

Dissertation Proposal: Inappropriate Seals

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To what capacity is the image-maker's ignorance of their subject a necessity?

o *INTRODUCTION*

A significant portion of my early youth involved day tripping. For some time I did not appreciate the beauty and peculiarity of the English countryside's hamlets and customs; I viewed its withering coastal towns in boredom, and my parents' insistence on visiting cathedrals and stately homes dry. Perhaps it is my upbringing observing the church as an unenlightened tourist that has led me to once again look through its window, for I cannot seem to cut ties to the cross within my practice- a motif I do not fully understand. Although, in spite of its connotations to the death of Christ, the cross even as a crucifix, of course, predates the inception of Christianity by hundreds of years so far as the 6th Century BC (Retief and Cilliers, 2003), so to what end should this form be bound to religious implication? I intend here to explore the cross and its context in art history as such a recurrence in order to contextualise the symbol within my practice. I shall discuss how it and other such cultural items may be reappropriated and moulded before a final look at the artist's position as an outside perspective, in doing so hoping to rationalize a practice that can only observe.

1 MAKING CROSSES

When a cross surfaces, its interpretations are inevitably broader than its intended implications. Throughout antiquity, its recurrence in the form of crucifix was a device of terror. Indeed as Hengel writes in 1977's *Crucifixion*, 'it was an utterly offensive affair' to 'the men of the ancient world (Hengel, 1977, pp. 22)- its sentence was of ultimate humiliation, torture and was an open display of state ruthlessness. The crucifix was not however fixed in form even at this time, contrary to the impression made of its later canon as a universally recognisable symbol of Christ. Arms stretched in the top quarter- the configuration of the cross and its victims upon it varied on account of its enforcers whim (Hengel, pp.24). In the case of Saint Peter [Figure 1], for example, he affixed with his head pointing downward. The cross remaining on some level a symbol of suffering is therefore indifferent to its orientation, unescapable- a concrete reading of the cruciform thus wholly untenable.

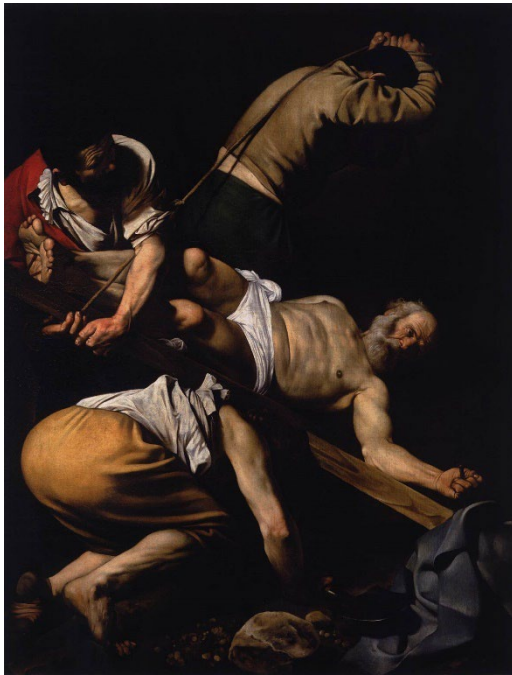


Figure 1. *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*



Figure 2. *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement*

When Lotty Rosenfeld took to the tarmac passing through her hometown and laced over its central markings perpendicular strips of cloth, a great deal of ambiguity came with the resulting mile of crosses that straggled the desert. The year was 1979 and the Santiago raised artist had witnessed Chile suffer under the tyrannical military regime of Augusto Pinochet since 1973. 1978 saw the implementation of a clause that nullified law enforcement's accountability for human rights breaches stretching back to the state's inception- such was the depth of the country's violent repression (Rothe and Bollander, 2011, pp. 162-165).

Road markings unabashedly control the personal action of the masses as a safety measure, unassumingly commanding road users to stay in line. Generally instituted by the ruling institution, within the context of Rosenfeld's *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement* such lines may be construed symbolic of the overarching government influence on Chilean life at the time, present even within what may be taken as innocent or unassuming. Rosenfeld decided against control.

If we disregard further implications, though, instigating a cross remained at the very least an intervention. The drawn cross is a decisive mark: two overlayed slashes of a pen on paper may be made with haste to vote on a ballot, mark a graph, or void a written statement. Such sketches are instinctual, but if their production is superfluous to their ratifying effects, why not issue them by stamp?



Figure 3. Stamp Sculpture

Atop a tower of identically filled yellowed vinyl postcards reading 'Honey is flowing in all directions' reads a stamp, 'Hauptstrom', translating from German to 'Mainstream'. The word is surrounded by arrows, a colon and an elongated 'U', and within are two variations on a cross. A stamp of this design had been used by the artist for over 30 years by the time *Stamp Sculpture* was produced in 1981- it had been applied to working papers of mathematical equations, envelopes, receipts, souvenir photos and official letters- its mark punched multiple times a subject, its intervention in keeping with a career long repurchase of the cross. Joseph Beuys was indeed Christian, but this seal was not overtly as such.

Post-war Germany was, and was continued to be, hurt- beyond mourning and destroyed homes its partition into a Soviet stringed East and a consumerist allied West (a microcosm of increasingly frosty international communist-capitalist tensions) came all the while much of its population [including, former Luftwaffe, Beuys] were still themselves distancing their own culpability in the calamitous affair of the Third Reich prior (Thomas, 2019, pp. 108). To Beuys, the cross' frequent appearance within his practice extended outside the projection of his Christian faith to a wider symbol of unity (Rosenthal, 2005, pp. 37). The strength and balance of its form emanating an aura of constancy, its prongs pushing outwards as if reaching to an ally. Consequently, its candid impressions in paint across various works acted as a plea for peace and universal committee in line with his interest in a united people of EURASIA (see Appendix B).

Beuys however, it appears, was acutely aware of the inversely painful implications of the cross that muddled these waters. 'Braunkreuz' ['Brown cross'] was a heavy bodied brown paint Beuys mixed to his own specification- it was used to project large, rough blocks, often on plain paper but most interestingly over the top of newspaper articles and working sketches. That the artist met with Braunkreuz in looking for a drawing material more reminiscent of sculpture (Beuys, 1993) is telling; the paint was a tool to establish physical barriers with subjects.

I was looking for a colour which was not at all experienced as a colour,

which was a substance; a kind of sculptural expression

which was a colour but was not a colour

(Beuys, 1993)

The newspaper was not painted therefore, Braunkreuz was laid on top of it. 'Brown cross' was a weighted label, suggesting first a cross that has been browned, browned in this case with implications of corporation and degradation- a hue closer in association with industrial material, laminate floors, rust and dried blood than materials suggesting growth like soil or bark. 'Brown cross' is a distinct diversion if not a disruption of the red cross scholars such as Hannah Abdullah (Abdullah, 2016) infer its nature alike . Beuys was an invested environmental activist and co-founder [also once Bundestag and European Parliament representative candidate of] the German Green Party (Adams, 1992, pp. 27). Nature, he felt, was being abused (see Appendix C). The wholeness of living things the cross represented was tainted, Braunkreuz indelibly interpretable as a reflection of disorder; its pasting over information perhaps indicative of society's dismissal of its failings to Earth.

The Hauptstrom stamp exists within the context of these sufferings, yet was fighting to be a catalyst for change rather than an institutional critique- notably, it was adopted in 1967 as a mark of Beuys' own German Student's party and its following iterations, a mouthpiece for a fairer, youth inclusive democracy that better served public interests amidst national cries for pacifism and a growing desire for national accountability for the Nazi legacy (Wilmers, 2015). The stamped cross was an appeal to these causes. Eventually, Beuys' persona became a significant tenant of his practice (Bonami, 2005) and visual motifs such as the cross and Braunkreuz developed into prolific trademark devices. As curator Ann Temkin has voiced (Temkin, No date), the cross' binding form allowed it to be used by Beuys like a 'battery', activating the power of its surfaces content simply through its application.

A proponent of 'social sculpture' whereby art may be adopted by all to develop societal harmony analogised by Beuys to a beehive (Adams, pp. 30) the crosses remained engrained requests for scepticism and righteousness fecund and fruitful. Honey, a medicinal substance, was flowing in all directions; the mark of a cross for Beuys was a guiding symbol of healing pushing into the mainstream.

2 HEADS IN HANDS I



Figure 4. Raw Materials

So far, this essay has glanced at the complexities of recurrence through the lens of the cross, yet this opens up to the question of what changes when such repetitions are conscious and centralised? With repetition comes rhetoric, syntax that controls and can be used to control.

Visitors of the Tate Modern in the winter of 2004/5 were welcomed to Turbine Hall by a confounding cacophony of seemingly unlinked and nonsensical looped voices, underpinned by a constant hum hanging from above. Crowded yet not overbearing in volume, if experienced at a busy time the recordings were reported to have merged with audience chatter (Auping, 2005) unnoticeable at first for unknowing visitors. They repeated themselves and equivocated, building up to rhythms and differing tones- calm to frustrated, rushed to panicked, panicked to calm. They filled the space with speakers present in every section, emitting from various directions individual tracks. This was Bruce Nauman's *Raw Materials*- a purely audial installation comprising of 22 vocal clips predominantly sampled or interpolated from across his career.

To what end? If we approach the precedents as they are illustrative, Nauman emphasised language is a material in the same vein as wood or steel; as one augments and compounds forms through physical sculpture, the artist has found to reconfigure text as sounds more musical than lexical, free of previous contexts. Nauman has long been interested in the technical aspects of music theory (Nauman, No date) and, indeed, adopting modern, immersive mastering methods, utilising the Turbine Hall's exceptional acoustics (MacDonald, 2005); the work may simply be seen as a cinematic experiment. This would not be out of character given the artist's admiration for Ludwig Wittgenstein (Saval, 2018), who spoke of language's lack of inherent meaning when drawn out of the social groups it exists within, its malleability and its illusion of structure (Wittgenstein, 1986): to use the philosopher's toolbox, Nauman had wrought a new language game.

However, perhaps a more interesting interpretation of *Raw Materials* is of Nauman reprising the role of ringmaster. On a base level, the repetition of the verses positions the clips as almost chantlike. The audience may infer as they would in a football stadium or as they may have on school trips as a child that they are to respond in some manner, however in what manner is unavoidably and frustratingly unapparent to them- there is no hidden key to meaning, for Nauman demands only attention. Visitors to the Tate walked and stopped; walked and stopped; came back and forth to listen (Hagendoorn, 2004)- Nauman had imposed ritual. Repeating is a manner of convincing.

3 HEADS IN HANDS II

Reappropriation is necessarily of repeating something, however as seen with Raw Materials, this (like repetition itself) may often occur incidentally. In keeping with a motif of this essay, what may come of more conscious decisions to twist an established narrative?



Figure 5. *Death of the Virgin*

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio existed within a period wherein the Roman Catholic Church was in dire want of art that grounded its teachings in reality- the Counter-Reformation (Chorpenning, 1987) (see Appendix D). His paintings did not glamourize his holy subjects as clean, unequivocally good people of a time so distant that their representation was confined to artificial, pristine postcards of valour, rather the artist depicted them as if in the present day: tired, weak and dusty. Such unabashed anachronisms fundamentally shifted the nature of the biblical narratives they were invested into. The *Death of the Virgin* [Mary] [Figure 5], for example was ceased to be a simple scene of tragedy but of contemporary political charge. Caravaggio's model for Mary was believed to have been a prostitute that the artist frequented- a sacrilegious deviation from the nature of the story so great in the eyes of the Church it was rejected from its exhibition in Rome's Santa Maria della Scala church (Loh, 2016). In such incoherencies, his images adopted a necessarily contemporary and progressive stance, levelling in stature working women and, in other works, various other impoverished portions of society, with the gilt and velvet wealth of Catholic authority. His paintings were developed out of darkness, black canvases laced with red and ochre; blood and earth. Caravaggio brought to the fore the reality of the imperfect world, one disconnected from the glorified façade of former Church narratives.



Figure 6. David with the Head of Goliath (c.1600)



Figure 7. David with the Head of Goliath (1600-1)

Caravaggio reframed the story of David and Goliath three times [museum accreditations to be accepted]. The artist had first notably approached the tale circa 1600 [Figure 6], David seen calmly retrieving the head of his victim, then in a second instance not a year following depicting a triumphant David posing courageously, holding Goliath's head outwards as if showcasing his doing [Figure 7]. Caravaggio's relation to the scene initially found in the proud retrieval of award, appropriate given his sharp increase in fame and wealth following the wide acclaim of his commission at the Contarelli Chapel a year before (Hall, 2010). Nauman held, tore and moulded his body of work and the language inhabited within. It was not an act of self-aggrandisement nor allegory but a philosophical thesis. Caravaggio a few short of 400 years prior, had killed a man. His life would only last another 4 years following the incident, dying of suspicious circumstances this same year- these times were defined by discomfort, uncertainty and fear, wanted by Rome having fled his murder trial, enemies amassed (Langdon, 1998). David and Goliath was seemingly a benchmark.



Figure 8. David with the Head of Goliath (1610)

By 1610 the painter had found his last refuge in Naples, having moved between the city, Malta and Sicily in retreat from the capital (Christiansen, 2017). Caravaggio returned once more to the story of David and Goliath, though on this occasion no sense of sprite or pride can be observed. Without question, David looks on his work with a disgust and trauma, stretching out his arm as if to most avoid the touch of the sawn head. The head of Goliath here is the head of the artist. Caravaggio presents himself defeated: once a prized painter in spite of his frequent debauchery and heresies, a figurative Goliath of Italy's artistic catalogue, he was now hunted and disgraced. The reframing of this tale indicates he believed the weight of his work an endowment so great the murder to be held against him was of an unfair valuation of his worth- an issue considered, like David by the giant, insignificant. At this time, Caravaggio was vying for a pardon (Langdon, 1998, pp. 383), bending the narrative into egocentric allegory: on David's sword is engraved 'H-AS OS', widely interpreted as an initialism for 'Humilitas Occidit Superbiam' [Humility Kills Pride] (Stone, 2012, pp. 583).

The nature of this reappropriation is complex- the model of David, in each iteration, wore a sashed robe, and in the latter two the same costume altogether. Caravaggio, it can be inferred, thus did not look to simply retell this story but to actively rewrite his previous works- detracting from his paintings the pretention that they were anything but depictions of reenactments. This paints Caravaggio as holding an uncharacteristically contemporary understanding of art fundamentally existing as an outsider's perspective of the subjects it portrays.

4 SELLING LIES?

In March 1994, having spent nearly a decade as resident of Mexico City, Francis Alÿs stood among a rank of prospecting labourers lining the fence of the Metropolitan Cathedral; his service read 'turista', translating to tourist.



Figure 9. *Turista*

Much of Alÿs' practice had and continued to be centred around Mexican (and generally South American) socio-economic and political issues. Indeed, his 1997 action *Paradox of Practice 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* related to the hard efforts of Mexican working classes failing to actualise tangible changes in their lifestyles, pushing a block of ice through the streets of the capital until it melted entirely as a metaphor. Alÿs though, was not in a position to truly relate with those he spoke for- he was well-educated, travelled and without experience of youth in such an urbanised city (Yood, 2023). The intuitive absurdity of *Turista* makes this sentiment apparent- the term tourist connotes leisure not work, freedom and ignorant fascination- the artist's occupation is removed from labouring society, it is viewed externally as trivial, and its makeup consequently cannot speak for a population. Crucially though, Alÿs' attendance to the transmission of an ignorant perspective is not deemed negative: his services are for sale just the same.

5 *CONCLUSION*

To be aware of one's limitations when representing pre-existing narratives or iconographies within their artistic output is a serious matter. Ignorance is not only frowned upon, as illuminated by Alÿs, but also dangerous. If Beuys viewed his Braunkreuz as a clear symbol of rejuvenation, a dissonance within his coding muddled this messaging into an even muddier brown. As this essay has contended, through repetition one may bend these properties like plastic, but misinterpretation is unavoidable. A question arises: to what capacity is the image-maker's ignorance of their subject a necessity? Overt depictions of weighted symbols are unpredictable. To claim a work's message forthright is to forge an unknown narrative; only in the acknowledgement of our blind spots may we establish rhetoric. My dissertation is on course to review this question.

To what capacity is an image-maker's ignorance of their subject a necessity?

RECONSIDER CONCLUSION AND OR QUESTION?

Appendices

Appendix A:

Lotty Rosenfeld and NO+

Rosenfeld would become instrumental in the 1983 initiation NO+ movement propelled by the performance art activist group Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA) of which she co-founded (Bryan-Wilson, 2020). 'NO+' became widespread across Chile through both graffiti and anti-Pinochet speakers (Hemispheric Institute, No date)- proponents were able to use the phrase as a template to critique whichever point of the regime or society they chose to [NO + _____] (Bryan-Wilson, 2020). *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement* consequently may have subconsciously alluded to plus icons like those that would become soon become so prominent in the Chilean's world, reflecting a boiling pot of discontent and a desire for change.

Appendix B:

Joseph Beuys and EURASIA

Beuys ideated a potential society in corroboration with Nam June Paik (manifesto included) whereby the peoples of Europe and Asia would exist under one utopian civilisation/culture/transcontinental community (Walters, 2019).

This idea was well surmised by his *Eurasian Siberian Symphony*, 1963, whereby a Hare was attached to felt tied rods over a black board reading 'EURASIA' with a halved cross, temperature readings of 42 Celsius in Berlin and the angles of which the hare suspending rods be affixed. The cross halved, as Mark Rosenthal has argued depicts the healing cross we associate with Beuys 'badly in need of healing' (Rosenthal, 2005), 'EURASIA' sits below it as if the answer to its resolution. The heat of Berlin reflecting rising political tensions in the face of Anti-Vietnam protests (Walters, 2019), the angles noted are instructions for the establishment of a means of escape to this dreamed EURASIA, free of such tensions- crucially establishing the hare. The hare was a European Hare, which as Victoria Walters states is interestingly also found in Asia (Walters, 2019); thus the hare became a symbol of the transition to EURASIA: borders and definitions must be blurred, and must be done with the haste of the animal.

EURASIA therefore was an inherently reactionary concept, and spoke of a desire to unify in the same manner as Beuys' crosses.

Appendix C:

Environmental neglect in the split Germany

The environment was treated poorly by both the FRG and GDR, and its neglectful treatment was viewed as weaponised by the opposing sides of the nation when one's actions backfired on the other: local issues involving water supply infrastructure shared with the other state, were not addressed in a rush either (Grady, 2015, pp. 670). Cold War tensions thus had a direct impact on the environment. Coinciding with the construction of the Berlin Wall, a slew of military placements were installed by the Soviets across the border- forests, streams and other biomes were built through rather than with, reinforcing this claim (Grady, pp, 674-5). In the West, Joseph Beuys acknowledged capitalism was ambivalent to the protection of nature amidst industrialisation and urbanisation (Adams, pp. 26).

Evidence that Beuys actively opposed such flagrant remiss can be seen throughout his career in the form of engagement in environmental protests (Adams, pp.27); *7000 Oaks*, et cetera, not to mention his aforementioned involvement with the Green Party.

Appendix D:

Brief context on the Counter-Reformation and art.

The Counter-Reformation was an urgent reaction by the Catholic Church to the new threat of Protestantism, sparked by the Martin Luther instigated Reformation. Luther, an Augustinian monk had pinned 95 grievances with the Roman institution on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517, most important being his disagreement with the divine weight given to Catholic clergy in their ability to absolve sin and also the church's excessively lavish art culture (distracting from the true connection to God found on an individual, introspective level to worship of a space). This school of thought reached across Europe extensively- churches were vandalised, communities were divided and the Catholic Church was undermined.

The 1545 Council of Trent marked the effective start of the Counter-Reformation, where it was agreed reformations on the transparency of church practice and the integrity of the churchmen should be made to reassert Catholic dominance (Mayor, 1945, pp. 102) . Further art was to be faithful to its biblical material brought down in luxurious grandeur in order to appease reformers and be more accessible to the general population (Mayor, pp. 104). All the while, it needed to be greatly dramatic to inspire audiences, restoring love for the church. Out of this arose Baroque. Such had been the backdrop for Caravaggio.

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