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**РИТУАЛНОТО ИЗМЕРЕНИЕ НА МАТЕРИАЛИТЕ, ИЗПОЛЗВАНИ
ОТ ЙОЗЕФ БОЙС В АКЦИИТЕ МУ**

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**THE RITUAL DIMENSION OF THE MATERIALS
IN JOSEPH BEUYS'S *AKTIONEN***

Abstract: The current report takes into consideration the relationship between art and spirituality, as reflected in Joseph Beuys's *Aktionen* (actions), focusing on the use of materials as vehicles of transport of energy and means of sculpting the social body, while transforming the human being into a creative one. Our attempt is to demonstrate, by analyzing the artist's performative work, the iconography related to his actions; his declarations and talks; that the actionist artist surpasses the artistic and social dimensions of his work and, particularly, of the materials he uses towards a spiritual and ritual dimension, as mirrored in his actions, doubled by a deep understanding of spirituality as the foundation of his work.

Keywords: action; performance; art; ritual; shaman; social sculpture.

The German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986)², who manifested himself in the particular context of the Second World War, questioned the function and the *télos* of art, proposing his own answer to the inquiry. Although his *Theory of Social Sculpture*³ could be interpreted in a social, economic, and artistic

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² Joseph Beuys was a “sculptor, graphic designer, author of some representations, teacher in a renowned art school, (...) considered to be one of the most influential European intellectuals in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Due to him and Yves Klein, there was a shift in the avant-garde perspective, focusing not on the work, but on the artist's personality, actions and opinions” (cf. [according to] Grigorescu, Dan. *Dicționarul avangardelor* (ediția a II-a). București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2005, p. 72).

³ Beuys exposed his new theory regarding art on various occasions, with one of them being his first visit to the United States of America (from 9 to 19 January 1974) at the invitation of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc. and Dayton's Gallery 12. In his *Public Dialogue*, which took place at the New School in New York on 11 January, Beuys clarified his ‘extended art concept.’ He distanced himself from the common understanding of art “as coming out of the art history – an art idea which contains the well-known disciplines like sculpture, architecture, painting, music, dancing, poetry and so on,” enlarging this definition to “a new kind of art, able to show the problems of the whole society, of every living being – and how this new discipline – which I call social sculpture – can realize the future of humankind. It could guarantee for the evolution of the earth as a planet, establish conditions for other planetarians too, and you could control it with your own thinking (...). In trying to change one well-known ideology to another, you have to develop a methodology by looking at phenomena in reality. And all these have to be related step by step to the social structure. We have to ask, in what part of the social structure does art live? Art as an element in the whole culture is normally placed at the point of creativity. But we have to see what cre-

way, we attempt to demonstrate that, in its foundation, it has a spiritual dimension, taking into account the particular use of the materials (objects, substances) that the artist has employed in his actions.

Our endeavour is to analyze how the materials used by Joseph Beuys in his *Aktionen*⁴ contribute to the development of his above-mentioned theory, seen as a fundamentally spiritual one. In this respect, we will observe and compare the use of the materials in the course of actions by the German artist, with the specific manifestations of shamans in their rituals. This attempt could have been labeled as an unreason-

activity means for the whole (...). Here my idea is to declare that art is the only possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole creativity. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living is an artist – an artist in the sense that he can develop his own capacity (...). In short, I'm saying, all work that's done has to have the quality of art.” (cf. Kuoni, Carin (ed.). *Energy Plan for the Western Man, Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990, pp. 25–27). Also, in an interview with Kate Horsefield, in 1980, Joseph Beuys elaborated, referring to the use of specific materials in his work: “... I built up a theory to which these materials seemed the most appropriate, to make clear a theory of sculpture, a theory of social order, a theory of the action as a living sculpture (...). So I came to elements, theoretical elements of isolating materials, raw materials, organic materials (...). When I built up a theory and a system of sculpture and art and also a system of wider understanding – anthropological understanding of sculpture being related to the social body, and to everyone's lives and ability – then such materials seemed to be right and effectful tools to make clear this theory and to bring impulse in the discussion during the actions and the performances.” (cf. Kuoni, Carin (ed.), *idem*, pp. 69–70). In *Zeitgeist*, Berlin, in 1982, Beuys pointed out that the term ‘social sculpture’ is ‘a whole new category of art’ (cf. Mannekes, Friedhelm, and Pilar Parcerisas (eds.). *Joseph Beuys – Manresa: A Spiritual Geography*. Barcelona: Tenov Books, 2021, pp. 118, 121).

⁴ In her Catalogue, dedicated to Joseph Beuys's exhibition from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1979, Caroline Tisdall specifies Beuys's preference for the term ‘action’ instead of ‘performance,’ relating it to the Fluxus concerts, in which Beuys performed at the beginning of his career (cf. Tisdall, Caroline. *Joseph Beuys*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979, p. 86). Also, in the context of a conversation with Joseph Beuys that took place in the Church of Saint Joan in Bochum during documenta 6, on 23 April 1979, Volker Harlan linked the term ‘action,’ related to the German artist's philosophy, to “actus and potentia: two Latin terms linked to the Aristotelian *energeia* and *dynamis* – reality and potential” (cf. Harlan, Volker (ed.). *What is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. East Sussex, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2004, p. 7). Beuys's preference for action was stated also in an interview with Willoughby Sharp in 1969, where he expressed his reluctance to participate in exhibitions due to the fact that “for me an exhibition is something that is already dead.” He understood the relationship to objects only through action: “... to transfer thought into action, and the action into an object” (Kuoni, Carin (ed.), *idem*, pp. 89, 92). Heiner Stachelhaus described Beuys as “not just a teacher but also a practitioner of the art of the Action...” who began to be known internationally after his participation in the Festival of New Art in the Audimax in Aachen in 1964: “The bill for the festival listed ‘Actions / Agit-Pop / De-Collage / Happening / Events / Antiart / L'Autrisme / Art Total / Refluxus.’” Beuys created the following actions: *Kukei*, *Akopee – Nein!*, *Brown Cross*, *Fat Corners*, and *Model Fat Corners* (cf. Stachelhaus, Heiner. *Joseph Beuys*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1991, pp. 90, 129). Richard Demarco, a collaborator of the German artist, emphasized the role of the performative artist as the one whose physical presence is essential “... in confrontation with an audience. The performance artist thus focuses attention upon the sacred nature of the human presence as the measure of all man-made things, from furniture, architecture to all manner of ornaments and implements, utensils, machinery, vehicles, clothing, jewellery and regalia. The everyday, as well as ritual, uses of all such things are the very stuff and substance of the performance art work, particularly when they are related directly to the elemental dimensions of time and space.” (Demarco, Richard. *Richard Demarco & Joseph Beuys: A Unique Partnership*. Edinburgh: Luath Press Ltd., 2016, pp. 69–70). Beuys's appeal to action has a clear goal – that of searching an answer to a problem, a conceptual, spiritual one. The action manifests itself as the only reasonable expression to an inquiry: “I know a lot before I start an action. I know a lot about the necessity of the general idea of sculpture, but I don't know anything about the process in which the action will run. When the action runs, my preparation works, because I am prepared to do a thing without knowing where it goes. You see, it would be a very uninteresting thing – it would have nothing to do with art – if it were not a new experiment for which I have no clear concept. If I had a clear concept of solving the problem, I would then speak about the concept and it wouldn't be necessary to make an action. Every action, every artwork for me, every physical scene, drawing on the blackboard, performance, brings a new element in the whole, an unknown area, an unknown world” (An interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980; cf. Kuoni, Carin (ed.), *idem*, p. 70).

able one if the artist himself had not traced the path for this interpretation in his talks and performative representations.

The 'Soul' of the Materials

Joseph Beuys's understanding of art and, consequently, life is not only founded on a spiritual background, but it also has a spiritual goal – the one of creation. The artist elaborated his *Theory of Social Sculpture* as a relationship between himself / man and matter. We are able to identify elements of the transcendent dimension of Beuys's extended theory of art in his very elaborate conversations and interviews, as well as in the way he utilized diverse materials and substances in his actions towards the objective of giving shape to the social body through creativity.

The idea of the artist as a creator is extended by Beuys to the idea of the human being as a creator. In the sense of social sculpture, the source of creation is the thought, giving shape to the matter. In a conversation with Volker Harlan that took place in the foyer of the Church of Saint Joan in Bochum, during documenta 6 on 23 April 1979, Beuys elaborated his idea, saying that "... thinking is practically a sculptural process. It can also be understood as a truly creative achievement, engendered by the human being, by the individual himself, and not a process indoctrinated by some authority or other. That's very important. From this, as I see it, one learns to recognize a great deal about sculptural situations and about warmth in the creative realm; in the principle of evolution. Thinking in the free individual is a reoccurrence of the evolutionary principle in existence from the beginning of time. The human being himself becomes a creator of the world and experiences how he can continue creation."⁵

In his notes⁶, Beuys also traces the path, beginning from thought to the Social Sculpture. He indicates that he used objects as a trigger for creativity, or as "stimulants for the idea of sculpture or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture **can** be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone: **Thinking Forms** – how we mould our thoughts or **Spoken Forms** – how we shape our thoughts into words or **SOCIAL SCULPTURE** – how we mould and shape the world in which we live: **Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone is an artist**. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change."⁷

In his actions, Beuys used objects and his own body both for provoking and stimulating the audience and for sculpting reality, as in *The Chief* (1963)⁸. In his understanding of the creative process, he moulded his body, wrapped into a felt cloth for eight hours, as a transmitter, as a 'carrier wave'⁹ in Beuys's own words, while he was producing sounds from the animal world. "The wave is **unformed**; semantics would give it **form** (*Theory of Sculpture*)."¹⁰ The process of creation he was attempting to achieve was a complete one, making connections with the multiple aspects and processes of the natural world. The artist behaved as the one who held the secrets of the universe in his own hands. Nevertheless, the process he took part in had profound effects on himself too. He confessed: "The sounds I make are taken consciously from animals. I see it as a way of coming into contact with other forms of existence, beyond the human one. It's a way of going beyond our restricted understanding to expand the scale of producers of energy among co-operators in other species, all of whom have different abilities – like the coyote for instance. This means that my presence in the felt was like that of a carrier wave, attempting to switch off my own species' range of semantics. It was a parallel to the old initiation of the coffin, a form

⁵ Harlan, Volker (ed.). *What is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. East Sussex, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2004, p. 17.

⁶ Tisdall, Caroline. *Joseph Beuys*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979, p. 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The Chief* – Fluxus Chant was performed in Copenhagen in 1963, and in René Block Gallery in Berlin on 1 December 1964 (cf. Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 94).

⁹ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 95.

¹⁰ Ibid.

to mock death. (...) Such an action, and indeed every action, changes me radically. In a way it's a death, a real action and not an interpretation.”¹¹

The quality of creator manifests itself in Beuys's actions as a self-creation process as well, i.e. the process of being reborn during the performative act. He had the “ability to self – and body – mastery (...). From this point of view, the artist put himself in an analogical relation to the artistic materials, as well as his body: both were mastered as matter. Both functioned as a substance to which Beuys acted as a forming, shaping creator. Thus, Beuys followed the classic figure of the sculptor who moulds his material.”¹²

The myth that surrounded the artist's personal life contributed to the aura of mystery that Beuys had. A well-known story is the one the artist told about his airplane crash¹³ that happened during his military service in Crimea during the Second World War, and also some other hagiographic¹⁴ elements linked to his biography. This ‘myth of origin’¹⁵ has the characteristics of being reborn or recreated from natural life to the one of the artist. Beuys had different approaches in terms of his experience among the Tatar tribes from Crimea. While he did not negate the fact that they found and saved him by covering his body “with a kind of fat, milky stuff – and even felt,”¹⁶ he declined the idea that he used fat and felt in his actions due to that particular event in his life¹⁷, arguing that those substances were not chosen arbitrarily, but as a consequence of his own theory about sculpture, thus contributing to the creation of the artist persona as a detainer of the secrets of life and creation. Despite the possible ‘falsified background,’¹⁸ the artist might have created with a specific motivation; this ‘myth of origin’ generated the idea of the artist-hero¹⁹, and could also relate to elements of the Christian myth about death and resurrection.

This is also true about the object called *Bathtub* (1960) that spoke about “the trauma of birth, the notion of salvation”²⁰ that could be seen as a reminder of Christianity. At the same time, such an object might be a proof of the fact that life and art were seen as a whole by the artist, his works containing biographical references and being invested with sculptural and even therapeutic qualities. “My intention with this work was to recall my point of departure and with it the experience and feeling of my childhood. It acts as a kind of autobiographical key: an object from the outer world, a solid material thing invested with energy of a sculptural nature. You could call this substance, and it is the transformation of substance that is my concern in art... (...). If creativity relates to the transformation, change and development of substance, then it can be applied to everything in the world, and is no longer restricted to art. The idea of contact with material implies this wider concept of art and of human work and activity in general, and that for me is the meaning of this object.”²¹

The Christian myth was part of Beuys's source of inspiration, contributing to his *Theory of Social Sculpture*. He built his theory on the foundation of Rudolf Steiner's antroposophy, especially on the “concept of redemption, in which the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms are seen as three stages in nature that lead upward first to man; then to the ‘fourfold structure’ of physical body, etheric body, astral

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² **Tomberger, Corinna**. “Show Your Wounded Manliness: Promises of Salvation in the Work of Joseph Beuys.” // *Paragraph*, vol. 26, nos. 1–2, MEN'S BODIES (March/July 2003), pp. 65–76. Edinburgh University Press, p. 70.

¹³ In Joseph Beuys: Timeline, Richard Demarco placed the plane crash and the rescue of Beuys by Tatars between the years 1941–1945: “Serves as a Stuka pilot and is wounded five times. In 1943 is shot down over the Crimea, and his life is saved by Tatars. Wrapped in felt and fat to keep him warm, this experience informs much of his later work.” (cf. Damarco, Richard, and Joseph Beuys. *A Unique Partnership*. Edinburgh: Luath Press Ltd., 2016, p. 23).

¹⁴ **Tisdall, Caroline**, idem, p. 10.

¹⁵ **Buchloh, Benjamin H. D.** et al. “Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim.” // *October*, no. 12 (Spring, 1980), p. 8.

¹⁶ **Kuoni, Carin** (ed.). *Energy Plan for the Western Man. Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990, p. 69.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 69–70.

¹⁸ **Buchloh, Benjamin H. D.** et al., idem, p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

²¹ **Tisdall, Caroline**, idem, p. 10.

body, and 'I'; and finally to an absolute human cognitive faculty."²² Beuys also absorbed from the founder of the *Order of the Rose* and *Croix* (1888), Sâr Joséphin Peladan's books, ideas about art and religion, mystery, music and philosophy of Wagner, and he took an interest to the total work of art and Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.²³

Christian spirituality was perceived by the German artist through the lens of Steiner's antroposophy. In this regard, he confessed to F. Mennekes that he was "... not interested in Jesus as a historical figure, but rather as the reality of this energy as continually present and as growing presence."²⁴

In Beuys's view, the matter was invested with spiritual energies. He used a variety of materials and substances in order to explain and demonstrate his idea of the expanded concept of art. "... Beuys worked with the fat that protects, the felt that warms, the copper that conducts, the honey that nourishes, the battery that takes a charge. He used aggregates, receivers, filters, transmitters, condensers, dynamos, tape machines, video recorders, telephones, Leyden jars, X rays. He worked with blood and with filth, with bandages, plaster, gauze, hypodermic needles, bones, hair, fingernails, gelatin."²⁵

It was not the material characteristic of the object that mattered, but its "spiritual potential as an evolutionary principle, a quality of spiritual warmth that establishes the relation between idea and (spiritual) reality. Nowald connects Beuys's art theory, particularly his thinking about warmth, to the Christian concept of the transubstantiation of matter, which transforms matter into 'the word' of scripture. Further, the theological dimension in Beuys's work, and the moment of Christian redemption and resurrection, is often implied in Beuys's presentation of his own body as shrouded – in a blanket of felt, for example, in several performances,"²⁶ such as *The Chief* (1964) or *Coyote / I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974).

The transformative power of art manifested itself in Beuys's action *Manresa* (1966), along with the direct reference to Saint Ignatius of Loyola's life and book, *Spiritual Exercises* (1523), and to Christianity. Using symbols of Christianity, such as the crucifix on a plate and a half-cross made of copper, Beuys made an allusion to the spiritual transformation of human beings through the mediation of the objects, whose energy, warmth, and force could help achieve a new state of mind. The artist embodied the qualities of a saviour, enlightening people's minds through creativity, through art. "... he shows himself in Christ, in the cross: because the world is in a transitional state, in an 'interim' period." It has yet to complete its development via the energy that flowed out of Christ. With this in mind, in *Manresa*, human beings are called upon to fill in the gap through physical deeds. Human beings, like Christ, must overcome the estrangement of the world and of history. According to Beuys, the fact that this can be achieved is indicated by the staff set down in front of the half-cross. Being made of copper, it embodies an energy conductor; with its vertical orientation, it embodies the form and direction of movement, the source and the content of that energy (...). This energy takes effect in creatures, in elements, the animals, plants and human beings when God gives them existence."²⁷

Christian elements and concepts were also present in the actions *Eurasian Staff* (1967) and *Celtic + ~ ~ ~* (1971). By washing the feet of several people in the audience and 'baptising' himself, the artist pointed out to the idea of self-redemption, assuming the role of Christ by every human being and transforming himself and the whole society, believing that "... a higher form of man has come into existence, a more advanced I, his corresponding divine appearance (...). Christ lives on in every human being."²⁸

Thus, the sacred, powerful quality of art, assigned to the artist the roles integrated in the images of "the messiah, the shepherd, the traveller, nomad or shaman that in the end collapsed into the image of the artist,"²⁹ whose charisma surrounded his work. Related to the *Theory of Social Sculpture*, the function of art seems to be redemptive, transforming art into a secular cult.

²² Stachelhaus, Heiner. Joseph Beuys. New York: Abbeville Press, 1991, p. 39.

²³ Ibid, pp. 41–42.

²⁴ Mesch, Claudia. Joseph Beuys (Critical Lives). London: Reaktion Books, 2017, p. 46.

²⁵ Stachelhaus, Heiner, idem, p. 126.

²⁶ Mesch, Claudia, idem, p. 47.

²⁷ Mannekes, Friedhelm, and Pilar Parcerisas (eds.). Joseph Beuys – Manresa: A Spiritual Geography. Barcelona: Tenov Books, 2021, p. 90.

²⁸ Mesch, Claudia, idem, p. 49.

²⁹ Mesch, Claudia, and Viola Michely (eds.). Joseph Beuys: The Reader, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, p. 77.

Spiritual Function of the Materials

On various occasions, Beuys stated that his objects were used in his actions as “stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture... or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone.”³⁰ In this regard, the objects carried energies and forces, responsible for this transformative process in human beings. The *Spade with Two Handles* (1965), made of wood and iron, was used in the 24-hour action *und in uns... unter uns... landunter (and in us... under us... flooded)*, performed at the Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, on 5 June 1965.³¹ The form of the object was provoking for the audience as it challenged them to think about its usage, suggesting that “... without the spirit of co-operation, harmony and even humour it would be impossible to work with the tool. Brotherhood and love are suggested by the heart shape of the iron blade, while the handles are like aorta or arteries. So, there is a relationship to the bloodstream here, and iron too is an important component of blood.”³²

The same concept of unity was emphasized in the action *Honey Pump* (1977), in which the system of the pump related to the circulatory system in human beings and also to the ‘bloodstream of society’³³. The very principles of the *Theory of Social Sculpture*, which were spiritual in nature, were present in the elaboration of *Honey Pump*: “**Will power** in the chaotic energy of the double engine churning the heap of fat. **Feeling** in the heart and bloodstream of honey flowing throughout the whole. **Thinking powers** in the **Eurasian staff**, the head of which rises from the engine room right up to the skylight of the museum and then points down again.”³⁴

The artist used objects and substances in all of his actions for their actual, physical qualities, such as warmth, cold, energy, transmitter or storage function, and also for their spiritual connotations. Beuys transcended the physicality of the materials, trying to express his extended concept about art as the transforming power of society or as a socio-sculptural process. He stated that “this artistic process is possible in all professions; that this process is possible in every field of work, and can be seen in conjunction with the issue of human work. That is what I have tried to do – to say something through substance: substances which, layer by layer, extend into a supersensible dimension, and are no longer present as physical substances. Thus, the link with spiritual substance is also part of the substance discussion (...). This discussion also encompasses its sacramental character, right through to the last stage of substance where it has condensed, for instance in wax, but where, in this condensed form, one can make the process accessible by arranging the material in particular ways or doing certain trials and experiments with it.”³⁵

The artist used his own body as an object in *The Chief* (1964), capable of achieving the function of a transmitter. As a performer in his action, he also used sound as a sculpting object, emitting unarticulated animal sounds, relating to the ones of a stag, reminding the audience of the ancient, mythical times, being wrapped in felt, with the role of transmitting and storing, and having put fat in the corners of the room for attaining the warmth principle, needed as a sculptural process. He believed that his function was that of transmitting a message with the help of the materials. “... I am also a transmitter (...). If I produce something, I transmit a message to someone else. The origin of the flow of information comes not from the matter, but from the ‘I,’ from the idea. Here is the borderline between physics and metaphysics: this is what interests me about this theory of sculpture.”³⁶

Beuys’s materials were unconventional objects and substances like fat, felt, copper, rosemary, horns, boxes, a piano wrapped in felt, crucifixes, blackboards, pump, batteries, electricity, which he manipulated with the wisdom of the artist for different demonstrations, all of them being examples of the *Theory of Social Sculpture*. Their use was not arbitrary, as the artist explained in a conversation with Volker Harlan, in the sense that he aimed to prove something on a spiritual level through the specific quality of the material. Science was a source of inspiration for Beuys, only to develop his theory. While

³⁰ Kuoni, Carin (ed.), idem, p. 19.

³¹ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 84.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 254.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Harlan, Volker (ed.), idem, p. 16.

³⁶ Kuoni, Carin (ed.), idem, p. 83.

sometimes he used electricity, other times he did not need it at all, or the alternation of the warmth with the cold principle. “You can’t just warm everything up, then it gets dangerous. You also have to have the hardening forces, as these form forces actually have the opposite effect. They are cooling forces, crystalline forces (...). That is why you always have to think in terms of polarities, or forces, which is nothing other than awareness, presence of mind.”³⁷

The therapeutic function of the materials used in the performative acts by the German artist could not be negated, as they are the most important aspect of the restructuring of the human and social body. Suggestions linked to the wounded, sick state of being, were made in all of Beuys’s actions. Beginning with his personal life, which was a source of inspiration for the performances he acted in, condensed in the *Life Course/Work Course*,³⁸ ending with the wound the war was inflicting to every human being, the most needed effect of his performative acts was the healing.

The Pack (1969) was presented as an installation providing an emergency kit for survival. The Volkswagen bus with 20 sledges, containing fat, felt, and a flashlight, suggested the idea that those substances and objects were the primordial means of survival. Martin Kemp, who saw the exhibition at the *Strategy: Get Arts*,³⁹ also referred to the installation as “bearing a therapeutic fat and felt, together with a torch for dispelling mental darkness.”⁴⁰

Claudia Mesch noticed that the themes of science and medicine were most common in Beuys’s actions, with references in his installations, multiples, vitrines, and objects, as in *Bathtub* (1961), containing bandages, or in the installations *Barraque d’Dull Odde* (1961–1967) and *Scene from the Stag Hunt* (1961).⁴¹

Ritual Dimension of the Materials in Joseph Beuys’s Actions

Having multiple facets, the ritual could be described as “a set of actions which are made for a particular effect – for changing the weather, for a prosperous life or for helping a person to pass to another state in life, through a passing rite. (...) they are centered on the active participation,”⁴² a meaning also extended to the common, daily activities, or to social ceremonies. The term is related to the action of a person invested with the power of officiating it, in Mircea Eliade’s view, to a shaman. As the source of the term ‘shaman’ is placed by Eliade in the space of the Tatar tribes from Siberia,⁴³ we could relate Joseph Beuys’s biography to shamanistic practices.

In his *Life Course/Work Course*, Beuys mentioned the plane crash that caused his near-to-death experience, and that he was saved by the Tatars who wrapped him in felt and fat, a practice that healed him. He integrated these practices in his work, using fat and felt as his main substances, responsible for the healing of the human being in the process of social sculpture. The ‘myth of origin’ mentioned above constituted the ground of his future performances. The *Fat Chair* (1964) or *The Chief* (1964) used fat as a therapeutic material.

The artist also embodied the role of the healer in his actions through the use of these materials. Eliade stated that “the ‘shaman’ is any magician, sorcerer, medicine-man, or ecstatic person... he is considered a healer, like all the other healers, and a fakir, like all the ancient or modern magicians. But, above all, he... could be also a priest, a mystic and a poet.”⁴⁴ As one who could heal himself after being close to

³⁷ Harlan, Volker (ed.), idem, p. 50.

³⁸ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 9.

³⁹ “*The Pack* (1969) was installed in a corridor at Edinburgh College of Art together with photographic documentation of his performance-actions (Arena) in a large studio adjacent to where he performed *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) The Scottish Symphony* (26–30 August, in collaboration with Henning Christiansen and Roy McEwen.” (cf. Demarco, Richard, and Joseph Beuys, idem, pp 25–26).

⁴⁰ Demarco, Richard, idem, p. 9.

⁴¹ Mesch, Claudia, idem, p. 75.

⁴² Allain, Paul, and Jen Harvie. Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performance. București: Editura Nemira, 2012, pp. 422–423.

⁴³ Eliade, Mircea. Șamanismul și tehnicile arhaice ale extazului. București: Editura Humanitas, 1997, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁴ Eliade, Mircea, idem, p. 19.

death, Beuys experienced an initiatic process, being wounded and reborn.⁴⁵ Only during such a state, the initiate would be able to heal the others. “In the initiatic sceneries, the symbolism of birth accompanied almost all the time the Symbolism of Death. In the initiatic contexts, death meant the overcoming of the prophane, unsanctified condition of the ‘natural man,’ who does not have a knowledge of the sacred and does not understand the spirit.”⁴⁶

In this regard, Beuys’s role in the course of actions could easily be linked to that of the initiate, the priest, the shaman. The ritual mask he wore in the action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), and the three-hour time spent in the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf⁴⁷, had the characteristic of a ritual scene. The audience was not allowed in the gallery, being forced to watch the action through the window. The practice of insulation or the filter⁴⁸ of the space was common in Beuys’s performances, as he behaved as the initiate one, distancing himself by the uninitiated, prophane audience. The artist used the same principle in the action *The Chief*, where “... the public stood in an adjoining room, which connected by a door to the room of the performance and reportedly contained a small installation of work by Robert Morris. Beuys had prepared the room of the performance beforehand. Significantly, he kept the door closed, implicitly denying entry to the public; a transparent screen or cloth allowed viewing, but did not invite a transversal of the action space. As photographs of the action reveal, Beuys marked the room of the performance by means of the careful application of margarine or ‘fat’ (*Fett*) to a number of different locations, in several forms...”⁴⁹ The same manner of delimitation of the space was also used in *Coyote / I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), performed in New York, where the artist, wrapped in felt, having a stick in his hand, spent time with a coyote in a room, with the specific goal of healing the wound of the native American Indians, caused by the Red Man.

Caroline Tisdall noticed that the Beuysian vocabulary contained “... words like trauma, healing, substance and transformation [which] hint at a shamanistic tendency that was to become most pronounced in the actions and behaviour of the 1960s, when, for instance, Beuys spent nine hours rolled in felt in **The Chief**, or covered his head with honey and gold to demonstrate **How to explain pictures to a dead hare** (...). Such events are literal enactments of concerns that appeared in drawings like **In the house of the shaman** of 1954 (...) or in any sculpture in which extraordinary properties are attributed to fat, felt, bone, blood or metal, or indeed to the artist’s own person through its contact with death.”⁵⁰

The artist was also aware of his assumed role, that of the healer, embodied in the person of the shaman. His practice and use of certain materials was made in a conscious manner. He explained: “I take this form of ancient behaviour as the idea of transformation through concrete processes of life, nature and history. My intention is obviously not to return to such earlier cultures but to stress the idea of transformation and of substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic.”⁵¹

Since the artist’s aim is transformative and redemptive, “the first resurrection attempted in the Beuysian ritual is that of our senses, which have been diminished by their dependence on just one of them: sight. This hypertrophy of the visual has led to an inevitably distorted and restricted perception of the world (...). In the paradoxical time-space of ritual, the perceptive horizon eludes its boundaries, as ordinary modes of experience are unsettled.”⁵²

Annie Suquet noticed that, in the ritual Beuys officiated, the common materials were used in uncommon situations, thus generating different reactions for the main reason of producing a change in the audience’s spirit.

⁴⁵ Elade, Mircea. *Sacral și profanul*. București: Editura Humanitas, 2017, pp. 142–143.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 144.

⁴⁷ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 101.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁹ Mesch, Claudia, idem, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 23.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Suquet, Annie. “Archaic Thought and Ritual in the Work of Joseph Beuys.” // *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 28 (Autumn, 1995), p. 153.

The materials, mainly objects that Beuys used in his actions, were kept as reminders of the processes that happened. They constituted “remains and traces,”⁵³ not often works of art, as Arthur C. Danto mentioned after seeing an installation called *The Tradition of the New* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.⁵⁴ He considered the blackboards remains of Beuys’s art, keeping the traces of the artist’s performative acts. The same reference to the objects as relics was made in Caroline Tisdall’s Catalogue about the blackboard *Eurasia*⁵⁵ or by Heiner Stachelhaus in terms of the Beuysian concept of merging all the materials of an action into a whole. “Beuys’s talent for combining the most disparate materials, constantly creating new tensions and surprising relationships, once again seems remarkable. Everything merges together. A component of one Action becomes a relic to be incorporated in an installation or presented as an object in an exhibition – this is Fluxus in another sense: Beuys’s work has the power to integrate all of its parts into one flow.”⁵⁶

The Beuysian materials as remains of the actions, following the artist’s concept of art, are invested with the energy and qualities of transforming the human being and the society. As the artist said, the process of social sculpture began in the thought, which created the action and, consequently, the object. In Beuys’s view, the materials he used in the performative act were ‘activated’⁵⁷ to produce a spiritual and conceptual change in people. They were invested with creative and therapeutic energy, being used in the ‘sacred space’⁵⁸ of the ritual. Therefore, they could be defined as relics, bearing the quality of being alive, the way a ritual is.

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⁵³ Mesch, Claudia, and Viola Michely (eds.), idem, p. XV.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tisdall, Caroline, idem, p. 107.

⁵⁶ Stachelhaus, Heiner, idem, p. 138.

⁵⁷ Mannekes, Friedhelm, and Pilar Parcerisas (eds.), idem, p. 89.

⁵⁸ Mesch, Claudia, idem, p. 35.