Perhaps it comes as no surprise that one of my great artist heroes, Joseph Beuys, is also for me a great political hero. Throughout his career Beuys did everything within his means to extend art beyond the confines of the 'high art' establishment that, especially since the decline of absolute belief systems, whether classical, monotheistic, eastern or even Marxist, had ever increasingly become the vehicle of bourgeois and petty capitalist values. Beuys was forever arguing for total transformation: 'Our art,' he claimed, 'is not molded by culture but by economic power. There would be nothing wrong with that, if one had the right concept of economics in mind. We must get another notion of economics.'

Besides being an intuitive theorist, Beuys, rather than straightforwardly re-presenting politics in his work, was an advocate of direct action, understanding and harnessing the burgeoning role of mass communications, pedagogy and personality as the political battleground in his own time. Joseph Beuys thought about and practised his art in a truly expanded field that never had anything less than universal character.

What makes Beuys unique as not just a great artist of the twentieth century, but a great political artist of the twentieth century, is his ability to resolve, in a classically German dialectical manner, the mystical and unanswerable aspects

of existence, and equally the random problems of everyday political life. The latter became increasingly central to his concept of art's purpose as his work evolved to a position where he would make his famous radical proclamation of all, 'everyone an artist', by which he meant that everyone had that potential.

During the early 1970s, Beuys began using chalk on blackboards to illustrate his lectures on the relationship between art and politics. As aides, the boards became layered registers of Beuys's expressive hand, redacted, annotated and overwritten, with the diagrammatic, conflating the cultural-historical with the pictorial. In 1974, at my invitation, Beuys came to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and made his famous blackboard environment Richtkräfte – what today we would call a performative installation consisting of a hundred used boards with which he had engaged the visitors over the period of a month.

There is something reminiscent of Beuys's own multi-layered, expressive use of chalk text on boards in Stefan Brüggemann's installation 'Hyper-Palimpsest'. What were Beuys's blackboards if not palimpsests themselves – written material used repeatedly after the earlier writing had been erased, even if only over the duration of discussion? Like Beuys's blackboards, Brüggemann's hyper

palimpsests remain for the viewer as a multi-layered record of dialogue and thought.

As declared art they also function as aesthetic objects. At Brüggemann's installation at Hauser & Wirth he brought together pre-existing texts – his catalogue of laconic statements dating back to the late 1990s, reproduced in a standard typeface – and a framework for generating texts – headlines appropriated from newspapers spray-painted during the installation as well as the last lines from movies in the work *Headlines and Last Lines in the Movies*. Intermittently, yet another layer, a sound recording plays Iggy Pop reading aloud Brüggemann's statements. The blank, standardised texts are given an affective range in the proto-punk's vocalisation.

Not merely registers of spatial deposition of texts, palimpsests layer time itself, and in Brüggemann's installation the distinct temporalities of his earlier works enfold in the audience's 'Hyper' moment of reception. Formally, the results are densely opaque surfaces that then tend towards minimalist abstraction. Where Beuys's blackboards covered the floor chance-like, dropped when each one's use had passed, Brüggemann's boards neatly line the gallery walls and we're reminded of his iconic statement: 'to be political it has to look nice.'

This statement, along with his astute labelling of 'minimal pop' and 'conceptual decoration', points at art historical cliches and disciplinary categorical paradoxes that have formalised themselves in post-war North American and European art. How can something abstract and reduced be exuberant and popular? Not excessive, conceptual art is full of intent. Art that is 'nice' cannot also be political. Or can it?

For anyone vaguely familiar with this post-war history, Brüggemann's work pays homage to his own artist-heroes through his appropriation of imagery, techniques and forms: the mirrored boxes of Robert Morris's sculptures of the mid-1960s; the fluorescent tubes of Dan Flavin's Tatlin Monument (1964); Don Judd's manufactured primary forms. Strips from the proto-minimalist Ad Reinhardt's 'How to look at painting' comics appear in Brüggemann's paintings and installations. And while it is Lawrence Weiner's or Robert Barry's wall-based text works that his statements most obviously call to mind (he has collaborated with the latter), syntactically they share more with the paradoxical word pieces of the proto-conceptual Fluxus artist Henry Flynt, such as the following from 1961:

'Concept Art: Work such that no-one knows what is going on. (One just has to guess whether this work exists and if it does what it is like.)'

Brüggemann's appropriation always involves witty transformations, on many levels and from many sources, that suggest to us that the work of interpreting art's history is ongoing and that more so than art historians, artists may be the ones to do this work – artists now are instinctive art historians. Flavin's Monument is attached to the ceiling, returning the tubes to utility; Reinhardt's comic book is tiled and overpainted; and at 'Hyper Palimpsest' the moderne aesthetic of the statements are overlaid with the organic forms of spray-paint words.

The conventional New York narrative history of modern art's passage into Conceptualism goes that Minimalism perfected Abstract Expressionist painting's tendency towards pure self-referentiality. If words name things then why not do away with the object altogether and advance a dematerialised art of pure ideas? The art historian Michael Fried's famous critique of Don Judd's 'specific objects' was that they stopped being something that was discernibly art, becoming more akin to theatre, enlisting the audience's body, pointing outwards at the surrounding context. Art's self-referential examination became an examination

of its social and economic context. To the extent to which Minimalist work seemed to be self-contained, a formal expression of 'less is more', Conceptualism, as Lucy Lippard puts it, 'was about saying more with less'.

In its self-containedness, Minimalist art looked supremely apolitical, as did much of Conceptualism. It would be more appropriate, though, to shift our understanding of the political in order to understand how it permeates art's production and reception and more generally what the art impresario Seth Sieglaub calls the 'art attitude'. 'There is "political" in the deeper sense,' he wrote in 1984, recalling the sixties:

> which refers to a conscious questioning of what is going on around you, not just in the sense of left/right or imperialist/anti-imperialist, but in terms of the kind of relationships that exist between people, between people and things, between people and institutions. This latter sense calls up in art, as in any other context, a whole range of issues. That moment in the late Sixties, particularly in the United States in any case, was very full of these kinds of questions… A lot of people, even those doing traditional things like Pop Art, were talking about such relationships. The Vietnam war brought into question a whole range of things – the traditional role of the

United States […] the role of imperialist power, the wider understand of world relationships. This also nourished the traditional "art attitude" which, at least as it has been presented in the twentieth century, is one of contestation too.

Despite the seeming 'apolitical' nature of Minimalism and then Conceptualism, if we shift our understanding of the political aesthetic as encompassing the kind of relationships that exist between people, between people and things, between people and institutions then the ways that this art challenged authority is profound and still very much speaks to us today, as Brüggemann's work suggests. Politics conceived as such would recognise the importance of Judd's rallying essay on Minimalism, 'Specific Objects', which claims that 'Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception'. Minimalism exacted a politics of perception, which is something that is thus never resolved.

Stefan Brüggemann's appropriations are never simplistic. 'Hyper Palimpsest' suggests that art history itself is a palimpsest to be continuously deciphered. Aspects of specific histories continue, always inflected by the present. 'Hyper' in the exhibition title evokes, of course, the multi-linear characteristic of webpage hypertexts and links. Taking into account Sieglaub's formulation of what we

might call micro-politics, if earlier forms of Minimalism were not avowedly political they still encouraged the viewer to look out at the world at large, and interrogate their own perceptions. Realising this, we might begin to grasp the urgency of Brüggemann's work in an age of informational abstraction and opacity.

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