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Notes on Art and Healing: Shamanism, New Media, and Technoshamanism

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More than ever before, contemporary artists, theorists, scientists, and activists need to pay more attention to so-called indigenous knowledge-Guillermo Gomez-Peña

In 2020, I was asked where I saw art heading in the future. My immediate answer was, "healing." Since 2018 my work as an art historian and critic has cycled back to my prevailing concern since the mid 1990s with how art and technology and especially the combination of the two can offer a fertile ground for cultivating expanded forms of consciousness and love. That earlier fascination was now supplemented by two key elements:

- I. a desire to expand my conception of technology beyond the limits of the western scientific tradition;
- II. a recognition of the importance of healing as a goal for the arts.

Following the work of anthropologist and shaman Michael Harner [1], I take shamanism, at its core, to be concerned with healing and with sustaining life. As Harner, who founded the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, claims, shamanic traditions around the world have developed a broad range of technologies - from sonic drivers (drums) to plant medicine rituals in order to achieve trance-states that offer insights beyond those available to typical waking consciousness. These insights have healing properties at many scales, from the individual to the global.

I take technoshamanism to join shamanic technologies with postindustrial technologies based in silicon (dry), biology (wet) and hybrid (moist), all in the service of healing and sustaining life. As Brazilian scholar Fabiane Borges claims, "It is important

to view shamanism as a methodology, as a technology for the production of knowledge" [2]. The same can be said of art, historically interwound with techne, the Ancient Greek word for art and the etymological root of technology. The legalization of psychedelic-assisted therapy demonstrates increasing acceptance of ancient indigenous technologies and marks a merger of diverse healing methodologies. Similarly, the engagement of contemporary art with shamanic practices bridges knowledge domains and augments art's potentials to heal and to envision the future. These goals characterize Marina Abramovic's performances, Roy Ascott's telematic art, and the installations of Ernesto Neto, Guadalupe Maravilla, and Dineo Seshee Bopape. A shaman was even a member of artist Refik Anadol's cohort of artists and software engineers at the Google Artists and Machine Intelligence program in 2016.

Gomez-Peña proposes that, "The basic answers to our survival might lie precisely in the very indigenous communities that the corporate global project is rapidly destroying"[3]. Borges and others use the term "technoshamanism" to problematize the destructiveness of western technoscience and its incursion on indigenous technologies of shamanism, which, by contrast, honor the sanctity of the Earth. Technoshamanism names the messiness of cultural hybridity and the commodification of shamanic traditions, including ayahuasca tourism and the gamification of Huni Kuin culture, resulting from colonization and globalization. The visual arts of indigenous cultures, including Shipibo textile patterns, Papunya Tula dot paintings, and Vodun rituals, are also being hybridized with, and appropriated by, international contemporary art and visual culture. Such appropriations raise vital questions about Technoshamanism as a form of aesthetic practice: How are

contemporary artists engaging with the cosmologies, technologies, and intellectual property of shamanism in ways that honor and benefit the indigenous and mestizo cultures that have cultivated and preserved shamanic traditions? How are indigenous artists engaging with shamanic (and postindustrial technologies) in ways that strengthen their communities and contribute to the discourses of contemporary art?

In addition to these concerns, my research on the topic addresses with the following questions:

- I. How can artists embrace visionary consciousness?
- II. How can art support entheogenesis (becoming diving together) by joining ancient shamanic techniques and contemporary technoscientific tools...
- III. How can art catalyze greater awareness of interbeing (the unity of all things) to help heal the Earth?

There is a dearth of literature that addresses the nexus of contemporary art and shamanism and far less on contemporary art and technoshamanism. Until recently, the work of Joseph Beuys dominated these discourses, with a few notable exceptions. Burnham [1] applied a structuralist method to interpret shamanic aspects of Dennis Oppenheim's work. McEvilly's, [3] interpreted performance by artists from Gunter Brus to Kim Jones as shamanic acts of expression and catharsis. The topic was largely ignored until Ascott [2] claimed that "this ancient ritual [shamanism] mirrors our contemporary artistic aspirations using digital technologies." Apart from the writing of Ascott and his circle, the topic all but disappeared from contemporary art discourses.

That changed in 2017, when curator Christine Macel curated *The Pavilion of Shamans*, one of nine "trans-pavilions" at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Macel exhibited notable works, including Juan Downey's *Circle of Fires Vive* (1979), Jeremy Shaw's *Liminals* (2017), and especially Ernesto Neto's *A Sacred Place* (2017), which was the centerpiece of the pavilion. Despite scant media attention directed to this pavilion, Thackara (2017) discusses *The Pavilion of Shamans* and many additional international artists, suggesting a broad resurgence of interest in the topic, if not by critics, then by artists. More recent scholarship [3-5] includes critiques of Mircea Eliade's and Michael Harner's universalizing of shamanism and Claude Levi-Strauss' and Burnham's psychopathology of the shaman, and is informed by Viveiros de Castro's concept of "equivocation," offering a more nuanced and theoretical approach to shamanism and contemporary art.

There is a broad literature on technoshamanism, with considerable writing about rave culture, but very little scholarship that focuses on visual art. Much of the art writing about Technoshamanism is highly speculative, notably the work of Roy Ascott and artist-scholars closely connected to him [6-11].

For over a quarter century, my scholarship has examined how artists build working models of alternative visions of the future that enable us to experience, in the present, what may come to be. I see new media as a common ground for collaborations between artists and technologists that can generate profound shifts in perception, knowledge, and values in tandem with scientific discoveries and

technical inventions. Similarly, the profound experiences of unity and the deep healing that characterize shamanic ceremonies offer a crucial counterbalance to the hyper-rationalism of technoscience. My research on shamanism is informed by first-hand experiences of ceremonies and years of personal practices that enable trance-states, expanded forms of consciousness, and a profound embodied experience of the unity of all things, bound together by love. Indeed, interactions between artists, scientists, and shamans are not simply an intellectual curiosity for me. Following Bateson [12], "art, religion, dream, and the like" are necessary to counterbalance the "merely purposive rationality" of western scientific culture, which is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life." As I have argued (2022), the conjunction of technoshamanism and art offers a vital means of survival. My work on this topic thus serves as a form of activism that bridges the intellectual and the ecstatic [13-16].

From my own trance experiences, I gained a crucial insight, that I have since heard voiced by others, including celebrated Buddhist monk Thich Naht Han and musician/composer Poranguí. The extent to which we can open our hearts to others is limited by the extent to which we can open our hearts to ourselves – both the light and the shadow. Similarly, the extent to which we can open our hearts the Earth is limited by the extent to which we can open our hearts to others. Thus, we must open our hearts as fully as possible to ourselves, in order to open our hearts as fully as possible to others, if we aspire to open our hearts as fully as possible to the Earth. I see this as the basic prescription to heal the pathogenic and destructive aspects of technoscience by catalyzing a greater sense of unity and love locally and globally.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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