

Article

# McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians

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**Abstract:** Looking at different disciplines in the humanities as water-tight compartments is doing a great disservice to knowledge; a comparative angle can do much to solve the situation. History shows how literature and the visual arts have been prone to mutual contagion. This essay will briefly examine a few examples of how performance art was approached by the literary realm during the second half of the 20th century compared to how it was done within the visual arts, and more specifically, regarding non-human creatures. To achieve this purpose, a performance carried out by writer Michael McClure during the 1960s will be collated with two further actions by visual artists who were prominent during the 1970s and 1990s, respectively. The three actions involved animals or pondered on how humans relate to animals and their environment. They differently addressed issues that are still being discussed today and questioned the status quo through their approaches towards animality. A comparative methodology will be used to assess these works under the light of recent publications. Discrepancies in these artworks from the ecocritical ethics and aesthetics viewpoint show a whole different perspective to the topics discussed and provide a worthy contribution to a comparative assessment of performance art.

**Keywords:** animals; beat generation; ecocriticism; comparative literature; white shamanism



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## 1. Cursed Hippies and Cannibal Spaniards

As he mourned a pod of orca whales slaughtered by American G.I.s stationed in Iceland, Michael McClure cried “Goya!” (McClure 1955). The invocation to the Spanish genius who painted *The Executions* in 1814 was contained in his poem *For the Death of 100 Whales*, which was read at the Six Gallery in 1955. There, McClure equated Goya’s gruesome prints from *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820) or perhaps his series of paintings called “cuadros de capricho e invención”—describing atrocities he witnessed in his time, such as anthropophagy—to a contemporary massacre of non-terrestrial beings (Valtierra 2016). There was a war in Vietnam, and a war was being waged against whales in Iceland too; thus, McClure’s invocation of Goya equaled the killing of wild animals with fratricide and cannibalism. The event at the Six Gallery was McClure’s first poetry reading, and it is safe to say that not only did ecology and the visual arts represent two extremely early concerns in McClure’s artistic output, but they also permeated the foundational event of the Beat Generation. Both interests were, again, strongly present in an action McClure carried out ten years later at the San Francisco zoo, where he read the poem *Tantra No. 49* to four caged lions (McClure 2021). In *Tantra No. 49*, the author uses the archaic forms ‘thou’ and ‘thy’ to address animals; such usage is still common today in the religious context. Choosing those pronouns to address wild animals reveals a stance of intense respect toward them, which is also apparent in the rest of the poems contained in the book. McClure’s reading to lions in 1965 has rarely been considered an action of interest neither to fine arts nor to English departments, with the latter quite out of their depth when trying to analyze such artifacts. Contemporary art critics are also often unaware of analytical tools outside of their area of expertise. Even if McClure’s action has been described as a “poetry stunt” by the media (Cerinio 2013) and his visual artworks were overlooked by art connoisseurs of his time, he

did initiate a discussion that performance artists from subsequent decades furthered and is of interest to ecocriticism.

In *The Green Ghost: William S. Burroughs and the Ecological Mind* (2016), Chad Weidner extended to narrative Randy Malamud's criteria for studying the relationships between humans and animals in poetry as presented in the first part of Malamud's *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (2003). Such criteria, which shape an ecocritical stance toward literature, may prove useful in the realm of the visual arts and will be considered in this analysis of McClure's action in relation to two other performance artworks from subsequent decades. Randy Malamud himself is not foreign to the visual arts and critically examines, for instance, Damian Hirst's sculptures featuring dead animals in part I of his book (Malamud 2009, pp. 46–48); using his criteria to examine performance art is likewise justified and moreover, it does make sense. This essay will briefly examine a few examples of how performance art was approached by the literary realm during the second half of the 20th century in comparison to how it was done within the fine arts milieu, and more expressly, regarding non-human creatures. A hybrid methodology will be used, combining criteria hauled from linguistics (for instance, with descriptors as 'motivated' vs. 'arbitrary', or 'marked' vs. 'unmarked'), institutional critique, and aesthetics. It will also test ecocriticism as a focal theory to examine artworks displaying ecological concerns. The methodology proposed here is justified given the complexity of the other two artworks examined in this paper by Joseph Beuys and Oleg Kulik. In 1974, an action by the German artist Joseph Beuys took place in New York. Beuys' second visit to the United States was brief but well-planned: as soon as he landed at Kennedy airport, he was wrapped in a felt blanket, entered an ambulance to avoid touching American soil (presumably to protest Vietnam war), and was driven to René Block Gallery. There, he shared time with a coyote in a caged room for approximately a week. Beuys was absorbed during his performance in striking up a relationship with the animal. After allegedly being able to hug the coyote, Beuys triumphantly got back on the ambulance, still wrapped in his blanket, headed for the airport, and left the States. Joseph Beuys shares with Michael McClure an interest in spirituality and transformation, and both their performances bring attention to how humans relate to animals, which makes them worthy of study also by ecocriticism. Further reading suggested by fellow Beat scholar Ian MacFadyen turned the spotlight over Oleg Kulik's work with performance art, with several actions where becoming animal was the underlying idea. Kulik's prominence during the 1990s was owed partially to scandal; a good example of it was his performance piece *Doghhouse*, which for instance disrupted the *Interpol* exhibition celebrated in Stockholm during the *Manifesta I* biennale (1996). Even if the exhibition displayed visual signs warning that should patrons trespass the artist's boundaries, they would be liable to a dangerous response on his part, the *Interpol* organizers opted for calling the police after Kulik bit a visitor during the exhibition vernissage. The real scandal was not Kulik's performance but an evident lack of communication within the *Interpol* collaborative project, mainly between curatorial teams and artists representing East and West. Should readers need further information on *Interpol*, the Russian curator Viktor Missiano wrote an excellent chronicle on the subject (Misiano 2005). A specific version of the *Doghhouse* action will be examined in this paper, as it was intended to be a response to Beuys' performance from 1974. After this very concise introduction, a comparative methodology will be applied to the three artworks involved using the following formal markers: title, venue, duration and iteration, props, and discourse/intention. The last two markers proposed (i.e., discourse/intention) are recurrent descriptors in contemporary art but less common in literary studies. Whilst intention is widely used and abused in contemporary art as a descriptor, intention remains a debatable factor in literature analysis; it will be pondered precisely in connection with discourse, since both are structural elements in contemporary art that are often overlooked by literary criticism. Since non-representational writing and writing heavily tinged by conceptualism certainly call for a supplementary discourse and further explanation on the writer's part, these markers are shared both by literature and the visual arts, even if they are rarely examined comparatively. After

analyzing the three actions proposed using the markers determined hereby, an ecocritical standpoint will be tested, and a few conclusions will be offered for further study.

## 2. On Titles: Where Are Skin-Walkers When You Need Them?

The first issue that called my attention as someone trained in the Fine Arts is that McClure's action does not have a title. As simple an explanation as it may sound, that is probably one of the reasons it has been rarely considered a performance artwork. Titles became essential after the onset of non-representational art during the 20th century, with later developments as conceptual art and minimalism. Titles and artists' statements helped clarify the meaning of artworks or pointed toward the intention behind them. McClure's action, even if possibly unintentionally affiliated to the visual arts, does display a few elements of consequence within that province. How he chose to carry out his action at that specific site displays a sculptural awareness of sound, space, time, and his approach may certainly qualify as visionary in picking wild caged animals as an audience. Even if McClure's action lacked a title, his poem did have one: *Tantra No. 49*. The word 'Tantra' refers to a spiritual system. 'Tantra' also means 'to weave' in Sanskrit and allegedly addresses the idea that everything is connected. As for the origin of the word, Tantric Master Shri Aghorinath Ji writes: "The word tantra is derived from two words, tattva and mantra. Tattva means the science of cosmic principles, while mantra refers to the science of mystic sound and vibrations. Tantra, therefore, is the application of cosmic sciences with a view of attaining spiritual ascendancy" (Shri 2018). A brave 'beast language' is displayed in the self-published *Ghost Tantras* (1964), which is the title of the book containing *Tantra No. 49*, wherein the poet's tongue acknowledges divinity within animality. If read aloud, the poem's guttural sounds do impact the reader on a physical level; McClure's 'beast language' owes so much to Chaucer as it does to avant-garde sound poetry:

Grahhr! Grahhr! Grahhr! Grahhr! Grahhr. Grahhr.  
 Grahhr-grahhr! Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr.  
 Grahhr. Grahhr! Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr.  
 Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr. (McClure 1964)

I asked Louise Landes Levi, a poet who belongs to the Beat lineage and is a devoted student and translator of Mirabei and Renè Daumal, what might McClure mean by the title *Ghost Tantras*. This is what she had to say about the word 'tantra' and McClure's book title:

Tantra refers in the Hindu system to heretical text outside the domain of the four Veda, in which the Shakti or female principle is the gate to liberation. In the Buddhist [ . . . ] tantra refers to teachings transmitted by Shakyamuni Buddha on planes other than the material (human) one, i.e., dreams, visions, spontaneous appearances in the sky, in water, in the elements, but not based on their material principle. The Maha Siddhas in the Tibetan tradition all received their teachings in this way, teachings that led to liberation [ . . . ] so to get back to our hero, our human hero, he might be referring to ghosts, to non-human spirits which he believed were informing his poetry, he may or may not have been informed regarding the Tibetan tradition. In India, of course, the tantras also refer to the tantriks, those who practiced the left-hand path (the five Ms) absolutely forbidden in the Brahmanic (vedic) tradition. (Louise Landes Levi, Facebook message to author, 9 December 2020. Landes Levi suggested the author studying a glossary included in her translation of the love poems of Mirabai, with clear definitions of 'mantra' and 'tantra'.)

Thus, an element of transgression is added to previous nuances (i.e., a connection with nature and spirituality) associated with McClure's book and poem. Going further into his

action, from all the things a visitor is supposed to do at a zoo, roaring a poem at caged lions is not one of them; thus, an actual transgressive element was featured in McClure's action. While on further inspection, the title *Tantra No. 49* reveals the poet's concern with sound and spiritual progress, reading it to caged lions portrays not only a tantric willingness to find divinity within oneself but also within the animal kingdom. Even so, such willingness is not apparent in the title, which remains somewhat cryptic. Unlike McClure's, Beuys' performance did have a title, which was *I Like America and America Likes Me*. At first glance, the title does not convey much information about the work in question or Beuys' position toward ecology, which he explained in several lectures during his first visit to the USA in 1973. While Beuys' action was part of a wider project and very likely intended to be understood within that context (namely, according to his artistic discourse), this paper must consider performance artworks not only in extenso or broadly, but also narrowly. It is true that Beuys' commitment to ecology was substantiated through activism and his key role as one of the initiators of a 1978 discussion to create of the German Green Party, but the title he chose for his coyote performance amounts to a bold statement about the author's alleged powers of seduction, not only regarding a hypothetical receiver but an entire nation. The title does not really provide any information about the work per se but merely announces some nebulous intention and pitches the author's public persona to the intended receivers of his artwork. Oleg Kulik's title *I Bite America and America Bites Me* is substantially more informative than Beuys' (and McClure's) about what the viewer is to expect. Kulik's title opts for using appropriation and applies the metalinguistic function of language to art. The title is self-explanatory, ironic, reflexive, and addresses Beuys' performance agonistically. It shows aggression and humor—or a dark strain of it—which sets the piece in a better position than those previously mentioned as titles are concerned.

### 3. On Venues: "Nature Is to Zoos as God Is to Churches"

Margaret Atwood wrote the analogy above in *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood 2003). It very much summarizes why McClure's action took place in a zoo and still referred to spirituality. A zoo is not a neutral, unmarked, place, but it is quite a distinct location; moreover, it is related or pertinent if the content of the artwork is considered. McClure performed his poem and performed the zoo as a space where animals were caged. The animals and their imposed space were set in conversation with McClure's voice and poetry. Given the content of the poem, his action made sense and clearly had an aesthetic organizing principle behind it. Not only did his action supplement the poem, providing a new layer of meaning and thus a new viable reading of the text; it was also a performance artwork in its own right, which is a logic that has been previously pointed out regarding how recordings and graphical materials produced by other Beat writers, such as William S. Burroughs, supplement his texts besides being artworks (Bonome 2018). Three locations are used in Beuys's action, which contains a classical narrative structure (introduction, core, denouement). Those locations are an airport, an ambulance, and an art gallery. The introduction and denouement occur at the airport, which is the first location to consider. Beuys is not like the rest of travelers in transit; he is covering his eyes (only wants to see the coyote), carries a shepherd's crook, and is accompanied by an entourage to an ambulance (does not want to tread on American soil). Before laying him on the ambulance stretcher, he is wrapped by his team in a felt blanket. International airports (as airport JFK, in Beuys' action) provide travelers with several reasons to get nervous. Travelers may arrive late for departure and miss their flights, or worse, they can get stopped by customs or even get in trouble with immigration authorities on arrival. An ambulance is the second location. Both airports and ambulances are associated with anxiety and produce estrangement from reality in the work, but—apart from being two well-known sources of pollution—their role as signifiers remains unclear. Ambulances are usually associated with illness and fatality, and they become stressful when their emergency light and sound alarm devices are on. Both airports and ambulances are transitional spaces, they are far from neutral, and they are often associated with stressful situations and transformative experiences.

They also stand as two clear symbols of post-Fordist economy as contemporary means of transportation, and they can be dangerous at times. An art gallery is the third location; the core of the action occurs there. The gallery is the main scenario for a crisis between Beuys and a coyote, which if some accounts are to be believed, climaxes with Beuys hugging the animal. A gallery affords a neutral scenario ready for resignification and profit. God is to churches as art is to galleries, one might say. Seeing an artwork in a gallery is one of the most obvious ways to recognize any contemporary artifact as an artwork, and using a gallery is something McClure did not do. It is interesting how Beuys juxtaposes three elements that initially appear arbitrarily chosen to convey what appears to be a complex message; even so, the most obvious problem with Beuys' site election is that a gallery is not the appropriate place to confine a wild animal. Oleg Kulik's notoriety owes much to several performances where he acted as a dog. Kulik performed a similar dog action in 1997 under the title *I Bite America and America Bites Me* (*Я кусаю Америку, Америка кусает меня*), in cooperation with Mila Bredikhina. Kulik's performance takes a critical stance toward Joseph Beuys' coyote action, among other subjects that will be examined below. The venue where Kulik's action took place was the Deitch Projects gallery in New York. Location in Kulik's performances is something to be aware of; while galleries usually try to provide an unmarked, neutral space to be charged by displaying cultural artifacts, Kulik's project is heavily influenced by institutional critique, which reflects on the housing of art, its social function, and all the elements that conform the art system. Kulik initially came into notoriety by carrying out his dog action outside art exhibitions, disrupting them. He began by parasitizing exhibition displays as if they were readymade objects to be resignified by his performance art. In this way, he gained entry in the contemporary art circuit, being formally invited to participate in group exhibitions. Then, he managed to show his artworks in biennales and finally was granted access to the upper echelons of the art market. Repetition with slight variation was key in Kulik's strategy, with one of his reiterative actions being included in the *Interpol* section of the *Manifesta I* biennale. *Interpol* was a creative exchange of Eastern and Western artists curated by Eda Cufer and Viktor Misiano. It was embedded in a pan-regional itinerant European contemporary art biennale, which was in turn coordinated by a curatorial team that supervised the local curators of each country invited. A super-structure that very well showed how the art system worked at the time, but Oleg Kulik knew how to play the system. Kulik's actionist project demonstrates a clear understanding of artwork location and exhibition conditions during those years. According to him, the *Manifesta I* Swedish curators were not willing to hear his ideas on what he might contribute to the biennale. They were familiar with his artistic output, wanted his infamous 'dog performance', and were not willing to accept the artist's input. Kulik argued in an open letter he was compelled to write by the organizers after the event: "I was invited to Stockholm and was open for any variant and form of collaboration. To my surprise Ernst Billgrin's ready work was waiting for me: he was not prepared for any kind of collaboration" (Kulik 1996). The artworld has a tremendous capacity for assimilation and especially during the nineties was very propitious to 'bad boys.' To have a taste of the artistic system Kulik faced, readers may want to watch the film *The Square* (2017) by Ruben Östlund, which parodies the art milieu at the time and refers obliquely to the *Interpol* controversy (Östlund 2017). Kulik chose the Deitch Projects gallery in New York for his dog performance; because of his institutional critique and location awareness, the gallery was pertinent as a location, but at that point in his career, it was also unmarked and highly conventional: Kulik was finally unable to disrupt his own exhibition as a readymade.

#### 4. On Duration and Iteration: "Prolong'd Endurance Tames the Bold"

A fierce ride naked and tied to an untamed horse across East Europe is what makes the main character in Lord Byron's narrative poem *Mazeppa* say: "Prolong'd endurance tames the bold" (Byron 1830). It might apply as a description of how duration (and endurance) are relevant markers in the analysis of the three performances considered. Duration and

endurance may convey meaning in performance art at times, while in other occasions, they merely attest to the performer's penchant for masochism. McClure's action was a one-time event and had a short duration, less than five minutes, which was the time he needed to read his poem to the lions and give them some time to roar between his verses. Use of duration is pertinent or justified in McClure's performance: the time used was the time required to read a poem. Duration might also be marked, since he did not have much time to carry out his action without being interrupted or generate unwanted attention: duration is apparently used to generate tension on receivers. Beuys' performance was also a one-time event and lasted three days according to some sources (Götz et al. 1979), five days according to the Deitch Projects webpage (Deitch 1997), while other scholars claimed it lasted a week (Adams 1992). A seven-day-duration is also consigned by the exhibition catalogue by Caroline Tisdall: "Coyote: I like America and America likes me/One week's performance on the occasion of the opening of the René Block Gallery, New York, May 1974" (Tisdall 1976, p.6). The coyote performance was one of Beuys' famous resistance pieces. The catalogue shows some very beautiful images of Beuys and the coyote, which are aesthetically fascinating. Were the alleged coyote-hugging the climax, the remaining time required to complete the action would mark its duration until Beuys' departure. Still, considering the coyote-hugging remains in question (there is no photographic record of the event), duration in Beuys' performance is less pertinent than it is significant or marked; the author apparently consigned an arbitrary number of days for his action to build a rapport between the coyote and himself and keep the viewers on their toes. Overpowering Beuys's performance in duration (if such a thing makes sense) was not difficult for Kulik, who was used to extreme working conditions. Still, neither long duration nor endurance do make performance more valuable or interesting, and Kulik's work might also be interpreted as an ironic statement in this sense. Ultimately, they show the artist's agony and a relentless struggle to carve a niche for herself in the artworld. Duration is neither pertinent nor marked in Kulik's action per se; it only seems to make sense in relation to Beuys' performance. A crucial factor in Kulik's action regarding iteration is that it was not a one-time event; while he had been repeating it with slight variation over the years, he managed to signify different things each time through his command of all the variables involved in producing and displaying his artworks. Iteration is a pertinent element regarding duration in performance art, which in Kulik's case shows his dog action as a work in progress. It is probably in his parody of Beuys that his dog action came to achieve the most success and the least novelty.

##### **5. On Props: Kinky Is Using a Feather, Perverted Is Using the Whole Chicken**

Counterculture detractors of the 1960s might remark that McClure rode a Harley Davidson motorcycle and wore leather pants, which hardly qualifies today as a consistent attitude toward ecology. Leaving presentism and ad hominem argumentations aside and considering McClure's position toward wild animals, his stance toward them is as delicate in his poetry as it was in his performance piece. McClure read his poetry to four lions; the number is relevant if comparisons are to be made, because even if they were caged, they were in their context (albeit an enforced one) and overpowered him in number, which produced very definite audiovisual results in his artwork.

Looking at Joseph Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* in the same vein, the artist got himself locked with one coyote for approximately a week and nobody knows how the coyote could have possibly endured Beuys in his taming of America pantomime. The coyote was allegedly extracted from her natural habitat and set in a confined, intimidating space, with a stranger.

Finally, while Kulik's attitude toward animals was certainly close to bestiality in the beginning of his career, he soon was wise enough to turn his attention to the very Deleuzian idea of 'becoming animal' himself. Kulik is the only artist from the three considered that does not instrumentalize animals in his action. Looking at *I Bite America and America Bites*

*Me* as a discrete unit, viewers may conclude that if anything, the action contains a display of some playful sadomasochism and no cruelty to animals at all.

It is astonishing how the three artworks considered show an incremental need for props and artistic discourse, with McClure being close to minimalism, rising to crescendo with Beuys, and peaking to slowly wear down with Kulik.

As production is concerned, McClure just went to a zoo (where animals were already caged), did his piece, and got it recorded and filmed, while Joseph Beuys' performance required a plane flight, an ambulance, a gallery transformed into a cage, a shepherd's crook, a pair of gloves, a felt blanket, a metal triangle, a lantern, a daily stack of fifty copies of the Wall Street Journal, a photographer/film crew, and to top it up, a living animal. Finally, Kulik had a specially built cage at the Deitch Projects and his performance piece required a dog collar and chain, a blanket, a ball to play with, food and water bowls, protective gear for those amongst the attendees willing to venture into his cage, and a recording crew. A flight to JFK airport and a van were also necessary, but perhaps to avoid mimicking Beuys to excess, those apparently were not part of his action, which allegedly began with Kulik inside his cage, or at least that is what can be found on video footage registering the artwork and the rest of documentation examined ([AP Archive 2015](#)).

## 6. On Discourse/Intention: 'Mystic Vibrations' Is a Wedding Band from Gaston

Regarding discourse, barring an error in my part, while McClure's performance does not have one save for the poetry book he used as a score for his performance, Beuys had embarked on his first visit to the States on a lecture tour to New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis during the winter of 1973, where he explained his 'Energy Plan for Western Man,' and his ideas about 'Social Sculpture' which supported actions as *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Finally, it seems that the theoretical part of Kulik's project was mainly designed by his then wife, artist Mila Bredikhina, who had a capital role in weaving the philosophical underpinnings supporting Kulik's actions. In short: Kulik had one person in his team devoted to producing discourse about his artworks.

Previously, Kulik had also involved himself with writer Vladimir Sorokin in a sort of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* trip to the Tver region in 1993 that inspired an artist book with images by Kulik and texts by Sorokin: *В глубь России (Deep into Russia)* ([Sorokin and Kulik 1994](#)). The trip proved useful to exchange ideas between both artists and gather materials they later shaped into an art installation. Ellen Rutten comments about their collaboration:

The book that resulted from the Tver journey is an album in which photographs of idyllic country vistas alternate with unequivocally zoophilic pictures in which Kulik is depicted having—vaginal and anal as well as oral—sexual intercourse with a variety of (mostly domestic) animals. If Ekaterina Dëgot' describes these as "scenes of imitated zoophilism" (Dëgot' in Burkhardt 1999, p. 225; my italics—ER), then Kulik himself uses much detail to convince the reader that they feature actual sexual actions which satisfied carnal feelings of both artist and animal (Bavil'skij 2002). The photographs are accompanied by short text fragments in which Sorokin re-enacts Russian literary and linguistic styles from Turgenevian writing to *mat* and from Village Prose to porn. ([Rutten 2008](#))

Kulik's dog action in New York was a relatively tame version of his shock tactics days, which required a plausible discourse to justify the actions he apparently carried out 'using the whole chicken', so to speak. His actions are questionable but also may be read as a question: who is the most perverted, me or the system I am playing? As an answer to that question, Kulik bit the visitor at Interpol firstly because of the aggressive behavior of certain visitors to his dog persona, and secondly because according to Renata Salecl, the Interpol curatorial team provided him with a very long chain that allowed him to move past the 'Dangerous dog!' sign ([Salecl 1998](#)).

Oleg Kulik belongs to the type of artist who sought to educate the public, often through bad example and the plausible guilt instilled in viewers when they realized they were not spectators anymore but accomplices. It might be very well the case that Kulik

faked his most disturbing images or that his discourse was pure gobbledygook. That does not matter so much as how his chosen media, content, and shock tactics were part of a design he conceived with his then wife as an artistic career.

Addressing the perversity of the art market as a metaphor for the New Economy through confrontational behavior and the instrumentalization (or even violence) toward other beings was not uncommon during the 1990s and later within the fine arts, literature, or cinema. Other cases in point within the performance/installation art sphere from those days might be Santiago Sierra or Teresa Margolles, who equally took no prisoners when it came to making viewers feel uncomfortable, in different degrees.

The datum that McClure's action did not have a title might obey to several reasons; perhaps he did not conceive his action as an artwork, or maybe he did conceive it as an artwork but did not care for titles. In support of such hypotheses, it may be stressed that Beat authors have been widely known for their performative and declamatory approach to poetry. For instance David M. Harris mentions apropos the poetry of Diane di Prima:

There is obviously a connection between the Beat poets and modern declamatory poets, slam poets; the Beats did traditionally read their work out loud, Allen Ginsberg almost chanted his work, and a number of the other poets did the same, and there is the sense, the feeling, among a lot of the Beats that the work is just extemporized [ . . . ] only very rarely is what we see a first draft put directly on the page, but there's the sense that this is just human speech, just the outpouring of emotions. (Harris 2015)

McClure's location of choice was unusual, possibly illegal, and more importantly, it was unrelated to the visual arts economic structure. It was in accord with the spirit of happenings, and many actions carried out during the 1960s by guerrilla theater groups that were spontaneous, provocative, and geared toward mixing art and life. According to McClure, both his performance and preferential location were guided by such spontaneity:

Bruce Conner and I went there to record roosters. We ran into the lion keeper, who was also a poet, and he invited us to see the lions. I read and they roared. We roared together. You can Google it. I also read Chaucer to kangaroos that waved their heads back and forth and to seals that were barking. (Raskin 2013)

Despite testing several locations and interacting with several species, the accessible footage of McClure's action corresponds to just one site, the lion house. That comes as no surprise, as McClure's guttural beast language resembles very much that of fiery felines, and the furry image of the I book cover reminds the viewer of Felidae. Considering lions are wild animals, the zoo in McClure's performance is a highly motivated space, in the sense that is far from arbitrary, and the ideal location for the poet and the lions to 'roar together'. Incidentally, lions in zoos are caged, which adds a critical nuance to McClure's action.

Footage from McClure's performance may be found on the Internet YouTube platform. One of the longest film fragments available lasts (02'54''), while his reading is restricted to (02'32'') (McClure 2011). The film's credits mention it was extracted from 'an episode of USA: Poetry, a series of ten films on American poets (1966) by Richard O. Moore'. A tape reel and nine identical copies of almost four minutes of duration (03'52'') are kept at the Wallace Berman Collection in the Smithsonian Institution Archives (Berman 1962). There is a good quality sound recording of McClure's action, which excluding the brief intro lasts (03'73'') and can be accessed on the webpage of the University of Pennsylvania Writing Center (McClure 2021). Listening to the sound file differs from watching the film in that the interaction of McClure's poetry with the roaring lions is spine-chilling, as the wild sounds trigger primordial fears to the sound of big hungry predators. It is, in my opinion, as a work of sound poetry—and not a film or a performance—that McClure's action shines the most. McClure did not produce a discourse associated with his action, but that is far better than producing the wrong discourse or imposing a non-pertinent reading on a certain artwork. Such strategies are not uncommon in the contemporary art realm with examples as recent as the MACBA (2021) solo exhibition of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, where curator

Tanya Barson enforced an eccentric reading on González-Torres's conceptual sculptures. It is to be remembered that conceptual artists developed their own discourses not only to make their works understandable to the public but also to avoid their instrumentalization by art curators. Artistic discourse is currently being scrutinized, and the ongoing debate also affects literary studies.

There is a thread that to some extent joins Bay Area poets (even if not exactly McClure), Beuys, and Kulik that remains to be addressed, and that is cultural appropriation. Chad Weidner mentions said phenomenon in his book: "Some who can be referred to as plastic shamans claim to share Native American insights or even ancestry" (Weidner 2016, p. 102). The topic of "white shaman poets" was raised by Geary Hobson and Leslie Marmon Silko during the late 1970s. While their arguments did not involve Michael McClure directly, they make his case even more interesting, since he was fundamentally inserted in the culture that produced such situation. Hobson and Marmon Silko expressed their timely concern about something that was happening in the Bay Area:

We wanted to do something that would address the proliferation of White poets who were suddenly calling themselves shamans, and by and large embarrassing/amusing/angering Indian people by their pretensions to Indian sacred knowledge and ceremonialism as they paraded such hucksterism in their various publications and public performances. (Hobson 2002)

Even if initially restricted to a small circle of American poets, such an allegation might also be used against Beuys. Joseph Beuys has been recently accused of fictionalizing his war time episodes which comprised, among other things, having had an encounter with Tartar shamans when the Stuka he allegedly piloted crashed in Crimea during World War II (Knöfel 2013). These episodes were capital in shaping out his artistic project, whereby he often assumed a shamanistic position. Whereas his works should be assessed for what they are, the danger of inserting personal narratives in any given artwork lies in certain receivers seemingly needing to believe everything an artist says, which unfortunately often includes reviewers. More analytical thinkers signaled the right track to follow when criticizing Beuys' oeuvre, in particular the discourse he associated with it, and his contradictory public persona. Jan Verwoert's essay "The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image," argues: "On the one hand, he gambled on everything that traditionally secured the value, claim to validity, and hence authority of art and artists, while on the other hand he assumed the traditional patriarchal position of the messianic proclaimer of ultimate truths" (Verwoert 2008).

The issue of how Beuys' shamanism was enthusiastically received by art critics as Donald Kuspit is also dealt with by Verwoert, who dedicates a section to Beuys' coyote performance under the following heading: "The Problematic Reversal of the Roles of Perpetrator and Victim." (Ibid.) There, Verwoert tackles with Beuys' Messianic role and twisted logic, "both sufferer and healer" (Ibid.). He finally pops the question:

By what right does this German claim to be not only healer, but also patient and sufferer (if not even victim)? Victim of whom? Why would a German—in the historical wake of Germany's responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust and its instigation of two world wars—ever be entitled to play that role on an international stage? (Verwoert 2008)

The main problem with Beuys, as his coyote performance is concerned, would not be so much his white shaman discourse or entitled public persona, as his alleged enforcement of an intellectually dishonest interpretation on that specific artwork. According to Verwoert, Beuys simply talked too much about his piece and imposed his metaphors on receivers: It was when he enforced his role as a victim with the ambulance symbol, or worse, when he assimilated the killing of Native Americans with capitalist alienation by connecting an allegedly wild coyote with *The Wall Street Journal*, that he slipped. The very in point element of a daily stack of *The Wall Street Journal* where the coyote happily urinated on

time and again during his action is far from relatable to the Native American genocide, and it is about this topic that Verwoert remarks:

Beuys essentially declares perpetrators to be victims. In this picture, the supposedly painful alienation of the United States from its roots is given the same status as the suffering of the victims of the genocide, which fall out of the picture entirely. Though surely unintentional (and nevertheless effective), murder is equated with a regrettable destruction of nature. The historical victims have no voice here. The coyote cannot complain. (Verwoert 2008)

Terry Atkinson, author of *Beuyspeak*, has been one of the critics who hardly endured Beuys' white shamanism; about *I Like America and America Likes Me*, he declared:

He alleges he made good contact with the coyote—whatever this might mean. Whatever it might mean, we can be sure it will be of a more profound character than when I consider I have made good contact with our cats, Heidi and Snowy. (Thistlewood 1995)

Kulik's criticism of Beuys's piece concentrates on a justified reading of his work in terms of domestication, pointing at a blind spot in previous analyses:

If Joseph Beuys' performance "I Like America and America Likes Me" (1974) was a symbolic domestication of America, this domestication of Kulik was a diagnosis of the state of contemporary American society. (Kulik 2020)

Art critic Mikhail Ryklin, in his article "Pedigree Pal: The Road to English Dog" agrees with Kulik's statement when he declares: "The cultural context was easily readable: while Beuys, the European, domesticated the wild American element, the Russian entered America as a dog to be domesticated by the New York public" (Bredikhina and Obukhova 2007).

There is the obvious temptation of taking Kulik's title as a prank or his action as an art stunt, when in fact authors as Mikhail Ryklin or Renata Salecl have very cleverly highlighted how it tackles with, firstly the very hackneyed idea of "dialogue" in contemporary art, secondly, the divide yet to be deconstructed between humans and animals, and thirdly, the problematic relationship between East and West (Salecl 1998).

If Kulik's open letter is to be believed, action, space, and props were allegedly imposed to the performer by *Interpol* when scandal erupted (Kulik 1996). Such structure belonged to one of the ubiquitous biennales that sprang during the 1990s, brimming with art curators and supported by lengthy theoretical discourse and a good measure of cynicism. It could be argued that Kulik could have chosen to walk out from the *Manifesta I* proposition and make a public statement against the Stockholm curators, but he chose instead to wreak havoc in *Interpol* by biting a visitor and destroying works by other artists in situ only to make his statement later in the form of an open letter informed by critical theory. Walking out of his artistic consecration in the West does pale in comparison with desecrating the artistic ceremony that was slighting his team and being the star of the show at the same time.

Having said that, from a strictly comparative viewpoint, and informed by what I know about contemporary art, in view of the markers used to assess the three actions and the arguments exposed above, Kulik's action *I Bite America and America Bites Me* (1997) does outrank Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), because the latter is confusing, and to some extent misleading, in its formal and conceptual articulation. McClure's action is certainly close to Kulik's higher qualification concerning the analytical tools used, but these tools still need to be collated with those offered by ecocriticism.

## 7. White Shamans, Pink Indians, and Conclusions

Randy Malamud proposes a new aesthetical frame of reference regarding ecology that may prove useful in assessing the quality of the performance artworks under discussion: "In condensed form, the basic elements of my ecocritical aesthetic are: seeing animals without hurting them; seeing them in their contexts; teaching about animals; advocating respect for them; and finally knowing them, richly but also incompletely" (Malamud 2009, p. 45).

If Malamud's criteria are followed, both McClure's performance and Kulik's end in a tie; despite having found divinity within animality, McClure saw animals "without hurting them", but in his artwork, they were constrained; he tried to understand them in their context and taught about animals (in a spiritual way), commanded respect for them, and finally, got to "knowing them richly but also incompletely" (Ibid.).

Kulik used no animals in his artwork, which is almost enough to outshine Beuys, and even McClure; he saw animals without hurting them in his performance, he critically saw animals in their context (not a happy one) and taught about animals and how people relate to them. He was not reverent nor condescending toward the animal he represented and advocated respect for. Finally, something that certainly happened along the two weeks he spent doing his performance in New York is that he managed to "knowing them, richly, but also incompletely" (Malamud 2009).

Regarding Beuys' action, he did not hurt the coyote physically, but he willingly confined a wild animal in an unnatural space with a stranger; thus, he did not exactly see animals in their contexts and hardly taught the viewers anything about coyotes. Furthermore, he did not precisely advocate respect for the coyote by the way he "used" the animal, while he certainly gained some knowledge about the creature.

To conclude this essay, it is worth mentioning that ecocriticism opens new venues for interpretation that neither traditional philology nor visual arts critical theory often visit, and this paper shows how it may be useful in analyzing artworks informed by current ecological concerns.

Lastly, looking through the ecocritical lens is an invigorating experience when examining artworks featuring animals or showing ecological anxieties. It is true that the art system works in a complex and often perverse way and Malamud's criteria used in this paper are allegedly aesthetical and not ethical, which is hard to totally agree with. Reading intention in an artwork is as dangerous a game as accepting artistic discourse uncritically. It is hard to ascertain what did McClure, Beuys, or Kulik have in mind when they produced the artworks analyzed here. If examined restrictively, only McClure's action seems to have addressed animalism directly. A broader approach shows how Beuys' involvement with ecology was a very serious and steady concern of his during all his career, which partially should exonerate him after all the negative criticism he received in this paper. Probably, Randy Malamud would be horrified if he discovered that McClure's and Kulik's respective artworks might end in a tie if his ecocritical aesthetics were applied in their assessment, which possibly calls for a critical examination of his aesthetics in terms of content and scope: Is it really aesthetics or ethics that Malamud is trafficking in?

There are many more implications in the artworks analyzed that deserve being studied at length and particularly through the ecocritical standpoint, as for instance how Kulik's artistic discourse relates to deep ecology. Only through empirical research and a wider knowledge of contemporary artifacts may ecocriticism evolve and generate a solid theoretical and practical corpus.

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