

Article

The Neglected Place of “Totems” in Contemporary Art

Aixin Zhang 

Department of Visual Arts, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai 200040, China; aixin3920924@126.com

Abstract: The religious nature of Joseph Beuys’ works was ignored or intentionally avoided by mainstream criticism since his artistic practice was ridiculed for its potential spirituality. It is argued that Beuys’ works are work meditations on the issues of potential ego in totemic art, which are frequent topics of theological concern. For example, what is the nature of our consciousness after death, and how does it relate to the consciousness of others? Beuys’ conceptual artworks reveal his engagement with the “witchcraft etiquette” of totemic art and his exploration of theological questions such as the relation between human consciousness and divinity, the role of sacrifice and resurrection, and the meaning of self-awareness. In other words, we can draw inspiration from the theological theories of Alfred North Whitehead and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to examine Beuys’ choice of conceptual art through the lens of his deep self-consciousness of totem worship. In general, Beuys’ works pose an important question: how can we awaken our chaotic consciousness to new or forgotten sprouts which may rejuvenate our existence in the world?

Keywords: totemic art; contemporary art; theology; Joseph Beuys; animal image; Shaman etiquette; sacrifice taboo; mystery

1. Introduction

Currently, there is so much critical literature on Joseph Beuys that it appears impossible to substantively explain his works. However, Beuys may be the most iconic example of the new religious movement in totemic research. He received more attention than most other artists in his era. He repeatedly incorporated primitive totemic symbols into his paintings, to which he added a sacrificial theme related to primitive witchcraft. By using “Shaman etiquette”,¹ Beuys demonstrated the power of self-sacrificial activities associated with the human subconscious, making him a very important focus point in the art world.

Totemic art is still discussed in the 21st century. However, we must reassess the definition of this traditional totemic art to adapt it to the contemporary context. The variations leading to this ideological transformation can be summarized as the expansion of the definitions of “art” and “totem” and the changes in “Shaman etiquette” and its sacrifices. Currently, some art is described as totems—not to support the institutionalized traditional totemic belief (for example, as defined by cultural anthropologists, such as Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1998) but as a means of expressing and experiencing their “Shaman” belief.²

Beuys, a contemporary German artist, works within this classification system. His creations delve into the potential ego issues in totemic art, touching upon theological topics such as the relationship between our post-death consciousness and that of others. Beuys’ conceptual artwork, particularly *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, profoundly engages with the themes of self-consciousness and individuation, as presented in the theology of Alfred North Whitehead and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. This artwork explores totemic art’s “witchcraft etiquette”, reflecting Whitehead’s emphasis on unconscious processes and interconnectedness, and Hegel’s dialectical structure of the unconscious. In doing so, Beuys’ work serves as a platform for theological discourse, illuminating the transformative dialogue between human consciousness, divinity, and the complex process of individuation. This intersection of art and theology in Beuys’ work offers a novel perspective on the role of art in spiritual discourse and the continuous quest for a higher spiritual reality.



Citation: Zhang, Aixin. 2023. The Neglected Place of “Totems” in Contemporary Art. *Religions* 14: 810. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060810>

Academic Editors: Taylor Worley and José María Salvador-González

Received: 3 December 2022

Revised: 4 June 2023

Accepted: 15 June 2023

Published: 19 June 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In my opinion, one of the most effective strategies for elucidating Beuys' complex and multifaceted oeuvre involves drawing upon Chinese theories of totem worship and sacrifice, while also incorporating the insights of thinkers such as Whitehead and Hegel. Despite the various influences of ecology, anthropology, and politics that impact Beuys' art, his primary focus is on post-war survival and fostering self-awareness through animal oil. Through his work, Beuys endeavors to represent nature, truth, and the profound interconnectedness that exists between human beings and the natural world, thereby bringing pressing ecological concerns to the forefront and articulating the underlying logic that drives his creative vision. Nonetheless, I propose adopting an alternative approach to understanding Beuys' work—one that illuminates the deeper theological questions that permeate his oeuvre. By attending to these themes, we can appreciate the broader significance that his art holds for theological reflection, rather than limiting ourselves to considerations of ecology or contemporary social issues.

2. History of Contemporary Totemic Art

Our current objective is to shed light on the experiential dimensions of witchcraft etiquette, vividly captured within Beuys' conceptual artistic output, and to simultaneously expound upon the remarkable parallels between this mode of creativity and diverse theological modalities. To achieve this, we will begin by delineating the theoretical concept of totemic art and undertaking a comprehensive analysis of its various roots within contemporary artistic discourse.

Totemic art refers to artistic creations that depict or embody symbols of animals or other natural objects representing the spiritual beliefs and traditions of a community. These symbols are often associated with shamanism, which involves communication with the spiritual and supernatural world. The shamanic interpretation of totemic art includes understanding the images as representations of different aspects of the spiritual realm, such as animal spirits or totems. By exploring the significance of totemic art and its shamanic interpretations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual beliefs and practices of diverse cultures and comprehend the symbolic meanings underlying these works of art.

The term "totem" originated in the Ojibwe dialect of North America and can be understood as a reference to "kinship", "lineage", "identity", and so forth. It was first introduced by the American businessman Long in 1791 through his diary, where he attributed it to Native American religion. Broadly speaking, "totem" refers to a representation or device that embodies the spirits of deities. In primitive societies and early ethnic groups, a belief in protective deities, ancestors, and kin who shared a blood relationship was common. Certain animals and plants were also believed to share this relationship, and thus their symbols became the national emblem of such groups, known as "totems".

As Western researchers have made considerable strides in the field of totemism, China has also demonstrated an increase in scholarly pursuits in this area. The study of totems has been applied to explain many phenomena observed in ancient, medieval, and contemporary national cultures. During this period, the contributions of both Western scholars such as Tylor (2005), Frazer (1998), and Chinese scholars such as Guo (1962), Wen (2006), Cen (1986), He (2008), and Ye (2007) have heavily influenced totemic studies. By the middle of the 20th century, a significant body of literature had emerged on the subject of totems.

A systematic inquiry into the numerous interconnections between totems and the emergence of artistic expression has yet to be conducted in scholarly research. Although preliminary investigations by scholars such as Tylor (2005) have been conducted, the subject area remains ripe for further development and exploration. Tylor (2005) suggested that theories of primitive art and aesthetic modes are based on a totemic framework, in which "images" and "likenesses" play a pivotal role. These representations have a sacred significance and serve as a powerful medium for conveying religious principles and doctrines. Analyzing totemic beliefs, therefore, requires a comprehensive understanding of both the social-material conditions and the collective psychological mechanisms underlying totem worship.

The renowned anthropologist Boas (1989), from the Western tradition, thoroughly identified and described a connection between the practice of totem veneration and the primitive forms of art associated with it. His in-depth examination focused on the remnants of totemic art, particularly as evident in the creative expressions of North American Indigenous peoples. Within this scope, Boas (1989) skillfully explained the development of various artistic styles, as well as the fundamental characteristics and social origins of Native American totemic art forms. Unfortunately, Boas (1989)'s inquiry into the relationships between totem worship and art is limited to the contemporary era and does not cover the entire historical timeline from antiquity to the present.

The insightful and pioneering scholarship of Cen (1986), a distinguished Chinese scholar, has ushered in a new era of academic inquiry into the esoteric realm of totemic art (Cao 2007). According to his meticulous research findings, a wide range of art disciplines, including painting, sculpture, decoration, and dance, are all expressions of the primal religious belief and cultural practice of totemism shared and observed by various groups and tribes. Based on his alternative epistemology, totem worship, manifesting itself in a rich diversity of forms ranging from myths, totem poles depicting composite human–animal figures, shamanistic dances, and ritual music and dance, can be classified into different sub-genres. To bridge the gap between the original context of totemic art and its contemporary iteration, Cen (1986) wrote a comprehensive work entitled *The History of Totem Art*.

Myers (2019) cited anthropologist Michael Jackson, who offers an unconventional definition of ritual art as a tool for changing the relationship between interiority and exteriority through sensory manipulation. While the term “totemic art” has been defined in various ways, most research has focused on examining cultures with totemic practices and social phenomena, specifically prehistoric or contemporary primitive ethnic groups. Ritual art, when utilized in transitional spaces, has the potential to disrupt individual perceptions of reality and result in the creation of new combinations and arrangements. Paul Cézanne, a modern artist, is recognized as a ritual artist capable of producing a magical universe that facilitates a rational and intellectual understanding of truth, as noted by Myers (2019).

Many studies on totemic art mainly focus on its significance in ancient times, disregarding its relevance to contemporary art. Currently, Conley (2013)'s research may provide insight into the relationship between totemic art and modern art. In an article titled “Sleeping gods in surrealist collections” (2013), she argued that Artaud (1961)'s article titled “les dieux qui dorment dans les Musees (God Sleeping in the Museum)” may describe Andre Breton's personal collection, including works of non-Western primitive culture that Artaud appreciated in the ethnographic museum. In the opinion of Conley (2013):

Such objects were plentiful in Breton's study and included shape-shifting animals such as the Haida transformation mask Breton wrote about in 1950, whose features move back and forth from human to animal, recognizing the common spiritual connection between the two in a material representation of the concept of the totem animal embraced by several surrealists—the fish for Breton, the bird for Max Ernst, the horse for Leonora Carrington, the dog for Dorothea Tanning (p. 6).

Finally, Conley (2013) concluded that the talismanic animal totems of surrealists reflected their love for the objects infused with non-Western spirit, which challenges the current trend of animal research. Conley (2013) aimed to deeply understand “the awareness of animal-human commonalities” by studying the interactions between animals and humans. However, Conley (2013)'s paper does not comprehensively explain how surrealistic works evoke the mysterious experience of universal totemic art. Paul Tillich, though not directly addressing surrealism, offered deep insights into the art–religion relationship, viewing art as a vehicle for expressing religious dimensions and responding to essential human existential questions. He also suggested an ontological theological method, investigating the “ground of being” or “absolute being” and surpassing traditional theological ideas with a mystical outlook. These concepts, I believe, can connect with surrealism's spirit, which likewise aims to convey a reality beyond rationality and logic through art—a profound reality

rooted in the subconscious, unconscious, life, death, nature, and the supernatural. Consequently, Tillich may be considered an influential philosopher and theologian for surrealism, even without directly participating in the domain. It is noteworthy that the condition of human existence evolves with the passage of time, influencing religious experiences and expressions. Kull (2014) noted: “Tillich’s theology of art is still useful and can be a point of departure for reflecting on the connections between art and religion, but Tillich himself would definitely have opposed viewing his analysis as the final word” (p. 78).

Agreeing with Kull’s viewpoint, I believe that Conley and Tillich provide unique yet complementary methods for exploring surrealism. In surrealist works, religious imagery serves as a challenge to Christian tradition and an expression of tension between life, death, reality, fantasy, nature, and the supernatural. Both acknowledge a duality or multiplicity in surrealist works, reflecting these tensions and unveiling a mystical experience triggered by imagery.

Thus, I suggest we view the rise of primitive religious and mythological discourse in contemporary art theory and practice as a current trend. In this context, we may consider some contemporary art forms, grounded in a broad religious basis, as a unique quasi-religious phenomenon. These artworks, created by artists, embody an inherent cosmological system, filled with diverse totemic worships and mythological thought aimed at nature and divine beings. In this system, the natural ecosystem is examined at visual and spiritual levels, exploring the relationship between people and nature. These non-ontological people and natural spiritual things are endowed with deified images through the incorporation of their deified images into the theme of primitive culture. Modern art evolved from the spiritual theme of primitive art, eventually resulting in avant-garde creations in contemporary art (Morgan 2005). Consequently, the concept of totems gradually emerged in modern and contemporary art in the 21st century. The relationship between Jackson Pollock and primitive religion,³ the association between Pablo Picasso and African masks, and the connection between avant-garde futurism and myth can all be cited as examples.

3. Theology and Totems: Whitehead and Hegel on “Self-Consciousness”

In the context of Christian natural theology, Whitehead postulated that human beings are an intrinsic part of the entirety of being. As sentient creatures imbued with self-awareness and endowed with the capacity for introspection, humans possess the cognitive faculties necessary for apprehending the concept of God and ultimately achieving a mystical reunification with the divine. On the other hand, Hegel’s early theological treatises provided a solution for dispelling the prevalent illusion of individual separation from the wider cosmic whole. In his celebrated dictum “Only self-consciousness can save itself”, Hegel emphasized the paramount importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of the individual being with the world at large, in order to acquire an understanding of divinity and attain redemption. To fully comprehend the nature of the divine, one must internalize and embrace the fundamental interconnectedness of all things and adopt a holistic approach to existence.

“The creativity is not an external agency with its own ulterior purposes. All actual entities share with God this characteristic of self-causation. For this reason, every actual entity also shares with God the characteristic of transcending all other actual entities, including God. The universe is thus a creative advance into novelty (Whitehead 1978, p. 222)”. Whitehead consequently posits that creativity, as the fundamental source and principle of all reality, harbors infinite potentiality, empowering each entity to actualize its existence amid a plethora of possibilities.

In Whitehead’s Christian natural theology, human consciousness is inextricably linked to anthropology. According to his thesis, humans are integral components of the whole. Moreover, human beings are unique in various ways yet do not exist entirely in isolation from others. As part of the world and a strand in the natural law system, humans are interrelated with all other entities. Symbolically, according to Chinese Buddhism and Hinduism, the ego represents a droplet of water yearning to return to the boundless ocean of

the universe. Since we are already part of the ocean, we are already a fragment of it. We are deluded by the illusion of separateness and fail to comprehend the authentic essence of our surroundings.

In secular imagination, despite speculations and musings about eternity, people still doubt the value of their own existence when faced with change, aging, and death. Though we understand that in eternity, we will be invulnerable, unafraid of disease, pain-free, sinless, inexperienced in senescence, and spared from death, what then is the meaning of “I” (Mesle 2008, X)? Consequently, we sever the ties between ourselves and the larger relational whole that extends infinitely through time and believe that our “self” will ultimately vanish completely alongside us.

Nevertheless, in religious beliefs, although “I” will disappear, it will merge with the ocean of eternal existence. According to Mesle (2008):

Process philosophers would agree that we are like a drop of water in the ocean of reality in the sense of affirming that we are fully a part of that larger whole, like a drop of water is part of the ocean. Whatever composes the world composes us, too. Yet, Whitehead would not have seen the diversity of the world as an illusion to be escaped but simply as something to be understood and appreciated (Mesle 2008, pp. 20–21).

In the secular imagination, personal identity fades away, leaving a sense of meaninglessness. Consequently, we cannot accept the pain and sorrow of the world and choose to sever the connection between ourselves and divinity.

In response to this issue, Hegel asserted, “only the self can save itself”, which could be considered his early motto in his theological works. According to Hegel (1998), God was initially perceived as a concept, an embodiment, an existence, and a person. In grasping these notions, individuals understand that they embody the spirit of self-awareness. Furthermore, self-awareness is a form of consciousness that does not vanish from God but integrates with Him in a specific manner.

In Hegel’s (1998) perspective, God, the infinite spirit, is incarnated in a person, a distinctive aspect of Christianity. Despite enduring all sufferings, even infinite ones, He was resurrected and ascended to glory. Thus, before the infinite spirit becomes conscious, it must first embody the limited spirit and bear the intense pain of the limited spirit’s demise.

Human consciousness struggles to grasp the unity of the world and people. Yet, after experiencing the harsh spiritual death, we can sense that the essence of both ourselves and the world is a form of consciousness. Hegel (1998) stated:

The spirit in real existence is self-aware as something inner, because in its manifestation it reverts into itself and remains at home with itself. To spirit alone, therefore, is it given to impress the stamp of its own infinity and free return into itself upon its external manifestation, even though through this manifestation it is involved in restriction. Now spirit is only free and infinite when it actually comprehends its universality and raises to universality the ends it sets before itself; but, for this reason, it is capable by its own nature, if it has not grasped this freedom, of existing as restricted content, stunted character, and a mind crippled and superficial (pp. 154–55).

Hegel’s discourse bolsters my earlier argument: God must manifest in human form, the sole form that can contain the infinite Spirit. This process, however, compels the Spirit to withstand numerous sufferings and sacrifices. It needs to surrender its infiniteness, incarnating finitude. Subsequently, it can fulfill its purpose via human form, eventually reverting to its infinite state. However, in the world, “God” has become a hollow echo for us and our inner culture. Consequently, severing the link between oneself and divinity inevitably leads to numerous challenges in spiritual development.

Fundamentally, both Whitehead and Hegel offer unique perspectives on self-consciousness, the process of individualization, and the interplay between human consciousness and the divine. Their individual theological perspectives offer essential blueprints

for deciphering our impending deliberations. Whitehead's process theology foregrounds the unconscious as the genesis of existence, and consciousness as its offspring and perceiver. This perspective is indispensable for appreciating the process of self-consciousness and the concept of interconnectedness. It allows a thorough analysis of the "shamanic ritual" concept and its affective components. Conversely, Hegel's dialectical theology offers a contrasting perspective. His conception of self-consciousness introduces a compelling approach to the dilemma of individual and cosmic separation. Hegel's unconscious dialectical structure proves vital in discussing the individualization process and the shift from physical reality to a higher spiritual realm. In my engagement with Whitehead and Hegel, I strive for a more holistic comprehension of these complex themes.

4. The Artworks of Joseph Beuys

4.1. Joseph Beuys' Conceptual Background

In essence, conceptual art, one of the most prominent schools of Western art, emerged in the 1960s as a form that prioritizes ideas or concepts, rebelling against traditional aesthetic principles. Beuys, who emphasizes thought over style or form in his work, is unmistakably a conceptual artist. As LeWitt elucidated:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman (LeWitt 1967).

LeWitt's words stress the primacy of ideas in conceptual art, wherein the notion or concept not merely informs the work but "constitutes" its most crucial aspect. Using the term "constitutes" may be more powerful, emphasizing the centrality of the concept in the creation and interpretation of the art piece. It is also noteworthy that LeWitt posits the idea as "a machine that makes the art," which seems to reduce the role of the artist to a mere executor of the preconceived concept, thereby highlighting the conceptual nature of such art.

In *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), Beuys' head was adorned with honey and gold leaf. Employing sound, noise, and silence, Beuys established a connection with the deceased hare. The "Honey's heat" symbolizes the rigidity of thought: honey softens and renders thinking more fluid. Conversely, he spent over an hour hurling liquid gelatin at the wall, collecting it on a tray, and pouring it onto himself. Like honey, gelatin mollifies the mind, restores fluidity, and obscures rigid boundaries. Gelatin also bears a relation to alchemy. Beuys referred to this as the "degree of transformation", entailing a process of "compression" followed by differentiation. Only by returning everything that arises from a substance to the substance itself can we discern the material's subtle physical and spiritual essence. Furthermore, gelatin raises questions regarding evolution. Beuys flung the gelatin against the wall and struck it, alluding to the parallel between the evolution of the world and that of the spirit.

Regarding these works, Beuys stated, "we will enter the most spiritual realm, as this slit introduces us to the mysterious world... a myth that is not inappropriate... I believe that people are capable of considering all possible life relationships. This is not a fantasy at all, as it is actually based on what can be found in nature" (Harlan 2017, p. 62).

Beuys' works, steeped in German romanticism, often employ alchemy, traditional Christianity, and animal and plant symbols as totemic elements. His animal-related art and performance pieces, such as sculptures of animal women, *I like America and America likes me*, and *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, have left a lasting impression. Chinese audiences, in particular, are captivated by the materials he used. Consequently, research achievements in China related to Beuys have surged since the beginning of the 21st century,

with numerous publications on his artistic ontology appearing since 2005 (Liu 2022; Xiao 2022; Yi 2020; Ban 2015; Lu 2005). Regrettably, theological topics remain underexplored.

In contrast, Western research is not confined to artistic ontology. Scholars examine Beuys' work through various lenses, including ecology, sociology, anthropology, and the intersections between these disciplines (e.g., Adams 1992; Ottomann et al. 2010; de Guzmán 2018). Some emphasize ecocriticism in human aesthetics, focusing on the frequent appearances of animals in Beuys' works and exploring the implications for the relationship between existence and the ecological environment (Crowley 2013). Others concentrate on the political significance of Beuys' works (1921–1986). Gyorody (2014), for instance, discusses the artist's political projects from 1967 to 1983 and situates his works within the contemporary art movement, striving to integrate art and life. A few scholars have recently begun reexamining Beuys' thought and practice in relation to alchemy and magic (Garza 2018). However, aside from Worley and Tylor, theological discussions remain scarce (Worley 2010, 2020).

While interpretations of Beuys' works through the perspectives of ecology, anthropology, and political science offer some insights, I propose an alternative explanation rooted in Chinese totem worship and sacrifice. Beuys' works may focus less on the actual ecological environment or human social life and more on deep self-awareness tied to human nature—a theological topic. The theory of Chinese totem worship and sacrifice, which emphasizes connecting with the deeper self while sacrificing superficial human desires, supports this interpretation.

Beuys' use of animal symbolism, such as confining himself in a room with a live coyote for three days in *I like America and America likes me*, signifies a desire to connect with nature and totemic power. Furthermore, he believed that employing fat and felt in his works would awaken spiritual forces within humans, representing a connection to the deeper self or soul. Wallis (2003) also discusses Beuys' use of shamanic practices and symbols, reflecting a deeper, more primal aspect of humanity in his book *Shamans/neo-shamans: Ecstasies, alternative archaeologies and contemporary pagans*. He argued that Beuys' works offer a way to explore and connect with the spiritual dimension of human existence.

These sources collectively suggest that Beuys' works possess a spiritual dimension transcending physical and social environments. He sought to explore the human condition on a deeper level and connect with the inner selves of his audience. This notion aligns with theological concerns, as both address the deep-rooted consciousness of humanity.

In summary, Beuys' use of animal symbolism and specific materials emphasizes a deeper, spiritual connection between humans and nature that surpasses physical and social environments. This interpretation aligns Beuys' works with concerns within theology, as both address the concept of connecting with the deeper self.

Nonetheless, bolstering my argument requires another piece of evidence. It will solidify the observed correlation between Beuys' work, Chinese shamanism, and totemic beliefs. By presenting this evidence, the thematic and symbolic parallels between Beuys' work and the totemic beliefs under my study become prominent, consequently affirming the chosen interpretive framework.

In his work, Thompson (2011) delves into the post-war avant-garde's engagement with Eastern spirituality, identifying spiritual, Eastern philosophical, and mystical motifs in Beuys' art. These motifs resonate with extensive themes such as human existence, interconnectedness, and reality transcendence.

Thompson recounts Beuys' influential meeting with the Dalai Lama in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 1982 (Thompson 2011, pp. 14–15). This interaction left a significant imprint on Beuys' subsequent artistic creations. This evidence supports my argument that Eastern philosophies and spiritual traditions greatly impacted Beuys' work.

The term “Eastern philosophies and spirituality” is a broad umbrella, covering a wide spectrum of traditions, schools, and philosophers. There is interplay and distinction amongst them. Totemic beliefs in ancient Chinese witchcraft and shamanism exhibit diversity and

evolution. They have a complex relationship with other Chinese religions and philosophies, marked by exchanges, amalgamation, and at times, conflict.⁴

Beuys may not have directly referenced Chinese Shamanism or totemic beliefs, but their thematic and symbolic parallels in his works are worth investigating. I aim not to impose a foreign cultural framework onto Beuys' works, but to shed light on an understudied aspect of his art and theology.

4.2. Analysis of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*

Beuys' performance piece, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, took place in 1965 at Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, Germany. In this performance, Beuys sat in a room with a dead hare on his lap, explaining a series of pictures to the animal. The audience observed the interaction between Beuys and the hare, exploring themes of communication, perception, and resonance. By analyzing the formal elements of this work, we can provide a contextual analysis of the piece as a performance art.⁵

The formal elements applicable to this performance art piece include:

1. Space—The performance occurred in a small room in the gallery, contributing to the intimate atmosphere.
2. Time—The performance lasted several hours, with a slow and deliberate pace that allowed for contemplation.
3. Body—Beuys' body, movements, gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations were central to the performance.
4. Audience—The audience was invited to observe Beuys' interaction with the hare and consider their reactions to the work.
5. Symbolism—The dead hare symbolized death, and the act of explaining pictures to it explored issues of communication and understanding.

These formal elements enable us to contextualize Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* as a performance art piece. Considering when and where the artwork was made and displayed, as well as its intended audience, is crucial. As mentioned earlier, the performance took place in 1965 in Düsseldorf, Germany, during a time of great experimentation in the art world. Beuys was a key figure in the emerging movement of conceptual and performance art.

The audience likely consisted of art enthusiasts and critics interested in exploring new forms of artistic expression, including members of the Fluxus movement. This movement sought to blur the boundaries between art and life, valuing process and experience over traditional aesthetic concerns.

The location of the performance, in a gallery setting, is also significant. By staging the work in a commercial art space, Beuys challenged the notion that art should only exist in museums or other sanctioned institutions. In this sense, the performance can be seen as a critique of the art world itself and its role in shaping our perceptions of artistic merit. Another important contextual feature to consider is Beuys' personal background and philosophical beliefs. He was deeply interested in ideas of nature, spirituality, and social change, and these themes are often present in his work. The dead rabbit, for example, can be seen as a symbol of the natural world, while the act of explaining pictures to it is a commentary on the need for communication and understanding among all living beings.

Based on our analysis of Beuys' performance art piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, we believe that there are significant connections between Beuys' work and Chinese shamanic or totemic beliefs. In particular, we believe that the dead rabbit in Beuys' performance can be interpreted as a symbol of incarnation and spiritual energy.

To support this claim, let us take a closer look at the artwork itself. In the performance, Beuys covers the head of the dead rabbit with honey and gold leaves, emphasizing the transformative properties of natural materials. He then proceeds to communicate with the dead rabbit through sound, noise, and silence, suggesting a desire for understanding and connection with the spiritual world. In a 1965 interview, Beuys described the dead rabbit as an externalized part of himself, used to reactivate and integrate death into his artistic

practice. He believed that even a dead rabbit retained more intuitive power than some stubbornly rational human beings, suggesting a reverence for the natural world and the potential for spiritual energy within it. Furthermore, Beuys' choice of animals as his artistic material echoes the totemic beliefs of many indigenous cultures, including those found in China. These beliefs hold that animals possess a spiritual power and can serve as conduits for accessing the divine. Given these connections, we believe that Beuys' dead rabbit can be interpreted as a symbol of the exchange or claiming of the gift of "God" through the death of an external object. This is similar to the totemic beliefs of Chinese cultures, which hold that the sacrifice of an animal can bring about spiritual transformation and connection with the divine.

To further explore this interpretation, one could examine the ways in which Beuys' performance challenges our modern Western notions of art and spirituality, as in Section 5 below: "Mysterious Consciousness: Joseph Beuys and Chinese Shamanism". By incorporating natural materials and engaging with the dead rabbit, Beuys suggested a more holistic, interconnected view of the world and our place within it. This interpretation also raises important questions about the role of art in contemporary society and the potential for artistic practice to serve as a conduit for spiritual transformation and connection with the natural world.

5. Mysterious Consciousness: Joseph Beuys and Chinese Shamanism

As mentioned earlier, this study investigates the contributions of theorists from various academic fields to the research of the relationship between totems and art in religious culture. In the remainder of this article, my analysis of specific examples of Beuys' works highlights the role of animals as totems in theology and the striking similarities between witchcraft characteristics in totemic art and theological experiences. The thoughts of theologian Worley (2010, 2020) and four anthropologists have been thoroughly incorporated into this study.

Worley's (2010, 2020) research reveals surprising similarities between Beuys' art and the German theological vision of the post-war period. According to Worley, Beuys' artistic practice was both ridiculed and supported for its potential spirituality, leading mainstream critics to ignore or deliberately avoid the religious nature of his works (Worley 2010, p. 169). The anthropologists argue that the key question in Beuys' work is the following: How can we awaken our chaotic consciousness to new or forgotten potential, which may rejuvenate our existence in the present (Adams 1992; Jasinski 2019; Mesch 2017; Suquet 1995)? Up until now, the idea that Beuys' totemism evokes deep "self-consciousness" associated with theology has not been explored in this study.

The following is the scholars' interpretation of Beuys' witchcraft context. Mesch (2017) wrote, referring to Beuys' ritual space, "the ancient or pagan sacred space: the marked ritual space of animal bodies and fat forms may undergo a transformation, resulting in a space that, due to the arrangement of these bodies, is associated with the sacrifice of space, which is closely linked to animal sacrifices dating back to human antiquity" (pp. 33–35). In Mesch's view, Beuys' "threshold" or "sacred" space is somewhat analogous to Christian ecclesiastical space, and as such, his works often emulate prehistoric rituals as primitive moments of communal memory and salvation (Mesch 2017, pp. 33–35). Shamanic ritual practices and Buddhist meditation practices have similarities in that they both involve sharing spiritual energy with the surrounding nature or animals to develop a peaceful approach to mindfulness. Thus, Harlan (2017) argued that Beuys' ritual art was like the images of ancient rituals in an ineffable symbolic language.⁶

Beuys viewed the animal kingdom as an ally in the evolutionary process of broadening and deepening human consciousness in these ways. Horses, stags, elks, coyotes, foxes, swans, goats, bees, rabbits, and moose in his paintings, performances and sculptures represent the primal, pre-linguistic forces found in natural ecologies unaffected by civilization. According to him, the formulas in the animal world refer to the meanings of connections in nature, in the environment, and in the life forms that live alongside humans, about whom

we know so little. Furthermore, Beuys believed that animals could give us the forgotten spiritual energy required by human society now (Adams 1992, p. 30).

The above is a broad interpretation of Beuys' religious significance. Tillich defined this religion as "ultimately concerned with a person's existence, about his self and his world, about its meaning, its alienation, and its limitations" (Adams 2001, p. 311). Focusing on a divine, mystical, or sacred object, this ultimate concern transcends secular and ordinary realities. Beuys' aesthetic considerations of animal imagery, therefore, are not entirely separate from his ultimate concern for humanity. Instead, they convey his attentiveness to human existence, self, and the world's meaning, alienation, and limitations, while also reflecting his comprehension of divine, mystical, or sacred reality. Due to Beuys' representation of "Shaman etiquette" in ancient China and its sacrificial rituals, he responded to the proposition of "emotional factors" and "deity lowering ceremony" about witchcraft in a sense. Many titles in his works demonstrate his relationships with animals as totems: *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), *Hare's Grave (Hasengrab)* (1964/1979), and *Fat Chair* (1964). These titles evoke a sense of mysterious awe of primitive witchcraft toward gods. However, this sense of mysterious awe is not the psychological state of facing the "transcendental" objective existence of God but the mysterious sense of "being with God" (Li 2012, p. 29). "Magic force" is the source of this state. Beuys' titles, derived from the ancient "Shaman etiquette", are based on the emotional factors aroused by witchcraft and related sacrificial activities. However, he did not use witchcraft to oppress these gods, nor did he aim to simply intervene in nature through a set of witchcraft rituals, as Frey and other scholars have claimed. The focus of Beuys shifted from the transcendental "two worlds" in which God and man are separated to the "one world" in which man and God are not distinguished. Thus, he used animals as totems as an example and described the activities of spiritual sacrifice under the subconscious mind as the drama, which was also "the performance of an image of human inner mystery".

In response to the aforementioned definition of religious art in a narrow sense, Beuys did use the definition of religious art in a narrow sense. In the following section, the relationship between Beuys' animal totemic art and China's *shamanism rationalized* 巫史传统 will be discussed. Beuys primarily presents the emotional elements of Chinese "Shaman etiquette" contained in totemic art—the display and exposure of an irrational or unconscious strong emotion (Li 2012, p. 16).

5.1. Totemic Art and Shaman Etiquette

Taylor (2005) once noted that primitive art and its aesthetic thinking were fundamentally based on the concept of "image" and "reflection". In other words, primitive artists gave it a deified image based on the totemic belief of primitive ancestors or tribes—the concept of the soul. Beuys' art is also inspired by the worship of primitive religions in the Middle East and other regions in the Neolithic Period, which is a consensus among scholars. This point should be highlighted since primitive worship in ancient China was often closely related to ritual activities, such as Shaman and divination, which were primarily devoted to totem gods. Therefore, as a medium, totems not only convey religious content but also become psychological knowledge—emotional factors in "Shaman etiquette", the display of "unconscious" strong emotions (Li 2012, p. 14).

Beuys' totemic art did not originate entirely from primitive witchcraft activities. However, its basic spirit and main features were derived from them.

To demonstrate how Beuys' art draws inspiration from shamanism and totemism traditions around the world, including those ancient sacrificial rituals in Chinese culture with totemic gods as the main objects of worship, the following quotes from Beuys, as well as various art critics and historians, will be directly cited to prove the connection between Beuys' work and Chinese shamanism or totemism.

First, there are actually a few references to Beuys drawing connections between his work and Chinese shamanism or totemic beliefs.⁷ According to Beuys' recollection, he was severely injured and even near death in a plane crash. When he was in a state of blurred

consciousness and life-threatening condition, he felt someone applying warm grease to his body and wrapping him in felt to help him regain his body temperature. This symbolic experience was seen by Beuys as a miracle, akin to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although some art historians have raised doubts about Beuys' account, believing it to be a fabricated mystical event for the sake of his artwork and theoretical concepts, this experience had a profound impact on Beuys' work and ideas (Riegel 2013, pp. 65–71; Harlan 2017, p. 146).

Here, we must explicate the relationship between the Tatars and Chinese Mongolian shamans. The name Tatar is used in Western missionaries' accounts, Marco Polo's travelogue, and the Song Dynasty's *Brief Account of Tatars* 黑鞑事略 to describe the Mongol Empire in northern China. Meanwhile, shamanism was the primitive religion of ancient Mongolians, an ancient religion prevalent in Siberia and the Far East that was named after the shamans of each tribe of Tungusic-speaking ethnic groups. The content of shamanism includes ancestor worship, totem worship, and nature worship. It follows that totem worship is closely linked to the beliefs of the Tatars as mentioned by Beuys and cannot be separated from their faith. Therefore, Beuys established a connection between his use of materials such as felt and fat and their symbolic associations with protection and nourishment, which he believed are reflected in shamanistic traditions around the world.

Additionally, Beuys derived nourishment from the animal worship in shamanism and transformed it into an ally in human consciousness processes. "By these formulations concerning the animal world", he said, "I refer to the significance of the connections in nature, in the environment, with forms of life that live together with humans, and which we understand only poorly" (Adriani et al. 1979, p. 95; Adams 1992, p. 30). Beuys believed that humans, nature, and animals are interdependent and complementary, yet we often overlook their contribution to our spiritual energy. He also believed that only through aesthetic contemplation of animal images can we regain the wholeness of self-awareness and even establish true self-consciousness for the first time, thereby avoiding the binary opposition and fragmentation of human spiritual subject and object brought about by forgetting. While Beuys may not have explicitly stated that his work was related to Chinese shamanism or totemic beliefs, he did draw upon similar ideas and traditions in his artistic practice.

Secondly, some art critics and historians have proposed links between Beuys' works and Chinese shamanism or totemic belief. Geertz (2004) contended that depicting indigenous religion as primitive and irrational is the product of colonialism and Eurocentric bias. Geertz (2004) also examined the works of German artist Beuys, who utilized totem animals as a form of shamanism in his art. He believed that Beuys' work highlights the Western fascination with shamanism and its use in artistic expression. Similarly, Moffitt (2005) explored in his article "The Inspired Shaman-Artist: The Case of Beuys" how deeply influenced Beuys was by shamanic traditions, which he believed can serve as a means for social change. He posited that Beuys' work embodies the concepts of transformation and healing, which were central to shamanic ritual. Additionally, the article examined how Beuys' ideas about art as a form of spiritual practice align with traditional Chinese beliefs about the relationship between art and spirituality. Overall, these texts demonstrated that Beuys' works can be understood through the perspective of shamanism and totemism, which formed the foundation of his artistic philosophy.

This viewpoint is also supported by Harvey and Wallis (2015), who provided a comprehensive overview of shamanism from various cultural and historical perspectives in his book *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism*. It covered all aspects of shamanism, including its religious, social, and cultural influences, origins, and development. The book also examined the impact of shamanism on modern society and includes detailed entries on important figures, practices, and rituals related to shamanism from around the world. For example, notable figures include Beuys, who referred to himself as a shaman and depicted shamanic themes in some of his works.

Overall, these readings demonstrate how Beuys' art draws upon shamanic and totemic traditions from around the world, including those found in Chinese culture. Through close

readings of individual works, these authors provide nuanced and convincing arguments for the connections between Beuys' art and these traditions.

How are these two terms ("Shaman" and "etiquette") specifically converted and linked? Despite several pieces of related literature in China, with each having its own argument and conclusion, there is no unified conclusion. Here, I offer only a speculative conclusion. The key link to "Shaman etiquette" is the unconscious emotional factor in the ritual characteristics. Establishing this factor is crucial to creating a transformational environment.

From ancient times to the Middle Ages, the worship of gods, totems, and ancestors was unified in China. Historians have different opinions regarding the relationship between ancient Chinese gods and ancestors. Li (2012, p. 7) asserted, "the close connection between the two is almost universally recognized". According to Wang (1997), Guo (1962), Zhang (1994), and other scholars, the boundary between man and God is not separate but connected from top to bottom. Prior to the evolution of modern folk customs, ancestor worship continued to be practiced as a form of worship of ancient gods and ancestors.⁸ Based on Li (2012, p. 8)'s findings, the "connection", "correlation", and "integration" were realized through the way of shamanism in ancient times. The important feature of this "Shaman way" is that the emotional factors in the etiquette impart to the "gods" in the ceremony an incomparable and limitless nature of transcendental integration of the body and mind.

Generally, Shaman activities are manifestations of irrational or unconscious strong emotions possessed by wizards. Since strict formal norms are required in activities and operations... The above crazy emotions are strongly controlled by reason, making them develop into an emotional state of imagination, understanding, and cognition (Li 2012, p. 16).

However, few scholars realize that Whitehead's "unconscious ontology" is analogous to the emotional factors of Chinese "Shaman etiquette" in some respects.

In "Process and Reality", Whitehead presents a process philosophy, asserting the unconscious as the source of all existence and consciousness as its creation and perception. He terms the unconscious the "principle of creativity" and consciousness "prehension". Whitehead delves into the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious and their roles in experience. He argues that consciousness emerges from a fusion of physical and psychological operations, with physical sensations being components of any conscious perception. Additionally, he recognizes the unconscious' influence in forming experiential elements. Relevant citations follow:

"Here we maintain the doctrine that, in the analysis of the origination of any conscious feeling, some component physical feelings are to be found; and conversely, whenever there is consciousness, there is some component of conceptual functioning" (Whitehead 1978, p. 242).

"In awareness actuality, as a process in fact, is integrated with the potentialities which illustrate either what it is and might not be, or what it is not and might be... Consciousness is how we feel the affirmation-negation contrast. Conceptual feeling is the feeling of an unqualified negation; that is to say, it is the feeling of a definite eternal object with the definite extrusion of any particular realization" (Whitehead 1978, p. 243).

Mills (2014, p. 145) wrote in *Underworld: Philosophy of the Unconscious from Psychoanalysis to Metaphysics* that the most neglected aspect of Whitehead's metaphysics was the fact that it contained unconscious ontology. Substantial cosmology refers to the eternal process of unconscious experience. In another place, Mills (2014, p. 145) added, "In Whitehead's metaphysical system, he emphasized the unconscious process is the basis of human consciousness, though his concept continues to be marginalized". As a result, his process theory is dominated by unconscious forces, which form the transcendental foundation of all human experiences. Mills (2014, p. 152) implied that, in Whitehead's metaphysics, the

field of “unconsciousness” was in a state of “primitive abyss”. The “primitive abyss” is unconscious, but it is an organized unconscious system that eventually becomes conscious. Mills (2014, p. 152) emphasized that Whitehead’s ontology of unconscious infiltration was a hidden field in the field of human thought. In the field of human thought, such a “primitive abyss” is often the site of mysterious shamans.

According to Chinese mystical shamans, certain aspects of life can be controlled by mysterious or supernatural forces, such as spirit-subduing. In fact, this is exactly the most primitive and strengthened characteristic of our unconscious instinctual life that Whitehead implied. This primitive characteristic may return in the “pressure” period. Gong Pengcheng quoted the contents of *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字 regarding the deity lowering ceremony in shamanism as an example and explained his reasoning:

Occasionally, I feel as if another spiritual master enters my body, although I am still me. During this time, the original subject abdicates or conceals, and another subject guides me to act or speak, a process known as “spirit subduing”. All religions share the same holy experience. Holy Spirit is full, Buddha is in the heart, God is with me, and so forth, but the words are different. In all cases, they fall under the Shaman category. It is this deity that replaces my original spirit; after being subdued and possessed, people believe all words and deeds are no longer my own but belong to “him”, another specific actor (Gao 2015, p. 16).

As Beuys seemingly agreed, deity lowering is a dynamic process of shaping the world—a dynamic, passionate “one world” without distinction between man and God—by emotional factors in “Shaman etiquette”. Thus, he chose a warm material to demonstrate his artistic posture. In an interview, he explained his choice of the beehive of the animal kingdom as follows:

Beuys’ use of honey as a material in his artwork is justified by its symbolic meaning. According to Adams (1992),⁹ the beehive represents a sense of collective warmth and fosters collaboration among humans and with the natural environment. This symbol of the beehive promotes harmony and synergy in a non-hierarchical manner. Similarly, the stag serves as a symbol of inner strength. Its majestic appearance, with blood flowing through its branching antlers, signifies the life force that connects the heart to the head. This connection imbues the stag with heightened spiritual awareness and intuition.

In addition to honey, Beuys incorporated other materials such as felt, beeswax, gelatin, and fat in his work. These materials not only refer to ecological energy sources but also represent fundamental forces that shape the world and define reality¹⁰ (Adams 1992).

In fact, in Beuys’ artistic context, this world-shaping energy is an “emotion”, and it is also called Kant’s “hyperactivity” emotion, a pleasant, expansive, instinctive excitement aiming to enhance our vitality, like a stimulant (William 2017, p. 500). This is the major reason why he chose animal blood as a metaphor for the emotional factors. Only when the “blood” is expanded or released and flows from the feet to the heart, much like opening a door, through which we flow to the gods or God and accept their or his influence, is our destiny transformed. Ultimately, our existence becomes a significant component of the universe. In addition to blood, other warm materials, such as beeswax, can also be used as energy sources to shape the world.

Beuys presented a phenomenon in which shamans in ancient China were dominant and merged with gods in terms of imagination and emotion. It is because he chose warm materials, such as beeswax, for the “threshold” or “sacred” space created by his art that the viewer still recognizes a fact that cannot be ignored or escaped. Since each of us has a mysterious primitive state, it is important to abandon our habitual thinking and study the characteristics of Whitehead’s primitive spiritual experience: “These characteristics mysteriously shaped our own nature—these periods were the products of returning to a certain primitive state... These feelings and emotions are closely related to the original function of ‘expansion’. Anger, hatred, fear, terror, attraction, love, hunger, desire, and great enjoyment are all closely connected with these feelings and emotions” (Mills 2014, p. 154). Our unconscious thinking is activated by insight and intuition, and we can feel

other energies, and we can become an important part of the energy that shapes our world. In the future, this will be of great importance.

5.2. Totemic Art and Sacrificial Activities

According to the previous section, the key to transforming “Shaman” into “etiquette” in Beuys’ totemic art is the “unconscious emotional factors” in “Shaman etiquette”. Nevertheless, there is a crucial link—“sacrifice”. A “sacrifice” activity often involves singing and dancing and ceremonies over the course of a long history. Through the practice of “sacrifice”, primitive Shaman activities include various practices and taboo rules of totem worship, which have been incorporated into a set of definite ritual rules followed by all members of the society. However, in Beuys’ animal totem worship, the original external rituals of shaman sacrificial practices are gradually replaced by internal psychological practices. He prevented our inner spirit from falling into modern Western anthropocentrism, which was originally the logical product of the medieval Western belief in a God-centered universe. When God’s authority is denied, people become the center and master. However, “China’s *Shamanism rationalized* 巫史传统 is not anthropocentrism”, Li (2012, p. 94) emphasized, “it simply preaches harmony between man and nature (‘God’)”.

Some scholars suggested that shamans actually oppressed and interfered with gods rather than pleased gods, as described by Frey in the translation of *Golden Bough* and by Malinowski in the translation of *Shaman, Science, Religion and Myth*. The essential difference between shamanism and religion lies in the “direct establishment of human subjectivity” (Li 2012, p. 95). In addition, the German idealist philosopher Hegel stated the same regarding the unconscious dialectical structure in the 19th century. According to him, an individual must independently unify his or her conflicting selves gradually to transform into a sacred, higher spiritual self.

Beuys’ sacrificial activities of animal images are somewhat similar to Hegel’s mysterious spiritual rites described above—the subconscious self-sacrificial activities of humans. Although Beuys’ animal totems represent death, they portray internal psychological images that are unique to the mysterious “Shaman etiquette”.

According to Beuys’ interview in 1965, the dead rabbit is an externalized part of himself (also representing human beings); that is, it is used to reactivate and integrate death, which is the abstract thought of objects now existing outside of him. Even a dead rabbit appears to possess more intuitive power than some stubborn rationalists (Adams 1992, p. 30). Thus, the rabbit is literally defined as an avatar, which can only be understood through living intuitively. Using animals as art materials, Beuys believed that only animals could provide the lost spiritual energy that human society requires today. While Beuys himself was not a shaman in the literal and authentic sense, his artworks and performances aimed to evoke and explore the essence of shamanism, making him an artist deeply influenced by shamanic traditions. To better understand the deep mysterious structure of his animal images, his so-called forgotten spiritual energy needs to be deciphered.

Primitive witchcraft, including totem worship, can be regarded as a collective unconscious avatar to some extent. Whether they are a world soul or a precipitation of human experience, they serve as cultural identity, fueling the myth of the collective nation, internalized on the original level as representations (on behalf of the collective), desires, and conflicts. In our view, Beuys’ rabbit suggests that the gift of “God” is exchanged or obtained through the death of the external part of human consciousness—an abstract concept of “object” existing externally.

Moreover, his thinking echoes Hegel’s theory of the dialectical structure of the unconscious. In detail, the rabbit’s process of individuation dies and reincarnates until it is reunited with consciousness and a certain level of unconsciousness. In the process of individuation, conflicting egos gradually unify, resulting in a higher level. Therefore, physical reality is transformed into a divine, higher spiritual reality. This is the process that is truly about the higher self and its symbolic meaning. Furthermore, Hegel clarified that the death of the pure “I”, if that is what we call unreality, is the most terrible of all things and

requires the greatest power to be grasped. In contrast, the life of the Holy Spirit is not one that shrinks from death and is not harmed by destruction but one that endures death and maintains itself in death. The truth can only be gained when it is completely dismembered.

Hegel described the dialectical structure of the unconscious as follows:

The detailed exposition of the Notion of this spiritual unity in its duplication Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as another being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. It must supersede this otherness of itself. This is the supersession of the first ambiguity and is therefore itself a second ambiguity. First, it must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its own self, for this other is itself. This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return *into itself*. For first, through the supersession, it receives back its own self, because, by superseding *its* otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free (Hegel 2018, pp. 178–81).

Hegel posited that the unconscious represented a pure process, an ever-evolving, purposeful, and unbound activity of becoming.

For Hegel, the unconscious is pure process, a changing, flexible and purposeful activity of becoming. As the very foundation, structure and organizing principles of the unconscious are informed by the movement of the dialectic, the architecture of the abyss is continually being reshaped and exalted as each dialectical conflict is sublated by passing into a new form, that in turn restructures, reorganizes, and refurbishes the interior contours of the core Self. Therefore, the structural foundations of the self are never static or inert, but always in dialectical movement, which has its origin and source in the unconscious, revamping the framework in which spirit emanates (Mills 2014, p. 33).

If we consider that Hegel is referring to the fact that our subconscious mind frustrates itself while destroying itself, we can understand his statement. Our subconscious gives itself life while it self-destructs. The abyss itself experiences its own loss, and when it feels the soul, it falls into despair over its own death. This is a pain that must be endured and maintained, even though the abyss remembers and feels its own pain. However, it is through this negative attitude that progress is achieved. Perhaps our subconscious must master its pain and death in order to be happy in elevation.

Thus, Beuys' totemic art—*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*—is not a desecration of the corpse. Instead, it reminds the audience—our subconscious minds—that only through a dialectical conflict between death and life can our souls be more fully refreshed.

6. Conclusions

Beuys' artistic influence has resonated with many artists, including the globally renowned Kiefer and the vanguard of the Chinese avant-garde circle. This resonance was particularly evident during the height of the "85" art trend. Beuys' artistic practice embodies the spirit of the times, permeating numerous intellectual discussions and scholarly debates. However, Beuys' persona exudes an enigmatic quality, similar to that of a wizard or shaman.

Drawing from the complex interplay between ancient sovereignty and totemic rites, Beuys created his most celebrated artwork, the evocative *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Beuys' works represent a renewal of totemic symbols in contemporary practice. He is not a practicing shaman himself but an artist who seeks to re-examine and reinterpret shamanic principles through his art. Totem symbols are characterized by unique animal

images. However, the author does not describe the common narrative associated with totem religion. Instead, they focus on the essence of early mystical shamanic views in the ancient totem age, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Finally, this paper discusses the interpretation of the concepts behind Beuys' artwork. While ecological, anthropological, and political perspectives are valuable in interpreting Beuys' work, this paper proposes an alternative approach from the perspective of Chinese totem worship and sacrifice. Beuys' work is not solely concerned with human ecology and social environments, but also involves a deeper sense of self-awareness associated with humanity. This perspective is parallel to theological concerns.

Based on our experience, witchcraft rituals embody self-sacrifice activities that are connected to the human subconscious mind. The example of Beuys demonstrates that totemic art has a place in contemporary art. In Western contemporary art, totemic culture has not received the attention it deserves, and instead, it has been combined with the broader category of primitive religious art. Therefore, it is particularly intriguing to explore the relationship between totemic art and Shaman etiquette, sacrificial behavior, and theological self-consciousness.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Taylor Worley, as well as the four anonymous reviewers, for their constructive suggestions and criticism regarding this paper. Additionally, I extend my thanks to my supervisor, Zhilong Yan, for providing valuable feedback on the early versions of this work. Lastly, I appreciate Evelyn Zeng for her continuous involvement and encouragement throughout the submission process of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ "Shaman etiquette" refers to a set of complex codes of conduct derived from witchcraft dances, shaman activities, and other sacrificial activities. See [Li \(2012, p. 14\)](#).
- ² The term "experience" is prone to misinterpretation; in gratitude for the anonymous reviewer's input, I have specifically employed "participation" in the footnote to avoid confusion and ambiguity. By participation, I refer to Beuys' interest in the symbolic, ritualistic, and transformative aspects of totemic art, which he integrated into his artistic practice.
- ³ [Elkins \(2004\)](#) argues that "some individuals believe that modern art, such as that produced by Pollock, cannot possess a religious quality because it may subvert the goals of modernism itself. However, Pollock's works, such as 'Man/Woman' and 'She-Wolf', which contain mythical themes, provide support for religious ideas despite the fact that modernism inherently conceals religious thought. Pollock's ideas represent one of the most significant topics in the history of 20th-century religion. Abstract expressionism effectively replaces explicit symbols and narratives with incommunicable personal and non-linguistic gestures. Although many religious artists, such as Mark Chagall and Georges Rouault, Paul Klee, Barnett Newman, or Mark Rothko, belong to this category, the first generation of abstract painters were religious or spiritual and did not shy away from discussing religious themes".
- ⁴ Relationships between Eastern philosophies, spirituality, and totemic beliefs of ancient Chinese witchcraft and shamanism are neither strictly uniform nor antagonistic. Instead, they represent a complex web of interactions and evolution. Certain Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions, such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, bear the influence of, or have absorbed elements from, these totemic beliefs. For instance, elements of witchcraft surface in Taoist immortals, talismans, and magical instruments. Shamanistic features manifest in Buddhist concepts of bodhisattvas, dharma protectors, and reincarnations. Confucian rituals, ceremonies, and filial piety exhibit links to totemic beliefs. While borrowing from ancient Chinese witchcraft and shamanism, these Eastern traditions have also refined and elevated them to align with their unique theories and values.
- ⁵ In gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for raising the question regarding the relationship between interpretive action and conceptual art, I offer a cogent response: Both art forms prioritize the ideas and concepts underlying the work, rather than aesthetics or traditional artistic techniques. While Beuys' performances may share certain characteristics with ritualistic ceremonies, such as incorporating symbols, gestures, and elements from shamanism and totemic beliefs, their intentions and contexts differ. Ritu-

als are typically part of religious or cultural traditions, whereas Beuys' performances serve as artistic expressions that challenge and stimulate thought on the ideas being explored.

- 6 "A number of Beuys' artistic acts have a resemblance to rituals... Their presentation is similar to a sacrificial or magical image. These almost ritual acts... he believes are not mysterious processes, but unspeakable symbolic languages, and in order to convey the meanings of these works, he utilizes refined language". See, [Harlan \(2017, p. 149\)](#).
- 7 Totemism and shamanism embody a primal religion, characterized by an animistic belief in the eternal nature of souls and the spiritual essence of all things. This belief system encompasses not only nature worship, but also totem and ancestor veneration, replete with specific devotional content and ritualistic practices.
- 8 Various opinions exist regarding the relationship between the ancient Chinese gods and ancestors, see ([Wang 1997](#); [Guo 1962](#); [Zhang 1994](#)).
- 9 In fact, I have paraphrased the statement from [Adams \(1992, p. 30\)](#) to support my argument, and have made it clear by citing the author's name and corresponding page number. Obtaining firsthand information from Beuys in this region of China was exceedingly difficult, thus I have resorted to secondary sources in search of direct interview records relating to Beuys. To avoid misleading readers, I have included a footnote disclosing the purpose of indirect quotation, and express gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for their reminder.
- 10 According to [Harlan \(2017\)](#), the content of "social sculpture" and its associated ternary social mechanism has been discussed in greater detail in the book *Soziale Plastik, Materialien zu Beuys*, Achberg, 1985 by Rappman and Schata, along with the references available. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. There will be an implementation of the reviewers' suggestions in the next article. However, in this paper, I will only point out the most important points and not go into more detail.

References

- Adams, David. 1992. Beuys, Joseph—Pioneer of a radical ecology. *Art Journal* 51: 26–34. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Adams, David. 2001. Theological Expressions through Visual Art Forms. In *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*. Edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. New York: Continuum, pp. 311–18.
- Adriani, Gotz, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas. 1979. *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*. Translated by Patricia Lech. Woodbury: Barron's Educational Series.
- Artaud, Antonin. 1961. Sorcellerie et cinema. In *Œuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, vol. 3.
- Ban, Lingsheng 班陵生. 2015. "Rhetoric" left by Joseph Beuys in art history 约瑟夫·博伊斯留给艺术史的“修辞手法”. *New Art* 36: 87–92.
- Boas, Franz. 1989. *Primitive Art*. Translated by Jin Hui 金辉. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Cao, Jing 曹靖. 2007. *Cen Jiawu and the Quasi-Study of the History of Totem Art* 岑家梧及《图腾艺术史》之准研究. Database of the China Knowledge Network. Wuhan: Hubei Academy of Fine Arts.
- Cen, Jiawu 岑家梧. 1986. *The History of Totem Art* 图腾艺术史. Shanghai: Xuelin Publishing House.
- Conley, Katharine. 2013. Sleeping gods in surrealist collections. *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 67: 6–24. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Crowley, Martin. 2013. Bernard Stiegler Goes Seal-Hunting with Joseph Beuys. *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 49: 45–59. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- de Guzmán, Diana Angoso. 2018. La materia viva: Oro, alquimia y sanación en Elena del Rivero and Joseph Beuys. *Espacio Tiempo y Forma. Serie VII, Historia del Arte* 6: 429–50. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Elkins, James. 2004. *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. Oxfordshire: Routledge. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Frazer, James George. 1998. *The Golden Bough: A Study of Witchcraft and Religion*. Beijing: Popular Literature and Arts Press.
- Gao, Guofa 高国藩. 2015. *General History of Chinese Witchcraft* 中国巫术通史. Nanjing: Phoenix Press.
- Garza, Marcela Quiroga. 2018. Joseph Beuys: Una visión de las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas y sus posibilidades políticas. *Calle14: Revista de Investigación en el Campo del Arte* 13: 332–42.
- Geertz, Armin W. 2004. Can we move beyond primitivism? On recovering the indigenes of indigenous religions in the academic study of religion. In *Beyond Primitivism*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, pp. 53–86.
- Guo, Moruo 郭沫若. 1962. *Collection of Moruo's Works* 沫若文集. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Gyorody, Andrea. 2014. The medium and the message: Art and politics in the work of Joseph Beuys. *Sixties-A Journal of History Politics and Culture* 7: 117–37. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Harlan, Falkel. 2017. *What Is Art?—A Conversation between Beuys and a Student*. Translated by Han Zizhong. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Harvey, Graham, and Robert. J. Wallis. 2015. *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- He, Xingliang 何星亮. 2008. *Totem and Chinese Culture* 图腾与中国文化. Jiangsu: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1998. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. New York: Oxford University Press on Demand, vol. 1.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2018. *Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jasinski, Isabel. 2019. The ashes of Beuys in Bellatin and the ritual of the dead hare: Articulations of the human and the animal by artistic language. *Caracol* 17: 137–69. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kull, Anne. 2014. How to ask questions about art and theology? The example of Paul Tillich. *Baltic Journal of Art History* 7: 59–80. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- LeWitt, Sol. 1967. Paragraphs on conceptual art. *Artforum* 5: 79–83.

- Li, Zhehou 李哲厚. 2012. *Shamanism Rationalized 巫史传统*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing.
- Liu, Qiang 刘强. 2022. *Research on Joseph Beuys' Art Thought 约瑟夫·博伊斯艺术思想研究*. Database of the China Knowledge Network. Chengdu: Sichuan Normal University.
- Lu, Chuan 卢川. 2005. Who is Beuys—Commentary on the German artist Joseph Beuys 谁是波伊斯——德国艺术家约瑟夫·波伊斯评传. *Northwest Fine Arts* 1: 34–35. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Mesch, Claudia. 2017. *Joseph Beuys*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Mesle, C. Robert. 2008. *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*. New Brunswick: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Mills, Jon. 2014. *Underworlds: Philosophies of the Unconscious from Psychoanalysis to Metaphysics*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Moffitt, John Francis. 2005. The Inspired Shaman-Artist: The Case of Joseph Beuys. In *Inspiration: Bacchus and the Cultural History of a Creation Myth*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 303–24.
- Morgan, David. 2005. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Myers, Fred. 2019. The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary Forms of Religious Life. *Material Religion* 15: 512–13. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Ottomann, Christian, Peter L. Stollwerck, Hans Maier, Ian Gatty, and Thomas Muehlberger. 2010. Joseph Beuys: Trauma and catharsis. *Medical Humanities* 36: 93–96. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Riegel, Hans Peter. 2013. *Beuys Die Biographie*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag.
- Suquet, Annie. 1995. Archaic thought and ritual in the work of Joseph Beuys. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 28: 148–62. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Thompson, Chris. 2011. *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tylor, Edward Burnett. 2005. *Primitive Culture*. Translated by Lian Shusheng. Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Wallis, Robert J. 2003. *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasies, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Wang, Guowei 王国维. 1997. *Collected Works of Wang Guowei 王国维文集*. Beijing: China Literature and History Press.
- Wen, Yiduo 闻一多. 2006. *Fu Xikao 伏羲考*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1978. *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- William, James. 2017. *Experiences of Religion in all Their Forms: A Study of Human Nature*. Translated by Xinjian Shang 尚新建. Beijing: Business Printing Press.
- Worley, Taylor. 2010. *Theology and Contemporary Visual Art: Making Dialogue Possible*. St Andrews: University of St Andrews.
- Worley, Taylor. 2020. Life after Death Joseph Beuys and Re-Enchantment. In *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art: Theologies of Lament and Hope*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Xiao, Weisheng 肖伟胜. 2022. Wave School and the Generation of Conceptual Art 激浪派与观念艺术的生成. *Jiangxi Social Sciences* 42: 97–109+207.
- Ye, Shuxian 叶舒宪. 2007. *Xiong Toteng 熊图腾*. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press.
- Yi, Shanbing 易善炳. 2020. Joseph Beuys' self-constructed artistic metaphor 约瑟夫·博伊斯自我构建的艺术隐喻. *Northwest Fine Arts* 1: 68–74. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Zhang, Guangzhi 张光直. 1994. *The Bronze Age of China 中国青铜器时期*. Taipei: Lianjing Publishing Company.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.