

## Beuys and the Beast: Symbolic Conflict in Human-Animal Performance

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### Abstract

The relationship between humans and animals, as depicted in works of art, presents a compelling avenue for exploration, particularly in the context of today's increasingly critical ecological crisis. Art can serve as a potent medium for encouraging reflection on the spiritual significance of animals and for fostering a more harmonious relationship between humans and non-human creatures. In this regard, specific animals, within particular cultural contexts, can symbolize not only their species but also embody the unique values, identities, and civilizations that emerge from human interactions with them. When an artist selects a particular animal as the focal point of their creative endeavor, this choice is rarely arbitrary; it is often imbued with layers of profound symbolic meaning, reflecting complex cultural, historical, and ecological narratives. A notable example of this is found in the works of Joseph Beuys, whose performance art frequently incorporated animals as key elements. Beuys's use of animals transcends mere symbolism; it delves into the realm of contrasting and often conflicting symbolic elements, wherein the animal subjects evoke both ancient traditions—such as folk customs, mythologies, and witchcraft—and confrontations with dark historical realities and absurdities of modern existence. Through his art, Beuys explores the tension between the idealized, spiritualized representations of animals and the brutal, often unsettling realities that humans impose upon them. This duality reflects the broader symbolic conflict between nature and civilization, innocence and violence, tradition and modernity, thereby offering a poignant commentary on the fractured relationship between humans and the natural world. In doing so, Beuys's work challenges the viewer to reconsider the ethical and spiritual dimensions of humanity's interaction with animals, while also highlighting the urgent need for ecological and cultural reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Joseph Beuys; Performance Art; Animals

## 1. Introduction

Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) remains one of the most influential figures in the history of performance art. His works, particularly the performances *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), transcend the boundaries of visual art, encompassing ecological, political, and philosophical discourses. These performances are prime examples of how Beuys utilized the presence of animals to challenge human-animal relationships, reframe anthropocentric paradigms, and pursue broader spiritual, ecological, and political aims. This paper examines these two performances through the lenses of animal symbolism, ecological thought, and Beuys's conceptual approach to the body, arguing that they embody an attempt to reconcile humanity's fractured relationship with the natural world and its inherent violence toward animals.

## 2. Literature Review

Concerning *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, there are three key academic articles worth mentioning. One is "Truly Human, Truly Animal" (Delapaix, 2013). In this article, Delapaix points out that the core concept of the performance art *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* is the state of flow and fusion of various energies. He believes that in this performance art, Beuys showed his special fascination with witchcraft. Through this secret technique that exists in human blood, Beuys tried to communicate with the souls of animals and tried to eliminate the alienation between animals and humans. Delapaix links Beuys's artistic concepts with Deleuze's philosophical concepts, and further points out that Beuys presented a Bohemian anti-capitalist attitude. From his point of view, the performance art *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* challenged the limitations of the rationalist worldview and achieved the mutual transformation and mutual penetration of the material world and the spiritual realm.

The second article worth mentioning is "Joseph Beuys and How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (Takac, 2020). Takac believes that the importance of the performance art *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* lies in the fact that it encompasses almost all aspects of Beuys's artistic philosophy and methodology, including mythology, anthropology and psychoanalysis. According to his perspective,

through this performance art, Beuys explored the possibilities of visual narrative and symbolic performance, and discussed the construction of the artist's identity.

The third article worth mentioning is “Beuys + Vieira: Critical contribution to the performance of the action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and the sermon of Saint Anthony to fishes” (Santos, 2007). This article positions performance as a critical category by comparing Beuys's 1965 action with Vieira's 17th-century sermon, tracing how performative acts bridge historical and cultural divides. Beuys's ritualistic engagement with a dead hare—a work often interpreted as a commentary on the limits of human communication—demonstrates performance's capacity to destabilize anthropocentric hierarchies. By analyzing the “performatic features” of both works, the authors underscore how Beuys's piece critiques rationality through embodied, non-verbal interaction with animality. This aligns with the central concern of *Beuys and the Beast*, which examines the symbolic conflict between human dominance and animal agency in performance. The article's historical perspective contextualizes Beuys's action within a longer tradition of performative storytelling, suggesting that his work reanimates archaic forms of human-animal dialogue to challenge modern epistemologies.

Concerning *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, there four important scholarly articles that deserve attention. One is “When Joseph Beuys Locked Himself in a Room with a Live Coyote” (Mann, 2017). Mann recognizes that the United States in the 1970s through the eyes of Joseph Beuys was a nation divided over its involvement in the Vietnam War and, particularly, a country whose white population oppressed indigenous, immigrant, and minority populations. The message Beuys wanted to convey through this performance art is: American society could only begin to cure its social ills through direct communication and understanding among its own varied populations. In Mann's view, the coyote is not only a symbol of resistance to environmental change, but also a metaphor for the resilience and potential for change of American society. He placed *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* within the context of 21st century American society, and further exposed how even though the United States's division problem still exists and its historical guilt is still questioned, Coyote, as a symbol, reminds people of the possibility of resilience and change, and has become a metaphor for the complex history and reality of American society.

A second article is “Stories of Iconic Artworks: Joseph Beuys’ I Like America and America Likes Me” (Wolfe, 2023). Wolfe places this performance art in a broader context and explores its contemporary global significance. “In fact, with white nationalism”, Wolfe writes, “fear-mongering, and racism towards minority groups prevalent not only across the United States, but also in Europe, Beuys’ profoundly moving communication with the wild coyote is a work of art that people can continue to learn from and seek answers and inspiration in. It appears that basic human and animal communication are in desperate need of a revival”.

The third article worth mentioning in this regard is “American Beuys” (Levi-Strauss, 1999). Levi-Strauss describes Beuys’s Coyote action as a therapeutic ritual aimed at addressing the “psychological trauma point of the United States’ energy constellation”—namely, the violent clash between Native American cosmologies and Eurocentric materialism. Beuys’s adoption of shamanic tools (the felt cloak, the triangular pendant, the staff) frames him as a healer of the “wounded” social body, a concept deeply rooted in his anthroposophical beliefs. His references to Paracelsus—a physician influenced by shamanic traditions—further reinforce the idea that Beuys saw his art as a form of medicine, bridging spiritual and ecological crises. This aligns with Beuys and the Beast’s investigation of performance as a site of symbolic conflict, where the artist’s role oscillates between mediator and colonizer. Does Beuys genuinely engage with the coyote as an equal, or does he appropriate indigenous symbolism for his own Eurocentric narrative? Levi-Strauss’s emphasis on Beuys’s vulnerability (sleeping on straw, allowing the coyote to urinate on the Wall Street Journal) suggests an attempt at humility, yet his orchestrated control over the ritual raises questions about power dynamics in interspecies performance.

This article also provocatively asks whether Beuys’s work prefigured the animal rights movement, given his founding of the “Political Party for Animals”. Yet it also acknowledges that his approach was more symbolic than activist—his dialogue with the coyote was metaphorical, not a call for structural change. This tension is crucial for Beuys and the Beast, which questions whether performance art can meaningfully challenge human-animal hierarchies or if it inevitably aestheticizes oppression. The text’s conclusion—that we have “much to learn” from the coyote—suggests an unresolved dialectic, one that contemporary artists continue to grapple with.

It is necessary to mention a fourth article as well: “Becoming-with-Animal: Cultivating a Feminist Understanding of Human-Animal Transformation in Contemporary Performance Art” (Fitzgerald-Allsopp, 2019). The thesis of this article is that feminist interpretations of human-animal transformation expand the discussion by framing Beuys’s practice within the Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of “becoming-animal” and ecofeminist critique. While acknowledging Beuys’s influence—particularly his shamanistic approach to interspecies healing, Fitzgerald-Allsopp critiques the gendered limitations of his work, arguing that contemporary female artists (e.g., Marcus Coates, Simon Whitehead) more radically subvert patriarchal constructs through animal alliances. This tension is pivotal to *Beuys and the Beast*, which interrogates whether Beuys’s symbolism reinforces romanticized hierarchies (the artist as shaman, the animal as passive muse) or genuinely dismantles them. The article emphasizes how “becoming-with-animal” (after Haraway) proposes an alternative framework, where performance fosters mutual vulnerability rather than appropriation. This resonates with this study’s exploration of how Beuys’s hare—simultaneously a sacred object and a lifeless prop—embodies the paradox of animal representation in Western art.

In examining the scholarly discourse surrounding Joseph Beuys's performance artworks *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, several critical perspectives emerge, each shedding light on different aspects of Beuys’s artistic philosophy and social commentary. Delapaix’s article, “Truly Human, Truly Animal”, offers a compelling analysis of Beuys’s performance as an exploration of the fusion of material and spiritual energies, emphasizing his fascination with witchcraft and his desire to bridge the alienation between humans and animals. Delapaix aligns Beuys's concepts with Deleuze’s philosophical ideas, positioning the performance as a challenge to rationalist worldviews and a call for anti-capitalist transformation. In contrast, Takac’s “Joseph Beuys and How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”, highlights the performance's role in encapsulating Beuys's broader artistic methodology, drawing connections between mythology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. Takac emphasizes the symbolic narrative of the performance and its exploration of the artist’s identity construction.

Turning to *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, Jon Mann’s analysis in “When Joseph Beuys Locked Himself in a Room with a Live Coyote” places Beuys’s performance in the

historical context of 1970's America, noting the country's societal divisions, particularly around the Vietnam War and the oppression of indigenous and minority populations. Mann interprets the coyote as a symbol of resistance to environmental change and a metaphor for American society's potential for resilience and transformation. Wolfe's article, "Stories of Iconic Artworks", expands this analysis by situating the performance within a global context, linking Beuys's communication with the coyote to contemporary issues of white nationalism, racism, and the urgent need for renewed communication between humans and animals. Wolfe sees Beuys's work as a powerful and timely call for reflection on the state of human and animal relationships in a troubled world.

Together, these scholarly contributions provide a multifaceted understanding of Beuys's work, highlighting its philosophical, social, and political dimensions, while also acknowledging its continuing relevance in the face of contemporary global issues. Each article brings to light different layers of meaning in Beuys's performances, from its critique of capitalist structures and rationalism to its engagement with environmentalism, social justice, and the interconnectedness of all species.

### 3. Research Method

This study employs a multi-method qualitative research framework to analyze Joseph Beuys's two seminal performances, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). By integrating historical analysis, symbolic interpretation, and critical theory, the research aims to uncover the layered meanings of Beuys's work, particularly in relation to human-animal dynamics, ecological ethics, and performance art as a medium of social critique.

#### 3.1 Primary Research Methods

##### 1) Archival and Documentary Analysis

**Primary Sources:** I examine Beuys's interviews, manifestos, and recorded statements (e.g., his 1983 interview in *Club 2*), alongside contemporaneous reviews and documentation of the performances (e.g., Caroline Tisdall's photographic records of *Coyote*).

**Secondary Sources:** I analyze critical texts such as Delapaix's "Truly Human, Truly Animal" (2013) and Levi-Strauss's *American Beuys*, which contextualize Beuys's work within shamanism, ecology, and post-war European art.

## 2) Semiotic and Symbolic Analysis

**Object Ethnography:** I do close reading of the materials used in Beuys's performances (e.g., felt, honey, gold leaf, the dead hare, coyote) through frameworks of cultural anthropology (Victor Turner's ritual theory) and folklore studies (Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist symbolism). For instance, the hare's association with fertility in Germanic myths and the coyote's trickster archetype in Native American traditions are decoded as multivalent signs.

**Visual Rhetoric:** I apply Tzvetan Todorov's rhetorical trichotomy (*non-realistic, double, and contrasting* expressions) to dissect the performances' narrative strategies, as seen in the juxtaposition of Beuys's "civilized" body with the coyote's "wild" presence.

### 3.2 Performance Studies Frameworks

**Embodiment Theory:** Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Judith Butler's performativity, the study analyzes how Beuys's bodily actions (e.g., wrapping himself in felt, whispering to the hare) enact a ritualized dialogue between human and animal, challenging Cartesian dualism.

**Post-humanist Critique:** I engage with Donna Haraway's *becoming-with* and Cary Wolfe's posthumanism to interrogate the ethical ambiguities of Beuys's work—e.g., whether the coyote's participation reinforces anthropocentric control despite its symbolic elevation.

### 3.3 Theoretical Approaches

#### 1) Ecocritical and Animal Studies

**Peter Singer's Utilitarianism:** This study evaluates the moral implications of using animal bodies (dead hare, captive coyote) in art, asking whether Beuys's symbolic goals justify potential exploitation.

**Ecofeminism:** Via theorists like Val Plumwood, I examine how Beuys's performances intersect with critiques of patriarchal domination over nature, particularly in *Coyote's* gendered symbolism (e.g., the felt as a "womb" of transformation).

#### 2) Anthropological and Shamanic Theory

**Mircea Eliade's Shamanism:** This study positions Beuys as a modern shaman whose performances mimic rites of passage (e.g., isolation, animal communion) to heal societal "trauma".

**Anthroposophy:** Rudolf Steiner's influence on Beuys's belief in art as a vehicle for spiritual evolution is analyzed, particularly in the use of materials like fat and felt as alchemical mediators.

### 3) Political and Ideological Critique

**Decolonial Theory:** This study interrogates Beuys's engagement with Native American symbolism in *Coyote*, questioning whether the performance appropriates indigenous cosmologies or critiques colonial violence (e.g., the coyote as scapegoat).

**Marxist Aesthetics:** Fredric Jameson's dialectical approach unpacks the tension between Beuys's anti-capitalist stance (e.g., urinating on the *Wall Street Journal*) and his commodification as an art-world icon.

### 3.4 Interdisciplinary Synthesis

The study bridges art history, philosophy, and critical animal studies to argue that Beuys's performances oscillate between subversion and complicity. For example:

**Linguistic Analysis:** The ironic title *I Like America and America Likes Me* is dissected using Roland Barthes's mythologies to reveal how Beuys deconstructs nationalist rhetoric.

**Ethnographic Parallels:** Comparisons to Siberian shamanic practices (via ethnographic records) highlight the transcultural dimensions of Beuys's rituals, while also exposing potential exoticization.

## 4. Process of Analysis

### 4.1. Analysis of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965)

#### 4.1.1 Introduction to the Performance: *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*

On November 26, 1965, Joseph Beuys performed a three-hour performance at Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, Germany, titled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (DACs, 2024). At the beginning of the performance, Beuys locked the door of his gallery hall from the inside, leaving the gallery audience outside so that they could only observe the scene inside through the window. During the performance, Beuys held a dead rabbit in his arms, with honey and gold foil smeared all over his head and face. A steel sole was tied to his right shoe, and a felt sole was glued to his left shoe. Equipped

like this, he explained the paintings collected by Galerie Schmela to the dead rabbit in his arms. The process lasted three hours and ended with Beuys sitting in a chair with one leg wrapped in felt.



Figure 1: *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* performed by Joseph Beuys

(Cited from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/626352260647474520/>)

#### **4.1.2 Symbolism of Objects Used by Beuys**

This performance is imbued with profound symbolism, where each object selected and utilized by Beuys carries distinct and significant meaning. The manner in which these objects were presented, and the relationships they formed with the artist, are both peculiar and thought-provoking.

When Beuys applied a mixture of honey and gold leaf to his face, it resulted in the creation of a unique mask. Gold, in Western traditions, is emblematic of wisdom and purity, and is often associated with the life-giving power of the sun. In ancient Egyptian culture, gold was considered a symbol of resurrection, and the Egyptians believed it represented the flesh of the gods. For members of the royal family, inscribing their names on golden masks and utilizing spells for resurrection were considered of paramount importance, which is why the pharaohs meticulously crafted golden masks and embossed them with their own likenesses (Schorsch, 2017). Honey has always been regarded as a

medium for rebirth by the Germanic and ancient Indian peoples. In addition, honey is a product of bees, symbolizing production and creation.

The steel and felt soles symbolize hard rational logic and warm emotional experience respectively. Beuys's two feet are stepping on different soles, symbolizing that human beings are a fusion of rationality and sensibility.

#### **4.1.3 The Role of the Dead Rabbit**

The central prop in this performance is a dead rabbit, which Beuys engages with as the object of his communication. In European culture, rabbits are often symbols of fertility, abundance, and the regenerative power of reproduction. The phrase "mad as a March hare" originates from the behavior of male rabbits during early spring, when they engage in intense competition for the attention of female rabbits. The female rabbits typically resist the advances of the males until they ultimately relent, resulting in a mating display that resembles a frenetic dance or revelry. Rabbits are renowned for their remarkable reproductive capacity, with a female capable of carrying a second litter while still pregnant with the first. This phenomenon, known as superfetation, is a rare form of ectopic pregnancy, further emphasizing the extraordinary fertility associated with these animals (Thompson, 2022).

The rabbit is indelibly associated with Easter. In the languages of the Germanic and Slavic peoples, the term "Easter" derives from an ancient pagan goddess, the goddess of spring. According to myths and legends that date back thousands of years, the goddess of spring once rescued a bird whose wings had been frozen in the winter and transformed it into a rabbit. Because the creature had once been a bird, it retained the ability to lay eggs, despite rabbits being mammals that do not naturally lay eggs. From this myth, the rabbit became a symbol of Easter. In German, the "Easter Bunny" is referred to as the "Osterhase", where "Hase" specifically denotes a wild hare, not a domestic rabbit, thus highlighting its vibrant wildness and unbounded fertility (Wilson, 2023).

In his youth, Beuys developed a profound interest in the behavior and ecology of rabbits, dedicating considerable time to studying their natural habits. He observed that wild rabbits possess a remarkable ability to adapt their environment to suit their survival needs, an instinctive behavior that he regarded as a form of creativity. According to Beuys, this capacity for environmental transformation was not merely a survival mechanism but an artistic act in itself, demonstrating an inherent connection

to the natural world. He viewed rabbits as transcendent beings, imbued with a divine quality that places them beyond human understanding. In Beuys's perspective, rabbits share a unique, symbiotic relationship with the earth and nature, embodying a closer, more harmonious connection to the land than humans, who have become increasingly alienated from their natural surroundings. This reverence for rabbits reflected Beuys's broader artistic and philosophical vision, where nature and its creatures were seen as essential, spiritual entities that could inspire a deeper understanding of life and creativity.

#### **4.1.4 Beuys as a Shaman and Spiritual Ritual**

Beuys can be understood as a modern-day shaman, using art as a vehicle for performing enigmatic rituals that transcend the material world. In this performance, he appeared to be possessed by ancient, primal forces, engaging in a profound communion with the spirits of the earth. The ritualistic nature of his actions suggested a spiritual dialogue that surpassed the physical realm, evoking a sense of mysticism and transcendence. Throughout the performance, Beuys seemed to enter into a metaphysical state, one in which he and the dead rabbit became symbols of an ancient connection between humanity and nature, communicating beyond the limitations of language and rational thought. At the conclusion of the piece, the serene stillness that enveloped Beuys, now masked, and the lifeless rabbit, created a moment of spiritual equilibrium, one that surpassed the boundaries of species and connected the human and the animal in a profound metaphysical unity.

This performance defies conventional artistic frameworks, distancing itself from established aesthetic norms. Rather than conforming to traditional notions of beauty, it seems to evoke a deeper, more intuitive form of expression. Beuys's work calls upon an emotional and sensory engagement that resonates on a subconscious level, prompting the viewer to experience the performance not as a mere spectacle, but as a visceral, existential encounter. The performance shifts the focus from visual beauty or intellectual analysis to a more delicate and primal intuition, where the essence of life and communication flows beyond the confines of human-created artistic concepts. It challenges the viewer to perceive art not through the lens of tradition, but as an immersive experience that connects with something far more elemental and ancient.

#### 4.1.5 Beuys's Artistic and Ecological Philosophy

Regarding how to interpret this performance art, Beuys once said in an interview:

When I faced a dead rabbit, to some extent, this behavior was placed in the context of ecological damage caused by humans, because humans will kill rabbits, humans will also destroy forests, destroy nature, and ultimately destroy all life. This is the current way humans live and develop. In fact, rabbits and any other life in nature are human organs. Without these organs, humans cannot survive. Humans need forests as lungs to provide us with oxygen; they need grains as food nutrition; they also need a variety of animals and the continuous reproduction of the land. When we know that human progress depends on these lives, we find that we are killing them, then we no longer have a loving relationship with them (Joseph Beuys Club 2, 1983).

Beuys's remarks responded to his identity as a supporter of the German Green Party and an environmentalist, and his last performance art "Seven Thousand Oaks" before his death continued his spirit of ecologicalism.

As Beuys cradled the lifeless rabbit and engaged in his one-sided communication with it, the audience was left unaware of the inner dialogue that unfolded within him. However, it is evident that throughout the performance, Beuys repeatedly spoke to himself, saying, "Even dead animals have stronger intuitive abilities than humans who hold stubborn ideas and concepts". This remark serves as a pointed critique of human reliance on rigid rationality, particularly that which is grounded in mathematical logic. Through this statement, Beuys subtly condemned the overemphasis on intellectual reasoning and the tendency to dismiss alternative, non-logical modes of understanding the world. The phrase underscores his belief that human beings, in their pursuit of certainty and control, have become increasingly disconnected from the deeper, more intuitive aspects of existence, which he believed animals—whether living or dead—still possess in abundance.

This statement not only reflects Beuys's philosophical stance but also embodies his

broader artistic ideology. His critique of human rationality highlights the limitations of a worldview that prioritizes calculation and objectivity over instinct and intuition. In Beuys's view, art should serve as a means of reconnecting with the intuitive, spiritual, and creative dimensions of human experience, which have been overshadowed by the dominance of logical thought. The performance, in this sense, becomes a vehicle for challenging conventional modes of perception, urging the audience to rethink the relationship between intellect, intuition, and the natural world. Through his interaction with the dead rabbit, Beuys subtly invites the viewer to embrace a more holistic understanding of existence—one that transcends rigid concepts and embraces the wisdom inherent in all forms of life, human and non-human alike.

#### **4.1.6 Beuys's View on Art and Human Sensory Perception**

Beuys once announced a statement on a TV program:

Humans can talk to animals, plants, soil, angels... and higher beings. Everything in the universe and the supernatural world is part of human beings. Only when humans are freed from objectification, alienation and possessiveness can they present a different relationship with the world. When I explained the pictures to 'my own organ' (that is, the rabbit), I also explained that art should be understood and felt in a brand-new way. This way should be sharper, richer and more powerful. This way should exist as a driving force for innovation at the sensory level. We should improve our thinking mode through intuition, inspiration and imagination to reach this inner creativity. This is the task of art. Art is to develop more feelings, more emotions and more will. Creativity lives in our bodies (Joseph Beuys Club 2, 1983).

In Beuys's perspective, if the theoretical framework underlying a work of art were considered the true essence of the artwork, then there would be no need for the artist to produce a tangible creation that engages the viewer's sensory faculties. The artist could merely articulate the concept with a few logical statements. However, Beuys firmly believed that art cannot be fully comprehended through causality and rational analysis alone. Instead, art must be experienced through

a sensory immersion that deeply penetrates the viewer's consciousness. For Beuys, art is not an intellectual exercise to be deciphered through detached observation; it is a visceral experience meant to be felt and internalized.

He argued that a work of art should have the capacity to physically enter the viewer's body, where it becomes part of their lived experience. In this view, the viewer is not merely an external observer or passive recipient but an active participant in the creation and reception of the artwork. The boundaries between the viewer and the artwork blur, as the viewer's body becomes an integral part of the artistic encounter. When an individual truly engages with a piece of art—whether through performance, installation, or other forms—they step into the work itself, allowing it to enter their own body, thoughts, and emotions. This interaction transforms the viewer from a distant spectator into an embodied experiencer, thereby redefining the role of the audience in the artistic process.

In this sense, Beuys's vision of art challenges the conventional understanding of aesthetic experience. It insists on the importance of sensory engagement and the idea that art is a living, dynamic process that involves both the artist and the viewer in a shared, transformative act. By positioning the viewer as a participant rather than an observer, Beuys sought to democratize art, making it a collective experience that transcends traditional hierarchies between creator and audience.

#### **4.1.7 Beuys's Exploration of Human Creativity and Sensory Expansion**

For Beuys, the human senses—vision, hearing, touch, balance, proportion, and many others—were of paramount importance. He believed that art exists not merely as a form of aesthetic expression but as a means to engage and preserve these sensory faculties, thus deepening the human experience. In his view, art should extend and explore the vast potential of the human senses, pushing beyond conventional limits to stimulate and develop the creative capacities inherent in every individual. Through this exploration, Beuys aimed to foster a more profound connection to the world, one that engages both the body and the mind in equal measure.

When Beuys engaged in the act of explaining paintings to the dead rabbit, he did not attempt to impose a rigid, intellectual interpretation upon it. Rather, his communication was an open, intuitive exchange, allowing for a deeper, unspoken connection between himself and the animal. The true meaning of each sentence Beuys uttered during those three hours remains elusive, and it is unlikely

that every phrase conveyed a singular, easily definable concept. Yet, the power of the performance lies in its indeterminate nature and in the profound, ongoing resonance of Beuys's act. His interaction with the dead rabbit continues to be a subject of contemplation, with its enigmatic qualities prompting discussions about the boundaries of art, communication, and existence.

As the central figure in this performance, Beuys appeared to embody the role of a tireless psychic, channeling unseen forces through his actions until he reached a state of physical exhaustion. His performance transcended mere physical exertion; it became an act of spiritual engagement, where his body and spirit were in constant dialogue with the unseen realms. Perhaps, in Beuys's view, the very essence of human existence lies in the continuous transmission of an eternal spirit through behavior—a spirit that seeks unity, empathy, and equality beyond the limitations of societal prejudices. In this light, Beuys's performance was not simply an artistic statement but a call for a new form of human consciousness—one that transcends traditional boundaries and embraces a more holistic, inclusive, and intuitive understanding of life.

#### **4.2. Analysis of *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974)**

##### **4.2.1 Overview of the Performance: *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me***

From May 21 to May 25, 1974, Joseph Beuys engaged in a remarkable performance art piece titled *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* at the René Block Gallery in New York (Greenberger, 2021). During this five-day performance, Beuys lived in isolation with a coyote in a specially designated space within the gallery. Upon his arrival in the United States from Düsseldorf, Germany, Beuys was deliberately wrapped in felt—a material often associated with his earlier works—and was immediately placed in a wheelchair, transported to the gallery via an ambulance. Notably, he had not set foot on American soil until reaching the gallery. At the time, the United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War (1955–1975), a conflict that Beuys vehemently opposed.



Figure 2: *Coyote: I like America and America likes me* performed by Joseph Beuys

(Cited from <https://www.kidsofdada.com/blogs/magazine/35963521-joseph-beuys-i-like-america-and-america-likes-me>)

In a direct act of political dissent, Beuys chose to isolate himself from the surrounding American context, stating that he wished to focus solely on the coyote and not engage with any other aspect of American life. He adorned himself in a felt tent, an unusual garment which he wore throughout the performance, and held a walking stick as his only means of protection. This performance was significantly more bold, direct, and politically charged than his previous work, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*.

The coyote, in this context, functions as a powerful symbol. It is often associated with the concept of the “scapegoat” in biblical tradition, representing malice, resentment, and a broader sense of vilification by external forces. Historically, white colonizers viewed the coyote as a malicious creature, paralleling how Native Americans were demonized and scapegoated by colonial powers. In Beuys's performance, the coyote thus becomes a metaphor for these marginalized groups, and Beuys's refusal to engage with anyone other than the animal reflects his rejection of mainstream American society and its colonialist history. The performance, through this singular communication with the coyote, articulates a complex critique of cultural violence and the oppression of indigenous populations.

#### **4.2.2 Symbolism of the Coyote**

The coyote serves as a powerful symbol of the untamed wildness and mystical qualities inherent in the indigenous cultures of the American continent. Among Native American tribes, the coyote was revered as a sacred figure, often regarded as an incarnation of the trickster or magician, a creature possessing both wisdom and transformative power. In contrast, white colonists perceived the coyote as a malevolent beast, associating it with evil and a threat to their settler society. This stark dichotomy reflects the broader cultural and ideological conflict between indigenous and colonial worldviews.

Thus, the coyote, as both an animal and a totemic figure, embodies not only the primal energy of the American continent but also the enduring spiritual trauma inflicted upon it through centuries of colonization. The symbolic presence of the coyote transcends its role as a mere creature of nature; it becomes a vessel for the spiritual scars left by the violent conquest and dispossession of indigenous peoples. This dual significance of the coyote—both as a figure of indigenous reverence and as an object of colonial disdain—captures the profound cultural and emotional divide that has persisted throughout American history, echoing the unresolved legacies of colonization, displacement, and cultural erasure (Rosenbaum, 2013).

#### **4.2.3 Themes and Techniques in the Performance**

The symbols, connotations, and artistic techniques embedded within this performance art are vast, multifaceted, and rich in interpretive potential. Beuys's *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* is not merely a spectacle but a profound exploration of human nature, cultural history, and the

power of symbolic exchange. The performance intricately weaves physical acts with intellectual and emotional dimensions, making it a complex and layered experience.

The interaction between Beuys and the coyote evokes a series of physical and emotional adventures that transcend typical human-animal encounters. In the space of the gallery, the coyote becomes both an object of fear and a potential source of communion. The dynamics of this interaction are not simply those of dominance or submission but rather a more nuanced form of dialogue—one that transcends language and communicates through presence, gesture, and shared space. This relationship between man and animal evokes a deep reflection on the boundaries between humanity and nature, civilization and wilderness, and the concept of the “other”.

#### **4.2.4 Human and Animal Interaction**

There is no doubt that being in the same space as a coyote—an animal symbolizing untamed wildness and primal energy—poses a significant risk to one’s physical safety and well-being. The proximity between the coyote’s body and Beuys’s body creates a charged, tense narrative space, filled with the potential for danger and vulnerability. This dynamic interaction between human and animal unfolds in a rhythm that oscillates between tension and release, fear and trust, encapsulating the raw immediacy of life and survival in their most elemental forms.

The body, as both a physical and symbolic entity, serves as the most authentic and honest representation of one’s existence. It is through the body that the mind is made manifest, and it is the body that allows for connection and communication between individuals, regardless of species. This truth applies not only to humans but to animals as well, each body containing within it a reservoir of instinct, emotion, and communication. In the case of the coyote, its body, initially tense and defensive, gradually begins to relax as it becomes familiar with Beuys’s presence. The wolf’s body signals this transition—its initial wariness giving way to a softer, more open posture, emitting subtle signals of trust and non-threat.

This physical interaction between Beuys and the coyote, therefore, represents more than just a visceral encounter; it becomes a profound moment of shared understanding and connection. The lowering of the coyote’s guard and its physical responses to Beuys’s actions symbolize a deeper, unspoken dialogue between human and animal. Through their mutual engagement, a silent bond forms,

transcending the boundaries of species, and offering a glimpse into an inner connection that goes beyond words or rational thought. In this sense, the performance becomes a testament to the power of bodily presence as a conduit for emotional and spiritual exchange, where the most primal instincts of both human and animal merge into a singular, harmonious experience.

#### **4.2.5 Body Philosophy and Beuys's Performance**

As a significant philosophical paradigm emerging in the 20th century, body philosophy reconceptualizes the body not as a mere physical object but as a subjective entity imbued with rich perceptual intentionality. It emphasizes the embodied nature of human experience, suggesting that the body is not simply a vessel for the mind but an active participant in the creation of meaning. This philosophy asserts that the body's lived experiences—its sensations, movements, and interactions with the world—are integral to our understanding of self, others, and the world around us. By focusing on the body's situational and experiential qualities, body philosophy challenges traditional Cartesian dualism, advocating instead for a more holistic approach that integrates body and mind.

In this light, Beuys's performance art piece, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, can be viewed as a compelling artistic manifestation of body philosophy. Through his interaction with the coyote, Beuys emphasizes the significance of the body as a site of knowledge and emotional exchange. The performance is deeply rooted in embodied experience, as it underscores the physical presence of both the artist and the animal as they engage in a shared, sensory experience. The coyote, a symbol of untamed nature and spiritual mystery, becomes a catalyst for Beuys to explore the ways in which the body, in its most primal form, can facilitate communication beyond verbal language.

Throughout the performance, Beuys's bodily movements—his gestures, his positioning within the gallery, his interaction with the coyote—serve as expressions of the body's capacity to transcend intellectual abstraction and access a more intuitive, visceral form of understanding. His use of felt and other tactile materials also underscores the importance of physicality in his art, inviting viewers to experience the work through their own senses and bodies. By engaging directly with the coyote, Beuys positions his body as an active participant in a profound exchange that transcends species boundaries, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings. This interaction becomes a

testament to the idea that the body, in its embodied state, is not merely a passive receptor of external stimuli but an active, conscious agent in the creation of meaning, connection, and understanding.

Thus, Beuys's performance embodies the principles of body philosophy by affirming the centrality of the body in the process of knowledge, communication, and artistic expression. It challenges conventional ideas of subjectivity and invites a deeper engagement with the lived, embodied experience of the world.

#### **4.2.6 Art as Emotional Release and Healing**

Art, in its truest form, serves as a powerful release of emotions and a means of self-redemption. It provides a conduit for the expression of the deepest human struggles and desires, offering an opportunity for personal and collective healing. In Beuys's *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, the eventual harmonious coexistence between Beuys and the coyote can be interpreted as a profound metaphor for reconciliation. The coyote, symbolizing a wounded and exploited America—scarred by colonization, violence, and historical trauma—finds a form of reconciliation with modern America through this deeply symbolic interaction. This moment of harmony signifies not only a personal healing for Beuys but also an invitation for the nation to acknowledge and come to terms with its past, seeking a path toward collective reconciliation and healing.

Beuys himself, as a complex figure with a multifaceted identity, carries a history deeply intertwined with trauma and redemption. A white man who had served as a German pilot in World War II, Beuys bore the weight of a tumultuous past, one marked by his experiences as a survivor of the war and an individual who had been complicit in actions that could be considered morally questionable. The guilt and trauma stemming from these experiences were integral to his sense of self, and through his art, Beuys sought to confront and transform this inner turmoil. By choosing the coyote, a figure of spiritual and cultural significance, as his companion in this performance, Beuys symbolically confronted the lingering effects of his own past. The coyote, a creature that embodies both resilience and transformation, becomes a mirror for Beuys's own journey of healing and reinvention.

Throughout the duration of the performance, the connection between Beuys and the coyote can be understood as an exchange of energy and healing, wherein the artist is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in this mutual process of renewal. The coyote, in its role as a

spiritual animal, helps guide Beuys through a process of introspection and redemption, offering him the opportunity to reconcile his personal history and emerge from it with a renewed sense of purpose and clarity. This mutual healing, between both the artist and the land that has been historically scarred, evokes a broader vision of redemption—a call for humanity to recognize its shared responsibility in addressing past injustices and to seek healing through empathy, understanding, and creative expression.

Thus, Beuys's interaction with the coyote is not only a personal ritual of healing and self-reconciliation but also a larger metaphor for the healing of a society torn by conflict, colonization, and violence. By embracing the coyote, Beuys presents a vision of art that transcends the individual, offering a means of collective redemption and a pathway toward understanding and healing in the face of profound historical wounds.

#### **4.2.7 The Significance of the Title: *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me***

Beuys's choice of the title *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* was deliberate and rich with significance. The term “America” itself carries layers of ambiguity and controversy, which Beuys likely intended to invoke as part of his larger critique of the sociopolitical landscape. The term “America”, as it is commonly used, refers to the United States—often abbreviated as U.S.A., the U.S., or simply the States. However, “America” originally denoted the entire landmass of the Americas, encompassing North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean islands. Over time, due to the expanding economic and political power of the United States, the term began to refer specifically to the nation, overshadowing the broader geographical meaning. Consequently, to differentiate between the various regions of the American continents, terms such as “North America” or “South America” were introduced, further entrenching the U.S.'s dominant usage of the term.

The shift in the meaning of “America” from a continent to a nation can be seen as symbolic of cultural and geopolitical hegemony. The United States, in asserting its identity as “America”, has exerted significant influence over global discourse and culture, reinforcing its position as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere. By using the term “America” in the title of his performance, Beuys subtly highlights this transformation of the term from a collective, continental identity to one representing a single nation-state. His choice is not incidental; it reflects his critique of the cultural imperialism and colonial hegemony imposed by the United States, particularly on

indigenous peoples. The term "America" itself has become a symbol of a broader cultural and ideological dominance, which Beuys deliberately challenges in his work.

By invoking the word “America”, Beuys positions himself against the historical exploitation and genocide of Native Americans by European colonizers, who, in their conquest of the land, imposed their own language, values, and power structures upon the indigenous population. The use of “America” in the title also serves as a critique of the pervasive cultural and ideological hegemony maintained by the United States. Beuys was acutely aware of the historical context in which this word was situated, and by choosing it, he emphasized his opposition not only to the physical domination of indigenous peoples but also to the ongoing intellectual and cultural colonization. The title, therefore, becomes a symbol of Beuys's rejection of the sanitized narrative of American exceptionalism and his refusal to accept the language and discourse shaped by those in power.

In essence, Beuys’s use of "America" is a deliberate subversion, a means of calling attention to the historical and ongoing systems of oppression, both physical and intellectual, that have shaped the nation’s identity. His performance becomes a vehicle for interrogating the power dynamics embedded in language and culture, urging viewers to critically examine the ways in which language shapes our understanding of history and identity. By appropriating the term "America" in his art, Beuys not only critiques the colonial past but also challenges the cultural narratives that continue to perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Through this performative act, he underscores the necessity of confronting these hegemonic structures, advocating for a more inclusive and just discourse.

#### **4.2.8 Irony and Self-Mockery in the Title**

*I Like America and America Likes Me* is obviously an irony and self-mockery. Because of Beuys’s opposition to the Vietnam War, he was once banned from entering the United States. Although he successfully entered the United States this time and performed this performance art, since Beuys did not want to see anything else about America except the coyote, it is clear that he did not love America and America did not love him either.

Therefore, Beuys's performance highlights the duality and irony inherent in language and cultural symbols. The use of the coyote—simultaneously a revered totem and a demonized creature—underscores the tension between the indigenous and colonial narratives that have shaped

American history. Beuys's refusal to engage with anyone other than the coyote accentuates the irony embedded in the term "America", which, for Beuys, symbolizes not just the United States but the entire history of cultural hegemony, violence, and exploitation. Through this, Beuys challenges the audience to confront the contradictions embedded in their own understanding of history, identity, and national consciousness.

The performance also serves as an intervention in the ideological space, questioning the prevailing narratives of power, war, and colonization. Beuys's resistance to the Vietnam War, coupled with his isolated, ritualistic interaction with the coyote, disrupts conventional modes of engagement with political and social issues. The work becomes a space for ideological subversion, as Beuys questions the very structures that define political and cultural identity. Through his art, Beuys reimagines the potential for healing and reconciliation, both on an individual level and within the broader socio-political context.

#### **4.2.9 The Role of the Media and Subversion of Culture**

During the brief period in which Beuys coexisted with the coyote, he made a peculiar request to the gallery staff: he asked that they deliver a copy of *The New York Times* to him each day. However, rather than using the newspaper to stay informed, as one might expect, Beuys instructed that it be used to cover the coyote's daily excrement. This seemingly trivial action, at first glance, can be interpreted as a deliberate and pointed critique of the media. In the context of Beuys's broader artistic and political commentary, the act of using *The New York Times*—a symbol of mainstream, often sanitized, and commercialized information—as a tool to cover waste becomes a subversive gesture that mocks the role of the media in shaping public consciousness.

Beuys's decision to involve the media in such a mundane and somewhat degrading task reflects his deep dissatisfaction with the ways in which the media serves the agendas of power, rather than engaging with the complex realities of the world. In choosing to defile the newspaper by covering the coyote's excrement, Beuys subverts the traditional function of the press as an authoritative source of information, instead using it as a tool for cleansing, shielding, or even concealing. This symbolic act critiques the superficiality and the often-distorted nature of media narratives, suggesting that, rather

than serving to enlighten or elevate society, mainstream media is complicit in masking inconvenient truths and perpetuating a sanitized version of reality.

The act also embodies Beuys's broader ideological stance against cultural norms and the commodification of knowledge. By placing the media in such an ignoble role, Beuys transforms the very nature of cultural products, challenging the boundaries between high and low art, and offering a pointed commentary on the devaluation of information in contemporary society. This subversion of the media underscores Beuys's belief in the potential of art to provoke critical reflection on the systems of power that influence the production and dissemination of knowledge.

In this context, Beuys's performance with the coyote becomes not only an exploration of human-animal relationships and spirituality but also a direct confrontation with the ideological forces that govern cultural and intellectual life. The irony of using *The New York Times*—a paper that has historically shaped public opinion—as a means of covering waste serves as a powerful metaphor for the way in which media, in its pursuit of spectacle and control, can obscure deeper truths and reinforce a narrow worldview. Through this gesture, Beuys effectively critiques the role of the media in shaping collective consciousness and positions his art as an alternative form of communication that seeks to expose and confront these cultural manipulations.

#### **4.2.10 Todorov's Rhetorical Trichotomy Applied to Beuys's Performance**

French-Bulgarian literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov (March 1st, 1939 – February 7th, 2017) proposed a theoretical framework for understanding rhetoric, categorizing it into three distinct types from the perspective of duality research. If we approach Joseph Beuys's performance art as a text and apply Todorov's rhetorical model, we can indeed interpret this unique performance through the lens of his rhetorical trichotomy.

Firstly, Beuys's performance is undeniably unconventional and transgressive, deviating sharply from normative artistic practices. This characteristic aligns with Todorov's classification of "non-realistic expression". Beuys's interaction with the coyote, which involves a symbolic, almost ritualistic relationship, creates a reality that is at once unsettling and beyond conventional experience. The very act of communing with an animal, particularly a creature often associated with danger and mysticism, defies the traditional boundaries of performance art and challenges the viewer's

understanding of reality. This “non-realistic” expression moves beyond mere spectacle to provoke a deeper, more visceral engagement with the audience, forcing them to reconsider their perceptions of human-animal relationships and the boundaries of art itself.

Secondly, Beuys’s performance embodies what Todorov describes as “double expression”—a rhetorical device wherein an object or subject simultaneously carries two conflicting meanings or characteristics (Berg & Zbinden, 2020). In this context, the two primary subjects of the performance, Beuys himself and the coyote, perfectly illustrate this duality. On the one hand, humans are depicted as both barbaric and destructive, as seen in their historical treatment of indigenous cultures and the environment, while simultaneously capable of civilization and compassion. On the other hand, the coyote is portrayed as both a symbol of fierceness and danger, yet also as a creature that embodies docility and peace in its interactions with Beuys. These dualities not only reflect the complexity of both the human condition and the animal nature but also underscore Beuys’s broader exploration of the contradictions inherent in contemporary society. By positioning these two figures within a single performance, Beuys invites the audience to engage with the tensions between civilization and wilderness, domination and harmony, revealing the inherent complexity of both.

Thirdly, Todorov’s concept of “contrasting expressions”, which he defines as the juxtaposition of two elements or behaviors that embody opposite qualities (Berg & Zbinden, 2020), is particularly pertinent in this performance. The human and the coyote—traditionally seen as opposites in both cultural and natural contexts—are placed together in a space of coexistence and mutual interaction. The coyote, often viewed as a symbol of wilderness, rebellion, and danger, contrasts sharply with Beuys, a highly educated, civilized, and political figure. Common sense would expect the relationship between these two subjects to be one of conflict or even danger, but Beuys actively mediates this opposition, fostering a subtle harmony. Through his performance, he seeks to dissipate the duality between the human and the animal, ultimately creating a space where this seemingly insurmountable dichotomy can be transcended. This resolution of duality is at the core of Beuys’s artistic vision, suggesting that the boundaries between civilization and nature, human and animal, can be bridged through understanding, empathy, and art.

In conclusion, approaching Beuys's performance through the lens of Todorov's rhetorical trichotomy provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex symbolic and philosophical underpinnings of the work. By analyzing this performance as a "text" in the linguistic sense, we can see how Beuys uses rhetorical devices such as non-realistic expression, double expression, and contrasting expressions to engage with profound themes of human identity, societal values, and the natural world. This method of "dissecting" Beuys's performance highlights the depth of its rhetorical and symbolic content, revealing the layers of meaning embedded within the artwork. Through this approach, the rich and multifaceted nature of Beuys's performance art becomes even more apparent, emphasizing its importance not only as an artistic gesture but also as a philosophical exploration of human existence and our relationship with the world around us.

#### **4.3. The critical thinking on *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me***

Both of the performance pieces, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, place the relationship between humans and animals at the core of Joseph Beuys's artistic practice. These works present animals—both dead and living—as partners in Beuys's artistic expression, elevating them to an equal, if not superior, status in relation to humans. Through these performances, Beuys seeks to highlight the inherent value of animals, subverting the anthropocentric viewpoint that positions humans as superior to all other species. This aspiration is reflective of Beuys's broader worldview, values, and artistic philosophy, wherein he attempts to break down hierarchical boundaries and challenge the conventions of both art and society.

However, a critical examination of these performances reveals certain deficiencies in terms of ethical expression and strategic execution. Specifically, from the standpoint of contemporary ethical frameworks, such as Peter Singer's utilitarianism, Donna Haraway's multispecies ethics, and Cary Wolfe's post-humanist critique, Beuys's works present challenges and potential contradictions in the treatment of animals and their role in art.

#### **4.3.1 *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare: Ethical Concerns***

In *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, the use of a dead hare as an integral part of the performance brings forth several pressing ethical questions. Animal rights advocates, particularly those influenced by Singer's utilitarianism, may question the morality of using an animal corpse as a prop in an art performance. According to Singer's utilitarian ethics, actions are morally right if they promote the greatest happiness and minimize suffering. In this context, the dead hare's use—without any clear indication of its ethical sourcing or how it met its demise—could be viewed as a form of exploitation, as the animal's suffering, and the process of its acquisition, is entirely unknown. From a utilitarian perspective, one might argue that the potential harm caused to the animal by whatever means it was obtained, as well as the subsequent objectification of its body, could outweigh any artistic or symbolic merit.

Additionally, from a multispecies ethical perspective, as articulated by Haraway, the performance's treatment of the dead hare raises concerns regarding the human-centered framing of animal existence. Haraway calls for a shift away from viewing animals as mere objects for human use and towards a more respectful and reciprocal relationship between humans and animals. By using the dead hare as a passive object in his art, Beuys risks reinforcing the very hierarchical structures that marginalize animals as commodities for human consumption, rather than engaging in a deeper exploration of what it means to coexist with other species in a truly ethical and mutual relationship.

#### **4.3.2 *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me: The Illusion of Wildness***

In contrast, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* presents a different set of ethical concerns, particularly regarding the dynamics of power, control, and the depiction of nature. At first glance, this performance may appear to offer a more direct engagement with the theme of wildness and the intrinsic value of animals, as Beuys attempts to live alongside a coyote in a shared space. However, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that this performance is fraught with contradictions and risks that undermine its purported message of harmony between humans and nature.

From a post-humanist critique, as developed by Wolfe, the performance's premise of human-animal interaction is problematic because it overlooks the inherent asymmetry in power between humans and animals. While Beuys may intend to create an egalitarian space for dialogue with the coyote,

the situation is inherently shaped by human authority and control. The coyote, though symbolizing wildness, nature, and Indigenous culture, is placed in a controlled environment under constant supervision, with its survival contingent upon the actions of human staff. The coyote's participation in the performance is not voluntary; it is a passive participant in an experiment that has been carefully managed to avoid dangerous outcomes. The real danger in this performance lies not in the risk to Beuys's safety, but in the coyote's vulnerability, as it is continually monitored and its fate is contingent on human intervention. If the coyote were to display aggression or become a threat to Beuys, it is likely that the animal would face immediate destruction at the hands of the staff—an outcome that starkly highlights the power imbalance inherent in this interaction.

The performance, therefore, presents a false spectacle: while Beuys's art suggests a dialogue between human and animal, this dialogue is ultimately mediated by the structures of human dominance. As Wolfe argues in his post-humanist critique, the performance fails to fully deconstruct the anthropocentric worldview that continues to dominate human interactions with animals. The coyote, though portrayed as a symbol of nature's purity, is ultimately rendered powerless by human control, suggesting that even in this bold artistic gesture, the basic dynamic of human supremacy remains intact.

#### **4.3.3 Beuys's Good Intentions and the Ethical Paradox**

Despite these criticisms, it is important to recognize that Beuys's intentions were, in many ways, well-meaning. He approached both performances with courage, a spirit of exploration, and a desire to transcend human-animal boundaries. In *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys sought to embody a deeper, more symbiotic connection with the natural world and its inhabitants, attempting to live with the coyote as a symbol of both cultural and ecological reconciliation. His willingness to place his life in the hands of an unpredictable creature reflects a certain heroism, underscoring his belief in the transformative power of art and its potential to heal societal divisions. However, as critics such as Singer, Haraway, and Wolfe have pointed out, even the noblest intentions can inadvertently perpetuate harm or reinforce existing systems of inequality.

The coyote, in its passive role, is subject to the very forces of domination and control that Beuys aims to critique. The paradox lies in the fact that while Beuys sought to elevate the coyote's status as an equal partner in his artistic exploration, the coyote's existence in the performance is dictated

by the constraints of human civilization. As a creature monitored, controlled, and surveilled by humans, the coyote's agency is limited, and its position in the performance reflects the ongoing, systemic imbalance of power between humans and the animal kingdom.

## 5. Conclusion

Joseph Beuys's performances *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) interrogate humanity's fractured relationship with nature through ritualistic actions and symbolic animal encounters. In *Dead Hare*, Beuys—his face smeared with honey and gold—whispers to a lifeless hare, critiquing rationalism while paradoxically reducing a symbol of fertility to a passive artistic prop. The work champions ecological consciousness yet raises ethical questions about using animal remains as spectacle.

*Coyote* amplifies these tensions. Isolating himself with a wild coyote for five days, Beuys wrapped in felt (symbolizing healing) performs an interspecies dialogue that rejects American imperialism and colonial violence against Native communities. The coyote, simultaneously a trickster archetype and victim of oppression, becomes a medium for confronting historical trauma. However, the animal's captivity and the gallery's contingency plans (including potential lethal intervention) expose the limits of Beuys's idealism, revealing how even anti-colonial gestures remain entangled with human dominance.

Both works exemplify Beuys's shamanistic approach: art as a transformative act bridging spiritual, ecological, and political realms. Yet they also embody contradictions. While advocating for animal agency, *Dead Hare* objectifies its subject; while critiquing control, *Coyote* relies on it. These paradoxes reflect broader tensions in activist art—can critique escape the systems it opposes?

Beuys's legacy lies in this unresolved dialectic. His performances remain touchstones for debates on art's role in ecological ethics, posthumanism, and decolonization. They challenge viewers to confront uncomfortable questions about representation, power, and whether art can truly enact the liberation it envisions. For contemporary artists, Beuys's works serve as both inspiration and cautionary tales—models of radical empathy that nonetheless risk replicating the hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

## 6. Academic Contributions

Different from other scholars' related research which focuses on the motivation and significance of Beuys's two performances, this study points out their shortcomings and defects, and reminds future artists to face up to the controversial points of these two performances, and encourages them to open up a more ideal and perfect path. In addition, the author introduced text analysis at the level of rhetoric study and body philosophy into the interpretation of these two performance art works, creating new academic excitement, extending the scope of application of the theory, and enriching the research perspective.

In conclusion, the study acknowledges the lack of direct animal agency in Beuys's work, using Wolfe's Zoontologies to critique the paradox of "giving voice" to animals while maintaining human authorship. By linking Beuys's ecological themes to current discourses (e.g., the Anthropocene), the research positions his work as a precursor to eco-art activism, yet problematizes its romanticized view of nature.

The methodological pluralism ensures a nuanced critique of Beuys's legacy, revealing how his performances both challenge and inadvertently replicate the hierarchies they seek to dismantle. The synthesis of embodied practice, symbolic systems, and ethical philosophy offers a roadmap for reevaluating human-animal conflicts in performance art beyond Beuys's oeuvre.

## 7. Research Limitations

Since I was unable to obtain the complete videos of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* and could only find some fragmentary clips, I was unable to conduct a more in-depth and detailed analysis of these two performance arts. In addition, at this stage, I'm not able to know the contact information of the relevant staff who worked with Beuys to prepare these two performance art works and are still alive. If they could be interviewed, I believe that more detailed information would be obtained.

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