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Embodied Coexistence: Human and Animal Life, Ritual, and Meaning in Action in Joseph Beuys's Work “I Like America and America Likes Me”

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Abstract

Joseph Beuys's performance “I Like America and America Likes Me” is one of the most prominent examples of twentieth-century performance art, in which a direct, lived encounter between human and animal becomes a ground for rethinking fundamental concepts of life, meaning, and ritual. By placing the artist's body in an embodied coexistence with a coyote, the work not only challenges established boundaries between human and animal but also opens up the possibility of reinterpreting the relationship between the body, ritual, and meaning-making experience within the framework of contemporary art. Adopting a qualitative and analytical approach, the present study examines the ways in which human animal coexistence is represented in this artistic action and seeks to elucidate the connections between embodied life, ritual elements, and the production of meaning. The theoretical framework of the research is grounded in concepts such as embodied life, interspecies relationality, rituality, and otherness, drawing on continental philosophy, interspecies studies, and performance art theory. The analysis demonstrates that through the restriction of movement, the use of symbolic materials, silence, repetition of actions, and the co-presence of human and animal bodies, Beuys creates a ritualized space in which meaning emerges not through representation, but through lived experience and bodily encounter. Within this space, the coyote, as the “Other”, is not merely a symbolic object but an active agent in shaping the semantic structure of the artistic action. The findings suggest that Beuys's coyote performance can be understood as an attempt to rethink human existence in relation to nature, history, and the spiritual realm an attempt that, through embodied and ritualized coexistence, proposes the possibility of healing existential and cultural ruptures. By offering an interdisciplinary reading, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of performance art and to the expansion of studies on human animal relations in contemporary art.

Keywords: Ritual and performance, Joseph Beuys, Human life, Animal life, Contemporary art.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary art, as one of the most important arenas for critical reflection on the modern world, has consistently operated beyond aesthetic representation and has become a platform for engaging with fundamental questions concerning the body, identity, power, nature, and human existence [1]. Within this

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context, art has distanced itself from the notion of an autonomous aesthetic object and moved toward process, experience, action, and relationality. This shift, particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward, paved the way for the emergence of approaches in which the boundaries between art and life, subject and object, and culture and nature became increasingly destabilized. Among these developments, performance art grounded in the body, time, and presence has played a pivotal role in this transformation. By eliminating mediating forms of representation and emphasizing lived experience, performance art enables a direct confrontation with bodily, social, and biological realities [2]. In this mode of artistic practice, the artist's body functions not merely as an expressive tool, but as a site for the production of meaning, experience, and critical action. From this perspective, performance art offers a unique framework for rethinking the relationship between humans and the surrounding world, others, and non-human beings. One of the key concerns in contemporary art, particularly in the late twentieth century, has been the human nature relationship and the critique of modern anthropocentrism. This concern, coinciding with the expansion of discourses such as biophilosophy, critical ecology, and Posthumanist studies, has led artists to reflect on new forms of coexistence, interdependence, and interspecies relationality. Within this framework, the animal is no longer treated merely as an object of representation, but rather as a living, active, and influential presence within the artistic experience. In this regard, the works of Joseph Beuys occupy a distinctive position. Conceiving art as a social, therapeutic, and ritual action, Beuys employs his own body as a mediator between humans, nature, and history. His well-known action with a coyote in 1974, titled "I Like America and America Likes Me", stands as a paradigmatic example of a direct and lived encounter between human and animal within the context of performance art. In this work, Beuys coexists with a coyote in an enclosed space for several days—an encounter that challenges conventional boundaries between subject and object, culture and nature, and human and animal. This action can be understood not only as an artistic event, but as a lived and interspecies experience in which meaning emerges through bodily presence, silence, repetition, and gradual coexistence. The use of ritual elements, symbolic materials, and an extended temporal structure brings the performance close to ritualistic and shamanic practices, enabling a reconsideration of concepts such as life, otherness, ritual, and meaning within the framework of performance art. Despite the significance of this work, existing studies in contemporary art have largely focused on formal analysis, technique, and symbolism in Beuys's oeuvre, while paying comparatively little systematic attention to the biological, bodily, and interspecies dimensions of this action. Yet the embodied coexistence enacted in this performance creates a space in which the human body and the animal body function not as objects of display, but as instruments of experience, ritual, and meaning production. Such a space calls for an interdisciplinary approach that simultaneously engages philosophical and biophilosophical concepts, performance art theory, and interspecies studies in the analysis of lived experience. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the ways in which human animal coexistence is articulated in Joseph Beuys's coyote action and to analyze the relationship between body, ritual, and meaning within this lived experience. The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in concepts such as embodied life, otherness, interspecies relationality, and rituality. Employing a qualitative analytical approach, the study investigates the visual, bodily, and ritual elements of the work. Analyzing this action not only deepens our understanding of performance art and Beuys's creative practice, but also opens up new possibilities for rethinking the human relationship with animals and nature, as well as for understanding interspecies lived experience in contemporary art.

2 | Research Background

"I Like America and America" likes me is one of the most significant examples of performance art in the twentieth century and has attracted extensive attention from art critics, art historians, and cultural researchers. This work was performed in 1974 at the René Block Gallery in New York, where Beuys spent three

consecutive days in a room with a live coyote an action that, above all, points to a reconsideration of the relationship between humans and animals, culture and nature, and the collective healing of society¹.

In art-historical texts, this action has primarily been analyzed from a historical-symbolic perspective. Richard Demarco and Caroline Tisdall published photographs and visual documentation of the work in the book *Coyote*, which has become one of the fundamental visual and descriptive sources for subsequent studies [3].

Additionally, in reference sources and general writings on Beuys, studies have addressed the meaning of his use of the coyote and its associations with Native American symbolism, as well as the role of felt and Beuys's symbolic sensibilities [4]. In the field of art analysis, several critical sources have examined this work, although most have been published in the form of cultural art criticism rather than as systematic academic research. For example, some analyses in art journals and articles have addressed the symbolism and the political and cultural dimensions of the performance, showing that Beuys employed the coyote as a symbol of the American spirit and its relationship to Native American history [5]. Some reference books on Beuys and performance art have also addressed this action, including general studies on Beuys such as *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* [6] which present the Coyote action as a key to a broader understanding of Beuys's artistic thought.

Beuys's techniques in performance art have also been examined to some extent in studies of contemporary art criticism; however, these discussions have generally focused on the overall meaning of the action and have paid less attention to a detailed analysis of the lived, interspecies experience between human and animal.

Although some theses and academic texts have also referred to this work for example, writings that relate the action to perspectives on shamanism, symbolism, and human animal companionship [7]. These discussions are usually presented as parts of larger research projects and are rarely found as independent articles published in peer-reviewed international journals. From a philosophical and interdisciplinary perspective, there are also only a limited number of sources that consider this action beyond a purely art-historical analysis; for instance, some studies have emphasized its shamanistic aspects and the importance of lived experience in encounters with the animal. However, a robust theoretical framework that systematically examines embodied existence, interspecies experiences, and ritual within performance art has not yet been clearly articulated in the literature of contemporary art research.

3 | Theoretical Framework

To analyze this work, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework consisting of three main components: Embodied Life, Interspecies Studies, and Ritual Studies and the Philosophy of Meaning in Performance Art. This framework enables a systematic examination of the relationship between the body, the animal, and meaning-making experience in performance art.

In theories of Embodied Life, emphasis is placed on lived and bodily experience in interaction with the environment and other beings. This approach, rooted in existentialist philosophy and phenomenology, argues that human experience is not confined to mental perception; rather, the body plays an active and constitutive role in it [8]. In Beuys's action, the artist's body, confined within a limited space alongside the coyote, functions not merely as a tool of symbolic representation but as a lived and interactive medium. This bodily interaction and physical presence move the experience of coexistence beyond the conceptual level, transforming it into a tangible and meaning-generating encounter. Interspecies studies examine human relationships with other living beings from the perspectives of biology, philosophy, and cultural studies, emphasizing interaction, interdependence, and coexistence among species [9]. This approach allows Beuys's action to be analyzed not simply as a symbolic confrontation with an animal, but as a real interspecies

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Like_America_and_America_Likes_Me

experience. The presence of the coyote alongside the artist, and the bodily, kinetic, and ritualized interactions between human and animal, constitute a clear example of active and embodied interspecies coexistence.

Beuys's action also clearly possesses ritual dimensions. Silence, restricted movement, and the presence of the animal create an atmosphere reminiscent of shamanistic and ritual ceremonies, in which meaning emerges through bodily performance and spatial presence. Research in ritual studies and the philosophy of meaning in performance art demonstrates that meaning in performance is produced not solely through representation, but through lived, interactive, and ritualized experience [10]. This theoretical framework allows us to examine how human–animal coexistence in Beuys's action simultaneously enables meaning-making and the ritual experience.

4 | Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative-analytical approach with the aim of examining the embodied coexistence of humans and animals. This approach allows for an in-depth and interpretive study of the interaction between the human and animal body, ritual elements, and meaning-making in performance art, making it suitable for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of art and philosophy of life.

This research is of an analytical-descriptive type, focusing on elucidating the relationship between theoretical concepts Embodied Life, Interspecies Being, and Ritual and the visual and bodily elements of the performance. The study seeks to provide a systematic and interdisciplinary reading of the lived experience between humans and animals in performance art. The research data include primary and secondary sources related to Beuys's action. Primary sources consist of visual and video documentation of the performance, notes, and archival materials associated with the event. Secondary sources include published research analyses in articles and books on Beuys and performance art, art criticism, interspecies studies, and sources in the philosophy of life and ritual. Data analysis is conducted through critical and interpretive content analysis, following these steps:

- I. Careful and descriptive observation of the visual, kinetic, and bodily elements in Beuys's action.
- II. Identification of symbols, ritual patterns, and human–animal interactions.
- III. Alignment of findings with the theoretical concepts of the research framework (embodied life, interspecies being, philosophy of meaning, and ritual).
- IV. Extraction of semantic patterns and analysis of the role of the body and the presence of the animal in meaning-making.

The case study examined is Joseph Beuys's Coyote performance in 1974, recognized as a prominent example of embodied human–animal coexistence in performance art. Due to its thorough documentation and prior analyses, this case provides the opportunity for an in-depth examination of bodily, ritual, and interspecies interactions.

4.1 | Validity and Reliability of the Research

To ensure the validity of the results, the study employs the method of triangulation, which includes: examining multiple data sources (images, videos, textual documents), evaluating analyses by peer researchers, and aligning the analysis with the existing theoretical framework. This methodology allows for a precise, comprehensive, and reliable analysis of Beuys's action and the lived experience of humans and animals, providing a solid foundation for the analysis and interpretation chapter. "I Like America and America Likes Me" is a multilayered, non-narrative, bodily, and ritualized work in which meaning is generated not merely through text or image, but through time, body, material, and relationships. Therefore, analyzing it with a single method (e.g., symbolic analysis) is insufficient. Triangulation enables the bodily action to be analyzed simultaneously as performance, ritual, and political act, the human animal relationship to be examined from performance studies, anthropology, and posthumanist perspectives, and meaning to be explored both as lived experience and conceptual structure. In the visual and video documentation of the performance, the analysis

focuses on bodily actions, spacing, repetition, and temporality. In Beuys's texts and statements, the artist's intentions regarding shamanism, healing, and society are considered. Additionally, in the historical and political context of the United States, interpreting the coyote as a symbol of otherness is of particular significance.

4.2 | Analysis and Interpretation of the Work

The analysis of "I Like America and America Likes Me" is conducted along three main axes: bodily action and human animal coexistence, ritual and meaning-making elements, and the role of otherness and interspecies being. This analysis demonstrates that Beuys's work goes beyond a mere performative act, offering a lived and interdisciplinary experience of human animal interaction. In examining bodily action and human animal coexistence, the artist's body functions as the primary medium of interaction with the coyote. Restricted movement, physical contact, and prolonged presence within a confined space create the conditions for a lived, bodily experience that surpasses symbolic perception. The bodily interaction between Beuys and the coyote reveals active coexistence between two species and illustrates that human-animal relationships in performance art can be shaped through the body, movement, and physical presence [9]. This experience exemplifies the concept of Embodied Life, in which the body plays a central role in generating meaning and experience. These dimensions allow the experience of embodied coexistence to be analyzed at both practical and philosophical levels, showing that performance art can provide a living, interactive experience that goes beyond mere symbolism.

4.3 | Ritual and Meaning-Making Elements of the Performance

Beuys's action exhibits distinct ritual dimensions. One of the key elements of the performance is the stretching of time and the removal of linear narrative. Silence, restricted movement, and presence within a confined space are intentionally designed to evoke an experience similar to shamanic or ritual ceremonies. The gallery space, temporarily transformed into a site of human animal coexistence, creates a "liminal" condition neither purely natural nor purely cultural. This liminal state is a defining feature of ritual practices. By confining himself and the coyote in this space, Beuys creates conditions in which identities human/animal, artist/object, performance/life are suspended. The use of felt as a symbolic material, prolonged silence, and the repetition of specific behaviors generate a space where meaning is produced through bodily action and spatial presence, rather than merely through symbolic representation [11]. These features allow for a meaningful experience and active (even if indirect) participation of the audience, reinforcing the role of performance art in producing meaning. The audience is not a passive spectator; rather, they function as a "ritual witness." Even without direct access to the performance space, observing the gradual unfolding of the action involves the audience in the creation of meaning. Meaning emerges through temporality, embodiment, and empathy, rather than from pre-determined symbolic readings. These qualities underscore performance art's role as a medium for generating meaning in the moment [12]. In Beuys's action, the coyote embodies otherness and interspecies being. It is not merely a living creature, but an active "Other" in the process of creating meaning and ritual experience. The presence of the animal challenges power relations, interactions, and coexistence between humans and animals, demonstrating that meaning and lived experience are not exclusively human. In this performance, the coyote also functions as a symbol of the "suppressed Other" in American history. In Native American culture, the coyote holds a mythic position, often recognized as a mediator, trickster, and bearer of ritual wisdom. By placing his body in direct encounter with the animal, Beuys enters a symbolic dialogue with the history of colonization, violence, and the erasure of Indigenous cultures. This encounter occurs not through language but through presence, silence, and gradual coexistence.

This interspecies relationship allows for an examination of embodied coexistence and interspecies relations, prompting a reconsideration of otherness and human-animal interaction in performance art. Consequently, Beuys's Coyote action stands as a prominent example of performance art that, through embodied coexistence, ritual elements, and interspecies experience, redefines the human-animal relationship. The body, the presence of the animal, and spatial rituals generate a meaning that is simultaneously lived, bodily, and interspecies,

offering the audience an opportunity to rethink the relationship between humans, animals, nature, and culture. This analysis demonstrates that performance art can go beyond mere representation to create a lived and active interspecies experience.



Fig. 1. "I like America and America likes me"
performance by Joseph Beuys.

Based on the table above, a summary of the analysis and interpretation of Beuys's work has been examined, and a threefold approach has been applied using the images and previous analyses.

Table 1. Analysis of the work.

Analytical Axis	Main Components	In Bois's Work	Conceptual Function
Bodily action and human animal coexistence	The artist's body, silence, limited movement, direct confrontation with the coyote	the body functions as the primary medium of meaning, and through physical presence, patience, and gradual coexistence with the coyote, a non-dominating relationship between human and animal is established.	Critique of the human/nature dualism and redefinition of a coexistent relationship based on observation and acceptance
Ritual and meaning giving elements	extended silence, repetition of actions, enclosed space, use of felt and wool	The performance has a structure similar to shamanic rituals and healing ceremonies; meaning is generated not through narrative but through the continuity of action, time, and bodily presence.	Transforming performance into a meaningful and ritual experience, reinforcing the role of performance art in generating meaning
Otherness and species Inter being	The coyote as "other," human animal coexistence, suspension of identities	The coyote represents the suppressed other (animal, indigenous, nature), and human-animal coexistence creates an inter-species condition that challenges identity boundaries.	Critique of anthropocentrism and approaching posthumanist and postcolonial interpretations

5 | Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the embodied coexistence of humans and animals in Joseph Beuys's performance "I Like America and America Likes Me". Data analysis revealed that this work goes beyond a mere artistic performance, offering an interdisciplinary, bodily, and ritual experience that represents the human animal relationship through active coexistence. Beuys's physical presence and his interaction with the coyote create bodily action and an embodied lived experience between human and animal, highlighting the significance of the body in shaping meaning and interspecies experience. In its ritual and meaning-generating dimensions, the work employs silence, limited movement, and repetition of actions to create a spatial, ritual, and experiential framework, where meaning is produced through action and presence rather than mere representation. The coyote, as an active Other, enables the analysis of interspecies relationships and rethinking of human connections with animals and nature. This work critiques the contemporary human distance from nature and animals, inviting the audience into a philosophical, ethical, and cultural experience.

Suggestions for future research

Based on the findings of this study, several directions for future research are suggested: In the field of comparative studies, the comparison of Beuys's similar actions at an international level and the examination of the role of animals and the body in meaning-making in performance art warrant further investigation and analysis. Additionally, exploring audience experience in future studies could focus on the lived experiences of spectators in encountering performance art and interspecies interactions. This would allow, with a comprehensive understanding of the work, the application of its various aspects in art education, using concepts of embodied and interspecies being to design workshops and educational programs in performance and contemporary art, which is highly effective and beneficial. Overall, this research demonstrates that performance art can provide an appropriate platform for embodied and interspecies coexistence, offering audiences opportunities for philosophical, cultural, and bio-political reflection. Studying such actions not only deepens our understanding of art and performance but also develops interdisciplinary research capacities in art, philosophy, and cultural biology.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

All data are included in the text.

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