

Wirtschaftswerte: a conservation history

Joseph Beuys

27 June – 13 September 2026

S.M.A.K., Ghent



Joseph Beuys, *Wirtschaftswerte*, 1980. Collection S.M.A.K., Ghent. Photo: Dirk Pauwels

This summer, S.M.A.K. highlights the conservation history of Joseph Beuys' iconic *Wirtschaftswerte* (1980). Visitors will discover not only a landmark work from the museum's collection, but also the story behind its care and preservation. Presented in conjunction with the 31st Congress of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC), the exhibition explores the artwork's conservation history and offers insight into the challenges of conserving and restoring contemporary art.

Joseph Beuys (1921, Krefeld – 1986, Düsseldorf) is regarded as one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century and is renowned for addressing political and social issues in his work. His installation 'Wirtschaftswerte' (1980) consists of metal racks on which packets of food and other products are displayed. Beuys sourced the

merchandise from former East Germany. Standing in front of the racks is a block of plaster, around which paintings from the period of Karl Marx (1818–1883), the German philosopher and founder of communism, are hung. ‘Wirtschaftswerte’ can be loosely translated as “economic values”. On every product, without distinction, Beuys wrote “1 Wirtschaftswert”, the value he assigned to it. With this work, the artist alludes to the former division between communist Eastern Europe and the capitalist West.

The installation contains many different materials, each of which reacts differently to the passage of time. Food spoiled or was attacked by insects. Packaging tore and began to leak. Metal tins rusted or burst open. The corners of the plaster block were crumbling when the work was first installed. At the time, Beuys repaired them with butter. Until our conservation department was established in 1998, the conservation and restoration of this artwork consisted mainly of emergency interventions. For example, the contents of many packets were replaced. From 1998 onwards, new materials, techniques, and research were deployed to keep ‘Wirtschaftswerte’ in the best possible condition and allow it to remain on display. The care of this artwork continues to raise questions, the central one being: **should we combat decay, or is it a defining feature of the work?**

With this presentation, S.M.A.K. offers visitors a behind-the-scenes look at museum practice. The exhibition demonstrates how the conservation of contemporary art requires a careful balance between preserving the physical integrity of an artwork and respecting the artist's original intent.

The presentation is organised on the occasion of the 31st Congress of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC), which takes place in Ghent from 8 to 11 September 2026. More information is available [here](#).

Project coordinators: Claudia Kramer and Carla Viana

Images

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(l) The artist installing the work in 1980. Staeck, Klaus; Steidl, Gerhard, 'Joseph Beuys: Das Wirtschaftswertprinzip / The Principle of Economic Value', 1990. Foto: Staeck/Steidl

(r) During the installation of the work in 1980, the artist signs each individual package. Staeck, Klaus; Steidl, Gerhard, 'Beuys Book', 2012



(l) Jar of hare pâté in its original condition in 1980. Staeck, Klaus; Steidl, Gerhard, 'Joseph Beuys: Das Wirtschaftswertprinzip / The Principle of Economic Value', 1990. Foto: Staeck/Steidl

(m) Jar of hare pâté in its current condition. Archive S.M.A.K.

(r) Current condition of a severely damaged chocolate pudding package that can no longer be exhibited. Archive S.M.A.K.

Press Contact

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About S.M.A.K.

S.M.A.K. shows art from its own collection in dialogue with works of contemporary artists from all corners of the world. By means of contemporary art, S.M.A.K. seeks and gives meaning to this complex and fragmented world. In doing so, the museum makes every effort to be accessible and inclusive, because art is for everyone.

Opening hours:

Week days outside school holidays: 9:30 - 17:30

Weekends, school holidays and public holidays: 10:00 - 18:00

Closed on Monday

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