

'Wirtschaftswerte' (1980) by Joseph Beuys: A Conservation History

Joseph Beuys is a central figure in the S.M.A.K. collection, which holds approximately fifty works by the artist. One of its key works is the installation 'Wirtschaftswerte', which loosely translates as "economic values". In 1980, Beuys creates the work in situ in Ghent for the exhibition 'Art in Europe after '68'. He brought the various components with him from Germany. He arranges six metal racks in an L-shape and fills them with everyday goods and foodstuffs, chiefly sourced from the former East Germany. Beuys had collected these products before 1980, attracted by their simple and sometimes colourful printed designs, which he saw as symbols of a different economic world.

In front of the racks, he places a plaster block. This came from the artist's studio and dates from 1960. As its corners have suffered damage, Beuys repairs them with butter, a material he often uses in his work. During the installation process, the artist marks each product with his signature, a stamp bearing the words "Free International University", and the inscription "1 Wirtschaftswert". On the upper surface of the plaster block, Beuys writes in pencil: "Der Eurasier lässt schon Grüßen, Joseph".

Period 1980-1998

After the exhibition, the work is purchased. Already in its early years, staff carries out so-called 'emergency interventions' because insects have begun to attack the foodstuffs. Museum staff removes the contents, often working heavy handedly: they cut open the packaging and subsequently reseal it with strong tape or glue. The original contents are replaced with materials including polystyrene beads, pieces of wood, metal wire and sawdust.

Furthermore, the work is exhibited extensively from the outset. It is likely that climatic requirements and lighting guidelines are not always strictly observed. The year 1984 is particularly significant, as Beuys himself installs the work in the exhibition 'Von Hier Aus' in Düsseldorf. (1) He supposedly noticed that some packages were missing, which led him to place chicken wire around the racks. He also noted that the replacement contents, which were not in themselves an issue for him, had been chosen without sufficient attention to matching the original weight. In other words, the 'look and feel' of the packages was important to him. (2)

In 1988, an Austrian researcher compiled a complete inventory of all components. (3) To this day, this inventory remains the reference for the products present. Between 1980 and 1988, a basic installation plan was compiled out of the need to have a tool to guide reinstallation.

Period 1998-2010

Ahead of the opening of S.M.A.K., in 1998 the museum establishes a conservation studio. From that point onwards, the work was viewed through a different lens. Whereas previously only the most pressing problems had been addressed, efforts were now made to monitor the condition of the work. Conservators produce condition reports describing damage in detail and documenting it through photographs. Preventive measures are also introduced to stabilise the work. For example, the foodstuffs are provided with a purpose-made crate for storage and transport. In accordance with the technical knowledge of the period, each compartment is lined with paper saturated with camphor spirit. Later, Plexiglas boxes are produced that can be hermetically sealed and filled with nitrogen. This method was used only briefly, as it proved overly labour-intensive.

Alongside measures to stabilise the work's physical condition, decay and degradation become more consciously integrated into its conservation strategy. An article in the journal 'Kunstenaarsmateriaal', in which then Director Jan Hoet and Restorer Frederica Huys publish a joint reflection on 'Wirtschaftswerte', demonstrates that the meaning and interpretation of the work go hand in hand with its material preservation. (4) The installation is described as 'processual', with change forming an integral part of the work. The way such change is managed must be based on knowledge and documentation, and it must also be preserved for the future.

Period 2010-2026

In 2011, the first major restoration campaign is undertaken. Two paper restorers treat 75 objects that have paper packaging. (5) The treatment involves removing old adhesive and tape residues, consolidating tears and deacidifying the paper. Where necessary, the restorers create a secondary support for individual packages to prevent the filling from coming into contact with the packaging. Each package then receives a new filling

of sustainable materials, such as conservation foam, cellulose fibres, sand or glass beads. Finally, the packaging is resealed in a reversible manner using methylcellulose.

A second major restoration campaign takes place in 2019, when the plaster block is treated. As a result of intensive handling, a corner on the underside has cracked and is at risk of breaking off. Following X-ray material analysis and endoscopic examination, a stone restorer glues the plaster and reinforces the corner with bolts. The plaster block weighs 225 kg and is therefore difficult to move. For this reason, a flat metal structure is fabricated and secured to the underside with bolts. This structure allows the block to be moved more easily using, for example, a forklift truck. As a result, the risk of damage during reinstallation has been reduced. (6)

Alongside restoration treatments, also the guidelines for conservation are refined. These include not only stricter parameters for temperature, relative humidity and lighting during exhibition and storage, but also specific instructions for handling the various components correctly. For example, the metal racks have to be fully assembled and dismantled for every installation and de-installation. This soon leads to distortion and instability. For this reason, specific guidelines were developed to stabilise the racks using consistent materials and techniques. (7)

In 2018, the packages undergo an anoxic treatment. Organic material is placed in an oxygen-free environment for one month, eliminating any active insect infestation.

What characterises the conservation history of 'Wirtschaftswerte' is not only the diversity of its materials, but also the wide range of damage types and restoration treatments with which restorers have to contend. Between 2015 and 2019, a collection researcher and a restorer develop a decision-making model. (8) The model connects past experience with present needs and centres on a crucial question: does the content of a package leak, or not? From there, further questions address the original contents and whether a package belongs to a particular product group. The aim of the model is to implement a nuanced and consistent approach to decisions regarding restoration interventions. The guiding principle is always to preserve as much of the original material as possible while protecting the work from damage.

Following the current exhibition, we plan to carry out a condition assessment of all components, with particular attention to the objects on the racks and the way they are

packaged in storage. For the first time, components requiring urgent treatment will be assessed using the decision-making model.

Sources

- (1) *Von hier aus: Zwei Monate neue Deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf*, Düsseldorfer Messe (Halle 13), Düsseldorf, 1984.09.29 – 1984.12.02
- (2) Blanchaert, K., *Art in Europe after '68, Ghent 1980*, Ghent, 2014, p.183
- (3) Zeiller, M., *Inventarverzeichnis*, in *Das Ding im Künstlermuseum*, Vienna, 1989
- (4) Hoet, J., and Huys, F., *Vervangbare authenticiteit*, in *kM*, no. 34, summer 2000, pp.5-6
- (5) Collaboration between Femke Segers, www.paperconservation.be, and Hannelore Mattheus, Papier Restauratie, 2011
- (6) Linda Temmink, stone restorer, IPARC, 2019
- (7) Advisory note prepared by METAFOSE, www.metafose.be, 2017
- (8) Collection Researcher Katrien Blanchaert and Conservator-Restorer Rebecca Heremans, former members of staff at S.M.A.K., studied 'Wirtschaftswerte' as part of a research project on the relationship between our museum collection and the exhibition 'Art in Europe after '68', 2012-2014. R. Heremans published and presented a study on 'Wirtschaftswerte' in 2019: <https://www.getty.edu/publications/living-matter/approaches/17/>

Decision-making model

