

It was my second year at grammar school. I'd just turned 11 and gotten used to the daily grind of cramming Latin vocabulary on the 40-minute bus ride from our village to Kassel Hauptbahnhof. One day after school, on my way to the bus station I walked past the Fridericianum. I was by myself, this skinny little blonde girl with pigtails, thick glasses and a huge satchel. There was a crowd in front of a makeshift stage. I got excited because I suspected this to be some sort of fairground attraction. As I moved into the crowd of adults, I could hear them muttering and exclaiming things. They seemed agitated somehow. Then I spotted this man on stage wearing a coat and a hat. He was gesticulating. I couldn't make out what he's saying. But the crowd seemed to respond to him and became even more roused. Is he a magician? I wondered. It was confusing, because the stage didn't look like a fairground. There was no glitter or colour. It was all drab and the proceedings seemed to take a long time. I had to catch my bus!

So, I tore myself away and walked up Treppenstrasse to the Hauptbahnhof. That evening, as my mum was preparing dinner, I turned on the local news. And there it was! The scene I had experienced that afternoon. It was on television! It was such an exciting feeling that something I had personally witnessed was on the news. This artist Joseph [Beuys](#) – I knew who he was, everybody knew who he was because he'd put up this huge pile of rocks in front of the Fridericianum – had taken the replica of the crown of Tsar Ivan the Terrible and melted it into a bunny. Many people were angry and upset because they thought the crown was so beautiful. Locals were outraged that [Beuys](#) dare melt this piece of great artisanship down into a silly bunny. My mum explained to me that the crown was a symbol of aggression and war and that the bunny symbolized peace. I thought that was so cool. I couldn't understand why one would make a replica of a crown anyways. What was the point? After all, you couldn't play with a crown made of real gold. The news moved on and my mum asked me to set the table. But that afternoon forever shaped my idea of contemporary art: it's an event that draws everybody in and everybody – even I as a child – was allowed to comment and have an opinion. It makes some people angry and some people elated, but most of all everybody is talking. It's like magic. And it's on the news.

Growing up in Kassel in the 80s meant growing up with [Beuys](#). I remember my mum's patients, mainly Volkswagen workers and farmers, discussing whether those 7000 oak trees were really art. He engaged people – not just the art crowd, but everybody. To me he was the face of the documenta, which energized an otherwise dreary and depressing city. I loved how his art ruffled the feathers of my conservative teachers and provided much needed disruption. Today the long road from my parents' village into town, which leads past a powerstation and a brothel, is lined by his oak trees. Kassel to me is a great example of how public art can transform lives because it's transformed mine. Maybe [Beuys](#) was a magician after all.

► Katja Eichinger, 2021

Katja Eichinger is a German writer. Born in 1971, Eichinger grew up in Kassel, home of the documenta as well as Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty.