

The Dual Dimensions of Joseph Beuys's Artistic Revolution: A Study on the Correlation Between Bodily Symbols and Social Events

Shanbing Yi,

Associate Professor. School of Fine Arts, Kashi University, China;

Research Area: Fine Arts Theory.

Email:yishanbing@163.com

Abstract

By integrating semiotic and sociological perspectives, the study achieves an organic unity in symbol decoding, context positioning, and the analysis of the correlation mechanism. The aim of this study is to reveal the connection between bodily symbols and social events in Beuys's art, elucidating how this relationship supports his artistic revolution, and interpreting his concepts of "social sculpture" and "everyone is an artist." The research focuses on addressing the specific meaning of bodily symbols in Beuys's artistic practice and how their correlation with social events reflects his core artistic claims. The method employed is case study analysis, combining semiotic and sociological theories to conduct in-depth analysis of representative works. The research focuses on three works: *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, and *7000 Oaks*, analyzing the correlation between bodily symbols and social events. The conclusion of the study indicates that Beuys's bodily symbols and social events are deeply intertwined, and his artistic revolution is realized through their correlation, forming a paradigm where "art is social practice."

Keywords: Joseph Beuys; Artistic revolution; Bodily symbols; Social events; Correlation; Peircean semiotics; Field theory

1. Introduction

Joseph Beuys was one of the most revolutionary artists in the field of contemporary art in Germany and globally during the second half of the 20th century. His artistic practice and theoretical propositions broke traditional boundaries of art, providing new pathways for the development of contemporary art. Throughout Beuys's art, there has always been a deep intertwining with specific social contexts. Key moments in his personal and creative life directly shaped his artistic consciousness and revolutionary ideas. During World War II, Beuys served as a Luftwaffe pilot, and after experiencing a crash, he was rescued by Crimean Tatars using animal fat and felt. This experience became a significant source for the "body" and "life" symbols in his art. The warmth of felt and the nourishment of animal fat were not only survival memories at a physiological level, but also transformed into core symbols of "healing" and "rebirth" in Beuys's artistic language, laying the foundation for his later use of the body

as a medium for artistic expression.

After World War II, European society became immersed in reflections on the trauma of war and the process of reconstruction. In the art world, there was a transition from modernism to postmodernism. The elitist tendencies of traditional easel painting were gradually questioned, and artists began not only to explore the relationship between art and life but also to link art with society. In this social context, Beuys's artistic concepts gradually took shape. He critiqued the detachment from reality in the idea of "art for art's sake" (Gautier, 2013:20) and proposed the core concept of "social sculpture." Beuys advocated that art is a tool for transforming society and awakening the creative potential of the masses. His slogan "everyone is an artist" expanded the subjectivity of art from professional creators to every individual in society, thereby restructuring the function of art and the boundaries of participation.

Beuys's artistic concepts and practices are rooted in specific social events. His works are both responses to social realities and vehicles for provoking societal reflection. In the 1960s and 1970s, Europe underwent a series of social transformations, including the student movement, anti-war protests, and the ecological movement. Beuys directly connected his work to these events. In 1969, in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, Beuys coated his head with honey, wrapped himself in felt, and whispered to a dead hare in a gallery. This performance art, on the one hand, metaphorically addressed the communication difficulties in modern society, particularly the gaps between humans and animals, humans and art, and humans and other humans. On the other hand, it implicitly mourned the loss of life in war. The "7000 Oaks" project, initiated in 1977, involved planting 7,000 oak trees during the Kassel Documenta exhibition, linking art with ecological conservation and urban renewal. By employing "slow art practice" (Arden Reed, 2019:169), Beuys aimed to awaken public awareness of environmental issues. This work became a typical example of how art could intervene in society and push forward public discourse. These works, linked to social events, not only reflect Beuys's idea that "art is social practice," but also construct a new paradigm of interaction between art and society.

The core research focus of this study is Joseph Beuys's artistic revolution, specifically concentrating on the dual dimensions in both theory and artistic practice—bodily symbols and social events—and the correlation between them.

The research in the field of body symbolism includes Joseph Beuys's artistic expressions using the body as a medium, as well as the various visual symbols in his works related to the life of the body. First, focusing on the artistic expressions with the body as the core medium, the study explores how the body functions as a unique system of meaning-making in art. It examines the role of the body as a medium in artistic practice, which not only carries the creator's emotions and concepts, directly transmitting them, but also serves as an intuitive interface for the audience's perception of the artwork's meaning. The analysis of the body



through gestures, tension, and forms of interaction transforms abstract ideas into perceivable visual languages, forming a cognitive process from body to concept to viewer. Additionally, the extension of the body's subjectivity is highlighted, as it is no longer merely a tool for creating the artwork, but a symbol of the artistic concept itself, coexisting with the concept and becoming a core element of artistic expression.

Secondly, the visual symbols associated with the life of the body delve into the symbolic meanings related to various symbols and their internal connection with the body's survival and the continuation of life. This includes symbols representing protection and warmth, such as materials with insulating and wrapping functions, which metaphorically suggest defense against external environments and protection of internal life. It also focuses on material symbols with nurturing and energy qualities, analyzing the symbolic connection between function and the sustenance of life, such as the nourishment of the body reflecting its energy needs, elevated to the metaphor of the "source of life." Furthermore, animal imagery as a visual symbol is explored, emphasizing the symbiotic metaphor between animals and the human body, uncovering the symbolic relationship between humans and the natural world based on shared life essence and survival conditions.

The research on "social events" is limited to those directly related to Joseph Beuys's artistic practice in the context of mid-to-late 20th-century European social events and public issues. These include:(1) the reflection on the trauma of war and post-war reconstruction, particularly the impact of World War II on European society. (2) The European student movements and anti-war waves of the 1960s, such as the 1968 French "May Events" and protests against the Vietnam War.(3) The environmental protection movement, in which the European environmental crisis of the period led to the awakening of public environmental consciousness. (4) Issues of ethnic systems and social justice, with Beuys advocating for "direct democracy" and focusing on marginalized social groups. Through a systematic review of the above-mentioned body symbolism and social events, this study reveals how both elements form the core of Beuys's artistic revolution, and how this relationship reflects Beuys's artistic concepts and social ideals.

In this study, "artistic revolution" refers to Beuys's subversion and reconstruction of the traditional art system, which includes three specific dimensions: First, the revolution of artistic boundaries, where the limitations of easel art are broken, and action and social participation are incorporated into the realm of art. Second, the revolution of the function of art, which denies the aesthetic instrumentalism of art and advocates for art to bear the mission of social healing and the transformation of reality. Third, the revolution of artistic themes, where the concept of "everyone is an artist" expands the subjectivity of artistic creation from professional artists to all members of society, reconstructing the mechanisms of art production and reception.

Drawing on Charles Peirce's classification of semiotics, the body symbolism in this study



refers to the symbolic system in Beuys's art that uses the body as a medium or is associated with the body and carries specific meanings. These can be divided into "iconic signs," such as the body, actions, and gestures; "indexical signs" and "symbolic signs," such as felt, honey, and their direct relationship with bodily needs, as well as the symbolic connections between animals, life, and nature. These three types of symbols do not exist in isolation but are combined to form narratives, conveying Beuys's profound reflections on life, society, and culture.

Based on the research objectives outlined above, which aim to examine the dual-dimensional correlation of Joseph Beuys's artistic revolution, two core research questions are proposed: (1) What specific meanings are associated with the "body symbolism" in Joseph Beuys's artistic practice? (2) From the dual perspective of the artistic revolution, how is the correlation between Beuys's "body symbolism" and "social events" reflected?

2.Previous Research and Theoretical Review

2.1 Previous Research

2.1.1 Current Research on Artists and Works with Similar Social Themes

Comparative studies of Beuys alongside other socially-engaged artists have primarily focused on figures such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Amalia Ulman. Taking Duchamp's art as an example, Rosalind Krauss (1985:33), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, analyzes his use of ready-made art as a core element, discussing how his act of "selecting" and "naming" dissolves the aesthetic attributes of art. She argues that the revolutionary aspect lies in the deconstruction of the definition of art. However, similar to the research on Beuys, present studies often overlook the social context, with scholars focusing mostly on the subversion of traditional aesthetics and rarely discussing the connection between ready-made art and the early 20th-century industrial society, as well as post-WWII social ideologies.

From the evolution of artistic movements, although Beuys's work engages in dialogue and differences with the ideas of other key artists of his time, collectively contributing to the plural development of postmodern art, there are notable contrasts between Beuys and Marcel Duchamp. Both sought to break the boundaries between art and everyday life, but while Duchamp mainly dissolved the aesthetic attributes of art through selection and naming, emphasizing the primacy of ideas, Beuys placed greater emphasis on the "interventional" and "social" aspects of art, viewing it as a means to participate in social transformation. For instance, Duchamp's *Fountain* challenged the public's understanding of traditional art definitions, while Beuys focused on art's potential to effect social change. Thus, Duchamp's concept is deconstructive, deliberately breaking the definition of art, while Beuys's concept is constructive, giving art the mission of transforming society. Additionally, compared to John

Cage's (1961:40-46) emphasis on "chance" and "everyday sounds" in his artistic practice, Beuys's art, while including improvisational elements like body movements in performance art, consistently revolves around social issues, such as reflecting on war, protecting the ecology, and advocating for social equality, with clearer artistic purpose and social concern. This difference and connection position Beuys in a unique place within the 20th-century artistic movements.

Regarding the research on John Cage, Gann (2010:70) interprets 4'33" from the perspective of Zen Buddhism's concept of "suspending judgment" suggesting that Cage forces the audience to re-perceive sound with a Zen-like "non-attachment" through silence. He argues that the revolutionary aspect of the work lies in transforming "listening" from aesthetic judgment into an experience of existence, echoing D.T. Suzuki's (2025:15–18) interpretation of Zen's direct experience. In contemporary artist Amalia Ulman's research on "social media performance," such as in her work *Excellence and Perfection*, she critiques the consumer society's "image alienation" by constructing a false identity. While this focuses on the relationship between media and society, it is more centered on the digital age context, which is significantly different from the mid-20th-century societal context in which Beuys worked, making direct comparison difficult.

A review of comparable studies reveals that current research on socially themed art generally suffers from insufficient integration with contemporary contexts. Interpretations of works' social attributes often remain superficial, primarily treating art as a reflection of society without delving into how art narratively intervenes in social events. Drawing on an analytical perspective that spans from media to society, this study strengthens the analysis of the interaction between Beuys's bodily signs and social events.

2.1.2 Current State of Research on Joseph Beuys

Academic research on Joseph Beuys has formed a multidimensional scholarly landscape, with core issues primarily focusing on the theory of social sculpture, the interpretation of bodily signs, and the social attributes of his works. In the study of social sculpture theory, Hans Werner Schmidt (1979:12–18), in his work *Joseph Beuys: The Concept of the Social Sculpture*, first elucidated the philosophical connection between this theory and anthroposophy. He pointed out the innovative nature of Beuys's expansion of the definition of sculpture from static material forms to dynamic social processes; however, he did not analyze the translation of this theory into practice in conjunction with specific social events. Hal Foster (1996:175), in *The Return of the Real*, used *7000 Oaks* as a case study to discuss the public and utopian dimensions of social sculpture. He argued that Beuys provided a "participatory" paradigm for contemporary public art but overlooked the mediating role of bodily signs, treating social sculpture merely as a plan of action and failing to recognize Beuys's use of bodily performance as a core medium of artistic expression.

In the study of body symbolism, Susan Suleiman (1990:125), in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, analyzes Beuys’s “body transformation” from a gender perspective, suggesting that it implies a male heroic self-construction. However, she focuses on the gender dimension without connecting it to specific social events, resulting in an interpretation disconnected from the concrete historical context. Chinese scholar Li Xianting (2000:156), in *What Matters is Not Art*, emphasizes the revolutionary role of Beuys’s body as an artistic medium but primarily provides an empirical description. He lacks a systematic analysis from a semiotic and sociological perspective, failing to reveal the deeper connection between body symbolism and social events.

In summary, current research on Beuys exhibits two primary limitations: first, a disjunction between theory and practice, manifested in the disconnection between interpretations of social sculpture theory and analyses of social event practices; second, a separation of signs and context, where interpretations of bodily signs overlook social events, resulting in an oversimplification of the works’ meanings. These limitations create a narrative space that this study aims to deepen.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic triad of “icon,” “index,” and “symbol” (Peirce, 1982:162–165) and his theory of semiotic elements comprising the “representamen,” “object,” and “interpretant” (Peirce, 1931:1.302–1.304), in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu, 1966: 865–906) as its core analytical framework. This integrated approach establishes a mutually supportive relationship between sign decoding and contextual positioning, thereby providing a methodological reference for analyzing the correlation between bodily signs and social events.

In Beuys’s system of bodily signs, icons are primarily constructed through everyday bodily postures that generate resemblance, such as tentative approaches toward others that simulate forms of friendly interaction. Indexical signs often rely on bodily states or associated materials to anchor specific contexts. For example, a traumatized bodily posture directly points to a particular historical trauma, or materials enveloping the body, when combined with their temporal background, indicate the individual’s vulnerability within ideological confrontations. Symbolic signs, in turn, embody deeper meanings sedimented in bodily actions or states. For instance, repetitive bodily practices symbolize ecological preservation and historical reconstruction, while bodily states of co-existence with others symbolize intergroup reconciliation. These three categories of signs form a progressive hierarchy: from intuitive resemblance, to contextualized indication, and finally to profound symbolism. Together, they systematically present the hierarchical structure of meaning within Beuys’s bodily semiotics.

Bourdieu’s field theory provides a social contextual foundation for symbolic meaning,



with its core premise being that artistic practice should be understood as a social practice interwoven with fields, where the artistic field is influenced by the rules of broader social fields. The series of transformations in European social fields during the mid-to-late 20th century directly shaped the connotations of related symbols. Under the ideological impetus of the 1968 student movement, the attributes of bodily participatory symbols were strengthened, emphasizing the value of mass involvement. The rise of the ecological movement explicitly endowed specific practical symbols with ecological significance, closely linking them to contemporary environmental demands. Within the context of the Cold War, marked by the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, Europe, positioned at the frontline of bloc rivalry, found its realities shaping symbolic expressions: bodily gestures of wrapping conveyed a “need for protection,” while interactions with heterogeneous others metaphorically reflected negotiations of inter-bloc relations. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s concept of “capital” helps explain the value generation of these ideas: through particular practices, the public is endowed with “symbolic capital,” granting legitimacy to their artistic participation; meanwhile, the accumulation of social influence capital through media dissemination disrupted the traditional elite monopoly over the art field, allowing the transmission of artistic symbols to become more public-oriented.

Within the framework of this study, Peirce’s semiotic theory and Bourdieu’s field theory form a deeply interwoven, mutually supportive relationship, jointly serving the interpretation of the correlation between bodily symbols and social events in Beuys’s art. Peirce’s triadic model and semiotic trichotomy provide analytical tools for unpacking the multilayered meanings of bodily symbols in Beuys’s works, clarifying the generative logic of bodily actions from concrete imitation, to referential direction, and finally to value condensation. In contrast, Bourdieu’s field theory offers the social context for the production of these symbolic meanings, situating artistic practice within the transformations of European social fields in the mid-to-late twentieth century. It reveals how symbolic meaning is shaped by field-specific rules, while explaining—through symbolic capital and social influence capital—the social mechanisms by which Beuys’s artistic concepts disrupted the elite monopoly. Together, the two approaches provide a dual support structure that integrates internal symbolic analysis with external social context, thereby offering a precise interpretation of the dual dimensions of Beuys’s artistic revolution in both symbolic expression and social engagement.

3. Case Analysis of Joseph Beuys’s Works

This chapter selects three representative works by Joseph Beuys—his 1969 performance art *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, the 1974 action art *I Like America, and America Likes Me*, and the 1982–1987 public art project *7,000 Oaks*—as the objects of analysis. Drawing on prior research and Beuys’s own artistic thought, the analysis employs perspectives

from semiotic and sociological theory. Using Charles Peirce's semiotic triadic model to deconstruct the internal logic of bodily symbols, and linking it with Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the chapter reveals the deep connections between bodily symbols and social events.

3.1 *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*: The Responsive Correlation Between Bodily Symbols and Postwar Trauma

In 1969, at Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, Beuys enacted the performance art piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Wearing a felt hat, with his head covered in honey, he cradled a dead hare while slowly pacing. From time to time, he whispered softly, lowered his head, and touched the paintings on the wall. The performance lasted 90 minutes, with the audience permitted only to watch through a window. The core bodily symbols can be summarized into three categories: bodily transformation symbols (head covered with honey, wrapped in felt); bodily action symbols (whispering, touching the paintings, holding the hare); and bodily-object relational symbols (interaction with the dead hare and the artworks) (Antliff, 2015:62).

From the perspective of Beuys's artistic thought, this work represents an early practice of his concepts of social sculpture and artistic healing. In a 1972 interview, he stated: "After the plane crash in World War II, I was rescued by the Tatars with felt and honey; these two materials made me realize that the "body" is the core medium carrying the memory of life and social trauma" (Beuys, 1972:112). He further explained in 1974: "*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* employs bodily symbols to awaken the public's collective memory of "lost life" and "broken communication" during the war, merging personal bodily memory with collective social trauma" (Beuys, 1974:78). The creative intent of this work, therefore, lies in responding to the core social event of postwar trauma.

According to Peirce's triadic theory of signs, the three core bodily symbols in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* can be analyzed as follows:

Head covered with honey: The representamen is the image of the head coated with sticky, light-yellow honey. Its material basis lies in honey's viscosity, sweetness, and adhesiveness. The object points to honey's nourishing and adhesive qualities, as well as to postwar Europe's collective psychology of longing for emotional warmth while being bound to traumatic memory. The interpretant is sweetness as nourishment, the rebuilding of life, and the symbolic "stickiness" of trauma that cannot easily be removed, echoing the psychological contradictions of the postwar period.

Head and body wrapped in felt: The representamen is the form of the head and shoulders covered with felt, characterized by softness and warmth as a material vehicle. The object refers both to the practical function of felt and to Beuys's own wartime rescue experience, along with the broader postwar anxieties about survival. The interpretant centers on safety and redemption: felt's protective capacity resonates with fear of violence, while its symbolic elevation into an



emblem of life's salvation transforms individual memory into a collective resonance of trauma.

Whispering to a Dead Hare: the representamen is the act of leaning close to the dead hare and speaking in a low voice, characterized by unidirectional non-interaction; the object refers to the attribute of whispering without response, the symbolism of the hare's departed life, and the post-war communication dilemma; the interpretant directly points to broken communication and the mourning of life: reflecting the reality of governmental avoidance of war and public self-isolation, mourning for overlooked individual lives, and calling for respect for life and the acknowledgment of trauma.

By linking the semiotic interpretant with Bourdieu's theory of the artistic field, the artistic field is understood as a sub-field of the social space, where sign production is constrained by social demands. When society harbors unmet demands for meaning, artistic signs become carriers of social issues (Bourdieu, 1993:124). In post-World War II Europe, the silencing of traumatic memories—where governments avoided addressing wartime violence and the public passively forgot—created an urgent need for signs capable of bearing this trauma. Beuys's artistic signs precisely responded to this social condition: honey transforms abstract trauma into a tangible substance, felt provides material for emotional solace, and whispering gives form to latent issues.

3.2 Action Art *I Like America and America Likes Me*: The Constructive Correlation Between Bodily Interaction and the Cold War Context

In 1974, Beuys performed *I Like America and America Likes Me* at the Rene Block Gallery in New York (Buchloh, 1980:3-43). The performance lasted for seven days. Upon arriving in the United States, he was transported by ambulance directly to the gallery without setting foot on American soil, where he cohabited with a wild coyote. During this time, clad in a felt overcoat and hat, Beuys engaged in alternating confrontations and grooming sessions with the coyote, occasionally playing the accordion, all without any human interaction. The core bodily signs, centered on interaction, can be categorized into three types: confrontational and reconciliatory interaction between the body and the animal; performative interaction between the body and the musical instrument; and spatially mediated interaction through isolation.

In his 1975 lecture *Art and Society*, Beuys explicitly clarified his creative intention: "Through bodily interaction with the coyote, I construct a paradigm of 'non-violent confrontation' in response to the nuclear crisis of the U.S.–Soviet Cold War" (Beuys, 1975:89–92). In 1976, he further explained: "The coyote symbolizes America's "confrontation"; the seven days from opposition to reconciliation dissolve the logic of Cold War antagonism, calling for reconciliation through patience" (Beuys, 1976:103). He also emphasized, "Not setting foot on American soil serves as a metaphor of 'bodily isolation' for the absurdity of Cold War bloc separation, calling for the breaking down of both geographic and ideological boundaries"



Thus, the symbolic structure of Beuys's work not only responded to the realities of the Cold War but also sought to construct a new model of social interaction, encouraging reflection on the logic of confrontation.

Based on Peirce's triadic theory of signs, the core bodily interactions in *I Like America and America Likes Me* can be broken down into three symbolic dimensions.

Body–Coyote Interaction: During the seven days of cohabitation in the gallery (Days 1–7, from confrontation to trust), Beuys's bodily actions served as the central material form. In the early stage (Days 1–2), his body remained tense, shoulders slightly raised, and hands lifted in a defensive posture, maintaining a safe distance from the coyote; his body language was saturated with tension. In the later stage (Days 3–7), his body bent slowly forward, his palms gently touching the coyote's fur, with grooming gestures that were tentative and cautious. The body posture gradually shifted from rigidity to relaxation, while the coyote's initial agitation calmed through these bodily interactions, becoming a form of responsive feedback to Beuys's actions. This interaction presented the dual attributes of confrontation and trust, reflecting the realities of the Cold War.

On one hand, the body–coyote interaction symbolized humanity's relationship with the “heterogeneous other,” such as opposing blocs or unknown threats. On the other hand, Beuys's defensive body language in the early stage corresponded to the bloc confrontations under U.S.–Soviet nuclear rivalry in the 1970s, with Europe as the Cold War frontier. The later gentle bodily gestures resonated with appeals for détente, aligning with public expectations for arms control negotiations, while also embodying Beuys's advocacy for non-violent communication as well as decoding the dissolution of antagonism. The tense, defensive body in the early stage concretized the abstract hostility of Cold War blocs, allowing viewers to directly perceive the instinct of confrontation. In sharp contrast, the later bodily gestures of bending and grooming conveyed the possibility of softening opposition through bodily tenderness: violence was unnecessary—only patience, tentative gestures, and the offering of trust at the bodily level could dissolve enmity. This metaphorically suggested the possibility of equal dialogue between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, responding to public desires for relief from nuclear anxiety, and ultimately negating the logic of hegemonic confrontation.

Body–Space Interaction: Artificial Isolation: Beuys's refusal to set foot on American soil constituted a bodily expression of artificial spatial isolation. Focusing on the details of his bodily interaction with space, we observe that after traveling from Germany to New York, his body never touched American ground: upon landing at the airport, he was transported directly into a sealed ambulance, his body enclosed by a confined space; once at the gallery, his movement was only in the gallery, remaining physically cut off from the surrounding American

society. His body neither crossed boundaries nor left the enclosed environment, establishing the body within space as the central material vehicle. This highlighted both the externally imposed restrictions of space upon the body and the body's active compliance with spatial boundaries.

This interaction emphasized the boundary-isolating attribute of body–space relations, directly resonating with Cold War bloc realities. The body's separation from the local ground and confinement within closed spaces symbolized the spatial isolation between self and other, as well as between art and daily life. At the same time, it corresponded to Cold War “bloc isolation,” such as the geographic division between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Ideology invested space with antagonistic attributes, and the body's submission to spatial limits became a corporeal manifestation of “ideological blocs.”

He also criticized the absurdity of boundaries, As Foucault (1986:16) observed, Beuys's refusal to step onto American soil functioned as an extreme form of bodily–spatial interaction that exposed the irrationality of Cold War spatial boundaries. The ambulance's enclosure did not protect the body but symbolized a metaphorical resistance to ideological divisions of space. By confining himself deliberately within a limited environment, Beuys ironically revealed the absurdity of artificially constructed friend–enemy boundaries during the Cold War. His performance called for dismantling the rigid belief that spatial positioning determines oppositional stances, urging reflection on how bloc antagonism distorted the relationship between body and space.

Accordion Solo: Nonverbal Transmission of Emotion: Centered on Joseph Beuys's body performance, the work adopts a seated posture in which both hands move across the accordion's keys. The fingers press in a slow, measured rhythm as the body gently sways with the melody. Throughout the performance, there is no verbal exchange—no dialogue with the audience and no attempt to guide or provoke response. The seated posture, hand movements, and bodily rhythm, together with the accordion, form a material constellation that embodies both musical lyricism and the solitude of bodily performance. Its distinctly nonverbal nature highlights the affective transmission between body and instrument under conditions of silence.

The interaction between the body and the accordion reflects a shared emotional transmission and resonates with the psychological impasse of the Cold War. The accordion, as one of Beuys's signature instruments, carries layers of European cultural memory and symbolizes an emotional resonance that transcends language. Meanwhile, the absence of verbal communication corresponds to the Cold War predicament: nuclear anxiety rendered public affect numb, and ideological discourse turned language into a weapon of opposition, severing emotional connections across blocs. In this context, the interaction between body and instrument becomes a possible path for mending emotional rupture.

Through this “empathic pathway” (dos Santos, 2022:51-53), Beuys transforms Cold War

trauma into an emotional projection of bodily expression. The slow, tender melody played through the body's motion communicates feeling without words, breaking through ideological barriers. Non-communication does not signify rejection of interaction; rather, it allows the body itself to become the medium of emotion. Reconciliation amid Cold War division, therefore, need not rely on opposing discourses, but can emerge from shared, bodily emotions—fear, longing, tenderness—that all humans can sense. This echoes the essence of “love” in the work’s title: love that transcends camps and ideologies, rooted in the body’s capacity for human empathy.

In the sociopolitical field of the 1970s Cold War—characterized by U.S.–Soviet hegemony, nuclear anxiety, and ideological confrontation—Joseph Beuys’s selection of bodily interaction symbols was profoundly influenced by these tensions. The pervasive fear of nuclear annihilation generated a public longing for a sense of bodily security; the rigid division of blocs evoked a desire for bodily transcendence of boundaries; and the emotional rupture between ideological camps fostered a need for embodied resonance and empathy.

According to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, the symbolic forms within an artistic field must both reflect reality and construct possibilities. Beuys’s bodily interaction symbols do precisely this. They reflect the Cold War condition: the defensive body mirrors military confrontation, the isolated body corresponds to political division, and the solitary performing body embodies emotional deprivation. Simultaneously, they construct reconciliation: the gentle act of grooming signifies trust, the ironic portrayal of isolation reveals reason, and the lyrical playing gesture expresses empathy.

Through these embodied interactions, Beuys transforms the abstract anxiety of the Cold War into a tangible artistic experience, allowing the body to become a vessel for imagining social transformation. His work invites the public to reconsider opposition and reconciliation through bodily perception, emphasizing the body as both a site of trauma and a medium of healing in Cold War society.

3.3 Public Art: *7000 Oaks*—The Coordination Between Bodily Action and Ecological Movement

In 1982, Joseph Beuys initiated the project *7000 Oaks* at Documenta in Kassel, which involved planting 7,000 oak trees throughout the city, each paired with a basalt stone. Beuys personally engaged in the physical actions of digging, planting, and placing the stones, while inviting citizens, students, and artists to participate collectively. This formed a large-scale communal bodily action, where interactions among individuals, trees, and stones constituted a system of bodily signs within the artwork. The project continued until 1987, after Beuys’s death, when volunteers completed all plantings. It has since become a landmark example of twentieth-century public art. The core bodily symbols can be categorized into three types: (1) individual bodily actions, such as Beuys’s planting and stone placement; (2) collective bodily

actions, including the coordinated planting by the public; and (3) bodily-object relational actions, such as the maintenance of the oaks and stones.

In a 1983 interview titled *Ecology and Art* (Ökologie und Kunst), Beuys explicitly articulated his creative intention: “*7000 Oaks* is a collaborative practice between art and the ecological movement; the bodily act (tree planting) is both an artistic creation and a social action of ecological protection” (Beuys, 1983, as cited in Smith, 2020:45). In 1984, he further explained, “During the 1970s, Europe’s ecological crisis intensified, with severe deforestation and air pollution. Although the public paid attention to ecology, they lacked the consciousness for action. I initiated this project to awaken ecological responsibility through bodily action; each act is a response to the crisis, and 7,000 acts together can generate the power to transform society” (Beuys, 1982, as cited in Kassel Documenta Archive, 2023). He also emphasized that “the oak symbolizes the endurance of life, and the basalt stone symbolizes stability and eternity; the interaction between the body and these two elements expresses the coexistence of humans and nature and serves as a critique of anthropocentrism” (Beuys, 1982, as cited in Kassel Documenta Archive, 2023).

Thus, the core of the work lies in the coordination between bodily action and ecological movement: artistic bodily actions provide a participatory medium for ecological activism, while the social influence of the ecological movement expands the public value of art.

According to Charles Peirce’s triadic theory of signs, the three core bodily action symbols in *7000 Oaks* can be analyzed as follows.

The individual bodily actions—Beuys’s digging, planting, and placing of stones—function as representamens manifested through the physical gestures of shoveling, planting saplings, filling soil, and moving basalt stones. These acts of physical labor form the material basis of the sign. The object refers to the immediacy of manual labor, the practical need for transforming ecological concern from passive observation into active engagement, and the ethical concept of individual responsibility in ecological protection. The interpretant conveys the pragmatic dimension of environmental preservation: Beuys rejected the conventions of studio-based art and employed manual labor as an artistic language, emphasizing that ecological awareness cannot rely solely on discourse. The resolution of ecological crises requires concrete bodily actions; through simple acts such as digging and planting, Beuys demonstrated that ecological engagement is not the privilege of elites but a model of accessible participation for the public.

The collective bodily actions—namely the coordinated tree planting by the public, serve as representamens expressed through the collaborative gestures of multiple individuals digging, planting, and filling soil, as well as through the diverse participation of people of different ages and professions. The cooperation and inclusiveness of these actions constitute the material form of the sign. The object refers to the division of labor and cooperative scale of collective

work, highlighting that ecological restoration requires large-scale, long-term collective action. The interpretant centers on the collective dimension of ecological protection: while the impact of an individual's planting is limited, coordinated collective action can generate a significant cumulative effect. This coordination is not merely a matter of synchronized physical effort but also a convergence of shared ecological awareness. Individuals from diverse social backgrounds gather to plant trees, breaking through class and social barriers, transforming fragmented personal ecological intentions into a collective force for action. In this way, the work responds to the ecological movement's demand for the integration of social forces, promoting the evolution of ecological protection from individual behavior to a broader social movement.

The bodily–object relational actions—such as the maintenance of the oaks and basalt stones, serve as representamens manifested through everyday gestures of touching the trees and cleaning the stones. The continuity and attentiveness embodied in these actions form the material vehicle of the sign. The object refers to the attributes of long-term maintenance and repetition, underscoring that ecological protection is not a short-term endeavor but one that requires sustained commitment and embodies the principle of human–nature coexistence. The interpretant communicates the sustainability and symbiotic philosophy of ecological preservation: simple acts such as watering and cleaning reject the superficial logic of one-time planting or performative environmentalism. Ecological protection demands ongoing dedication, just as the growth of oak trees depends on continuous care. The intimate physical contact between the human body, the trees, and the stones challenges anthropocentric hierarchies by conveying the ideal of equality and coexistence between humans and nature. Humans are not the rulers of nature but its partners; through daily acts of maintenance, they establish a relationship of positive interaction. This stance critiques the exploitative logic of industrial society and provides a conceptual foundation for the ecological movement.

Linking the interpretant of the sign to Bourdieu's theory of the artistic field, the social field of the European ecological movement in the 1980s had evolved from early street protests into a phase demanding systematic forms of action. The artistic field and the social field interact dynamically; when specific social needs emerge, art responds through symbolic production, thereby achieving a coordination between artistic signification and social action (Bourdieu, 1993:162). At that time, the core contradiction within the social field of the ecological movement lay in the absence of effective vehicles for action. On one hand, industrial development intensified deforestation and air pollution, prompting a public shift from passive ecological concern to active participation. On the other hand, traditional forms of ecological activism revealed their limitations: street protests often relied on short-term emotional mobilization, and policy lobbying depended on elite influence. Although the general public possessed the willingness to engage, they lacked concrete channels for participation.

Consequently, society urgently required an inclusive and sustainable mode of action that would enable broad civic involvement and carry long-term ecological value.

The interpretants of Beuys's bodily action symbols align precisely with these societal needs. The interpretant of individual action—embodied in manual labor and practical participation—offers a low-threshold and highly operable vehicle that enables the public to perceive the feasibility of ecological engagement through concrete physical acts. The interpretant of collective action responds to the need for integrating individual forces, thereby amplifying the social impact of the ecological movement. Meanwhile, the interpretant of maintenance action complements the demand for long-term commitment, aligning ecological practices with the broader goal of social sustainability. Through this triadic correspondence, Beuys's work transforms bodily action into a mediating structure that unites artistic creation with the enduring social aspirations of the ecological movement.

4. Conclusion

This study centers on the bodily symbols and social events within Joseph Beuys's artistic revolution. Through the theoretical frameworks of semiotics and sociology, it systematically analyzes three representative works—*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, and *7000 Oaks*. The analysis reveals the underlying mechanisms that link Beuys's bodily symbolism with social events, as well as the critical role these linkages play in sustaining his artistic revolution.

The research finds that Beuys's bodily symbols are not isolated artistic expressions, but are profoundly intertwined with the social realities of postwar Europe in the mid-to late twentieth century—specifically, postwar trauma, Cold War confrontation, and ecological crisis. These relationships manifest in three interrelated modes: responsiveness, constructiveness, and coordination. In *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, bodily symbols such as the head covered with honey, the felt wrapping, and the act of whispering operate through a responsive mode, engaging directly with the collective trauma of war and evoking public reflection on historical memory. In *I Like America and America Likes Me*, the bodily interactions of confrontation and reconciliation with a coyote function through a constructive mode, embedding Beuys's actions within the Cold War context to model a non-violent form of social engagement. In *7000 Oaks*, collective bodily actions such as tree planting exemplify a coordinative mode, integrating art into ecological activism and fostering mutual reinforcement between artistic and environmental action.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that Beuys's artistic revolution is fundamentally realized through the relational dynamics between bodily symbols and social events. From easel painting to body and action art, Beuys expanded the boundaries of artistic practice—from aesthetic representation to social intervention—and redefined the function of art. By

transforming the artist from a professional specialist into a participant of social change, encapsulated in his notion that “everyone is an artist,” Beuys used the body as the medium and social reality as the context. Ultimately, his work established a paradigm in which art becomes a form of social practice, bridging symbolic creation and collective transformation.

Due to limitations of scope and research capacity, this study has focused on three representative works and has not included other significant practices by Beuys, such as *50 Proposals for Direct Democracy* and *Fat Chair*. These works may exhibit different characteristics in the correlation between bodily symbols and social events—for instance, the fat symbol in *Fat Chair* may reflect the material scarcity of the postwar period. Including such works in the analysis could further enrich the typology of relational modes and enhance the generalizability of the conclusions.

Future research could address these limitations in two ways: first, by expanding the range of analyzed works to include a broader array of Beuys’s artistic practices that have received less scholarly attention; and second, by introducing cross-cultural perspectives to compare how Beuys’s bodily symbols are interpreted in different cultural contexts. Such approaches would further refine and deepen the understanding of the relational mechanisms between bodily symbols and social events in Beuys’s artistic revolution.

References

- Antliff,A.(2015).Phaidon Focus:Joseph Beuys (Q.Zhang,Trans.).Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House.
- Beuys,J. (1975). Joseph Beuys (p 91). Kestner-Gesellschaft.
- Beuys,J.(1972).Conversation Between Joseph Beuys and Hagen Lieberknecht [Interview with Hagen Lieberknecht].In Beuys: Drawings (p.112). Munich, Germany: Schirmer Verlag.
- Beuys,J.(1974).Explaining Painting to a Dead Hare. In C.Kuoni (Ed.),Joseph Beuys in America:Energy Plan for the Western Man (p.78).New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows.
- Beuys,J.(1975).The Challenge of Social Sculpture.In C.Kuoni (Ed.),Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man (pp.89-92).Four Walls Eight Windows.
- Beuys,J.(1976).Coyote:I like America and America Likes Me. Schirmer/Mosel.
- Bourdieu,P.(1966). Intellectual Field and Creative Project. *Les Temps modernes*, 246, 865–906.
- Bourdieu,P.(1993).The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature (R. Johnson, Ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Buchloh,B.(1980). Beuys:The Twilight of the Idol. *October*, 12(12), 3-43.
- Cage,J.(1961).Silence:Lectures and Writings.Wesleyan University Press.
- dos Santos, A. (2022). Empathy pathways: A view from music therapy. Springer Nature

Switzerland AG.

Foster,H.(1996).The Return of the Real:The Avant-garde at the End of the Ccentury.Cambridge,MA: MIT Press.

Foucault,M.(1986).La pensée du dehors[The Thought from Outside].Fata Morgana.

Gann,K.(2010).No Such Thing as Silence:John Cage's 4'33".Yale University Press.

Gautier, T. (2013). Mademoiselle de Maupin: Preface (Huang,S.Q.,&Xu,M.Y., Trans.). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

Kassel Documenta Archive.(2023).7000 Oaks:City Forestation Instead of City Administration. Documenta. <https://www.documenta.de/en/works/7000-oaks.html>

Krauss,R.E.(1985).The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.MIT Press.

Li,X.T.(2000).What Matters is Not Art.Nanjing,China:Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House.

Peirce,C.S.(1931).One,Two,Three:Fundamental Categories of Thought and Nature. In Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Vol.1,paras.1.302-1.304). Harvard University Press.

Peirce,C.S.(1982). Logic of Events (1865). In Writings of Charles S.Peirce:A Chronological Edition (Vol.1,pp.162–165).Bloomington:Indiana University Press.

Reed,A.(2019).Slow Art:The Experience of Looking,Sacred Images to James Turrell.Oakland,CA:University of California Press.

Schmidt,H.W.(1979).Joseph Beuys:The Idea of Social Sculpture.Cologne, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

Smith, J.(2020). Art and Activism in the Nuclear Age.Routledge.

Suleiman,S.R.(1990).Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-garde. Cambridge,MA:Harvard University Press.

Suzuki, D. T. (1971). What is Zen?. Row, Publishers, Inc.