The Man, The Artist, The Teacher: Approaching Joseph Beuys' I Like America and America Likes Me

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The Man, The Artist, The Teacher: Approaching Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the action piece *I Like America and America Likes Me*, performed by Joseph Beuys in New York in 1974. Temporally based in a century of changes and fast developments in the artistic, political, social and economic fields, this performance stands as one of the deepest representations of Beuys' theory of art. For this event, the artist spent three days inside the René Block Gallery with the unique presence of a coyote. The actions and the movements ensued were aimed at developing a silent dialogue with the animal, which the artist achieved also through the use of an assorted group of objects. *I Like America and America Likes Me* has been analyzed and interpreted by a number of scholars and critics, such as Caroline Tisdall, Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, David Levi Strauss and Martino Nicoletti. Some of these writers have supported Beuys' theory and practice (Tisdall and De Domizio Durini), while others have criticized firmly the German artist's production (Buchloh). However, no scholar ever managed to convey the strong spiritual and aesthetic essence of the performance, which has to be understood as part of Joseph Beuys' project of Social Sculpture. Through an initial rational approach, this thesis will propose a new aesthetic approach to the action piece, which helps to perceive the performance as an empathic event aimed at stimulating a mental and spiritual change in the human beings. This new proposal will constitute also a chance to respond to the critiques moved mainly by Buchloh to Beuys' persona and art. The evidence to support these arguments harbor in the words of the artist, as well as in the iconography of the symbols included in the performance, which will constitute the rational basis for proposing a new way of looking, thinking and interpreting a work of art.

To those who can read the words,

between the words,

beyond the words.

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«Ein wahrhafter Fürst ist der Künstler der Künstler; das ist, der Director der Künstler. Jeder Mensch sollte Künstler sein.»

Novalis, *Glauben und Liebe oder der König und die Königin*

"The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for human kind in the future."

Joseph Beuys

Introduction

Fat, felt, torches, wood, and broom. Animals, plants, crucifix, sound and chalk. These are some of the tools most frequently used by Joseph Beuys. Elements of nature, objects of common use; tools that were never casually picked – rather they were *chosen* for their universal power. Tools that can be used and understood by anybody, in every existing culture, because they own global values.

A man, an animal. Two beings, two souls, an attempt at spiritual connection. Silent communication working as a line that binds the whole event: all the objects, all the actions. Acts that occur not only because of the artist, but because of the animal, of the location, of time and atmosphere. What is highly interesting in Joseph Beuys' performances resides not only in what the artist wished to create. Joseph Beuys' performances became eternal because they resulted to be the convergence of a variety of factors, all strong, all historical and universal at the same time. In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the protagonists of the performance are two beings, belonging to diverse natural spheres – but still, beings. The coyote and the man: looking at each other, moving and behaving in relation to the other.

The general reception of Joseph Beuys' art demonstrates a consideration of him as one of the most complex and influential artists and thinkers of the postwar generation. He included in his *oeuvre*, as well as in his life, many fascinating interests that aimed at touching every angle of the social field. Through his career, which has developed

especially between the 1950s and the 1980s,[1] not only art, but also economy, ecology and politics were part of Beuys' attention. His aim was wider than those of other artists, both preceding and contemporary to him. As it will be understood through this thesis, the main objective of Joseph Beuys was to create a new form of art that could lead to a spiritual revolution, to a personal change and, eventually, to the birth of a new society. This attempt, even if seemingly utopian, was meant to generate in people a desire for participation, which constituted a necessary element to experience one's personal resurrection.[2] By no coincidence, the German artist dedicated his whole life to a variety of activities and to several forms of art that, is some way, were always related to the human being. He inspired the avant-garde with his impassioned appeals for democratic anarchy; for such reasons, he also founded a chain of 'free universities' across Europe, whose aim was to ignite the flame of creativity in as many people as possible. Almost as if developing a modern version of the Quattrocento humanism, Beuys stimulated communication and change among and for the people, to teach them how to reconnect to their human essence. Everything that mattered to life became a matter of art for Beuys. Ecology, politics, economy were seen by him as promulgators of new ideals that could be realized through a new art, which Beuys expressed mainly through performance and sculpture. On one performance, in particular, this thesis wants to focus: *I Like America and America Likes Me*, also commonly known as *Coyote*, which was performed in New York's René Block Gallery, from the 23rd to the 25th of May 1974.[3]

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[1] See Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Breve biografia ragionata di Joseph Beuys dal 1921 al 1964", in Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura – The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 – Venezia 2007* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2007), 276-285.

[2] See the article by Eric Michaud, "The Ends of Art According to Beuys", trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 45 (Summer 1988): 36-46. JSTOR.

[3] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura – The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 – Venezia 2007* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2007), 279; ibid., 282.

The reason for this choice is a personal one. My encounter with Joseph Beuys was unexpected and sudden. The memory of his eyes, of his words, and of his beliefs was a strong one; a thought I could not avoid. The image of his body moving through the space of the American gallery accompanied by a coyote stuck emotionally in my mind. His name, *Joseph Beuys*, came to me as if no other choice could be as *just* as that one. This emotional force is what allowed this thesis to be born; a need of comprehending in a very deep sense his actions provoked a desire to lead an investigation that could advance something new within the art field. For such reasons, the approach to *I Like America and America Likes Me* is based on disclosing the deepest implications of the event, as well as on learning why the spiritual strength of this art piece still lives today, even in people who, just like myself, could not have the chance to experience a performance by Beuys first-hand.

The analysis of this performance will be led by focusing on how communication was at the center of this event's significance, in order to demonstrate how deep Beuys' message was –a message that still echoes nowadays. The use of the term 'communication' already conveys the desire of the artist to transmit his most important messages, related to the concept of social sculpture and to his will to renovate society through spiritual and didactic actions (Figure 19). This communicative aspect of the works of art relied on the use of symbols and materials people could recognize. These elements are part of the Beuysian language that, once learnt, unveils its deepest meanings.[4] Indeed for Joseph Beuys, verbal, spoken and even silent communication stood as the perfect means to reach the ends of each individual's revelation, of change and

[4] See Joan Rothfuss, "Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America", in *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy,* ed. Gene Ray (New York :D.A.P.; Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001), 52-53.

transformation, which would eventually lead to the establishment of a truly democratic society, in which art shall substitute politics. The performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* has to be recognized as a very human and empathic event, whose aim was the achievement of both didactic and spiritual purposes. These two elements are often connected under a certain interpretation of the artist Joseph Beuys. He was indeed frequently considered as a shaman of the modern Western world and many writers attributed or contested this and other roles of his; but the true reasons behind such varieties of attributions were hardly ever investigated and explained clearly. For this specific case, the New York performance *Coyote* will be an excellent case study to understand why such event was so evocative and full of symbolism, related to a spirituality that too often has been left aside in the interpretation of the artist's creations.

The method elected to develop this thesis is in some way both traditional and innovative.[5] The structure of the following chapters is indeed based on the renowned Panofsky's method, which is constituted by three main partitions of the theme engaged: pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological analysis. In the first section, which also corresponds to the first chapter, a neutral description of what exactly happened in the René Block Gallery during the *Coyote* performance will be given. Moving on, I will analyze the various symbols that were part of the event (iconographic analysis); these symbols include the objects chosen by the artist to be in the room of the gallery, as well

[5] This method has been recently developed by Yvonne Zu Dohna, whose soon-to-be-published article explains how this approach results efficacious to understand modern art under a new perspective. The foundations for this method are theoretical and philosophical and, as a matter of fact, they belong traditionally to the field of spiritual theology. However, Dohna aims at demonstrating it is possible to apply this method to art, too. This thesis, following the same line, wants to use this new method to look at the performance by Joseph Beuys in a new way. To demonstrate and justify this possibility, however, it is extremely necessary to conduct, first of all, a rational analysis of the work of art. Only successively it is possible to accept and comprehend the approach of the *aesthetic experience* (which will be described extensively in the last chapter of this thesis).

as the coyote itself. A brief view on the historical tradition of these images will be suggested, in order to note possible changes Beuys delivered to them, too. Furthermore, I will introduce the general interpretation of these objects, as it was intended by both the artist and the critics who analyzed Beuys' action. Next, an iconological analysis will present the disparate literary sources, related to the artist and to the performance, which are mostly used and highly linked to the investigation of Beuys' works. Thus, this analysis is lead especially through the words of the artist, as well as through the social, historical and artistic backdrop of the time. His biography, his theory of art, and his style will be considered, in order to figure out the main influences that lead the artist to choose such particular symbols in *I Like America and America Likes Me*. The next chapter is committed to interpretations, thus to what the critics said about Joseph Beuys and the performance he conceived in 1974. Notably, three different views on it are proposed: the interpretation of Caroline Tisdall (and, in smaller part, of Lucrezia de Domizio Durini); the critiques moved by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh; and the recent publication of Martino Nicoletti, who studied and illustrated Beuys' connection to the culture of shamanism. Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to a conscious response I wish to propose for the critiques Beuys received, especially by the just mentioned Benjamin Buchloh. Through this response, I will propose a new look at the means used by Beuys to convey his message. By referring to his theory of art, I will point out the spiritual character of the performance; an element that has not been considered seriously by other scholars. As a result of my investigation on *I Like America and America Likes Me*, I will propose a point of view on the performance dissimilar to previous interpretations. The event has to be understood on a deeper level, one which takes into consideration the didactic character

inherent in Beuys' production; a feature that even becomes independent from the artist himself.

In the following chapters, the investigation will always be based on scholarly recognized facts, words and actions that demonstrated something of the artist and his work. Overall the thesis, different approaches to Beuys and to *I Like America and America Likes Me* will be proposed. From an initial rational approach, developed throughout the discussions on the iconography, the iconology and the interpretations of the performance, the reader will end up experiencing an aesthetic approach to the work of art, born from a desire of understanding how Beuys' theory of art gains life though the medium of performance. Both the rational and the aesthetic features of Beuys' work are essential to understand the final goal of the performance: the didactic end of the work of art. This didactic aspect considers Beuys' desire to stimulate a change in the human beings as the main aim of his entire production. The action piece proposed stands as a case study to introduce a new procedure to learn something from what Beuys created when he performed *I Like America and America Likes Me*. In a more universal sense, the tentative is to find a definition for the relationship that is established between the artist, the performance, and the audience. Once one comprehends the deepest implications of this event and provides a conscious response to the critiques moved to Joseph Beuys, which were never structurally answered, it is possible to *feel* the true essence of this performance.

1 *I Like America and America Likes Me*

In May 1974, Joseph Beuys performed a three-day action that was meant to remain imprinted in the history of modern and contemporary art. From the 23rd to the 25th of May, the artist stayed at New York's René Block Gallery with the unique company of a coyote; an animal that owns a wide range of symbolism, thus a figure which can convey multiple meanings. The performance became, in the following years, one of the most exclusive and representative actions of the German artist, especially with respect to his relationship with the USA. With the variety of layers of interpretations and themes included in this event, *I Like America and America Likes Me* became highly discussed in the artistic and critical fields. Every scholar and art passionate proposed a different opinion on the *aktion*, thus contributing to a growing number of critiques and eulogies of the artist that sometimes result contradictive, if compared either to one another or with the actual words of the artist. However, before entering any discussion on interpretations, it is necessary to understand what precisely happened during those three days spent by Beuys and the coyote at the René Block Gallery of New York.

This journey in the US was not the first time Beuys travelled to the 'New World', but evidently the most successful one. He had already been in America four months earlier, for a series of public dialogues and lectures on his *Energy Plan for the Western Man*; but the American audience did not know what approach to have with Beuys' persona and art, yet. On one hand, they shared the ideas of Beuys' idealism; on the other

hand, they could oppose to materialism as the German artist did, for this element defined the American culture.[6] Also, this first visit generated little media attention; even though people knew about his fame in Europe, they could not easily relate to his ideas of social sculpture, which were received with a general skepticism. Beuys gave lectures in three different American cities: New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis; but the only memorable occurrence of that travel remains the artist's spontaneous Action in front of the cinema 'Biograph', in Chicago, where the gangster John Dillinger had been shot in 1934 (Figure 26).[7] Therefore, when returning to the USA for the *Coyote* performance, Beuys was more conscious of the American situation and of the citizens' general attitude towards his work; thus, he decided to move from verbal language to the language of action, in order to spread his beliefs (Figure 22). As it is commonly interpreted, already the title of the performance was, on one hand, ironic, for it referred to his being little appreciated in America, while, on the other hand, it was referring to Beuys' opposing position with regard to the American military actions in Vietnam.[8]

By no coincidence, the artist intentionally never touched the American ground, neither before nor after the performance. He was carried from the Kennedy Airport to the gallery in an ambulance, with his whole body covered in felt (Figures 1, 2). In the same way he would have left, after the event. When he arrived at the René Block gallery, the coyote was already there; from that moment on, the process of encounter and

[6] David Levi Strauss, "American Beuys, 'I Like America & America Likes Me'", *Johanhedback.com*, Johan Hedback, accessed February 13, 2015, http://johanhedback.com/beuys.html.
[7] Beuys felt some kind of link between the artist and the gangster, especially when speaking of John Dillinger. Indeed, for Beuys, "the artists and the criminal are fellow travelers; both have a wild creativity, and both are amoral, driven only by the force of liberty." (See Claudia Schmuckli, "Chronology and Selected Exhibition History," in Mark Rosenthal, Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, and Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments,* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 178.
[8] Mark Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", in *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments*, 89.

communication between the human being and the animal started. The space in which the performance was made was a long light room, with three windows to illuminate the location. There was a barrier, made of chain-link, meant to separate the almost sacred space of communication from the audience territory (Figure 5). People could of course go to the gallery, to look at the artist and the animal coexisting in the same space; but they were kept outside of the performance. The room was filled with some exemplar objects. Straw had been brought with the coyote; the man, instead, had chosen some objects, representative of his world, of his ideas and of his beliefs, which were arranged in the space. There was felt, a walking stick, gloves, a flashlight, a triangle, and two neat piles of Wall Street Journals (fifty a day, the edition of each changing day).[9] What happened during those days with these objects was highly interesting: at the very beginning, the coyote claimed the man's objects to be his, by pissing on them deliberately. Meanwhile, the man ended up using the animal's straw (Figure 8). This approach between the two already conveys the beginning of a possible relationship between two very different creatures. The communication between these two beings became more and more confidential, with the passing of hours and days.

Joseph Beuys altered very carefully his moves and his actions, in order to transmit certain feelings or messages to the coyote. The element of motion and the notion of time were reshaped in that room, so that they could be both adapted to the nature of the animal. Beuys developed a repertoire of movements and performed certain choreographies directed towards the animal, repeated numerous times during the day, but with an always changing mood and tone. The beginning of the sequence was always

[9] Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 6.

defined by the struck of the musical triangle, which the artist wore pendant around his neck (Figure 14). After this sound, the recording of turbine engine would be played by the tape recorder, creating a contrast between harmonic and chaotic energies. Then, Beuys would pull on his gloves and get into one length of felt, wrapping it around his body and disappearing into it. Then the man would extend the crook of his stick out from the felt wrap, as if creating an antenna to transmit energies to the coyote (Figure 6).[10] The movements he used to do were dictated in time by the coyote response, in order to create a harmonic dialogue between the two. The artist helped himself with the use of a brown walking stick. He also took advantage of the pieces of felt to create different images of his body. Sometimes he had a hierarchical appearance, upright and distant, as if claiming which was his position with respect to the coyote (Figure 4); other times he rolled on the floor, waiting for the coyote to approach (Figure 13). Sometimes, instead, he stayed reclined on the straw, looking at the animal, and trying to establish a connection with him.

Even though, generally, the structure of Beuys' movement was always the same, the reactions of the coyote were interestingly constantly changing. Caroline Tisdall, eyewitness of the event, described how the coyote was sometimes distant and sometimes watchful, looking and circling around the felt sculpture of the man. The creature occasionally went "mad with excitement, mischief and malice mixed, playful to the point of aggression, leaping at the stick, mauling the felt, tearing it apart" (Figure 11).[11] The felt was particularly loved by the animal, especially for sleeping and resting on it.

[10] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys".
[11] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 7.

Interestingly enough, though, the coyote never turned his back to the audience, almost as if those people beyond the chain-link were the real danger – the unknown stranger to hold in check. The animal's behavior was fascinating in every move he made, especially when relating to the figure of Joseph Beuys, of course. This last, too, moved and acted in the room both independently and in relationship with the coyote. As the days went by, the animal and the man grew closer together, "as if they had always been there."[12] At the end of the performance, Beuys had to leave the gallery. After he hugged the coyote Little John, he was carried back to the airport with an ambulance, wrapped in felt (Figure 15, 16). From the moment the man was gone, the animal started to behave differently. He was alone and, for the first time, he began to act like a caged animal.

[12] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 8.

2 The Symbolism of the Performance

The actions done, the tools used, and the place chosen by Joseph Beuys for the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* were not determined by coincidence. The artist was totally conscious of his choices and aims. This chapter wants to focus on the variety of symbols included in the performance; these are the key elements that both convey and refer to certain meanings, which can be either traditional or new. Since this action piece has to be inserted in the artistic and social program developed and lead on by Joseph Beuys, and since contrasting interpretation were proposed for it, it is essential to define, first of all, the history of these symbols and of how they gained a new significance in the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me.*

Many of the objects present in the René Block Gallery had already been used by the artist in other works of his. The instruments he handled were: two large lengths of felt, some straw – originally meant for the coyote, – brown gloves and a brown walking stick, a flashlight, a musical triangle, the piles of Wall Street Journals and a tape-recorder that projected the noise of turbine machines (Figure12). All these factors played a role in the act of communication between the artist and the coyote, as well as between the artist's performance and the audience. Not only the objects, but also and especially the coyote are symbols that need to be valued and understood thoroughly. While the coyote was the artist's interlocutor and focus, the objects constituted the essential ingredients of Beuys' language; a language that, in this case, does not articulate through spoken words. Indeed,

the dialogue between the man and the coyote was silent; it was based on gazing and moving in either a choreographed sequence (in Beuys case) or in an impulsive and almost primitive way (in the coyote case). The mentioned ingredients operate as "vehicles of experience, transmitters and communicators",[13] since each of them represents a hodgepodge of meanings and symbolic values. As Lucrezia De Domizio Durini claims, the symbol is for Beuys an element that unifies the artist's message, whose function is both didactic and therapeutic.[14] What was the purpose of having the previously mentioned objects as part of this event? What significance do they own? Before getting to the artist's and the critics' interpretations, an overview of the historical significance of these symbols will be presented.

Traditional Interpretation of the Symbols

The tools more easily associable to traditional symbolism in visual art are the walking stick, the gloves, the flashlight and the triangle. On the contrary, felt, straw and the Wall Street journals stand as part of a new symbolism developed by Beuys through his art. The coyote as well is a symbol that looks back at indigenous and primordial cultures and that, in some way, can be found in the Western artistic tradition, too. Although Beuys was not so much interested in creating a vocabulary of symbols, as a matter of fact he spotted a light on certain objects, which he used very often in his performance. This is particularly true for felt, a material full of potentials, which has been largely considered and interpreted by various authors, as we will see later. Now the focus

[13] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 13.
[14] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Un presente senza presenza", in Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: L'immagine dell'umanità* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2001), 24.

will be kept on noticing how the stick, the gloves, the flashlight, the triangle and the coyote can be reconnected to past iconographic traditions.

In Christian iconography, the stick is an object usually attributed to Aaron, elder brother of Moses, or to Joseph, husband of the Virgin Mary. Even more often, the wand is used as an attribute for Moses, who cause the water to issue from a rock by striking it with his stick. This article was also associated to the personification of Grammar, one of the seven liberal arts, who uses it to chastise her pupils.[15] In some depictions, the stick might also be shown as a scepter or a caduceus. In the first case, the object would become an emblem of authority and/or royalty;[16] in the latter case, the object would be linked to Ancient Greek mythology, in which the caduceus was an attribute of Hermes/Mercury, and to previous near-Eastern religions, in which it was associated with messengers of the gods. Interestingly enough, Mercury was believed to be the teacher of Cupid, in which case the caduceus would stand for Eloquence and Reason, which are exactly the qualities a teacher should have.[17]

The gloves might be seen as an extension of Beuys' hands, thus as a means to reach the coyote, both metaphorically and physically. Hands are also very much present in the traditional – especially Christian – iconography. The hand of God, First Person of the Trinity, is widely shown in visual art. Also, there are frequent depictions of the hand that struck Christ during His Passion, as well as images of hands giving money, which refer to the payment of Judas. The washing of hands, instead, became a symbol of

[15] James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, (London: John Murray Ltd., 1979), 338.
[16] Ibid., 274.
[17] Ibid., 55.

innocence, since it referred to Pilate's action after the trial of Christ. Finally, according to an ancient oriental custom, veiled hands at the presence of Christ convey respect.[18]

The flashlight is, clearly, a reference to light. Light is always related to spiritual elements. It is an association that comes automatically to people's minds, for it is deeply rooted in their culture. In Christian iconography, light is especially symbolic of Christ, as mentioned in the Gospel of John.[19] Tom Chetwynd, in his psychoanalytical interpretation of symbols, defines light as "perhaps the most basic symbol of conscious life",[20] for it is the first and most immediate experience of waking from sleep or coma, and thus refers to the very act of being born into the light. Therefore, light stands to represent life itself.[21] Light is often opposed to darkness, frequently as a reference to the Good (light) and the Evil (darkness), or as an opposition of moods (darkness for depression, light for wellness).[22]

The musical triangle, often hanging down the artist's neck, is remarkable both for its form and for its use, namely as a percussion instrument. In the first case, the triangular form usually refers to the Holy Trinity, standing thus as a form related to perfection and full sacredness. Especially during the Renaissance epoch, the triangle was often shown with an eye depicted inside, which refers again to the Trinity.[23] In the second case, the musical instrument is occasionally the attribute of Erato, one of the Muses.[24]

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[18] Ibid., 144.
[19] "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of fire." From the Gospel of John 8:12, quoted in George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 43.
[20] Tom Chetwynd, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Glasgow: Paladin – Grafton Books, 1982), 242.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art,* 118.
[24] Ibid., 308.

The image of the coyote can also be traced back as a symbolic element in various cultures, which however do not include Christianity and, in general, the Western culture. For instance, in the myths of creation bequeathed by indigenous tribes, the coyote appears as a trickster, thus as an image of chaos, instability, and disorder. The coyote was also considered as a rascal; a careless being able to provoke a sudden destruction of the entire macrocosm. It was seen, therefore, as a strongly influencing being in nature. In classical iconography, it is possible to see a substitute of the coyote in the image of the dog. Although the dog was rarely mentioned in the Bible except in an unfavorable light, it was defined by Pliny the Elder as, together with the horse, the animal most faithful to man. The different breeds of dog might be related to different meanings; for instance, black-and-white dogs were sometimes used as symbols of the Dominicans, who wore habits of the same colors.[25] But also, dogs could be used to express carnal desire and greed.[26] The parallel between the Western dog and the Asiatic coyote finds, therefore, some common ground.

Rephrasing the Symbols

Although felt, straw, the Wall Street newspapers and the tape recorder do not figure in any iconographic tradition, they own a symbolic significance, too. As a matter of fact, both these three and the other elements previously analyzed share this common symbolic value. By no coincidence, writers dealing with *I Like America and America Likes Me* and the artist himself felt the necessity of explaining the reason why those

[25] Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols,* 15.
[26] Sarah Carr-Gomm, *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western* Art (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 81.

objects were present in the gallery. In the following paragraph, I am going to propose a wider interpretation of each one of these symbols, by taking into consideration, first of all, the words of the artist; but also the written and photographic documentation of Caroline Tisdall, eyewitness of the event, and of other major writers who analyzed and interpreted this performance. The following analysis of symbols takes into consideration the lesson of semiotics: the study of signs and signification that developed from linguistics, and which was later applied to the interpretation visual art – modern and contemporary art, especially. The investigations of semiotics, begun with the linguistic studies of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Pierce at the beginning of the 20th century, introduced the possibility that signs might be independent from the reality they represent.[27] In the art field, this new approach caused the questioning of the traditional artistic system, in which the visible had to be made legible ("to every plastic element a linguistic element must correspond")[28]. With the birth of conceptual art, especially, matter became more and more indeterminate. As a consequence, Beuys claimed it was necessary to find a new way to approach to matter. Since it could not be quantified and

[27] Ferdinand de Saussure identified two components of the linguistic sign: the signifier, namely the physical word that is spoken and written; and the signified, that is the mental concept behind the sign. He understood these two elements as interdependent but separate, specifying that the relationship between the two may change according to the language system to which they belong. Pierce, however, pushed this theory even further, developing a typology of signs based on the various relationships that may occur between the three components: symbolic, iconic, and indexical. These theories became very important in the study and analysis of the history of art. Indeed, the investigation of semiotics introduced the possibility that signs might be independent from the reality they represent. This possibility led to different views on such issues, such as the 'realist' view, based on the belief of the existence of a one-to-one relationship between signs and objects/concepts; and the 'idealist' view, which claimed that the human reality cannot be separated from the sign system people use. Roland Barthes even developed the term "empty signifier", hypothesizing that signifiers were open to interpretation by anyone – which meant that each person could understand the sign as he/she wished. Based on this theory, Barthes proposed the 'death of the author', in which the author or the artist ends up having no control on how his work is interpreted. See Grant Pooke and Diana Newal, "Semiotics and poststructuralism", in Grant Pooke and Diana Newal, *Art History - The Basics*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 90-114.

[28] Annie Suquet, "Archaic Thought and Ritual in the Work of Joseph Beuys", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 28 (Autumn, 1995): 149

delineated, anymore, matter had to become energetic vibration, a force that could transform things.[29] By no coincidence, transformation is usually considered the central idea of the performance, as we will see later. In analyzing *I Like America and America Likes Me*, semiotics theories result useful to understand the wide range of signified each single signifier can refer to. Of course a complication occurs in the moment one deals with a performance, for it is necessary to consider the existence of a fourth dimension, which is not visible: time. Therefore, in order to deal with this action piece, I am going to focus only on the symbolic elements previously mentioned, as they were analyzed by eyewitnesses of the event.

The Objects

Straw and felt were peculiar objects of the two living beings present in the room. Straw for the coyote, felt for the man. These objects, however, underwent a transformation of their meaning and use as the performance went by. Even though straw was meant to be used by the coyote, the animal soon chose to snatch the man's felt for his everyday use. Consequently, Beuys, too, began to use straw as a place where to lie down and also interact with the coyote (Figure 8). Felt was an especially loved fabric for the artist. For this event, he consciously chose to bring two lengths of this material; each of them had a different purpose. While one was used by the man to wrap his body and create different and transformable shapes, the other was a straw equivalent, used mostly by the coyote, from which the flashlight shone. Dual was also the character of this material. Indeed, felt was for Beuys both an insulator (from America) and a warmth transmitter (to

[29] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice", in *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura,* 30-31.

the coyote).[30] But what do these terms mean? The insulator and warmth factors were importantly present in Beuys' Theory of Sculpture, which will be described in the following chapter.[31] The artist himself claimed that the principle of the insulator was "a prerequisite for every experiment with the Theory of Sculpture".[32] The process of insulation is something Beuys tried to achieve in various performances and works; in *Coyote,* too, this process is present. The decision of not touching the American ground and of not even looking directly at the city of New York – if not through the gallery's windows – are already signals of a detachment Beuys wanted to create between him and the modern America. If one considers the coyote as an example of the minorities of America, such as the Natives who, paradoxically, were the original inhabitants of those lands, the insulator factor grows into a declaration of partition from the modern America – the US. Interestingly enough, felt was used by both the protagonists of this event. While the two lengths of felt were insulating and isolating the coyote and the artist from America, the same material became a transmitter of warmth to the animal. Almost like a source of energy, felt could create a link between the human and the animal through the expansion and preservation of warmth. Warmth was, for Beuys, a positive element, which stood as an equivalent of life itself; [33] this quality was common to fat, too, which the artist considered "the warming principle per se".[34] Consequently, heat was intended as the starting point for metamorphoses, movement, the circulation of energy, and a

[30] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 13-14.
[31] Annie Suquet mentions, in her article, that to mark a space was usual in Beuys' performances, especially when it came to insulate. Felt, she writes, was a particular insulating material for him, who therefore used it abundantly. (Suquet, "Archaic Thought", 151).
[32] Joseph Beuys, "Discussions of a few objects and an action piece with Caroline Tisdall, 1974 and 1978", in Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man. Writings by and Interviews with the Artist,* edited by Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 119.
[33] M. Buschges et al., "Joseph Beuys and the Ever-lasting Effect of Trauma" (*Open Access Scientific Reports*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, 2013): 2, http://omicsonline.org/scientific-reports/2167-1222-SR-675.pdf
[34] Buschges et al., "Joseph Beuys and the Ever-lasting Effect", 2.

dissolution of boundaries.[35] However, felt can also appear to be a material filled with ritualistic and, more precisely, shamanic references. As Martino Nicoletti interprets the performance, the felt mantle that wraps entirely Beuys' body becomes an expression of power, which can reconnect the artist to a primordial and pre-formal dimension. According to this interpretation, when Beuys covers himself with this material, he becomes an amorphous creature, a "less-than-body" being (Figure 10). Even the act of covering his face, might create a connection between Beuys and some typical Asiatic rituals, in which to cover one's eyes and face is a symbol of clairvoyance powers, typically owned by shamans, the ones who could see without looking.[36]

The walking stick has often been linked to shamanic rituals, too. This tool was frequently present in Beuys' performances – most notably in *Eurasian Staff*, from 1967,[37] in which the artist used the stick as a visual metaphor for a possible conjunction between the East and the West. The same word 'Eurasia' reveals a desirable union between Europe and Asia, two continents that differ highly from each other. Beuys believed human beings could reconnect with one another to re-create a cultural Pangaea. To do this, faith in humanity and in the birth of a new society, of a new economic system, and of a new political structure was required. His role was that of the connector, the element of conjunction who, through communication, could spur people to make this 'revolution' begin. Therefore, it is possible to see how the figure of the teacher, proposed in traditional iconography, can be valid also in this interpretation of the wand. This link is probably not casual, since Joseph Beuys, as we will see especially in the next chapter,

[35] Suquet, "Archaic Thought", 154.
[36] Martino Nicoletti, *L'uomo che Dialogava con il Coyote. Una Breve Incursione sul Tema "Joseph Beuys e Sciamanesimo"*, (Roma: Edizioni Exorma, 2011), 41.
[37] Suquet, "Archaic Thought", 151.

considered teaching his greatest work of art.[38] The stick, in *Coyote*, represents the attempt at creating a contact with a world that seems extremely distant from what man is now. It is again, as it was in *Eurasian Staff*, an "extension through time of the wanderings of peoples",[39] which reminds of the travel that, according to Beuys, the coyote did from polar lands to America. The animal is the image of a primordial world, of the instinctive nature that belongs to human beings, too, but which has been mostly forgotten.

The movements and the employ of this tool are significant. Beuys knew when to use the stick to impose his figure and his strength over the animal; but he also knew when to put it away, when to reach a different connection with the coyote. This tool is a powerful and very direct one, for its shape and its appearance instantly convey a certain set of reactions. In front of a man with a stick, contrasting feelings would clearly grow, according to the motions of the bar. Slow and sweet motions, with a stick kept low, could convey relaxation and easily allow the viewer to feel like becoming part of the movement. If, contrarily, the stick is held high and rigid, in a vertical stance, and if moved violently and fast, one would feel fear and tension; just like an animal, he/she would get ready to attack, to counter-act an expected assault from the man with the bar. In the New York performance, Beuys never took on a violent attitude towards the coyote, of course; but it is interesting to see, through Caroline Tisdall's photographs, how the artist varied his poses and his use of the stick in relation to the coyote's behavior (Figures 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14). When keeping the stick high and vertical, Beuys was always fully covered with felt, as if in that moment he was assuming a shapeless identity, leaving his own being, letting the man Joseph Beuys go to keep only a spiritual essence

[38] Joseph Beuys, "Interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1969", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 85.
[39] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 14.

under the felt. He looked authoritative, firm, creating a hierarchical image. Then he would change his pose, bending, crooking to the ground and crouching with the stick moved in different directions. All of these changes were due and followed the motions and reactions of the coyote, as if the very existence of the human being inside that space was dependent on the existence of the animal. A reciprocal relationship, a interrelated necessity that lead the animal and the human to be together, to find a way to get in contact, to communicate through an unknown secret language. It is Beuys himself who claimed the importance of this factor – the most important one, the receiver, that is, the coyote.

> "The stick became an extension of my head, a head bending before the coyote in a form of devotion. I kept him constantly in view, stayed in line with his every movement . . . At all times my actions, all of the were dependent on the actions of the coyote. When he came near to my figuration I bowed in devotion. When he lay down, I knelt. And when he fell asleep, I fell over. Then when he sprang up again, I threw off the felt and jumped up too."

The stick was thus transformed from object to conduit, able to build a metaphorical bridge between the man and the animal.

The gloves, the flashlight, the musical triangle, and the Wall Street Journals were also filled with deep implications. The gloves were brown, for no coincidence. This color is indeed a neutral one, closer to the idea of sculpture to which Beuys wanted to be faithful. This neutrality was also useful as a contrast to the "incredible richness and life of color that exists in the world."[40] Also, as the artist went on claiming, brown echoed the color of earth and warmness and allowed a process of transformation that echoed the natural processes of the world. However, the gloves also assumed a new significance

[40] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 14.

when relating with the coyote. In fact, during the three days in the gallery, the animal got to play with them quite often. It was Beuys himself who threw them at Little John, as if giving him his own hands. The hands were, for Beuys, a symbol of human freedom. Thanks to the use of hands, human beings can create freely and choose to do different things in their lives. Hands were defined by Beuys "universal tools . . . because they are embryonic. They are not directed towards one specific use . . . In this free choice lies human kind's freedom."[41] Thus, the gloves became symbolically essential to contribute to the communicative task of the performance. It was not enough for the man to share his objects with the animal. He wanted to share his own body, his essence, his freedom. He was ready to open his soul to the coyote, to create a link with him that could eventually re-evaluate the human principles he was carrying with himself.

Then there was the flashlight; again, not an oddity in the set of objects commonly used in Beuys' works and performances. The clearest example for the employ of torches by the German artist is *Das Rudel (The Pack)*, from 1969 (Figure 27). In this piece, twenty-four sledges, resembling a pack of dogs, tumble from the back of a Volkswagen van. In each of these sledges, there was what Beuys considered his essential survival kit: a roll of felt for warmth and protection, a lump of animal fat for energy and sustenance, and a torch for navigation and orientation.[42] In the case of *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the torch was chosen to act as a "source of light, a hearth, the glowing of a fading sun, or the gleaming of star energy in that grey hill",[43] as Beuys himself claimed. During the performance, the flashlight interacted fascinatingly with the coyote: the two of

[41] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 15.
[42] Joseph Beuys, "Discussions of a few objects and an action piece with Caroline Tisdall, 1974 and 1978", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 131.
[43] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 14.

them were often covered by the same heap of felt and, when the animal laid on it, the beam of electric light and the sparkling gaze of the animal always pointed at the same direction (Figure 9). The value of this object, therefore, drives beyond the simple nature of technical device; this light becomes spiritual light, a "representation of energy".[44] The peculiar feature of the torch is the obligation of replacing the batteries after they discharged. This change is parallel, for the artist, to an accumulation and gradual fading away of energy, which was, interestingly enough, opposite to the shift of energies in the coyote. While the flashlight was almost out of power by the end of the day, the coyote became lively as night approached.[45] Light is, remarkably, one of the clearest visual examples used in art – especially during the 20th century – to convey a spiritual presence, a metaphysical energy. The same interpretation of light is valid for Christianity and other forms of religion, as explained in the previous section. In this performance, the torch is a representation of transformation, of the mutable forms of energy that play an essential role in the communicative process. Its use is testified by the discharging of the batteries. This process became indeed an integral part of the whole action, for it epitomized the activity of the artist in the enclosed space of the performance.

The other two objects of the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* were: the triangle, a musical instrument used by Beuys when relating to the coyote, and the Wall Street journals, symptomatic of the modern Western world. The sound of the triangle interacted – and contrasted – with the machine turbine roar coming out of the tape recorder. These two were the only sounds produced during the performance, and their effect was highly different. This contrast was of course created on purpose by the

[44] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 14.
[45] Ibid.

artist, who considered the roar of the turbine a confused element, a representation of the idea of "undetermined energy",[46] which is similar to the primordial state of fat in many other works Beuys did.[47] However, while this roar represented a chaotic state of energy, the triangle stood as the element able to stop and harmonize this chaos. The triangle had indeed a contained and geometric form: it was "an equilateral triangle in which the undetermined nature of the fat [was] completely integrated with determined, mathematical form."[48] By no coincidence, the shape of the triangle resembles exactly the form of fat in Beuys' Fat Corners. This passage from unformed and chaotic to geometric and harmonic was, once again, designed for the coyote. The triangle, in particular, was intended as an "impulse of consciousness . . . to restore his harmonized movements and forms";[49] an attempt to create a link between the instinctive and impulsive nature of the animal and the more rational and organized sphere of the human beings. The triangle also echoes the antroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, which attracted strongly Beuys. According to Steiner, the progress of humanity are divided into three progressive movements of structure: state, economy, and intellectual life. Joseph Beuys was fascinated by this structure, which he called "the essence of man".[50]

The Wall Street newspapers (Figure 7) belong to a different category of objects. Their reason to be there is mostly as a critique to the economy of the USA, which reflects

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[46] Ibid., 15.
[47] One of the most renowned examples of this employ of fat by Joseph Beuys is *Stuhl mit Felt (Fat Chair)*, from 1963. In this piece, fat was chosen for its flexibility in reaction to temperature changes. In Beuys works with fat, it is important to consider this material as undergoing a process of harmonization. Indeed, fat has, at its first stage, a chaotic character. But then, through the changes of temperature and the action of the artist, fat can take form, as it is clear in Beuys' Fat Corners. In *Fat Chair*, however, fat maintains something of its chaotic character. This feature is what Beuys sees also in the roar of the turbine. (Joseph Beuys, "Discussions of a few objects", 125).
[48] Ibid., 142.
[49] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 15.
[50] Adriani, Konnertz, Thomas, 1979, 220-221, quoted in Rosenthal "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 39.

on the human sphere. Beuys indeed used these journals as "the ultimate *rigor mortis* afflicting thinking about CAPITAL (in the sense of the tyranny exerted by money and power) embodied unequivocally in a financial paper."[51] According to the artist, the capitalistic system, which included the concept of economic growth and that of capital as the basis for the modern social system, could not make the world productive. Beuys claimed that art was the real tangible capital, which had to replace the degenerated concept of capital present at the time: "Money and capital cannot be an economic value, capital is human dignity and creativity."[52] For Beuys, therefore, it was necessary to develop a concept of money that could allow *art* to be capital; the real economic values were creativity and human intention, from which a product could arise.[53] Therefore, the Wall Street newspapers became a symbol of the modern fixation based exclusively on the production of physical goods. What Beuys sponsored through the three-day performance was exactly the opposite of what those journals were symbolizing. The piles of paper became another tool that, by contrast, re-affirmed the most important messages of the performance; the critique against them was another action within the principal action, which advocated Beuys' Theory of Social Sculpture. Most interestingly, the coyote played his role in this critique, too. He clawed at the journals, he chewed them, he pissed and shitted on them, as if re-affirming Beuys' silent word (Figure 3).

[51] Joseph Beuys, "Discussions of a few objects", 143.
[52] Joseph Beuys et al., *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys* (West Sussex: Clairview Books, 2004), 27.
[53] Ibid.

The Animal

Why the coyote? The animal chosen by the artist had the precise features Beuys needed to communicate his message. Beuys loved animals; they constituted, for him, the embodiment of a lost state of innocence.[54] But the reasons why he wanted the coyote to be part of this event were undoubtedly wider. Frist on all, the coyote is extremely instinctive for its nature; it is also one of the best examples of a symbolic consciousness in the relationship between individual and community. In many cultures the coyote is believed to be divine. The most direct example is of course the American Indian culture, in which the coyote stands as an image of transformation, a being able to change his state from the physical to the spiritual one, as Beuys, too, noticed:

> "For the Indians, the coyote was one of the most mighty of a whole range of deities. He was an image of transformation, and like the hare and the stag in Eurasian myths, he could change his state from the physical to the spiritual and vice versa at will."[55]

According to the Indians, the coyote also had symbolic functions related to a harmonization between man and nature. There are plenty of Native American tales that speak of the coyote as a transformer, "an agent of change bringing order to chaos and chaos to order."[56] These tales are considered as representations of man's earliest attempts to verbalize the movement of the Spirit, thus are great examples to understand Native Americans mindset. According to these traditions, the coyote was the one who could make things happen, especially when dealing with survival and evolutionary change. In

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[54] Beuys frequently made animals participate his performances and especially the hare was present in more than one actions. But he also coexisted on stage with a horse (in the performance *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie*, 1969) and, of course, with a coyote in *I Like America and America Likes Me*. See Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 28.

[55] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), 228, quoted in a footnote in Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 127.

[56] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys".

this Natives culture, the coyote was believed to have taught human beings how to survive. This belief probably derived from the animal's extraordinary ability to adapt, second only to the Homo Sapiens. Beuys saw this animal exactly in this way: as a survivor and a transformer who used to teach people how to live.[57]

After the colonizers arrived to America, however, that harmony between coyotes and humans was broken and a wound was opened. The coyote became a prime scapegoat in the West, for it was seen as a threat to husbandry, law, order, and domesticity.[58] This detachment, this injury, became deeper and deeper; the wound underwent a climax of worsening right until the modern times, in which materialism and a limitless exploitation of technology made the detachment even more serious.[59] The figure of the coyote became a representation of polarity, for it was as venerated by the American Indians, the "red men", as it was persecuted by the new colonizers and their successors. These "white men" turned the image of the coyote from a deity to a trickster, a mean animal. The image of the trickster is interesting, for such etiquette, as I pointed out in the previous part of the chapter, is conferred to the coyote also in various myths in indigenous cultures, in which this animal was considered as a personification of chaos and anarchy.[60] However, for Beuys, the persecution of the coyote stood especially as a representation of the human tendency to offload his sense of inferiority on to an object of hatred or a minority. In the case of America, he referred to the Indians, of course; the original inhabitants of a land becoming, paradoxically, the persecuted beings. According to

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Demosthenes Davvetas, "Joseph Beuys. L'uomo è la scultura", in De Domizio Durini and Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: L'immagine dell'Umanità*, 198-199.
[60] Martino Nicoletti, (*L'uomo che dialogava,* 39-41) notes this element more than once through the analysis of the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* as a link between Beuys and the shamanic culture. The element of the trickster-coyote will be analyzed more in depth in the following chapters.

Caroline Tisdall, this constitutes the reason why Beuys wanted to isolate from America: to remember and give attention to the trauma of persecution.[61]

The study of symbols, however, is not enough to comprehend *in toto* the work Joseph Beuys created. This performance, one of the highest peaks of Beuys career, reverberates in the history of art not exclusively for the use of tools Beuys made. This action piece is not about symbolism, nor was Beuys' *oeuvre* focused on iconographic lessons. These objects, these symbols, need to be considered only as a means to reach a wider and universal end. The teachings, the sculptures, the drawings and the performances produced by Joseph Beuys are so intensely discussed because they constitute treasures of existential messages that go beyond a simple identification of icons. There are deeper levels of meanings that too often have been left behind; the words of the artist, mixed with the words of his critics, created a variety of interpretations that however are never summoned together to understand what is the point of creating a certain artwork. Where is the connection between the universal message Beuys wanted to spread and the unavoidable link with the historical background? How is it possible to give a conscious and critical response to what has been written on this performance, not by leaving aside the spirituality of the piece created? First of all, in order to get to conclusion, it is crucial to go beyond the iconographic description proposed in this thesis until now. Therefore, the following chapters are dedicated to levels of interpretation. The first level represents the iconology of the art piece: the biography of the artist, his training, his artistic theories as stated and written by him, his style, but also his personal interpretation of *I Like America and America Likes Me*. The second level represents the

[61] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 11.

interpretations of the performance. Three case studies will be taken into consideration, in order to understand the variety of perceptions sprung from this event.

3 About Beuys: the Iconological Level

This chapter unfolds in three sections, which can be considered as three different instruments one might use to interpret Beuys' *oeuvre*. The first section is dedicated to Beuys' biography; therefore, those events of his life that are predominantly related to the symbolism of the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* will be mentioned. The second section deals with the artistic styles and movements of the century that have influenced Beuys' work, whose repercussion are particularly evident in the performance in analysis. The third section, instead, explains Beuys' theory of art: his aims, his beliefs, and his view on what art is and how it should be used. These blocks stand as examples of the typical approaches employed to interpret Beuys' creations and will be adopted to acquire an initial knowledge of the performance. Notwithstanding, these interpretation still dwell on a rational level, based on facts and words that can only scratch the surface of a much wider cauldron of significances Beuys' pieces own. Still, this information constitutes the basis for unveiling a new perception of *I Like America and America Likes Me*, which will be the focus of the last chapter.

His Life

Before getting to the description of Beuys' theory of art, it is essential to briefly illustrate his biography. As already stated, the artistic aims of Joseph Beuys were indeed

extremely related to his life.[62] Speaking of biography, it is also interesting to consider what the artist himself wrote about his life, in his *Lebenslauf/Werklauf* from 1979.[63] This text consists of a sort of curriculum vitae of Beuys' activity, constituted almost exclusively by fictitious exhibitions he presumably did already from the year of his birth. The works seems to convey the strong connection between what Beuys did in his life and his artistic and humanistic mission. His *Lebenslauf* (the word *Leben* in German means 'life') is indeed perfectly mirroring his *Werklauf* (*Werk* means work, so the *Werklauf* is intended as a curriculum of Beuys' work). However, I will now stick with a description of Beuys' actual biography. Joseph Beuys (Figures 18, 19, 20, 28) was born in Krefeld on May 12th 1921, from Hubert Beuys and Johanna Hulsermann, who gave him a strictly catholic education. They lived in Kleve, a German village very characteristic for its history, its particular traditions and its geographical location; this village influenced Beuys' imagination and sensibility as a child, as he himself stated:

> "If I look back, I find that what I did as a child had a lot to do with an understanding of art . . . what I experienced in the fields, in nature and also in the industrial part of human activity . . . had a kind of character which people can now see in the Guggenheim Museum pieces, for instance."[64]

His experiences as an adolescent and his memories would have thus become part of his work, in the following years,[65] as one may notice in the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, too. The presence of an animal as interlocutor and means to convey his message, the use of natural materials that have underwent human labor,

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[62] The following facts regarding Joseph Beuys' biography are extracted from the book "*Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura – The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 – Venezia 2007*" by Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, 277-279.
[63] To read the whole text, see Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), 9, which is also quoted in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 261.
[64] Joseph Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 62.
[65] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice", 34.

such as felt, are clarifying Beuys' constant attachment to what he had already experimented during his childhood. The coyote is, as we saw, representing a primordial and instinctive nature as well as a state of innocence that clearly links back to the artist's childhood. It is as if, already from his first years, this man felt a deep connection with a human connotation of nature, which could only give rise to his life as an artist. However, during his first serious studies, Beuys developed an interest for sciences, even if he soon felt limited in his research: "I realized that the necessities of the so-called exact, natural sciences were a restriction for my specific ability and I decided to try it another way."[66] So he discovered art, among whose kinds he favored sculpture. This passage from science to art has been defined as a key experience by Beuys himself, who claimed he had "experienced the feeling of being forced by a specialized concept of science into a particular field of work, as no longer a possibility for myself."[67] This need for freedom echoes the artist's consideration of hands as symbols of freedom, for they can produce and give form to anything. Thus, another link can be traced between the symbolic element of the gloves, which was present in *Coyote*, and the need for total freedom of creation Beuys already felt when studying sciences. Later, he discovered the art of Wilhelm Lehmbruck, who soon became a mentor for him: "there were . . . a couple of Dada magazines . . . there was an illustration of a torso by Lehmbruck. There again I experienced . . . that it's all a question of forms. That one can do something tremendous with form [art]."[68] He also learned to play the piano and the cello, studied folklore and northern mythology, and read intensely works by Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Schiller,

[66] Beuys in "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", 64.
[67] Joseph Beuys in an interview with Georg Jappe, September 27, 1976, translated and annotated by Peter Nisbet and included in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, (New York : D.A.P.; Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001), 186.
[68] Joseph Beuys in an interview with Georg Jappe, 190-191.

Goethe, Hölderlin and Novalis.[69] All of these references must be taken into consideration when trying to find a comprehensive understanding of Beuys' works of art. He knew how to use scientific methods, but art, in its most widened sense, was for him the only path in which he felt free to experiment and communicate his ideas.

Everything changed when World War II begun, though. The nineteen-year-old Beuys answered to his call of duty and in 1940 entered the German army. He became pilot and a few years later, in 1943, one of the most crucial events of his life occurred. While flying over Crimea on a Ju-87, Beuys was hit by the Russian army and fell to the ground in the middle of a snow storm. Beuys told various times how he was saved by the Tartars; I will point later to the wide discussions on this event that have developed in the last thirty years.

After-war consequences reinforced Beuys' decision of following an artistic path. He could not be satisfied with the limits of science, anymore; so he got in contact with the artists of Kleve and in 1947 he enrolled in the Fine Arts Academy of Düsseldorf. Here he met Ewald Mataré, a teacher who believed strongly in the mystic unity of the entire creation and emphasized the importance of geometry and ornament as basis for all decisions in art. Even though also this 'dogma' was limiting for Beuys, he had the chance to learn a lot during these lessons.[70] And indeed, geometry was always incorporated in his works, later, to convey a feeling of order and harmony. In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the musical triangle is the element responsible for creating harmony; this

[69] Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", 65. Note, also, that a quotation from Novalis' poem "Glauben und Liebe oder der König und die Königin" was proposed at the beginning of this thesis. The choice is due to the artist's loan of the poet's verse "Jeder Mensch sollte Künstler sein" (each man is an artist): a motto that became Beuys' most representative claims. See footnote n° 25 in Max Reithmann, "In the Rubblefield of German History", in *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), 152.

[70] Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", 67.

contrasted with the chaotic, undetermined energy of the noise of turbine machines, whose energy could only be ordered by the sound of the triangle. From 1949 to 1952, Beuys produced his first plastic works. These pieces shared with the drawings he made after the war the recurrent theme of religion, as well as animal, human and vegetal motifs. In brief, Beuys intended to include natural substances as the protagonists of his art, together with his own presence. According to Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, the works of this period represent a surprising parallel between a formal scheme, which was sometimes conventional and sometimes innovative, and traditional themes that own a strong symbolism:[71] another proof that symbolism has, in some way, always been present in Beuys' work. In this period, Beuys also got in contact with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. Of this philosophical current, the political elements Beuys was keenest to were the concept of auto-administration and the analysis of state, economy and intellectual life as three-parted structures. As Caroline Tisdall reports, the artist "saw threefold form as governing natural structure and human nature, and it recurs throughout his sculpture, drawings and actions."[72] Even the concept of Social Sculpture, which Beuys developed through the years, was based on three stages that described a passage from chaotic energy and formless mass to a precise, determined and crystallized form.[73] This passage might be visible in the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* in the use of felt to wrap the artist's body. From an amorphous stance, the material gains a shape, while the man's silhouette almost disappears as his self-being fades: he becomes an essence, rather than the human being he previously was.

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[71] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura,* 278.
[72] Caroline Tisdall, "Beuys in America, or The Energy Plan for the Western Man", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 10-11.
[73] Ibid.

After he finished the Düsseldorf Academy, Beuys went through a deep depressive crisis. He went to Kranenburg, hosted by the van der Grinten brothers, and only there he could start to recover both physically and spiritually. This period is fundamental to understand how and why Beuys took a certain artistic, spiritual and personal path later. The crisis was indeed decisive for the consecutive experiences and activities of the man. He himself claimed the importance of this moment, in which he called everything into question, even his own life. He thought and dug deeply inside conceptions of life, art, and science, to eventually develop a new, complementary theory that could be comprehensive of his work. In those years, he fixed the major terms of an expanded theory of art, which included social issues and did not limit art anymore. He effectively started a research and a reflection upon the anthropological idea of human *creativity*, a word that is central to understand Beuys' mindset. The artist admitted how war marked and changed him; but also, how that experience constituted a chance to renovate himself. From this crisis, Joseph Beuys learned who had to be the artist: someone who points out the traumas of the time, someone who is able to initiate a process of healing.[74] The action of healing was widely present in Beuys' *oeuvre*, for he believed the world had been wounded.[75] For instance, in *Coyote*, the animal can also be seen as a symbol of this wound, for it had to suffer a persecution and a separation from its native land by the moment colonizers invaded America. Thus, it was possible through this animal to recognize and cure the illness produced in the world by this wound. From these ideas, Beuys' Theory of

[74] In an interview with Amnon Barzel (at Documenta 6, in Kassel, 29 June 1977), Beuys defined the artist also as one who is caged and who works within the system; one who cannot break the barriers of his isolation, which is defined as 'art' or 'modern art'. According to Beuys, he and the Free International University existed exactly to show an alternative to this model of artist: "it's a chance", he claimed. See Amnon Barzel, "La magia del logos", in *Joseph Beuys: l'immagine dell'umanità*, 100-101.
[75] See pp. 29, 55, 56.

Sculpture was born. He saw a relationship between the chaos he experienced and sculpture, for he saw in chaos the possibility for purification and the idea of movement from confusing energy to order and form.[76]

In 1961, Beuys became professor at the Fine Arts Academy of Düsseldorf. This role was fundamental for him, for being a teacher was, according to his words, his most important achievement:

> "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration . . . Objects aren't very important for me anymore. I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it. Thought, speech, communication – and not only in the socialist sense of the word – are all expressions of the free human being."[77]

In the early sixties, the artist participated to various Fluxus events. This collaboration arguably led Beuys to experiment performance for the first time, with *Siberian Symphony, Section I* and *Composition for Two Musicians.*[78] From then on, he performed numerous *aktionen*, metaphors of his art and of his thought that, together with lectures and conferences, shaped his new form as committed artist. Beuys also engaged in various collaborations and exposed his production in numerous galleries, both in Europe and in the US. In 1974, he founded, together with Heinrich Böll, the Free International University (Figure 24): an organization aimed at developing "an alternative against the Western private capitalistic system and the Eastern central communistic ideology – so against the two most important economic concepts now ruling and destroying the

[76] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice", 37.
[77] Joseph Beuys, "Interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1969", 85.
[78] The two actions were performed at the Festum Fluxorum, a two-day concert organized at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie in February 1963. See Joan Rothfuss, "Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America", 41.

world."[79] In the same period, he was fired from the Düsseldorf Academy for having accepted in his course students who had not passed the admission exam. This demonstrates Beuys' strong belief in an academy made not for those who were already able to create, but rather for those who, even if not owning the necessary tools and skills, really wanted to succeed (Figure 23).[80] His projects and performances shaped and at the same time demonstrated who Joseph Beuys was, both as a man and as an artist. His credo and his aims became more and more clear and concrete, and consequently his success widened. Either loved or hated, his name became one of the most influential and important ones of the artistic scene; and it still is, even after his death, occurred on the 23rd of January 1986, in Düsseldorf.

His Background

What is it that makes a performance so captivating? Is it the directedness of the event? Is it empathy? Or the strong flow of thoughts, emotions and sensations that flow in that particular timeframe? Whatever the answer(s) might be, what allows such happenings to be so direct is especially the presence of the human body as vehicle of communication. The human body has often been used in twentieth century art, in order to achieve numerous different aims. In that historical period, the body became not only the content, but also the means to create art, thus the artwork itself. Especially after the birth of psychoanalysis, which changed the relationship among mind, body and behavior, artists began to focus on alternative media and themes, as it could already be seen in

[79] Beuys, "Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama. Interview with Louwrien Wijers, 1981", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 186.
[80] Massimo Donà, *Joseph Beuys. La Vera Mimesi* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2004), 12.

Dada and Surrealism. From the first half of the century, artists started to look at non-Western cultures, where a different conception of the self was proposed. In these cultures, altered states of minds were directly related to the body as forms of somatic knowledge, and the individual was considered as "part of a continuum in time, a community, an environment, a cosmos."[81] The non-Western element is often present in Beuys' work, as it will be shown especially in the *Coyote* performance. The twentieth century saw the advent of Conceptual art, too, a current that moved away from the art object, as a response to the need for an independent art. Being often based on the creation of immaterial works, Conceptualism aimed at producing creations that could not be bought or sold by "the greedy sector that owned everything and that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam war."[82] The use of performance is already an element that is related to Conceptual art, for the result of this work is not an ever-lasting objects that can be experienced by anyone also in the future, but rather a temporal production meant to last for relatively little time. In such political and social atmosphere, another group, destined to mark one of the most important pages in the history of modern art, opted for the use of human bodies to convey significant messages: Fluxus. As said before, Beuys collaborated with Fluxus for some time. It is useful to understand how this group was operating, to understand what Beuys shared with its members. First of all, Fluxus artists were driven by a democratizing impulse within the art practice, which was often present in that period because of the Cold War and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Art was, by that time, no longer a private affair. Artists were producing scripts that anyone could enact, to stimulate emotions that could break down the apathy and passivity promoted by

[81] Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 12.
[82] Rothfuss, "Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America", 47.

corporate bureaucracy. This was especially true for Fluxus artists. Allan Kaprow, who started organizing Happenings, proposed to erase, through these actions, the divisions between the maker and the viewer, between the everyday and the artistically produced. The idea of breaking the boundaries between artists and audience was totally shared by Beuys, of course, who found in this preposition an important common ground. As Kaprow himself stated, "[t]he line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct as possible."[83] This is why Fluxus artists produced repetitive everyday actions, which encouraged people to observe the structure and meaning of daily life and restored the authenticity of those actions that had been commodified by consumeristic culture.[84] Therefore, it is clear that both Fluxus and Joseph Beuys had a main didactic aim, in order to redirect the use of materials and human ability into socially constructive purposes. However, Beuys' and Fluxus' view of art and society also contrasted in certain ways. As the Fluxus' principal organizer George Maciunas stated, the kind of art they wanted to produce was an art that required, first of all, an anti-individualistic stance:

> "The aims of Fluxus are social (not aesthetic) . . . and are directed to: step by step elimination of the Fine Arts . . . This motivates the desire to redirect the use of materials and human ability into socially constructive purposes . . . So Fluxus is strictly against the artist with an income. At most it can have the pedagogic function of making clear how superfluous art is and how superfluous the object itself is. . . . Secondly, Fluxus is against art as a medium for the artist's ego . . . and tends therefore towards the spirit of the collective, to anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM . . . the best Fluxus composition is one which is most strongly impersonal and ready-made."[85]

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[83] Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environment, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N.Abrams, 1966), 188-98, quoted in the section "Survey" by Amelia Jones, in Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body,* 28.
[84] Amelia Jones, "Survey", in Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 27-29.
[85] George Maciunas, quoted in Stefan Germer, "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys," (*October* 45, 1988): 68-69, originally written in a letter from Maciunas to Tomas Schmit of January 1964, quoted in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York, The S. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), 84.

It is clear that what Beuys created was contrasting with Fluxus' program on this "anti-individualistic" position. Beuys and Fluxus artists both believed in the same definition of extended creativity. But Beuys practice, contrarily from what Maciunas preached, insisted on the necessity and the importance of *individual* creativity. For the German artist, who was deeply influenced by Rudolf Steiner's thought,[86] the possibility for a change was determined by a subjective volition. The key to unlock the building of a new society based on direct democracy was self-determination.[87] In the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the beholder should be the responsible for focusing and experiencing the symbolic objects used to understand Beuys' didactic message. This credo echoed and still echoes in all the creations elaborated by Joseph Beuys throughout his career.

Annie Suquet rightly explained how the artist's performances could be intended as rituals, which followed a pattern comparable to the archaic rites.[88] The very use of meaningful objects delineates a ritualistic character that is present in Beuys' acting. One of the great deeds of Joseph Beuys was his innovative attitude towards the relationship between art and language. Even though the twentieth century had brought to a shift of the hegemony of language over art, Beuys managed to coordinate and to harmonize the two

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[86] The influence of Steiner's anthroposophy on the life and works of Joseph Beuys is recognized by all the writers who dealt with Beuys' art in their production. In particular, as Germer explains in his article ("Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", *October* 45, Summer 1988, 68-70), Beuys based his "aestheticization of the political" on Steiner's lectures about the organization of bee communities. Steiner recognized this organization as a model for a new human society; its structure is indeed based on two *formative processes*: the "crystalline-anorganic" building of the honey-combs, and the "organic-energetic" production of warmth within these combs. These two factors are highly similar to the insulation and warmth factors that recur widely in Beuys' production. Indeed, Beuys created an analogy between the formative processes mentioned by Steiner and his idea of "state" and "society", which he considered to be works of sculpture. This structure was for Beuys the basis to develop a new political system, based on a direct democracy.

[87] Germer, "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", 68-70.

[88] See Suquet, "Archaic thought", 148-162.

elements in a way that was both innovative and effective. During this century, indeed, artists understood there was a possibility to communicate and express emotions and concepts through a new relation to the perceptible (matter). While in the classic system there was a need for signs, namely for something visible and understandable that allowed people to read what was seen, the twentieth century was marked by a shift of focus in art, from the visible to the "immeasurable indetermination of matter".[89] What Joseph Beuys was looking for was indeed the transformation and the transmutation of the invisible into something perceptible, which could be felt and experienced by people. In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the symbols identified are all concrete representations of a canister of meanings that only in such material form could be conveyed. By no coincidence, as it is clear from his extended conception of art and his intention of creating social sculptures, Beuys wanted thought to be included in the experiencing of a work of art. Materials and thought had for him an equal importance in the creation of a sculpture: "The thought is a sculptural process, and the expression of the thinking forms in language is also art."[90] Thought is for Beuys the very source and cause of the birth of sculpture. In Beuys' case, it is the entire procedure that led to the creation of something that matters. Through their ability of elaborating thoughts, human beings can develop their creativity and can transform both themselves and the others. It is no coincidence that many of the works and performances of his are based on focusing on the transformative processes, which end up constituting the very essence and significance of the actions/works themselves. The transformation in *Coyote* occurs via the animal itself, which however can only act as a means to reach a higher end of spiritual unification. Matter, as well, is

[89] Suquet, "Archaic thought", 149.
[90] Joseph Beuys in "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", 73.

fundamental for the creative activity of Joseph Beuys; matter has to be understood not as something precise, concrete, delineated, but rather as the "impalpable energetic vibration that makes and unmakes things".[91] So, how should people intend the term 'ritual' used by Annie Suquet in the previously mentioned article? A ritual is, by definition,

> "the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree. Ritual is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies. It is thus possible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing humans."[92]

It is thus possible to intend Joseph Beuys' performances as rituals, for they followed precise patterns and procedures aimed at reaching a particular objective, as it will be seen in the description of *Coyote*. The events organized by the German artist were well-prepared, but also very natural and instinctive. He spoke of his practices and of the realization of his works during a discussion with Volker Harlan, occurred on 23 April 1979 in the foyer of St. John's Church in Bochum, at the presence of a group of young people who were there to participate the gatherings organized by the artist.[93] When asked about the preparation dedicated to his artistic creations, Beuys answered that he kept preparing himself throughout his whole life, not spending a moment without focusing on such groundwork: "I must always have the presence of mind, the overview, the wider perspective, to perceive the overall context and set of forces".[94] This almost endless preparative process is what Beuys believed to be necessary to collect all of the necessary resources – or 'principles – by the moment he came to the specific artistic act. In this way, a first substantial creation would emerge from the artist's intention.

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[91] Suquet, "Archaic thought," 150.
[92] *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "ritual", accessed January 23, 2015, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504688/ritual.
[93] Joseph Beuys, *What is Art?*, 5-7.
[94] Ibid., 12.

However, the creative process could only be completed and become a true artwork when other people were introduced to it. According to Beuys, dialogue and arguments with the audience epitomize the essential factor that 'sublimates' the artistic production. Also, if considering art in the widened sense the artist aimed at, one may agree that various forms of art could never be possible in a univocal way: dialogue and confrontation are necessary. Even when speaking of personal resurrection and of the beginning of a new spiritual life for each individual, Beuys spoke of the eventual birth of a new society, based on art, in which each person could express his/her own creativity. The necessary presence of an audience, of an interlocutor, of a receiver is in some way similar to what Marcel Duchamp called the 'art coefficient'.

Duchamp and Beuys have notably contrasted each other in their theories of art. In particular, the German artist, even if he held Duchamp in high esteem, was contrary to his passivity in front of a possible change that could have spurred from people through Duchamp's art, thus even before Beuys developed his theories. Beuys, indeed, famously claimed through one of his works that *Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet* (The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated). With this statement, he meant that, since the aim of Duchamp was mainly to shock the bourgeoisie, he actually destroyed the creative powers of his ideas, which could have instead served to stimulate discussion and possibly solve problems or achieve targets. According to Beuys, in a political and aesthetic sense, Duchamp got nowhere.[95] Indeed, even if many of the objects created by Joseph Beuys could be interpreted as ready-mades, the two artists had

[95] Joseph Beuys in "'Death keeps me awake', Interview with Achille Bonito Oliva, 1986", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 169.

extremely different aims in their artistic theories. Duchamp wanted to destabilize and shock the people, often through the use of irony. The viewers, in front of a Duchamp's work, are meant to feel uncomfortable, for they cannot realize which role they should play in such a situation. This is exactly what Duchamp wanted to achieve: the creation of a high tension between observer and artwork, the feeling of non-sense and loss in the experience of a work of art.[96] Joseph Beuys, contrarily, dedicated his work to all the people who were interested in his message. Instead of just creating a frustrating emotion in the audience, Beuys wanted to exploit reality to help people realize their condition and their possibility for resurrection and revolution. However, the creative process of these two artists can be similar, in some way. Duchamp spoke of the 'creative act' as a process born from the artist, but only completed in the spectators. According to him, even if the artist conceived something, that piece of creation could only become art if the spectators recognized it as such. Already in the process of creation, the artist "goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization . . . cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane".[97] Only after a "transubstantiation" occurs, the inert matter can become art; namely, only when the audience is able to experience the work by "deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications", the creative act can be considered completed. Thus Duchamp's art coefficient represents the accidental changes that occur to an artwork while it is being created, outside of the artist's conscious will. Joseph Beuys, too, believed there was an instinctive factor in the production of his performances and works

[96] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Difesa della Natura*, 30.
[97] Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act", Session on the Creative Act, Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Houston, Texas, April 1957, edited by Michel Sonouillet and Elmer Peterson, PDF document.

of art. Even if he kept preparing himself every day, there was always a part of the production that was unknown to him and impulsive, in some way. Therefore, there is a kind of art coefficient in Joseph Beuys' theory of art, too. Most importantly, the German artist, too, believed in the necessity of the audience to complete the artwork:

> "I must . . . look at *what* has emerged from me . . . and see how it works . . . But I also have to introduce it to other people, in fact, one must immediately enter into dialogue with others and listen to their arguments, for I cannot claim – ever – that what I have drawn out of myself is something objective and right from all perspectives."[98]

The presence of a so-called art coefficient is clearer when dealing with performance, in which the result of the art piece is based not only on the action of the artist, but also on the reaction of the receiver. As a matter of fact, the audience is the main reason why such event is planned. The objects Beuys used for *I Like America and America Likes Me* own, as we saw, a strong symbolic character, aimed at communicating and creating a link with the people. The major part of these elements already existed in traditional iconography; Beuys re-elaborated them and added new elements that could fit the socio-historical situation, in order to give a possibility for universal comprehension and to move people's souls.

His Credo

Knowing about Beuys' biography makes it easier to comprehend more intensely the social and artistic choices Beuys made during his lifetime. The claim mentioned at the

[98] Joseph Beuys, *What is Art?*, 12-13.

beginning of this chapter, 'each man is an artist', is central in the artist's way of thinking. Generally, it is possible to understand this claim as a reference to everyone's possibility of self-determination; and by self-determination, Beuys intended the possibility for each person to become a "social designer of the future", namely to turn the 'anthropological' disciplines practiced by each human beings into creativity, as intended in Beuys' human-centered concept of art (Figure 21).[99] Thus, a true and powerful 'resurrection' could and *should* occur in each human being.[100] He understood thoroughly the crisis the modern man was undergoing, in which the loss of identity and the total absurdity of certain events – especially related to the World Wars – caused a need of rebirth and of innovation, especially in a spiritual and psychological sense. The word needed to be reevaluated; people had to be taught how to get back their lives and their souls. Joseph Beuys was looking for a path to take, in order to reach the truth, which, according to him, already existed in the world: men had to re-discover this path, through a reconciliation and reconnection with themselves and with nature: "Man and Nature, with a reconciled soul, will build a true world".[101] It is clear, therefore, the focus of the artist's research was the human beings and the free and creative energy they all own. I would like to mention Max Reithmann's essay "In the Rubblefield of German History. Questions for Joseph Beuys" (in *Joseph Beuys-Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2001: 139-174), whose starting point is Beuys' definition of self-determination, as explained by the artist himself in 1977, during Documenta VI in Kassel. As Reithmann explains, Beuys' understanding of this concept was based on his belief that

[99] "Joseph Beuys - English Subtitles - How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare 1/2," YouTube video, 14:59, posted by "mishiko1824", October 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo47lqk_QH0.
[100] Michaud, "The Ends of Art", 36.
[101] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice", 49.

the Ego contained the human need for freedom, which constitutes the source for creativity within the social and political systems: "By returning into itself, the Ego is able to experience its free independent activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) as a creative/formative occurrence and is then willfully able to undertake such activity as the process of shaping the life-world." When the Ego experiences its free independent activity in a conscious way, its perceptual field is expanded, so that the Ego can cross the "threshold of freedom" and recognize the link between the inner and the outer dimension.[102] When this happens, the human beings grow ready to understand the concept of labor as linked to the new notion of art Beuys promulgated; but also, they become ready to revolutionize themselves and the world around them:[103] "the revolution can only take place within us."[104]

Beuys considered himself as an informer – a teacher who appeared in different places and dedicated his life to organize events that could reunite people. But his main role was that of a kind of professor who, rather than forcing people's minds, lead them gently and naturally towards the conclusions he believed in (Figure 28). He wanted people to wake up, to open their eyes and see the truly important goods harboring in the world.[105] This is why Beuys widened his interests beyond the 'traditional' artistic experience, expanding his actions in the political, economic, agricultural, ecological and

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[102] Joseph Beuys, "Eintritt in ein Lebewesen", in Rappmann Harlan and Schata, *Soziale Plastik. Materialen zu Joseph Beuys* (Achberg, 1984), 127, quoted in Max Reithmann, "In the Rubblefield of German History", 139.

[103] Reithmann, "In the Rubblefield," 143.

[104] Jacqueline Buckhardt, *Ein Gespräch/Una Discussione. Joseph Beuys/Jannis Kounellis/Anselm Kiefer/Enzo Cucchi* (Zurich, 1986), 154, quoted in Reithmann, "In the Rubblefield", 143.

[105] Beuys in "'I put me on this train!' interview with Art Papier, 1979," in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 49.

humanitarian fields, to take care of all the ordinary problems people suffer every day.[106] Thus he stimulated people, through discussions and art, to accomplish a radical change in their way of being and living. He indeed sponsored the necessity of dynamism and action in the human beings. According to Beuys, people, to accomplish their personal resurrection and to build ultimately a new social system, had first of all to change their own understanding of themselves and of humankind. They shall realize their primal needs are not material, but rather spiritual. If a man can cultivate and train such primary nature, he can also become able to develop whole other energies.[107] Furthermore, the artist believed that human beings had to be totally free to complete this process: "He believed passionately in the individual's right to develop his or her own capacities and creativity."[108] The word creativity, as already claimed in the introduction, is a key term to understand Beuys' mindset. Around this word, all the major concepts of his actions end up being interrelated. Creativity is, first of all, the basis for the statement 'each man is an artist'. With these words, though, Beuys did not meant that everyone has the skills to paint or sculpt; one of the great efforts of this artists was indeed to demonstrate that every profession, every job constitutes a possibility for human beings to express their creativity, their being artists. The act of creativity is the act of freedom for each human being which Beuys sponsored widely. The artist wished to stimulate people to live their lives creatively, because in them resides the ability to shape the energies that constitute the social sphere. In her catalog *Beuys Voice*, Lucreza De Domizio Durini proposes some points about creativity that represent the approach of the artist with the social problems of

[106] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice," 49.
[107] Beuys, "A public dialogue, New York City, 1974", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 32.
[108] Caroline Tisdall, "Beuys in America, or The Energy Plan for the Western Man", 12.

the human being, as well as with economical and educative issues.[109] These points relate with various issues; most importantly, the strict relationship between creativity and the inner nature of the human beings, which is based on freedom. Freedom was for the German artist the necessary element that allowed to change the basic democratic order and to reconstruct the economic system, in order to serve all people's needs.[110] Therefore, this freedom had to be intended as dealing with both the individual, who owns free will, and the openness towards other people: by no coincidence, the fundamental value to be present in any social relationship had to be communication. The three points of creativity refer to three levels: thought, feeling and will – which constitute the realization of Beuys' Theory of Sculpture. Also, creativity represents a critique against materialism and capitalism, as well as a search for a new political model neither capitalistic nor communistic, aimed at creating a social order in which human faculties are totally realized.[111]

Art had an extremely important role in this process. It constituted the very instrument of resurrection, eventually aimed at the universal and absolute democratic union of the human beings. Art's most important task was, for Beuys, to establish a connection between the human beings and their higher nature.[112] As a result, art became for Beuys not only a means to achieve a personal revolution, but also the *only* usable

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[109] Even though these points were not directly elaborated by the artist himself, the words of Lucrezia De Domizio Durini are highly trustful to understand Beuys' points of view and theories. She, indeed, was one of his closest followers and dedicated her whole life to the pursuing of Beuys' objectives, even after his death. The seven points to define creativity are written in Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice," 49.
[110] From a speech given by Joseph Beuys at Documenta V in Kassel in 1972, in Adriani Götz, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, (Cologne, Dumont Verlag, 1973), 163, quoted in Germer, "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", 67.
[111] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, "Beuys Voice," 50.
[112] "Joseph Beuys - English Subtitles - How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare 1/2," YouTube video, 14:59, posted by "mishiko1824", October 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo47lqk_QH0.

instrument to change society, for it represented the very power of creativity:[113] "Politics has to become art, and art has to become politics".[114] Beuys wanted all political intentions to become artistic ones, thus to "stem from human creativity and individual liberty".[115] It is clear how, for Joseph Beuys, the only way to achieve a transformation – an evolution-revolution of the whole human population, in order to construct a new society, was through art. He intended art in a non-traditional sense. He did not limit it to certain boundaries; rather, he wanted to destroy the narrow lines that limited it to be only a part of culture, disconnected from the everyday life and from the social structures of the world: "The principle of resurrection transforming the old structure, which dies or stagnates, into a vibrant, life-enhancing soul – and spirit – promoting form. This is the expanded concept of art."[116] By expanding the understanding of art, a process of totalization of the idea of art could begin; this would lead to a totalization of freedom and of the understanding of economy. Production would change and recognize the spiritual needs as the most important ones.[117] This is why Beuys wanted art to include everything related to the human beings:

> "Art is the only possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole creativity. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living being is an artist – an artist in the sense that he can develop his own capacity."[118]

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[113] Beuys, "A public dialogue, New York City, 1974", 31.
[114] Ibid., 37.
[115] From a speech given by Joseph Beuys at Documenta V in Kassel, in 1972, quoted in Germer, 67.
[116] "Joseph Beuys in Conversation with Friedhelm Mennekes," in Memorium, 1986, 34, quoted in Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 25.
[117] Beuys in "Speech upon receiving an honorary doctorate degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1976", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 56.
[118] Beuys in "A public dialogue, New York City, 1974," 26.

The most necessary element to begin this project, as mentioned before, was freedom: "EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – [...] learns to determine the other positions in the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER."[119] The kind of art Beuys wanted to produce, to achieve this aim, was called by the artist himself "social sculpture":

> My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone:
>
> **Thinking Forms** – how we mould our thoughts or
>
> **Spoken Forms** – how we shape our thoughts into words or
>
> **SOCIAL SCULPTURE** how we mould and shape the world in which we live: **Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist.**[120]

These words explain what Beuys wanted to be his life and artistic mission. What he created has not to be intended as something stable and eternal, but rather as an "evolutionary process". Indeed, most of his works and performances are based on the materials' changing statuses, as well as on processes that must be developed and lead on during the events organized: "everything is in a state of change".[121] This evolution was for Beuys both the means and the aim of his work, which could be lead on only through art.

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[119] Joseph Beuys in "'I am searching for the field character', 1973", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 22.
[120] Joseph Beuys, *What is Art?*, 9.
[121] Ibid.

The performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* constitutes a perfect example a way of not only processing this evolution, but also stimulating thoughts and change in the audience and in the artist himself. *Coyote* represents a wide cauldron of meanings, aimed at speaking to people, in order to make them realize something new and hidden of themselves. This is why so varied opinions were proposed during the years. Performance was possibly the best means Beuys could use to communicate through a silent and visual language his credo. Although he, especially during the last period of his activity, preferred the spoken language over the plastic one, performance was often for him and for people the most powerful way to achieve certain aims. As he explained in an interview, Beuys thought actions developed organically from his intention of having an expanded concept of art. Also, what fascinated and interested him of performance was the possibility of including sound, which is in fact very often present in the artist's *oeuvre*.[122] Furthermore, the use of verbal or artistic language was always related to the site and the kind of audience who could have experienced such happenings. This was true for *I Like America and America Likes Me*, too, of course. It has to be reminded that Beuys opted to do an action piece also as a consequence to the not very successful lectures he had done few months before, always in the US. If spoken words were not working with American people, Beuys planned to find a different way to communicate with them. Therefore, he exhumed the American past history, and placed a coyote in a just-born art gallery of New York.

[122] Georg Jappe, "Interview with Beuys about key experiences: September 27, 1976", translated and annotated by Peter Nisbet, in Gene Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy,* 198.

In a discussion on the performance occurred between Beuys and Caroline Tisdall, Beuys described extensively the performance he did in 1974.[123] In this interview, Beuys claimed he felt he had got in contact with a psychological trauma of the "United States' energy constellation",[124] namely the rift between American and Indians, between the White and the Red Man. This trauma could be lifted, according to Beuys, only in the moment a reckoning was made with the coyote. Since the interest of Joseph Beuys was to meet the coyote as a symbol of purely instinctive, natural and primitive connection, he decided to keep the performance separated from the audience, and to dedicate his attention to the animal exclusively: "The manner of the meeting was important. I wanted to concentrate only on the coyote. I wanted to isolate myself, insulate myself, see nothing of America other that the coyote."[125] This symbolic and effective separation was created through the use of a chain-link, which divided the space of the gallery, and by using felt, which was for him a material that could accomplish an insulation process. Indeed, felt is a very unstable and morbid material, thus appears as a perfect "moving insulator": "it retains warmth, yet breathes, it insulates, yet has its own life and movement. Like a womb, it protects the space of gestation".[126]

Furthermore, the coyote and the country in which this performance was made are strongly linked symbols. Beuys believed that evolution went from East to West and that, therefore, "Indians are in reality Asiatic people, but they changed almost their whole race elements in the Western area, and together with the powers of the land in America, they

[123] Beuys in "Discussions of a few objects and an action piece with Caroline Tisdall, 1974 and 1978", 141.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 10.
[126] Suquet, "Archaic thought", 151.

changed almost the whole biological substance, too."[127] This journey happened to the coyote, too, which was at first an Asiatic wolf, but which changed biological configuration and behavior when reaching America.[128] This trauma is the reason why, according to Beuys, the new American man had to be healed. He recognized the social body as a wounded body, in need of treatment, which could be healed only through art and through a reconnection with a spiritual sphere.[129] Also, the connection between West and East clearly echoes the Eurasia idea, as well as the Eurasian staff, which presents itself again in this performance. The connection between opposite poles is intense and lively, and it becomes more visible in *I Like America and America Likes Me*. The action takes place in New York because America is the geographical location where another paradox occurs: the territory is so vast that if you go far enough West it almost becomes the East.[130] In the US, Beuys found a new form of Eurasia, a new ideal unification between the opposite poles of the world. In the same place, he found the coyote, which acted as a reminder of the wound of humanity that needs to be cured.

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[127] Beuys, "Interview with Alan Moor and Edit deAk, 1974", ", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 213.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys". Also, see Rosenthal, "Staging Sculpture", 68, in which the wound is explained as a frequently present image in Beuys' works and life. Apart from the wounds he reported from World War II, the artist frequently referred to the word 'wound' as a figure of speech referring to illness of all kinds, including emotional scars and suffering. Also, see description and analysis of the installation "Zeige deine Winde" (Show Your Wound) from 1974/75 proposed by Rosenthal in "Staging Sculpture", 72-74.
[130] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 9-10.

4 Critiques and Interpretations of the Performance

The three days spent by Joseph Beuys in the René Block Gallery were observed, analyzed, and interpreted by different beholders. Even if not plenty of people witnessed the event, *I Like America and America Likes Me* stimulated the interest and curiosity of many people, who heard of it even from far places, especially in the following years.[131] Not only this action piece, but all the artworks produced by Beuys – as well as his own life – were always acclaimed and criticized at the same time by numerous people. His controversial biography and the occasional incongruity between what he stated to have gone through and what he actually did provoked endless discussions on what was Beuys' concrete contribute to the art of the twentieth century. Beuys' art has sometimes appeared to critics as closed in itself, or as something valid only in its frame of reference: a totalizing system whose interpretation has been already supplied by the same artist.[132] Since this variety of interpretations is unavoidably interrelated in our present understanding of *Coyote*, it is necessary to cite and analyze the divergent opinions writers proposed on Beuys' lectures, interviews, and actions.

Writers have often used Beuys' words and actions to generate a certain character out of this man: a character who played the role each author wanted him to play. If the writer was a close friend and collaborator of Beuys, his/her opinion reflected almost exactly the words spoken by the artist himself. Other times, scholars and critics have

[131] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys".
[132] See the critique moved by Stefan Germer in "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", 73.

proposed a different consideration of the artist's actions and lectures, which have underlined discrepancies in his statements about himself and his aims. There has often been confusion on what Joseph Beuys wanted and what actually preached, which has sometimes caused a rather distorted view on his work. These examples highlight a problematic extendible to the entire artistic and academic field. There are often controversies caused by different interpretations of a work of art. Especially the art of the twentieth century caused the question of authorship and responsibility in analyzing artists' productions to raise. Claims of the artists – whom very often produced conceptual works with various layers of meaning – got in contrast with claims of the critics, who possibly proposed a different view on the art piece. The very figure of the art critic became indeed more and more influential and prominent in the art world during this century. Therefore, the questions to be asked remains always the same: who should one trust more, when analyzing and evaluating a work of art – the artist himself or the critics? Who can see and experience at best an art creation?

In order to contribute to this discussion, I selected a restricted number of writers who dealt with Joseph Beuys in disparate ways, especially in relation to the performance. Part of the final aim of this thesis is to give a response to these views on Beuys, particularly to the critiques that were moved against him. My goal is, as a matter of fact, to offer a different way of looking at this performance; to find those implications that have been left aside until now. The three interpretations on which I will be focusing include writings by: Caroline Tisdall – and, in smaller part, Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, both close friends and supporters of Beuys' message; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, whose harsh critiques never received a substantial reply; and Martino Nicoletti, an

anthropologist and ethnologist who recently published a book that analyzes with precision the possible link between Beuys and the tradition of shamanism.

First of all, I want to focus on the interpretations of the people closest to Beuys, those who wrote extensively about the artist's life, personality and creative process: Caroline Tisdall and Lucrezia De Domizio Durini. The latter has been one of the closest friends of Joseph Beuys, and undoubtedly one of the strongest believers of his message. Cultural operator, journalist, writer, curator, editor and sponsor of many artists, Durini can be considered a historian of the 'Beuysian' thinking. She organized events with him and always sponsored his actions, especially in Italy. She also published plenty of writings about his work and mission,[133] and she still promotes Beuys' ideas on art and society worldwide:

> "The teachings and the message of my teacher Joseph Beuys lasts in world art history. I will continue to spread his message until I die, with all the means I have, so that everyone can understand his masterpiece 'Difesa della Natura' and his Living Sculpture."[134]

Caroline Tisdall was also very close to Joseph Beuys, both as a friend and as a supporter. She was in the gallery when the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* was acted, and testified the whole event through photographic material. This material has been then published in her book *Joseph Beuys – Coyote* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976/2008), which constituted the first attempt to capture a performance by Beuys in a book format. Tisdall wrote extensively on Beuys in other texts and articles, too, and she even directed films about him. Since both Lucrezia de Domizio Durini and

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[133] Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Difesa della Natura*, 286-287.
[134] Marco Enrico Giacomelli, "Beuys e gli artisti del silenzio. Intervista con Lucrezia De Domizio Durini," *Artribune.com*, last modified August 1, 2013, http://www.artribune.com/2013/08/beuys-e-gli-artisti-del-silenzio-intervista-con-lucrezia-de-domizio-durini/ (my translation).

she were so close and in constant communication with Joseph Beuys, their interpretation of his works is very close to what the artist himself claimed about his vision of them.

The approach of these two writers is obviously different, even though both of them tried to explain and spread the messages sponsored by Beuys in his Social Sculpture. Tisdall's and Durini's writings on Beuys generally constitute the basis for understanding what the artist wanted; and indeed they include, as often as possible, the artist's words inside the analysis of works of art, performances, lectures and events in which the German shaman-teacher was present. These women's backgrounds differ in various senses. Caroline Tisdall was a former art critic for *The Guardian* (until the early eighties), who was and still is deeply engaged with political and social problematic situations. For such reasons, her approach to Beuys' art keeps in high consideration the historical and social background of either Europe or the US. Durini's writing, instead, seems to own an aura of absoluteness. Her aim is to divulgate Beuys' message towards the future, to present his words and his teachings as universal truths, equally valid for each epoch.

"You want to know what he was like?" she asks. "He was fun to be with."[135]

Caroline Tisdall met Joseph Beuys at the Richard De Marco gallery during the Edinburgh Fringe, at the end of the 1960s, and right after that she became his collaborator and travelling companion. By no coincidence, her writing in *The Guardian* became increasingly preoccupied with the artist's work and their travels together. Knowing him seems to have also led Tisdall towards a preoccupation with the environment. In an article published in the same newspaper she used to work for, Tisdall described Beuys as

[135] Caroline Tisdall speaking in an interview for The Guardian: "Joseph Beuys: The man who fell to earth," *Theguardian.com*, last modified 19 July, 1999, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/jul/19/artsfeatures2.

"the most relevant representative in [her] time of an art which could be relevant to every field of life, from plant life to politics."[136] She used to take photographic documentation of all the travels and events in which she and Beuys were present: *I Like America and America Likes Me* is the best example for that. Her book-documentation of this performance is essential to get in touch with all the elements of the event. In the book, Tisdall claims:

> "I have often wondered how so many people who were of course not present at the performance can yet identify with the relevance and resonance of this encounter, and instinctively relate to the warmth and optimism of its meaning."[137]

Indeed Tisdall's approach aims at analyzing especially the social impact of the event, as particularly related to the audience of those years. She analyzes the tools and the movements of the performance in great detail – a precious legacy that is still a point of reference today, as it is evident in the second chapter. Tisdall also gives a wide view on why Beuys chose to do this piece, by speaking of his theories, his beliefs, and his aims. The proof for what she claims is entirely based on what the artist said himself, as demonstrated by the frequent quotations included in her texts.

In her analysis of *Coyote*, Caroline Tisdall claimed that the division of the gallery space through the use of the chain-link was used to mark "an area of freedom for the protagonists, ambiguously caging the spectators."[138] This comment is interesting, for it supplies a view on the event as if the action was acting as a mirror. The audience, exactly because they were prevented from entering the scene in front of them, felt the need to

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[136] "Joseph Beuys: The man who fell to earth," *Theguardian.com*, last modified 19 July, 1999, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/jul/19/artsfeatures2.
[137] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 5.
[138] Ibid., 6.

participate and get in a deeper relationship with the protagonists. The cage was not the place where the spiritual encounter between animal and human was occurring; the cage was the outside world, where people had lost care for their inner selves in favor of arid materialistic ideals. But the most important point the writer made on the performance is what she considered to be the key of it, namely

> "the *principle of transformation*: the transformation of the idea of freedom, the transformation of language to a wider understanding of it as an evolutionary means, the transformation of verbal dialogue to energy dialogue."[139]

This factor was visible, during the performance, especially in the movements Beuys did. The sequence of actions he performed in relationship to the coyote, the gestures, and the use of the tools in the gallery appeared to Caroline Tisdall as part of this transmutation progress. For instance, she described Beuys' use of the stick as following three main directional flows that conveyed just as much energy movements:

> "held horizontally running along the ground – the flow of energy across the surface of the earth; raised high and vertical – the passage of spirit from above to below; held normally, crook to the ground and exposed. That's the normal position of the ordinary showman (not shaman): 'A normal part of everyday life, and that's important too.'"[140]

This concept of transformation is already implicit in Beuys' interpretation of "sculpture as an evolutionary process", as we saw in the previous chapter.[141] In *Coyote*, this mutable essence and objective of the event harbors in the relationship established between the coyote and the man. The two of them were different entities who, by colliding and relating to each other, have come out of that gallery with a renewed

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[139] Ibid., 13.
[140] Ibid., 14.
[141] Joseph Beuys, *What is art?*, 9.

expertise. Tisdall sees in this approach what the artist saw, too, namely the widening of communicative means life offers. The silent dialogue between Beuys and the coyote resulted in the production of a strong energy, which constitutes the 'sacred aura' for which the event was and still is considered so extraordinary. Other writers agreed with Caroline Tisdall on defining transformation a key point not only in this performance, but in the entire production of Joseph Beuys. An example is Annie Suquet, who claimed that

> "[Beuys'] work with materials has but one aim: awakening us to the 'transformation principle' that animates all matter, from the densest to the most immaterial . . . in other words, awakening us to the fundamental plasticity of everything, including ourselves."[142]

Of course writers easily agree on this principle, for Beuys himself stated the importance of movement and change in his works and performances. An example of this is the chart of sculptural poles he described in his Theory of Sculpture: the opposite poles (such as chaos and order, organic and crystalline, warm and cold) could all be traversed through movement (*Bewegung*).[143] Furthermore, even the unfolding of a creative process was in part unknown to the artist himself: although he planned and knew a lot about his aim before he started an action, he did not know anything about the process in which the action would have run. This is due to the possible intervention of new elements to the whole, which produce a continuous transformation of the final product (similar to the discussion on the art coefficient I dealt with in the previous chapter).[144]

Other writers, however, have dealt differently with Joseph Beuys. A major example is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's, the scholar who contrasted the theories and practices of the German artist especially in the articles "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol",

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[142] Suquet, "Archaic thought," 153.
[143] See the chart in Mark Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 25.
[144] Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980", 71.

"Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim" (a discussion between Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson), and "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys, Once Again".[145] Buchloh principally denounced the mythical foundations of the German artist's public persona while also treating his artistic production. His commentary on Beuys' artistic personality and practice has always been rather harsh. For Buchloh, Beuys was either a fool or a trickster, who rejected art-historical information and adopted a strategy of displacement of actual history, in order to create a personal myth, to elude people, and to serve his pre-established ends.[146] In various writings, Buchloh spoke of Beuys' art and biography as something born out of 'ahistoricity', which is described as "that unconscious or deliberate obliviousness toward the specific conditions that determine the reality of an individual's beings and work in historical time."[147] In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to consider what Buchloh saw as the main background for Beuys' activities: the legacy of Jackson Pollock and of Abstract Expressionism, which from 1952 onwards had been reestablished in more than one European exhibition. This kind of art was based on formalist thinking, which incorporated into the interpretative approach to the artwork the criteria of seeing, writing, and making. Therefore, the artist's procedure and the execution of the work of art were seen as performative elements that needed to be part of the work itself. This spectacularization of performativity was, according to Buchloh, the starting point for Beuys' creations. However, the scholar denotes an important difference in the common interpretation of performativity and the connotation Beuys gave to it. While this

[145] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol. Preliminary Notes for a Critique" and "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys, Once Again", both in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: D.A.P.; Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001); Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 3-21.
[146] Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 16.
[147] Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 200.

element pointed to the linguistic nature of painting and visual practices, Beuys was actually rowing in the opposite direction. Buchloh says that art, by that time, was intended as a linguistic system, whose parts could be redefined and repositioned according to the spectator and the participant-practitioner's will. On the contrary, Buchloh claimed that Beuys was acting as a healer who focused the attention on himself and was still bond to the formal and outdated parameters of performance. Thus, according to the scholar, while the avant-garde artists had developed a semiotic, phenomenological, linguistic, and psychoanalytic model of meaning, Beuys' approach to performance reverted everything backward into humanism.[148] Buchloh thus underlines again what he saw as Beuys' will of spotlight himself as a privileged being, "a seer that provides deeper or higher forms of transhistorical knowledge to an audience that is in deep dependence and need of epiphanic revelations." [149] The eventual result is, for Buchloh, the reinvestment of the aesthetic with the dimension of ritual and cult: an action that goes exactly in the opposite direction of the developments that, since the 1930s, had been discussed by Walter Benjamin as the main tendency of the artwork under the conditions of modernity.[150]

Furthermore, according to the scholar, Beuys' propaganda – especially spread through the Free International University – was ineffective and, since it lacked an historical background and an educational practicality, resulted useless: a "simple-minded utopian drivel".[151] To underline this factor, Buchloh proposed a comparison with the student movements of Germany who in the 1960s were highly involved in radical politics

[148] Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys, once again", 79-82.
[149] Ibid., 82.
[150] Ibid., 87.
[151] Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 201.

and presumably derided Beuys' will to found the Grand Student Party. Also, according to Buchloh, the equivalence of politics and art sponsored by Joseph Beuys could only lead to the absorption of both these factors into the artist's myth and work, eventually neutralizing and estheticizing them.[152] The writer indeed believed aesthetics and politics to be concrete phenomena, impossible to be transformed into art, as Beuys wished to do. The only propaganda the artist was doing, according to Buchloh, was a self-exposure of himself as a messianic artist, who was presumably engaged in politics, but who actually stayed passive when there was a true need to stand up against injustices, especially when related to the art world.[153]

Buchloh also claimed that the only successful creation of the German artist was private and public mythology he created for himself. This statement was shared by Stefan Germer, who followed Buchloh in his critique against Beuys.[154] They both spotlighted the incongruity of the artist's assertions about his biography and what actually happened; the clearest example is Beuys' plane crash in Crimea, in 1943. Buchloh considers this episode to be the origin of the myth of Joseph Beuys. Indeed, by comparing different documentations (approved and co-produced by Beuys himself), the scholar shows how

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[152] Both in Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 201, and Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 4-6.

[153] I refer especially to an episode that both Benjamin Buchloh ("Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 210) and Stefan Germer ("Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", 63-66) point out in their critiques against Beuys, namely the censorship of Hans Haacke's show at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971. In that occasion, Haacke refused to exclude two documentations of Manhattan real estate holdings and a poll of the museum's visitors from his show at the Guggenheim. Therefore, Thomas Messer, director of the American museum, cancelled the show and fired the curator Edward Fry. This episode was seen as a declaration of restrictions of the artistic practice in exhibitions in a public museum, as if to show all political implications had to be excluded from the artworks. As a consequence, numerous signatures by artists and critics were collected as a protest against the Guggenheim's policy. The artist Broothaers even withdrew his work from a Guggenheim exhibition, the following year. Beuys was highly criticized, for he never signed the 'condemnation' of the Guggenheim museum's politics. He appeared to be contradictive, for even if he had always claimed to be highly involved in politics, he remained quiet during such a scandal in the art world – which should have been his main field of interest.

[154] See Germer, "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", 63-75.

the description of the event is never the same.[155] Also, some statements or documentations of the artist result contradictory, as other writers as well have noticed: "No one can look at those photographs of the crash in the Crimea without bursting into laughter, because it is, of course, highly unlikely that Beuys or anyone else, the Tartars included, would have had a camera."[156] According to Buchloh, the creation of this myth of origin is an attempt of the artist in denying his participation in the German war and his citizenship. It is, therefore, Beuys' way of coming to terms with that period of German fascist history and war, a period of destruction and annihilation of cultural memory. The 'Tartar fable' is thus seen as a way for the artist to place himself outside a German context, to idealize an experience that otherwise would not be particularly heroic.[157]

Other writers, too, have looked at the Crimea accident as a rebirth episode. Especially when interpreting Beuys' actions as rituals, thus when creating a link between him and the primitive traditions related to shamanism, the plane crash as told by the artist gains a new shape. Martino Nicoletti, ethnologist and visual anthropologist, wrote a book in which he proposed a brief discussion on the relationship between Beuys and shamanism, which he defines a logic, conceptual and formal link.[158] The writer's starting point is exactly the Crimea episode, whose report, as it was told by the artist, is recognized to be fictitious by Nicoletti, too.

> "Had it not been for the Tartars, I would not be alive today. It was the nomads of the Crimea, which lived in the no man's land between the German and Russian front. They had been known to me already earlier, for I often wandered to their camps and ate with

[155] To see a comparison of different documentations, see Buschges et al., "Joseph Beuys and the Everlasting Effect", 1.
[156] Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 8.
[157] Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 8 and Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 203.

> them. Their nomadic lifestyle attracted me, even though their mobility then of course was very limited. Then they found me in the snow after the crash, when the German search posse had already given up. I was still unconscious and came around only after roughly 12 days. My recollection of these events is images that have gone deep. I remember the felt of which they made tents, the sharp scent of cheese, fat, and milk. They anointed my body with fat, so that the heat returned and wrapped me in felt, as felt retains heat."[159]

This is the most famous first-person documentation of the accident we have. In this event, Nicoletti sees something different from Buchloh's critiques; he interprets it as a total revelation that gave start to an integral transmutation of Beuys from simple man to artist. The elements present in his tale are rich of elements with an initiation character, as if that accident was a symbolic death and resurrection, entirely similar to what neophyte shamans undergo to acquire magical powers and knowledge unknown to common human beings. The shaman who comes out of this ritual is clearly a different person from whom he was before. This process is recognizable, according to Nicoletti, in the autobiographical myth of Joseph Beuys. There is a quasi-death; there are rescuers and the symbolic elements of resurrection, fat and felt; and the whole action occurs at the right moment, exactly when Beuys is able to comprehend, a moment before embracing death. Also the heat produced by the use of felt and fat is symbolic of the warmth of the shamanic cauldron: it is a *tepor* that is born only when an individual encounters and rubs a different universe.[160]

Nicoletti was able to see shamanistic references also in many works and performances created by Joseph Beuys. He dedicated a chapter of his book to the

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[159] Beuys in "Willoughby Sharp: An interview mit Joseph Beuys", *Artforum*, Dezember 1969, S. 46, quoted in Buschges et al., "Joseph Beuys and the Ever-lasting Effect", 1.
[160] Nicoletti, *L'uomo che Dialogava,* 11-17.

performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* and, interestingly, he considered the image of the trickster as belonging to the coyote rather than to Beuys, as Buchloh claimed. By basing his interpretation on his studies of indigenous myths of creation, the anthropologist described the coyote as a personification of disorder, anarchy and chaos, elements that refer to a wider expression of reality that is capable of destroying its own basements. Thus, the coyote represents a constant danger; an animal whose actions reverberate in the macrocosm and provoke a series of chain reactions that may cause the world to collide. Nicoletti, however, is not the only one to propose an interpretation of this performance as a portrayal of shamanic rituals. David Levi Strauss, Jina Khayyer and Annie Suquet[161] also referred to a possible interpretation of Beuys' works and action pieces as rituals linked to a highly spiritual and arcane tradition related to the culture of shamanism. David Levi Strauss, in particular, investigated the figure of the coyote and the trauma Beuys dealt with for this performance. [162] Strauss links Beuys' coyote to the animal protagonist of the 'Coyote tales' told by Native American people, which speak of an ancient time in which animals were people and everyone communicated with each other. The protagonist of these tales is a transformer that brings order to chaos and vice versa. It was believed, also, that the Coyote, during the Time of Creation, taught humans how to survive. Strauss thus describes the coyote as an animal that "mythologically and biologically . . . is a survivor and exemplar of evolutionary change."[163] According to the author, this was exactly the kind of animal Beuys wanted for his performance. These forces and powers of the animal are what led the artist to choose him as a partner for *I*

[161] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys."; Jina Khayyer, "Energy Plan for the Western Man", PDF file <www.jinakhayyer.com/assets/Uploads/PDF/BEUYS.pdf>; and Annie Suquet, "Archaic thought".

[163] Levi Strauss, "American Beuys".

Like America and America Likes Me. Indeed, for Strauss, this performance had mainly therapeutic goals for the artist; in other words, it stood as a means to solve the trauma between native intelligence and European positivistic and materialistic values.[164]

Nicoletti also saw *I Like America and America Likes Me* as a performance entirely played on the interaction between man and animal, separated from the external world through a chain-link. He analyzed the symbolic tools used by Beuys to make this event be born: the mantle of felt is, for instance, seen as an instrument of power for the artist, since through it Beuys could be reconnected to a primordial and pre-formal dimension. David Levi Strauss, too, noticed how the conical shape of the felt, once it was covering Beuys' body, resembled a "*tipi*", that is the nomadic shelter that migrated from Siberia to North America with the hunters (Figure 4).[165] Also, he considered the triangle hung at the artist's neck to be the alchemical sign of fire, which ancient glacial Eurasian shamans sorely needed,[166] echoing again the interest Beuys had in the quality of warmth. Nicoletti, instead, saw the stick as the element of conjunction between the man and the animal, a means of communication. This communication occurs through a modality that recalled the theme of "secret languages", very famous in shamanistic cultures. These secret languages are learned by the neo shaman during his apprenticeship and allow him to get in contact with all natural beings, animals first of all. Thus the animals are seen as receivers and vehicles of a sacred power that is perceptible only when a contact with them is established. A shamanistic interpretation is proposed also in the analysis of Beuys' arrival to the New York gallery. According to Nicoletti, the blindfolding, the use of a gurney and of a white sheet to cover his whole body like a corpse, as well as the

[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.

transportation by ambulance from the airport to the gallery are all elements that refer to an initiation ritual. Such rituals, in traditional societies, are composed by a clear symbolic scheme of death and resurrection. In a shamanic contest, the young man is called by the spirits through dreams and visions in which the soon-to-be shaman experiences a temporary death, followed by a resurrection and a re-composition of the man's body, now regenerated and owning his new powers of shaman.[167] Nicoletti sees the same scheme not only in the Crimea accident, but also in the first phase of *Coyote*. The ambulance alludes to accidents or diseases that cause death and has the function of driving Beuys in a world beyond. Only in this world he will be able to communicate with the coyote. In this place, Beuys is confronted with a transcendental reality in which the coyote is simultaneously inhabitant, master and teacher.[168]

[167] For more details on initiation rituals in shamanic cultures see Nicoletti, *L'uomo che dialogava*, 13-17.
[168] Ibid., 39-47.

5 A Conscious Response and the Aesthetic Approach

The interpretations of *I Like America and America Likes Me* proposed in the previous chapter represent the most common points of view on the three-day event. As Joan Rothfuss underlines in his contribution to *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, the general discourse on Beuys' achievements has always been exemplified by two opposite poles: on the one hand, the so-called "apologists", who strongly believed and diffused Beuys' word even after his death; on the other hand, the "censors", who denounced Beuys' work and character for the various reasons exposed principally by Buchloh.[169] As the author suggests in the conclusion of her essay, it is still hard – and probably useless, I would add – to define Beuys as either an "inherently German" artist, or as the producer of a "universal" *oeuvre*, as the artist himself claimed. If the answer to this question harbors in the subjectivity of each person, to struggle with such quest for a right resolution of the eternal 'Beuysian' riddle might result worthless. It all comes back to the dilemma between art criticism and artist's interpretation, as I exposed before. While scholars may have focused on a particular aspect of a performance, sculpture or installation, Beuys may have wished to concentrate on other points of his artistic program. Regarding *I Like America and America Likes Me*, I believe it is essential to respond to what has been written until now, especially by Buchloh and other writers who criticized Beuys. Various assertions this scholar proposed, indeed, do not take into consideration important details of the artist's life and work.

[169] Rothfuss, "Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America", 39.

First of all, even though Buchloh's critics are organized in a consistent and plausible structure, the scholar's approach to the practice of Joseph Beuys does not take advantage of the right perspective on the artist's claims. When considering Beuys' actions and productions as something exclusively material and immediately visible, one fails to consider the very abstract and spiritual essence of his messages. It has to be taken into consideration that Beuys claimed art's mort important task was to create a link between each human being and their higher nature. Art was an instrument to induce a transformation that would have allowed the establishment of a new form of society;[170] thus, his politics was of a kind directed towards a future. The tools and the kind of spirituality[171] owned by Joseph Beuys were meant to be both temporal and universal, as it is demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

Clearly there are discordant facts about Beuys biography, too; and it is highly probable that some details of what happened, especially in the Crimea crash, were made up by the artist. As Peter Nisbet reports in "Crash Course – Remarks on a Beuys Story,"[172] Beuys' deployed different kinds of autobiography at different times during his career. Even if until the end of the 60s Beuys declared to be unwilling to speak of the plane crash, the "Story" – as Nisbet calls it – stuck anyway in people's minds. The dramatic and mystical experience the artist went through became a link for the audience to establish a connection with what Beuys was preaching, especially because it became

[170] "Joseph Beuys - English Subtitles - How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare 1/2," YouTube video, 14:59, posted by "mishiko1824", October 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo47lqk_QH0.
[171] Here I intend the word 'spirituality' as the quality and the character of the artist's spirit, which is something incorporeal and related to abstract matters that affect the soul of the human beings. Therefore, any religious connotation should be avoided in the use of this term.
[172] In *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, 5-18.

an iconographic key for the interpretation of fat and felt.[173] By no coincidence, from the beginning of the seventies Beuys described more extensively his memories of the event. It is true that the report of the Story keeps on changing in various interviews with the artist; and Nisbet detect these shifts as parallel to Beuys' moves into the public realm of politics. I believe, as Nisbet suggests, that this highlights a variation of strategy undertaken by Beuys, in order to communicate his message more effectively.[174] This variation, however, has to be considered as something positive, as the right action to be done in order to spread a message that was valuable and strong.

Indeed, the point I want to underline is that it makes no sense to stress so much attention to what has *truly* happened during the artist's lifetime. Buchloh denounces the artist's creation of a personal mythology that misleads people; a case that degrades Beuys as a "fool or a trickster", almost unworthy to be called artist. However, as Michelson suggests, the creation of a private mythology is a standard procedure in the art world.[175] And this myth of origin is essential to define a rebirth of the artist, a reference point from which one can consider and understand what Beuys has created. The Crimea crash constitutes an exemplary event that might obviously contribute to the creation of a mythology of Joseph Beuys; but this mythology was not built up to exalt Beuys as a man – to create a remarkable artistic character in the history of art – but rather to make people

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[173] I would like to point out a claim of the artist, made in 1980, in which he denied a connection between the Crimea accident and his use of fat and felt: "If this were true, then I ask why did I come so late to use such materials? The proof ... is that before I did these things, I built up a theory to which these materials seemed the most appropriate, to make clear a theory of sculpture" (Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980," 69-70). This quote is another example of shifts in opinion and use of the artist's autobiography. However, in an interview with Georg Jappe from 1976, Beuys claimed that, even he "didn't make these felt pieces to represent something of the Tartars . . . [he] probably would never have come back to felt, without this key experience." (See Georg Jappe, "Interview with Beuys about Key Experiences", 188).

[174] Peter Nisbet, "Crash Course. Remarks on a Beuys Story", in *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, 5-17.

[175] See Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 7.

feel in contact with the artist, to help them understand his message. When criticizing Beuys' biography, Buchloh does not take into account many declarations of the artist. He does not examine his theory of art, his actions, and his lectures. The myth of origin may exist, but for a just cause.

Moving on with his critique, Buchloh defines Beuys' work as born out of 'ahistoricity,' a term that describes a voluntary or involuntary detachment from the past history, related both to the individual and to the country of provenance (in this case Germany).[176] And indeed, to this displacement of history Buchloh linked the artist's presumable detachment from the contemporary history of Germany. While various authors claim that Beuys was the first important and representative artist of Germany after World War II,[177] for Buchloh his art was actually detached from the historical and artistic background of those years. First of all, I would like to denote an interest Beuys had in remembering the dramas of World War II and especially of the Nazi horrors. As it is possible to notice already in his theory of art, Beuys was conscious of the crisis, of the 'wound' people was suffering at that time. This crisis was clearly caused by the events of the World War, thus including the terrible deeds accomplished by the Nazi regime. The reason why this influence might be hidden, if compared to the works of other artists, is that Beuys' approach was different. For him, the only way to remember such terrible

[176] Buchloh, "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol.", 200.

[177] Pamela Kort, "Beuys. The Profile of a Successor", in *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy*, 19-20. Kort suggests that Beuys was carrying with him the heritage of German history: "despite a widespread feeling of national humiliation in post-World War II Germany, Beuys formulated an aesthetic embedded in the rich cultural and intellectual heritage of his country . . . at a moment in history when it was almost unthinkable to excavate inherently Germanic traditions." (ibid., 19.) Also Mark Rosenthal remarked the importance of Beuys' actions in that historical period. For Rosenthal, Beuys stood as "the signal to his countrymen that German artists had found their voice again." (Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 194); the author also established this artist as the "spearhead" through the artistic scene of post-war Germany who, already from the 50s, has established a point of view and a program that took into consideration the recent historical events (ibid., 124). A visual example of Beuys' influence on German artists is the painting *Beuysland* by Jörg Immendorff (Figure 25).

events was "by presenting a positive counter-image" of them. Indeed, the artist admitted how shocking the recognition of those events was for him:

> ". . . that shock has been my primary, my basic experience since the end of the War, and it led to me starting to tackle art critically in the first place, in other words to my orienting myself anew in the sense of a radical new beginning."[178]

This is part of the reasons why Beuys' art wanted to stimulate rebirth and renovation in the human beings; in order to reach such end, it was also necessary to rejoin nature, significantly present in *I Like America and America Likes Me* through the presence of the coyote. This possibility of rebirth was possible because people, according to Beuys, had the power to self-determine themselves, for their ego contained an ambition for freedom able to lead to the establishment of a new socio-political system the artist aimed at. For such reasons, it is incorrect to define Beuys' work as non-historical. Even though the references to the German recent past were hardly explicitly present, his message precisely includes a reaction to what the World War and the Nazi regime had caused in Europe. The need to promulgate an expanded concept of art is symptomatic of the events Beuys went through.[179] This line of reasoning retrieves to the 'myth of origin' explained before. Buchloh considered this myth to be another example of disengagement with the German history. Even if accepting the scholar's claim, it is crucial to understand the possible reason for such disentanglement. Let us consider the Tartar fable as a virtual 'rebirth' for Beuys. It is true that this 'renaissance' did not take place on German soil, as Krauss noticed.[180] However, I believe this choice should not be interpreted as a desire to create a

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[178] Joseph Beuys cited in Reithmann, "In the Rubblefield", 152-153.
[179] Gene Ray interestingly interpreted Beuys' *oeuvre* as having a second project, parallel to the main one of the social sculpture: a project of mourning, related to the Holocaust. See Gene Ray, "Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime", *Joseph Beuys – Mapping the Legacy*, 55-74.
[180] See Buchloh et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim", 11.

drastic detachment from the responsibilities of Germany and from the country's past; instead, the 'rebirth abroad' is emblematic of Beuys's desire to create universal works. As a consequence, the displacement results even necessary to let the new man, the new Joseph Beuys come alive: not a German man, but 'a man', a teacher, a universal being who speaks to the present with the future in mind.[181]

Buchloh also stated that Beuys' "performativity" was obsolete, one that rowed back into a mythical dimension that was already bygone. I think this critique actually advocates Beuys' belief that his art was universal. In point of fact, the impossibility of framing Beuys' work exclusively into its historical setting represents its main strength.[182] Also, Buchloh stated that Beuys' performances and artworks were not constituting a linguistic system, as the works of Abstract Expressionist and postwar avant-garde artists were doing instead. Bucholoh, however, was wrong: since the aim of the artist was expressly communication and since his message was well structured in his Theory of Sculpture, Beuys' products were *always* relating to a linguistic system. This system is of course composed by a variety of signified behind each signifier; still, it followed a logic that made Beuys' *oeuvre* function as a language: "it is a closed system whose components have meaning independent from their material form."[183] Once a person digs into the essence of each component of this language, a revelation of meaning occurs. This

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[181] A similar interpretation is given by Micheal Oppitz, anthropologist and great expert of shamanism, who had the opportunity to meet and discuss for long time on his work with Joseph Beuys. Oppitz, in an interview with Martino Nicoletti realized in Rome on November, 10th 2011, claimed it is irrelevant to know if the Crimea story was invented or not. The most important thing is that Beuys 'felt' like being initiated – reborn – exactly as it happens in shamanic initiations. Therefore, the Crimea episode can be defined true in the sense that he decided to communicate this idea to people (see Nicoletti, *L'uomo che dialogava*, 51).

[182] Buchloh strongly dissented with the point of view I agree with. Indeed he claimed: "One of the many virtues that has been attributed to Beuys is to have escaped from the specificity of the reflection on the discursive frameworks of art. And it is no always evident and it doesn't necessarily make it better whether this is the result of his ignorance of the history of artistic practices or whether it's the result of an intentional misrecognition on his past" (Buchloh, "Reconsidering Joseph Beuys, once again", 83).

[183] Rothfuss, "Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America", 52.

is the reason why Beuys repeatedly used precise materials. These were the components of his language, while he operated as the teacher who helped people learn. As we saw in *I Like America and America Likes Me*, not by chance Beuys used objects borrowed from everyday life, which conveyed symbolic meanings that could be understood by anyone at any time in history. The powerful nature of these elements, together with the interaction with the coyote, the movements of the artist, and the silent communication between man and animal constitute the everlasting components of this Beuysian language that, especially in this performance, underlines the universal character of his art.

The universal character of Beuys' creations is also evident if one considers the temporal dimension, which is essential when dealing with performance, above all. In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the movements and the objects used during the event were simultaneously related to different times. The action was thought in relation to what America was, as well as to what it had become. There is an implication of past and present, whose aim is to shape the upcoming future in an improved form. Therefore, the 'ahistoricity' criticized by Buchloh, if effectively accepted, might be considered as a natural result of this continuous involvement of past, present and future. Although an action develops from the present days, it also refers to primordial and antique traditions, from which humans can re-learn how to re-shape society. Also when speaking of shamanism, Beuys referred to his constant desire to look forward, and not backward into tradition: "When I do something shamanistic, I make us of shamanistic element – admittedly an element of the past – in order to express something about a future possibility."[184] This is why Beuys thought self-determination to be at the basis of the

[184] Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen, *Joseph Beuys: Zicchnungen/Tekeningen/Drawings* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980), 92, quoted in Levi Strauss, "American Beuys."

unfolding of this transformation process. Self-determination is something very concrete and very spiritual at the same time, which brings out the "aliveness" Beuys was after: an aliveness that is born from the past and that can exist in this present, to build a new future.

> "It's this aliveness that I'm after, also in the sense of will power based on the necessity of bringing back something into our time-conscious culture that's been lost, namely a willingness to take these lost forces seriously . . . and to put them back in the context of our thinking in a completely new way. That's why these things are realities not only in an aesthetic context, they're also real intentions."[185]

Thus what Beuys was looking for was not the best way to show off himself as a Messiah of the modern world, as Buchloh suggests. He wanted to be a teacher, a kind of orchestra director who aimed at uniting the full variety of individuals who wished to make a change.

When considering these issues, it becomes clear that what writers stated about *I Like America and America Likes Me* is not enough to comprehend the whole range of meanings hidden behind its iconography. Symbols are not enough to grasp the message Beuys sent in 1974; but if considered differently, namely as *means* rather than ends, these symbols acquire a strong character and become essential to unravel the enigma the artist created. Beuys' symbolism should not be intended as based on a univocal relationship between signifier and signified. Indeed, even if the objects chosen for the performance own symbolic features, they are mainly aimed at pointing to a more profound and ample assortment of significances. The greatness of this action piece harbors in its universal

[185] Ibid.

spirituality, as I have just explained –a characteristic that Beuys could manage to achieve thanks to the use of symbols.

However, as I demonstrated through the exposition of this thesis, it is necessary to look at various forms of interpretations to find out it is still necessary to look for something beyond. The efficacy and the successfulness of the performance become integral by the moment the human soul is affected on all levels. Rationally, it is necessary to fathom the traditional aspects and the innovations related to the objects included in the event. Also via reason, an iconological analysis has to be conducted, in order to recognize the various influences that are visible in *Coyote*: facts of the artist's life, the development of his style, the artistic and the intellectual encounters he made along the way, the principles of his theory of art, no less than the interpretations second people proposed for what Beuys claimed and created. Now, however, one realizes all these elements do not allow to reach the final point, yet. It is indeed indispensable to struggle with an aesthetic approach. Thus, the attempt is to consider this performance as an aesthetic experience, whose satisfactory account "must explain what makes it so powerfully intuitive and, at the same time, explain why its opposite – detachment, or even disgust or horror – might also be compelling."[186]

Clearly the term 'aesthetics' automatically reminds of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's belief was that only through art one could accept the existence of something beyond the object, something that men cannot understand and master completely; but it is exactly this human ability of accepting rationally one's inadequacy that allows men to be elevated and free. What Kant investigated mostly to get to this conclusion is what he named "aesthetic judgment". This element is linked to the concept

[186] Sheppard quoted in Pooke and Newal, *Art History - The Basics*, 17.

of beauty, which, according to Kant, does not exist in the object, but rather in an emotional event that occurs while experiencing the object. When people look at something and determine that object is beautiful, they are only reflecting upon themselves. Namely, instead of really judging the object in itself, they are developing a subjective and reflective judgment that refers exclusively to their own beings.[187] What really matters in the performance, therefore, is the didactic essence coming out of it. An essence that is independent from the artist, just like that art coefficient Duchamp spoke of.

I do not meant to stick with Kant's definition of aesthetic judgment, but the philosopher's definition of aesthetics is helpful to understand what it means to experience this performance through an aesthetic approach. It is necessary to go beyond the visual symbolism of the objects, as well as beyond the facts one knows about Beuys. What is needed is a spiritual experience of the action piece. Even if confined to a past temporal dimension, the essence of Beuys' message still lives today. For such reasons, it is essential to base this aesthetic approach on the artist's theory of art, in order to stick with what the artist's declared intentions; but also, it is important to consider what the performance became on its own –as if it were an existing being per se. It is no coincidence that, as mentioned in the first chapter, Beuys chose such medium to present his message in the US, after his lectures of the same year did not incite a wide success. He could have made a sculpture or a second attempt with lectures; instead, he chose performance. A medium that could allow people to experience his message differently from any other form of art; a medium constituted by a variety of layers that wanted to communicate, to speak silently with the American audience and with all those people

[187] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Excerpts*, Trans. James C. Meredith, PDF File: 2.

who, in future times, would still be commenting on the event. Three days to whisper gradually in the ears of the Americans what his art was about.

The spiritual aspect of the performance is also recognized by the artist himself. As previously mentioned, already in his Theory of Sculpture the artist denoted that people, to transform their lives, had to realize their primal needs are spiritual, not material.[188] In *I Like America and America Likes Me* this message is clear. All the material objects in the room are pointing to a more spiritual and abstract meaning and even the encounter between the two living protagonists of the event results full of intangible energies. As Beuys remarked, between him and the coyote there was not only a difference in provenance, but especially a difference in soul kinds. The human beings have, according to him, an individual soul, for they can exist as free individuals; also, the humans' freedom resides in their ability to think. On the contrary, animals are dependent on their group souls and cannot act without relating to one another. Differently from human beings' freedom of thinking, animals must follow certain unchangeable patterns of thought. However, this situation does not always result as a positive attribute for men and women. Indeed, knowing they have freedom of thought, human beings arrived to a point of crisis, of spiritual poverty, which can easily lead to the destruction of the world. This is the reason why it is so necessary to cooperate with other beings, such as animals: "The human being has the power to change, the free possibility to act one day in the spirit of a wolf or fox, the next in quite a different way."[189]

Beuys' acted as an example for this fusion. He spent three days entirely dedicated to the coyote, moving and behaving for him, to establish a connection with the animal.

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[188] See page 50; Beuys, "A public dialogue, New York City, 1974", in *Joseph Beuys in America,* 32.
[189] Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*, 12.

This is not the only example of works elaborated by Beuys that posed the animal as the centerpiece of the creation; for instance, in the performance *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie*, from 1969, a horse was present (Figure 17).[190] As for *Coyote*, the artist claimed more than once the various reasons that gave importance to the presence of that animal:

> "My intention was firstly to hold together and retain in the West powers, and then to appear as a being representing the group soul area. I wanted to show the coyote a parallel power, but I also wished to remind him that it was now a human being who was speaking with him, and that's why my behavior was varied."[191]

The series of cyclic movements, which followed an oscillating rhythm, were used by the artist to remind the coyote the geniality of his species, but also to demonstrate to him the possibilities for freedom he had, which could contribute to the production of a more universal freedom, which included human beings. Beuys said he was working with "invisible powers"; energies unknown or forgotten by the human beings, but still extant in the kingdom of animals. He claimed that "the spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for humankind in the future."[192] The energy issue arguably represented one of the highest interests for Beuys, in his theory of art. The very 'resurrection' each human being could accomplish was for him dictated by the proper use of creative energies, which belong to everyone. This is why Beuys wanted to get in contact with the soul of the coyote: the different point of view on existence can be part of a change in the natural society, including every form of life. He played the role of the shepherd, by leading and respecting the animal; the role of the teacher, by humbly demonstrating the truths he believed in; the role of a body-less

[190] Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", 28.
[191] Beuys, "Discussions of a few objects and an action piece with Caroline Tisdall, 1974 and 1978", 141.
[192] Ibid., 142.

essence, silently present and firmly convinced of his view of the world; the role of a friend, whispering gently the best route to be taken.

Conclusion

The path of this arguments leads to a new consideration of Joseph Beuys' performance. It is not enough to consider it as a socio-historical-based piece, aimed mainly at criticizing American interventions in the Vietnam War and the capitalistic system.[193] Nor it appears to be fair to limit the analysis of the artist's actions and choices to an arid symbolism based on a univocal relationship between each object and their relative signified. This has been demonstrated through the development of this thesis; the iconography, as well as the various interpretations proposed for the performance resulted to be not enough for approaching *I Like America and America Likes Me* in a new way. The rational section of this writing, which constitutes the largest part of the whole text, has demonstrated that symbols and writings may only take us to a certain point. When dealing with artists like Joseph Beuys, one who developed a whole theory aimed at transforming people and society by communicating with their emotional and spiritual side, it is not enough to just criticize the truthfulness of each word and action done. On the contrary, it is essential to dedicate a careful attention to what Beuys preached; it is necessary to learn his language, and to look beyond the first layer of meanings materialized through his art.

Beuys' *oeuvre* is constituted by a wide range of media that include sculpture, performance, sound, time; and many stirrings, too, influenced the work of this artist:

[193] Mark Rosenthal, "Joseph Beuys: Staging Sculpture", in *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments*, 89.

ancient and present traditions, different forms of spirituality, the art scene of the time and the horrors of World War II, philosophers and writers who dealt with themes often re-elaborated by Beuys... all these aspects must be considered, when approaching to Beuys art. Nonetheless, the kind of investigation proposed here had never been undertaken before. Even if Caroline Tisdall and Lucrezia De Domizio Durini always dug into the artist's message, as well as into his personality and his works, the approach of this thesis is a new one. The Panofsky-based structure helps to maintain an accurate and objective view on the performance. The neutral description of the performance led the reader to the iconographic analysis of each symbol included in the performance, which examines their historical tradition and confronts this heritage with the re-evaluation of the same elements in the performance conceived by Beuys. Then, the iconology chapter displayed the main information regarding Beuys: his life, the artistic background and the artistic theory developed by him throughout his career. In addition to these three ways of considering Beuys' influences for *Coyote*, the fourth chapter exposed three different divergent of the action piece, which depict the event in very different shades.

These four chapters all followed a rational analysis of the performance, based on facts, visual symbols, verbal and written sources related to the artist. The investigation was conducted by focusing especially on the writings and the testimonies of those who were very close to Beuys, both personally and related to the timeframe. In order to understand how a new approach to modern and contemporary art can be developed, it was indeed unavoidable to consider the common manners in which the art piece was interpreted. Thus, this block of the thesis, which one may group under the term "*ratio*", represents the imperative preparation for a new look on the performance. However, it has

to be recognized there is something more in this work of art. The rational approach is not sufficient to grasp the entire range of nuances included in the action piece, even if it gave the basis to learn how to connect to an aesthetic approach to interpret the performance, as explained in the fifth chapter.

The fifth and last chapter of the thesis has, first of all, proposed a response to some critiques moved to Beuys, especially by Benjamin Buchloh. This response is supported by statements made both by the artist and by the other critics, in an attempt to find a balance in the discussion that opposes artists' and art critics' interpretations of the works of art. Through this response, references to a deeper way of interpreting the performance and Beuys as an artist already suggested the need for a new point of view of Beuys' creation, more precisely for an aesthetic approach, which is the focus of the second part of the chapter.

The conclusion one may get from this argumentation is that, in order to penetrate into the didactic substance of Beuys' art, it is necessary to go beyond symbolism and to encounter, metaphorically, his artistic and human vision. Joseph Beuys can thus be recognized as a person, an artist, a teacher, who aimed at touching and changing people in their souls, first of all. This goal of his is clarified extensively through his Social Sculpture, which *must* be applied to the analysis of his performance, if one wishes to look for the key to unlock the "*Coyote* riddle". The comprehension of the performance thus has to be deepened and extended – just like Beuys wanted the concept of art to be expanded – in order to embrace an aesthetic dimension and, eventually, to acknowledge a new didactic approach to the work of art. In the previous chapter, the theory of the medium, linked also to Beuys' theory of art, has been scrutinized. An answer was

proposed to the initial questions of this thesis: What is performance for Beuys and how can it become a spiritual exercise, practiced in order to let the audience experience a personal revelation? How can the artist change society through performance? In order to give an answer to these questions, we saw how necessary it was to look first at the action piece through our *ratio,* thus through the analysis of iconography, iconology and interpretations. It became clear that the theory of art Beuys expressed was essential to catch all the nuances of the performance; also, the *being* of the performance per se emerged as a significant aspect that is even independent from the artist who created it. The readers could note how such action piece meant for Beuys an opportunity to communicate deeply with the audience, to move their souls, to stimulate their self-determination. The final aim of this dialogue was to re-shape society, to establish a new system modelled on the union between Man and Nature; to constitute a world where art and creativity represent the source for freedom. *I Like America and America Likes Me* was part of this program, as it was clarified throughout this text.

Nonetheless, this new approach developed to understand the spirituality of *I Like America and America Likes Me* still leaves the questions open to other discussions. Now, the goal would be to understand *how* this spiritual exercise was performed by Beuys. This discourse, however, would lead far beyond the objectives of this thesis, for a much wider collection of sources would be needed. Let this thesis just provide a starting point for a new approach, to understand the profound metaphysical implications of modern art and, hopefully, to disclose some of the most intriguing enigmas of the past century's art.

Appendix 1 Images

Figure 1

Ambulance from the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 2

Beuys brought to René Block gallery wrapped in felt. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

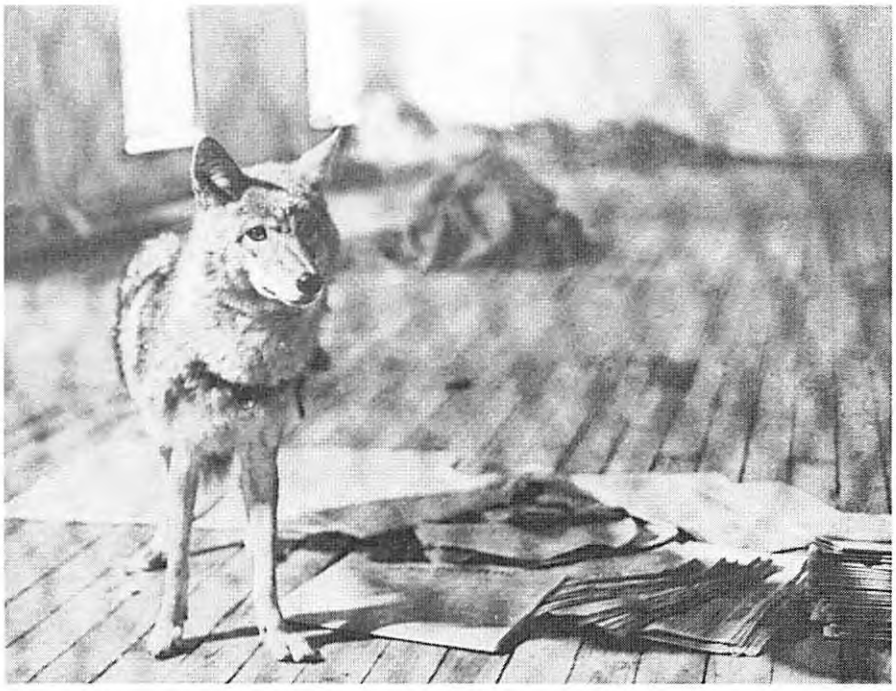


Figure 3

Coyote and Wall Street Journals, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

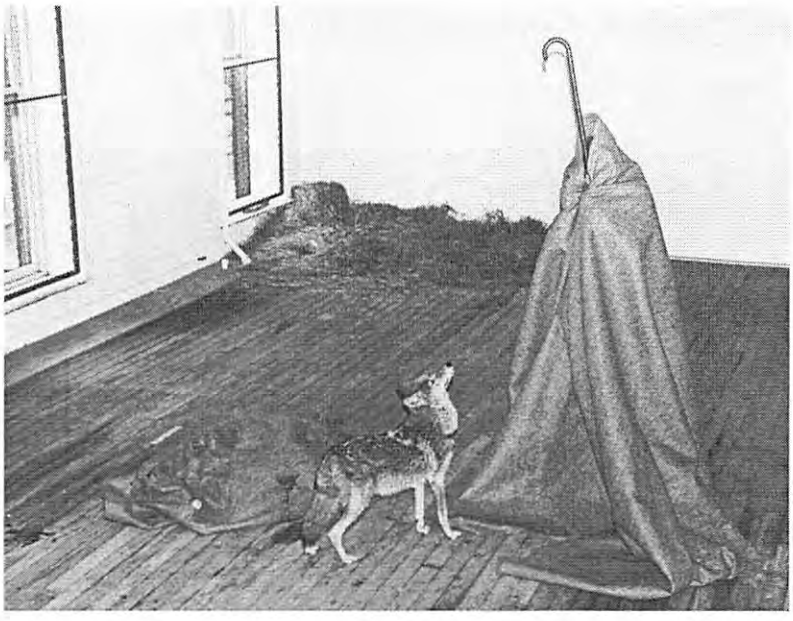


Figure 4

Joseph Beuys wrapped in felt and the coyote, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

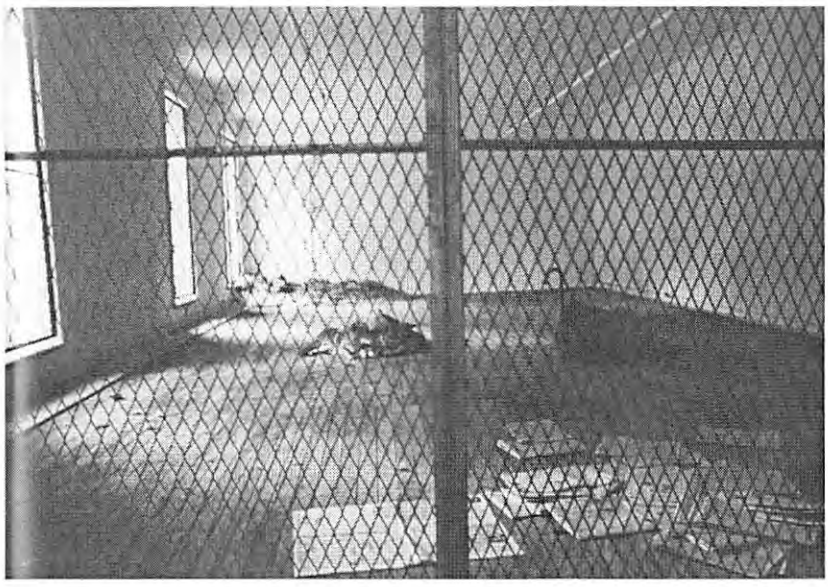


Figure 5

View of the gallery during the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me.* From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 6

Beuys and the coyote during the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me.* From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 7

Piles of Wall Street Journals, from *I Like America and America Likes Me.* From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 8

I Like America and America Likes Me: Beuys lying on the straw, while the coyote rests on the felt. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

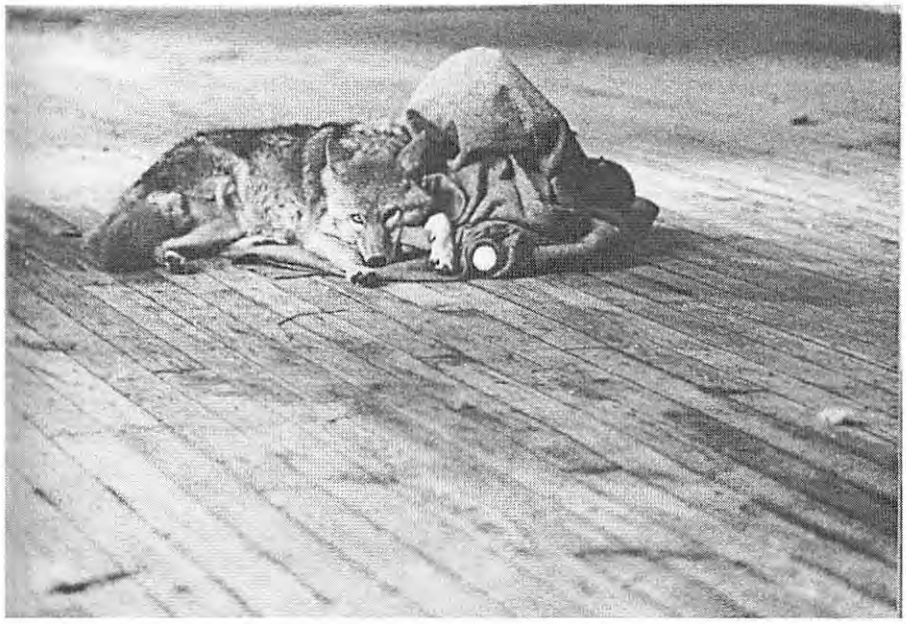


Figure 9

Coyote and the flashlight, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 10

Joseph Beuys and the coyote, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

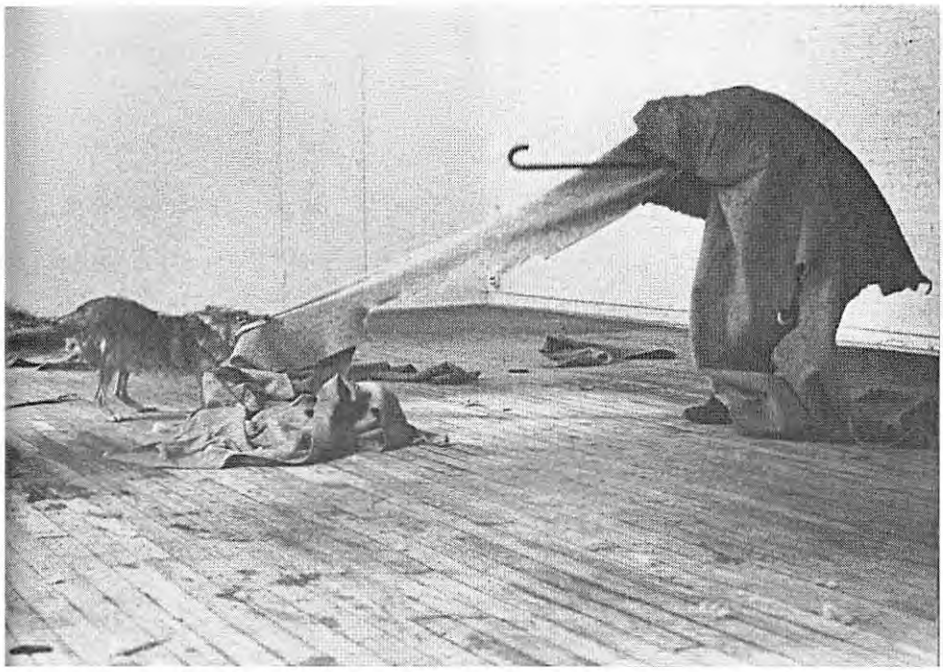


Figure 11

Coyote and Joseph Beuys, wrapped in felt; from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 12

Coyote and Joseph Beuys, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Note the objects: the triangle, the stick, the flashlight, and the felt. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 13

Coyote and Joseph Beuys, from *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 14

Joseph Beuys during the performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

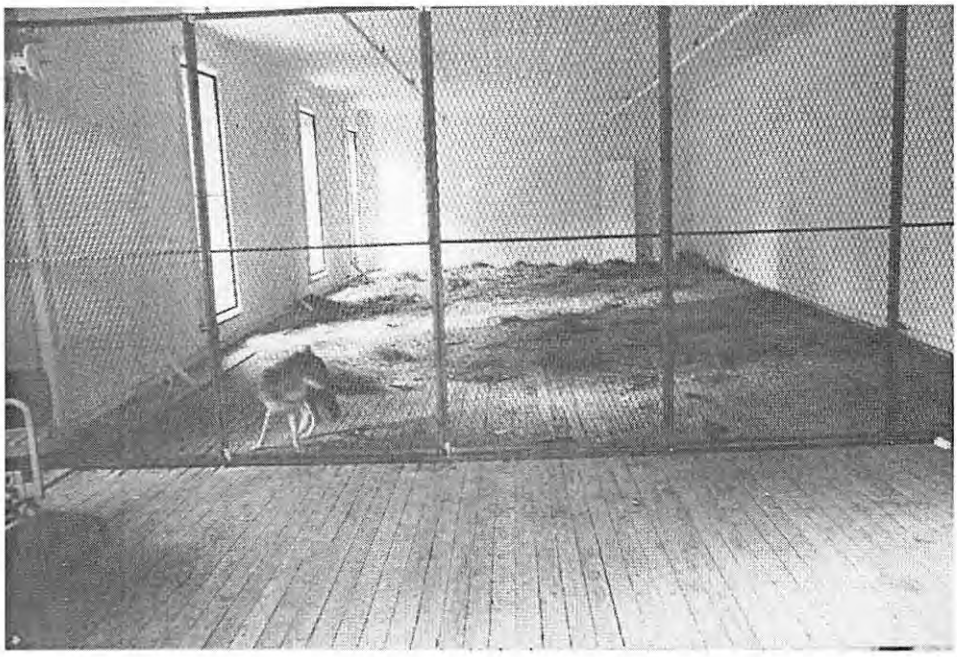


Figure 15

A view of the gallery with the coyote alone, after Beuys left at the end of *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 16

Beuys brought back to the Kennedy Airport: the epilogue of *I Like America and America Likes Me*. From: Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys – Coyote*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).

Figure 17

Joseph Beuys, *Titus Andronicus/Iphigenie*, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt am Main, 29 May 1969, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2008.
Photo: Abisag Tüllmann.

From: Art Tattler International, http://arttattler.com/archive josephbeuys.html.

Figure 18

Joseph Beuys.

Photo: Buby Durini
From: Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: l'immagine dell'umanità*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Silvana, 2001.

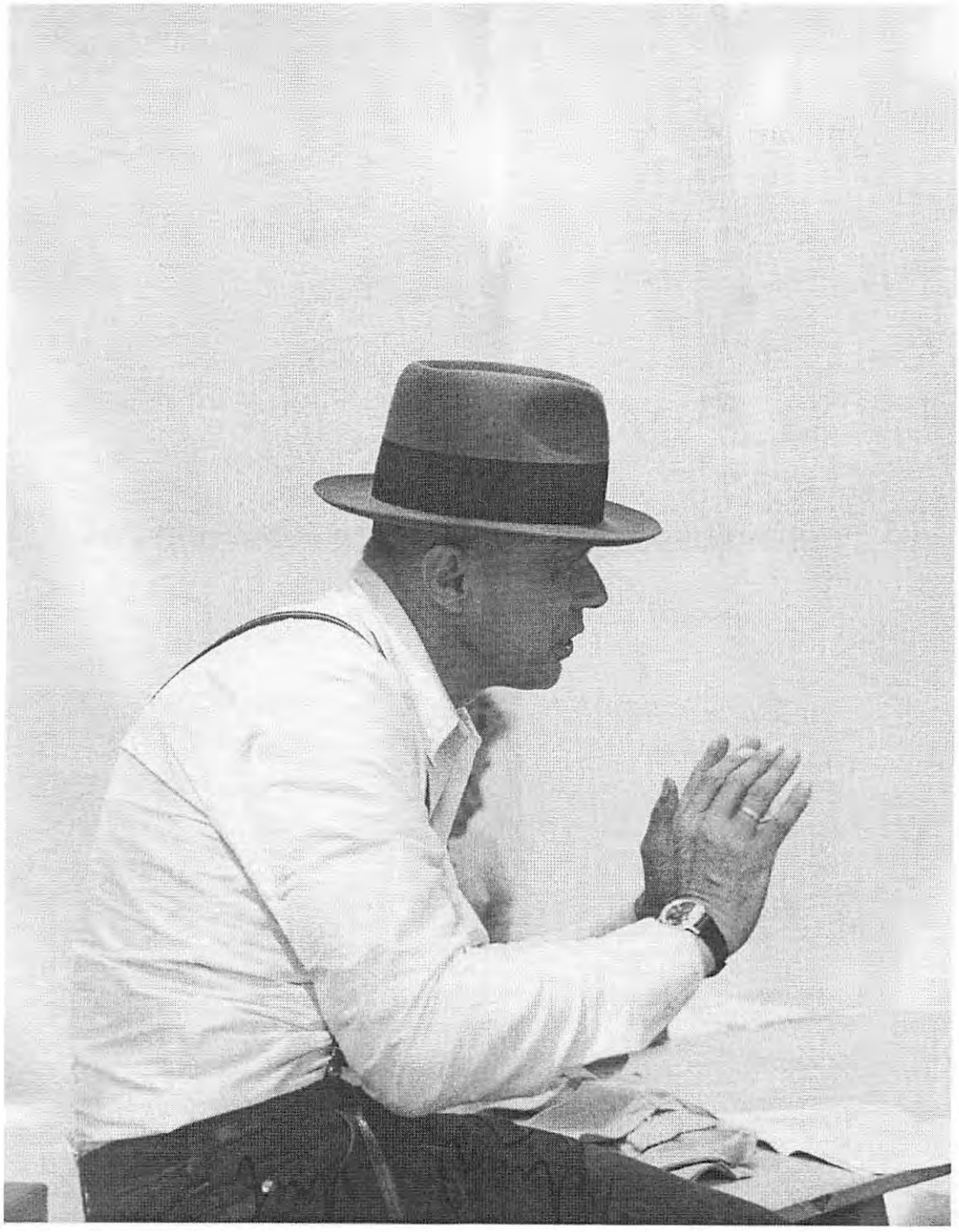


Figure 19

Joseph Beuys. Photo: Buby Durini. From: Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: l'immagine dell'umanità*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Silvana, 2001.

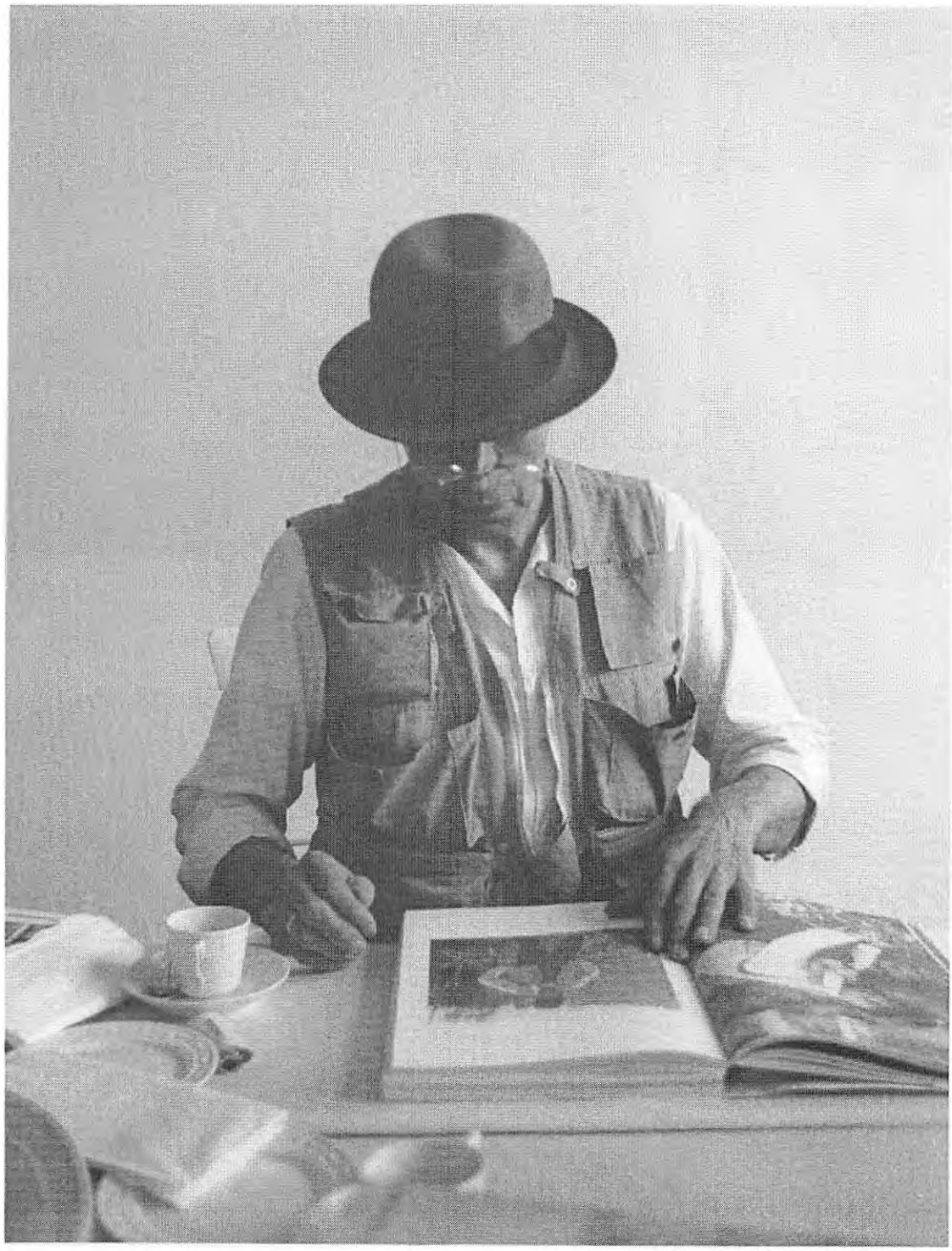
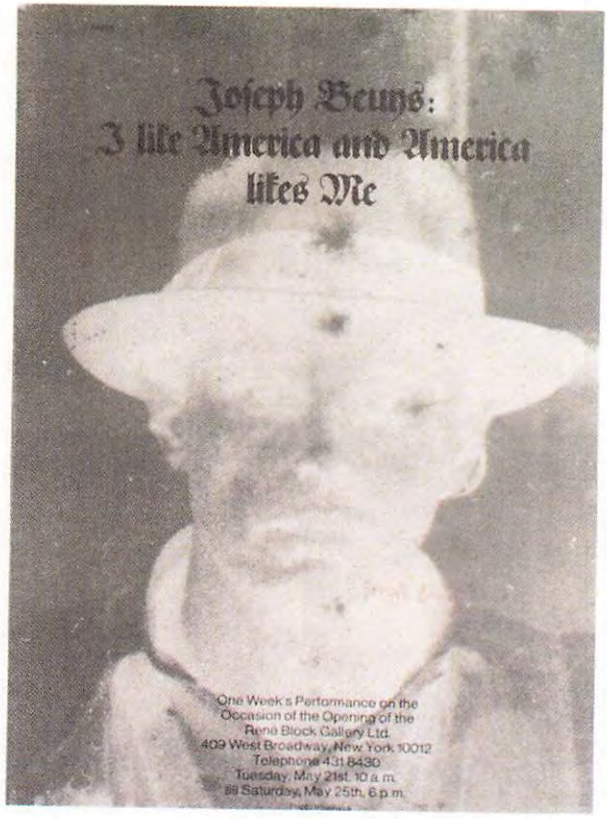


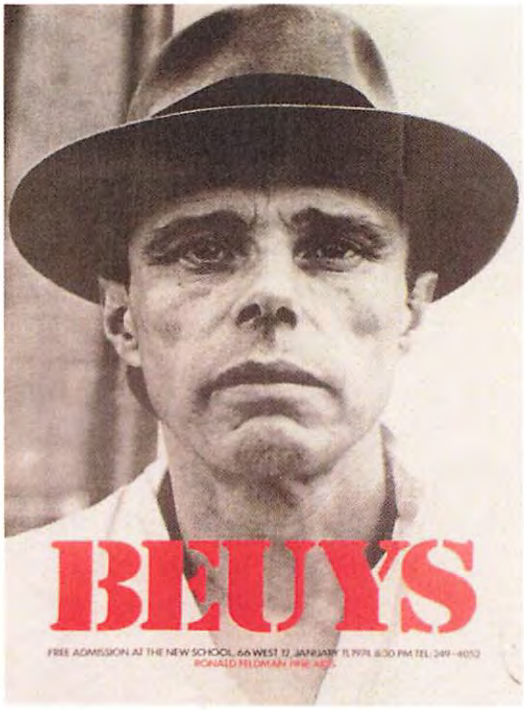
Figure 20

Joseph Beuys. Photo: Buby Durini. From: Lucrezia De Domizio Durini and Joseph Beuys, *Joseph Beuys: l'immagine dell'umanità*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Silvana, 2001.

21



22



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Figures 21, 22, 23

Posters with Joseph Beuys. Credit: Archivio Luigi Bonotto – Bassano del Grappa. From: Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura – The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 – Venezia 2007*. Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Silvana, 2007.

Fig. 21: Poster for *Die Grünen* party.

Fig. 22: Manifesto for *I Like America and America Likes Me*.

Fig. 23: Poster for free admissions at the New School (Ronald Feldman Fine Arts).

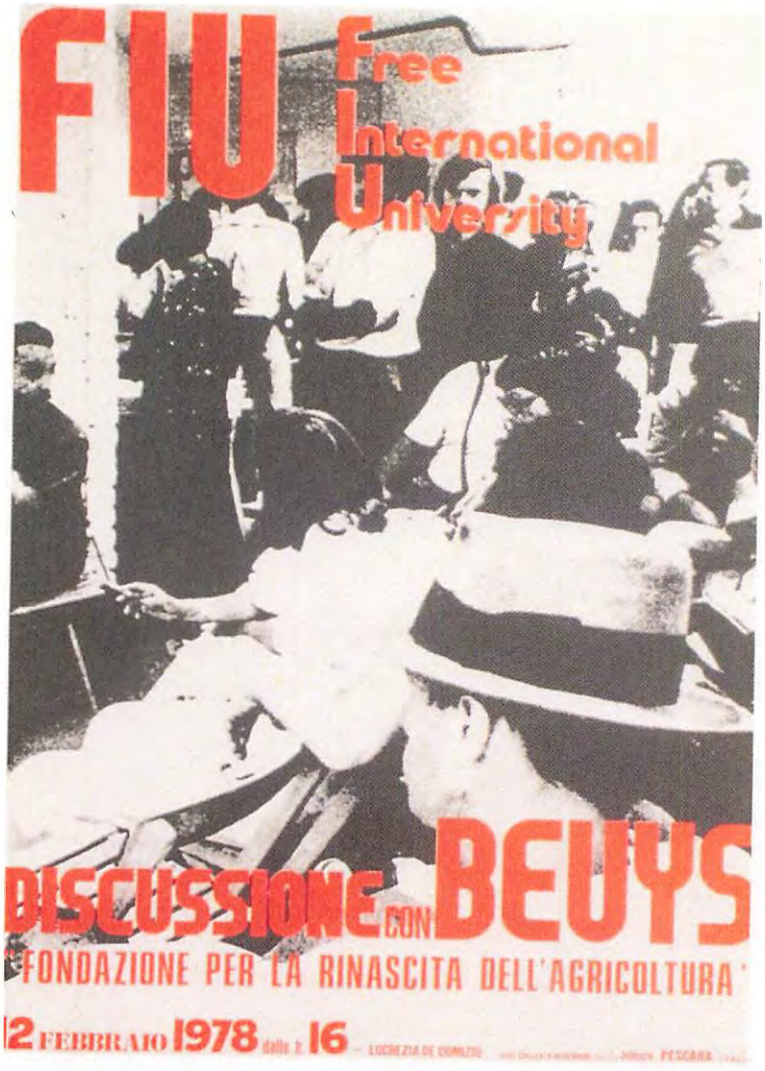

Figure 24

Manifesto for an event organized by the Free International University.

Credit: Archivio Luigi Bonotto – Bassano del Grappa.
From: Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della Natura – The Living Sculpture. Kassel 1977 – Venezia 2007*. Cinisello Balsamo (Milano): Silvana, 2007.

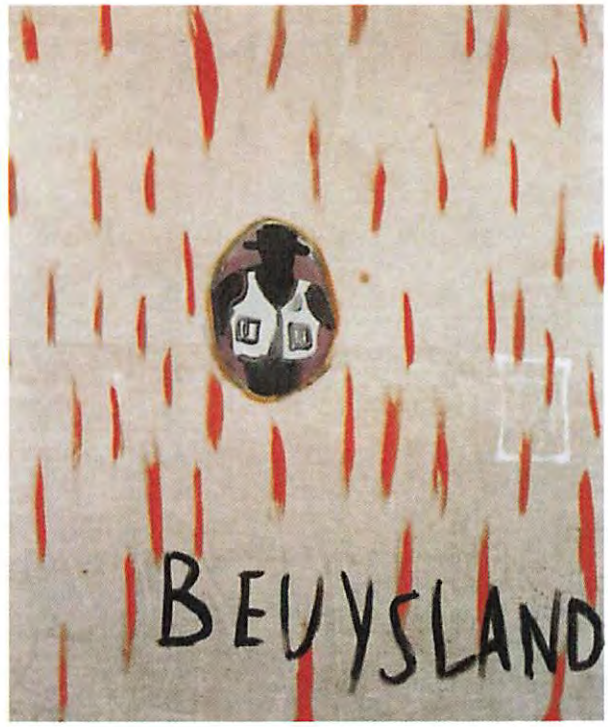

Figure 25

Jörg Immendorff, *Beuysland*, 1965. Oil on canvas. 125.4 x 104.8 cm, The Saint Louis Art Museum. Friends Fund.

From: Mark Rosenthal, Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, and Joseph Beuys. *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments.* London: Tate Publishing, 2004.

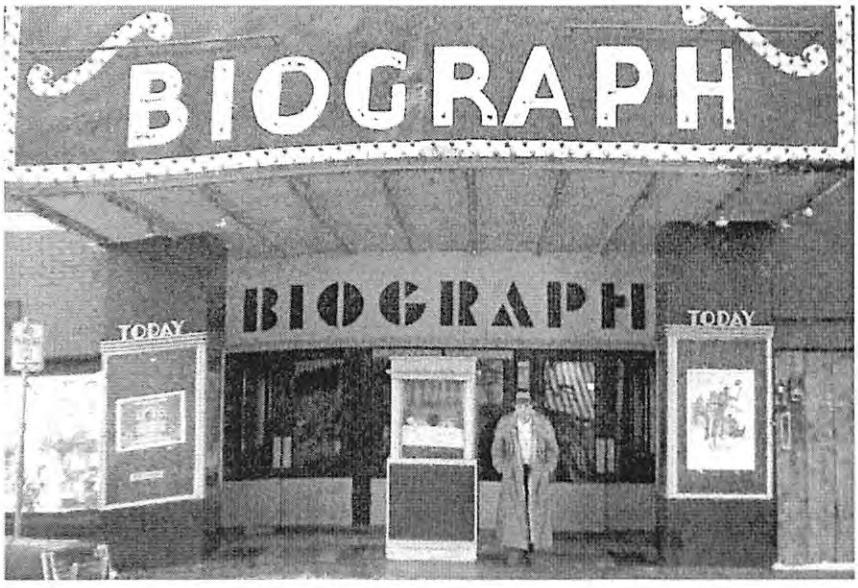

Figure 26

Joseph Beuys, *Dillinger Action*, 1974, Chicago.

From: Mark Rosenthal, Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, and Joseph Beuys. *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments.* London: Tate Publishing, 2004.

Figure 27

Joseph Beuys, *The Pack*, 1969.

From: Mark Rosenthal, Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, and Joseph Beuys. *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments.* London: Tate Publishing, 2004.

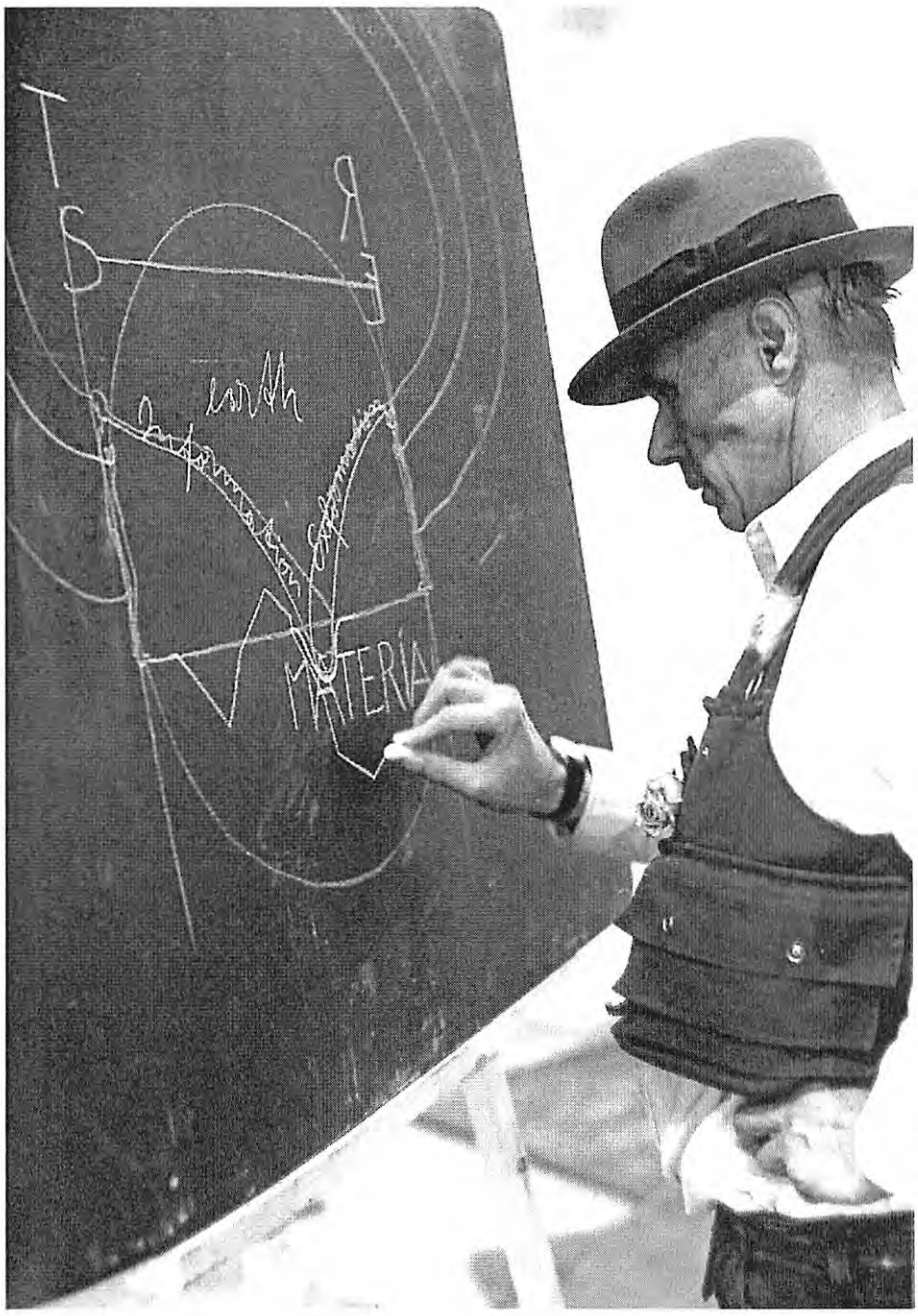

Figure 28

Joseph Beuys writing on a blackboard.

From: Mark Rosenthal, Sean Rainbird, Claudia Schmuckli, and Joseph Beuys. *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments.* London: Tate Publishing, 2004.

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