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Joseph Beuys
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The Joseph Beuys drawings scandal: Expert Heiner Bastian explains why the drawings are fakes while the dealer who owns them defends them and himself

“I’m right and you’re wrong!” “No, I’m right and you’re wrong!”

Jason Edward Kaufman

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In May, the Viennese dealer Julius Hummel received back from the Guggenheim Museum in New York fourteen dubious drawings attributed to Germany’s most influential post-war artist, Joseph Beuys, which the museum had been considering buying. In exchange the museum took two securely attributed works made by Beuys while in Vienna: an installation and a related blackboard on which the artist had illustrated one of his famous performance lectures, both titled “Jungfrau” and both dated 1979 (they are currently on view in the uptown museum).

The fourteen suspect works had featured in the 1992 inaugural exhibition of the Guggenheim’s SoHo branch. Director Thomas Krens received a letter from Beuys’s widow Eva, asking that the

works be taken off the walls until they had been authenticated. They remained on the walls until the end of the exhibition, but the museum was sufficiently rattled to insist on a renegotiation with Mr Hummel.

The Berlin-based Beuys expert, Heiner Bastian, comments, “The interesting question is why the Guggenheim Museum was so naive as to purchase drawings from that part of Mr Hummel’s collection. I mean, if you don’t know anything about Beuys drawings, you at least ask for a written, provable provenance—for the expertise of Hans van der Grinten or Dieter Koeplin—and you ask Mrs Beuys. I am quite amazed by their procedures”.

This concludes a minor chapter in the ongoing tale of the allegedly fake Beuys works exhibited at the Accademia di Brera in Milan in 1992 and early in 1993 (The Art Newspaper No. 29, June 1993, pp. 1-2). The Guggenheim drawings formed part of this exhibition, which Mr Bastian roundly denounced as full of fakes.

Other critics emerged, a Milan court temporarily sequestered the works, and scheduled stops at the Albertina and in Kassel were cancelled. Mr Hummel sued his accuser in Berlin, seeking an injunction to prevent him from repeating the charges, and he initially won. But the decision was reversed when it became clear that the provenance for the disputed drawings was highly questionable. Mr Hummel’s supposed source, Viennese artist/dealer Oswald Oberhuber (who was not available for comment), announced that he had unwittingly signed a false declaration, and that in fact he was unacquainted with the works in question. Mr Hummel has filed suit against Mr Oberhuber in Vienna, with the next hearing slated for the autumn.

Contributors to the Brera catalogue, Swiss exhibition organiser Harald Szeeman, who acquired one of the pieces, and the director of the Kassel Art Association Veit Loers, have distanced themselves from the affair.

The Berlin court made no ruling as to the authenticity of the works, and unless the estate elects to pursue Mr Hummel, a full hearing on that question may never occur. However, The Art Newspaper decided to give Messrs Hummel and Bastian an opportunity to state their cases, which they did separately to The Art Newspaper.

Heiner Bastian: Mr Hummel speaks of his collection as the so-called “Wiener Block”, but you have to be as dumb as Mr Hummel even to try to say such a thing. More than fifty art historians, curators, publishers, writers, students, collectors have never heard Beuys say that he produced drawings in Vienna, and he never did.

Julius Hummel: I have about seventy pieces by Beuys, all acquired through Oswald Oberhuber. I went to pick them up at the Galeria Nächst St Stephan in Vienna where Oberhuber was the artistic director at the time.

Joseph Beuys was represented in Austria by the Gallery Nächst St Stephan and Oswald Oberhuber was his closest friend in town. I was present when Beuys worked in Vienna in front of an audience, and I acquired works which are documented with photographs showing Beuys working on the pieces. [The disputed drawings are undocumented by photographs. Ed.]

Bastian: I do not know how many works Mr Hummel owns. I can only say that twenty-six out of twenty-nine exhibited at the Brera in Milan are fakes. The Berlin court ruled last year that I have every right to say this. Not one single Beuys expert or art historian disagrees with me. There is no serious discussion possible about these fakes; they are simply junk, produced with criminal energy (unfortunately we do not know by whom) for exhibition and eventually sale—simply to make money.

Hummel: Bastian came to the Brera exhibition with his family and visited the show for an hour and a half. Afterwards we met to have coffee and talked about the exhibition. He did not mention anything about his doubts. Just three days later he sent a press statement to various museums and newspapers claiming that all works, except the multiples, are fakes. This is not the approach of an expert.

Bastian: He called my house in the morning and found out I had gone to Milan, and went there to meet me at the Brera. I asked him three questions: Have you personally ever been present while Beuys did one of these works I have just seen? And he answered, “No”. Do you know anyone who was present when Beuys did one of these works? Again he said “No. I have everything by courtesy of Oswald Oberhuber. He was a friend of Joseph Beuys”. At my third question, “What would you think if most of these works were fakes?” he looked at me a little strangely and said, “I would really start laughing”.

Hummel: Bastian has not even seen half of my collection, or the other works Beuys created in Vienna. Other so-called experts sided with Heiner Bastian and Eva Beuys, just on hearsay, without taking the time to look at the works they are condemning. People such as Lucio Amelio [a dealer and friend of Beuys] in Naples judged my collection from newspaper illustrations.

Bastian: Many experts would like to see the rest, but Mr Hummel is hiding the material.

Hummel: Most of the works were in my apartment, but also shown in my public gallery in Vienna, even before the death of Joseph Beuys. Central pieces were exhibited in the Modern Art Museum in Vienna, the Neue Galerie in Linz, and two exhibitions in Spain in 1992 [sic, actually 1991]. Due to my activities several Beuys experts were familiar with my collection in Vienna and came to visit it, including Koeplin from Basel, Szeeman from Zurich, Dahlem from Düsseldorf, and Loers from Kassel. I published a large catalogue on the occasion of the Spanish exhibition and at the opening of the exhibition at the Brera a lot of experts were present. [The disputed drawings were not exhibited until the 1991 exhibition on the Canary Islands, Spain. Ed.]

Bastian: He exhibited part of his collection on the Canary Islands, but no one saw the exhibition. Why an exhibition on the Canary Islands? Probably to avoid visits by Beuys experts. After the exhibition closed we finally saw the catalogue. The Beuys experts almost fell off their chairs.

Hummel: At least half my collection was shown in Spain. Catalogues were sent to museums all around the world and also to Eva Beuys. She wanted copyright fees for the photographs, which I refused on legal grounds. We also had some misunderstandings. I do not think that Eva Beuys would claim copyright fees for publication of works that are not by her late husband.

Bastian: The catalogue violated German Urheberrecht (copyright)—he did not get in touch with the estate or present the unknown material prior to the exhibition. Mr Hummel had reason not to do so! One asks why all this material was unpublished during the lifetime of Beuys? Why did Beuys not borrow from Hummel's collection for various exhibitions including the 1979 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum? One year has passed since the Berlin ruling and Mr Hummel still has not found a new provenance, nor one single witness. Mr Oberhuber has denied being the source. In a sworn affidavit he claims that Mr Hummel got the signature from him while he was in the hospital in intensive care after a serious heart operation.

Hummel: In the beginning Oberhuber assisted in preparing the claim and wanted to appear as a witness; later he changed his mind. In Vienna I have filed action against Oberhuber and the case is still pending. Several witnesses have asserted that Oberhuber has always claimed the authenticity of all my works deriving from him.

Bastian: Seen from Berlin, the Hummel-Oberhuber lawsuit in Vienna looks like a farce; in the first two hearings someone has always been absent. The case has been postponed twice and has just now been postponed again until the autumn.

Hummel: I still do not think that Oberhuber has forged or faked any works of art. He is a man

who changes his opinion a lot, especially when under pressure. After his statements to the Berlin court I do not speak to him any more, so I can only speculate on his reasons.

Bastian: I cannot say that Mr Hummel is a forger, but he is accused of having done some quite strange things.

Hummel: To my knowledge, I have never seen a fake Beuys.

Bastian: I have seen fake Beuys. When you work for more than twelve years as closely as I did with Beuys, you know his work.

Today we know that Mr Hummel owns more than 100 works, twenty-six of which we know are fakes.

He has not one explanation for the most stupid claim—that Beuys back-dated his work in Vienna, producing the drawing in 1979 but dating it “1964”! How could Hummel come to this conclusion having never talked to Mr Beuys? Is he justifying to himself a stupidity, a mistake in dating? Whoever forged these works was not aware that in 1979 Beuys never did a single drawing in the style of earlier works!

Hummel: We have said in our catalogue in Italy—and Eva Beuys has said it herself—that the dates on the drawings were “idea signatures”. Beuys at that time was in a retrospective period. He did other works where he gives dates other than when they were made. The drawings that I own could have been made only between 1979 and 1983, because this was the only time he was in Vienna. So the dates on them—1964, 1972, 1968—are “idea signatures”.

Bastian: When Joseph Beuys died in 1986 all environments and installations were known and published, with the exception of Hummel’s installation “Mensch/Fähre”, a construction with a wooden cart and some blackboards leaning against the wall. Since this work is a fake of the worst sort it was, of course, impossible to publish it during his lifetime.

Hummel: Beuys made “Mensch/Fähre” when he was in Vienna making works for the Secession. Oberhuber was with him, and also one man who went with him to the Hochschule to help pick up the things he needed for his work. Do you think every piece Beuys made there was with people sitting around?

Bastian: A real idiot must have produced this rotten work.

Hummel: We are still in the course of legal action, and I do not want to make any public reproaches. But ... after Beuys died we saw several court cases and controversies between the estate and collectors. There were even quarrels between Eva Beuys and Bastian after his 1988 exhibition in the Gropius Bau. Who decides today what is an authentic Beuys and what is fake? It is obvious we are talking about the art market at large, and a special problem in our case. Heiner Bastian claimed in court that he is not an art dealer, but a writer. I do not think that he is living on being a writer and the former best friend of Joseph Beuys!

Bastian: This seems to me part of Mr Hummel's character—an accusation to get away from his own problems. Naturally I have no financial or any other interest. What could any known or unknown motive be? I have never done any “dealing” with Mrs Eva Beuys. She has never sold one single work to me. What I did, I would do again and again if confronted with fakes. It is part of my moral duty.

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