art' end up by saying that there are artists and there are non-artists—people who can do something, and people who can't do anything (Beuys quoted in Nairne 1987:93).

By the early 1970s, Beuys was engaged in a variety of political projects such as the Organisation for Direct Democracy through Plebiscite, the Organisation for Non-Voters, and the Free International University. As a result of these political activities, he was dismissed from his post at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1972. This led to widespread public consternation, provoking mass demonstrations in his support. The publicity surrounding his dismissal served to enhance the perceived immediacy and radical import of his political concerns and his calls for the creation of an art-based "Fifth International." In the late 1970s, he became a cofounder of the German Greens and also stood unsuccessfully for the

European Parliament. In 1979 he had his first major international retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, followed by a series of major shows in Berlin, Zürich, Madrid, and Paris. At the time of his death in 1986, Beuys was probably the most influential postwar European artist, yet the significance of his legacy and the source of his aesthetic power remain enigmatic.

Beuys's sculptures and installations made extensive use of a relatively small range of basic materials such as stone, felt, lard, blood, honey, and wood (Figure 1). These materials were used to emphasize innate tensions between heat and cold, birth and death, organic and inorganic, and masculine and feminine (these dualistic metaphors running through his work have been scarcely remarked upon in the scholarly literature). For Beuys, the use of organic materials revealed the dynamic nature of his art through processes of fermentation, desiccation, and decay, in order to emulate biophysical processes in nature (see Beuys 1980; Mennekes 1995; Stachelhaus 1989). Though he denied any clear connection between his war-time experiences and his approach to sculpture, his work does appear to be both personally therapeutic and symbolically autobiographical, with its emphasis on personal and social healing and his publicly adopted role in assisting the rehabilitation of postwar German culture (Kuspit 1991). His extensive use of felt and fat, for example, highlighted his war-time experience in the Crimea where he claimed to have been wrapped in these materials by Tartar nomads in order to aid his recovery from injury.¹⁰ Many studies of the artist have tended to go along with Beuys's own assessment of the innate originality of his work and have consequently played down the degree of influence or dialogue with other contemporaries such as Carl Andre, George Maciunas, Yves Klein, and Henry Dunant. Of the few artistic influences that Beuys has himself conceded, the sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck features prominently. In keeping with the mystification that surrounded any interpretation of his own work, Beuys argued that Lehmbruck's sculptures could not be comprehended in visual terms but only through intuition and especially through "hearing," since the work contained "categories that never previously existed," rooted in the meditative dimensions of "a completely new theory of sculptural creativity in the future" (Beuys 1986: 60). I will show during the course of this paper that this tendency towards "aesthetic exceptionalism"



Figure 1. Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair [Fettstuhl]* (1964). This is one of Beuys's best known sculptures using everyday objects and materials. The extensive use of fat in his work was an oblique autobiographical reference to his war-time experience in the Crimea. Source: The Ströher Collection, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. Courtesy of Eva Beuys-Wurmbach.

has been fundamental to Beuys's attempt to deflect the opportunities for critical appraisal of his art and ideas. Considering his status within the development of postwar art, it is surprising that his work has not been subjected to much in the way of sustained critical or scholarly attention. In this paper, I intend to set up a more rigorous examination of his work than has hitherto been the case by focusing on the centrality of nature to his discursive power and rhetorical appeal. I argue that his aesthetic project, as it has evolved since the 1960s, has been predicated on an ecologically based anti-rationalism. Furthermore, I suggest that his revival of nature-based genres is a significant element in the broader dissolution of cultural modernism with far-reaching implications for environmental discourse.

Reworking the Romantic Tradition

Beuys has been one of the leading postwar exponents of themes drawn from the northern European romantic tradition. We can also find in his work a degree of aesthetic continuity with the Renaissance and early European modernity. His repeated emphasis on the search for mystical and transcendent meanings in nature finds resonance with the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century writings of Goethe, Schiller, and Novalis, while his interdisciplinary concerns with building bridges between the arts and the sciences have been likened to the Renaissance ideals of da Vinci and Dürer (Schüster 1986). His art and ideas bear similarity with the counter-discourses of Enlightenment thought which stress the mystical, irrational, and myth-based elements to human experience. Much of his work has involved a challenge to the ostensible rationality of postwar industrial society through a questioning of its intellectual and institutional foundations. During the 1960s, Beuys's aesthetic and ecological concerns became fused together through his preoccupation with nature as a basis to transcend the strictures of Enlightenment rationality. For Beuys, his concerns with nature mirror his broader interdisciplinary project of an aesthetic universalism through the release of innate creative energies rooted in a series of invariant natural laws.

Beuys integrated his ecological concerns into his art principally through his choice of materials and iconic symbols, in combination with his own extensive expositions on the meaning of his work.

His close association with what might be termed the "ecological avant-garde" is derived from two main sources: first, his performance art or creative "actions" [*Aktionen*], of which he carried out more than 70 after his enrollment at the Düsseldorf Academy; and second, his large-scale sculptures using organic, crystalline, and even living materials. In his numerous performance pieces, his so-called *Aktionen*, audiences were transfixed with a theatrical display of objects and symbols combined together in a didactic spectacle. In Figure 2, we see the artist during the course of *Aktion, Eurasia* (1966). Familiar symbols from his work were brought together here: a dead hare (a childhood image pertaining to the problems of language, thought, and the consciousness of animals), the crossing of sticks (an allusion to the Celtic cross and pagan mythology), and above all, the physical presence of the artist himself, to enhance the personal poignancy and authorial authority of the performance. The central theme running through *Eurasia* was a reconciliation of a series of divisions between material and spiritual existence, between humankind and nature, and between Europe and Asia. For Walter Benjamin, this resolution between a series of tensions is a recurring characteristic of romantic art, where nature forms the focal point of pantheistic spirituality rooted in a state of intense contemplation (see Roberts 1982).

The growth of ecological politics since the early 1970s provided Beuys with an ideal opportunity to develop his "social sculpture" much further. The culmination of his ecological concerns was to be the project *7000 Eichen* [7,000 Oaks] inaugurated at the Documenta 7 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 1982 (Figure 3). For this piece, he began planting 7,000 trees throughout the city. Each of the trees was planted next to a small basalt column about four feet high. For Beuys, the primary purpose of this mass sculpture was to raise ecological consciousness:

The planting of seven thousand oak trees is thus only a symbolic beginning. And such a symbolic beginning requires a marker, in this instance a basalt column. The intention of such a tree-planting event is to point up the transformation of all of life, of society, and of the whole ecological system (Beuys quoted in Stüttgen, 1982:1).

This mass sculpture drew widespread public interest and was installed at a time of intense concern with the effects of acid precipitation on German forests. The work proved hugely popular,

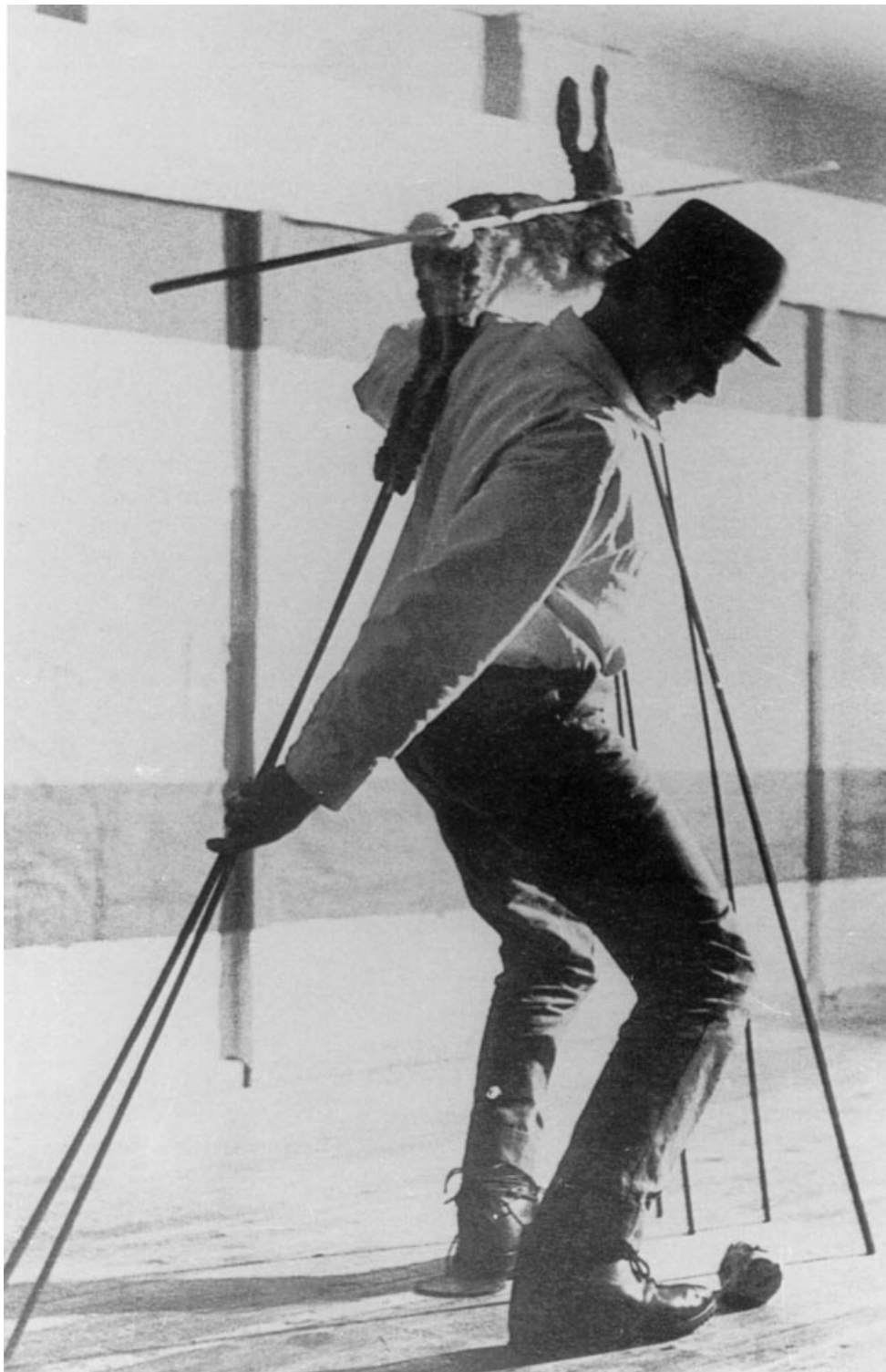


Figure 2. Joseph Beuys, *Aktion, Eurasia* (1966). These and other creative *Aktionen* placed Beuys at the forefront of new artistic developments in the 1960s. This particular performance took place at Gallerie 101 in Copenhagen. Courtesy of Eva Beuys-Wurmbach.



Figure 3. Joseph Beuys, *7,000 Oaks* [*7,000 Eichen*] (1982). This extensive mass sculpture involved planting 7,000 oak trees. The political salience of the sculpture was heightened by public concerns with *Waldsterben* (tree death) attributed to acid precipitation. This photograph was taken in Kassel in 1987. Courtesy of Caroline Tisdall.

skillfully tapping into the ecological concerns of the German public and confounding the wariness of sceptics. Yet even if Beuys had successfully extended art outside the institutional space of the museum, his work was still fully backed by galleries, dealers, and the money of the art world. His ecological sculptures remained comfortably within the appropriative scope of mainstream art and posed little real threat to those institutions and interests that benefited from the pollution of the German countryside. With *7,000 Oaks*, Beuys had not only addressed contemporary ecological anxieties but had also tapped into nationalistic conceptions of German heritage as a wooded landscape. Historians have suggested that only since the sixteenth century has the symbolic perception of forests altered in reflection of a newly emerging national identity that sought to differentiate a specifically German landscape and culture from that of southern Europe (Wood 1993). In reviving a forest theme, Beuys reworked a long-standing tradition articulated in the *Germania* of Celtis, the folk traditions and sylvan vernacular of Johann Gottfried Herder, and more recent attempts to revive the organic *Gemeinschaft* of Ferdinand Tönnies (Schama 1995). Since Beuys's project had a normative political aim, his work cannot be satisfactorily interpreted without considering the way in which nature aesthetics has been repeatedly combined with nationalist sentiment in European environmental discourse.¹¹

Talking with Nature: Beuys and the Coyote

Running through Beuys's work we find a constant tension between nature and reason: nature is used time and again as a bulwark against Enlightenment rationality. His fusion of radical ecologism and postmodern aesthetics is not only predicated on the blurring of boundaries between high art and popular culture but also lacks any meaningful distinction between humankind and the rest of nature. One of the most extraordinary confrontations between nature and modernity in postwar art is undoubtedly Beuys's well-known action entitled *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). For this creative action, Beuys had himself locked in a cage with a coyote for three days at the René Block Gallery in New York (Figure 4). To add to the air of mystery and excitement surrounding this action, Beuys was transported to the gallery on a stretcher by am-

balance directly from John F. Kennedy Airport. In addition to the coyote, Beuys had with him a felt blanket, a cane, a triangle, a stack of hay and fifty copies of the *Wall Street Journal*. For most of the time, he remained hidden beneath his felt blanket, using the cane as a kind of antenna or limb to provide movement. For Beuys, the critical significance of his performance involved its focus on the coyote as a sacred animal in North American mythology.¹² In this instance, Beuys sought not merely to highlight the breakdown in relations between people and animals but also to draw on native-American cultural heritage. Central to this performance was Beuys's claim to have communicated with the animal world in order to tap into innate and primordial sources of meaning. *Coyote* was to be a historical reconciliation between both western and nonwestern cultures, and between human and nonhuman nature:

I believe I made contact with the psychological trauma point of the United States's energy constellation: the whole American trauma with the Indian, the Red Man. You could say that a reckoning had to be made with the coyote, and only then can the trauma be lifted (Beuys quoted in Kuoni 1990:142).

Many critics were similarly unconstrained in their assessment of the significance of Beuys's performance. For Wilfried Wiegand (1986:7), "all kinds of remarkable confrontations resulted," whereas Caroline Tisdall found the performance infused with "a magic of timing, light and rhythm" (quoted in Kuoni 1990:14). Marilyn Smith (1995: 180) goes even further:

Like St Francis with the wolf of Gubbio, Beuys befriended and conferred with his coyote brother. He presented himself as fisherman, shepherd, teacher, healer, martyr and miracle-worker. These characteristics struck ancient chords at the roots of our understanding, so deep and so universal that they bound artist with audience in recognition of the continuum, while placing the artist in a vulnerable position.

Few other performances by Beuys have elicited such uncritical adoration. Yet *Coyote* may well serve an ultimate role in provoking a wider assessment of Beuys's work and his relationship with broader developments in European thought. I shall develop my critique of *Coyote* by focusing on three issues: the problematic notion of nature-based aesthetic autonomy, his reliance on an antirationalist ontology, and the historical roots and ideological implications of Beuys's ecological discourse.



Figure 4. Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). For three days Beuys was locked in a cage with a coyote at the René Block Gallery in New York. Beuys claimed to have achieved a historic reconciliation between humankind and nature. Courtesy of Caroline Tisdall.

Beuys's resistance to the critical scrutiny of his ideas stemmed in large part from the romanticist aura of mystery that surrounded his work. Just as Beuys concealed himself behind a felt blanket in *Coyote*, he consistently sought to subvert the possibility of critical appraisal for his work by linking it to a philosophical totality beyond historical and political discourse. His role was to be a messenger or interpreter: a humble purveyor of "truth" to the rapture and delight of his audience and the international art market. Central to Beuys's discursive strategy was his privileging of speech and action over other forms of communication. For Terry Atkinson (1995a:6), this allowed Beuys to present his own testimony as sovereign in matters of interpretation, whereby art becomes a kind of "permanently live recording of the artist permanently, presently speaking." This emphasis on the artistic voice as the central source of cultural authenticity places Beuys firmly within the historical tradition of Schiller, Novalis, and the German romantics. Far from "reaching out to the transcendental instinct that is timeless and universal" as Tisdall (1995:112) claims, Beuys reworked a historical tradition in a contemporary context by suppressing the social and historical basis of his work. Beuys's radical inversion of the political import of the modernist avant-garde represents not a further radicalization of modernity but its precise opposite: a reclothing of traditional genres in the kaleidoscopic garb of the postwar culture industry. Just as the drab and alienating public housing projects of the postwar era became symbolic of the exhaustion of cultural modernism, Beuys's performance art can be interpreted as a rhetorical coda to the modernist avant-garde.

A recurring discursive strategy employed by Beuys was his ambivalence towards iconic clarity and the use of deliberate mystification in order to allow the "courting of incomprehensibility." The "Shaman earth divinity" model he adopted belied a real fear of rational intellectual traditions in Western thought, and the possibility that his "theatre of hubris" might be exposed to critical scrutiny (Atkinson 1995a). In seeking to unify the divide between humankind and nature, Beuys invoked a pre-Cartesian and antirationalist ontology embodied in his occultist claim to be able to communicate profound philosophical and historical truths with animals.¹³ The yearning to understand and communicate with nature is a persistent element in Western environmental discourse: both Addison and Bolingbroke, for exam-

ple, argued that the differences between species in the "great chain of being" would be lessened if we knew their "motives" (Soper 1995:24). Yet Beuys's claims to know the consciousness of others, even nonhuman others, must be placed in the context of rationalist objections that we cannot know what it is like to be a coyote (Atkinson 1995a).¹⁴ The recent upsurge of interest in occultism and its interrelationship with various strands of environmental thought is widely documented and forms part of the contemporary dissolution of faith in science, rationality, and Enlightenment. Yet this is not to say that such sentiments form part of a broader critique of society: just as Beuys's performance art has been enthusiastically backed by the art market, the upsurge of interest in New Age spirituality, personal healing, and bioconsumerism is fully backed by capital. Indeed, one might argue that the precise import of Beuys's legacy is to subvert the possibility for rational environmental discourse, to shift attention away from the underlying causes of environmental degradation and socioeconomic polarization, and to highlight a realm of myth and transcendence in his theatre of esoterica.

Despite repeated public pronouncements on the relationship between art and politics, the philosophical roots to Beuys's vision are rarely examined in any detail in the art historical literature. He presented his world view as transcending both the political right and left, in parallel with many "green" political thinkers involved in the development of western environmentalism since the 1970s. His political project contained diverse elements: traces of nineteenth-century utopian anarchism, the symbols and beliefs of Celtic mythology, the earth-based anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, as well as various ecological discourses drawn from bioregionalism and ecogism (Adams 1992; Alexander 1990; Bellman 1995; Bramwell 1989; Kockel 1995). Beuys's ecological vision has also drawn on a specifically German variant of early twentieth-century environmental thought, where antiurbanism and antirationalism were combined in a reactionary synthesis (Dominick 1991; Gröning and Wolschke-Buhlman 1987). He presented the essence of German culture as an oral, nature-based tradition, an invariant essence disturbed by the intrusions of an industrialized modernity. Consequently, Beuys's sympathy for radical ecogism as a form of cultural redemption is both disquieting and unsurprising (Michaud 1988). Beyond Beuys's

vernacular and regional ecologism lies his holistic conception of quasi-spiritual interconnectedness as a radical alternative to the modernist disenchantment of nature. This has its counterpart in global environmental discourses concerned with bringing the biosphere back under the control of “natural” laws. This “whole-earth” imagery, so pervasive in Western environmental thought, is itself a totalizing discourse with its own history deeply (and somewhat ironically) imbedded in the European modernist tradition (Cosgrove 1994:290). The ecological supremacy espoused by Beuys is really a form of cultural supremacy in disguise (Atkinson 1995b:171). When Beuys and his followers demand a return to an ecologically based society, they are calling upon a specific set of historical and political traditions in environmental discourse: a conception of social reality which sits comfortably within the dominant power relations that structure the current patterns of global resource use and the accelerated commodification of nature.

Gerhard Richter and the Empty Spaces of Modernity

If we move to a radically different point in the spectrum of cultural representations of nature, we encounter a quite different aesthetic and intellectual experience. In the art of Gerhard Richter, we are presented with a bewildering array of subjects and styles, routinely shifting between photorealism and abstraction, between sculpture and painting, yet always pervaded by a sense of doubt, an eschewing of any ideological system that conceals the contingency and diversity of meaning. The possibilities and limitations of postwar art are expressed in all their fullness and contradictions, posing questions rather than answers, subtlety rather than simplicity. Central to Richter’s artistic dilemma has been the place of nature and landscape in postwar art: how are we to reconcile aesthetic pleasure in nature with the historical and metaphysical trappings of nature-based cultural discourses? As a young artist, Richter noted his intellectual unease with the romantic affinity for nature-based sources of cultural inspiration. In 1962, he recorded in his diary how “the idea that art copies nature is a fatal misconception. Art has always operated against nature and for reason” (in Richter 1995:11). For Richter, nature does not have any innate

meaning, it is “neither good nor evil; neither free nor directed towards a purpose”; the traces of romantic symbolism within his work are thus borne out of a mixture of nostalgia, irony, and an aesthetic predilection for beauty:

Of course, my landscapes are not only beautiful or nostalgic, with a Romantic or classical suggestion of lost Paradises, but above all “untruthful” (even if I did not always find a way of showing it); and by “untruthful” I mean glorifying the way we look at Nature—Nature, which in all its forms is always against us, because it knows nothing and is absolutely mindless: the total antithesis of ourselves, absolutely inhuman . . . Every beauty that we see in landscape—every enchanting colour effect, or tranquil scene, or powerful atmosphere, every gentle linearity or magnificent spatial depth or whatever—is our projection; and we can switch it off at a moment’s notice, to reveal only the appalling horror and ugliness (Richter 1995:124).

Gerhard Richter was born in Dresden in 1932. From 1952 to 1957, he studied fine art and mural painting at the Dresden Art Academy, then emigrated to West Germany in 1961, just before the completion of the Berlin Wall. In the early 1960s, he founded a German variant of Pop Art along with Sigmar Polke. Early influences of Richter’s include the Fluxus Movement (with which Beuys was closely associated), along with the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana.¹⁵ From 1961, he studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy with Karl Otto Götz and began to incorporate photographs and other fragments of mass culture into his work. In 1964–65, he had his first solo exhibitions in Munich, Düsseldorf, and Berlin, and by 1971, he had been appointed professor at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. By the mid-1990s, he had enjoyed major international retrospectives of his work in London, Paris, Madrid, Toronto, and Chicago and is now one of Europe’s leading artists, both in terms of his critical acclaim and commercial success. Most of the scholarly attention devoted to the art of Gerhard Richter has focused on his extensive use of imagery drawn from mass culture. Comparatively little attention has been given to his repeated use of traditional motifs drawn from nature: mountains, forests, clouds, and other fragments of nature are ubiquitous in his work. In some instances, the presence of nature is merely hinted at, as in his abstract pictures, whereas in other cases, classic figurative imagery is directly reproduced in the form of photographs.

Indeterminacy and Abstraction

Gerhard Richter is best known for his paintings within the idiom of abstract expressionism. Yet he has developed his abstract art in an era radically different from its post-war heyday epitomized by the art of Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock. For Newman, the creation of abstract art was to be devoid “of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful” (Newman 1948, quoted in Harrison and Wood 1992:10). The autonomous aesthetic of postwar abstract expressionism sought to create a form of social transcendence in distinction to the nature-based forms of transcendence associated with the romantic legacy. By the late 1960s, however, the “golden age” of abstract expressionism had disappeared through a combination of developments within art itself (the theoretical implosion of the putative aesthetic autonomy of cultural modernism) and changes within wider society (the appropriation of the avant-garde by the art market and the culture industry).

From their initial formulation in the mid-sixties onward, Richter’s abstract paintings sought to confront the circumstances that had “devalorized” abstract art under the demise of cultural modernism (Buchloh 1993:50). In *Forest* [Wald] (1992), we find a complex layering of form and texture (Figure 5). We can discern some continuity between the romantic preoccupation with introspection and the power of the unconscious, but these are radically detached from any figurative resemblance to the nature-based iconography of the past. Hints of figuration are discernible that resemble the enlarged fragments of a photographic negative. The eye is drawn repeatedly across the canvas in search of meaning or pattern in order to make sense of the image yet the overall effect remains tranquil and calming. The illusion of deep space typical of figurative landscape is replaced by the infinite and heterogeneous space of the human imagination. When talking about his abstract paintings, Richter has explicitly rejected the notion of any natural or transcendent order; the comparison with nature is derived from his conception of the random and chance elements in the creative act of painting.¹⁶ We can argue that Richter uses chance in abstract painting both as an analogy for nature and as an emulation of the random processes of change (which contrasts with spontaneously ordered notions of nature and evolution). Whereas Beuys’s

holistic scientific vision owed much to the natural theology and pantheistic spirituality of the eighteenth century, Richter’s conception of ecological science lies closer to the contemporary chaos theories of James Gleick. A chaotic nature is irreducible to a few Newtonian laws but is a “morphology of the amorphous,” emanating from an evolving and multilayered kaleidoscope of interacting elements (Porter and Gleick 1990). In his abstract paintings, Richter has developed ways of expressing a recognition of the limits to knowledge and understanding, thereby eschewing any simplistic iconic basis to representation. For Richter, his abstract painting is “the making of an analogy for something nonvisual and incomprehensible: giving it form and bringing it within reach” (Richter 1995:100). It is this theme of uncertainty and the limits to aesthetic representation that leads us to his definitive artistic statement contained in the on-going installation, *Atlas*.

The Ironic Landscape

In its recent showing at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York City, *Atlas* has grown into almost 600 panels with some five thousand photographs, including a variety of sketches and details from his own work. The first few panels are drawn from the early 1960s and are predominantly composed of miscellaneous pictures derived from magazines (mass-produced imagery features prominently throughout), interspersed with various family and holiday photographs (we see dour and laughing faces, childhood beach holidays, views of mountains and historic sites). Then something quite unexpected occurs: mingled with advertisements for jewelry, swimwear, and other blandishments of the postwar consumer boom, we are confronted by a juxtaposition of images drawn from Nazi concentration camps and hardcore pornography—Richter confronts our apathy as passive consumers of images by provoking a mixture of prurience and unease. Like Adorno, Richter clearly fears the mind-numbing and propagandizing effects of mass culture: one must be ever alert to art as a mere instrument of ideological power. In the next section, there are several hundred photographs of historical figures drawn primarily from the world of art, science, and philosophy: their presence underlying our incomprehension of the earlier images. There is also an increasing emphasis on



Figure 5. Gerhard Richter, *Forest [Wald]* (733) (1990). Since the mid-1960s, Richter has developed an increasing interest in purely abstract paintings. By the 1990s, he has largely dispensed with his extensive use of photomontage in nonfigurative art. The title *Forest* may be suggestive of Richter's interest in the continued poignancy of the idea of nature in art, not simply in terms of recognizable iconic forms, but as a metaphor for creative activity. Courtesy of the artist.

sketches and details from Richter's own work, suggestive of his attempt to recover the capacity of art to engage with wider society and the proliferation of mass produced imagery.

The next series of images, drawn from the late 1960s onwards, is of a series of aerial photographs, plans, and maps. The pictures are of real places interspersed with designs and models produced in the imagination of planners and architects: there is an eerie similarity between the vistas of postwar reconstruction and the miniature models of high-rise housing projects and multilane highways (Figure 6). Then we abruptly turn back to a mix of images drawn from nature and history: mountain ranges, Hitler, Munich, landscapes of the Canary Islands, unidentified landscapes, New York, Nuremberg, Venice, Greenland, the night sky, forests, trees, Düsseldorf, more unidentified landscapes, clouds, and seascapes. A whole series of images is presented as if we are looking through windows, or standing in a room; in some cases, the room is presented as a vast arena with panoramic glimpses of clouds at impossible angles. The depictions of landscape in Richter's *Atlas* provide a multi-perspectival vista interspersed with a range of other seemingly unconnected figurative and abstract elements. The landscape panels resemble a flickering bank of television sets or perhaps even the fragments of a half-remembered dream (Figure 7). Elements of alpine imagery so beloved of the transcendent eye in the mountain genre of European aesthetics are overlaid with largely abstract painterly motifs and textures. The use of photomontage serves to destabilize the photographic naturalism of dramatic landscapes. The extensive use of photomontage and photorealism addresses the ambiguous place of mass-produced imagery in the formulation of our aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities. The complex oscillation between painting and photography in Richter's work plays at the very core of his artistic dilemma between a "redundant figuration and the inflated subjectivism, idealism and existential weightlessness of various forms of abstraction" (Osborne 1992:104; see also Koch 1992). Photographic images are used to denote aspects of contemporary reality, as a means to work within a dialectic between mass culture and the elitist and esoteric conditions of high culture (Koch et al. 1995; Zweite 1990; Richter 1995: 152).

Richter presents us with an ironic landscape in which he recognizes the continued poignancy, yet metaphysical redundancy of landscape motifs. He has referred to these pieces of nature as "cuckoo's

eggs," an appropriate analogy for their superficial resemblance to the classic imagery of the romantic period (quoted in Butin 1994:461). There is no attempt here to reproduce a direct experience of nature, as in the nineteenth-century art of Caspar David Friedrich and Carl Blechen (see Koerner 1990; Vaughan 1994). The presence of nature does not form a symbolic continuity with a larger system or idea, as in the work of Beuys, and is not attached to any claim for innate originality.¹⁷ Richter attempts to divest nature-based iconographies of their ideological import by subverting our aesthetic sensibilities towards nature. The rhetorical power of Richter's *Atlas* is derived from its contextual conjunction of diverse imagery in order to radically rework the relationship between art and mass culture. If, like Richter, we can find no innate or universal meaning in nature, beyond that which we project onto it, the relationship between nature and culture becomes historically contingent and socially mediated. Instead of communing with a transcendental nature that severs material relations, the dialectic of nature is retained throughout. Fragments of nature become stimuli to memory and interpretation and serve to emphasize existential concerns with human ephemerality and the centerless characteristics of contemporary intellectual discourse. His work lies neither in the realm of traditional claims for aesthetic transcendence and universality, so pervasive in the work of Beuys, nor within the more cynical and self-serving idioms of slavish adaptation to the culture industry. *Atlas* challenges any lingering presence of the universal or disinterested viewer and speaks for contemporary concerns with the dissolution of western humanism and the struggle to find an adequate epistemological and ethical basis for the establishment of any shared meaning.

Conclusion

The increasing engagement of art with nature-based sources of inspiration from the late 1960s onwards is one of the most subtle, yet profound indications of contemporary unease towards the radical separation of culture from nature under the impetus of twentieth-century modernity. By the early 1970s, nature-based art had diversified into a multiplicity of different forms, ranging from the earth works of Robert Smithson to the ephemeral gestures of Richard Long, from the

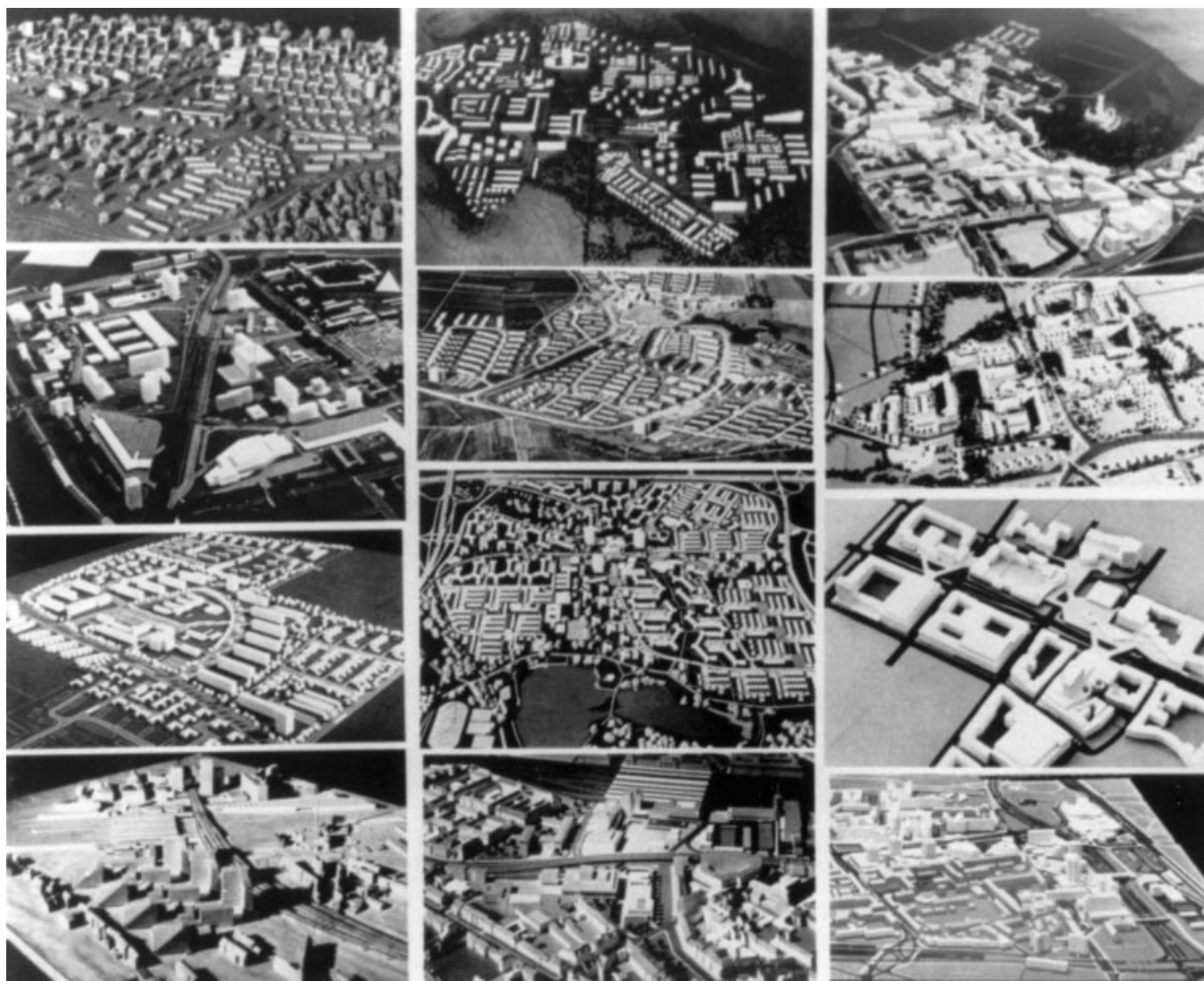


Figure 6. Gerhard Richter, *Städte [Cities]* (1968). This panel taken from *Atlas* depicts one of many panoramic cityscapes derived from aerial photographs, plans, and models that Richter has used in his work since the 1960s. In some cases, he has extensively reworked the images with paint as if to highlight the memory of the wartime destruction of cities, with their eerie landscape of skeletal half-standing buildings. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Gerhard Richter, *Übermalungen* (1989). Taken from *Atlas*, this over-painting of photographs taken in a naturalistic setting illustrates the complex interaction of iconographic symbols and painterly techniques in Richter's art. Courtesy of the artist.

mammoth installations of Robert Christo to the new public spaces of Nancy Holt, not to mention the burgeoning of murals, community gardens, and countless other new cultural engagements with nature (Beardsley 1991; Krauss 1985; Ross 1993). Within this proliferation of cultural representations of nature, the approaches of Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter occupy radically different positions. Beuys has played a key role since the 1960s in revitalizing the romantic tradition in Western art. He has used nature as a powerful metaphor in order to challenge cultural modernism and rationalist discourse. In contrast, Richter has attempted to retain an aesthetic dialogue with nature and landscape in the absence of any linkage to metaphysical traditions in European thought. The ecological critique of modernity articulated by Beuys leads back to nature and the illusory certainties of holistic universalism, whereas for Richter, the crisis of modernity stems from the effects of terroristic ideologies and the inadequacies of art to represent the centerless characteristics of Western thought.

Since the 1960s, the destruction of nature has emerged as an ideological point of reference for wider social and political discourses concerning the transformation of society. We can argue that the contradictory dynamics of modernist aesthetics have been repeatedly expressed through nature. Indeed, the suppression or exaltation of nature can be read as one of the defining tensions in modern intellectual discourse. To throw off tradition is to rework nature, to invoke the past is to return to nature. For Clement Greenberg and the guardians of high modernism, the "wish to return to the imitation of nature" was an ever-present danger, a retrograde step signaling a loss of aesthetic autonomy and a reversion to the more primitive and unsophisticated art of the past (Greenberg 1940:45). In this respect, Greenberg was mistaken since the presence of figurative nature-based forms in art does not necessarily involve an aesthetic regression to the past. In Richter's *Atlas*, we saw how nature-based motifs can play a role in the search for new forms of representation adequate to the changing relations between high art and mass culture.

At a superficial level, the contrast between the work of Beuys and Richter mirrors a series of intellectual tensions between modernity and postmodernity: whereas Beuys works within the romantic tradition based around universalist conceptions of value, Richter emphasizes the frag-

mentary, partial, and multi-perspectival dimensions to social reality. Yet if Beuys's romantic utopianism places him at odds with the postmodern critique of Enlightenment ideals, his art has nonetheless been at the forefront of both the ecological critique of modernity and the postwar challenge to the institutionalized spaces of high modernism. The lack of any clearly demarcated distinction between modernity and postmodernity is also reflected in Richter's continuing attachment to a series of ostensibly outmoded aesthetic strategies ranging from collage to abstraction. In questioning the possibilities for romantic utopianism through his ironic engagement with nature-based themes, Richter contributes to the on-going internal critique of modernity that has developed since the earlier explorations of Benjamin and Adorno (see Wellmer 1991).

Recent years have seen important advances in scholarship on the cultural depiction of nature and landscape: John Barrell has unearthed the social and economic realities that lie behind the pastoral façade; Charles Harrison has addressed the fallacy of aesthetic autonomy through the separation of landscape art from its intended audience; W.J.T. Mitchell has explored the presence of colonial and class-based iconographies in the European landscape tradition; and Gillian Rose has explored the pervasive anthropomorphic representation (and reception) of landscape as a female body. In this paper, I have sought to explore the ideological implications of nature-based claims for aesthetic autonomy and historical transcendence. I have developed my argument by emphasizing the need to locate the relations between nature and culture in the history of environmental discourse. I argue that a critical reworking of the discourses of nature leads to an aesthetic acceptance rather than suppression of the human presence in nature. As John B. Jackson (1984:xii) reflects:

the longer I look at landscapes and seek to understand them, the more convinced I am that their beauty is not simply an aspect but their very essence and that their beauty derives from the human presence. For far too long we have told ourselves that the beauty of a landscape was the expression of some transcendent law: the conformity to certain esthetic principles or the conformity to certain biological or ecological laws.

Implicit within the development of cultural modernism was a celebration of the urban present over the rural past. The new urban vistas of

skyscrapers, bridges, and factories, of swirling crowds, of social transformation, were to increasingly dominate cultural and political life. The antinature transcendentalism of De Stijl, the new urban landscapes of Le Corbusier and the Futurist glorification of machines and technology all sought to break free of nature (Rosenblum 1991). Yet through time, modernist aesthetics was to become increasingly separate from the progressive impulses of modernism more generally: earlier architectural innovations were to become subsumed into postwar "corporate modernism" and mass housing projects. The radical impulse of modernist art was to become lost in the autonomous aesthetic of abstract expressionism, and the avant-garde's political futility was to be ever more sharply revealed in the face of the capitalist art market.

An aesthetic reconciliation with nature has emerged as a prominent element in new cultural discourses since the 1960s. The shifting of boundaries between audience and artist has involved a rearrangement in the classificatory canons and relative status of different genres (Crow 1993). Yet the postwar recovery of an aesthetic dialogue with nature remains profoundly contradictory. In one sense, it is simply a reflection of the emerging crisis in nature-society relations. In another sense, it is indicative of a radical opening out and diversification of modernist discourses (Berman 1982). In Richter's art, nature and landscape have served as stimuli and points of reference to enhance the capacity of art to become both the "object and process of historical memory" (Buchloh 1993:48). In Richter's dialectical nature, the relation between past and present and between the artist and his subject is laid bare. This contrasts with Beuys's use of nature in order to dispel history and revive the realm of myth. If we hold onto a dialectical understanding of the relationship between nature and culture, we can articulate a dynamic interaction that is negotiable and historically specific. If we dispense with any historical or dialectical conception of nature, we have no means to make sense of the relationship between nature and culture. We drift into a realm of arbitrary nature-based ideologies in conjunction with conceptions of aesthetic autonomy where the human presence is rendered uncertain. A mythic nature can easily degenerate into a mere instrument of power whereas a dialectical or social nature is open to contestation and change.

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Notes

1. The symposium "Considering Joseph Beuys" was held at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in the New School for Social Research, New York, April 3–8, 1995. The symposium drew together a diverse array of contributors, including Terry Atkinson, Germano Celant, Mario Kramer, Donald Kuspit, David Rieff, Berenice Rose, Edward Lucie-Smith, Friedhelm Mennekes, Johannes Stüttgen, Marcia Tucker, and Armin Zweite.
2. Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* was shown at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York from April 27, 1995 until the spring of 1996. Begun in 1964, the *Atlas* installation was first exhibited in Bremerhaven and Utrecht during 1972 and has also been shown in Krefeld (1976), Munich (1989), and Cologne (1990).
3. The term modernity is widely used to refer to an era of unprecedented historical transformation since the sixteenth century (later or earlier in some accounts) (see Giddens 1991; Williams 1989). Modernity is also used in a more specific sense to refer to the emergence of cultural modernism as a particular aesthetic sensibility. This is frequently traced to the late nineteenth-century and is widely considered to have reached its zenith under the abstract expressionism of the immediate postwar period (Clark 1985; Kern 1983). In practice, however, these meanings tend to become blurred. When one talks of the "ecological critique of modernity," there is invariably a conflation of concern about the aesthetic impact of modernity with more generalized indictments of rationalist epistemologies, and the radical separation of society from nature in the twentieth century.
4. There is a tendency to place artists who use images or motifs drawn from nature within the realm of the romantic tradition in European thought regardless of the extent to which their art is actually founded in pantheistic and metaphysical readings of nature. Hubertus Butin (1994), for example, questions the simplistic placing of Richter's work within the tradition of German romanticism by a variety of scholars including Robert Rosenblum, Michael Danoff, Michael Shapiro, Jean-Pierre Criqui, and Werner Spies. A weakly developed differentiation of aesthetic approaches to nature is problematic since some scholars suggest that

- any aesthetic interest in nature is simply an extension of wider aesthetic sensibilities learned in society (these kinds of arguments are contained in Wollheim [1980] and Savile [1982]). In contrast, other scholars stress innate differences between aesthetic responses to art and nature and contend that nature is simply a reflection of different ways of seeing (see, for example, Danto 1981, 1988; Goodman 1984).
5. The concept of ideology has also been used to refer to the technical rationale of secular societies in the writings of Clifford Geertz, Alvin Gouldner, Nicos Poulantzas, and Jürgen Habermas (see Eagleton 1991). If we were to adopt this more restricted understanding of the term, then the ecological formulations behind Beuys's art would be better considered quasi-religious than ideological.
 6. In recent years, there has been an increasing dialogue between geographers, philosophers, and art historians concerning the aesthetic representations of nature and landscape. Examples include Cosgrove and Daniels (1988); Duncan and Ley (1993); Kemal and Gaskell (1993); Mitchell (1994); and Wrede and Adams (1991). Another emerging area of interdisciplinary scholarship concerns the aesthetic tensions between nature and modernity (see Gandy 1996a, 1996b; Matless 1992; Matless and Revill 1995; Rollins 1995). Geographers have now begun to respond, albeit only tentatively, to the broader implications of the critique of modernity for the understanding of environmental problems. Central to this project is a closer imbrication of geographical scholarship with critical discourses in European thought, a development not only of relevance to the concerns of this paper but also to the wider historiography of the discipline (see Jones et al. 1993; Natter et al. 1995).
 7. One of Beuys's earliest performance pieces or *Aktionen* was entitled *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated* and given as a live television broadcast in 1964. This has subsequently been interpreted as an early attack by Beuys on the failure of the modernist avant-garde, as epitomized by Duchamp, to effect any real change in society (Blume 1994). Other early actions that contributed to Beuys's rapidly growing notoriety within the art world include *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), *Manresa* (1966) and *I Am Trying to Set (Make) You Free* (1967).
 8. The strict demarcation of modern art from mass culture, embodied by the postwar development of abstract expressionism, is especially associated with the influential role of Clement Greenberg. His essay "Modernist Painting" from 1961 traces a direct modernist lineage between Kantian self-reflection and abstract expressionism as a teleological progression of western aesthetic sensibilities independent of wider historical and political influences (Greenberg 1961). The postwar development of abstract expressionism in the U.S. is now known to have been part of the planned cultural hegemony of the West during the Cold War, thereby dispelling the Greenbergian conception of aesthetic autonomy (see Sandler 1970; Cox 1982; and Guilbaut 1983).
 9. Gregory Ulmer insists that Beuys's performance art represents a practical exposition of the pedagogical project of Derridean grammatology founded on "the display and displacement of the literal sense of the root metaphors of Western thought—dialectic and rhetoric, science and art" (Ulmer 1985:264). Yet Ulmer never satisfactorily shows why Beuys's performance art can be conceived as an exposition of textual deconstruction because his analysis rests on an obfuscation of the ontological and epistemological questions that illuminate the contextual dimensions of the art itself.
 10. Beuys mingled his autobiographical experience into a carefully promoted "art personality," complete with the immediately recognizable fishing jacket and felt Homburg hat, to become a persona at the center of international debate and scholarship (Storr 1992; Crow 1993). The veracity of his war-time experience has been openly questioned by the art scholar Benjamin D. Buchloh. Buchloh notes how, in the biography of Beuys edited by Goetz Adriani et al., the artist is pictured standing next to what is purported to be his crashed JU 87 in the Crimea. Yet in the Guggenheim catalogue, edited by Caroline Tisdall, we find a quite different image also described as the wreckage of his plane. Buchloh wonders "Who would, or could, pose for photographs after a plane crash, when severely injured? And who took the photographs? The Tartars with their fat-and-felt camera?" (Buchloh 1980:39).
 11. During the Second World War, afforestation formed part of the planned "Germanization" of the invaded territories—particularly in Eastern Europe—and the imposition of a landscape ideal was integral to an expansive nationalistic conception of the relationship between nature and culture (see Dominick 1987; Gröning 1992).
 12. The coyote (*Canis latrans*) has long held a symbolic place in Native American mythology and culture. More recently, the coyote has been invoked as a generalized metaphor for nature by Donna Haraway (1991). Further elaboration of these themes is to be found in the work of Jane Bennett (1993; 1994). A contrasting perspective on the coyote as an interface of nature and culture can be found in studies of urban ecology (Gill 1970).
 13. The extent of occultist influences in the arts remains a neglected area of scholarship but is especially associated with nature-based iconographies (see Adams 1991; Cambell 1980; Moffitt

- 1988). We should note, however, that occultism and nature-based motifs were integral to the emergence of abstract art in the early decades of the twentieth century (one thinks here particularly of Kandinsky and Mondrian) (see Tuchman and Freeman 1986).
14. Terry Atkinson (1995a) draws on the rationalist philosophy of Thomas Nagel and his essay entitled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974) in order to refute Beuys's claims for knowledge of the consciousness of nonhuman others. For Atkinson, "Every would-be mystic, every champion of every catalogue of occult entities, every devotee of the art ontological zoo, feels empathy towards Beuys's obscurantism. It even makes them feel 'politically progressive' since it is so compulsively couched in a rhetoric of 'free democracy,' Green demagoguery and anti-bureaucracy" (Atkinson 1995b: 173).
 15. Other influences that Richter has alluded to in his interviews and writings include Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Barnett Newman, and Carle Andre (see Richter 1995).
 16. Richter has compared abstract painting with the biophysical processes of nature as a nonteleological evolution of form: "This plausible theory, that my abstract paintings evolve their motifs as the work proceeds, is a timely one, because there is no central image of the world (world view) any longer: we must work out everything for ourselves. . . . It also conforms to a general principle of Nature; for Nature, too, does not develop an organism in accordance with an idea: Nature lets its forms and modifications come, within the framework of its given facts and with the help of chance" (1986:128–29). Richter has also occasionally drawn analogies between the creative act of painting and musical improvisation. This line of argument is developed by Coosje van Bruggen (1985), who contends that we can find important similarities between Richter and Cézanne in their search for aesthetic "harmony," as a pictorial analogy with sound.
 17. Another leading postwar interpreter of the German romanticist tradition is undoubtedly Anselm Kiefer who has sought to rework romantic iconography shorn of its metaphysical pretensions. In contrast to Beuys, however, the art of Kiefer does not promote the notion of artist as autonomous genius, it is strongly secular and devoid of any shamanistic impulse, and it does not privilege the voice of the artist in matters of interpretation (Huyssen 1989, 1992).
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