

David Levi-Strauss: *American Beuys: “I Like America & America Likes Me”*

Complicity battling redemption—that’s what the history of America is. – Susan Howe

In fact, America has never known quite how to respond to Joseph Beuys. In Europe, Beuys is either loved or hated (rarely “liked”), but in America the terms of reception and critique have been less sharp. This ambivalence is reflected in the title of an article which appeared just after the Guggenheim retrospective in 1979: “Joseph Beuys: Shaman, sham, or one of the most brilliant artists of all time? (1) The Guggenheim catalog itself is prefaced with a pinched and cautious apology from Director Thomas Messer which begins: “Joseph Beuys has been the subject of much controversy in the past and will, no doubt, challenge the responsive capacities of visitors to the current exhibition of his work at the Guggenheim Museum.” (2) [...]

By most accounts, the American audiences for Beuys’s public dialogues in January 1974 (arranged by Ronald Feldman) also didn’t quite know how to take Beuys. His reputation for provocation and controversy had preceded him, but the substance of his teachings had not, so much of the time of these meetings was taken up by the most preliminary clarification of terms. When the dialogues did break through to more substantive exchange, the audiences often seemed caught on the horns of a particularly (though not exclusively) American dilemma: How can we embrace Beuys’s idealism (which is akin to our own) without denying its profound opposition to the materialism which also defines us.

For his part, Beuys was equally ambivalent about America. As his influence spread in Europe, he continually declined invitations to come to the U.S. or show in the U.S., saying he would not come as long as the U.S. remained in Vietnam. When he finally did come in 1974, he tried to engage Americans in two very different kinds of dialogue. Four months after his largely unsuccessful public dialogues and lectures on his *Energy Plan for the Western Man* in New York, Minneapolis, and Chicago, Beuys performed his first and only *aktion* in America, and this second contact was fittingly traumatic.

You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted. (8)

For three days in May of 1974, Joseph Beuys lived and communicated with a coyote in a small room in the newly-opened Rene Block Gallery at 409 West Broadway in New York. Though actually witnessed by only a handful of people, this action, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, awakened the interest and curiosity of many who heard about it, far and wide. Along

with Beuys's golden-flaked honeyed head in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), and the glowing white horse and cymbals of *Iphigenie/Titus Andronicus* (1969), images of the Coyote action are among the most resilient and generative images to come out of Beuys's performance work.

Caroline Tisdall, author of the book documenting the Coyote action, has elsewhere written, "The represented environment must affect the modern consciousness originally, archetypically and beyond the times." (9) Perhaps more than any other, Beuys's American action was projected "beyond the times." Fifteen years after the act and three years after Beuys's death is perhaps a good time to make an inquiry into the further meanings of the Coyote action, and to reconsider its significance.

Coyote in America

*Coyote, ululating on the hill,
is it my fire that distresses you so?
Or the memories of long ago
when you were a man roaming the hills. (10)*

Native American Coyote tales speak of a time long ago "when animals were people" and everyone communicated with each other. Though there are many different kinds of Coyote tales, varying from place to place and people to people, they flow from a common, ancient source and represent "one of man's earliest attempts to make articulate the movement of the Spirit." (11)

The Coyote of the Coyote tales is primarily a *transformer*, an agent of change bringing order to chaos and chaos to order. He is "the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries." (12) In much of Western North America he fills the role of Culture Hero and Trickster, found in virtually all traditional societies. He is an American Zeus, Prometheus, Orpheus, and Hermes all rolled into one: mating to create the human race, inventing death, stealing fire to give to humans, shapeshifter, androgyne, messenger and guide to the Underworld. In whatever guise, Coyote makes things happen.

In contrast to the virtuous gods and heroes of some other traditions, the Coyote of Coyote tales is by turns greedy, lecherous, deceitful, vain, jealous, and gullible. The poet Gary Snyder has pointed out the "Rabelaisian-Dadaist overtones" of the Coyote tales. (13) It is typical of Native American thought that comic indirection paradoxically indicates the way of right action. There is more than a little Coyote in Buster Keaton.

During Sacred Time, the time of Creation, Coyote taught humans how to survive, and the incredible survival of the coyote, both mythologically and biologically, continues to be one of the great American mysteries.

The Coyote War

The coyote is the most adaptable and successful North American mammal besides *Homo sapiens*. Favoring prairie, basin, and bajada, the coyote has recently extended its range from the forests of Maine to the city parks of Los Angeles, from Alaska to the mountains of Guatemala, and it has done this in the face of one of the most concerted attempts ever made to wipe out an entire species.

Weapons in the war against coyotes have included poisons such as strychnine and thallium sulfate, leg hold traps, cyanide “coyote-getters” designed to explode into the coyote’s mouth, snares, den-hunting to destroy pups, aerial hunting from planes and helicopters, “dying rabbit” calls to guns, sterilization baits, sight-running hounds, toxic collars on sheep, and “Compound 1080” (sodium monofluoroacetate), hailed as “the best, most species specific, most foolproof predator poison ever developed by man.” (14)

All over the West, coyotes are hunted with four-wheel-drive jeeps, CB radios and high-powered rifles with scopes. There has been a bounty on coyote scalps since 1825, even though no state or province has ever reduced any predator animal population through the bounty system.

Through the Predator & Rodent Control Branch of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (sister agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and other agencies, the U.S. Government has poured millions of tax dollars into coyote eradication efforts since Congress first appropriated money for it in 1914. Charles L. Cadieux compared the government’s war on coyotes to another recent debacle:

Many people feel that the Vietnamese mistake was the first war that the United States didn't win. That isn't true. For forty-five years, Uncle Sam has fought a war against coyotes...and lost! In the years between 1937 and 1981, minions of the Fish & Wildlife Service scalped 3, 612, 220 coyotes. The ears with a connecting strip of skin were sent to a central tallying point as proof of their 'body count.' [Cadieux estimates this figure should actually be doubled to include the number of unverified, unrecorded kills due to Compound 1080 poisoning.

If my calculations are reasonable, coyotes suffered six million casualties in this war with Uncle Sam. Yet, we would have to admit that the coyotes have won the war. (15)

Mythologically and biologically, Coyote is a survivor and exemplar of evolutionary change. This is what attracted Beuys to Coyote. Beuys embraced the coyote as the progeny of the paleo-Siberian, Eurasian steppe-wolf that came across the Bering Strait 12,000 (or more--some estimates go as high as 50,000) years ago and adapted to its New World home. Coyote carried the paleo-Asiatic shamanic knowledge with him, spreading it throughout the North American West and into Mesoamerica. Our word “shaman” comes directly from the Tunguso-Manchurian

(Turko-Tartar?) *saman*, possibly derived from the verb meaning “to know,” and remark ably similar to the Yucatec Maya word for a shaman, *h-men*, also meaning “one who knows” (the secrets of the Old Ones). Our word “coyote” is from the Spanish conquistadors’ corruption of the Nahuatl word “*coyotl*.” The Hopi call him “*iisaw*.” He received his scientific name, *Canis latrans*, only in 1823, two years before Missouri made him an outlaw (a “Dillinger” or a “Geronimo”) (16) by putting a bounty on his scalp. After this, the coyote became a prime scapegoat in the West. (17) He symbolized the wild and untamed, an unacceptable threat to husbandry, domesticity, and law & order. In Christian symbology, he was a satanic figure, the enemy of the Lamb and the Shepherd. Like the American Indian, (18) he was the Other in our midst, and we did everything we could to eliminate them both.

The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. . . . Oglala Sioux Chief Luther Standing Bear in his autobiography, 1933

The American intelligence is an indigenous plumage. Is it not evident that America itself was paralyzed by the same blow that paralyzed the Indian! And until the Indian is caused to walk, America itself will not begin to walk... Jose Marti, “Autores americanos aborigenes,” 1884

The Trauma

Coyote Old Man is a fine doctor, a great medicine man. (19)

Medical symbolism is rampant in Beuys’s work. (20) His own birth is referred to in his vitae as “Kleve exhibition of a wound held together with an adhesive bandage. “ Beuys recognized the whole Social Body as a wounded body, a traumatized body requiring treatment, and this realization led to a lifetime of research into the healing arts.

The Coyote action was performed in the shadow of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, on a postcard of which Beuys inscribed the names “Cosmos” and “Damian” in one of his multiples (made the same year as the Coyote action), as a comment on the commercialization of allopathy and as an homage to the greatest physician in the history of Europe, Paracelsus, who was born the year after Columbus “discovered America,” and assassinated 48 years later by men in the employ of irate druggists and doctors. Legend has it that Paracelsus was captured by the Tartars while in Russia and was schooled in their shamanic healing arts.

Beuys’s intentions in the Coyote action were primarily therapeutic. Using shamanic techniques appropriate to the coyote, his own characteristic tools, and a widely syncretic symbolic language, he engaged the coyote in a dialogue to get to “the psychological trauma point

of the United States' energy constellation"; namely, the schism between native intelligence and European mechanistic, materialistic, and positivistic values.

This is the dialogue he tried and failed to have with people in his *Energy Plan for the Western Man* tour earlier that year. In turning to the coyote, he moved from verbal language to the language of action. The conceptual simplicity of the Coyote action--"a man in a room with a coyote"--combines with its semiotic complexity to allow entrances and readings at many different levels.

Arriving for his first and only action in America in an ambulance, with "Emergency" emblazoned across its front and marked with the red crosses so prevalent in his earlier drawings and paintings, Beuys left no doubt about the purpose of his trip. Wrapped in a felt cocoon inside the ambulance, Beuys recalled his own myth of origin, in which he was shot down over the Crimea and rescued by nomadic Tartars, who wrapped him in insulating felt to warm him. Here again, the artist journeys to another world (the New World) through ritualizing threshold rites. Again he is wounded and in need of treatment. The trauma is always double. The Coyote action is an updated version of the masked dance dating from the Upper Paleolithic. In 1974, a New York art gallery replaced the cave as *temenos*.

Beuys's "medicine" in this action consisted of his usual costume (felt hat and fishing vest), staff, Braunkreuz flashlight, two large pieces of felt, a musical triangle, a pile of hay, and stacks of the daily *Wall Street Journal*.

Upon arrival in the room with the coyote, Beuys began an orchestrated sequence of actions to be repeated over and over in the next three days. A triangle is struck three times to begin the sequence. This triangle that Beuys wears pendant around his neck is the alchemical sign for fire (dry, fiery, choleric warmth), which ancient glacial Eurasian shamans sorely needed. It is also a sign for the feminine element (earthy & mercurial) and for the creative intellect, and it is the Pythagorean symbol for wisdom. Striking its three sides three times, Beuys calls himself, Coyote, and the Audience to order.

After the triangle is struck, a recording of loud turbine engine noise is played outside the enclosure, signifying "indetermined energy" and calling up a chaotic vitality. At this point, Beuys pulls on his gloves, reminiscent of the traditional bear-claw gloves worn by "master of animals" shamans such as those depicted on the walls of Trois Freres, and gets into his fur pelt/felt, wrapping it around himself so that he disappears into it with the flashlight. He then extends the crook of his staff out from the opening at the top of the felt wrap, as an energy conductor and receptor, antenna or lightning rod.

The conical shape of the felt resembles a tipi, the nomadic shelter which migrated from Siberia to North America with the hunters. Topped with the crooked staff, it also recalls both the stag and the shape of the lightning in *Lightning with Stag in Its Glare* (1958-85), and is a reference to the classic shamanic antlered mask, also going back to the caves of the Upper Paleolithic, as does Beuys's "Eurasian staff," the shamanic *phallos* (Coyote carried his around in a box on his back) and staff of the psychopomp--messenger and mediator. The felt enclosure doubles as a sweat lodge for Beuys, accumulating the heat necessary for transformation.

Beuys bends at the waist and follows the movements of the coyote around the room, keeping the receptor/staff pointed in the coyote's direction at all times.

When the beam of the flashlight is glimpsed from beneath the felt, we recognize the figure of the Hermit from the Tarot--an old man with a staff, holding a lighted lamp half-hidden by the great mantle which envelopes him. This card in the Tarot indicates wisdom, circumspection, and protection. It refers to the developed mind of man, the prudence and foresight of learning, and is thought by some to picture Hermes, the Messenger, signifying active divine inspiration and "unexpected current." (21) Arthur Edward Waite gives the sense of the Hermit's lantern as "where I am, you also may be." (22)

After awhile, Beuys emerges from the felt and walks to the edge of the room, marking the end of the sequence of gestures. There is a pile of straw, another piece of felt, and stacks of each day's *Wall Street Journal* in the room. Beuys sleeps on the coyote's straw; the coyote sleeps on Beuys's felt. The copies of the *Wall Street Journal* arrive each day from outside (like the engine noise) and enter the dialogue as evidence of the limits of materialist thinking.

Beuys's ongoing argument with materialism is what most clearly identifies him as an Anthroposophical artist. Following Rudolf Steiner, Beuys was not against materialism, per se. He valued it as a positive result of Christianity and recognized its historical necessity, but believed that humankind's survival depends on its letting go of materialism in order to move on to the next evolutionary stage.

In a previous sculpture, *Batteries* (1963), Beuys employed bound stacks of newspapers as "batteries of ideas." In the Coyote action, the batteries are disassembled (by the coyote), their stored energy dissipated. The coyote sleeps on the felt and pisses on "the Daily Diary of the American Dream."

Indeed, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that coyotes do have a sense of humor. How else to explain, for instance, the well-known propensity of experienced coyotes to dig up traps, turn them over, and urinate or defecate on them? (23)

Coyote also pisses on the *Wall Street Journal* to mark it, as if to say, “Everything that claims to be a part of America is part of my territory.”

In previous actions and drawings, Beuys repeatedly identified himself with the Hare, “which as an animal of the steppes elucidates the principle of movement and later becomes the image for the whole ‘Eurasian’ story.” (24) In Beuys’s iconography, the Hare symbolizes birth and especially incarnation. Though fertile, the Hare represents the vulnerability and finiteness of humankind. Like the Hare, Beuys is careful. He always uses felt and fat to insulate and protect. He moves slowly and deliberately, approaching Coyote carefully. In the Coyote action, Beuys/Hare is burrowing in, wanting to be born into Coyote’s world. Coyote Old Man is the long survivor, found painted on paleolithic cave walls as already having been around a long time. “I know what happened after the before and before the after,” he says. (25) Hare comes to Coyote to learn how to survive.

In fact, Beuys in his Hare nature was less a shaman than an ordinary Anthroposophical man; that is, his inquiries were seldom in extremity as the shaman’s are, but rather in the direction of more common and communal work: producing warmth, planting trees, talking with animals, sweeping up, farming, teaching. Because of this, it took a good deal of courage for Beuys to put himself in vulnerable contact with the more dynamic and chaotic force of Coyote.

Among the Ohlone peoples who once lived in what is now the San Francisco Bay Area, vision-seekers going out (in dream) to contact animal-helpers had to be very careful. These animal-gods were “amoral, unpredictable, greedy, irritable, tricky and very magical. Cultivating such helpers was a complicated, exasperating and often dangerous undertaking.” (26)

In social terms, the Coyote action calls attention to the crisis brought about by mechanistic, materialistic, and positivistic thinking in the West, and to the emergent need for Western Man (“Old Western Man is most clearly represented by what has become of the United States”) to move into the next evolutionary stage, from progress (domination of nature, “triumph over the past,” positivist reductions) to survival (holistic, ecological, evolutionary).

One of the most prevalent and persistent misunderstandings of Beuys has been that, by invoking the shaman and invoking other ancient esoteric lore and practice, he suggested an atavistic return to a pre-technological past. Beuys addressed this in a conversation with Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen in 1979:

Beuys: ...When I do something shamanistic, I make use of the shamanistic element--admittedly an element of the past--in order to express something about a future possibility.

Simmen: All right, but how much of it is the presence of the shamanistic now, how much of it is the actuality of a model taken from the past, and how much of it is really alive and viable at the present time?

Beuys: 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, forces that are there in shamanism, 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. (27)

In that same interview, Beuys explains why he would not want us to “return to the age of shamanism,” even if we could:

In the age of shamans, men may have created closed images of the meaning of life, but they actually lived in subjugation, in a state of spiritual subjugation. It's different now--human beings are in a position to shape their own future, to determine how the future is going to look....

Self-determination is something very concrete, something very spiritual.... In philosophical terms, human liberty is the basic question of art. (28)

This is the key to Beuys's “expanded concept of art,” elsewhere addressed by Max Reithmann: “For *poiesis*, which has a more comprehensive meaning than *techne* [art], means creation in the broadest sense of the word, the freeing of all natural beings.” (29)

Beuys clearly comes out of the tradition of German idealism that can be traced from Goethe and Novalis to Rudolf Steiner. Beuys apotheosizes art with a totalizing insistence that would have made the English Romantics blush. For Beuys, everything begins with art, and art is finally synonymous with life, with survival: “Art alone makes life possible,” and “without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms.”

The evolutionary narrative which can be traced through Beuys's entire oeuvre is Anthroposophical at its base, but it is also molded by the artist's own investigations experiences, including his empathic dialogues with animals and his intuitive understanding of traditional shamanic practices. From his earliest drawings on, Beuys depicted animals (elk, stag, goat, swan, queen of goats, fox, hare) as bearers of psychic and spiritual forces, and the shaman--*In the House of the Shaman* (1954), and *The Shaman 's Bundle* (1962), among others--as a vital and initiatory technician of the sacred.

Beuys was not a philosopher. He was a sculptor, and his life's work was to uncover and demonstrate certain principles sculpturally. That this led him into pedagogy and social communication on a scale unheard of for avant-garde artists is a measure of the necessity and timeliness of those principles.

Every art action Beuys made looked to a future in which our continued survival will depend upon our ability to adapt, and to marshal senses and powers of intelligence now lying

dormant. He recognized scientific materialism as a reductive and backward-looking *idée fixe* that must be transcended if human evolution is to continue.

It should perhaps not be so surprising to find that the holistic views espoused by Beuys have more and more come to the cutting edge of quantum physics and the life sciences. Modern science has recently discovered (in the “Gaia hypothesis”) that the Earth is alive! Popular science writers like Fritjof Capra, Lewis Thomas, Stephen Jay Gould, James Gleick, and others report that the dominant world view of the past 300 years, based on a scientific method that reduces everything to its parts for separate analysis without considering each part’s relation to the whole, has reached the end of its tether. Recent developments in scientific thought as well as recognitions of global crises are moving many scientists toward new holistic, systemic, and ecological paradigms that see things *in relation*.

The modern Western world is extremely distrustful of the vatic role of artists, and is more likely to characterize their actions as *autistic* rather than vatic. In his role as Trickster/Transformer, the shaman in traditional societies acted as a safety valve, letting the air out of society’s repressed fears. Beuys often played a similar role. When German newspapers and magazines carried story after story about the escapades of “Prof. Beuys,” they most often characterized him as both ridiculous and dangerous. In his attacks on Beuys in America, Benjamin Buchloh refers to Beuys at several points as a “trickster,” always disparagingly: “Sometimes I’m not sure whether he’s simply a fool or a very shrewd trickster, or perhaps a mixture of both.” (30) Contrast this with the Navajo, who still attend the double function of the culture hero as ethical lawmaker and frivolous prankster, benefactor and buffoon.

The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for mankind in the future. (31)

Beuys’s dialogue with the Coyote stands out against the more prevalent modern relation to animals as inferior (“pre-technological”) pests, pets, monsters, or medical spare parts. As Beuys the ecologist led to the Green movement, did Beuys the animal communicator and founder of the “Political Party for Animals” (with its billions of members) lead to the Animal Rights movement?

The Coyote tales say that we learned a great deal from Coyote at one time. Recent developments indicate that we have a great deal to learn from him again. The Coyote action was Beuys’s attempt to renew that synergistic dialogue, and to make contact with an America that is both ancient and nascent.

1. Kay Larson, *Art News*, April 1980, pp. 126-27.

2. *Joseph Beuys*, ed. Caroline Tisdall (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), p. 5.

8. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys, Coyote* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1980), p. 24.
9. Gotz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works* (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1979), p. 275.
10. Jaime de Angulo, *Coyote's Bones* (San Francisco: Turtle Island Foundation, 1974), p. 59.
11. Bob Callahan, "On Jaime de Angulo," in *A Jaime de Angulo Reader*, ed. Bob Callahan (San Francisco: Turtle Island, 1979), p. xii.
12. Karl Kerenyi, "The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology," in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 185.
13. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 27. See also "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," *Western American Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 1975.
14. Charles L. Cadieux, *Coyotes: Predators & Survivors* (Washington, D.C.: Stone Wall Press, 1983), p. 113.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 51 (emphasis added).
16. The Apaches say that it was a coyote that taught Geronimo how to make himself invisible, and that Geronimo's strongest medicine was the Coyote ceremony.
17. It was this scapegoat aspect that most affected Jimmy Boyle, an inmate serving a life sentence in the Special Unit of a Scottish prison who wrote about the Coyote action and eventually arranged a meeting with Beuys. Tisdall's Coyote book is dedicated to Boyle.
18. In Mexico "coyote" is often used as a synonym for "native," and is applied to Indians and mestizos. At the same time, a "coyote" is a thief, shyster or go-between, as in the "coyote engranchistas" on the border.
19. Jaime de Angulo, *Indian Tales* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1953), p. 11.
20. See Axel Hinrich Murken, *Joseph Beuy und die Medizin* (Munster: F. Coppenrath Verlag, 1979).
21. Aleister Crowley, *A Description of the Cards of the Tarot* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1976).
22. Arthur Edward Waite, *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (New York: University Books, 1959), p. 105.
23. Francois Leydet, *The Coyote: Defiant Songdog of the West* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1977), p. 65.
24. *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, p. 38.
25. De Angulo, *Indian Tales*, op. cit.
26. Malcolm Margolin, *The Ohlone Way* (San Francisco: Heyday Books, 1978), pp. 138-39.
27. Heiner Bastian and Jeannot Simmen, *Joseph Beuys: Zeichnungen/ Tekeningen/ Drawings* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980) p. 92.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 96.
29. Max Reithmann, "Language, Mind and the Present in Beuys," in *Punt de Confluencia, Joseph Beuys, Dusseldorf 1962-1987* (Barcelona: Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, 1988), p. 176.
30. Buchloh, et al., "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," p. 16.
31. Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys, Coyote*, p. 26.