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Plant Ontology, The Amazonian Yachag and the Artist in Trance

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“VEGETAL SOUL”
PLANT ONTOLOGY, THE AMAZONIAN YACHAG, AND THE ARTIST IN TRANCE

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Submitted to the faculty of
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Blindness is transformed from denial to recognition. Hubristic sightlessness is transformed into visionary blindness. Deprived of eyeballs, Oedipus sees. What? Tragic truth, the truth of the differend.

Reiner Schürmann

dedication

Para Amina y Maio por sus enseñanzas diarias

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ABSTRACT

ANA ISABEL FERNANDEZ PORTILLA

“VEGETAL SOUL”

PLANT ONTOLOGY, THE AMAZONIAN YACHAG AND THE ARTIST IN TRANCE

In this project I argue that plants are actually housed in a home of their own, where proto-language and haptic non-vocalized communications reign and thus are a “world” on their own terms. Moreover, it is the shaman or *yachag*, as this figure is called in the Andes, who is capable of translating and communicating this language from the house of plants to his community. The artist in trance, in turn, a hybrid of Walter Benjamin’s “ecstatic trance” and Nietzsche’s tragic artist is the one who develops awareness of its moment and is able to shed light for others to see it. To understand this continuum, I propose the figure of “metonymic contiguity,” in Viveiros de Castro’s parlance, to address the connectedness enacted by plants, the *yachag*, and the artist in trance. This contiguity is sustained in the poetic-organic relation that the plant develops during its lifespan with the *yachag*, the interpreter of worlds, who in turn passes it along to the artist in trance. The being of plants or plants as Being, understood as Michael Marder’s vegetal democracy, with its rare generosity and energetic renewal, can only be understood if an interconnectedness between species is set in motion. Hence, I demonstrate how the plant, the *yachag* and the artist operate as the enablers of such a paradigmatic shift in the coming community.

Key words: plants, Amazonian ontology, metonymic contiguity, vegetal democracy, trance, *yachag*, contemporary art

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Introduction

In the Beginning Was the End: Worlds in Commotion

Botany cannot be defined by the sum total of the truths one could say about plants.

Michel Foucault



Fig.1. Charles Morren *Guzmania Musaica* Massangea Bromeliad Plant. 1872

Bromelia (fig.1) is a plant from the family of the monocots, growing mainly in South America. It is an *epiphyte*, which means it lives as a guest by deriving support from other species of plants and trees to which she attaches. In turn, it also hosts many insects and plants for whom it constitutes a world, blossoming all year long under favorable conditions. Being an epiphyte, *Bromelia* does not need the soil directly: her roots are aerial, which could be seen as interconnectedness to the whole. She grows in subtropical climates as one of the plants that shows us how an alliance with insects and birds is established to benefit all these groups. In the same manner plants might make alliances with humans in order to learn from each other in their own respective worlds. I propose the image of the *bromelia* as a world, both host and guest in a hospitable alliance that benefits itself and the other.

Thesis/Argument

Philosopher Martin Heidegger contends that beings are housed in language which is the home of Being, thus, he writes “Because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely in the clearing of Being which alone is ‘world,’ they lack language. But in being denied language they are not thereby suspended wordlessly in their environment” (230). In contrast to Heidegger, I argue that plants do have a world of their own not housed in the home of language, but rather in a specific house all of their own, inhabited through non-vocalized communication and haptic connection. This is also somehow the contention Michael Marder poses in his book *Plant Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, however, he augments on Heidegger’s thought on the possibility that what he meant was not actually that they lack a world. Although Heidegger denies the possibility for plants to have a world, Marder, Luce Irigaray and Emanuele Coccia pose the notion of plant thinking and vegetal generosity to open an-other path for humanity “in catastrophic times” (1) as Isabelle Stengers

names contemporary times. In their works, it becomes apparent that survival on this planet may depend on the relatedness humans develop with the plant world. Plant ontology would presuppose then, the notion of agency and community organization — which is culture — that vegetal beings have.

This dissertation focuses on the possibility of plants to create alliances with other beings, human and animal. While inhabiting different “houses,” however, they are capable of cooperation, pollination and contamination in order to endure as beings. Here we find three entities at play which will reveal a potential new ontology: the plant, the *yachag* and the artist in trance. As a result of their interplay, the interconnectivity that plants generate, as well as the idea of them being a world in themselves allied with the *yachag* (Andean word for healer and seer), who is able to apprehend the world through the ingestion of teacher plants, leads the artist in trance towards the understanding of a world to come. By applying and expanding the notion first posited by Claude Levi-Strauss and then contested by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro that the relation between nature and culture is one of “metonymic contiguity rather than metaphoric resemblance” (Viveiros de Castro 83). I argue that the same kind of contiguity exists between plants, the Amazonian *yachag*, and the artist in trance. This artist, I contend, may show us the path to follow into the end of a world and the beginning of another. The trope of metonymic contiguity serves to connect, into a continuum, these three entities one after the other in a nature-culture effervescent symbiosis.

The main questions I pose in this dissertation are: How is a metonymic contiguity enacted between plant world, Amazonian *yachag* and an artist in trance? Where is the possibility of “vegetal democracy” in the alliance plant-*yachag*-artist? (Marder 52). In what ways these three systems of haptic, mythological and epistemological clusters communicate? And finally, what

alternative non-western ontology emerges as a result of this configuration? Marder explores the ontology of vegetal life in Heideggerian terms distinguishing the ontical way in which plants have been nominated and instrumentalized as opposed to their ontological stance as Being. The commonalities that plants, *yachags* and artists share may not be evident at first glance; nevertheless, if we dig for uncomfortable entanglements and difficult questions, we may find that for centuries the voice with which plants speak has been transmitted through the Amazonian *yachag* and the chamana or healer. Furthermore, the figure who has invariably accompanied different plateaus along humanity's convoluted becomings, has been what I have called the artist in trance. This artist is a hybridization born from Walter Benjamin's notion of ecstatic trance and Friedrich Nietzsche's tragic artist. The concept of ecstatic trance that Benjamin forwards serves as a hinge that bridges the epistemological towards the mythological. In the same manner Nietzsche's tragic artist helps us to navigate this road. I call this artist an "artist in trance" in an ecstatic trance and also within a tragic stance. In his essay "To the Planetarium" Benjamin states that it was the ancients' intercourse with the cosmos that was different, for they did not see themselves as separate from it and, hence, remained in awe of this relationship. Nietzsche's idea of the tragic artist complements this ecstatic trance, since for these artists the tragic condition of life means the acceptance of an ecstatic but at the same time tragic condition. In Nietzsche's words, "On this level of knowledge there are only two paths, the path of the *saint* and the path of the *tragic artist*; what they both have in common is the ability to carry on living even in the clearest knowledge of the nullity of existence, without sensing a rupture in their view of the world" (133). For the purpose, in this research, I have delved into the study of diverse approaches to knowledge from other ontologies such as the Andean and Amazonian, and I have chosen a certain type of artist who is always in search of the numinous: spirits, voices, or simply

another way of communicating what she is seeing and perceiving. The artist-*yachag* or artist philosopher as we may call her, is the one who is able to bridge disparate *conocimientos*, in Gloria Anzaldúa's terms, or knowledge, those of plants and those of *yachags*, to translate them into diverse words and worlds. In her own words: "In trying to make sense of what's happening, some of us come into deep awareness (*conocimiento*) of political and spiritual situations and the unconscious mechanisms that abet hate, intolerance and discord. I name this searching, inquiring and healing consciousness 'conocimiento'" (19). What for? To learn to inhabit this planet in a softer mood, in "a weak thought" mood as Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala would say" (7). This position stems from the respect and bewilderment that other visions and other nonwestern perspectives carry. When other visions and other metaphysics are acknowledged, entire worlds shift leaving space for almost imperceptible tweaking that transform the footprints of societies on the planet's soil.

Concepts

Amazonian communities and plants, according to their placement in hierarchical, metaphysical capitalism, are subaltern and oppressed groups, accounted for in the notion of weak thought from Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala. In weak thought we find a way to understand the vulnerability of these worlds and their strength in being able to propose resilience and resistance in silence and opacity. In their own words, weak thought could be resumed: "While metaphysics, or which is the same, the politics of descriptions is the philosophy of the winners who wish to conserve the world as it is, the weak thought of hermeneutics becomes the thought of the weak in search of alternatives" (2). While continuing this hermeneutic line, Marder proposes for contemporary philosophy to "include plants in the tradition of treating language neither as a means of communication nor as something exclusively human" (75). Therefore,

opening a stance towards plants as beings who have to be listened to and perceived as members of community and as important makers of worlds.

A few of by now gone South American governments of the so-called socialism of the 21st century (Bolivia and Ecuador for example) granted constitutional rights to nature, the Amazon forest specifically, of which Amazonian communities are guardians and caretakers. This particular entanglement between human and nonhuman is explored in Viveiros de Castro's concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism to explain the alliances between human- plant- animal. In short, since the well-known western chiasm nature-culture has not been part of Amazonian ontologies, plants have been treated as persons with all their properties and grievances. As Viveiros de Castro poses:

This interspecific resemblance includes, to put it a bit performatively, the same mode of apperception: animals and other nonhumans having a soul 'see themselves as persons' and therefore 'are persons': intentional, double-sided (visible and invisible) objects constituted by social relations and existing under a double, at once reflexive and reciprocal –which is to say collective– pronominal mode. (56)

This means that all humans and nonhumans are endowed with a perspective as persons, each of whom sees the other as human. In other words, the *pecari* (wild boar), the jaguar and the *bromelia* see the human as animal or plant and themselves as human, and each collective has its own ceremonies, organization and kinship, just like humans. In this frame of mind, it is important to bring into the conversation the notion posed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari of ““Becoming-intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible” (233) for it creates a conceptual framework that was inspired by Amazonian ancestral thought. Becoming-intense, becoming-animal or, becoming-plant in a Deleuzian sense proposes a way of being in this world

that learns abilities and skills from the nonhuman and becomes affected by them, turning into something else altogether. In Deleuze and Guattari's parlance: "Becoming is always of a different order than filiation, it concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation" (238). Thus, the alliance enacted between plants-*yachag*-artist, turns into a powerful triad that enables divergent communities to thrive without hurting the ecosystems they inhabit. It is in the atmosphere that plants create finally, that life and the thriving of humans is possible. In the words of philosopher Emanuele Coccia: "It is already *by existing* that plants modify the world globally without even moving, without beginning to act. 'To be' means for them, to *make world* [fairemonde]; reciprocally to construct (our) world is only a synonym of 'to be'" (38). We never stopped living like fish in our own atmospheric ocean that in turn is made of and by plants.

Oswald de Andrade, a 20th century Brazilian artist proposed in his Anthropophagic Manifesto the idea of eating all our influences, enemies or not, in order to truly know and apprehend them. Cannibalistic spiritualism and contemporary art appropriation techniques bear some similarities. In a different manner than the *yachag*, but in the same line, the contemporary artist, an artist in trance, is able to conjure, heal and, even at times, precede things to come. For this reason, I propose Walter Benjamin's notion of ecstatic trance and Nietzsche's concept of the tragic artist as hinges from the world of the modern episteme to that of the proto-modern Amazonian "mytheme" and the world of plants. In the prologue to Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Peter Skafish writes: "A mytheme, he [Levi-Strauss] states, is always made up of all its variants, just as a concept is irreducible to the arguments or propositions expressing it" (21). I have called such artists the 'artist in trance' for it seems to me that their

work and the conditions with which they challenge themselves, bring them into such a state. In Benjamin's words: "The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other" (486). The contemporary artist-philosopher or artist-*yachag* is also capable of ecstatic trance, of that intoxicating communion with the cosmos that brings her into a different realm. It is worth citing Nietzsche's idea of the tragic artist, since for these artists the tragic condition of life is installed as the wandering learnings of humans on this planet: "Living joyfully in scorn of life!" (133) seems to be their ascertainment.

Considering that it is not possible to think of the overpowering of nature without acknowledging the modern epistemological apparatus of conquest and domination of Europe over the Americas and Africa, this project opens a window into indigenous thought since listening to ancestral wisdom and philosophy from the *Abya Yala* is a long due task. Thus, I explore how this ancient world was, in the words of philosopher Enrique Dussel "covered-over" how the Other was made the Same in an abundance of eurocentrism and as part of the metaphysics of power exercised by the conquest (36). The concept of the other covered-over (as opposed to the narrative of dis-discovery) is developed by Dussel who explains: "The Other is Oviedo's beast, Hegel's future, O'Gorman's possibility, and Albert Caturelli's *material in the rough*. The Other is a rustic mass dis-covered in order to be civilized by the European being (*ser*) of occidental culture. But this Other is in fact covered over (*en-cubierta*) in its alterity" (36). However, this other survived oppression and poverty for centuries until now —five hundred years later— mediating the uproar of the possibility of an actual end of this world, we turn to their wisdom long covered up and laid aside. Moreover, in order to understand an ending world

and be able to envision a coming one, a translational quality of interpretation of the multiplicity of nature-culture is needed in ways that prepare the navigation of these cataclysmic times. A becoming Malinche of the time to come is in order, as Franco “Bifo” Berardi writes: “Malinche is able to transform the collapse of her world into the creation of a new language, and therefore of a new world that is neither the prosecution of the old, nor the mere translation of the world of the conquistadores” (335). For it is necessary to understand the other, and not only the other known, but the absolutely distinct other, that which Jacques Derrida calls “the absolutely unknown, anonymous other” (25) to which unconditional hospitality is offered.

Furthermore, I rely on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of continuum for the interiority and exteriority proposed in his posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible*, to ease the possibility posited by Deleuze and Guattari that all is exterior. To think of a continuum of the interiority of plants into the exteriority of its alliances and cooperation with, for example, fungi, animal and humans, has led to imagine worlds poised by such difficult and wild entanglements. Last but not least, entering the world of Andean philosophy inevitably requires to touch upon concepts like *Pacha* or earth and *wak’a*, a truly remarkable notion of place, object and being which is explored widely by contemporary artists in the Ecuadorian Andes. I have relied on the concept of *Pacha* developed by Josef Esterman in *Filosofía Andina* and *wak’a* by Bruce Brian in his work on the Inca *ceque* system. These concepts are tremendously different from the western philosophical notions of world or space and time and they propose a way of seeing inert beings not as things but as spirits with personhood. This is equivalent to entering a world that is almost a fairytale inhabited by innumerable creatures enabled by a decentering of a metaphysical stand as humans on top of a hierarchical pyramid.

Context

Marder speaks of the constant instrumentalization plants have undergone as human and animal nutrition or as nominalist objects to be named and classified by science, thus their inconspicuousness as beings. He argues that it is perhaps the aesthetic attitude that seems to be more propitious to a nonviolent approach to plants. Because of their strange familiarity we have not been able to recognize in vegetal beings, traits of ourselves. They remain the closest and the farthest. Paradoxically enough, the Being of plants has been explored for centuries through the *dietas*, (not a diet, but knowledge acquired through ingestion of so-called teacher plants), cultivation of the land and dream work of communities like the *Siona*, *Secoya* and *Sapara* from the Amazon basin, the Putumayo and Napo rivers, who have been taking care of plants, edible and medicinal, and have been taken care of by them.¹ Marder explains this alliance in an enlightening way:

Through the sanctified human activities of cultivating certain kinds of plants and transforming them into edible and drinkable substances (here, I repeat, we are dealing with a very telling example), the subaltern plant, itself incapable of speech, is represented by and commences to speak with more than one voice and in more than one tongue: it comes to ventriloquize at once the voice of Reason and that of Revelation...and so ceases to be a plant. (33)

In this sense plant thinking and Amazonian thought go together hand in hand, since it is the *yachag* who has been talking and translating the plant world for millennia. This is what is at stake in a post-metaphysical notion of relating to the vegetal world, to stop seeing plants as lesser beings to be used and instrumentalized to human's only advantage, and to start relating to them as beings with their own stance. The proliferation of plants and their generosity pose a stark

contrast to the measured and calculated markets of the world where nothing is for free; nevertheless, the plant world, given the right circumstances, disseminates, blossoms and proliferates. It does not seem in vain that an alliance between human and plant has characterized the Amazonian way of life, since their belief gives personhood to the plant, and beyond personhood, sacredness, enabling them with the *puissance* of knowledgeable elders who “speak” through other beings.

This alliance between two “weak” members of the planet, Amazonian groups and plants, left aside by western metaphysics with its emphasis on succeeding and thriving over the work, sweat and death of the world’s weakest members, seems to be able to teach the rest of the world how to live without hurting the planet: sweetly caressing the soil in order to take only what is needed, in silence and dwelling.

Decentering the metaphysical stand of humans, which for centuries has reigned over all the nonhuman is one of the tasks of post-metaphysical thought; as such, in this hermeneutic possibility of interpretation of one of the weakest, most subaltern beings we know, we find a manner of being, dwelling and thinking that is altogether other. When plants and humans form an alliance, they can see each other as persons with soul and agency.²

This is achieved in the communication that is enacted not only through the ingestion of the plant, but also from an intuitive posture that enables the becoming-plant of the human in order to understand plant thinking. Connectivity is then understood as the thread that runs through all beings, human and nonhuman, implying an understanding of nature as culture and vice versa. In Viveiros de Castro’s words: “There would thus be a single series –that of persons– instead of two, while the relations between “nature” and “culture” would involve metonymic contiguity rather than metaphoric resemblance” (83). This contiguity and continuity could be seen as

connectivity that is not only a notion privy to Amazonian indigenous groups. Western pre-Socratic philosophers such as Anaxagoras posited an intimation of fractality in his theory of the all contained in the very small and the very small contained in the whole. This first venture into the idea of all-contained-in-one and one-contained-in-all, is also the vision of other ontologies such as the Amazonian.³

The notion of cannibal spirituality as a way to get to know the other in order to cross onto this multiverse, is of great importance. The concept of becoming-intense, becoming-animal to relate to the world of healers and seers from the Amazon and other indigenous communities is invaluable for it opens the gaze into an economy of predatory alterity, in a different direction. Viveiros de Castro explains this notion of appropriation of the other by “the manducation” or symbolic capture of the soul of the other: “...the idea, in brief, was that the interiority of the social body is integrally constituted through the capture of symbolic resources –names and souls, persons and trophies, words and memories – from the exterior” (144). In a shamanic ceremony the shaman is the greatest artist present and all other creative forces would be possessed by him. It could be indeed a “demonic alliance” that is being enacted (Viveiros de Castro 139). These problematic notions of cannibalism are rinsed out in neo-shamanic exercises which are seldom acquainted with the more obscure practices of Amazonian shamanism and sorcery. This knowledge, as Michael Taussig posits, does not come without the perils from the world it belongs to, where there are specific magical forces that perform all kinds of deeds:

And so it goes, the far away rubs against the familiar, the primitive against the modern, the forest against the city, race rubbed against race in a magic-creating fiction. These imputations of magic in Otherness enchant the medley of difference in a poetics of place and race that is no less political and economic than it is aesthetic. (179)

Hence, in my research I pose a critique of appropriations from the western modern artworld of traditional rituals and ceremonies that belong to a territory and specific relations of power. The art projects I analyze pose a question to neo-shamanic strains that advocate the intake of sacred plant medicine in urban settings, disregarding the sacred ritualistic component of the practice, while neophytes to the very problematic dangers it entails (such as mental illness) being it a deep plunge into the unconscious with no certain way to return.

I compare Heidegger's "being held out into the nothing" (103) during the moments of anxiety, when being is able to pose the ontological question about Being, to the abyssality of the experience of drinking the sacred potion *yagé*. The people and *yachags* who take it are acquainted with an experience that immediately brings them into contact with death and the question for *Dasein*, for in Heidegger's words: "Da-sein, means being held out into the nothing" (103). Amazonian *Siona* spirituality proposes precisely turning away from idle talk, incessant chatter and feeling constantly elated as a road to knowing oneself. The Heideggerian concept of dwelling and thinking is very close to this thought for in dwelling we may understand other beings in a manner that encompasses all without metaphysical hierarchies and categories that grant more value to humans. The *yachag* in this world is in his own right an artist if we understand by an artist one who is able to see and bring awareness. The Amazonian *yachag* performs an intense ceremony of teacher plant intake where he is transformed into the "cosmopolitical ambassador" Viveiros de Castro mentions (151) who travels from the world of the dead and beyond, back to the world of the living, transposing energies and spiritual connections that profoundly affect ceremony participants. While addressing the notions of the tragic artist from Nietzsche, I will refer to the notion of destructive plasticity from Catherine

Malabou, offering the possibility of spirit possession and energy transmission as a parallel to the well-known existential and psychoanalytic twentieth century theories.

Thinkers like Marder, Coccia, Eduardo Kohn and Viveiros de Castro offer us a glimpse into these territories outside mainstream philosophy. I am following their findings in plant ontology, Amazonian theoretical framework, notions of proto language and an “anthropology beyond the human,” as Kohn calls it (7). To follow them is to shake the foundations of both philosophy and anthropology because these philosopher-anthropologists are themselves venturing into uncharted land. Their scholarship is opening up a path for artists to venture also beyond known terrains and into less measurable and calculated transformations. Brushing ourselves with the unknown and deconstructed worlds of plants or Amerindian philosophies is a challenge and it deserves the time and patience it takes to place aside one by one, the rocks of metaphysics, in order to un-cover that which was covered-over, as in the conquest of the Americas. Developing a substantiated reflection on plants as beings with intelligence and agency, thus culture, catapults us into a different plane of immanence. Thinking about beings, dwelling with them, building relationships and environments of time and non-utilitarian values is what the rapport with plants brings into our lives if we are to think about them in those terms. Plants are part of an otherworldly knowledge; returning to them and their silent non-vocalized communication is like returning to the womb of the earth, the *Pacha*; understanding its stance as beings is at least beginning a true understanding of this planet and its earthlings.

Methodology and Contribution to knowledge

The notion of weak thought in Vattimo and Zabala enables me to develop a hermeneutic approach to the treatment of the contiguity plant-*yachag*-artist in a sense in which they can be

understood as opposing a model of capitalistic success. Thus, the humble plant, the inconspicuous *yachag*, and the artist in trance, enact resistance from the very weak instances they are able to, and propose emancipation “which is opposed to the objective state of affairs” (Vattimo and Zabala 78). The Amazonian *yachag* in his frailty is a bearer of emancipatory interpretation. Having undergone extreme spiritual training and plant-based apprenticeship for years, he foretells through ceremonial ritual the coming future and the maladies that could affect his people; in spite of his apparent weakness, he is also powerful and able to translate and relate through opacity several worlds that coexist in the magical conception of spirituality. In spite of the fact that there are parallels to what Viveiros de Castro calls an “Amazonian theoretical framework” in some thinkers of the western tradition, one set of practices and epistemologies is completely different from the other.

My inquiry will follow a constructive methodology which will allow me to build my thesis. I will rely on a hermeneutical approach from the line of Heidegger, Vattimo and Marder, to dissect concepts and notions at use and or conversely, long forgotten, in order to give them possible new meanings as well as to reinterpret certain ideas and assumptions about plants, Amazonian communities and the work of the contemporary artist. I will also apply a phenomenological approach from Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the visible and invisible and interiority and exteriority that contrast with the Deleuzian notion that all is outside. This allows me to dive into the experience of plants, Amazonian knowledge and rituals. Some formalist descriptions of works of art, plants and Amazonian rituals are in order since form is what all these manifestations have in common. The object, not absent of personhood, is named and described. I also rely on the notion of becoming-animal from Deleuze and Guatarri and I transpose it into that of becoming-plant. Although I will be using some field notes and drawings

made in my visits to the Putumayo region of *Resguardo Buena Vista* and the communities guided by the knowledge of the *Siona yachags*, I am relying more than anything in the current literature on the subject. Overall, I place myself in an anthropological and post-metaphysical line of thought that engages and questions long held notions of being. If metaphysics is the philosophy of the winners in search of truths, a post-metaphysical approach is the ontology of the weak in search of interpretations.

I will show how this approach constitutes an original contribution to the issue at hand by virtue of proposing a comparison of western philosophical concepts with plant and Amazonian ontologies, augmenting in a way the knowledge of a philosophical indigenous framework and perhaps correcting the concept of non-world for plants and animals that Heidegger proposes. I contend that this triad plant-*yachag*-artist is the bearer of a torch initiated by translators of lives like Malinche, in order to help us transition into understanding the earth from a different paradigm. I believe this work matters because although there is current philosophical scholarship on plants from European philosophers on one hand and studies of the ancestral communities who cultivate them by anthropologists on the other, no scholarship is following these paths as a whole in contiguity with the artist in trance. Thus, I believe my contribution could be a strong and interesting addition specifically to Latin American philosophy, art theory, and the new visual turn in social and environmental studies and ecosystems of thought.

Chapters Summary and Artists Considered

The artists I have chosen bear a commonality that connects them in one way or another to a specific happening in their lives that awakens them to an-other path of being in the universe. They are not necessarily indigenous artists or *yachags* themselves, although they are tied to

indigenous and spiritual traditions. The artists I have chosen embody the connection to ecstatic trance in their work, the tragic condition and the notion of living in Nietzschean terms “ joyfully in scorn of life” (132). What these artists have in common is that they have chosen an unusual road in order to understand the world they are living and instead of turning their backs indifferently to it, they have acquired knowledge and wisdom to accompany and guide their communities through tough times. I contend they are the *yachags* of our worlds.

In the first chapter “Hostedness”, I approach the metaphor of the bromeliad as hostess and host to the most unknown guests. I associate this concept of hostedness to the Amazonian *yachag* and its communities who relate, host and are hostess to the jungle as the environment of bromeliad is to insects, mosses and lichens. In this chapter I explore the concept of “world” departing from Heidegger's concept of “non-world” for plants and animals, conceiving, instead the notion of a different world and communication altogether for plants. I explore the world of *vegetalistas* or herb healers from the Andes and their understanding of plant medicines.

For this chapter I have chosen the work of Cuban artist Belkis Ayón and her series *Nkame* (fig. 7) which posits her own path as artist-healer and bridge to the unknown. Her investigation into extremely hermetic and dark worlds show what the secret Abakuá society rituals she depicted, might have prohibited her from saying. She succumbed to the world she most knew and feared. Nonetheless her images are witnesses to the very idea of the artist who, entranced by a quest, delves into the depths of being just to find her own demise. She navigated the fine line between genius and madness, to finally succumb.

Chapter 2 “Blossoming”, is the beginning of any kind of life, be it human or nonhuman; and by nonhuman I not only mean biological life but the life of figures of speech and objects. A project blossoms, a book, an enterprise, an investigation, an invention or a pregnancy may

blossom. It is the departure from seed to flower. Floration in a word is “being born”. In troubled times, one wonders how plants are able to blossom and flourish, in spite of all difficulties and challenges that could emerge from pollution, or meteorological circumstances.

In this chapter I engage with the work of Maria Teresa Hincapié. Her silent performances and work with the body, plants and *Mamos* (shamans) of the Kogui community in Colombia, led her to understand that the violence those territories were experiencing had to be healed and could be healed through the work of art. In her performance *Una cosa es una cosa* (fig. 14), she enters the gallery space and inhabits it for a week. She brought various bags of things from the outside world and each day she ordered those things throughout her space for eight hours in complete silence. She proposed this dwelling as a way to practice understanding towards other beings or things, and to mourn the people who owned these objects. Her silence is akin to the *yachag*’s path where idle chatter is out of the question, in that sense it also reminds us of Heidegger’s proposal of dwelling, thinking and building.

In chapter 3 “Proliferation”, I contend that in a different manner than the *yachag*, but in that same line, the contemporary artist in trance is able to conjure, heal and even at times, precede things to come. For this reason, I propose Benjamin’s notion of ecstatic trance and Nietzsche’s concept of the tragic artist as hinges from the world of the modern episteme to that of the proto-modern mytheme and the world of plants. I have called this artist the ‘artist in trance’ for it seems to me that their work and the conditions with which they challenge themselves, bring them into such a state.

A powerful example of this kind of artist and work is Joseph Beuys’ action piece *I love America and America Loves me* (fig. 17) In his 1974 performance, Beuys enters voluntarily into a gallery space in New York where a coyote is awaiting him. He goes inside with his felt cover

and a wooden cane, both symbols which he has embedded with mystical healing power. His aim is to stay with a coyote, symbol of the wilderness and America, for three days. He tames the beast, which by the end of his time inside the enclosed space, has come to terms with the artist's presence. Beuys enables a shaman like approach to his work. He is at the same time establishing a desire to close the human-nonhuman chiasm that western metaphysics has created and kept for long.

In this chapter I also examine the work of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint and her relationship with spirituality as a methodology she pursued to create the one hundred and seventy-three *Paintings for the Temple* (fig. 19) series as an example of summoning help from forces other than what can be seen with the naked eye. She envisioned an exchange of energy in communicating with higher spirits in seances which were extremely popular at the time. In order to offer a vision of the experiences of descending into the depths of self to confront fears and trauma often buried deep in the unconscious through spirituality, she delved into a voyage of discovery through art as a medium to invisible voices and callings.

In Chapter 4 "Dissemination", I explore what philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala have called weak thought or *pensiero debole*, the notion of the weak as purveyors of change in the face of tyranny and power. In their prologue to *Plant Thinking* they write: "Weak thought resists the tyranny of 'objective' factuality and welcomes a multiplicity of interpretations, even as it takes the side of the victims of historical and metaphysical brutality" (7). Which correlates to the definition of weak thought as the thought of the weak of the earth.

Artist Ernesto Neto and his work: *Um Sagrado Lugar* (fig. 23) interest me for he is an artist who crosses the colonialist barriers almost always posed for artists of color. Nevertheless, he embodies the capitalist notion of "successful artist" and for that reason his choice of topic is

even more controversial. Although I remain strongly critical of his appropriation of the hut, sacred medicine and knowledge of *Pajés* or shamans of the Brazilian Acre in his work at the 56th Venice Biennale of 2017, at the same time I understand his need to show the world this “other” way of seeing and becoming. I will explore his reasons to bring the *Cupixawa* sacred hut), the shamans and potions into a hyper capitalistic and charged (in the wrong way) environment. Aware as I am that the piece attempts to bring the world together to meditate and embrace in fraternal peace, I argue that for an object to retain its ritualistic power it must remain within the territory of the ritual.

In this chapter I also analyze the work of Bernardo Oyarzún, a *Mapuche* artist from Chile. His project *Werkén* (fig. 24) made from One Thousand Five Hundred *Mapuche* masks is also a project that was featured in the 56th Venice Biennale and was chosen for it clearly placed the work of the *Mapuche* community and their claim for visibility and the right to be at the center of attention. Oyarzún, through his artwork, also enacts the role of seer and healer of his own community. In this piece he explores the meaning of the word *werkén* or *huerquén*, who is chancellor in the *Mapudungun* language of the *Mapuche* community, of which he is an authority figure and advises their worlds. The *werkén* is at the same time the messenger of his community.

Furthermore, I reflect on the work of artist Cecilia Vicuña and her opus *Quipu Mapocho* (fig. 25) and Viveiros de Castro’s concept of predatory alterity in the sacrifice of *El niño del Cerro de El Plomo* (El Plomo Hill’s child). In Vicuña’s work opacity seems to be the ability to remain in wonderment towards the questions of the cosmos that are not answerable, to remain in expectancy of that which is passed through storytelling from one generation to another, and, apparently, has no scientific basis. The *Quipu Mapocho* in its strange voyage down the waters of

the river that traverses down the Andes, knows no end or beginning, nor does it, or the artist, know what entanglements it will approach.

In this chapter I expanded my field of vision including works by artists Juan Zamora (fig.27) from Spain and Sandra Nakamura (fig. 28) from Perú, whose work I experienced at the XV Cuenca Biennial. I offer interpretations of their work providing a critique of Zamora's extractivist approach on one hand, and Nakamura's spiritual emphasis on the other.

In Chapter 5 "Mapping the Soil", I propose that different knowledge or *conocimientos*, apparently disconnected, find sensitive concatenations with each other. In Franco Berardi's words: "Sensibility is the sense-driven creation of conjunctions, and the ability to perceive the meaning of shapes once they have emerged from chaos." (14) Thus, the knowledge of plants, its multiple interpretations through the *yachag* or *chamana*, and the ability to connect all these worlds that the artist in trance has, finally finds a boiling point in an alembic of sorts.

Under these precepts I examined the work of Andean artist Angelica Alomoto an indigenous healer-artist who engages in her piece *Retorno* (fig. 33) with paraphernalia from her practice as a *curandera* in the intersection of art and shamanic practices. I am particularly interested in her use of contemporary art devices within traditional ancestral indigenous healing practices. She has found in contemporary art languages a possibility to inhabit her indigenous world from a completely uncharted territory.

Lastly, I address the work of Amaru Cholango, an artist based in Quito and Berlin. His installation *Las Carabelas de Colón aún están en Tierra 1994-2013* (fig. 32) features twelve large *pangas* or boats full of petroleum oil installed at the center of a historic patio in a Museum in Quito. The petroleum oil started to make workers sick so he was asked to remove them. The work alludes to the toxicity of petroleum oil spills in the Ecuadorian Amazon. He is himself a

yachag who performs healing ritual ceremonies for the prevalence of nature as culture. I explore specifically his idea of the *wak'a* aesthetics and what this could mean for the Andean world. All these artists work within contemporary art canons but choose in their installations to depict mythical and epistemological relations.

Conclusions and Limits

This project considers the possibility plants find to create alliances with other beings, human and animal, inhabiting all different houses, however, capable of cooperation, pollination and contamination in order to endure as beings. The interconnectivity that plants generate, as well as the idea of them being a world in themselves allied with the *yachag*, who is able to apprehend the world through the ingestion of teacher plants, leads the artist in trance towards the understanding (and translation) of a world to come. Applying and expanding the notion first posited by Levi-Strauss and then contested by Viveiros de Castro that the relation between nature and culture is one of “metonymic contiguity rather than metaphoric resemblance” (Viveiros de Castro 83). I argue that the same kind of contiguity exists between plants, the Amazonian *yachag* and the artist in trance. The trope of metonymic contiguity serves to connect in a continuum these three entities one after the other in a nature-culture effervescent symbiosis.

As an artist-philosopher in a western modern upbringing I recognize my limits to fully acknowledge the gigantic identity explosion that understanding plants and Amazonian thought imposes. Confusion and fear for the unknown are important components of this journey, as well as a descent into the depths of self to encounter Da-sein, or, in *Siona* parlance “spirituality” or the world of spirits. My limited experience as a journeyer through sacred medicine and its exhilarating and perilous paths are part of this research. Although I have chosen to remain

outside the medicine rituals as an observer, I continue to cultivate the relationship with soil, air and plant worlds as well as art as a path to *conocimiento* in Anzaldúa's terms. I remain critical of certain experiences I have perceived and seen through my own senses that do not always perfectly understand the implications of such potions and spirits on unaware western apprentices. The deep voyage within, which implies spiritual encounters or sorcery, might generate tremendous anxiety or even madness which may well be confused with psychosis if we were to translate them into western psychoanalytical terms. Nevertheless, if the path is taken seriously and understood in its own terrain, it will bring no doubt, beneficial outcomes for our whole planet. However, it is not a knowledge to be taken lightly; it certainly is much too powerful for it allows communication between unknown worlds filled with nonhuman entities. As Viveiros de Castro warns us, we should: "stress against fantasies of the narcissistic paradises of exotic peoples (a.k.a Disney anthropology)" (230) for it does not cease to be an altogether otherworldly alliance, and we should approach it with much respect and caution.

Because I am dealing with sources from anthropology, philosophy, and art theory, I have tried as much as possible not to make generalizations which would seem weak in any of these disciplines. However, considering the vast amount of literature in each of these disciplines, I am also aware that this study is bound to be insufficient when it comes to certain technical concepts, or non-exhaustive when it comes to fieldwork experience.

Chapter 1

Hostedness: Ontophytology and Amazonian Vegetalism

Every understanding of another culture is an experiment with one's own.

Roy Wagner



Fig. 2. *Vegetal Being*, Miranda-TeXidor, gouache on paper. 2019.

Bromelia (fig. 2) the epiphyte, as a guest, teaches to gracefully lean on outside help to survive and in turn, by being host, she teaches generosity, giving back what is taken from the tree she leans on. This does not mean that her generosity lacks perils; any creature coming to drink of

the water stored in her bosom might drown all the same. This counterbalance of forces shows how a flow is interchanged in these worlds in order to achieve some sort of equality. In the same manner plants might make alliances with humans in order to learn from each other in their own worlds.

I address the possibility of plants creating alliances with other beings, human and animal, inhabiting all different “houses,” yet capable of cooperation, pollination and contamination in order to endure as beings. The interconnectivity that plants generate, as well as the idea of them being a world in themselves allied with the *yachag*, or shaman, who is able to apprehend the world through the ingestion of teacher plants, may lead humanity towards the understanding of other worlds to come.

The concept of hostedness is comparable to Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle’s notion of “hospitality” in which the perfect guest is the most unknown and enters “[t]hat unbearable orb of intimacy that melts into hate” (4). Thus, guest and host establish a dialogue about hospitality, and the condition of unknownness of the perfectly unknown foreigner guest. This perfectly unknown guest is that insect or bird that comes to visit and stays inside *Bromelia*’s world: a perfect foreigner of whom nothing is asked, provided its beak is long enough to access the nectar of the flower or its wings are strong enough to lift her from the weighty water stored inside the *Bromelia*. In both cases the unknown guest is never aware of what awaits her and the host never knows for sure who her guest is and what is being brought into her home. She waits patiently and gives all she has in order to accommodate such visitors. Such is the concept of hospitality that Derrida talks about:

To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of

being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (25)

In the case of Amazonian forest systems, absolute hospitality is at work most of the time. The intricate laws of interspecies alliances between humans, plants and animals require this sense of trustworthiness established in the exchange between guest and host. This does not mean the guest will not betray its host and conversely that the host will not give the guest away. The alliances established between species are even more important than filiation, for it is extremely vital to maintain good relationships with the political families one enters into, which have to be appeased in order to keep the good cooperative balance of the forest. Viveiros de Castro speaks about these systems of alliances that are produced by marriage in this way:

It is indispensable that they be animals, or in general, nonhumans, whether vegetable, astronomical, meteorological, or artifactual (in truth future nonhumans: in myth, the whole world is partially human, actual humans included, even if the way is not the same in the two directions). For it is precisely this alliance with the nonhuman that defines ‘the systems intensive conditions’ in Amazonia. (178)

Interspecies marriages, in ritual terms, are possible and they bring enormous advantages to the whole clan. This very delicate system of balances is maintained mainly by the *yachag* who is able to translate between these worlds. The knowledge of plants is the vehicle through which this “cosmopolitical diplomat” is able to traverse worlds (Viveiros de Castro 151). In the ritual ceremony of *yagé* drinking, the *yachags* are able to foresee the convenience of these alliances and how to protect their community. The entheogen, *yagé* for the *Sionas* and Amazonian groups,

Ayahuasca for the *Kichwa*, *Nixé Pae* for the Brazilian, is made of the combination and cooking of various plants such as the *Banisteriopsis Caapi* (*Ayahuasca*), the *Psychotria viridis* (*Chacruna*) or the *Brugmansia Suaveolens* (*Floripondio*). The word entheogen comes from the Greek root *entheos*, which means “full of the God”, and *genesthai* meaning “coming into being.” Thus, an entheogen is a plant capable of producing spiritual inspiration. In contrast with hallucinogenic synthetic substances, which provide a psychedelic trip with no spiritual outcome in particular, an entheogen is believed to enable a deep voyage within, when taken in a ceremonial context. In such a densely populated world of spirits as the forest, it would be impossible to live without such knowledge and protections.⁴

This knowledge is not only a cosmovision or cosmology as it has been condescendingly called, it carries such profound thought that it is truly a philosophical system that has its own concepts, categories and intricate pathways that resemble a mycorrhiza. The mycorrhiza is the conglomerate of fungi growing in the roots of trees. This amazing interconnective multiplicity runs throughout the entire planet. This is a different ontology of which we are becoming aware lately. Different ontologies are making their way into a world where European metaphysics have been the sole guiding principle for centuries. Plant ontology is one of these ontologies, so is Amazonian thought. *Ontophytology* is the notion that plants are beings with their own soul, ways of thinking and personhood. Amazonian thought places as its central cosmovision the alliance with the invisible entities of human and nonhuman actants such as plants, animals and the spirits of the dead. One is contained in the other and the two are inseparable as the ecosystem of certain epiphytes promote: the same lives inside the other and the other lives within the same.

In the history of western metaphysics, plants having souls could be unimaginable; plants talking and communicating with each other and with humans even more so. How do humans

realize plants are communicating with them not as decorative objects or nutritious feedings but as beings in their own capacity? Michael Marder contends that through the overcoming of western metaphysics humans are able to understand and relate to plants as beings which can communicate with them in a non-vocalized language. In *Plant Thinking* he writes:

Vegetal life expresses itself otherwise, without resorting to vocalization. Aside from communicating their distress when predators are detected in the vicinity by releasing airborne (or in some cases belowground) chemicals, plants, like all living beings, articulate themselves spatially; in a body language free from gestures, ‘they can express themselves only by their postures [ils ne s ’expriment que par leurs poses].’ (75)

However, it is the communities such as the *Siona*, *Secoya*, the *Achuar* and the *Cofán* (and according to Descola, all Amerindian communities from the Inuit to the Mapuche) which have for millennia developed a relational system of kinship that places “the subaltern plant” (Marder 33), the peccary, the jaguar and the hunter in a world of worlds where each sees the other as human. In other words: Amazonian thought gives personhood to plants as nonhuman actants in the wide ecosystem of the jungle. In Descola’s words: “But it is above all in their conceptions of the animal world that the Indians of the northern Canadian forest most resemble those of Amazonia. Despite differences in language and ethnic affiliations, the same complex of beliefs and rites everywhere governs the hunter’s relationship with his prey.” (14) Each actant forms relationships and alliances with each other in order to traverse the visible and invisible, or interiority and exteriority, swiftly and in a continuum, with permission of each other. In his book *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines a continuum of interior towards exterior without a schism or binary opposition. He also does not contend that we are all exterior as Deleuze and Guatarri. In his notion of continuum, I find parallels to the world of plants which

seem to be all interior and exterior at the same time. As he writes: “It is therefore indeed true that the ‘private worlds’ communicate, that each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world. The communication makes us the witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing” (11). This perception of a private world that is “perceived” as common to others even if that commonality is dubious, seems to pervade the notions that surround the world of the forest. Amazonians believe they understand their commoner plants and animals and no doubt they are able to; when there is a common ground of connections it becomes undoubtedly possible to “hear” and “see” in a shared perception of worlds.

In his book *Plant Theory in Amazonian Literature*, Juan Duchesne Winter explores the notion of *vegetalism* from the *vegetalistas* or herbalists trained by *yachags*, like Ino Moxo, a shaman in Duchesne Winter’s text who lives in the vast part of the South American Andes and the jungle. *Vegetalism* is not necessarily a plant ontology, although it does care about plants as beings-in-relation-to other actants. This is the case of the healer and seer who performs treatment or healing through his knowledge of plants and conversely, plants heal through the *yachag*.

Duchesne writes:

Vegetalismo is a complex and heterogeneous body of knowledge and healing practices cultivated by mestizo shamans in urban and rural settings not necessarily corresponding to distinct indigenous communities. Vegetalistas claim that master plants, that is, spiritual plant-persons that hypostasize plant species, directly transmit their knowledge through them, although their own account may also mention human teachers that teach them how to learn from plants in the first place. (59)

The knowledge plants give the communities and *yachags* who are guided by them is precious because the plant world is the most powerful creator of life.⁵ The vegetal world is weak and powerful at the same time. It can host a whole ecosystem of insects and birds as well as serve as a drinking cup for thirsty humans and other animals; but it could kill a bird, human or insect in a second. Plants are takers and givers, they are silent with interiority, although its exteriority is most evident. It is a world among other worlds; the world of plants forms a rhizome with fungi, insects, birds and humans. Communities who know how to listen to plant knowledge, do so through the intervention of plane travelers such as the *yachags* in order to apprehend the messages they carry along. As Viveiros de Castro writes:

The ethnography of indigenous America is replete with references to a cosmopolitical theory describing a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents human or otherwise –gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects and artifacts as well—equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of soul. (56)

Thus, enabled by the possibility of communication with these actants, Amazonians are placed in the middle of a mythofictive world where an altogether different approach to everything known as science, belongs. This is a different metaphysics altogether, that of mixture as Emanuele Coccia calls it, and a cannibal one for Viveiros de Castro, in the case of humans.

Moreover, in pandemic times, the words of Isabelle Stengers resonate profoundly: “One way or another, the time is over when we considered ourselves as the only true actors of our history, freely discussing if the Earth is available for our use or should be protected” (1). More and more, communities from all over the planet already know they are part of a vast cosmos and are becoming aware of the need to ask permission from the many entities that populate it, to act

and live in it. Opening to a different metaphysics, one in which actants of all kinds are meanderers, no matter how much the scientific community offers proof of what is “real” and what is not, societies are becoming aware that other worlds live in parallel times and spaces to them; other sounds, sights and non-vocalized languages murmur around them. Some get ready to enter the world of spirituality and vegetal soul, at times soft spoken, often scary, other times loud. In this spiritual world, all plants have their own personhood and live in alliance with humans for their endeavors. The population of spirits is enormous; nevertheless, these actants have to encounter the western world’s reasoning, thus, a hinge becomes necessary. This hinge is the *yachag*, although it could also be what I have called the artist in trance. This *yachag* or artist is just a guest in this amazing cosmos populated by entities of all kinds, but could well demonstrate various lessons in caring for imagination and the health of planet earth.

Siona yachags are expert voyagers through worlds, they often talk about their travels through the Putumayo River down to the Amazon. They travel without moving, the sacred plant carries them through places as if voyaging across the mycorrhiza, the conglomerate of mycelium growing across the rhizome of plants, communicating all vegetal life along forests and cities, throughout the entire planet. These worlds are possibilities for imagination: the *yachag*, the child and everyone in the *Siona* community share their dreams every day. They talk to animals and plants and imagine all kinds of mythic happenings within that populous world the forest opens for them. It is a whole forest that thinks, and together imagines, thus, makes images. In Eduardo Kohn’s parlance: “Such encounters with other kinds of beings force us to recognize the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human” (1). Semiotic or linguistic abilities thus, are not only human, they go beyond the linguistic notions western thinking may have harbored. These notions imply leaving behind an assumption that

language is the verbalized possession of humans. On the contrary, it encompasses all kinds of sounds and energies and invisible haptic perceptions of the bodies of animals, plants, and even objects.

1.1 Bromelia as World

Heidegger, Plants and Animals



Fig. 3. *Amazonía Eterna*, Ramón Piaguaje, oil on canvas. 2000

In his work *Amazonía Eterna* (fig. 3) artist Ramón Piaguaje portrays the jungle as an image of vegetal being. Ferns, lichens, epiphytes, vines and supporting trees are this being itself. In this portrait we can apprehend the jungle forest as one entity in its connections with billions of

organisms all living in a cooperative system. There is something revolutionary in their mutualistic living, it cooperates, it coordinates and expresses a multiplicity. Martin Heidegger is considered one of the philosophers who set out to overcome western metaphysics. His phenomenological and hermeneutical approach excavates the meaning of words and accounts beyond their traditional definitions and nominations to seek notions long forgotten or hardly paid attention to. Marder, a philosopher who follows this hermeneutical line, excavates these laid aside notions from Aristotle to Hegel and the immense scholarly use of vegetal metaphors and interpretations of plant life.⁶ Marder brings the idea that the way to overcome metaphysics is to offer plant or vegetal democracy a revolutionary chance, much in the same way Vattimo and Zabala offer their hermeneutical communism as an antidote to the Russian and Maoist communism with their fallen recipes for revolution. Nevertheless, neither Vattimo and Zabala nor Marder in their prevalent western notions of weak thought and plant ontology are able to see a different road beyond or in-between one and the other. The road might not be that of plants as beings alone: perhaps only through certain human-plant-animal alliances a different traversing of this plane of immanence might be possible. Perhaps it is precisely these subaltern groups of amerindian peoples whose knowledge have been so “covered-over” (32) as Enrique Dussel says, who can show us a different metaphysics, another way of thinking or to use Duchesne’s term, a way to “Amazoning” (1).

Heidegger contends that animals and plants do not have a world because they do not inhabit the home of language that is the home of Being. However, not inhabiting the home of language does not mean plants lack a world; they are a world in themselves, given the possibility of the existence of multiple worlds at multiple times. Plants possess the ability to communicate with other creatures in a haptic manner that is all interiority but is also and at the same time

exteriority. For example, the way plants act, apparently unmovable if we see them in human or even animal terms, conforms an exterior that is apparently unable to move or transport by itself; nevertheless, it is beaming with happenings inside, an energy plant literally, a generator of sap and chlorophyll, organizing at all times a photosynthetic revolutionary movement. In this sense the plant is unable to vocalize but is interpreting the sun rays and converting them into food for its growth which happens so imperceptibly to human eyes that it is almost impossible to see. In the middle of the forest and under the influence of the ingestion of certain vegetal components, the human actant is able to perceive the movements and language of plants as a silent communication that takes place through some sort of electrical currents throughout the body. These movements provide a continuum interior-exterior never divorced and never a chiasm but all symbiotically working in a mutualistic endeavor. These concepts that come from western thought apply in many ways to plant thinking. In their book *One Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari write: “The plane of consistency or immanence, on the other hand, implies a destratification of all of Nature, by even the most artificial of means. The plane of consistency is the body without organs.” Thus, it is a “plane of immanence” (270). Plants as well as the *yachags* —more than anything— live in a continuum of interiority-exteriority, the visible and invisible in Merleau-Ponty, that is at all times interchangeable and in fluid passage; in Merleau-Ponty’s own words: “[I]f we can withdraw from the world of perception without knowing it, nothing proves to us that we are ever in it, nor that the observable is ever entirely observable, nor that it is made of another fabric as the dream” (6). Indeed, the plant is experiencing its own systemic processes at all times while it presents form as its only way of being-there, as if perception was its true form. The *yachag* himself is at all times in connection with dreams and visions, and his own bodily processes while enacting his own forms of presencing much in the

way a plant does. There are no chiasms or separations. Moreover, his being-there, his “Dasein” is the same as the plants being-there within a continuum that entails a crossover of nature-culture and politics. The being- in-the-worlds he traverses is a cosmopolitical existence he shares with plants, animals and the dead alike. In this sense he/she is a host on the world of plants, for they are determining his/her experience and containing him/her within a home, which for all intents and purposes might be the cosmos itself.

On this assumption, it is no longer possible to talk about a Heideggerian “world” in which humans rule. In the notions presented by Viveiros de Castro there are various worlds and each one of those has its own point of view. According to his ideas, plants, humans, animals and other entities have their own worlds and thus their own perspectives. In this cosmos, a place where not only humans with their language, syntax and signs rule, a myriad of beings and politics are enacted in waking hours as well as in dreams, storytelling, child rearing, war and ceremonial rituals. A full continuum of beings-there-in-worlds is always already, at all times acting and enacting this multiplicity, the non rectilinear lines and circles that traverse that plane of immanence.

Bromelia, the plant and flower, is a world that houses alliances and multiplicities at the same time that it hosts and can be hosted. It enacts a game of imaginations with all actants, humans included, involved with her at any point in time. No language in particular is needed to communicate but an embodiment and a realization that plant thinking may require a modal apprenticeship that no other agent would provide better than the *yachag*, the seer or healer of Amazonian and Andean communities. Nowadays some of the strongest barriers against getting to know these other worlds are being overcome and more and more humans are experiencing a need to understand the planet and its rhythms from another place, thus the enormous interest in

teacher plants and their translators, the *yachags*. The slowing of the agro-consumer business due to the Covid 19 pandemic proved right what seers from indigenous communities all over the world have been saying for decades: humans cannot keep using natural resources endlessly, thinking that planet Earth is eternally available for their sole use and abuse. However, understanding the plant world and plant language is not something humans can easily do without experiencing teacher plants. It seems almost impossible, that is why the *yachag* or an artist in trance is needed, to ease a swift communication between worlds, like a cosmopolitical ambassador. It is not the place of the artist to be a pawn in market strategies, her task is to unconceal a world difficult to see for everyday people. In this case I agree with Jean Baudrillard when he writes: “Therein lies all the duplicity of contemporary art: asserting *nullity*, insignificance, meaninglessness, driving for nullity when already null and void. Striving for emptiness when already empty. Claiming superficiality in superficial terms” (27). An art that propels a different plane of immanence aims to overcome marketing programs and aligns with a cosmopolitical vision; perhaps a “becoming-indigenous” which would mean an unlearning of the western gargantuan greediness that believes humans are the sole proprietors of this planet, is needed. By “becoming-indigenous” I mean to adapt and adopt certain principles such as sweet cultivation of the soil in attunement with plant and animal partners, alliances with plant masters and understanding of a spirituality that has all to do with presencing the spirit of all beings.

The artist in trance sees the soul of the *Bromelia* as an entity that accompanies her voyage through plantness in various stages of dream work and as advisor in sacred plant journeys. She does not diet with it but realizes that plants do communicate with her in various ways, so she finds attunement to their language. At times it is through the intuition of a plant that can cure a certain ailment, at times through dreams or visions. She finds also in the repeated contact with

the drawing of a plant that the connection is established. Marder writes: “The aesthetic attitude, broadly conceived, seems to be more propitious to a nonviolent approach to plants than either their practical instrumentalization, or their nominalist-conceptual integration into systems of thought” (4). It is in the delicate relationship the draftsman finds in the realms of drawing or painting that the plant remains in its own environment without being utilized either as banal adornment or nutritious instrument. The drawing of a plant within a conceivable naturalistic milieu or an imaginary plant environment differs from the botanical illustration where the plant is constantly instrumentalized in order to be categorized and nominated for taxonomic reasons. In the botanical drawing, although precious as it might be, the plant is seldom placed as a connected actant or character worthy of being portrayed. The encounter found in the jungle with plant spirits is the eye opener for a respectful relationship with plants as Being and thus agent and creator of cultural possibility. The words of Kohn propel the notion of an anthropology beyond the human and the capabilities of the vegetal world to create and be, *in se stesso* a cultural plateau. According to him, “[f]orests are good to think because they themselves think. Forests think” (21). His statement is questionable; he himself questions it as he responds to the question “can forests think?” and his answer is, “[t]hese two things —the claim itself and the claim that we can make the claim — are related: It is because thought extends beyond the human that we can think beyond the human” (22). Observing the close relationality that living the forest entails, is what unconceals thinking beyond the human.

1.2 Naturgemalde

Unity of Nature

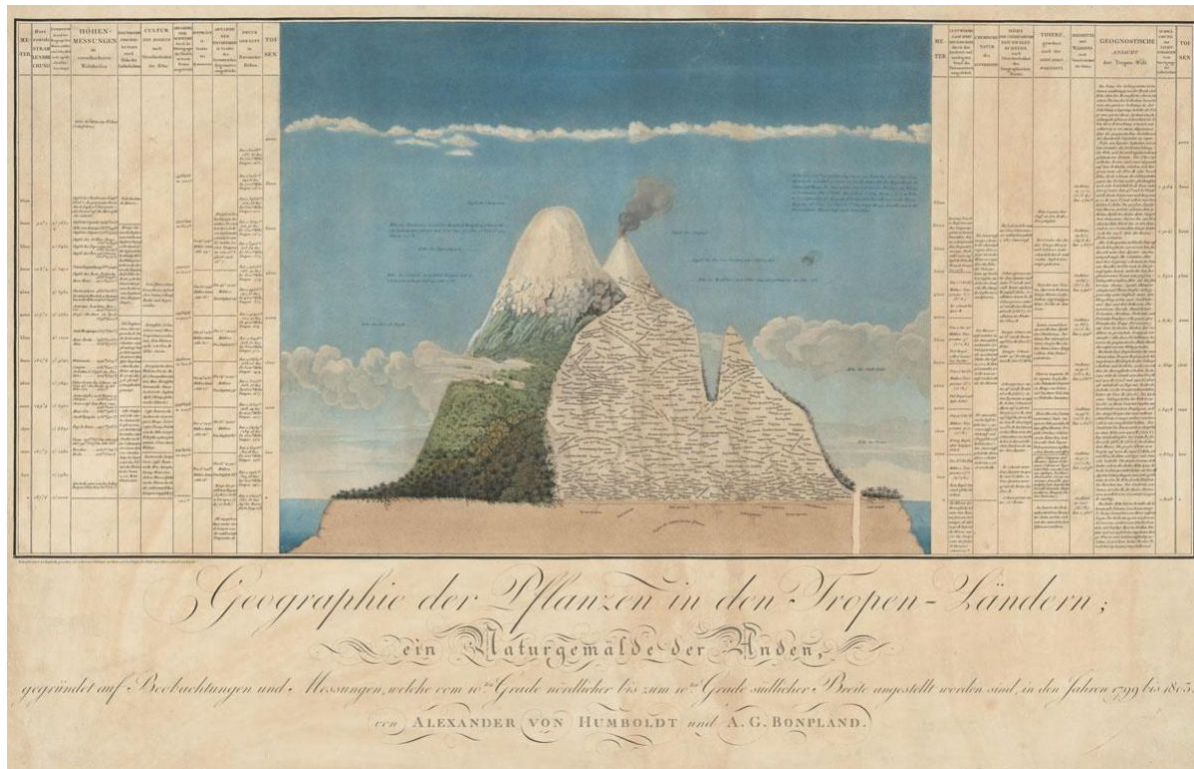


Fig. 4. *Ein Naturgemalde der Anden*, Alexander Von Humboldt and A. G. Bonpland.
1803

Naturgemalde (fig. 4) is one of the many illustrations Alexander Von Humboldt made with the aid of Aime Bonpland in their first voyage to the Chimborazo. A volcano in the middle of the earth, the Equator, that blew their minds over all assumed knowledge thought of before. In 1802 Humboldt climbed the Chimborazo in what is now known as Ecuador and his thoughts on the “unity of nature” started to take shape. He arrived as a well-seasoned young man, befriended local creole aristocrats, and set out to collect and give name and classification to unknown (to Europe) flora and fauna from the Andes. His work has been much praised and overtly studied by various scholars and generations who see plant knowledge as a scientific field. Although

chronicles from the conquest and tales from various *yachags* sustain that healers from Amazonian and Andean regions had profound knowledge of plants and already had alliances with vegetal and animal worlds, it is disheartening, though understandable, to learn that Humboldt has been credited with “discovering” plants and animal species from South America for the first time.⁷ The knowledge indigenous communities have was far more remarkable than what nomination and classification can bring from the plant world. Nevertheless, it was laid aside and straightforwardly ignored just until the XIX century. Naming a plant and classifying it within species, genus and categories does not amount to much; it is her spiritual properties, personhood and relationships with other beings that make it what she is. Duchesne puts it in these words:

Being a visionary healer is in many regards a *becoming-plant*. This becoming-plant can hardly be compared to plant theory because it presupposes a paradigm of what constitutes thinking, knowledge, language, being human, being plant, and being in the world that is quite different from what “theory” stands for in a modern agroindustrial society.” (35)

Humboldt himself already knew this and often acknowledged the wisdom already found in these lands. Michel Foucault came into awareness that the whole notion of discourse and who is able to speak is defined by power, as he writes in the *Discourse on Language*; a botanical proposition had to retain certain characteristics that made it botanical, but of course one ought to ask who sets the characteristics in the first place. In his own words:

The proposition must refer to a specific range of objects; from the end of the seventeenth century, for example, a proposition, to be ‘botanical’, had to be concerned with the visible structure of plants, with its system of close and not so close resemblances, or with the behavior of its fluids; (but it could no longer retain, as had still been the case in the

sixteenth century, references to its symbolic value or to the virtues and properties accorded it in antiquity.) (223)

The 18th century was not a time in which Europe was ready to give any opportunity to subaltern knowledge and so it happened that most knowledge already there in the Americas was overrun by the consequent enlightenment of naturalistic discourse. However, by now we know that for generations the Tukano people as well as many other Amazonian and Andean indigenous groups had been living through the guidance of plants. What makes a people accept knowledge as one sanctioned truth, and place it before and beyond their own knowledge and intuition? These knowledges that Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges” act as a resistance from subaltern groups that hold a different kind of ontology or philosophy not accepted by official venues; in his own parlance:

I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse, of the doctor –parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine – that of the delinquent, etc.) and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (*le savoir des genes*) though it is far from being a commonsense knowledge, but it is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it –that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (991)

Indeed, it is for these reasons that elite creole societies (such as the South American) rejected completely the *savoir des gens* locally and were so ready to accept and engage in Humboldt’s

quest to categorize plants in order to present them within the exotic realm of the unknown. This sense of subordinated colonial self-deprecation South American upper middle classes have suffered for ages (and continue to suffer), comes from a sad sentiment of the colonized mind that is not able to appreciate what does not belong to the European canon. It is hard for a mestizo to like him/herself when the idolized image is always of the European master. The slave wants to be the master, in Hegelian terms, but the slave ought to be able to dismantle the master's house with other tools than the master's own, as Audre Lorde would tell us. However, ethnobotany gives popular knowledge an important place and brings the wisdom of people into the arena with its rounded and ancestral depth and also with its own names and its own classification that does not pertain to the scientific realm of genus and species but nonetheless includes a categorization of plants according to popular knowledge and needs.

Having said this, Humboldt has to be credited for his extraordinary ability to appreciate the world he longed to know: the Andes and the South American forests. It is in the Andes that Humboldt discovered a passion for writing, drawing, poetry and the naturalist researcher's curiosity that accompanied him all his life. It is to him that the world owes the very exquisite and rare combination of scientist and artist, philosopher and poet he was able to birth. The importance he gave to imagination in the portrayal of plants and the environment opened up a form of relating to nonhuman beings that was altogether novel. In his beautiful book *Cosmos* Humboldt writes:

The mere contact with nature, the issuing forth into the open air, —that which by an expression of deep meaning my native language terms in *das Freie*, —exercises a soothing and a calming influence on the sorrows and on the passions of men, whatever may be the region they inhabit, or the degree of intellectual culture which they enjoy. (6)

His writings are never exempt from poetic marveling at the amazing surprises nature had reserved for him. He realizes that the unity we find in nature is within ourselves and we are an important part of it, although not owners or even authors of its very own rhythms and laws. In this sense he resembles a pre-socratic thinker in the line of Anaxágoras. If we remember him, he offered a hint of fractality in his Fragment 6 noting that the portions of the great and the small are all-together and contained in each other. This way of thinking which does not separate what seems to be small from the grand but understands it as a whole, is what Humboldt intends to pursue his entire life. His way of describing nature and pairing it with the emotions humans perceive, turns them into one more of the myriad specimens which make part of this unity Humboldt constructs: a being not at all of higher importance in the scale of creation. This thought of being connected and in tune with nature gave Humboldt a sense of belonging to this cosmos; thus, the idea of *Naturgemalde*, or the all in one, that would be the basis for his research, began taking shape. He was able to pair the plants, trees and shrubs from one area of the world, from highlands and tropics to one another, finding relations and familiarities among the nonhumans from all parts of the planet. Better said in his own words:

Amid the luxuriance of this exotic flora, surrounded by colossal forms of unfamiliar grandeur and beauty, we experience (thanks to the marvelous flexibility of our nature) how easily the mind opens to the combination of impressions connected with each other by unperceived links of secret analogy. (8)

Moreover, Humboldt might well be one of the first European naturalists to realize how connected and similar floras from the Siberian Steppe are to the ones in the Chimborazo. In his *Naturgemalde*, the level of detail and patience he applied to the comparisons of different plateaus and soils and their incidence in the types of vegetation they gave birth to, can be clearly

appreciated. His vision has had such a strong influence on naturalists, scientists, artists and poets all over the world, that we can say without doubt that Humboldt, the artist-philosopher, was able to go beyond the perils and squalors of life, to richly live in spite of it.

1.3 Red and Green

Deleuze and Guattari meet Viveiros de Castro

-A plant-human.

Like a plant, he abandons himself to the rhythm of universal life. There is not the slightest effort to dominate nature. Mediocre farmer. Perhaps. I am not saying that he makes the plant grow: I am saying that he grows, he lives in a plant-like manner. His indolence? that of the vegetal. Do not say "he is lazy," say "he vegetates," and you will speak the truth for two reasons. His favorite phrase: "Let it go." By that, understand that he lets himself be carried along by life, docile, light, un-insistent, non-rebellious-in a friendly way, lovingly. Obstinate moreover as only a plant can be. Independent (independence, autonomy of the plant). Surrender to self, to the seasons, to the moon, to the moreor-less long day. Fruit harvest. And always and everywhere in the slightest manifestations, the primacy of the plant, the plant trampled under foot but still alive, dead but reviving, the plant free, silent, and proud. (Suzanne Césaire 30)

In this gentle poem Suzanne Césaire opens up the possibility for a human to become-plant; not in the vegetative inability to perform as human which is always pejoratively implied when talking about humans who are no longer capable of their bodily functions, but of a perfectly aligned creature that flows with the light of the sun and undertakes the possibilities the seasons give to her. "Surrender of self," she says, a human who is able to be carried along by life, that is what she means by a plant-human. This is perhaps what becoming-plant means in order to traverse a plane of immanence. Deleuze and Guattari write about becoming-intense, becoming-

animal. Their position aligns very well with what anthropologists since Levi-Strauss have found out from the mythologies and training of *yachags* along their studies. It is not to filiation that becoming belongs to, they are in the order of alliances instead. In the case of families, filiation is not as important as alliance; the relationship with a son is not as crucial as the relationship with an in-law; animals can also be in-laws in certain Amazonian groups. Also, becoming-animal does not belong to the order of filiation and it is not of course a becoming animal in the sense that one turns into another species. It is more an alliance of this genre:

[Finally], becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation.

Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms with no possible filiation. (Deleuze and Guattari 238)

Thus, becoming-plant is an alliance of the human with plant soul, grown in stages as a crafty commitment to the vegetal world from the part of the human who in turn will be gifted with the aptitude of plant-thinking; the plant will in turn speak through her. What Cesaire describes then as a human plant, is a being who like a plant *is* and thus is not striving incessantly to *do*.

According to Deleuze and Guattari becoming is a rhizome, it is to the human becoming-plant to form a rhizome with any other actant human or non-human: water, air, sun, fire, ants. It is this alliance that permeates and caresses the intimate purring of the souls of humans or even objects in the world of the *yachag*. It is this notion of the spirit in every being that finds attunement with what is called spiritualism, which has nothing to do with religiosity but with the awareness (and communication) with spirits (or entities) that inhabit everything. These spirits become entities; the jungle is full of these entities, and the Amazonian communities speak to them through plant

diets, teacher plant rituals, dreams and songs. These communities believe there is no other way to communicate with those beings than through the ecstatic trance provided by teacher plants.

Viveiros de Castro is poised to encounter his own way of practicing anthropology with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical thought. He meets them halfway although his encounter is mediated by his profound reverence towards his findings in the forest. He finds out where the notions of immanence and becoming-animal come from, for it is the *yachags* who usually traverse lines of flight surreptitiously when voyaging the *ma?timo/bai* and *ume siaya* or celestial river.⁸ Moreover, Viveiros de Castro challenges this notion of "metonymic contiguity" of nature-culture that Levi-Strauss talked about at first in his work *The Savage mind* and Philippe Descola fine-tunes: "We could say then, that if the challenge Descola confronted and overcame was that of rewriting *The Savage Mind* after having profoundly assimilated *The Order of Things*, mine was to know how to rewrite the *Mythologiques* on the basis of everything that *A Thousand Plateaus* disabused me of in anthropology" (84). Viveiros de Castro finds out that it is not in animism (with its classificatory and thus analogous preclusions) that the sacrificial-cannibalistic corpus of knowledge inhabits, but in perspectivism with its own line of flights and immanence. His challenge, thus, is to rewrite Levi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* through Deleuze and Guattari's lenses. Nevertheless, Viveiros de Castro does not speak about plants, he speaks about the people who are capacious translators of worlds: the worlds of plants and animals, the world of alive entities and dead ones. It is this understanding of cannibal metaphysics, as he terms them, that enables me to comprehend the intricate world of the *yachags* and vegetal thinking.

Given the fact that understanding a myriad of nonhuman actants and entities of all kinds in Amazonian spirituality might be impossible for the non-indigenous apprentice of plant voyages, the *Siona* ceremonies often open with prayers to a Christian god and saints. However, I

find it a lot more interesting to learn to apprehend the world of these spirits in their own terms, even if at first it seems an impossible task. It is in this realm that the notion of “predatory alterity” coined by Viveiros de Castro is so useful. He delves into a very complex ontological territory of the mind-body continuum, to explain how, by the magical approach to spiritual cannibalism, one is able to learn and apprehend the enemy. Using de Castro’s own terminology:

What was eaten was the enemy’s relation to those who consumed him; in other words, *his condition as enemy*. In other words, what was assimilated from the victim as the signs of his alterity, the aim being to reach his alterity as a point of view on the Self. Cannibalism and the peculiar form of war with which it is bound up involve a paradoxical movement of reciprocal self-determination through the point of view of the enemy. (143)

This very peculiar form of apprehension of the self through the manducation of the other, could be also transposed into the notion of apprehension of knowledge from plants and animals through eating them. So Viveiros de Castro’s positing of the predatory alterity of the *yachag* is also applicable to the predatory relationships we hold to the world.

How to apprehend the world? By eating and drinking it. In this sense Deleuze would say that intoxication is “the triumphant irruption of the plant in us” (11), and Marder too, by positing that “[t]he subaltern plant, itself incapable of speech is represented by and commences to speak with more than one voice and in more than one tongue...” (33). There lies precisely the core of our predatory relationship with the plant: it is through ingestion that we get to know her, and she, in turn, gets to know us. In Duchesne’s words: “Plants are great, yes, but just as potentially dangerous or beneficial as any other being. Plants are everything but inherent depositories of goodness and wellness in the sense purveyed by New Age characterizations of the spirituality and sacredness of plant knowledge” (2). It is indeed a scary thought that the hospitable host, the

one who invited his guest to be part of a ritual or ceremony might have in mind to eat that very guest. The altogether unknown guest is eaten. The foreigner is placed in the utmost role of confidence: in order to be known you will have to be eaten. However, I am not only referring here to being eaten in the literal sense of the word. I mean that our resources, creativity and life could be sucked right out in a second in order for the community or the *yachag* to be fortified. If this is possible, if this can happen in a ritual ingestion of teacher plants, it means that we enter a world altogether unknown, the house of our host, and who knows how (if) we will come out. Of the deeds that *yachags* may perform, many anthropologists and researchers write. In this sense the ritual ceremony of *yagé* intake may well be a cosmopolitical performance where the *yachag* is the most important artist and host.

In the last century a good number of artists unapologetically loved and participated of the notion of anthropophagy posited by Brazilian artist Oswald de Andrade who declared our own right as subaltern South Americans to eat up all our influences and become strong and knowledgeable through this kind of spiritual cannibalism. In short, “civilized” humans too, are cannibals even if they do not realize it, even in their most innocent and loving moments of seeing and approaching other beings. Amazonian communities for once are extremely careful, for example, on who sees and approaches a newborn; at least forty days should pass between the time the baby is born and the time someone outside of the realm of the close family meets him or her. This is because they believe that every person sheds and shares energies that are extremely powerful. In the post-industrialized world of practicalities and pragmatism none of those considerations are valid any longer. Although later on people might realize and regret the harms that come off the experiences and energetic fields they are exposed to everyday of their lives. This is especially notorious in the *dieta* that a *yachag* is supposed to follow before he even starts

his training with the master plant beverage called *yagé*. This plant component is believed by the *yachags* and their communities to be able to talk to the person who takes it, allowing in this manner a perception of a higher spirit or god, who speaks from within, an immanent sense of divinity. *Yagé* is and has been used by the tribes of the Amazon basin throughout Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Brazil for thousands of years as a vehicle to encounter *conocimiento* or knowledge. The use of plants to cure and aid in the treatment of different ailments has been a knowledge passed through generations within the indigenous communities of the Amazon basin and specifically through their *yachags*. It is an intricate and complex way of performing an alliance with plants, animals and other beings alive and dead. The *yachag's* role is, in the words of Vickers: "A central aspect of the shaman's political function is his role as an interpreter of supernatural facts and as protector of the welfare of the members of their group against the ritual aggression of the sorcerers (that is, the shamans of other local groups)" (170). I would add that the *yachag* is also the political leader of the group and his teachings and guidance are envisioned, respected and followed in ceremonial context at all times.

The knowledge and preparation of plants and plant-based medications and potions is the basis of the training of the *yachag's* apprenticeship. His energetic field needs to be protected at all times. This is why female energies are so important and at the same time so difficult to govern. Having said this, it is important to ask why women are not allowed in the *yachag's* presence or realm when they are menstruating. Obviously in western societies, all the taboos involving menstruation have been erased. But why is it that most shamanic communities from the Americas, Asia and Africa prevent men from mingling with women during their periods? It is believed by the *Siona*, *Secoya* and other Amazonian and Andean communities, that women's energies debilitate the *yachag's* spiritual practice. Also, sexual contact with women before

ceremonies and hunting is strictly prohibited. Women in their periods are not to cook or be together with men. They are *enlunadas* or “mooned” (under the influence of the moon) and they must remain in the “moon-house” a house apart from where the men and *yachag*’s live. In the moon-house women are among themselves, cook and knit mainly performing their tasks seriously and in meditation. They are not to engage in any strenuous exercise in those days. These precautions seem to be for protection not only for the men and *yachag* but also for the women. Being able to withdraw and be protected within a circle of women during the menstruation period is a privilege that most western women have completely lost. They force themselves to perform tasks as men would, in those days, which takes away their strength and “challenges-forth” (321) using a Heideggerian term, their energies. The sweet cultivation of the land that an Andean or Amazonian woman undertakes, takes into account the moon calendar. She stays away from the *chakra*, her vegetable garden in those days also, since she plants and feeds her family from this land. She needs to conserve and wisely use her energy the way the cycles of concealment and unconcealment of the moon tell her. In this way, she is acting like a plant, listening to her own rhythm and needs, she is “bringing-forth” (Heidegger 319) the fruits of the soil, and the fruits of her body.

Trees have ways of intertwining and serve as a home to both parasite plants and epiphytes. The tree becomes-plant and it is always reaching horizontally throughout the mycelial network it is part of. Deleuze and Guattari take the metaphor of the tree and demonize it, making it seem as the epitome of ascending vertical power. The “tree of life,” the “genetic tree,” or the “family tree” have served as metaphors of a sole hierarchical ascending power hungry, logocentric knowledge. Nevertheless, the tree is also a plant, a shrub, and a becoming host to every possibility of life within the forest. In his study *Un Arbol Llamado Rey de la Selva* (A Tree

named King of the Forest) Carlos Cerón, an Ecuadorian botanist, writes about the great *Supay Chakra* or devil's garden, a formidable tree also known as the king of the forest. Amazonian groups from the *Siona* to the *Achuar* call it different names and they all use it as a cure for various ailments. This tree has a working alliance with ants to which it provides food, shelter and growth as colonies. Thus, it is a "formicarium" for it houses great colonies of ants that colonize the tree completely and prevent other types of plants from growing nearby. In Cerón's own words: "The translation of the Huaorani name is *Yuca del Diablo* (Devil's Yucca) for around her nothing else grows. Many legends are told, such as that at night if a young person finds this plant, the devil may kill her or may eat her since he has his *chakra* under this plant. Only older sorcerers may sleep near her" (42). Apparently, this symbiotic dance that takes place around the *Supay Chakra* tree, with its massive systems of leaves and roots, has nothing to do with the notion, so despised by them, of the binary arborescence paired with modernity and the state. The tree has nothing to do with a molar binarism. According to Deleuze & Guattari:

Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree. Even a discipline as 'advanced' as linguistics retains the root-tree as its fundamental image, and thus remains wedded to classical reflection (for example, Chomsky and his grammatical trees, which begin at a point S and proceed by dichotomy). This is as much as to say that this system of thought has never reached an understanding of multiplicity: in order to arrive at two following a spiritual method it must assume a strong principal unit. (5)

I differ from this thought. For it begins precisely assuming that linguistics is "advanced" and portrays a being that is never a unit but a mutualistic cooperative. However, I believe it is quite *au contraire*, it is linguistics which perform a static reflection, nothing like the root or rhizome (the rhizome is actually formed especially from the roots of giant trees). For in the interpretations

of other ontologies such as the *Sapara* from the Napo River, the sounds of plants (and trees are plants) and its allied other species, according to Kohn, mean that “forests think” (21). They possess a semiotics of their own. The multiplicity of life that is hosted by a *Supay Chacra* is extraordinary, from all types of epiphytes such as bromeliads and vines, to mosses and lichens and other trees that actually root within the bark of the tree itself, communing with its sap at all times in a magnificent hospitable maneuvering unseen anywhere else. In Kohn’s words: “What we share with nonhuman living creatures, then, is not our embodiment, as certain strains of phenomenological approaches would hold, but the fact that we all live with and through signs.”

(9) Plants (trees) and animals live through signs, they communicate in a “language” that is their own, linguistics is their realm too, but a molecular kind of linguistics, rhizomatic in its interconnectivity, horizontal and multiple.

1.4 Cosmic Guest

Awareness of Plant as Being in Michael Marder and Emanuele Coccia



Fig. 5 Olaf Hajek, *Sun Dance*, illustration. 2020

In *Sun Dance* (fig. 5) illustrator Olaf Hayek depicts the idea that plants are personified by dancing spirits performing a ballet of sorts towards the sun, giver of energy and principal actor in the process of converting light into food. Although these harlequin-like beings have human features, they all partake of a vegetal efflorescence mainly in their heads and lower bodies. It is possible to see the joyful continuum of the visible and the invisible within vegetal beings; it is also possible to intimate an ability within humans to relate to the vegetal world. “Let beings be the beings that they are” (125), says Heidegger, and Marder takes this notion of the unconcealment of Being to open his vision to the world of plants. Very differently from the way that *vegetalistas* relate to plants, through ingestion and intoxication, Marder proposes an apprehension of the being of plants through thinking, observation and perception through the

senses. How else could a relationship to an entity that does not speak a vocalized language and lives outside of syntax as we know it, be enacted? The signs that it transmits might be difficult to translate, if not altogether impossible. That is why Aristotle posits that plants are mortal decaying things because they lack a soul that would certainly be immortal. Marder, nevertheless, finds himself digging into an interiority that is always in the open, always in perilous conditions, through a notion of body. As he writes: “The plant’s life is indissociable from the finitude and materiality of its soul, and this is why Aristotle concludes that this soul is perishable, subject to degeneration and decay, in contrast to the ‘soul of another genus’ *psukes genus heteron*, the mind and the immortal faculty of thinking” (44). It is the soul of plants or vegetal beings that he is referring to. This soul is devoid of the chiasm between a notion of exteriority and interiority; it is only exterior in its most precarious and vulnerable state, although not in a Cartesian sense. Nevertheless, it is at the same time all interior, although not in a psychoanalytical sense. What could this continuum then be for a being who is eternally exposed and, conversely, always already withdrawn? This is a characteristic of the being of plants that turns them into entities so obscure and mysterious that has made humans assume they are silent and almost not alive. It is this condition that has protected them in some sense from being even more exploited, but nonetheless has segregated them to the very backrooms of ontological theories. It is in this discarding of plants as lesser beings that western metaphysics has overlooked their silent but profoundly rich world. In this sense and as subaltern beings they come to occupy places with what Fanon has called the “wretched of the earth” and what Vattimo and Zabala have called the “weak of the planet” (2). Plants, amerindian communities and artists that do not follow the western canon of capitalistic success, fall in the same category; they are subaltern subjects, obscured and weak. However, this is specifically why the weak have inspired these two

philosophers' notion of weak thought. It is not in the forceful "challenging forth" (Heidegger 321) that change would come. If humans would do as plants do, without doing anything, they will be doing it all. Plants do everything without noticeable movement. Nature does not rush yet everything is achieved. The seed grows, seasons and climate change, trees grow from tiny seedlings, plants sprout, blossom, come into fruition and disseminate, while humans are constantly engaged in meaningless production, at all times trying to defeat finitude, forgetful that they are engaged in the eternal cycle of nature that means life and death intertwined. In Kohn's words: "Rethinking cause through form forces us to rethink agency as well. What is this strange way of getting things done without doing anything at all?" (21). It is certainly the way of vegetal beings, the "effortless efficacy" (Kohn 21) of the forest.

In a world full of nonhuman agents, humans are a part of it in continuous alliance, whether they realize or not, with other actants, as Emanuele Coccia writes: "Our relationship with our digs is exactly one of immersion: we do not stand before them the way we stand before objects, we live in them as fish lives in the sea, as primordial organic molecules live in their primordial soup" (34). Hence, all beings are connected in a myriad of ways to all that lives in the cosmos, very much in the way Anaxágoras posited: relating to every being on the planet and beyond, connecting through cells and bodily tissues through a mycelial conglomerate. Coccia is able to imagine into this world of connectedness, the same way that Amazonian thought has imagined for thousands of years. He is able to notice the nuances of such ancestral ways of relating to plants, that perhaps Marder adjudicates more than anything to perception without the help of the "cosmopolitical ambassadors" that are expert voyagers between worlds. I understand, notwithstanding, the position Marder and plant theorists share, coming from a tradition of thought they are trying to overcome from within. Can a set of concepts, from a radically different

geographical context and epistemology, be related to a set of myths? Or is it equating one philosophical stance, western metaphysics, to another, Amazonian thought, completely opposed to it? Much in the way mycorrhiza, the mutualistic relationship between fungi and plants, and its immense conglomerate of roots travel the whole planet, thoughts and myths seem to be connected one to the other in an infinite rhizome. Coccia writes that photosynthesis is a cosmic process: “Photosynthesis—one of the major cosmogonic phenomena, and one that is indistinguishable from the being itself of plants—is neither of the order of contemplation nor of the order of action...” (40). I would add that the mycorrhizal activity is also a cosmogonic process. Thus, the connectivity between all beings is almost visible in a variety of processes that seem to happen in synchronicity. As Heidegger said intuiting the world to come, when we let beings be the beings that they are, when we exercise a “bringing forth” into unconcealment, respecting the times and rhythms that are given to us by the earth, we are living in the clearing of Being, to which all beings belong (319). It is not difficult to imagine a sun dance of plants in the midst of the forest, in their untenable proliferation and exuberant generosity giving of themselves to the world. Coccia is able to find within metaphysics, the mixture he talks about from a different standpoint, that of connectivity. His purpose is not to overturn western metaphysics, but to talk about a different kind of metaphysics. Viveiros de Castro speaks about “cannibal metaphysics.” This diverse and intense metaphysics are what make a multiplicity of worlds possible. Not just one metaphysical truth, not just western metaphysics, but a multifaceted cooperative trans-metaphysics that is able to encompass and admit interpretations from all walks of life but primarily from those overlooked or covered-over for so long. In this metaphysics of mixture everything a plant is, has been considered within various philosophical traditions, thus, the purpose of this metaphysics of mixture is to understand what a plant is about in a very broad

sense. “Every plant seems to invent and open a cosmic plane” Coccia writes, “where there is no opposition between matter and fantasy, between imagination and self-development” (105). Thus, the plant itself is capable of “imagining”, making an image of itself, which in human terms would be called “identity” but the plant nevertheless does not cling to it as if it was its only image. There is the flower, and the pistil and the leaf, and each image is a creation and an opus; a sign if we must, to the world.

1.5 Alma Vegetal

Parallels for an Understanding of *Vegetalism*



Fig. 6 Author unknown, *Taita and tiger*. Mural and photo 2016.

The manifestation of the spirit of plants in dream and ritual encounters with humans is often perceived through the image of an animal. In *Taita and Tiger* (fig. 6) the *yachag* is personified by the image of a tiger who is also the teacher plant, the most powerful,

banisteriopsis caapi. Different plants bring different images of animals, these animals become the guides and protectors of the dreamer. This kind of alliance with plant-animal spirits is enacted throughout the *Abya Yala*. Nevertheless, it is not until a different journey begins that the house of plants can be entered. Leaving behind the home of language implies a huge explosion of what has been considered the house of [human] beings for a long time. However, this voyage is necessary if the intention is to translate one world to another. For Duchesne it is very important that humans understand that plants on their own are partners in family alliances with communities in the Amazon basin. “According to this view,” he writes, “*personification* of the other, whether the other is human or non-human, is the foundation of knowledge. Knowledge is a person-person affair. It is not necessary to prostrate the other and nail it to the Cartesian dissecting table to scrutinize, to snoop if it has the ability to speak or think” (22). Differing from Marder in his hermeneutical analysis of plant as Being, Duchesne contends that the metaphysics of mixture that Coccia speaks of has a lot more to do with the understanding of plant as person in the *dietas* from the *vegetalistas*, than the concepts which Marder proposes. Indeed, *vegetalistas* treat plants as persons from their own family or political family to which they relate in an alliance that is very delicate to balance. Personhood then is enacted as in the perspectivist theory of Viveiros de Castro and the concept of animism in Descola whose words resonate: “For the women, their plants are blood relatives; for the men, animals are relative by marriage: the natural beings thus become real social partners” (6). And as persons and partners they are able to bring them joyful moments and bear the fruits of that partnership providing their own with nourishment, wisdom and knowledge.

Vegetalismo offers, from the perspective of mestizos from different parts of South America, an opportunity to bridge the gaps between a very abstract theorization of plant thinking and a

lived experience of cultivation of the soil to enhance the growth of medicinal and sacred teacher plants. In Duchesne's own words:

It shows that what matters about plants are not only their bio-ecological functions, and how they can be projected into cultural notions and vice versa, but the manner in which they enact an interspecies praxis of continuously shifting bodies and souls, becoming other, and fashioning a cosmopolitical diplomacy to resist capture by any superior force.

(2)

In other words, it is not only the plant per se, individualized again in its own world, but its relationship with other species that makes the vegetal turn so remarkable. In Duchesne's text, he offers a critique of various texts written by Peruvian *vegetalistas* who explain in a sophisticated, albeit magical, fashion, their voyages with plant medicine. Some of these accounts, like Cesar Calvo's, are anecdotal tales that relate how *Ino Moxo*, a mestizo healer, who was abducted by Amazonian Indians as a child, was initiated into plant medicine. In Duchesne's perspective it is not only indigenous *yachags* who are able to learn the arts of healing from indigenous and plant teachers. His vision helps us see the vegetal ontological turn as a road to *Amazoning*, a term that Duchesne coined to mean the corpus of research in anthropology, literary criticism, ethnography, etc. that englobes Amazonian thought. I argue that this *vegetalista*, an artist herself, in the manner that an artist treats her work, relates to plants and spirits as her living medium in a cooperative relationship, that helps her understand people's ailments, helping them to heal. This intersection of plant thinking-sensing and becoming other that the *vegetalista* brings forth is an interesting alliance of human and nonhuman in a way that defies nature-culture schisms.

The woman herbalist from Andean and Amazonian communities is usually in charge of the *chakra* (vegetable garden in Kichwa) where the food the family eats comes from. She also

cultivates her medicinal garden where all kinds of healing herbs are husbanded. Forest basil, fennel, aloe vera, Saint John's wort, mint and peppermint grow next to rude which is there to protect the territory. Healers have "to see" in ritual *yagé* ceremonies what they are looking for and then later in consequential dreams. Most plants come as spirits of animals in dreams. Of this, most Amerindian nations testify from the North to the South. It is through the "speaking" of the plants that the healer is able to learn her trade. Descola talks about the euphemisms used in all Amerindian groups to talk about certain deeds with spirits that do not need to be disturbed and which have to be appeased in order to help the hunting, the gathering and the gardening, the talk about "going to see" (15), as if they were going to consult an oracle in the forest. The extremely careful balancing act of asking permission from the spirits in order to perform any deed is something that the *vegetalista* learns to do very early in her voyage to become one.

Nunkui is a spirit among the *Sarayacu*, a *Kichwa* speaking community in the Amazon. She is a female auspicious entity that takes care of the *chakra* or vegetable garden where cassava and other goods are cultivated. The spirit must be sung to and be well treated almost like a daughter and is passed down from another woman who knows how to "sing it". *Nunkui* is the spirit of Mother Earth who needs to be loved and sweetly sung in order to give fruits. In Descola's words: "This mothering relationship is explicitly modeled on the guardianship that *Nunkui*, the spirit of the gardens, provides for the plants that she herself initially created" (5). The *vegetalista* works always in cooperation with the plant world, has to sing it, and learns the *icaros* or chants that are given him in ceremony and is supposed to act in accordance with her guiding animal-plant spirits. As it happens with other learning processes in the delicate balance of forest and humans, the one initiated between *vegetalista* as an apprentice and plants or *yachags* is carefully overseen by other more experienced *yachags*. The *vegetalista* is always part

of a network of influences and relationships that, equal to the world of plants, are never isolated, bringing into play a very different system of unity that exists, knitting tightly open nets at all times with different processes and circumstances. Teleology is not a walking path in forest thinking, there is no end but always tracks, roots, rhizomes.

One of the most important tasks a *vegetalista* assumes is to undo a *daño*, a maleficent sorcery worked upon her clients that needs to be undone through herbs, chants, potions and tasks. Accounts of this type of sorcery in Duchesne's text or in Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, relate the initiation voyage that the *yachag*'s apprentice or *vegetalista* has to take in order to achieve healing powers. Many of these tales foretell a voyage to the depths of self that is parallel to a voyage through death or in mythical terms to the underworld. Only some are equipped to do it, some might be too weak, or lazy or not able to leave their worldly comforts and pursue a perilous path. Taussig describes the herbalist (*vegetalista* or *yerbero*) "These herbalists may also act as healers, transmitting, acquiring, integrating, patching together new words, new spells, new concepts, as they move from city to city, hamlet to hamlet, coast to coast, charging the new with Indianness" (285). They say they follow God, nonetheless I believe this god is truly the entire cosmos with another name. Many of these tales have been told in the Latin American boom's literature as magical realism novels, making them palatable and appealing to fiction and odd adventure seeking readers. However, these herbalists are really the primary care doctors for many communities that confide and trust in them. Their interpretations of dreams and voyages are a lot more capacious and profound than those of western medicine or psychologists and psychiatrists. Taussig summarizes it in these terms:

It is an enchanting and empowering notion that, in striking contrast to what we might call the scientific model of healing and sickness on which the university training of doctors is now based, folk healers and shamans embark on their careers as a way of healing themselves. The resolution of their illness is to become a healer, and their pursuit of this calling is a more or less persistent battle with the forces of illness that lie within them as much as in their patients. (447)

It is then a voyage towards themselves, a deep plunge into the unknown, from where the healer comes back as in the mythical hero's voyage, intact, carrying the wisdom given to them by enduring suffering and hazardous work. "The cure is to become a curer" (447), says Taussig, a threshold that the apprentice has to cross, for it is only confronting death that the patient is healed and in turn becomes a healer. This could also be likened to the path of the tragic artist in Nietzsche's terms. This path is not an easy one, it is always full of perils, illnesses and very difficult passages the apprentice of a *yachag* needs to go through. The concept of the tragic artist, in Nietzsche's terms, one who is able to live in spite of life itself, is equivalent to the concept of the healer. More often than not this artist will have to go through the most arduous of tasks in order to be able to truly see, thus become a *seer*. Seeing implies not only foreseeing, but also the ability to "see" in the images and symbols presented, and the aptitude to interpret those signs. It is no coincidence that the images seen in the *yagé* voyage are called *pintas* (paintings) and the moments that the *yachag* is in complete trance he is said to be *pintando* (painting). We can say then that the Amazonian *yachag* is the only artist in trance when performing a ceremony.

There are times in the very difficult journey of the *yachag* when they fall prey to the abyss of illness and death and subsequently, they have to confront the energies or sorcery which may have caused their illness. As is the case with the hospitable guest, there are inhospitable

guests and many times in the treacherous worlds of the forest spirits, they are seeking to prove the *yachag*'s apprenticeship. There are also apprentices, and powerful *yachags* who become envious or jealous of the fortunes of others and send their envy darts. Taussig writes: "Above all it is envy —discussing its manifestations and ramifications – that provides, as it were, a theater of possibilities in social life. It is on this stage that implicit social knowledge roams and scavenges, sharpening its sensitivity, its capacity to illuminate, its capacity to wound." (394) For *nepantleras* in the words of Anzaldúa, or beings in between worlds, the *vegetalista* or *yachag*'s interpretation is as credible as the scientific discourse that finds other causes everywhere but in the spiritual milieu. It is this journey that the healer takes that is comparable to the path of the artist and vice versa, the artist becomes the journey. The artist in trance embarks on the journey of the hero where the descent is to the very depths of self and world, in order to, like Osiris in the myth of creation, re-member himself, to put herself together and then voyage into the ascent. This does not mean that death is not awaiting. Maybe the question lies here: is the artist just a vehicle for the trance to be performed into humanity? As is the case with many artists that have left their work as witness of a passage or ascent into another plane of immanence, they seem to have been immersed in a search (that is altogether different from the consumerist commercial marketer striving), that takes them beyond the scope of life and into a plane where other multiplicities and encounters lay. In this case again it is not the artist embodied but her work which travels other planes, strata and plateaus, finding nexus and lines of flight with other works, other texts, other rituals and ideas, thus entering another world the artist herself was never invited to. The spirit or master of the work is in charge and meets with the other master spirits. For this reason, artworks, ritual masks and paraphernalia are imbued with spirits that rule them, energies that are highly imperceptible though powerful. They serve as living accounts of the

spirit that enlivens those who create and wear them and might serve as guidance and inspiration for others to come.

1.6 Ancestral Spirituality

The Work of Belkis Ayón in Alliance or Dissent with The Abakúa Society



Fig. 7 *Nlloro*, Belkis Ayón, collagraph on paper.1991

Nlloro (fig.7) is part of the series *Nkame*, the work of Cuban artist Belkis Ayón. She poses an interesting example of the rule of spiritual forces that an artist might not be able to curb through her own spirituality and artwork. An uninvited guest in the powerful house of the Abakuá and at the same time a host to the house of western knowledge, for she passionately wanted to translate in images the hermetic rituals and ceremonies of the society she so much wanted to belong to. This is the case of the unwanted guest and the pains the host took to avoid her knowing the treacherous passages into its house. She is an artist in trance. The contemporary

artist-philosopher is also capable of ecstatic trance, of that intoxicating communion with the cosmos that brings her into a different realm. The artist in trance is also a guest in the house of spirits and must adhere to norms and rules according to the territories she traverses. It is not for the artist (or anyone really) to enter into sacred territories without the permission of the spirits that govern them. In this way the artist may well be like a bee who is able to feed and bathe in *Bromelia's* bosom knowing that her wings must never get too wet or sticky in the nectar of the flower lest she might get trapped in her sweet quarters forever. In Aymara, the language of the indigenous people of Bolivia, it is said that a plant may be *colla* as much a remedy as poison or in Duchesne's parlance "pharmakon, what heals you can kill you" (30). It is always a risk to enter the territory of hospitality for you never know who you will encounter.

Ayón wants to dismantle the house of the master, and mainstream's eurocentric discourse of science, with her medium: her literal tool is printmaking. She is able to act as a hinge between the Abakuá society and the everyday world in order to bring this subjugated knowledge into light. Ayón was an artist engaged in a discourse both of intuition and erudition. She became interested in the hermetic Abakuá Society, one of the most secretive Afro Cuban spiritual fraternities. In her work *Nlloro* (fig. 7) Ayón explores the many spirits present in an Abakuá death ritual ceremony. The participants have their mouths erased and are unable to speak, thus, language or *logos* is not present, and the brothers or *ñáñigos* are dutifully mourning the death of a member of their society while Ekué and Sikán are watching. Ayón started exploring Abakuá's secrets knowing the society is an extremely closed group open only to men. The society bans all women's participation in their rituals. She was interested especially in the myth of Sikán, a princess who uncovered the secret words a fish spirit shared with her on her way back home from the river; for this reason, she was killed in order for the secret not to be revealed. Lydia

Cabrera, a Cuban scholar who studied in depth the Abakuá secret society explains the myth in her book *Anaforuana*:

Certainly it was a woman Sikán the Sikanekue, which all "*moninas*" -brothers- consider a mother (Akanarán), who found in the margins of the river that bathed her father's territory, king of the Efor tribe, a fish Tanze or Tansi, whose extraordinary form animated a supernatural spirit – or an ancestor's spirit—. However, that woman revealed the secret of such prodigious finding, which had to be maintained inviolate, and in just punishment was sentenced to death or was sacrificed for pure religious necessity. (2)

Ayón identifies with Sikán and tries to uncover the secrets of this hermetic, male-only society, in an effort to understand and perhaps share it with the outside world. Her work establishes the battle she holds with the worlds she is forced to juggle in this mysterious entrenchment of interiority and exteriority. Cabrera explains why women are banned from the cult: "Many people think that *Ekue*'s misogyny is due to the fact that a woman, during her menstrual period, is an impure being; menstrual blood is nefarious not only to the sacred forces, but also to those who would be in contact with them during sacred rituals" (6). In this study Cabrera also refers to Abakuá men not being misogynists when it comes to real life as they are held to be respectful and courteous to women. Ayón veered towards the study of this secret society in a most surrendered way, so much so that the vast amount of her oeuvre is dedicated to it. The interest she felt towards the spiritual world of Abakuá was absolutely a free choice, for it is said that Abakuá, as opposed to other Afro Cuban Yoruba cults does not choose its members, the members instead choose it willingly. Sacred rituals and attributes that hold power over the people that are close to it are never barren from attachments that may revert in disfavor of the person involved; for the energies they work with are much too powerful and even if westerners

do not quite believe (because most ancestral traditions have been rinsed out with scientific enlightenment discourses) these spiritual energies inhabit a field of forces unbeknownst to the most skeptic.

Talking about the continuum of the invisible towards the visible, Merleau-Ponty reverts the notions so dear to Cartesians and Freudians of a chiasm between all that belongs to human and his socio-political being as an uncontaminated exterior while the intimate psychic realm belongs only to interiority. Merleau-Ponty instead makes us aware of the continuous flow of interior towards exterior and the other way around. As he writes:

It is therefore indeed true that the ‘private worlds’ communicate, that each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world. The communication makes us the witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing. (11)

In Ayón’s case, the interior pull of curiosity to know her Afro Cuban roots was very strong while her western education pointed her to treating the topic she was researching in a scholarly fashion, thus, always traveling from the visibility of appearances to the invisible pull of esoteric visions. The communication or continuum makes it possible, not the cartesian chiasm. Ayón seemed to be able to produce and create an extensive body of work while engaging in the research of Abakuá rituals. She learned while in ceremonies how to proceed and work with her artistic tools. I believe, though, there is an undertow that is at work when one enters the very fragile energetic terrain of the spiritual. One has to pay in order to know, there is a payment that the spirits ask, in order to purvey the knowledge necessary to swim in these waters. In Descola’s words: “This imposes upon every individual ethical responsibilities, in particular that of not upsetting the general equilibrium of this fragile system and never using energy without rapidly restoring it by

means of various kinds of ritual operations” (12). Within this mode of thinking I venture the hypothesis that Ayón’s research on the Abakuá secret society did in some way upset the delicate balance of this very secretive group. The energy that an individual is supposed to bring into the group is dispersed by other, especially sexual female energies, that may disenfranchise spirits from their operative locus.

According to Lydia Cabrera women are deemed impure especially during their periods when their energy is too powerful and thus able to carry away the spiritual forces. Ayón found herself identifying with oppressed and discriminated women in a cult that fascinated her but also challenged all the rights she felt she had as a human being in this world. She felt that as an Afro Cuban and as a woman she needed to overcome the barriers of secrets and silence that negated her own being. In a science driven metaphysical world barren from the beliefs and influences of deep spiritual energies, it would be easy to dismiss any power of the spirits in everyday life. The work of enlightenment and deep atheism, both part of communist ideology that the Cuban Revolution upholds, taught their citizens not to believe in “superstitions” and religious monikers. Nevertheless, Cuban African roots are very powerful and many households believe in Orishas and African tribal cults that aid them in moments of need or maim them all the same as a result of “being worked upon ” or bewitched. They maintain home altars that have lived along communist party ideology in frank syncretism.

The extraordinary body of work Ayón dedicated to the *ñanigos* of the Abakuá cult really tells her story of battling certain forces that pulled her in different ways. Being part of the western world means being able to pull together a series of strategies that enable her to be functional, participate in academia and the art world consistently, while also doing her very meticulous printmaking work. Her choice of very dark black and white imagery within the

European tradition of printmaking and the contemporary turn to collagraph, are resourceful ways of solving technical problems due to lack of materials that would allow her the use of a technique in an orthodox manner. In Ayón's own words:

Depending on the materials I use, it [the black color] gives me a whole range of shades of white, grays and blacks, and I think of it as an ally for the type of figuration I work with its composition... so hermetic, so secret and mysterious apart from the force and the power it conveys to us. (1)

This is not only the case of Ayón, as most Cuban artists have become masters of resourcefulness and creativity due to the harsh economic conditions they have faced since the *período especial* (special period) from 1991 to 2000 when the USSR dissolved and withdrew their aid to the island. Investigating these very disparate worlds could be tantalizing and apparently it was at some point impossible for her to keep up.⁹ What are these forces that are so powerful to be able to disrupt a person's interiority and violently express into the exterior as an irrepressible eruption? In her book *Powers of horror* Julia Kristeva, referring to certain rites of defilement, writes:

A split has been set in between, on the one hand, the body's territory, where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play —the order of the phallus. Such a split, which in another cultural universe would produce psychosis, thus finds in this context a perfect socialization. (74)

Socialization that was apparently very difficult for Ayón to find. How, if not compartmentalizing and splitting the life of the body and that of the soul, is a woman to find her place in a hostile

context? Exteriority must find a continuum to interiority if there is to be a swift management of the organism in order to thrive. The life of a plant with its intricate processes of absorption of light, air, water and nutrients from the soil and the highly technological requirements for the blossoming and fruition requires a constant checking of the interior of the plant towards the exterior. Splitting this continuity, as in cartesian or psychoanalytic interpretations, might obliterate the line of flights she could traverse in order to survive such pull.

Some of these forces, called “anxiety” and “depression” in the psychoanalytical lexicon, have other names in Afro Cuban and spiritual traditions, which usually name them as sorcery or *trabajos* (works of sorcery). Abakuá society protects their initiates, offers them a family and rituals of passage, mourning in death and funerals for their *ñáñigos* or participants. They make sure their people do not go isolated and forgotten. This is mainly what they offer to their members. If there is something that characterizes western agro-capitalistic societies is the isolation of their individuals. The belief that competition is better than cooperation makes them go alone in their feats, often falling prey to tremendous sadness, and mental illness. It seems as if Ayón was trying to juggle these two forms of dealing with the world without being able to. On the one hand was her desire to be recognized as a great artist in the western world and on the other, her desire to participate in a hermetic man-based cult that ignored her dedication, because she was not a man. She was like a priestess of the Abakuá and in that way acted as a *yachag* translator of worlds.

She portrays in every image a different part of ceremonies and possession by spirits. For example, in *Veneration* (fig. 8) members of the Abakuá pay deep respect to Ekué (the prince that married Sikán and is inseparable from her) through the portrayal of various cult members kneeling before him; they are portrayed as jaguar spirits possessing the venerators.

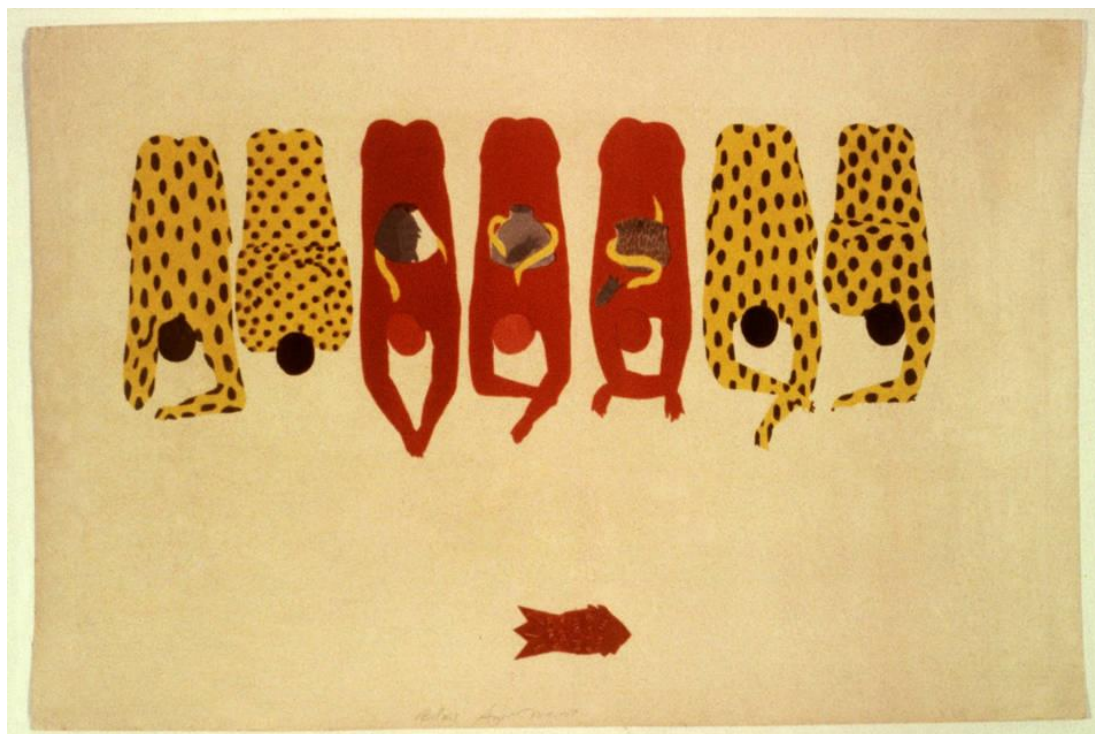


Fig. 8. Belkis Ayón. *Veneration*, lithograph and blind print on paper. 1986

In this transposition of spiritual energies, we can see that metonymic contiguity Viveiros de Castro describes, when the animal spirit takes possession of the person in a cannibal spirituality act, that feeds from the energy and powers of said venerator in order to augment the force of the Ekué. As Viveiros de Castro writes: “When a shaman activates a becoming-jaguar, he neither ‘produces’ a jaguar nor ‘affiliates’ with a reproductive line of jaguars: he *adopts* and *coopts* a jaguar —establishes a feline alliance” (164). The *manigua* or *Monte* (literally the mountain or territory) where all the spirits of the Afro Cuban spirituality live, is in many ways like the forest. As Lydia Cabrera accounts at the beginning of her book *El Monte* quoting her old *yerbero* (herbalist) Sandoval “Everything is in the jungle –the foundation of the cosmos– and all has to be asked from el *Monte* which gives us everything” (13). All spirits are found living in forest plants and it is the basis of a system of communication with the cosmos that the *ñāñigos* of the

Abakuá society use. In this way both cosmovisions, the Amazonian *Siona* and the Abakuá share this notion of metonymic contiguity; or a “transborder alliance” as Viveiros de Castro calls it, “an affinity between humans and nonhuman beings” (165). It is not strange to find in ancestral Amerindian and African cultures, this commitment to the “unity with nature” which Alexander Von Humboldt and the Presocratics were so fond of. It is in this discovery of the continuum of nature/culture that we find Ayón’s search for that interiority that shines to the exterior as a plant does.

The pull I argue Ayón had to battle, was always between a dichotomy she felt as a woman from African descent in a mostly male, white dominated art world. Her pursuit of the myth of Sikán and her long fought war with depression and anxiety could be due to a possession of spirits that relentlessly took hold of her body and soul and were not willing to let her go. She took something that did not belong to her, just as princess Sikán did. Another of the privileges that the Abakuá society offers its members is according to Cabrera:

In secrecy, protect them through an alliance with spiritual powers, against, what we could call unthinkable perils, such as malefices, damages, attacks from witches who use malefic forces to obstruct fortune, ruin health and soul, provoke illness and death and generate all kinds of ruination. (2)

Was it possible that Ayón, being a woman and thus banned from the hermetic society, could not find the protection needed against such powerful and malignant forces? She ventured on her own, as an individual who fears nothing, but also who is not willing to pay the right dues the spirits claim. Was it that she too, like Sikán, revealed the secrecy of the Tanze and had to be punished by death? Taussig finds some explanations: “[Levi-Strauss] makes much of the suggestion that shamanism inverts the psychoanalytic technique for achieving abreaction since in

shamanism it is not the patient's but the shaman's speech that fills the therapeutic space. The woman lies silent while the shaman's song fills her with imagery ordering the chaos of her being ...” (460). These are considerations we need to make in light of the very powerful forces that artists who enter an ecstatic trance have to face. Many of them perish in battle, even more if they lack the support of the community that they are most committed to. Those who, in Nietzsche's words are able to live “without sensing a rupture with their view of the world” come out triumphant and are able to translate the secrets of their voyages to their communities (133). However, the Abakuá secret society found in Ayón, whether they liked it or not, an industrious and dedicated nonmember who illustrated their visions of the diverse moments of the Sikan and Ekué cult. Her dedication to the intensive labor of creating large collagraphs that defied what had been until then the limits of such a medium, left us a legacy that accounts for the struggle of a black Cuban artist against prejudices of all kinds, social, economic, religious and artistic. Although she claims other concerns were part of her search, it is to the Abakuá rites and ceremonies and her struggle with the many spirits that populate it, that most of her opus is dedicated to.

In this context we may ask ourselves how is the host able to provide what the guest needs if the guest is unwilling to go by the rules of the house? In a vegetal democracy, as Marder calls it, rapport between host and guest needs to be balanced in order to maintain the alliance. If said guest crosses the boundaries that were set upon her, consequences might take place. In Abakuá parlance these territories need to be stepped into with respect and always abiding by the rules of those who own such territories. The artist in trance needs to surrender to the ecstasy of the cosmos in order to cross the plane of immanence and come out with the secret. Nevertheless, it might be pondered if the gift or secret in the case of Ayón is the work itself. Perhaps her gift to

humanity lies precisely in the sacrifice she had to undergo in order to open up the Abakuá secret world for all to peek in and learn. It is imperative to respectfully interpret the codes she has depicted. Taussig writes about the journey of the healer:

He was close to becoming something else in which that limit was inscribed. But he faltered and fell. Yet, unlike his friend who did not falter and instead journeyed on to become a healer, the person who faltered returned, albeit spinning, to tell us what it was like. In a sense his journey was a failure. But because of that he was here to tell us the tale while the healer is not. (448)

As such then, the legacy Ayón left for the world, even if she failed to become part of the Abakuá cult, turns her into the ecstatic artist in trance who becomes a vehicle for the work to speak, and the work in turn finds its own planes of immanence to traverse.

Chapter 2 Blossoming

The Play of Life and Death



Fig. 9. Ernest Haeckel. *Orchideae*, *Kunstformen der Natur* 1899. Lithographic plate

The *wantug* is a very interesting example of a floration that is enchanting and malignant depending on its uses.¹⁰ The *yachags* use it to clean the body (and spirit) of a patient for its powerful cleansing properties; the flowers afterwards are discarded because they retain the

illness in question. In the herbarium *Plantas que sanan*, the *wuantug*'s properties are described as follows:

The indigenous people of the Andes recognize its medicinal qualities. They attribute magical and sacred powers to it. Because of this in the mentioned treatment the *yachag* rubs very powerful plants on the patient, such as the red *Datura*. When the 'cleansing' is over, she throws the plants away because they have absorbed negative energies. (14)

On the downside the plant is supposed to cause muteness, drowsiness and the loss of will power. It is used in ceremonial preparations to induce fantastic images and it is also the psychedelic component of the ritual *yagé* potion. In neo-shamanic cult drifts it is used to manipulate people into potentially destructive behaviors. Flowers of evil and power, they give and take what humans consider the most precious: imagination, free will and speech.

Blossoming is the beginning of any kind of life, be it human or nonhuman; and by nonhuman I not only mean biological life but the life of figures of speech and objects. A project blossoms, a book, an enterprise, an investigation, an invention or a pregnancy may blossom. It is the departure from seed to flower. Floration, in a word, means being born. In troubled times, I often wonder how plants are able to blossom and flourish, in spite of all difficulties and challenges that could emerge from pollution, or meteorological circumstances. The blossoming of a plant obeys to different factors and yet it happens granted there are specific conditions. Closer to the poles, most plants bloom in spring, although in the tropical Andes, blooming often occurs at different times of the year. There is a period right before and after the December 21st solstice when all native flora is in bloom as if thankful for the rain and sun that the atmospheric factors in equatorial climate bring. In native words the *yuyos*, or common weeds, born in this period are the gift of the season to the renaissance that is brought about. Popular wisdom calls it

veranillo del niño (baby Jesus' little summer). The blossoming is so intense that it is hard to pay attention to anything else when strolling around the countryside, so incomparable is the luscious sight of the vegetation in bloom.

Oftentimes flowers are metaphors for thinking and the flourishing of humans themselves. It is said that when someone blossoms, she is full of life, opening and radiant. This description fulfills perhaps a radiancy that equals the best years of a young person or animal. Later on in life, spring turns into the fall that equates moments in which it will no longer be possible to blossom. Nevertheless, a plant is capable of blossoming over and over again. Even after the harshest winter or extreme conditions trees and shrubs flourish many times. Societies of the global North adjudicate a lot of value to youth and the blossoming that occurs at a young age. When the autumn sets in, that is during the middle years, it is thought that a blossoming would be extemporaneous. Indigenous groups from the Amazon treat their elders with the utmost respect, providing them the possibility of flourishing precisely at a later period, and, moreover, many times in a lifetime. But the flourishing of a later period in life is not the same as youth blossoming.

Blossoms or flowers are often thought to be harmless, beautiful and feminine creations of nature. They have been likened to a stereotyped notion of the feminine, powerless and pleasing. However, it is quite the opposite, in Coccia's words:

The flower quite often demonstrates the opposite mechanism: that of the misappropriation of the self, of becoming a stranger to oneself. This is what happens in fertilization, the majority of hermaphroditic flowers develop a system of self immunization to avoid self-fertilization, a defense against themselves that allows them to open to the world more. (103)

Flowers embody what is most sexual of all beings at all times and in the open region. There are no innuendos, veiled assumptions or games of nebulous sorts. They are the plant's sex organs opened freely to the world. Being hermaphroditic, they are not at all a metaphor for only the feminine, they represent the masculine and the feminine together, just like a *yachag* who strives to be a balance of both energies. In her book *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, Anna Tsing explains this gender balancing act:

A shaman is not a representative of men, as a gender, but an individual who has extended himself beyond ordinary limitations. He is a Superwoman-remembering that women are generic humans. He offers leadership because, unlike ordinary wo/men, he can reach out to incorporate the unbounded power of the world. (195)

Within all her harmless beauty, a flower could be a deadly poison or a marvelous remedy. In Duchesne's words: "Moreover, Amazonians take into account that plants are a *pharmakon*: what heals you can kill you" (17). They could be carriers of the worst maladies and calamities as well as the bringers of health and well-being. No such notion as "delicate" and "feminine" applies to them, although they have been given such lame functions in the salons and courts of Europe and the Americas since the modern era.

What could blossoming mean in a forever changing context? No longer the recipients of the delicate, the feminine and the powerless, but powerful sentient beings full of charms and properties, flowers might well be an image of the cruel and gruesome, albeit sweet and delightful game of life and death. As much as flowers mean life and hope, they also remind us of their immediate demise, rapid death and decay. The image of the woman sharing a flower with a soldier in World War II, the flower next to the gun, guns and roses, remind us of the fragility of

life. Blossoming is then the augur of transition, the very transient stage into something else, at all times: a maturation process that gives way to death.

Why do flowers give humans such pleasures then? On one hand they are the closest to human's own ability to express beauty. Such creations of the soil, air and sun, show an astonishing aesthetic capability which may be attempted to be reproduced by artistic mediums. But the flower itself, its aroma and shape, its color, is a supreme creation unparalleled by any other human task. It is remarkable then to realize that plants, superior beings capable of creating such unsurmountable beauty, would be thought of as lesser beings, and their creations, flowers, not thought of as culture. This is not the case for Amazonian and Andean indigenous thought. Every single plant and animal is believed to be capable of culture in the same manner as humans are. Thus is the immanent notion of nature as inseparable from culture and vice versa.

Nevertheless, speech and language are not only the realm of humans, as Kohn reminds us, there is thinking in plants, animals and other beings and spirits like the dead. Semiosis is an ability of sharing signs that all creatures share, specially within the Runa Puma community in Ecuador who give personhood to every being on the planet, including the dead. "We humans," Kohn writes, "then, are not the only ones who interpret the world. 'Aboutness' –representation, intention, and purpose in their basic forms– is an intrinsic dynamic in the biological world. Life is inherently semiotic" (74). Talking about an anthropology beyond the human, Kohn arrives at the realization that other beings are capable of thought and communication, so much so that from them humans might learn to listen and thus understand the planet in a different, more connected fashion. Plants too, and the forest as a whole entity, have its own signs that Amazonian communities learn to interpret and speak. What is interesting though is that none of these interpretations are thought to be possible without drinking the *ayahuasca* or vine of death. In

Avila, the land of the Runa Puma, Kohn tells us, even dogs are given hallucinogenic concoctions in order to be able to traverse onto the space of human language and communicate with humans since we all are selves. “What makes their dogs selves is that their barks were manifestations of their interpretations of the world around them” (Kohn 73). Thus, communicating with other beings is a task that humans are capable of performing once the acknowledgement that other beings are capable of communicating with them is accorded. This relational task requires a special openness from human beings. Emmanuel Levinas words, in *Entre Nous* read, “The face *signifies* otherwise. In it, the infinite resistance of a being to our power is affirmed precisely in opposition to the will to murder that it defies, because being completely naked —and the nakedness of a face is not a figure of speech— It means by itself” (10). The face is that of an animal, a plant, a dead relative or even a mountain or meteorological phenomena, if what Levinas had in mind was or could ever be the face of the other nonhuman.

On the side of imagination, Coccia conceives plants as beings able to imagine and transform the world. In imagining themselves they turn into flower and then into seed in the most excessive sense of the notion of creation. Coccia writes:

The flower is a *cosmic attractor*, an ephemeral, unstable body that allows one to perceive —that is, to absorb— the world and to filter its most precious forms in order to be modified by it, to prolong one’s being there, in the place where its form would know not how to lead it. (100)

The flower then, is a hermaphroditic receptacle that opens up and closes in, within a complex relational alliance with insects, birds, air and sun. It envelops the openness of the clarity of day, and the dark opacity of night.

2.1 Mikuna

Inflorescence, Ethnobotany, and Amazonian thought



Fig. 10 Claudia Anhalzer, *Planta Útero*, illustration. 2020

Planta Utero (fig. 10) a drawing by artist Claudia Anhalzer, portrays the uterus of a woman as the blossoming of a passion flower or *taxo*. The floration of life within the female uterus is visibly a happening of the possibility of reproduction of a hermaphroditic flower that turns female for the only purpose of hosting a human embryo. The Kichwa people from the highlands of the Andes name *mikuna* the food that grows in the fields. They call *allku mikuna* the weeds dogs eat in the fields. The study of local plant knowledge of peoples is called

ethnobotany, a ramification of botany that takes into account local and subaltern knowledge of plants and their properties. Richard Evans Schultes (1915-2001) is considered the father of this branch of science which he studied in depth. The vast array of plants in the lowlands and highlands of the Ecuadorian region are a remarkable laboratory for naturalists from all over the world. The depth of knowledge indigenous groups have about plants, their medicinal, hallucinogenic and domestic uses is quite astonishing as it has been the subject of much anthropological research. However, the use of medicinal plants within such groups is always subject to a diverse relational and cosmic interspecies collaboration; it leaves western botany only as a nomination system devoid of the relationality it needs in order to provide a world to its individuals. Evans Schultes learned from *yachags* and Amazonian communities the various uses of hallucinogenic and medicinal plants. His research opened an *inflorescence* of other related research and interest from different anthropologists and botanists. According to botanists:

Inflorescences are complex structures with many functions. At anthesis they present the flowers in ways that allow for the transfer of pollen and optimization of the plant's reproductive success. During flower and fruit development they provide nutrients to the developing flowers and fruits. ¹¹

The passage of knowledge in Amazonian communities is like an inflorescence that has been shared with naturalists like Schultes and others; it provides nutrients and allows the transfer of wisdom, like pollen, from one to another. The main difference between flower and inflorescence is that a flower is a modified shoot, which serves as the reproductive organ of flowering plants whereas inflorescence is a group of flowers arranged on a floral axis.¹² An inflorescence is a cluster of blossoms adapted for a more effective reproduction.

Blossoming as a metonymy adjacent to the breaking through of perceptions from different species, a trans-species vehicle or a floration of a cluster of concepts or cluster of myths, enables the understanding of the complex relationships between human and nonhuman economies. If the blossoming of a cluster of myths or communities is paired to the inflorescence, their interrelated trans-species actions become evident. This idea of “clusters of myths” or “mythemes” as there are clusters of concepts or epistemes, first posited by Levi-Strauss, states that there is not one myth without another myth and there is no concept without another concept. Skafish writes:

Mythemes thus have a relational, extrachronological character much like that ascribed to concepts by Deleuze, and the affinity between them is only heightened when the transphenomenality of mythemes —the fact that they are irreducible to the individual myths constituting them— is emphasized by Levi-Strauss. A mytheme, he states, is always made up of all its variants, just as a concept is irreducible to the arguments or propositions expressing it. (21)

In this way a myth is also an inflorescence. Some species act as the *umbela*, the cluster carrying peduncle from where the actual floration stems, and some others are the actual blossoming. One may not exist without the other, they are part of the same system of production, reproduction and creation. The *Bromelia* is an inflorescence, a blossoming that hosts and is also part of a very complex scaffolding of vegetal beings. So are the myths of the Putumayo River that bathes the Amazon basin communities and their goods along the *ume siaya* (the celestial river). One myth relates to the other and carries the wisdom to be passed from one generation to the next. The myths are always blossoming as the inflorescences of *Heliconias* (the flower of a *Bromelia*) and not two are the same when accounted for by the distinct members of a community. These vegetal beings form part also of the myths of some Amazonian basin communities like the *Siona*,

Secoya, *Cofán* and other Amerindian groups that frequently pair the knowledge a plant gives, to the animal it is often represented with. In most ceremonial plant *dietas* the *yachag*'s apprentice sees the animal spirit master that a certain teacher plant carries within. "There is" writes Duchesne, "a fractal oscillation between the spirit master personifying a species and the particular specimen at hand. Myth literature widely portrays these relations of fractal personifications of plants, animals and other phenomena" (20). In other words, the plant spirit master may appear as a puma, jaguar or anaconda when "speaking" to the *yachag*'s apprentice in order to convey a lesson or advise. There is, then, also a metonymic quality of the blossoming of the plant within the apprentice either in single floration or inflorescences.

One of the very interesting ways in which one may perceive the "language" of the plant is precisely as an "inflorescence within", a sort of luminous perception that grows inside the teacher plant's apprentice. In this way the plant "speaks" to her. It is no wonder that after a ceremony with master plants, ritual participants feel in connection with all creatures, human and nonhuman: the blossoming appears to grow within and uses the body in an alchemical process, as cucurbit for the distillation of the soul indeterminate. In a beautiful passage of *Broken Hegemonies*, Reiner Schürmann explains the roasting of the soul in this way:

Alchemists do not hesitate to declare that the indeterminate they produce by successive roastings in the cucurbit and by adding mercury *is* the soul in its indeterminate state. It is the soul led back from its thought activities, its sense impressions, its biological functions and movements, to a state of total receptivity." (281)

The soul is thus processed in the cucurbit that is the body, and reappears as limpid as when it was just born.

2.2 Charms:

Shamanism, Catherine Malabou's Destructive Plasticity, and Michael Taussig's Sorcery



Fig.10 *Datura Sanguinea*, Van Houtte Louis. 1869

In one of his early writings on ethnobotany *Indicios da riqueza etnofarmacologica do Noroeste da Amazonia*, Richard Evans Schultes writes:

There is another characteristic that we should note: Although there are also many vegetative drugs with physical effects --to soothe, for example a toothache, or relieve nasal congestion due to flu-- hallucinogenic plants constitute the remedies or medications par excellence, because they make possible to establish direct communication, by means of visions, between the *curandeiro* and the spirits from which illness and even death

come. Therefore, we need to understand indigenous medicine before starting to study its pharmacopoeia. (1)

This seems to be a warning for scholars and researchers, to study indigenous medicine within the medium it stems from: the communities that use it. Evans Schultes was at the beginning of a lifelong search for the uses of medicinal and hallucinogenic plants, which is the scholarship he provided the world with. He is well aware from the very beginning of his research that the immense knowledge of plants that the indigenous tribes of South America treasured was not isolated from their lives in social and political terms. He realizes that it is an inflorescence, a cluster of knowledge well ingrained in a whole ecosystem of thought that the Amazonians possess. This reconnaissance of the ancestral knowledge is what enhances the difference between what had been known as botany alone and the new gatherings of ethnobotany. These clusters of specific knowledge are also intertwined with clusters of myths that in conjunction make what we know as spirituality in the Amazonian sense, which could be defined as the communication with the master spirits of the forests. Shamanism then, in this regard, is the ability to communicate between worlds and to talk to the spirits of plants, animals and the dead.

In his book *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig writes about the intertwinedness of this knowledge and popular beliefs that *yachags* or *indios* hold special powers that make them magically able to cure and heal. He writes,

There is much to ponder, in the use of Indians as magical beings to thwart the things that frighten children and the 'evil eyes' that frighten their parents. Perhaps the Indian is thought of as even more fearsome and even more evil, yet just as they were domesticated by Christian conquest, so can these illnesses be tamed. (173)

Indigenous healers are thought to be the perfect charms to deal with all kinds of sorcery deeds.

Yachags from the Amazon and the highlands of Colombia, Ecuador and Perú are well sought out to tend to those suffering from all kinds of malaise that results from envy and, as Taussig writes, “the works of Satan” (177) as people go on looking for the culprits of their misery

Some *yachags* are said to be extremely powerful, able to cause true damage to their enemies if prompted. Some healers enjoy great fame for being able to cure and provoke illness or even death. Viveiros de Castro refers to these powers within an economy of predation in which the shaman is the locus of all potentiality and absorbs or feeds from all the creative energy he needs in order to heal his community or curse another one. Predatory alterity is explained as: “*Through his enemy (...) he apprehends himself as a subject at the moment that he sees himself through the gaze of his victim, or to put it differently, when he declares his singularity to himself through the voice of the latter*” (143). The very powerful forces a *yachag* is able to move during a *yagé* ceremony might as well be lethal to their enemies or to whomever wishes him, his family or community, any ill will. One of the most important deeds a shaman learns is to cast off darts that will damage or produce illness or death on the being they are thrown at. It is said that the *Siona yachags* made a pact that they will not cause any harm to anyone and that they will use the medicine only to heal.¹³ Having said this, the amount of *ayahuasca* tourism that happens nowadays in South America, is so heavy, that it is doubtful most of these tourists know what the teacher plants provide and provoke and many are absolutely naive about their powerful chemistry and the deeds of shamans and *vegetalistas*. The spirit world of the *yachags* could turn out to be terrifying and can bring tremendous harm and physical or mental illness if it is not harnessed and known in depth before entering it. As Viveiros de Castro writes:

If a human who is not a shaman happens to see a non-human (an animal, a dead human soul, a spirit) in human form, he or she runs the risk of being overpowered by the non-human subjectivity, of passing over to its side and being transformed into an animal, a dead human, a spirit. A meeting or exchange of perspectives is, in brief, a dangerous business. (230)

This could happen if one enters the world of spirits without protections. The charms that may be used in sorcery are many and at times they might be confused with religious images and trinkets used in Christian practices. Nevertheless, there are real perils within this predatory economy where wars are being waged and interests, envy and mishaps abound.

The “new wounded” is a term Catherine Malabou uses in her book *New Wounded, from Neurosis to Brain Damage*, to refer to all the new types of psychiatric illnesses attacking humans from all cultures in the present. Many of those new wounded seek “recomposition” through the *yachags* from the Amazonian forests nowadays. Some of these seekers might be already wounded or they get wounded on the battlefield, in ceremony, for the voyage into the unknown territory of master plants could be hazardous. As a matter of fact, a new term has just recently reached the pages of the famous psychiatry booklet DSM: Spiritual Crisis. Most people who enter the world of *yagé*, *peyote* and other hallucinogens/entheogens fall deeply into an identity crisis that is often confused with depression, PTSD or even schizophrenia. In the parlance of the *yachags*, one is expected to find oneself thrown into such a state; a state I have paired to Heidegger’s notion of *Da-sein*, or “being held out into the nothing” (103). It is a full-blown existential crisis. It is the brain suffering tremendous changes. As with any powerful drug, it may also cause destructive changes in its plasticity. Malabou talks about the plasticity of the brain that is changed because of the accident of trauma: “As a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no

reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room” (1). The changes that a powerful hallucinogen as *yagé* brings onto the voyager can be identity altering, for no one who has experienced such connection to the all may live from the same place any longer. But this is a positive plasticity, as in art and creativity, the term plasticity refers to a differentiation that brings forth something beneficial; Malabou continues: “No one thinks spontaneously about a plastic art of destruction. Yet destruction too is formative. A smashed up face is still a face, a stump a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche. Destruction has its own sculpting tools” (4). Perhaps, in the case of an apprentice of teacher plants, his educational discovery path brings him into the realm of illness and destruction in order to become a healer. So, the plunge must be taken, but something must pull him/her towards the light of day. Revisiting the trauma during the voyage of *yagé* is what converts the wounded into the healer as can be read in Taussig’s account of the *yachag* who needs to come back from his own illness in order to heal others:

The cure is to become a curer. In being healed he is also becoming a healer. In becoming one the option is whether he will succumb to the encroachment of death subsequent to soul loss, or whether he will allow the sickness-causing trauma and the healers ministrations to reweave the creative forces in his personality and life experience into a force that bestows life upon himself and upon others through that bestowal. (448)

The plant speaks through the *yachag* and the patient becomes his voice. The plasticity undergone through the “roasting of the soul” (Schürmann 281) is what is needed in order to live and understand the life-death dyad as a continuum. In this reconstructive realm of the self is where the *yagé* or vine of death becomes a life changing charm that enables the voyager to awaken into a new self that has discarded the masks of the ego and is ready to embark upon the upward

voyage towards wisdom and healing. Plasticity, destructive and constructive at the same time is enabled in this precarious journey through master plants knowledge: it may arrive in the full blossoming of the *yachag* and the patient or it may bring destruction altogether.

Nevertheless, wholesome practices are possible even if the realm of the Amazonian forest is a pregnant locus of relationality, where cannibalistic spirituality is always put in practice, albeit all the political, socio-economic, colonial dances that engulf most dealings. In his book *The Forest and the School, Where to Sit at the Dinner Table*, Pedro Neves Marques writes about an anthropophagic cultural paradigm:

Though the modernist anthropophagi certainly knew their French literature, they did not praise the Amerindian state of nature, but rather the Indians' vision of nature.

Antropofagia then, as the paradigmatic image of another philosophy, cosmopolitical, perhaps even nonhuman. (31)

This might be taken as praise for the upheaval of the nature-culture divide: humans from the global North might be able to cannibalize each other without the guilt of potential "spiritual extractivism" as Macarena Gomez-Barris calls the extraction of spirituality that happens nowadays in the Amazonian jungle through *ayahuasca* dealings (42). These dealings are themselves a regurgitation of the cannibalistic act.

2.3 The artist *yachag*

And the *Yagé* Ceremony as Cannibal Performance



Fig. 11 A *Siona* elder performing cure after a ceremony with teacher plants. Photo Mateo Barriga. 2016.

The image above (fig. 11) shows *Taita* Humberto, a *Siona* elder from the community of Buena Vista in the Putumayo as he is performing a cure at the very end of the ceremony with teacher plants like *ayahuasca* or *yagé*. In the backdrop we see the walls of the *maloka* (ceremonial hut) that have been painted with images of the Virgin Mary and Child wearing traditional paraphernalia of the *Siona* tribe. The other images are typical from the vision quest that is traversed throughout the hallucinogenic ritual. The *yagé* ceremony is an ancient ritual that throws the *yachag* into a spiritual voyage towards the encounter with the dead and the spirits of animals and plants. This ritual as well as other Amazonian rituals are part of what Viveiros de Castro has called an “economy of predatory alterity” (144). Only through the gaze of the other,

the warrior sees himself; for this feat to be accomplished, the warrior needs to eat his enemy. A predatory economy enacts a cannibalistic performance in a spiritual sense, that is able to reject and serves as an antidote to spiritual extractivism. In a predatory economy the *yachag* has to seek the most allies, in this case the Virgin Mary in the *maloka* is a proven icon for it channels the energy of the feminine without the impure bodily fluids of the woman. It also appeals to Christians who find comfort while they believe they are sinning since participating in an indigenous savage and demonic ritual. Enrique Dussel cites Oviedo: “The people of these Indies, although rational [sic] and of the same branch of the holy ark of Noah, are made irrational [sic] and bestial by their idolatries, sacrifices, and infernal ceremonies” (36). The colonial catholic image of the virgin is syncretized with the Amazonian plant remedy, while her personification as mother calms them. Taussig records a Putumayo woman’s perception of the Virgin Mary’s icon:

She sees the miraculous virgin as a magical weapon in racial and spiritual warfare. She says that the Spanish were very superstitious, as were the Indians, and that in their campaigns of conquest the Spaniard’s carried a Virgin, possibly made in Quito, to protect them. The Indians understood this. They understood the Virgin to be a magical weapon and they determined to take her and thereby sap the power of their oppressors. (194)

The Amazonian *yachag* is the master of ceremonies in the ritual performance of *yagé*. He is the performer of a total work of art that englobes components such as music, visual arts, relational aesthetics, performance, dance and drama. He is, in a sense, the flowering of the plant collective if we may compare an Amazonian shamanic community with an ancient tree. The tree hosts lichens and mosses, different epiphytes, parasites and alliances of the most diverse kind. The *yachag* might be paired with a flowering bromeliad, an inflorescence which holds together many

florations. In the central composition of the flower is the egg, a camera that houses the pistil or carpel, the feminine part and the stamen, the masculine part in the same floration. This reproductive machine, molecular in its most malleable composition, is a hermaphroditic container that is able to transform the flower into the seed in order to enable the cycle of life and death to be turned over and over again. This cycle is what makes possible life on the planet. The *Siona yachag* is the translation into the human of this floration. Male and female energy at the same time, he is able to conduct the patient's voyage towards healing and the discovery of another way of being. The flower brings the possibility of proliferation to the tree or community, in a cosmopolitical engagement enacted within the various characters who are part of this symbiotic relationality. At the same time since this engagement institutes a predatory economy, everything is circumscribed to a state of warfare. Viveiros de Castro notes:

Amazonian shamanism, as is often remarked, is the continuation of war by other means. This has nothing to do, however, with violence as such but with communication, a transversal communication between incommunicables, a dangerous delicate comparison between perspectives, in which the position of the human is in constant dispute. (151)

The shaman as artist enacts a “total work of art.” Wagner called this type of work *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a piece that englobes everything from the visual, dramatic, musical and sculptural arts. Mathew Wilson Smith writes about it:

The most frequent translation of the word is “total work of art” but even this is by no means straightforward: other possibilities include ‘communal work of art,’ ‘collective work of art,’ ‘combined work of art,’ and ‘unified work of art.’ Indeed, the concept includes all of these ideas, for it is an art-form as much about collectivity as about unity, about community as about totality. (8)

If we take the *yagé* ritual with all its components, we have an action which includes music, drama, a catharsis or climaxing point, visual arts elements, a social performance of participants in situ; in short, a total work of art. It is a joyful communion to be realized in life.

Transformation may be one of the outcomes of this performative endeavor, if not, it is seldom something one may just bypass without any consequences in everyday life. Moreover, the performative part engages the sharing of a potion or plant food that induces altered states of consciousness and may pair the ritual to Greek tragedy which included intoxication as a means to attain ecstasy through lucid dreaming. As Nietzsche reflects in *the Birth of Tragedy*:

Dionysiac art, by contrast, is based on play with intoxication, with the state of ecstasy.

There are two principal forces which bring naive, natural man to the self-oblivion of intense intoxication: the drive of spring and narcotic drink. Their effects are symbolized in the figure of Dionysos. In both states the *principium individuationis* is disrupted, subjectivity disappears entirely before the erupting force of the general element in human life, indeed of the general element in nature. (120)

This *principium individuationis* which guides humans in an awakened state of consciousness, disappears in plant potion or hallucinogenic ceremonials. The community takes over and the collective, like a plant, moves as one. For the objectives of the performance this movement is helpful, however, often collectives are unable to leave the altered state of consciousness immediately after a *yagé* ceremony. The *yachags* guide their communities towards an objective, whether it is a common objective or an individual shaman's own ambition. Such is the power of the *yagé* potion and the magical arts attributed to the indigenous healer. This is seldom the case within the realm of art. Most rituals and performances by artists are done within an institutional artistic context in which participants might not really be a captive public, but mere visitors,

interested in the artist's performative and entertaining action. More often than not, the artistic ritual cannot engage a public, nor can it convince them further. The question is, does art exist outside an art gallery/museum context? If the object is outside this institutional space, is it art? If not, what is it? Art rituals, nonetheless, seem to be capable of making profound impacts on participants, as is the case with Greek tragedy. "He [man] feels himself to be a god;" Nietzsche writes, and he continues:

...that which had previously lived only in his imagination he now feels in his own person. What does he now care for images and statues? Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art; man himself now moves with the same ecstasy and sublimity with which, in dream, he once saw the gods walk. (121)

This ecstasy is no doubt produced by intoxication where drunkenness is a "triumphant irruption of the plant in us" (Deleuze and Guattari 11) enabling a person to embody a certain state of altered consciousness outside of the ordinary.

In order to conduct the ceremony, the *yachag* needs to be gifted with all the prowess possible. A predatory economy of spiritual cannibalism seems to pervade the exchanges between the participants and the *yachag*, who needs to have total control and to be in full strength in order to perform the ceremony. Since he will be traveling to the realm of the dead and of nonhuman entities, he needs to be fed, as in a sacrificial offering, all creativity and strength at hand. In other words, the ultimate performance of the *yachag* is the voyage in which he would be conversant with the master spirits of the jaguar, the plants, and those of the dead. This is of course, a figure of speech, a metonymic contiguity, of which the *yachag* is just part; he continues the chain of plant, animal, human through the conversions he is enabled to perform during his travels to other states of consciousness. The overall success and performativity of the ceremony depends on the

level of ability of the shaman. There are those who are renowned performers, such as full-fledged musicians who enact their performance under the influence of the *yagé*; they are also well informed in all the feats that the *yachag* must be schooled, in order to be part of a ceremony, like chanting, sensing the patients voyages, etc. This knowledge is provided by the training and use of all kinds of plant remedies which allow the *yachag* to travel and speak to all those “spirit masters”. Anna Tsing speaks of the travels of shamans in their own bodies:

Through his metaphorical travels, the shaman constructs the healthiest body conceivable, one with the spiritual power of the entire cosmos. Further, the glorified body of the chant is not just the shaman's own body, but a model of the empowered body for all who listen. The shaman's metaphors create the healthy body for all his potential patients. Health proceeds from his body to encompass theirs. (190)

Amazonian thought contends that everything on planet Earth has a spirit master and the *yachag* is able to communicate with it during the ceremonial trance and his own travels, in order to know what is happening with a patient or the community. Descola refers to these “master spirits” in these terms: “Because they are bigger and more beautiful, it is they who best embody the characteristic features of the species that they represent and so are the species’ preferred interlocutors with human hunters who request them to concede a few of their fellows as hunted prey” (18). It is important for the human shaman to have an equal partner to communicate with, in equal terms.

The *yachag*, thus, is the facilitator or medium through which all energies are channeled and who will translate from one realm to the other. Such creative enterprise is potentiated by the harnessing of the creative energies or entities around the *yachag* in the ceremony. He is a medium which, through a predatory economy, feeds off the energetic fields of the participants.

He channels the desires and creative potentials of the surroundings. In this sense this predatory economy is not altogether different from what the great artists of modern and contemporary times do: appropriate cultural manifestations to make them their own through a process of digestion and regurgitation. The gist of Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropofágico* (Cannibal Manifesto) from 1928 is very relevant: "The spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without a body. Anthropomorphism. Need for the cannibalistic vaccine. To maintain our equilibrium, against meridian religions. And against outside inquisitions" (39). He argues that Latin Americans from the global South must feed off all other art and artists around the globe in order to become greater themselves. "Tupí or not tupí, that is the question" (38) he writes, against all vertical influences there is the possibility of devouring the enemy to get to know them fully and thus, acquire strength and power. In the words of Neves Marques:

Furthermore, one can extrapolate that the anthropophagic 'descent,' meant not only the rediscovery of Amerindian cosmopolitical thought but also a confrontation with the 'oceanic feeling' proclaimed by Freud, and which has since haunted mankind with the consciousness of its species' mutability, of his bodily decay within the Earth system, of which he is only but another evolutionary result, and the environment nothing but the cannibalization of its children. (44)

Even the *yachags* themselves are always already a byproduct of *mestizaje*, that cannibalistic mixture that entails the preying of one community towards another. When a predatory economy is enacted, all the participants of the ceremony are subjected to some kind of predation. This might sound quite destabilizing for naive participants, but this is a kind of performance that may leave profound scars. It is indeed an economy of warfare. As was the case with the Tupinambá of Brazil, who enacted cannibal rituals at all times, spiritual cannibalism is at work at all times in

shamanic and, neo-shamanic communities. Viveiros de Castro states that shamanism could be defined as continuation of war, spiritual war. It is perhaps a relevant feature of the concept of cannibalism that the male shaman is able to appropriate spiritually from the members of the community. The metaphor may be interesting, nevertheless, in actuality it may prove to be a form of vampirism.

It is a wonder that there are such few women *yachags* who could turn the table around in this warfare economy. However, deep taboos make it almost impossible for *Siona* and other Amazon basin communities' women to become *yachags*, or *chamanas*. Bodily fluids, menstruation and childbearing passages are considered impure. In Vicker's words:

According to *Siona* and *Secoya* precepts women are ritually contaminated because of their biological functions; their menstruation periods, pregnancy and postpartum are potentially dangerous and are protected by a series of restrictions, behavior and diet. A recurrent aspect of these restrictions is the isolation of women. (215)

Pains are taken to separate women during their menstruation cycle and couples who are bearing a child are often prevented from coming into the ceremonial hut. *Yachags*, because of the wear and tear they present after years and years of plant dieting and *yagé* drinking, are the most fragile of all and the damage that women's energies cause to them is thought to be irreversible. However, in some communities in Brazil, Perú and Mexico many women become *chamanas* and are able to heal and see the future. Looking at the practices of women artists as Maria Teresa Hincapié and Gloria Anzaldúa it is evident that anyone may enter a spiritual realm through different processes, proving that the male Amazonian *yachag* is not the only one able to communicate with spirits and nonhuman entities. In Tsing's words: "Without gender-appropriate ways of bringing together dramatic self-presentation and claims to traditional knowledge, women have

difficulty breaking into the mainstream of male dominated spiritual expression” (243). One of the great threats to women in these communities comes within their own subsumption as members, wives, mothers. The success they experience must be within the parameters of their communities in order to be protected by them. It is not easy at all for indigenous women to walk into the uses of mestizo culture with its ambivalent values and ways. Mestiza women, “ch’ixi” or stained, in the parlance of Rivera Cusicanqui, are always walking a tightrope in between cultures (7). That is why it is so important to identify with other role models of feminism within their own cultures. There is always the great peril to romanticize and idealize the indigenous communities and the work of a *yachag*; it is important to realize that women do not have a preponderant role in *Siona* spirituality, unless as aides to their husbands, leaders, and men in general.

This predatory and warfare economy might turn out to be extremely dangerous because it ultimately means a quest for who is the strongest warrior and who will be eaten last. Neither shamans nor *vegetalistas* escape a milieu full of contradictions, such as the South American colonialist, drug and guerrilla state. It is a world where anything is possible according to a notion of “magic realism” perpetuated by writers, anthropologists and artists. The notions of “magic” are embedded since day one in the entourage of its people. As Taussig writes, “the enormity of the magic attributed to those Indians is striking, an attribution as forceful among the lower classes, black, white, and mestizo, as it is among the middle and upper classes and intellectuals – including archaeologists and anthropologists” (171). In such a charged spellbound realm nothing seems impossible, and everything can be attributed to spirits. But then again, why not? If other ontologies are acknowledged, to recognize the probability of such wonderment is crucial.

In pandemic times when the world seems to offer so little for humans, hallucinogenic plant-based groups' promises could be tremendously powerful. Evans Schultes was aware of the power of such plants and that is why it is important for those who have access to them to “understand the concept of indigenous medicine before starting to study its pharmacology” (209). Those who study it, may want to be in alliance with ancestral indigenous traditions, as artist ethnographers perhaps, embedded in a community that carries the knowledge and the potential to curb excess that could become detrimental to its members. The *yachag* is not an almighty saint or god, he is just another man fulfilling the cosmopolitical role of mediator between spirits and the human world, enmeshed in a colonial regime of extractivism, traversed by the contemporary threats of narcotraffic, guerrilla and paramilitary interventions in the jungle. Assigning *yachags* powers that are beyond their reach is a romanticization of their craft and lives. The very fine encounter of perspectives is in Viveiros de Castro's terms “...not only a dangerous process but a political art: diplomacy. If Western relativism has multiculturalism as its public politics, Amerindian shamanic perspectivism has multinaturalism as its cosmic politics” (60). His words speak against idealizing the world of Amazonian communities which is complex with layers of perspectival relationality, predatory economy and cosmopolitical warfare, enacted at all times to balance a very delicate and perilous world. Perhaps living a predatory economy is similar to acting in a spiritual cannibalistic position at all times *donde el que no come se deja comer* (where those who do not eat are eaten).¹⁴ Of this spiritual cannibalism shamans and pseudo-shamans alike partake. It can be said that this is what happens in all planes of life on the planet, however, understanding the predatory nature of such communities might prevent the interpretation of certain signs (semiotics) in a western metaphysics optic, instead of interpreting them through an altogether different cannibal metaphysics.

2.4 Covering-up.

Sepals: The conquest or *En-cubierta* and Spiritual Extractivism



Fig. 12. Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, *Cortenle la Caveza*. 16th century

Cortenle la Caveza (fig. 12) is an image drawn by the first chronicler of the New World, Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, an indigenous draftsman and writer, who was witness to history and wrote about everything that he saw happening in these lands. He chronicles events that span from the brutal mistreatment of indigenous peoples encountered, to the cynical death of Atahualpa the king of the Inca empire at the hands of *conquistador* Francisco Pizarro. In the image, we see two Spanish *conquistadors* cutting Atahualpa's head right after he fulfilled their wishes to provide a room full of gold in order to be released. He died by treason, which was the way Spanish conquerors found it easy to get rid of unwanted royalty, military, or plainclothes Inca people. When the conquest of the Americas happened in 1492 a whole world was covered

up and another one juxtaposed over it in a game of *birlibirloque* (by magic) that covered everything that had been until then. Thus, explains philosopher Enrique Dussel in his book *The Invention of the Americas*:

The Asiatic being of these islands existed only in the aesthetic and contemplative fantasy of the great navigators of the Mediterranean. As a result, the Other, the American Indian, disappeared. This Indian was not discovered as Other, but subsumed under categories of the Same. This Indian was known beforehand as Asiatic and reknown in the face-to-face encounter and so denied as Other, or *covered over* (*en-cubierto*). (32)

As a result, the Indian or indigenous groups that populated the whole continent were placed in the drawer of history as a mishap that had no place of enunciation. These inhabitants of the *Abya Yala* had been the only managers of their lands and life until now. They were subjected only by the laws of their community leaders and *curacas* (shamans), they had been able to roam freely the earth they considered their mother spirit *Pachamama*. In a matter of days their lives changed completely and a full-blown genocide began. It was the end of the world as they knew it, and the beginning of another one altogether. From the seeds the conqueror brought to this new land, other flowers blossomed. The mestizo or *chi'xi* is that floration sprouted from the seeds brought over from another world, planted in *Abya Yala's* soil. A new floration that was not expected, a hybrid being that saw the light after being conceived from components of different cultures and beliefs so opposite he/she finds it difficult to get to a place of agreement even to this day.

There is no way of seeing the everydayness of Latin America without seeing the magic realism veil that covers it. Rivera Cusicanqui cites what René Zavaleta calls “*abigarramiento*” (8) or jumbled overflow, which is analogous to the real marvelous that engulfs everything and juxtaposes all kinds of disparate things. A baroque notion of overflowing the borders of every

myth or concept forwards a notion of the world in which everything is possible. In that magical state of consciousness, it is not improbable that the lure of the abilities to solve, cure and heal that the Andean and Amazonian *yachags* are believed to hold, would even further the greed for that occult knowledge that the Spaniards felt when the conquest just began. In *The Extractive Zone* Gomez-Barris writes: “What was at first a relatively small army of Spanish soldiers used the combination of Christian religion and colonial violence to thoroughly dismantle the Incan Empire over the course of a few short decades” (44). The catholic church under the Reformation used the baroque as a style to indoctrinate indigenous peoples on this new belief system.

Nevertheless, more than a meeting or *encuentro* it was clearly a covering, as Dussel writes:

No meeting could have been realized because the Spanish totally disdained indigenous rites, gods, myths, and beliefs, and sought to erase them through the method of *tabula rasa*. Nevertheless, in the clarity/obscurity of everyday practices a syncretistic religion formed, which not even the purest Inquisition could have snuffed out. Popular creativity shaped this mixed religion contrary to all the intentions of European missionaries. (55)

It is this *abigarramiento* of the world that corresponds to a moment of intense “semiotic inflation” (Berardi 117) where the *ch'ixi* being is formed. All the newly found fruits, plants and animals, and even people were mind blowing for the Europeans that never had seen such a flux of goods and unexplainable things coming from the other side of the ocean where they believed only one-eyed monsters and amazons once lived. The New World was envisioned as a new limitless locus of resources, from mineral to vegetal, animal and human. This bounty that invited the Spanish to prey upon with all might and strength, contained in its very core the seeds of the Malinche, that Indian mistress of Hernán Cortés who was able to foresee the coming world in the ashes of the old one. She was the mother of the first *ch'ixi*, her son from Cortés. Such a mixture

was as unfathomable as the gastrocephalus, a fantastic creature with the head in his stomach, conceived by the European imagination. As “real” as the Indian was, he was also covered-over, non-existent, *encubierto*. In Dussel’s words: “Europe constituted other cultures, worlds, and persons as objects, as what was thrown (arrojado/jacere) before (ob/ante) their eyes. Europe claimed falsely that the covered one (en-cubierto) had been dis-covered (des-cubierto)” (36).

Nevertheless, *encubierto* as he was, the Indian *yachag* has remained the site of magical healing which has attributed to him, in equal parts, admiration, fantasy and terror. As much as he is respected, he could very well be disdained and killed. This tremendous vulnerability that the body of the Indian is subjected to, is also the locus of his power and occult magic. As Gomez-Barris’ suggests “we cannot understand the recent growth in a spiritual global economy without also attending to the fascination with and colonial investment in the Andean shaman” (47). The colonial wound that traverses all *ch’ixi* bodies has not been healed altogether and it continuously spurs its mixed and stained malaise. The fascination that syncretic religiosity and its possibilities of healing exerts over the “new wounded” (Malabou xiii) its magical pull, is extraordinary. I say magical because it is situated between the territory of religious Catholic belief/guilt and the gray zone of new age spirituality. It is an opaque territory that is rather occult and thus very prone to be ignored, while at the same time it is remarkably evident.

When the conquest happened in 1492, the *Tawantinsuyu* was the land of the Incas. They referred to their empire as *Tawantinsuyu*, “the four *suyu*”. In Quichua, *tawa* is four and *-ntin* is a suffix that means group, in this case the four *suyu* (regions or provinces) were corners of the land. The four *suyu* were: Chinchaysuyu (north), Antisuyu (east, the Amazon jungle), Qullasuyu (south), and Kuntisuyu (west). The name *Tawantinsuyu* was, therefore, a descriptive term indicating a union of provinces. The Spanish translated the name to *Tahuatinsuyo* or

Tahuatinsuyu.¹⁵ It is told in the Chronicles of Guamán Poma de Ayala, that Atahualpa, ruler of the *Chinchaysuyu*, was taken hostage in Kitu, capital of the stronghold, by the Spaniards for a ransom of one room full of silver and one full of gold. The conquistadors received the rooms filled with gold and silver but later, when Atahualpa questioned Francisco Pizarro on his incoherence, he decided to kill the Inca anyway. They beheaded and dismembered him and then proceeded to spread his limbs to the four corners of the earth. The myth says that the tribes of these four corners of the earth have to recover those limbs and voyage to put them back together. The activism we are seeing nowadays from indigenous peoples of the whole continent attests to this desire to re-member in both ways: to put together what has been fragmented and to keep alive the memory of interconnectedness to the earth. What Atahualpa had questioned was the validity of the tributes they had to pay to King Carlos of Spain. In the chronicle of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega' quoted by Dussel, this is what Atahualpa asked Pizarro:

You listed five preeminent men whom I ought to know. The first is God, three and one, which are four, whom you call the creator of the universe. Is he perhaps our Pachacámac and Viracocha? The second claims to be the father of all men, on whom they all piled their sins. The third you call Jesus Christ, the only one not to cast sins on that first man, but he was killed. The fourth you call pope. The fifth, Carlos, according to you, is the most powerful monarch of the universe and supreme over all. However, you affirm this without taking account of other monarchs. But if this Carlos is prince and lord of all the world, why does he need the pope to grant him concessions and donations to make war on us and usurp our kingdoms? And if he needs the pope, then is not the pope the greater lord and most powerful prince of all the world, instead of Carlos? Also you say that I am obliged to pay tribute to Carlos and not to others, but since you give no reason for this

tribute, I feel no obligation to pay it. If it is right to give tribute and service at all, it ought to be given to God, the man who was Father of all, then to Jesus Christ who never piled on his sins, and finally to the pope.... But if I ought not give tribute to this man, even less ought I to give it to Carlos, who was never lord of these regions and whom I have never seen.” (57)

Such ability to discern threw the Spaniards off completely. Immediately Pizarro gave orders to attack the Indians and mobilize all their troops, while his nearest men beheaded the Inca lord and his limbs were pulled apart as was the usual custom.

The conquest brought a destruction of such proportions that what was left was only a ravaged land. A space and time that lived in a double bind, between the despoils of a rich kingdom that was destroyed and the imaginary New World promised by the conquistadors. Schürman writes: “What if the common and the singular both bind us—then is it not rather that we inhabit a ravaged site?” (16). When facing a double bind, we are often inhabiting a ravaged site, and that precisely could have been the locus of existence for the new order in the New World. In a ravaged land it is very difficult for anything to flourish, for vegetation to prevail, for blossoming to occur. First this ravaged land has to be cleansed and prepared sweetly, the soil needs to be amended, and a fertilizer like a mycelium layer has to work in order to reclaim the ground for it to produce and blossom again.

In his book *The Conquest of America* Tzvetan Todorov engages in the enormous hermeneutical task of interpreting the conquest and unpacking what it meant for Columbus as a European man of God and for Spain as a nation to “discover” this new continent and perform a refounding of its inhabitants in order to recreate a new Spain. Todorov writes:

If the word genocide has ever been applied to a situation with some accuracy, this is here the case. It constitutes a record not only in relative terms (a destruction on the order of 90 percent or more), but also in absolute terms, since we are speaking of a population diminution estimated at 70 million human lives. None of the great massacres of the twentieth century can be compared to this hecatomb. (133)

The end of the world for Indians was imminent not only in terms of direct genocide, but from the destruction of their habitat in terms of the natural disaster that the conquest brought upon them. Such decimation brought to their knees all indigenous populations, the sadness and depression that they experienced was an overload unfathomable in our contemporary imagination. It was like a plague sent by the gods: the Indians thought and felt they had some strange fate to undergo and were clearly baffled as to what it was. The covering-up of everything that they hold dear in order to indoctrinate them with the belief in a new deity, customs and ways of life, was a dismemberment only comparable to the end of times. Unable to understand such destiny, adopting explanatory narratives from the conquering God was imperative in order to survive.

Under an umbrella of religious indoctrination Spain was able to conquer the minds and bodies of the Inca populations as well as other groups. Some of them willingly joined the force of the conquistadors in order to combat the Inca nation which had conquered them in the first place. The adjoining of these groups meant for the Spaniards a chance to overcome the little resistance they encountered. The Amazonian groups were spared such an excruciating panorama because access to the forest was almost impossible. Francisco Pizarro attempted to make it through the Amazonas River, bearing all kinds of vicissitudes without luck. He lost all his company in the intent and hardly saved his own life from a disastrous attempt. Thus, the Amazonian indigenous tribes were not contacted until centuries later. The Amazonian *yachags*

were spared the terrible fate of the other *curacas* (shamans) from the Andes, and remained almost untouched and able to keep a way of life within the forest. Their power comes from this victory over conquest that makes the Amazonian communities fierce, almost terror provoking for their strong defense of the land. Many priests, nuns, miners, oil and rubber lords have perished at the hands of the *Shuar* and other Amazonian communities seeking to defend their land and the right of their peoples to remain in their territories unharmed and untouched. It is almost impossible to understand the notion of spiritual extractivism without acknowledging the fabric it was built upon: the Christian indoctrination movement that began with the conquest. In this sense, Gomez-Barris posits:

We must also consider the long production of fantasies about the other in relation to the colonial violence of extractive capitalism. Therefore, the legacies of the spiritual ‘wild man’ are palpable and integral to the production of colonial fantasies about Andean shamans and their magical abilities to change Western character. (47)

Gomez-Barris is making reference to Taussig’s “wild man” which in his book is the Amazonian *yachag*. As I proposed before, there is a difference between the spirit of these two *yachags*, the wild Amazonian and the domesticated Andean. Taussig is talking about the man of the forest that lives in everyday contact with nature, plants, potions and the toll of a jungle impregnated with its own problematic relationality determined, among other factors, by the extraction of resources from the land. He also makes reference to how the Incas went to conquer “the wild *chunchos*” (as the Incas called the Amazonians) in order to tame them and “and reduce them to the life of men, for which purpose our father the Sun sent us here” (Taussig 229). The Andean *yachag* has dealt with spiritual indoctrination for centuries since the onset of the conquest, instead his Amazonian pair has experienced the conquest and different extractive moments at a later date

and from a different standpoint. Taussig writes: “The shamans come up from the jungle offering their superiors what their superiority denies them, namely the magical power of wildness to kill and to heal...” (234). In contemporary times and given the proliferation of western new age spiritual and eco-depressed cure seekers, the “wild man” is given the chance (by ancestor spirits perhaps?) to take back what was extracted from the forest and the land: fortitude and wisdom. Spiritual seekers may find the way to revert centuries of extraction by letting themselves be “extracted” by the magical powers of the Indian. Forest spirituality, with its belief system in entities that influence living earthly beings, poses, in fact, the possibility of a real threat to western extractivism from within this spiritual realm. As said earlier, this economy of warfare may well be the cultural cannibalistic response to centuries of slavery, and extraction of natural resources from the realm of the Amazonian peoples.

I suggest here a questionable though possible scenario: the Amazonian *yachag* is a cannibal warrior seeking to apprehend the enemy through his spiritual ingestion. I bring this thought back towards what I posed at the beginning of this section, a ravaged land’s only possibility to heal and blossom again is through recomposing the soil of all toxins through soil amendment and mycelium growth. Going back to the myth of Atahualpa and the future of indigenous communities from all the corners of the planet to bring back his dismembered body, the dismemberment is to be healed through the reclaiming (re-membering) of a soil that has been ransacked for centuries. In admitting to giving spiritual medicine to all westerners seeking healing, the Amazonian *yachag* acts as the mycelium that conquers back a corpus of society that historically submitted them to genocide, and changes their composition by turning them into the Other. Thus, a ravaged land is recomposted back into a soil where flourishing and blossoming are possible. It is the end of this world and the beginning of a new one. Or perhaps the old world

coming to fruition after centuries of being ravaged? Perhaps it is the body of Atahualpa finally being re-membered together.

2.5 Metonymic contiguity.

Petals. Artist Maria Teresa Hincapié's performance between the sacred and the profane



María Teresa Hincapié, *Una cosa es una cosa*, registro de performance. Colección Museo Nacional de Colombia. Reg. 6063 © Museo Nacional de Colombia / Juan Camilo Segura. 1990

Maria Teresa Hincapié, barefoot, dressed with light trousers and t-shirt, places cardboard boxes and plastic bags on the floor located in a central space of the 1st floor of the Corferías Pavillion. She opens the packages and places its contents randomly at her side: skirts, blouses, pants, shoes, pens, silverware, plates, glasses, pots, vases, plastic containers, napkins, makeup, plastic and paper bags where she kept other stuff: pencils, candles, seeds, grains, fruits and vegetables, beauty accessories, cleaning products, kitchen and office supplies. People who

enter the place accommodate themselves, seating or standing, around the space occupied by Hincapié and her things; some pass quickly and some stay for a long time while her actions take place. (Nicolás Gómez 36)

In the *Una cosa es una cosa* (fig. 13) performance, Hincapié installs the notions of silence and repetition in a sanctified space towards which she attempts to lure the spectacle-avid art public to the idea of sacred ritual. Hincapié's performance sets out to erase the borders between art and life in an attempt to find what she had been looking for in her theatrical work and was unable to find. A former theater actress, Hincapié left the world of drama because she no longer could see herself interpreting the role of somebody else. She wanted to be herself, to interpret herself. She becomes a performance artist almost by accident and grows into one of the most acclaimed Colombian artists of the 21st century. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that she was truly able to attain this very end. In a text written for *Elemental*, Julián Serna reflecting on her work wonders if she ended up not only not representing someone else but if she had to represent herself in an artworld persona she did not want to be represented as. He writes:

I wonder, to what extent, she can be herself without representing the role previously described in order to keep being part of an art circuit based on social rapport. In one way or another, any artist is forced to represent a role similar to the self-proclaimed in order to find an institution that would make her work circulate in the public domain. (91)

For one thing is to enter the ground of ritual and to be part of a ceremonial community as *yachag*, *mamo*, hippy or groupie, and another altogether, is to create a ritual of one's own making and turn it into a sacred deed.

The space of ritual is a space that has been sacralized by the ritualness imparted through the knowledge of its leader, generally through a shaman's sanctification. This knowledge is

attained via the sanctioned wisdom (religious or secular) convened upon church or civil authorities or via ancestral powers generally bestowed upon shamans or healers. Hincapié leaves the theater grounds only to enter those of a most complicated institution: the art world. The cultural device called Museum is what she chooses to be the realm of reverence and the art world accouterments are what she prefers in order to attain the sacred. However, I contend that her intentions of bringing a notion of sacredness are instantly washed away when she decides to enter the art institution in order to inscribe her work as art. The aura that the work exhibits is actually issued by the framework these institutions bestow and is needed in order for a work to be recognized as art. In Benjamin's words:

It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. (522)

However, I would like to argue that a different interpretation of her work that comes from the notion of the continuum nature-culture that Descola advances, could open other avenues of understanding it. In his theory Descola argues that Amazonian shamanic communities view the forest as a whole creative force that has the ability and capability of agency and thus of culture. He writes:

Amerindian thought envisages the entire cosmos as being animated by a single cultural regime that becomes diversified, if not by heterogeneous natures, at least by all the different ways in which living beings apprehend one another. The common referent for

all the entities that live in the world is thus not Man as a species but humanity as a condition. (11)

In this frame of mind, the flower is a creative endeavor of the plant as well as the ceremonial ritual of plant ingestion is a creative endeavor of the *yachag*. Rituals that remain circumscribed to art world institutions might be unable to release real transformation and healing. They remain a spectacle. Notwithstanding, it is certain that the radical departure from the art world and the art institution might mean that the artist and the art work in question disappear altogether. Who is to say a flower is not a work of art? If the contention of the flower as a being with its own perspective and personhood stands whole, why would its creation not be a cultural dispositive?

If the ritual ceremony of *yagé* plant ingestion is a thousand years old tradition with full-fledged shamans, sacred potions, chants and participants within a healing context, what makes it not a work of art? Perhaps only the fact that it is not inscribed within the framework of the institution which offers it its aura. Here, Wagner's notion of *Gesamkunstwerk* plays an important role again, especially because Hincapié had been reading the work of Joseph Beuys who embodies said notion. Hincapié writes:

The performer plays, somehow, the role of the shaman, she is a spiritual being that invokes divine forces, who tells her people what's going on so they can act. She is a visionary who contemplates life with much pain, who suffers when she sees so much waste around. Painful too is that not all have eyes to see or ears to listen. (103)

She is then fulfilling the role of shaman, albeit in a non-sacred space *per se*, but rendering it sacred through her ritual. She is aiming at opening people's eyes and ears to seeing and listening to something she feels is important for her times. The fact that she chooses to do it performatively through the body and not through political activism shows the degree of

commitment to the role of *yachag* or translator of perspectives she embodied. She represents the Nietzschean tragic artist, and Benjamin's concept of ecstatic trance, by entering these spaces and turning them sacred through ritualistic compass and silence.

When Hincapié decides to enter the museum, she agrees that a work of art, in order to retain its aura, needs to be presented within the art institution; she thus risks losing the complementary notion that in the age of mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin posited, "the cameramen is able to assemble multiple fragments under a new law" (523). If it is necessary for the work of art to remain in the art institution to be inscribed as such, it is inversely not necessary for the ritual to be within an institution to be inscribed as work of art. Conversely there might be a chance for something like the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to exist as a complete and total locus of rituality and art or art as ritual.

Hincapié's *Una cosa es una cosa*, runs the risk of depleting the potential of the ritual practice in order to keep up with the requirements of the art world, the artist and the work of art. For spirituality to retain and invoke its rituals, it needs to be practiced in community, otherwise it remains a spectacle for the few gallery or museum visitors who remain absolutely out as spectators, thus reproducing the old recipe of the institution that bestows the aura to the work of art. The communities which practice their rituals and engage in their ritualness, recur to the paraphernalia and accouterments necessary to its ceremonial nature. The *yachag* is an artist, as well as cosmopolitical ambassador among different worlds, nevertheless he remains a healer and medicine person when he is outside of the ceremonial realm. Hincapié devised an artistic dispositif that desired to incorporate ritual and sacred components. But how important is ritual in art? How can the work of art take the place of ritual for everyday people? In Hincapié's work it is rather what is left out of the incursion in the art institution, what is compelling. It is the silence

that is the most powerful in her work; all her actions are silent. Silence traverses and marks all her work. Silence is a sign and a gesture and pretty much equates Hincapié to a silent plant. Although she was surrounded by visual artists and art critics who helped her articulate her performatic activity's theoretical framework, her mark, once alone in the consecrated art space, is silence. The complete ritual of the work of art is at times difficult to grasp in the canonic space of art. In her book *Overlay* Lucy Lippard writes:

Immateriality and impermanence, for instance, though sometimes valid strategies against commodification, have often backfired, leading to the same kind of isolation and inaccessibility the artists hope to overcome. Although the form has changed—for example, from expensive steel to inexpensive xerox, or from object to action—the content is still meaningless to many people. (159)

In the canonic space of the museum or art gallery, the visitor is not a willing audience that will perceive the ritual performance of an artist as anything other than a “work of art”. It is questionable if the performance watchers or voyeurs really participate in the ritual or only observe it. However, the power of the performance could really instigate reflection in the audience, albeit not changing their view of the world. For a work of art to be ritual as well as art it is important that it is done in collectivity, the objects or images borrowed from other cultures become ritual only when filled by a communal impulse that connects them to a notion of past, present and future, when the ritual is repeated. Hincapié replicates her ritual over and over again during the recourse of seven days in which she repeats the same movements with the same objects for eight hours every day. She is alone performing an activity that implicates her, nonetheless, this is not a private activity, she has placed herself in the time and space of the museum or gallery where visitors are able to share her ritual. However, visitors in Hincapiés

work are passersby who observe from the outside, they do not participate in it properly speaking. They might be moved by the action, although it is unlikely that they ever stayed for the entirety of the eight hours the artist took to arrange all the objects in spirals. Lippard writes: “When ritual doesn't work, it becomes an empty, self-conscious act, an exclusive object involving only the performer, and it is often embarrassing for anyone else to witness” (160). This is not the case with Hincapié's performance, people kept coming back to see it and spread the word (just as in religious propaganda), although they did not directly participate in it. The repetitious and intriguing nature of the work kept drawing attention and publics to engage in the performance.

In John Cage's book *Silence*, Kyle Gann writes the introduction on Cage's 4'33": “At the August 29 1952 performance in Woodstock, New York, David Tudor “sat at the piano for that amount of time exactly, four minutes and thirty-three seconds and played —nothing. The piece the audience listened to consisted of whatever sounds occurred during the interval” (xv). That is what was most important of all in the placing of the portions of Hincapié's installation: silence, and all variants of sounds that happen when silence is installed in time and space. It is in silence that spirits of the forests are manifested, and it is in silence that being is able to pose the ontological question about Being, according to Heidegger. It is in silence that the flower opens in blossoming, it is in silence that the seed turns into a plant. It is in silence that Hincapié encounters the sacred, almost imperceptible for the audience. In all spiritual pursuits, silence is a guiding path towards the encounter with the sacred. Like the petals of the flower, silences grow together to become a blossoming. Silence is also a proto-language, non-vocalized semiosis. Hincapié “speaks” through her tight body which moves to the beat of an interior organic rhythm. Each object obeys the command of a predetermined order which she gives to things and spaces. Silence is the primordial ingredient for her action in the time-space continuum. In this way she is

able to traverse from interiority to exteriority, from the visible to the invisible. She transmits to the audience a profound echo of what is invisible through her visible acts and paraphernalia, through her own sense of the world. In the words of Merleau-Ponty:

To be sure, the least recovery of attention persuades me that this other who invades me is made only of my own substance: how could I conceive, precisely as his, his colors, his pain, his world, except as in accordance with the colors I see, the pains I have had, the world wherein I live?. (11)

Thus Hincapié, in ritualizing her own life, her own doubts, affirmations, and sense of the world, offers an audience the possibility to engage and make theirs her performatic intimations, reaching toward what a ritual that works aims to: the audience that participates, relishes in her silence and her rigorous bodily methods day after day, vicariously lives a life of confinement and neurotic order corresponding to a paroxysmal repetitiousness without end. Or so it would seem.

2.6 Poetry and the tragic artist

Gloria Anzaldúa: Poetry to Cure the Ailments of the World. The Fight Against Patriarchal Domination.

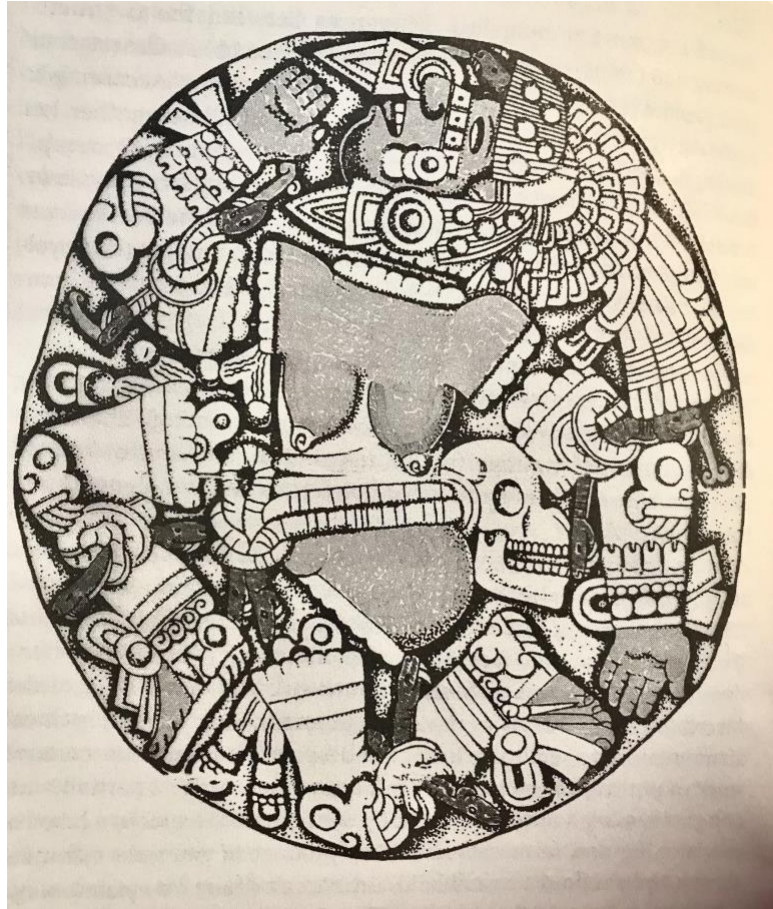


Fig. 14 *Coyolxauhqui* Illustration by Gloria Anzaldúa. 2015

In the posthumous work published in 2015 *Light in the Dark*, poet, artist, scholar and *chamana* Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) develops the concept of the *Coyolxauhqui* Imperative (fig. 14), and *Nepantla*. She also coined the term *chamana* as a response to the patriarchal and misogynistic assumption, spread throughout Latin America, that only men are able to become shamans or *yachags*. Anzaldúa's notion of *Nepantla* is a space in between: "Nepantla is the bridge between the material and the immaterial; the point of contact y el lugar between ordinary

and spirit realities; the midground in the vertical continuum of spirit/soul that places spirituality at the top end (heaven) and soul at the opposite end (underworld)” (29). Anzaldúa claims that this liminal place where women may wonder, is the locus of a different type of knowledge which she calls *conocimiento*. This place in between is a reality outside of everyday perceived reality. It is another reality that lives within or parallel to everyday life. It is a metaphysics of interconnectedness that possesses another level of possibilities for humans. She explores the ways in which artists and chamanas are able to mythologize and understand, through creative expression, the human experience. When I think of Anzaldúa and her work, a fig tree comes to my mind, subtle and powerful at the same time, one that bears fruit without blossoming. The fig is a flower and fruit at the same time. It is used to cure women’s reproductive systems illnesses like a *curandera*. Contrary to misogynistic claims that only men can be powerful *yachags* and medicine people, Anzaldúa brings forward the feminist notion of empowering women through her scholarship, poetry and spiritualist research. Here we find a motion to find, in the same places where sexist views of women deplete them from their force, a locus of strength. In the cycles of women, she sees potential *puissance* within the ability to heal colonization wounds and transgenerational trauma. In her own words:

A heightened consciousness or awareness that I call “conocimiento” and some call “love” (which may be the same thing) stirs the artist to take action, propels her toward the art of making. This *conocimiento* initiates the relationship between self-knowledge and creative work. (40)

She sees the potential of the *metier* of the artist as a path to both remembering herself and forgetting herself in the world. Creation thus acts as a “rearrangement and reordering of preexisting elements” (Anzaldúa 40). The artist is enabled through a decolonizing of her own

history to challenge pre-existing views and prejudices against women's knowledge and intuition, so seldom taken into account in academia and art.

The *Coyolxauhqui* Imperative

In Anzaldúa's words the *Coyolxauhqui* imperative "is the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us" (2). In this voyage of discovery of self/soul that she embarked upon, she summoned her own *curandera* or healer of epistemological, sexual, historical, social, linguistic, political and gender wounds. She conceives her ideas and artwork through her own formulations, "Soy la que escribe y se escribe, I am the one who writes and who is being written..." (3), she says, invoking in her own creativity the power to heal herself and others. Treating all work like fiction and poetry, she is able to distance herself from her own ailments and wounds and looks at the world from a different perspective, a liminal perspective. She is focused on the task of writing from "othered perspectives", that is, women's, queer, people of color, in order to understand and make sense of the world. She pairs the "flights" of reading and writing to "ensueños" similar to dreams and fantasy "resembling the magical flights of the journeying shaman" (7). Thus, she creates a hybrid mythopoesis that runs from theory to dream and back to reality. These "flights" are of the kind of Deleuze and Guattari's becomings; a multiplicity which moves molecularly "in between and in betwixt" worlds, in that liminal space that Anzaldúa calls *Nepantla* (Anzaldúa 32). Her poetic voice is that of the wounded healer that is enabled to heal, through art, a community of women who are usually dispossessed of these abilities in other realms and cultures. Thus, it is within this mestizo Mexican-American community that she is able to perform as *chamana* freely without anyone questioning her authenticity. In a Duchampian statement she claims she is an artist-healer

just because she says so. In *Borderlands* I find a poem that translates her relationship with death as a healer:

Dead

The doctor by the operating table said.

I passed between the two fangs,
the flickering tongue.

Having come through the mouth of the serpent,
swallowed,

I found myself suddenly in the dark,
sliding down a smooth wet surface
down down into an even darker darkness.

Having crossed the portal, the raised hinged mouth,
having entered the serpent's belly,
now there was no looking back, no going back.

Why do I cast no shadow?
Are there lights from all sides shining on me?

Ahead, ahead.
curled up inside the serpent's coils,
the damp breath of death on my face.

I knew at that instant: something must change

Or I'd die.

Algo tenía que cambiar. (57)

In this poem Anzaldúa embraces the Coyolxauhqui imperative. As she is held out into the depths of being, she poses the ontological question of Being. It is the voyage of the hero in the myth of Coyolxauhqui. In her own words: “Coyolxauhqui represents the psychic and creative processes of tearing apart and putting together (deconstructing constructing). She represents fragmentation, imperfection, incompleteness, and unfulfilled promises as well as integration, completeness and wholeness” (50). Again, we see the potentiality that exists in a philosophical plunge for knowledge; a knowledge that encompasses body/mind/spirit/soul not as separate but as continuum: “...an entirely embodied artistic practice that synthesizes identity formation with cultural change and movement among multiple realities” (Keating xxi). Anzaldúa pairs the metaphor of the serpent to death and illness. In many mythic accounts, the serpent is the symbol of knowledge and potential to change what needs changing. In this poem she sees herself passing through the fangs of the serpent as a rite of passage towards another stage of self. As a wakeup call, or being held out to the abyss, death is a lesson that the artist-chamana confronts in order to acquire the *conocimiento* she needs consequently to live. “*Algo tiene que cambiar*” (Something must change) (50) she says, something must change. As in a floration the pistil, the petal and the stigma, are gone after the flower has completed her cycle, and then the fruit appears as the result of change. There are plants, nevertheless in which fruit and flower are the same: in the fig tree the flower is within the fruit, which then matures and opens to uncover the seed. This “fruition”, a mixture of floration and fruiting, shows the metaphysics of mixture that Coccia talks about. As a flower, Anzaldúa’s writing is like “the paradigmatic form of rationality: to think is always to invest oneself in the sphere of appearances —not in order to speak, to say something, but in order to put different beings in touch with one another” (Coccia 110). Reason, thus, is embedded in the flowering and fruiting of a plant as well as of the writer-chamana preparing a poetic brew

that enables transformation of herself and most probably of her entourage through the work of art. Art as floration is a balsam for the ailing, for solitude, for illness and a ritual passage itself into another realm of being. As in the song she talks about in this poem, the troubadour sings: *Sueño con serpientes* (I dream of snakes) as if the snake that devours her is eclipsed and fed at the same time with the antidote of her poetry. Ourobouros of sorts, she feeds the serpent that gobbles her, to once again give birth to another self.

In seeking the truths of our lives” she writes “let’s not draw back from what frightens us.

Let’s look toward our nepantleras (poetas, artistas, queer youth, and differently abled) who have a tolerance for ambiguity and difference, la facultad to maintain numerous conflicting positions and affinity with those unlike themselves. (94)

In seeking Anzaldúa’s balm, I find the openness and disposition that the male *yachag* does not yield. Anzaldúa gives women artists-philosophers the ability to find in art what can truly save us, within the realm of art institution or outside of it, in the simple ritual of cleansing, opening to luminosity in the sharing, a participatory non-hierarchical and non-misogynistic environment where all interpretations and voices are welcome. In the giving, non-anthropophagic desire of the female *chamana* we may find life and nurturing words that prompt us into an economy of generosity instead of an economy of warfare.

Anzaldúa’s proposition corrects the male misogynistic *yachag* who seeks to possess or to manducate his enemy. Anzaldúa’s generosity-based economy purveys florations and inflorescences as possibilities after the recovery from fragmentation by colonization. She invokes the artist as *chamana*:

The artist uses the imagination to impose order on chaos; she gives psychic confession from and direction, provides language to distressed and confused people—a language that

expresses previously inexpressible psychic states and enables the reader to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form real experiences that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible. (39)

However, in the best scenario, and not to romanticize her idea, the *chamana* does not engulf the power and the creative energy of her community, it guides and gently, thus generously, helps seek balance and harmony in reciprocity through art, poetry and “the realities of people’s life and struggles” (Anzaldúa 39). This carries political implications that traverse the spiritual; thus, it is a cosmopolitical posture that the artist acquires in order to act within the planet.

Chapter 3 Proliferation

3. 1 Ecstatic trance and the tragic artist

Walter Benjamin's Ecstatic Trance and Nietzsche's Tragic Artist. Proliferation of Voices, Images and Sounds in the Artist's Entourage



Fig. 16 Milly Acharya *Cucurbita Pepo*, botanical illustration. 2011

Cucurbita Pepo (fig. 16) is a plant which bears the biggest fruit from the family of cucurbitaceae. It is a very generous plant which proliferates where conditions are favorable, mainly in Andean tropical climates where it is also called *sambo*. Its main mode of proliferation are her guides which climb and cling to every tree, plant or object it encounters. It is bountiful, for it generates rapidly, and though prickly, its rambunctious nature is mimicked by many wild plant and animal species which propagate voraciously when left on their own. I use the metaphor of proliferation in plants to animate the notion coined by artist Joseph Beuys that every human

being is an artist, thus, artists may proliferate as the *cucurbita* everywhere and anywhere. The astounding ability to reflect from the sensual world and make something appear from imagination is what artists have in common; the ability to create in generous fashion, in prolific ways, is what a plant and an artist may share as commonality. In the same way that the guides of the cucurbit plant trace for her a path to proliferate, the hands and imagination of the artist trace for her the path to prolific creation of the artifacts we call works of art.

Like the Amazonian *yachag*, the artist in trance is capable of summoning and at times even predicting future events. The concept of ecstatic trance that Benjamin forwards serves as a hinge that bridges the epistemological towards the mythological. In the same manner Nietzsche's tragic artist helps us to navigate this road. I call this artist an "artist in trance," in ecstatic trance and also within a tragic stance. Benjamin states that it was the ancients' intercourse with the cosmos that was different, for they did not see themselves as separate from it and, hence, remained in awe of this relationship. In his words there is an intimation of a communion with the cosmos:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights. (103)

The contemporary artist-*yachag* is indeed capable of ecstatic trance, the intoxicating communion with the cosmos that brings her into a different realm. Whether through the ingestion of teacher plants or through communication with the living entities of rivers and mountains, the ancients were aware that such contact is what permeates the human and enables contagion from the more-

than-human world. The human body is a perfected organism with the ability to sense a living planet. Benjamin's text proposes such an idea: "The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call 'Nature'" (59). What he means for "Nature" is a possession of (hu)man who manipulated it the way they deemed convenient to their interests which are mainly the prevalence of their species. When politics, culture, art and science are invoked, it is implied that it is human "nature" which rules over all other natures. Such has been the great mistake of the Anthropocene. However, the artist in trance (or entranced) may be the carrier of a different way to relate to a world beyond the notion of nature manipulated by humans.

Nietzsche's idea of the tragic artist complements this ecstatic trance, since for these artists the tragic condition of life means the acceptance of an ecstatic but at the same time tragic condition. In Nietzsche's words, for the tragic artist "[d]isgust at the continuation of life is felt to be a means of creation, either saintly creation or artistic. The terrifying or the absurd is uplifting because it is only *seemingly* terrible or absurd" (133). From the notions of ecstatic trance and the tragic artist I extract the concept of the artist in trance; a trance that enables her to carry on, and to commune with the cosmos in an interconnectedness that may help us navigate the waters of a new way to relate to the Earth.

It is difficult to imagine nowadays in a world so full of capitalistic assumptions of power and wealth, someone who finds it suitable to pursue a path of knowledge through art, asking questions and staying attuned to the signs that the world brings upon them. The "ecstatic trance" of which Benjamin speaks, was something accomplished through the bodily perception of the earth's dwellings and the firmament. An ability to stay attuned to those words spoken by nonhuman entities, plants, animals, rocks, mountains or water, got lost somewhere down the

road. Listening to find consonance with earth's surroundings has been supplanted by reading and writing. The intuition of mythic tales has been exchanged for an assurance in logic and language. Technological advances, although marvelous for humans, are also detrimental to a rapport with the surrounding nonhuman bodies. Life in the cities turns people blind to the shining of stars, keeps them from feeling the earth under bare feet and dulls their senses, making them unable to feel the almost magical perception of their own bodies. An artist feels a call to translate into works of art her perception of the world: the continuum interiority-exteriority, or the invisible turned visible as Merleau-Ponty says. The artist in this way is like a shaman or *yachag* who translates between worlds like a "cosmopolitical diplomat" herself. This is what Beuys did when entering the gallery in New York. His idea was to talk to a coyote named *America*. In her own way this is also what Hilma af Klint performed when making her *Paintings for the Temple*: translate the world of nonhumans like coyote or the spirits into human language, thus creating a fabulative world for the public to get immersed in.

In Hellenic times Apollinian cult was a cult of reason and beauty but lacked spontaneity and the possibility of letting go of oneself; it was the reign of reason and the beginning of measure and calculus, which rapidly took prevalence. As Nietzsche recounts, it was not until the cult of the divine Dionysus entered Hellenic society, that Greeks were able to let go and throw themselves in an all new intoxicating perception of the world. He writes:

Nature expresses itself with its highest energy in Dionysiac intoxication, in the tumultuous, wild chase across all the scales of the soul under the influence of narcotic stimulants or when the drives of spring are unleashed; it binds individual creatures together again, and it makes them feel that they are one with each other, so that the

principium individuationis appears, so to speak, to be a perpetual state of weakness of the Will. (123)

It is in this ecstasy that (hu)man perceives an extraordinary way to inhabit the world. Not unaware of its tragic nature, but in spite of it, or as Nietzsche quotes Goethe saying: “to be able to live life with its horrors throwing a veil of roses over it” (124). Such is the stance of the tragic artist, an artist that does not dwell in the shallowness of everydayness and does not succumb to the cruelty of the world, but is capable of raising above life’s inherent sufferings making a cloak out of them in order to transform these experiences into food for creation and joy.

An ability to remain moved towards the everyday miracles of planetary existence and the *puissance* to shepherd those perceptions into fruition is what turns an artist into a *yachag* or *chamana*. Gloria Anzaldúa calls herself a *chamana* not because she has been ordained by any tribe chief, but because through her poetry and scholarly writings she can transform her own life, and the suffering of an immigrant community into joy and wisdom. In her poetic words:

For both la *chamana* and the artist, this inner journey is one of turmoil and distress. By recounting intense psychic details through transpersonal language, the psyche organizes itself and gives significance and direction to human suffering. Through creative expression, the human experience is mythologized and collectively understood. (39)

If there is no fable to follow, the road is hazardous and perilous, believing that truth is only what can be proven, remains a scientific method that more and more has shown to be too limited.

When a teleological impetus is present the moment and detailed process is lost to an economy of endings. Thus, the artist who falls for stardom lights and instant economic success may never find her way through the voyage that accompanies the tragic artist in trance. This does not mean that economically successful artists do not find their ways through perilous paths; no, instead it

means that the artist pursues a “relatedness” to his work, instead of the immediate satisfaction of the business of it. As Heidegger reminds us:

Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork, any occupation with it will be determined exclusively by business concerns. Every handicraft, all human dealings, are constantly in that danger. The writing of poetry is no more exempt from it than is thinking. (379)

Thus, the artist is not someone concerned with “business” (meaning busy-work) but with the possibility of creation to be *poiesis*, to think or to be moved through our senses into a poetic rapture. For those in search of meaningful or “strange attractors” (Baudrillard 79) we might not find what we are looking for in the bright lights of artistic stardom. Joseph Beuys said at some point in his journey:

Every man is an artist: only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the death line: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/Social Architecture – will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism. (1)

This might be only possible when it is a matter of finding out where to tap the well of creativity and attunement to the planet or “social organism as a work of art” the way he envisioned it. The artist is in direct relation to such an organism as the cabinetmaker is to the wood with which he builds his cabinets from.

Benjamin talks about the “ecstatic trance” which the ancients entered into, just by looking at the firmament and tuning into a special state of awareness that held them in awe towards the world. The entities that inhabited the stars and the sky they saw, were able to talk to them

because they were able to listen. That trance was not imbued by any substance, it was actually an intoxication with life and the gist of life itself. The eruption of a feeling of plenitude was that *pneuma* or breath which awarded them the ability to carry on a trance to live in. It is communally, Benjamin says, that humans can be in contact with this perception of the cosmos. I add that perception happens through the senses, hardly through logical thought, but is traversed by and with the body. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* philosopher David Abram writes that it is the senses that brought ancient humans to be in contact with the spirits of everything surrounding them, rivers, plants, rocks, stars, atmosphere, etc. He writes:

As we have already recognized in the untamed world of direct sensory experience, *no* phenomenon presents itself as utterly passive or inert. To the sensing body, *all* phenomena are animate, actively soliciting the participation of our senses, or else withdrawing from our focus and repelling our involvement. (81)

The sense of awe is provided by the beauty in the shining that is seen, the odors perceived, the sounds almost imperceptibly heard, the silence intuited and the soft cadence of the tact in consonance with the skin. This invisible occurrence that happens in connection with what is visible enables the human to perceive the more-than-human. This consonance and possibility to perceive is activated when the openness to listen to different voices is activated and silence permits it. “Everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth” (104) writes Benjamin, sadly noticing the wounds made to the land, the scary detonations of arms that engulf audition, the toxic smells of burned flesh and atomic particles in the air. It is almost impossible to hear and smell, to taste and touch when all senses are appropriated and conquered by the latest technological contraptions. In order to enter that ecstatic trance, the opening of senses is vital as well as a consonance with the planet; in other words, accordance is needed to fall into a trance.

How does the space and time to listen to the voices of the river, and the proliferation of sounds and smells from plants or birds open without using the senses to do it? It is the body which performs this ability to connect. It is this technology, the sensing body, that is always already incorporated as the enabler for such mnemonic enterprise. Thus, in that cry for a place in the planet, Benjamin presents the notion of ecstatic trance upon the contemplation of the sky, an open space which is the most unknown and unconquerable a being can ponder. This fluttering of the heart that is felt so graciously when it is thus opened, has been said to be part of that ability the artist finds for attunement to the cosmos. Benjamin mentions Hillel of the Jews' myth: "They alone shall possess earth who live from the powers of the cosmos" (103). This stance mentions attunement but also implies "possessing" earth, which is most troublesome, even if it means "living from the powers of the cosmos," this harmony itself should prevent humans from possessing the earth. The commandment of the Old Testament that man should reproduce and populate earth and rule over all creatures goes in direct opposition to what indigenous cultures from the *Abya Yala* knew and nurtured, precisely the understanding that the sky, the stars, the moon and the air are all spirits themselves (Deleuze and Guattari call them intensities) not to be possessed, but to be listened to as any other creature. "Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods" (Benjamin 103). This absorption is what in a phenomenological sense would bring humans into that ecstatic emotion. The penchant for communion with the senses, (in a cathartic mix, all the senses together) to see, and foresee, to envision that magnificent connection through their own eyes and listen to its delicate silence, brought ancient humans into that very trance. Unable to move, thus ecstatic, transposed, feeling moved from inside by this immense, impossible to gulp at once, cosmic panorama, ancient humans entered into a spacetime

continuum that enabled them to speak to ‘the gods’, in this case, the voices, the smells, the visions, the tactile sensual spell.

The artist in trance is dotted with this sensuous proclivity, with a spirit whose skills are attuned to the captioning of moments and places where this sensual communication is established. She is then the translator, or the cosmopolitical diplomat, like the *yachag* to bring these experiences to other human beings. The fascination and entrenchment with the world is what brings the artist to experiment with the senses, to work with materials, colors, textures, voices, sounds, smells and a whole array of investigative possibilities that are brought into the playful arena. The artist is not alone in these encounters, that idea of the artist tormented in her own studio is almost ludicrous; as Benjamin writes, this ecstatic trance is not possible without a communal experience. The communal experience is no other than the human’s appertaining to the whole cosmic dance, not as a private psyche incarcerated in an individual body, but as a collective interconnectedness to the earth, earthlings, the planets, the galaxies and beyond. The gift of “[c]reatedness, in the broadest sense of something’s being produced, is an essential structural moment of the ancient concept of Being” (Heidegger 69). Enacted by human beings then, they depend on this connection for the possibility of trance. Now this ecstatic trance is a presencing in itself and it describes space with time: the space with time of Heidegger’s Being-there or *Dasein* which is able to formulate the question about Being in that very moment of anxiety. That ecstatic trance is perhaps a question of relationality with the present and with the terrain. Thus, it is a topological stance; that is why ancient peoples (or those who hold ties to the land) are able to perceive through the senses, in a phenomenological manner, the stars, the firmament beyond, the unfathomable light which produces the ecstasy of such an occurrence.

‘The artist that seeks the ecstasy of presencing as a means to perceive the world and then give light to it, is seeking within a phenomenological approach. Heidegger defines the concept of phenomenon this way: “The Greek expression *phainomenon*, from which the term ‘phenomenon’ derives, comes from the verb *phainesthai*, meaning ‘to show itself.’ Thus *phenomenon* means what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest” (73). How does a phenomenon show itself to a human being? Through the senses; through her perception she is able to “make sense” of all that comes to light, the visible, and the invisible. However, also things that are concealed are perceived. The life of Being and beings is always being concealed and then unconcealed. Thoughts, as produced by the body which conceals them are invisible, unconcealed in speech or language they become visible, they are unconcealed in body language. Merleau-Ponty speaks about the character of the perceived world making itself present to us beings:

...that the perceived world is beneath or beyond this antinomy, that the failure of ‘objective’ psychology is —conjointly with the failure of the ‘objectivist’ physics—to be understood not as a victory of the ‘interior’ over the ‘exterior’ and of the ‘mental’ over the ‘material.’ but as a call for the revision of our ontology, for the reexamination of the notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object.’ (22)

When casted fully into the world the body is all exteriority, but then again, we might say that it is always exteriority even when fully immersed in bodily functions. Invisible-Interior and visible-exterior then perform a continuum within the body and among the relationality that bodies may engage in. This relationality allows the findings of the artist in trance to make way into the world through speech, images or writing. Furthermore, the translation that has been produced after what was perceived in the ecstatic trance and the relation with the world of beings is what is made visible, palpable, audible, olfactory or tasteable. The connection therein with the possibility

of creation is manifold and relates to the ulterior elaborations of imagination. The artist in ecstatic trance is enabled with a fecund imagination which can be paired with the prolificacy of a plant. The *sambo* plant also perceives the world around her, processes the sun into her system, admits air, water and soil through all her own sensual channels and then is able to proliferate, to flourish, to come into fruition. Understanding plant as Being means that our understanding of her as a being in her own dexterity, brings us to unconceal plant beings as we understand Being itself. This is what plant ontology means. As Heidegger writes “The task of ontology is to set in relief the Being of beings and to explicate Being” (72). Explicating the Being of plants in their thrownness, or “*being-together -with*” beings, means to understand their dimension as Beings; thus, their attributions such as hostedness, blossoming and proliferation which provides a togetherness as beings in the world. In *Being and Time* he writes: “Being-in-the-world has always already expressed *itself*, and as *being-together-with* beings encountered within the world, it constantly expresses *itself* in addressing and talking over what is taken care of ” (387). Hence, being-together-with implicates humans being-with-plants, that is caring with them (not for them) understanding and translating them as creators of tales, not purveyors of truths. It is not difficult to envision, then, a possibility of the artist-as-plant proliferating within the world. What this means is that the artist in encounter with the ecstatic trance, can transform her relationship to the world, in this case, making proliferation of connectivity possible; this manner of being-in-the-world turns to be capacious and mutualistic for other beings.

The artist then becomes a channel for createdness, becoming-plant, becoming-artist, or becoming-with-plants, always already in a relational suspension. The ecstatic trance is a motion in time, past, present and future: earlier, today and later on; however, it is also a topological realm of that time. So, the relational topos allows a dimensionality. In ecstatic trance the

becoming-artist is thrown into the world, to live in a state of irreparability as Agamben says in *The Coming Community*: “The Irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being. States of things are irreparable, whatever they may be: sad or happy, atrocious or blessed. How you are, how the world is —this is the Irreparable” (89). That the world is irreparable is related to know “the terrors and horrors of existence” as Nietzsche writes, covering “them with a veil in order to be able to live” (124). How, if not covered in a veil of roses, is this artist who knows the irreparability of the world, able to come back to the everydayness of it and talk about the tragic voyage? This is where the ecstatic trance meets the tragic artist, in that temporal topos, in order to live. As Nietzsche writes:

What mattered above all was to transform those repulsive thoughts about the terrible and absurd aspects of existence into representations with which it was possible to live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means. (130)

Hence, this artist in trance processes the pleasures and horrors of life and is able to transform them into art. She is able to translate the experience as a *yachag* does for his community; she traverses the world of beings, from the *then* onto the *later on* and then onto the *now*; she translates the terrifying aspects of existence into the sublimity of creation. This sublime, or this comical, may well pose questions, provide answers, open or close wounds and serve as therapeutic remedies. The temporal and topological assertiveness of art is in this way a cloak that bestows “a cross hidden behind roses” in Goethe’s words, to cover the most hideous and make it palatable for human existence (Nietzsche 125). The tragic artist is the artist that lives despite life itself, not in epicurean terms, but in a state of bewilderment, in awe of her surroundings, in strange attraction of what her perceiving abilities bring forth, nevertheless in awareness of the

possibility of an end. The tragic artist is such in terms of her ability to grasp what is most concealed, beyond the petty manipulation of art world and art markets. She is an artist who pursues “The pleasure found in falling in the dust, the peace of happiness in misfortune! The supreme self-abandonment of man in his supreme expression! Glorification and transfiguration of the devices of terror and atrocities of existence as the means to cure us of existence!”

(Nietzsche 132). In effect, this artist may be altogether *inconnu* for the art world, creating in the most obscure desert on earth, but in consonance with the perception of being after createdness as such. The artist who is able to transpose the ecstatic trance and at the same time is able to live within the tragic condition of life, is able to come back to narrate the tale for us. As in Oedipus’ myth, he is able to see only when his eyes are gouged out: “Deprived of eyeballs, Oedipus sees” (Reiner Schürmann 28). The artist who follows this path may seem strange, a “wacko” as Joseph Beuys and Hilma af Klint may have appeared to their contemporaries, for their pursuance of the strangely numinous, sacred or sublime was a latent inspiration for whatever outcome their work would bring.

From this perilous voyage to the depths of being, the artist needs to come back intact: from the world of mythos to the world of logos. If they are not able to bring themselves back, as cosmopolitical diplomats, to give the rest of beings their magnificent booty of imagination and creative prowess, their work will never come into fruition through the communication necessary with other beings, to perceive these gifts. The very fine line that separates the artist from madness has to be carefully navigated in order for the artist not to succumb or fall prey to the abyss. Freud speaks about sublimation, Kant speaks about the sublime, Schopenhauer talks about the genius, Jung about the voyage of the hero, finally Anzaldúa speaks about the travels to *Nepantla*, that liminal space where the chamana goes to speak to the spirits. For this reason,

Schelling in his *STI* named art “the organ of philosophy,” for only through art some things can be conveyed. (Andrew Bowie 117). The proliferation of images, voices and sounds the artist in trance experiments, as in plant proliferation, needs to be channeled into a presencing of sorts. In plants, when there is an overgrowth and proliferation of cells, the plant is incapable of controlling its own population, other plants, animals and aquifers suffer the over proliferation. In the case of the artist, the over proliferation of ideas images, voices, sounds and smells may prevent the creative path to flourish “without sensing a rupture in their view of the world” (Nietzsche 133). The rupture may mean a psychotic break, a deep depression, where the proliferation of sensual materials from the world outside are impossible to be processed experiencing a semiotic and sensual tsunami of sorts. The gift of creativity, art as a path, may mean the difference between life and death, imagination and madness. The only way is to channel all those voices, or “winds” (in the parlance of the Kichwa from the Andes) into therapeutic mantras, *icaros*, chants, performances or images that bring light to the blind eyes of the hero/voyager.

The fine line that separates the artist in trance from madness is indeed so slight, so tenuous that at times threatens to fold one into the other. What Schopenhauer holds as madness, Lacan and Kristeva as psychosis, may very well be the whisperings of those “winds” of the breath, the air that carries and entangles the spirits of the whole cosmos around and through human beings.¹⁶ If the *principium individuationis* of the Dionysiac arrest is left, the peril is to be engulfed by the revolving and tumultuous abyss that threatens every human. That which Plato called *psyche* in its etymological significance is air; the air which humans inhabit as a fish inhabits the ocean waters: they live in the world’s air: the atmosphere, partaking from those connections to the fold. After any voyage, the artist in trance needs to be able to come back to the world of everydayness to be

able to recount the tale. As Osiris comes back from the depths of the underworld and the *yachag* comes back from the voyage induced by *yagé* and other plant potions, the artist must come back unharmed. How does she come back? What is the chord that anchors her to the world of the living? She needs not to attribute it all to interiority or the inner life of the psyche.

Psychoanalytic theory that attributes interiority to individual psyches not connected to the world may leave the artist disconnected from this precise world. Cartesian perception that humans are one and nature is other, along with Judeo-Christian beliefs that (hu)man has been placed in the face of the Earth to dominate nature standing above all nonhuman, institute dismemberment and fragmentation over notions of worlds. The artist in trance overcomes this dismemberment in dreams and in the daily performative crafting of the work of art, the imagination and intuition she grasps, are her chord, her anchor. Whether she is dealing with potions and magic amulets that conjure death, or depicting the *Paintings for the Temple* inspired by higher spirits (air in her ears), the chord that anchors her, needs to be strong enough to pull her back, to bring those wares to life, to communicate them to other human and even nonhuman beings. This is where western metaphysics meets other philosophies such as the Andean or Amazonian: the cartesian split or chiasm between mind and body are attenuated and healed in the understanding that the mind, geist or spirit, is part of a bigger world of worlds, a cosmopolitical entanglement which appears in dreams and imagination, and whose carrier or phenomenological medium is the body. Writes Nietzsche:

The *intoxication of suffering* and the *beautiful dream* have different pantheons: By virtue of the omnipotence of its character, the former penetrates to the innermost thoughts of nature, it recognizes the fearful drive to exist and at the same time the perpetual death of everything that comes into existence; the gods which this intoxication creates are good

and evil, they resemble chance, they startle us by the sudden emergence of a plan in their actions, they are pitiless and without delight in beauty. (126)

The gods bring on life and death. Often mortals choose to re-member their dead, to pick up the pieces or remains of the hero, to bind his body back together in mind-soul-spirit. Rituals provide precisely that momentum where the artist in trance voyages to the very deep dark corners of the earth, only to come back and spring into proliferation. Thus, she attains the ability to molecularly travel in time, in dreams, in ecstasy.

There are other contemporary definitions of trance that give us a plethora of conceptions of this raised state of consciousness. Anzaldúa explains:

A system of healing based on spiritual practices, *chamanería* has survived for more than forty thousand years. It is the oldest known religious practice, one in which the shaman or *nagual* undertakes a 'journey' (or trance journey) to the underworld, upper world, or other worlds, moving from one zone to another to encounter 'spirits' from whom she or he obtains healing insights and brings them back to help their community. (32)

She calls the *chamana* a "walker between worlds" because using specific techniques, she can break through this plane of reality and enter into other worlds. Shamanic "journeying" thus is a state of trance that can be accessed when "we shift our attention" (Anzaldúa 34). In other words, when we suspend our attention to an everyday reality and we enact, I quote Anzaldúa again, "...dreaming ... 'seeing' from the other side, seeing the ego as other and seeing familiar elements from that other alien perspective" (34). Not every trance needs to be induced by plants or substances, some very dextrous *chamanas* are able to enter these states at will, through chanting, fasting, meditation, dance, dream or hypnosis and other forms of suspension/shifting of everyday reality. All states of trance need a form of suspension, shifting or "flying over" that permits the

chamana or *yachag* to enter another field where it is possible to speak to entities or spirits. The *chamana* needs to be empowered in her conviction that such a thing is possible. In Anna Tsing the trance is a travel, a voyage:

As every Meratus shaman can explain, the first principle of shamanic travel-whether on dewa or on other spiritual routes-is the ability of words to build a framework of perception. The chants allow the shaman to move in an empowered cognitive space.

What looked far appears close

What looked close appears far

In this empowered space, the body is a landscape and the landscape is the body. Travel over the landscape is accomplished as the chant re-frames one's knowledge of the landscape of one's own body. (97)

As the *chamana* is traveling over vast territories to search for the origins of an illness, she is at the same time traveling through her own body and the patient's body. Furthermore, the voyage through different landscapes turns to be the voyage to the landscape of the body itself, where both *yachag* and patient indulge each other in the shared journey.

For Duchesne Winter the trance is a fly-over, "The shamans with whom I have been able to converse in the Amazon" he writes, "assume, without further ado, that 'to think' is 'to fly over the territory' in their visionary states. This mode of "thinking" includes all actions performed within its scope" (68). Much of the *yachags* training is in this mode of "thinking" with the soil, through it, within, over, around and inside it. That is perhaps why the lines of flight of *yachags* are so molecular and so similar to the lines of flight of plants; moving without moving, doing without doing, nevertheless, doing so much. Deleuze and Guattari write:

No one can say where the line of flight will pass: Will it let itself get bogged down and fall back onto the Oedipal family animal, a mere poodle? Or will it succumb to another danger, for example turning into a line of abolition, annihilation, self-destruction, Ahab, Ahab...? We are all too familiar with the dangers of the line of flight, and with its ambiguities. The risks are ever-present, but it is always possible to have the good fortune of avoiding them. (250)

Trance, thus, a dangerous line of flight, is a fly-over, a traveling and/or a liminal state in which the *yachag*, or “the sorcerer” (or the artist if we choose to believe) reaches other planes of reality, and is able to transform herself and retrieve images, notes, poetry or healings from those travels. This is (not so obviously) a plane of immanence, since the plane of consistency of Nature is like an immense “[a]bstract Machine” where there is unity, therefore, “...it is -necessary to pass through fog, to cross voids, to have lead times and delays, which are themselves part of the plane of immanence. Even the failures are part of the plane of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari 255). This is something that sorcerers and *yachags* know very well, and thus are able to molecularly snitch around, transform themselves into an animal, become-plant, establish alliances with demons and other nonhuman beings. The trance, moreover, might be the possibility they afford themselves to be part of a fable, of a flight of intensities in the fiction of the world.

There is also a difference between trance, possession and ecstasy. Trance in the words of many authors of Amazonian shamanic practices is the “fly over” that the *yachag* is able to conduct through the *yagé* voyage. Ino Moxo (cited by Duchesne) says that the “thinking” he does is a “fly over” the territory, flying with the help of plants. Furthermore, the plant in her own way is a spirit that “possesses” the *yachag* enabling him to see the cure or the ailment of his patient

(Duchesne 68). Lydia Cabrera writes about El Monte or the forest as the main place where all Orishas from the Yoruba spirituality are to be sought and from where all cures come:

Trees and herbs, in the field of magic or in that of folk medicine, inseparable from magic, respond to any demand. It is no wonder that, regarded as precious agents of health and wealth, our Negroes, and perhaps we should say our people, who are mostly mestizo physically and spiritually, usually have a great knowledge of the healing virtues that he attributes to the magical powers which plants are gifted with. 'They heal, because they themselves are witches.' (17)

This statement evidences the ability of plants to take possession of the human itself in order to work their magic healing powers. In Yoruba religions it is the spirit itself that "mounts" the priest or priestess: mounting equals possession.

In the 19th century, spiritualism was in great fashion. Rudolf Steiner, who was Hilma af Klint's mentor, was specially invested in this kind of "spiritual science" as he called it. Spirits would be deemed to take possession of the medium as in af Klint's case. Possession by spirits was habitual for women in Europe and the United States. Hence, ecstasy is a quickening of the soul that is moved with the experiencing of certain phenomena of nature, possession is enacted by spirits that enter the space of humans and trance is a fly over, a traveling without moving. All these stages attest to an ability to suspend one's attention and enter onto a different perceptive state of being.

3.2 Magical Tools

Joseph Beuys as Embodiment of the Tragic Artist in Trance.



Fig. 17 Joseph Beuys, *I like America, and America likes me*. Performance 1974

The two artists I have chosen to illustrate this chapter bear a commonality that ties them in one way or another to a specific happening in their lives that awakens them to an-other notion of being in the cosmos. They are not *yachags* or *chamanas* in the traditional sense, however, they illustrate the idea of the artist in trance because of their openness to the calls of the sacred, and a pursuing of paths that differ from their peers at the moment. They lead the road for other people, not only artists, but healers, scientists, anthropologists, etc., to investigate and give a place for perception within other ontologies.

For the action *I like America and America likes me* (fig. 17) Beuys flies to New York in 1974 and arrives at JFK airport, where an ambulance was waiting to transport him directly to the gallery. He wanted to avoid stepping on US soil because he believed the US government's actions abroad in the Vietnam war were especially harmful to the world. Beuys enters voluntarily into the gallery space where a sort of cage has been constructed and where a coyote, named *America*, is awaiting him. He goes inside with his signature felt and lard blanket and a wooden cane, his magical tools which he has embedded with mystical healing power. His accouterments come from the time when he was supposedly saved by the Tartars and brought back to life covered with a felt blanket smeared in lard. His aim is to stay with a coyote, symbol of the wilderness and America, for three days. He befriends *America* and she befriends him. He listens closely to her, watches carefully every movement, as does the coyote. Beuys establishes a shaman-like approach to his work. He is at the same time desiring to close the human-nonhuman chiasm that western metaphysics has kept for long. Nevertheless, not only America is epitomized in the coyote, the coyote also represents Beuys himself. As critic Mark Rosenthal writes in his book *Joseph Beuys, actions, vitrines, environments*:

Beuys' world, like that of the trickster, is not about rules but about transgressions, not about truths but about artifice. Let it be noted that the animal who best epitomizes the trickster is none other than the coyote, which Beuys celebrated in *I like America and America likes me*. (24)

Beuys the trickster meets the other in the body of the coyote. As a shaman of sorts, he is precisely embodying the possibility to speak to another entity of his own caliber. At the same time, he is also the artist who brings into the artistic arena the prospect of things to come: speaking directly to the entities that conform a beyond-the-human world. Entering the space

filled with coyote's scent, asking permission from him to inhabit the same territory, a habit keen to communities of the *Abya Yala*, is part of the Beuys as shaman predicament, "[f]or Beuys, like Borges, art requires mythic material from life as its font for its substance" (Rosenthal 10). The artist in trance is proposing a different kind of rapport with the work of art, with the public and, of course, with the art world. He is also envisioning and foretelling a world in disarray, where we need to rethink our relation with otherness. The zone he enters, an ecstatic trance zone of communion with his nonhuman counterpart, is parallel to the translation the Amazonian *yachag* has to perform during his ritual plunging into the depths of self and forest. There, the shaman is to encounter the spirits of the dead and those of animals and plants. He comes back from the experience renewed and in pact with his animal-plant counterparts.

The parallels between one and the other are to be found in this otherworldly alliance. In Viveiros de Castro's words: "On account of their capacity to see other species as the humans that these species see themselves as, Amazonian shamans play the role of cosmopolitical diplomats in an arena where diverse socio natural interests are forced to confront each other" (151). Beuys' performance is a kind of ambassadorial quest to mediate between human and nonhuman. Amazonian *yachags* enter the world of the dead and other nonhuman actants through the ingestion of sacred plants. Nevertheless, artists like Beuys' and others do not necessarily enter the connective zone through intoxication. Interestingly enough throughout cultures and histories we have seen intoxication through diverse channels as a way to access this zone beyond, a state of consciousness that is attained in order to bring back images, healing, music and other spiritual wares. Beuys' attempt was to heal current societal ailments. The Amazonian *yachag* also attempts to cure his own community's ailments. Artists like Beuys are in continual communication with their bearings, in sensitive recognition of their lodgings.

I compare the practice of Beuys to the *sambo* or *cucurbita pepo*. Its impressive capacity of proliferation reminds me of Beuys' boldness at contending that every human being is an artist. His way of conducting his practice in relationality is also nearest to the *sambo* which is prickly and questioning in its manner of embracing the terrain, capacious in its proclivity to forward his asperous vines into new and unbeknownst fields. The *sambo* is very sensuous, it relates to all other plants climbing them, not in a parasitic manner though, rather in a *radicans* use of their structure, much as Beuys related to society or to other species, the hare or the coyote. In botany, a *radicans* is that which "takes root." In his *A Dictionary of Botanical Terms* John Stevens Henslow (1796-1891) teacher and mentor to Charles Darwin, defines *radicans* as a term associated with taking root. Radication is, in his own words, "...the general disposition or arrangement of the roots of a plant" (161). Contrary to Nicholas Borriaud's use of the term "radicant" as nomadic, I propose the figure of *sambo* as a *radicans* that is able to stay in her soil, and take care of it, though she is able to climb and know other worlds (structures) albeit not throwing roots, but using its rugged vines as climbing tools. The notion of the *radicant* is proposed by Nicholas Borriaud as a parallel to the manner in which the ivy plant is envisioned as the postmodern, nomadic artist who travels here and there and has no soil, land or roots to be attached to. In Borriaud's own words:

Because contemporary creators already propose the basis for a *radicant* art— term which signals an organism that takes root as it advances. Being radicant: to mise en scene, to move its own roots in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the virtue of defining completely our identity, translating ideas, transcode images, transplant behaviors, exchange instead of impose. (22)

Beuys, nevertheless, is a *radicans* for his mode of working utilizes different platforms, climbs into the performative role of a shaman which he claims to be, achieves climatic encounters with such beings as the coyote in *I like America*, or the hare in *How to explain pictures to a dead hare*, turns into an activist, then into a professor. His radicancy is to be turned into the platform that he sees convenient for his performative mood. In a way that follows Deleuze and Guattari, Borriaud turns against the idea of rootedness as a term understood to be a single vertical root from which everything stems, much like the tree, which they despise also for its verticality, ignoring that the tree and the root are part of an alliance between the world of plants and other beings. Trees with roots extend to form a rhizome shared by other plants and shrubs in the surface of the earth, however, down under, in the humid and shady world of the soil, this rhizome is conquered by fungi and this mutual relationship makes possible the existence of a mycorrhiza, which is the cosmic channel that connects all plant kingdom to each other and to other nonhuman actants. The root does not live by itself, it turns into a rhizome; the tree is no vertical structure for it depends on such horizontal rhizome, and furthermore the mycorrhiza lives and communicates with the root-rhizome system, feeding all plants and trees that grow and partake of it. One is not without the other. Radicans plant as *sambo*, are planted in earth's soil, her rhizome is seized firmly by it, its curly vines are not small roots that attach here and there, but dainty hands with which she climbs structures and attaches to them. Much as the indigenous communities along the Amazon the *sambo* is dependent on their soil and the communion with it, the relationality they engage in with other nonhuman beings helps to establish an ecosystem, an *oikos*, directly connected with the land.

As a young pilot, Beuys' motor plane crashed in Indonesia, and according to his own story he was nurtured back to life by a tribe of Tartars from a nearby village with what became his

signature materials, animal fat and lard; he saw this experience as a calling that showed him another path to follow, different from what he had done before. This impulse was of such force that he felt as if he was called to heal himself and his own community, just like a *yachag* would. Many people in the art world were incredulous and felt uneasy towards his shamanic claims, it seemed pretentious to some. Nevertheless, the healing of his physical and psychic wounds and his subsequent inspiration to heal and defend nature, remained the imprint of a moment in which he had touched bottom in order to be re-born again. This experience helped him see life in Nietzschean tragic terms. This precise demeanor is what turns him into a tragic artist. One who is able to live through harrowing circumstances. In this way he is like a *yachag* in his ability to translate one world to another and to journey back and forth among those worlds. He went to seek his healing magical tools in the land of the dead, for he felt death as a tragic turning of his own existence.



Fig. 18 Joseph Beuys arrival by stretcher: *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974.

Beuys uses fat and felt as his magical tools, much in the way an Amazonian or Andean *yachag* uses his *wayra* to wind off unwanted spirits or energies, and his *fluido* and *tobacco* to attract good winds. The constant use of these tools, places them within the realm of magical amulets embedded with the power necessary to perform the healing desired. In this realm, the work of art and the artist become transformative energetic objects, power instruments that shed, share and spread important fields of transformation for audiences present and also for those who become acquainted with the work. The objects become anointed with transformative elements which enact powerful processes through a continuum of the visible and the invisible. These fields become a continuous flow of events, places, spaces, happenings and accouterments where human presence is just part of a fluidity. This singular relationship between things and body as participatory entities provides the temperature and animates Beuys performances enacted as embodiment rituals that engage beings energetically throwing them into a vortex of relational participation. Things themselves acquire a life of their own, they become alive in the locus of the perceived and the perceiver, pretty much in accordance with the notions that Amazonian indigeneous tribes imbibe their world with: each entity has perspective and participates in a perpetual dance of senses, a whirlwind of beings interacting and intersecting without beginning or end.

Whether his story was purposefully created as a fable or it was a true experience, such fabulation is already part of the Beuys' artist myth: "What if the story was invented, or, more likely, an elaboration of an event? Art, too, is an invention, a myth" (Rosenthal 10). Artists do not operate in a scientific manner, the artist's research is more akin to the witch doctor or *yachag*'s where there is a strong component of fabulation, myth and experimental processes that do not seek to "prove" a fact or truth. In the two performances in which Beuys interacts with

nonhumans, a hare, and a coyote, he is not trying to prove a scientific truth, he is enacting a magic ritual in which his potential to communicate and exchange perspectives with the animals is completely random and has no expected outcome that will serve to demonstrate anything else than what the poetic sublime can accomplish: sensing our own participation in the dance of the universe and its creatures. The magical tools he carries are a vital part of his performance and his fabulative persona. For him, these tools have been imbued with magical powers that transform whatever they touch and whomever they surround.

Notwithstanding his prolific work and his larger-than-life persona, Beuys' shamanic claims were not quite believed nor accepted among many of his peers and critics. For example, in a 1980's "Art Forum" article art historian Benjamin Buchloh wrote an extensive text questioning the artist's claims that he was indeed found by a tribe of Tartars and even saved by them, thus leading him to use his signature materials as magic instruments. These claims seemed ludicrous and even ridiculous to Buchloh, who quoted philosopher Ernst Bloch deriding Rudolf Steiner (Beuys revered master) calling him "a dreamer": "They are sufficiently disrupted to be open for unconditioned experiences. [The dreamer] tends to remove frontiers of everyday life so that it can cover the unusual with the ordinary, and vice versa" (37). Beuys was certainly another dreamer, his apparent disdain for science was in Buchloh's eyes an infantile way of not seeing reality. His own invention of a myth to live by, could have been a protection towards extremely painful and difficult to accept post war circumstances. Buchloh writes:

As in every such retro-projective fantasy, such a narcissistic and slightly pathetic distortion (either dramatization or nobilization) of the factually normal conditions (made either more traumatic or more heroic) of the individual's coming into the world, the story

told by the myth's author reveals truths, but they are different from what their author would want them to be. (38)

It is understandable that a critic like Buchloh, would actually want to apply a cartesian logical analysis to what Beuys was proposing. His ideas went far beyond thinking of science as superior or even separate from arts. For the moment and the time, it was hard to envision what Beuys was trying to convey. This account gives more power to the idea that it takes a long time for art to be understood and assimilated into societies. An invented reality is what enables the artist to inhabit other worlds and other fantasies, it is not necessary for him to relate the "truth" of what actually happened. This account can be part of the fable of the artist. He did play with the idea of being a shaman for he actually believed he could heal his community. Buchloh writes in this regard:

It is fairly evident that the myth is trying to deny his participation in the German war and his citizenship. But, of course, the repressed returns with ever-increasing strength, and the very negation of Beuys' origin in a historic period of German fascism affirms every aspect of his work as being totally dependent on, and deriving from, that period. (38)

Buchloh disparages a Beuys that dramatically wants to heal a period of world history through his own history. Buchloh wants a critical Beuys, in tune with reality, a fact bound artist with no magic or spirituality, more like a Marcel Duchamp of his time (who Beuys did criticize). Beuys failed to do so. His claims of being a shaman seemed pretentious and were curtailed often then as now and kept being questioned. *Yachags* themselves disparage efforts by mestizos and non-indigenous peoples to become shamans because they maintain, and rightly so, that a shaman is a healer that needs arduous training in plant knowledge, strenuous rituals and initiations. Western trained physicians also disdain plant healers and *vegetalistas*. It is one philosophy, one perspective, against another. Nevertheless, a contemporary version of the shaman may well be

the artist who is able to swiftly move between science, politics and the arts. Buchloh mockingly wrote that Beuys ideas of everything being art, including politics and science were ridiculous. And they probably were ridiculous if seen under an analytical science-as-truth mindset. Moreover, Beuys was ready to embrace being ridiculous himself, which is a characteristic of the trickster. If we want to listen to the artist as a “truth bearer,” asking scientific proofs from her practices, we will be disappointed; the artist is a poet, fable maker, fictioner and purveyor of fantasies. As such Beuys, no matter what his critics say, remains a controversial figure in between the art world and other liminal spaces. Shamans and artists in trance share that possibility of believing and making believe their own fabrications, their own perspectives. Through their work, not scientific and thus unfettered of truth they are able to open their worlds to others who are willing to enter the bewilderment it entails.

3.3 Seance

The Fine Line that Separates Genius and Madness: Hilma af Klint and the Guidance of Higher Spirits.



Fig. 19 Hilma Af Klint. *Group IV The Ten Largest, Youth*. Watercolor on paper 1907

Youth (fig.19) is a large watercolor painting depicting ovals, circles, elliptical forms and spirals, reminiscent of atomic particles in various tones of yellows, reds, white and blues, floating on a vibrant ochre background. This is one of the *Ten Largest* paintings part of the series of *Paintings for the Temple* created by Swedish artist Hilma af Klint from 1905 to 1915. The series consisted of one hundred and seventy-three large abstract paintings representing forms that could be slightly inspired by nature, but for the time were highly unusual. Af Klint was trained as an artist and painted landscapes to make a living; on the side as her own research, she conducted spiritual seances with a group called The Five. They followed the teachings of Rudolf Steiner,

first theosophist and later founder of Anthroposophy, philosophical currents that were in great fashion at the time. In one of his early articles on philosophy and Anthroposophy, Steiner explained: “Anthroposophy does not lead away from reality to an unreal imaginary world; it embodies the search for a cognitional method in response to which the real world will reveal itself” (1). The Five were seeking this method of approximation to the unknown. After some time conducting the seances, the “high spirits,” as they called the voices and presences they perceived, asked them to paint a great collection of images for a temple. After much deliberation, af Klint decides to take the challenge or “commission” as she liked calling it, even as the rest of her group declines to pursue this challenging path. As is recorded in “Temples for Paintings,” Tracey Bashkoff’s essay on af Klint: “They [the Five] expressed concern that such an intense engagement with the spiritual realm could lead to madness and cautioned af Klint to carefully consider before taking up this burden” (21). Af Klint, effectively, was the only one who accepted to pursue this very dangerous commission and performed it with the best of results, not being apparently affected by this journey into unknown worlds. The journey lasts two years in which she completes the paintings. Nevertheless, after finishing, she continues painting in the manner she learned from her deep research within the spiritual realm. Her work was informed by the experimentation and interests of her time. She dedicated series to topics such as *Evolution* (1908) and *The Atom Series* (1917). Scientific developments had a profound impact on her work and the work of modernist poets and painters. In his essay “Science and Occultism in Hilma af Klint’s Time and in her Work,” Tessel M. Bauduin writes: “For occultists as much as for artists, science’s exploits raised urgent questions. If disembodied voices could speak over large distances (by telephone) why not also across the boundary between life and death?” (187). The work that af Klint produced was highly inspired by these ideas which led her to excavate in the

spiritual realm. Inspiration is a word related to respiration, breathing or *pneuma*, the Greek word for breath, which appear to be the spirits that af Klint perceived with her sensing body and her imaginative mind. Such an enormous ability to perceive the invisible is what turns af Klint into an artist in trance. In ecstatic awe of the surrounding world of senses and perceptions, she channeled the voices that whispered in her ears and followed her intuition towards these creations. The High Masters “...identified themselves as Georg, Amaliel, Ananda, Esther, Clemens and Gregor” (Bashkoff 19). Not listening to anything or anyone else but her guides’ voice, af Klint engaged in an almost utopian task. In *Youth*, the forms painted are elliptical and almost transparent, wind like in their lightness, in dance with each other, much as the way she imagined that the winds or spirits she engaged in conversation, would whisper amongst themselves. The forms are reminders of flowers and circles, or atomic microscopical particle patterns that swirl and swing changing from one painting to another, as engaging in an airy conversation between each other. One wonders if she chose to depict them in painting because air and wind are specifically prone to be *sensed* and seen in visions. The imagination exercise is not a logical alphabetical process, such as the one required for writing and reading, but it engages the senses: visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory, which are definitely involved during the painting process. The size and scope of the paintings had no precedence in the art world at the time. They followed no established canon whatsoever and regardless of the expectations artists and works of art have to conform to, af Klint definitely found in the most avant garde fashion a new and unprecedented way of painting.

In order to acquire the directions to paint the commissioned paintings, af Klint had to engage in strenuous work. After the seances she would come up with several instructions to make the paintings. She was listening to the world, fine tuning her instruments to entities living

beyond everyday reality. When she showed her paintings to Steiner, she was disappointed at his lack of enthusiasm, “Steiner was weary of the mediumistic nature of her practice and encouraged her to rely more on the process of introspection” (Bashkoff 24). This reaction no doubt contributed to keeping her work private. She feared no one would give credit to a female artist painting from the voices she heard, commanding her to create such paintings with explicit instructions. More or less at the same time painter Wassily Kandinsky stated that colors emitted sounds, which is a special perception that in psychology has been given the name of synesthesia. Although it could be argued that it was the spirits of color whispering melodies to Kandinsky, he was not deemed mad at all, perhaps just “artistic.” Artists who exhibit such gifts are often regarded as deranged, because frequently genius borders madness. But why is it that genius seems to be separated from madness by just a very fine line? Af Klint was perhaps a genius seeking to unfold something yet not seen. Arthur Schopenhauer writes in this sense:

Genius is the power of leaving one’s own interests, wishes, and aims, entirely out of sight, thus of entirely divesting oneself of one’s own personality for a time so as to remain *pure knowing subject*, clear eye of the world; and this is not merely at moments, but for long enough, to enable one to reproduce by deliberate art what thus has been apprehended, and ‘to fix in lasting thoughts the hovering images that float before the mind’ (Goethe, *Faust*). (109)

Af Klint, embarks upon a voyage into other worlds, senses, animals, plants, perceived particles; hence, her journey could prove to be maddening; if she has the strength to come back from that mythic world to a logic world, she can tell her stories; she may bring back her wares as triumphal trophies of victorious encounters. However, if she is unable to return to the land of logos, her stories would be forever lost. The voyage of the heroine is thus plagued with strife and

difficulties. If she does not recognize the signs that the horrors of life are there to show her, she may just sit there, lost in the terrors, lost in an unutterable terrain, dormant without hope. I cite Schopenhauer again:

Now this is exactly his point of contact with the man of genius; for he also fails to recognize the connection of things, since he abandons that knowledge of relations which conforms to the principle of sufficient reason, in order to see in things only their Ideas, and to seek to comprehend their true nature which manifests itself to perception, and in regard to which *one* thing represents its whole species, for which reason, as Goethe says, one instance is valid for a thousand. (117)

The very fine line that separates the (wo)man of genius from the mad (wo)man is the ability she retains to transform those ideas and perceptions into drawings and paintings so extraordinary, they are able to open our eyes to other forms of perception four decades later. Indeed, she could have been judged mad, however, she was so delicately attuned to her search, that she knew how to navigate her own times, not showing a trace of madness left from what she perceived and received from those high spirits.

At times, the soil is just not ripe or right to promote growth in a seed. The seed would lay there dormant in the earth waiting for her time to come. Before the time to be ripe for growth and before the time to proliferate, there needs to be a time of ripening and awaiting. Many seeds lay dormant for years before they open up to the outside world. Af Klint's work waited until the world was ready for it. As a matter of fact, it seems as if Kandinsky opened a door for her to be received, years and years before. The kind of forms, colors and formats she used were attuned more to contemporary modes of perception than they were to those of the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, she embodies the notion of Benjamin's ecstatic trance, right at the

moment when Benjamin was pondering this very notion. It is not surprising that a woman of her time would be denied a voice. It might seem unfair, but there are other implications of such delay in her work being shown. It is often the case that works of art that had little or no meaning at the time of production make sense years and years after. In the case of plants and seeds, it happens that the fruits of a certain seed may not be appreciated by birds or humans, or even by the soil, occupied in nurturing other more pervasive species. The wisdom of plants lies in the ability to wait until conditions are perfect. It is the circumstance often, of the artist and the work of art to have to wait until the work can be appreciated, understood and pondered with sufficient excitement and wonderment. For this, she might not even be around any longer as is the case of af Klint.



Fig. 20 Hilma af Klint, *Svanen, nr. 17*, Photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström.1915

For example, her piece *Svanen* (fig. 20) a white, blue, yellow, rose and black circle over a red background, a geometrical shape that stood for a swan, was apparently suggested to af Klint by her friendly spirits. The swan, in indigenous American cultures, is the symbol of the renewal of light that climbs upon darkness; in Asian Zen practices, it is the symbol of yin and yang, masculine-feminine, black and white. The spirits might have spoken about the connection of swan and earth and probably, about the relation to af Klint's own life, the structure of the cosmos, light or darkness within. These are all questions that inhabit the artist's world or the world that the artist inhabits, where she partakes of a cosmological dance of sorts. She seemed to be aware of this sense of the world, her forms strive to open the curtains of understanding beyond the everydayness of human realities and leap across opening the materiality of entities beyond the human. These ideas are evidently something the world was not prepared to understand and embrace in 1915. When human beings are the center of the world, as the planet and the cosmos were for early twentieth century peoples (and remains somehow till these days) it would be outrageous to suggest other possibilities. Outside of Amerindian and African indigenous communities who believe in such entities, voices and visions of spirits were confined to the seances of a few strange individuals. For Abram it is really not the spirits or ghosts in human form which inhabit the world, but instead a spirited world that is animated by the soul that each animal, plant, rock or even thing possesses; humans partake of this animated world. It is considered in many indigenous traditions that the spirits are air, live in the air and they themselves enter the body by way of air. Moreover, air, which is called *wayra* in kichwa or "a wind" in the language of some indigenous groups throughout the *Abya Yala*, is the cause of many ailments and also of good omens and magical healings. Abram writes:

Nothing is more common to the diverse indigenous cultures of the earth than a recognition of the air, the wind, and the breath, as aspects of a singularly sacred power.

By virtue of its pervading presence, its utter invisibility, and its manifest influence on all manner of visible phenomena, the air for oral peoples, is the archetype of all that is ineffable, unknowable, yet undeniably real and efficacious. (227)

Thus, these winds, which are not inside our own psyche as psychology has schooled us to think, are part of a much larger consciousness that is outside of us, for this *pneuma* is precisely what guides us throughout our days as a collective unconscious sense. It would not be surprising to find out that the spirits that guided af Klint to create the paintings would be *inspiration* from a world beyond what her contemporaries saw and perceived. Seeing this way brings an understanding that the “winds” or what af Klint called high spirits were really the animated beings that all beings are. If this is the way she perceived the world, it would not be difficult to recognize the spirit of the swan in her *Svanen* and the spirits of colors and shapes conversing among each other in her work *Youth*. For Christianity, spirituality is the idea that the spirits of dead human beings are among us, although, for indigenous cultures of the *Abya Yala* every being is spirited with life and intelligence, thus with their own perspectives, what Viveiros de Castro calls “perspectivism” (49). This manner of accepting the components of the world, where each individual bird, rock, mountain or even object, senses the world from within their own point of view, gives the painterly world of af Klint a very different definition since they are no longer images dictated by unknown human ghosts, or in modernist terms “disinterested” geometrical forms and shapes, but the whispers from the very things, forms, colors and shapes themselves being unconcealed, made present to her imagination and creation ability.

The presence of this souled and perspectival entities that conformed her language proliferated like cucurbit vines within the one hundred and seventy-three *Paintings for the Temple*. The way she populated long papers with these images of diverse shapes and forms, mimics the way the *sambo* plant advances through all terrains and soils, climbing each tree or shrub, in order to finally blossom and produce fruit. Many of af Klint's paintings actually show distinct flowerings, organic and elliptical shapes that appear to propagate in every single paper taking what seems to be an unprecedented flight over any preconceived notion of arrangement or design. No reference is made to any object or scene known to everyday life; even the graphic alphabetic like letters are her own alphabet. It all conjugates an ecstatic trance that precedes any possible epistemic justification, as if her logos had been erased in order to become a mythos of its own without a perceptible logical arrangement. The forms that are presented occur almost as an account of a journey through other worlds outside of daily happenings. It is entirely a world created as in a trance produced by accessing another reality. The perception of things to come, the importance she gave to what she "saw" and "heard" when in this trance, was recorded with special freedom and audacity, perhaps because not having an anchor in the art world provided incisively such freedom for creating an unknown ontology. Merleau-Ponty writes: "The "psychism" is not an object; but —we emphasize—there is here no question of showing, in terms of the 'spiritualist' tradition, that certain realities escape scientific determination" (22). In this way he is explaining this other ontology of a continuum existing beyond object-subject not as an excision but as a contiguity. Af Klint's work shows this perception of another ontology, or knowledge of being, within the spiritualist realm she claimed to perceive and draw from. It is not my interest to explicate if those spirits lived outside or inside her; the perception of interiority-

exteriority as a dichotomy is always already bridged by Merleau-Ponty's concept of the visible and invisible as an indivisible perception of the world "outside" of (hu)man and her perception of an "inside" world as resemblance of it, as opposed to a partaking of the world as integral (and elliptical) existence or whirlwind. If we take Merleau-Ponty's notion of indivisibility or continuum of visible and invisible, the ecstatic trance that af Klint participated of, was not a conception of her head or interiority; it was indeed a participation into the elliptical sensing of the world of which all human, nonhuman and even objects participate.

Af Klint was a magician, or, in Anzaldúa's words, a chamana performing magical and healing images for the future, as she writes:

It is not the service or specific activities the shaman renders to others that make her a shaman but the method of deriving knowledge and power to perform these activities. She consults with her spirit advisers before prescribing an herb, or she may even journey into the spirit realms and consult directly with the spirits of the plants before prescribing them. (33)

As the chamana in Anzaldúa's world, af Klint cultivated the skills to hear voices and sense the breath whispering in her ears, teaching her the process with which she would paint and draw. Hearing voices, a trait that psychiatry has categorized as an hallucinatory symptom of schizo affective disorders, is in some Amazonian cultures a trait that connects the individual with other worlds, other realities and other entities. Learning to listen and converse with the voices is what af Klint did. As a result, lines, shapes, colors, flowers, seeds and atoms encountered a place in her *Paintings for the Temple*. A practice that was created in the beginning of the 20th century, makes sense only at the beginning of the 21st century, bridged by almost a hundred years of

understanding and quests of all kinds. Moreover, her practice finds sense only now that the art world is able to understand her research, not as modernist jargon, disinterested, but as powerful interconnectedness with a cosmopolitical whole. This process of hearing voices and sensing entities, corresponds to the murmuration with which plants communicate with each other, almost imperceptible, silenced but sound, accepting the wind or the breath of life through their vines, infusing life. Coccia writes:

To breathe is to know the world, to penetrate and be penetrated by it and its mind [*esprit*] — to traverse it and to become for an instant, with this same impetus, the place in which the world becomes an individual experience. This operation is never final: the world, like the living being, is only the return of breath and of its possibility. Mind [*Esprit*]. (56)

Because of this breath, which Coccia names *esprit* and af Klint determined was the higher spirits, the artist experienced an entranced way to relate to the world that impulse her *Paintings for the Temple*. Her artistic research necessitated the *pneuma* from the surrounding entities driving her imagination. Af Klint's studies and intuitive research led her to find a rather curious way to channel images and voices into paper, as well as her own disquieting thoughts on the origin of natural phenomena and nature itself. According to Abram perhaps those spirits that western cultures have learned to understand as the spirits only of the human, are instead “creatures of the embracing air” (239) which animate every other nonhuman being.

At the time af Klint was painting the series, Freud was devising his own research on hysteria. As is told in his essay “Aetiology of Hysteria” hysteria and genius both provoke in the individuals that suffer them, overwhelming feelings of sublimity that they cannot explain and that would, at times, overwhelm their spirits. Af Klint and Kandinsky were both looking into the

sublime mediated by the art making experience. She could have been a genius and him an hysteric or vice-versa. Kandinsky's paintings pose the questions that most interested the painter. He uses the circle, beginning and end, point and line at the same time, a geometry that for him is an entrance into the theological realm. Reaching out as entities in a far-off intergalactic trip, the circles change and vary in shape, contour and color following a distant pattern that repeats ad infinitum. In his own words "If association does not seem a sufficient explanation in this case, then it cannot satisfy us as regards the effect of color upon the psyche. In general, therefore, color is a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul" (83). In this paragraph Kandinsky's interest in the psychic effects of color is evident as is apparent his surprise at being overwhelmed by the realization of such discoveries. If the case would be possible at all, he would have been diagnosed with a severe case of hysteria.

Freud distinguishes the first stages of such illness as: "The first stage of hysteria may be described as 'fright hysteria'; its primary symptom is the *manifestation of fright* accompanied by a gap in the psyche. It is still unknown up to how late an age this first hysterical overwhelming of the ego can occur" (96). Af Klint and Kandinsky both, apparently felt this overwhelming of the ego, the fright that certain experiences might produce in the artist which would prompt him/her to look into the findings of the occult or the sublime for answers to such mighty forces of the world. Freud speaks not only of women suffering from cases of the malady but also men. He writes that in the eighteen cases, men and women which had been diagnosed with hysteria combined with obsessions, all of them were caused by incidents of a sexual nature in their infancy. In psychological terms there is definitely an excision between an interior and the exterior world. Whether hysteria or genius, these two artists found channels to tap into the unknown, into the invisible. The abstraction these artists were to find in order to prove their

discoveries in the realm of philosophy is almost of a scientific quality. The studio as a research lab and their experiments and data closely documented in diaries are a very important witness to this way of working. In some cases, the work was of a psychoanalytical nature itself using language as a track to finding the unconscious realities they were looking for. In Bashkoff words:

Af Klint's imagery, here and elsewhere in the cycle, bears a resemblance to the visualization of recent scientific discoveries at the turn of the century, which had rapidly migrated into cultural discourse. The artist was likely to have encountered these advances in popular newspapers and journals and, more certainly, through the lens of Theosophy.

(22)

It is interesting to notice that many paintings resulting from the ceremonial flight of hallucinogenic and entheogenic trances show images of spirals, and almost scientific illustrations of microscopic views of the interior of plant cells or, conversely, of cosmic galactic patterns. Bashkoff writes that "her imagery proliferated like a language" (23). As is the case with plants or animal tracks, which could be their own way of imprinting. These languages proliferate copiously without slumps as if effectively dictated by spiritual entities. The graceful state or ecstatic trance in which the artist (or medium) had to be in, was very special. Af Klint had to work, serve as medium and rest after the seances which would leave her depleted of energy. Many cases of what was called hysteria or "possession" left people (women in most of the cases) in a similar state of depletion. *Yachags* from all over the world recognize illnesses or troublesome behaviors as "possession" by demons or different spirits that have taken hold of a person. However, the spirits that contacted af Klint were in no manner evil, if ever, they wanted to guide her (and through her, her community) towards a different understanding of the cosmos. In her notebook entries af Klint clearly specifies what her guides told her:

Ten paradisiacally beautiful paintings were to be executed; the paintings would be in colors that would be educational and they would reveal my feelings to me in an economical way...It was the meaning of the leaders to give the world a glimpse of the system of four parts in the life of man. They are called childhood, youth, manhood [adulthood], and old age. (23)

Cartesian notions of the excision body-mind have determined the understanding of mind (or spirit) as separate from body; nevertheless, in the last decades of the twentieth century this notion began changing. In fact, Merleau-Ponty gives initiates a sense of the interior as continuum of an exterior that partakes of the world, which nevertheless, offers a problematic puzzle to solve: “The investigation of the ‘psychic,’ like that of the exterior object, first progresses only by putting itself outside of the play of the relativities it discovers, by tacitly supposing an absolute subject before which is deployed the psychism in general, my own or that of another” (19). This psychism he refers to, attributes the object a life of its own outside of the subject and conversely the subject is submerged within an interior life disjointed from the object. In those terms, the dislocation is always already present without a route to continuity. When Deleuze and Guattari say there is only exterior they refer to the idea of continuity between the visible and the invisible. The view of the world that Amazonian indigenous communities hold is that they share the sense of the world that envelops every single entity, they do not have a separate interior from that of the world, but they are themselves that entity called *nature*. This is why Amazonian communities such as the *Sapara* and *Siona* believe that dreams are what connects all to that big thing called the world. According to them, dreams are not the product of individual psyches but a result of collective dreaming, a dreaming of the world. As Klint in her search for the creative power sensed from higher spirits, felt, thought and dreamed the world. In fact, the voices of spirits she

heard were the world itself, the entities existing in plants, flowers, animals, mountains and rivers speaking to her. She devised a way to hear them and understand what they wanted, lest they would drive her mad. In other words, she learned to hear the voices and learned to converse with them. Instead of believing these voices were driving her into madness, she believed them and gave them the privileged place to help her create an astonishing body of work.

The difference that exists between cultures that honor and understand the spirit within everything and those which adjudicate sensing and perception only to the individual psyche is that the first are able to see and conceive a world that is interconnected and not disjointed or fragmented as the latter. Interiority is not an individuality where thoughts and feelings and emotions are discontinued, *au contraire*, interiority is a continuum with exteriority, visible and invisible flow in contiguity:

It was believed that we were returning to clarity by exorcizing ‘introspection.’ And to do so was indeed necessary: for where, when and how has there ever been a vision of the inside? There is —and this is something quite different, which retains its value— a life present to itself (*prés de soi*), an openness upon oneself, which does not look upon any world other than the common world —and which is not necessarily a closedness to the others. (Merleau-Ponty 19)

Does this mean that this exorcized introspection found a place in the common world? If this is so, the voices heard, the presences perceived, are they within or without the world? Af Klint and the anthroposophists believed these entities were outside of their heads and bodies, thus, were *of* the world and for this reason their entire rapport with them was as with other human entities. The expanse of time and effort this endeavor took seemed to proliferate very rapidly, it was as if af

Klint from every seance gathered the most accurate indications to proceed with her work without truce. It was as if she embodied the ecstatic trance and was able to live on it while she was working on the paintings. The difference between mad(wo)man and genius would be precisely the ability to carry out the creative process. In other words, the artist in her journey back from the trance, as the *yachag*, brings back the results of her travels, in order to be able to share them with an audience.

The problematic reception that af Klint would have encountered if her paintings were shown in 1915 would have not given them the depth of understanding in philosophical terms that she wanted. “Like Kandinsky, af Klint wanted her work to communicate spiritual values, even messages, and also like him, she did not expect her contemporary audience to understand this new approach to artistic expression” (Andreas Kollnitz 75). According to Kollnitz she did not want her rich, insightful paintings to be seen as “adequate for carpet patterns” (74) Kollnitz adds: “... the underlying spiritual symbolism and intentions in works like Kandinsky’s *Compositions* were dismissed by most and strongly ridiculed by some critics ...” (74). We can be most certain that such derision would have happened; the fictions about life and the world which are believed or disdained are always already changing. Some tales and fables that are great today, are deemed ridiculous superstitions or ludicrous mistakes tomorrow. Perspectives are shifting invariably; they are like the accounts of a troubadour changing disguises as she navigates the spinning earth under the scorching sun or the tenacious rain.

3.4 Cucúrbita Ficifolia

A Great Folly: Changes in the Terrain as Plasticity Shifts in Human and Beyond-the-Human Bodies.



Fig. 21 Hilma af Klint. *Svanen, nr. 1 gruppe IX/SUW*, Photo: Albin Dahlström, Moderna Museet. 1915

The two artists I have discussed in this chapter are both entranced in an ecstatic realm in the Benjaminian sense and both meet the idea of the Nietzschean tragic artist. As a cucurbit plant their creativity proliferates giving many florations and fruits. The ecstatic trance is a continuum of time and space that the artist inhabits and it is what brings them the bewilderment with which they relate to the world. The ability to carry on “in scorn of life” and to be able to create is what the tragic artist does. Now, the relationship these artists establish with this world is an embodied, fully fleshed knowledge that makes visible the invisible or establishes a continuum of interior and exterior, making it possible for a being to be of the world and in it at the same time. Thus,

what seems to be individual disorders and individual psyches, are indeed not individual or separated from the collective ailments the earth itself is experiencing. As the seed seeks the comfort of a good soil for its successful ripening, also humans and nonhumans find attunement in their dwelling places. The impossible number of what has been called mental health disorders among populations of the world are not to be seen as separate individual sufferings but as the suffering and the plea of the planet. It is only evident that all troubles are attributed to the mind as if separate from the body, and the world itself. As Isabelle Stengers writes, “... the time is over when we consider ourselves as the only true actors of our history, freely discussing if the Earth is available for our use or should be protected” (1). It is not possible any longer to speak about the earth as if humans were the sole custodians of it, it is crucial to speak with her and with its other nonhuman dwellers as well, in a cosmopolitical accord. Af Klint was, as many artists *yachags* are, attuned to the times to come, sensing what other entities inhabiting the cosmos had to say, derailing the notions of traditional thought.

Derailments in plant contingency imply that wild growth, propagation and proliferation act as microcosmic game changers or provocations that enable becoming-plant. Imagining the more-than-human becomes tangible when humans are willing to inhabit a beyond-the-human world, implying that a great folly is a capacious generator of entanglements and connections outside systems too well known and too well traversed for them to provide different outcomes. For a great folly to envelop territories within a more-than-human escape, humans necessitate to be inhabited by other entities in the manner of Beuys and af Klint: being porous to other ways and spirits to conquer them as mycelium to be part of a mycorrhizal bond. Porosity is the enabling route into this *pneuma* or breath of worlds beyond the human and it requires an ability to

permeate and be permeated through synchronic sensing. The *sambo* plant establishes a vigorous alliance with its entourage transforming the soil through a magnificent proliferation, sometimes so great that it threatens the balance of entire landscapes. The *yachag* as well as the artist in trance transform their environments with their ability to create alliances and filiations.

Nevertheless, other plants may be wiped out of this same environment due to the power of such invasive force. There are *yachags* who through anthropophagic relationality may also cause tremendous changes in their communities since no practice lives without diverse detriments.

However, there is always a balancing act that brings the *yachag* and the artist in trance into conflicts with their environments. The great folly that is the proliferation of artistic and shamanic practices find obstacles and other forces which invade, change and permeate their terrains. The powerful influence of world economies and shifts in politics also alter the soil for the human and the more-than-human. In many places there is a proliferation of magical and spirit related practices that take hold of the land and may cause grand transformations in thought and manners of living. One does not exist without the other, the visible and the invisible are always fluctuating, great intensities moving molecularly in Deleuzian terms. What the land experiences are also the experiences of its inhabitants. The proliferation of sensual stimuli and perceptions could be thought as inflation, as an astounding propagation that knows no limits. Invasive plants have that quality, which can be imagined as a great folly, a madness that pervades and takes hold of the whole planet. Could that be what is happening to humans of all continents right now?

According to Catherine Malabou the changes in neuroplasticity of the human brain suggest we are witnessing the core shift of a way of being in the world. She attributes this to ways in which the human brain is able to cope with detrimental forces that at times surpass its capacity to

process: “Construction is counterbalanced by a form of destruction. This much we know and accept. The fact that all creation can only occur at the price of a destructive counterpart is a fundamental law of life” (Malabou 4). The tremendous amount of suicides, mental health disorders and afflictions that humanity experiments as species are almost uncontrollable, a never-ending destruction paired with the endless construction of capitalistic enterprises that evidence no concern for anything other than monetary profits and market gains. These calamities and changes that bring folly are not new to the many species on earth, their demeanor and environments. Franco “Bifo” Berardi writes about *Hikikomori* a term in Japanese that accounts for a *maladie* that is killing young Japanese people. They become intensely withdrawn from society, showing marked signs of distress and depression, suicide is the number one cause of death in young people in Japan. He writes: “Such behavior should be understood as a form of adjustment to the anthropological and social mutation that is underway, as an answer to the unbearable stress of competition, mental exploitation and precarity” (104). In the XV century the discovery of the Americas with the incredible “souvenirs” that were brought home from the new continent, human and other beings and things that had never been seen before, caused as Berardi calls it, a “semiotic inflation” (117) a term that conveys a proliferation of meanings for not enough words. This was also a time of distress: the Baroque was a moment in which folly was not unknown, so difficult it was to understand a world that was completely turning Other. The turn of the 20th century was as well a maddening time. Astounding technological wonders were being implemented and modernity was finally showing humans what they had conquered.

As climate change stresses the planet and all creatures living in it, this same planet changes and shifts its responses towards those stressors. If there is an abundance or extreme proliferation

of plant species, fire may be the combatant to that proliferation. Many indigenous communities used controlled fires to reset the land before another cultivation cycle. Or it is the same forest which catches fire to reorganize itself and contain unwanted proliferations. In mammals and species like deer or rodents, predators like wolves or pumas contained and controlled populations. In nature all alliances exist for a cause; these alliances are not ever far from death and decay as natural containers of overpopulation. From time to time human, plant and animal populations are decimated by fires, storms, earthquakes, viruses and wars. We have also seen how human ways of life cause vast extinctions of entire populations of nonhuman species.

Communities of the earth who are able to extricate themselves of hubris as supposed rulers of the earth and accept themselves just as creatures, one of many actors in the ongoing total work of the cosmos, may show other communities that they are not indispensable for the planet to keep running and turning. Their advertising signs of earth's demise and catastrophe are poignant, although many times despised as the cries of subaltern communities without importance to markets and finances. Change will keep being the engagement of entropic forces, the Sun will warm up the Earth, the Moon with its cool indifference will watch from afar, Mars will keep waiting for humans to establish their colonies. If all human life disappears from the Andes and leaves it as is, probably the *sambo* will invade surreptitiously every single corner of the land.

Without pigs or chickens and other wild beasts to eat them, this small but tenacious invader will take hold of the soil. If all humans were artists in the art market manner it could be a disaster. But all humans can become-artist in the sense that they may learn to be intuitive and sense from an organoleptic level, that is from the body, the surrounding environment in order to formulate questions about being. Everyone can become-artist in a Beuysian mode to engage the "social

organism” that Beuys proposed. They can all listen to voices and spirits that inspire them and bring them to create in an af Klint mode. The *sambo* makes an alliance with the boar so he can carry the plants’ seeds to another terrain. The artist makes alliances with the scientist and the engineer to impact the soil less and with tender husbandry. The *yachag* establishes alliances with other nonhumans to bring well-being to his community.

In some Mesoamerican myths, nonhumans and humans have been extinguished by the gods, because they were not able to speak to the gods or be thankful to them, for example in the *Popol Vuh* myth of creation.¹⁷ In a *Shuar* myth the gods also created humans and animals but they made a mistake and they couldn't make them immortal. The creatures inhabiting this planet are always on the brink of disappearance, although some have stopped dying. Death is the grand teacher, no wonder the teacher plant *Aya-wasca* literally means “vine of death,” (*Aya* is death and *wasca* is vine) for it not only communicates the ceremonial plant drinkers with spirits of their own dead ancestors, but with the tiger and the peccary, as well as with the plant itself in the obscure tenderness of the earth. For tribes of the Amazon basin, death is a great master from whom they learn. As Heidegger himself writes, only in those moments “of being held out into the nothing” is where and when Da-sein formulates the ontological question about Being. Beuys fable tells that he encountered death when his airplane falls in the desert, and he is rescued by the Tartars. He faces his own mortality, the definitive threshold for the human animal. Af Klint encounters the other’s mortality in her sister’s death, thus, chooses to speak to the voices which she believes are the spirits of those dead. In af Klint painting the *Svanen*, the black swan meets the white swan, dark and light as an alliance of a collective existence. Not one without the other: the seed needs the darkness of earth to strive towards the sun and the dark night blossoms at

dawn. The dark night dreams bring out the inflorescence of collective creativity. Sunlight induces growth and well-being. Every weakness is tweaked within a tender pervasiveness. Beuys did not conquer and dominate the coyote, he tenderly shared his space and both shared scary times of being in unknown territory. Af Klint did not dismiss and turned away the voices of spirits speaking instructions for the *Temple*. Both artists listened to human or nonhuman, whoever wanted to caress them with their inspiration or breath. As *sambo* slowly and pervasively, without even making itself present, proliferates within an entire forest, the voices of entities from the more-than-human world are constantly speaking quietly, in a weak but powerful manner.

Silence is a meaningful entity that dwells within and without. One of the wonders of many explorers in the South American forests has been the silence with which plants, animals and humans, dwell and inhabit the space. Silence is not void, it is a liminality between space and time. It is a quality of the forest to dwell in silence: making a sound may mean falling prey to predators. Greek thinkers like Pseudo-Aristotle deemed plants as practically dead or mere decorative objects, for their silence is so manifest, so present we are unable to hear them. Marder quotes him (most likely Nicolaus of Damascus) in *De Plantis*: “‘But the plant does not belong to the class which has no soul, because there is some part of the soul [*meros psukhēs*] in it, but the plant is not a living creature [*zoon*] because there is no feeling in it’ (316a37-40)” (23). However, plants speak in the clearing of the forest or the park. *Sambo* speaks when someone listens carefully to her tiny movements. It also speaks through tea and food; man and woman become-plant, and plant becomes-man or woman, or, they may think-with-plants. In Marder’s words: “This yearning is of course foredoomed, because it spells out the end of poetry and a

descent into silence, which mimics but still falls short of the absolute muteness of plants” (79).

No innocence of vegetal life is implied in the weak power of plant’s language, its muteness and sheer apparent indifference. Notwithstanding, plants seem to be listening, their poetic and soft language caresses without any trace of emotional taxing, as if the wind itself was ever present, as if the voices of spirits were gently whispering.

Chapter 4 Dissemination

4.1 The Weak and the Subaltern

Weak Thought, the Plant-Yachag-Artist Triad as Resistance to Metaphysical Domination

For the man who negates nature could not in any way live outside of it, he is not merely a man who negates Nature, he is first of all an animal, that is to say the very thing he negates: he cannot therefore negate Nature without negating himself.

Georges Bataille



Fig. 22 Miranda Texidor. *Pangolin and imaginary habitat*. Gouache on paper. 2021

The Pangolin (fig. 22) is one of the most fragile and shy creatures in the animal kingdom. Its precious keratin scales are used in the manufacturing of lotions, boots and leather pieces. Its meat is greatly appreciated and its many medicinal properties make it one of the most coveted (by humans) creatures on various continents. Recently its precarious condition has become even more present due to its extraordinary human-like nature capable of displaying the same symptoms of the dreaded coronavirus. Its habitat can be the desert steppes of the Serengeti or the lustrous Asian jungles. The little Pangolin establishes his rhizomatic relationship with other human actants by providing them with exquisite meat and lustrous leather, his strength is his great weakness, and most probably his only defense.

Philosophers Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala have called weak thought or *pensiero debole*, the conception of the weak as purveyors of change in the face of tyranny and power. In their prologue to *Plant Thinking* they write: “Weak thought resists the tyranny of ‘objective’ factuality and welcomes a multiplicity of interpretations, even as it takes the side of the victims of historical and metaphysical brutality” (7). This notion correlates to their definition of weak thought as the thought of the weak of the earth. In *Hermeneutic Communism* they write: “While metaphysics, or which is the same, the politics of descriptions is the philosophy of the winners who wish to conserve the world as it is, the weak thought of hermeneutics becomes the thought of the weak in search of alternatives” (2). Pangolins and plants are weak since they are unable to exercise force against an enemy, nonetheless, they are capable of exercising tweaking in their natural processes to change pervasively but softly their environments and thus, the world. This is the possibility that the weak of the earth, according to Vattimo and Zabala, are afforded to practice this powerful but subdued ability to change things little by little, without violence.

Revolutionary violence, they say, as in the case of Russia and China, is no longer capable of bringing change to our worlds.

In this chapter I argue that plants, *yachags* and artists are like the flowerings of weak thought, capable of bringing change to their communities through small tweaking of their environments; their weak perseverance and resilience seems to be one of the ways to resist western metaphysical domination. But what is the way to bring it about? Going by the book and taking the examples that Vattimo and Zabala propose, such as the South American Socialism of the XXIst century, it can clearly be seen that those are fallen examples. All those governments failed to provide a hermeneutical ground for the cries of social and indigenous movements to truly be counted as voices with agency to bring change. The governments of Lula in Brazil, Chavez in Venezuela, Evo in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador failed atrociously and are charged with being the most corrupt governments in recent South American history. The illusion of hermeneutic communism proves to be a fabulation with no ground for actual implementation in the here and now. In Vattimo and Zabala's words:

As the political alternative to the impositions of neoliberal capitalism and the philosophy of the interpretative nature of truth, communism and hermeneutics, more than revolutionary positions at the service of power, have become alternative responses for the losers of history, that is, the weak. (2)

It is observable that it is not in governments that weak thought lives; it might probably be able to live only in the subtle and weak fine tuning of small-scale societies that are able to bring change in small numbers, almost imperceptible growth, almost immovable undertakings. In Kohn's words:

What is this strange way of getting something done without doing anything at all? What kinds of politics can come into being through this particular way of creating associations? Grasping how form emerges and propagates in the forest and in the lives of those who relate to it—be the river, dolphins, hunters, or rubber bosses—and understanding something about form's effortless efficacy is central to developing an anthropology that can attend to those many processes central to life, human and nonhuman, which are not built from quanta of difference. (21)

In a way, this is what he calls “effortless efficacy,” doing without doing; very much in the same way plants blossom, proliferate and disseminate.

According to the *Dictionary of Botanic Terminology*: “In biology the dispersal or dissemination is the natural process of dispersing of plant, fruit and seeds and of the offspring of non-mobile organisms over a wide area” (4). It is one of the characteristics of plants which are unable to displace themselves from one area to another, to disperse their seeds in order to propagate and thus, proliferate. Many alliances have to be made for this purpose. Thinking collectively is one of the abilities plants and animals have. The wasp, the bee, or the *quinde* (hummingbird) collaborate with diverse plants to bring their seeds in their legs, beaks or bodies. The water hyacinth or *eichornia crassipes* and the dragon fly make an alliance that enables the dragon fly to thrive in the hyacinth's nutrition and coupling as it delivers its seeds to produce marvelous florations and propagation. The water hyacinth is able to eat up different algae and maintains waters clean, alive and vibrant. This is an example of how very weak laboring is able to accomplish a vast task. To imagine how plants teach humans this way of weakening thought, I quote Michael Marder: “On the one hand, both colloquial and philosophical discourses associate the rooted mode of being with immobility and captivity, but, on the other, the perceived

indifference of plants interlaces their freedom with human liberty in the domains of ethics, aesthetics, and religion” (12). A being, perceptibly incapable of movement, teaches others about liberty in cooperation, the ability to move beyond borders (and travel without moving) in complicity with creatures completely different to her.

The pervasive ability that art has to tweak and change the status quo of societies, is equally weak, almost imperceptible but its dim action acts as water dripping constantly on a rock. In Vattimo and Zabala’s words:

Weakening, like deconstruction, does not search for correct solutions wherein thought may finally come to rest, but rather seeks ontological emancipation from truth and other concepts that frame and restrict the possibilities of new philosophical, scientific, or religious revolutions. (xii)

Works of art like Ernesto Neto’s *Um Sagrado Lugar*, Cecilia Vicuña’s *Quipu Mapocho* and Bernardo Oyarzún’s *Werken* exercise this *puissance*. The possibility they have to imbue the viewers or participants of their works with a sense of bewilderment, not seeking truths but asking themselves questions about other worlds and other visions, is a probability, even remote, where art finds a way to be disseminated and potentially bring a swift change to societies. In this *modus operandi*, art acts, not any longer as the beacon of beauty, goodness and truth of the Kantian categorical imperative, but as a *Verwindung*, as Heidegger said, that is, a twister or weakener of this imperative, “to distance us from its frames” (Vattimo and Zabala xiii) By reading the work of art as an open interpretation site we are able to outdo the enframing of truth and unmovable facts. The dissemination probabilities of the flower, the bee and the pollen to become seed and plant, speak about an ecological form that permeates communities and societies in a weak way.

The oral knowledge of the *Sapara* nation, a community in the Ecuadorian Amazonian Napo River, is shared presently with the world through technological advancements such as online classes which have enabled them to disseminate their wisdom, considered occult before to outsiders.¹⁸ One of the tools used by the *Sapara* are dreams. Each morning after waking, people share their dreams; these dreams let them know how their daily tasks like hunting, walking or working, will develop over the day, week or year. In dreams, they connect with plants, animals and the spirits of the dead. There are various categories of dreams that enable them to interpret what the dream, its images and messages are trying to convey. It is a different way altogether of looking at dreams than the Freudian interpretations which adjudicate the images and the beings that inhabit our dreams, all to the individual psyche. *Sapara* interpretation connects the dreamer with the world not as an individual inside his own separated psyche but as part of the whole. As Manari Ushigua, a *Sapara yachag* says: “Our hearts connect in dreams with the heart of the earth.”¹⁹ Dreams are weak thought, although not considered “thought” per se within western metaphysical knowledge, dreams tweak softly the way we act in waking life. The decisions made by peoples who follow their dreams as a guidance towards their dealings with worlds, are attuned to a way of walking the planet in connection with all its beings. Perhaps that weakening of thought occurs in the world of dreams. The *Sapara* interpret their dreams by dividing them into five or six categories. The first one refers to dreams that happen to the person dreaming. They usually have to do with things that will happen in the following day. The second connects the dreamer to the world via someone bringing a message. The third has to do with problems that will happen with the dreamer and the community. The fourth talks about very serious problems that could arise in the future. The fifth and sixth are oracle or divinatory dreams that need to be held in the forest with the *yachags*, in order to learn wholly the teachings of the dream world.

Many times, dreams connect the dreamer with a medicine plant which is seen in dreams and then needs to be tried upon awakening. The dreamer may also dream with animals or family members. The great difference with Freudian or Jungian interpretations is that the dreamer dreams to connect with the world or worlds instead of believing that everything is in his mind alone. In his essay “On Dreams,” Freud wrote that in pre-scientific times, men afforded the manifestations they perceived in dreams “...to higher powers, daemonic or divine.” And: “...when modes of thought belonging to natural science began to flourish, all this ingenious mythology was transformed into psychology, and to-day only a small minority of educated people doubt that dreams are a product of the dreamer’s own mind” (143). However, thanks to decolonial research and dissemination of hybrid mestizo and Amerindian ontologies, different perspectives on dream interpretation are available to the world. In this other perspective dreamers may change, by way of specific techniques, the messages that the spiritual world is sending them. Ushigua and the *Sapara* people, for once, offer their own theory, a contrasting perspective that opens a diverse and rich universe of meanings.

In *Sapara* the world of dreams is called *Makijaunu*; that is where we go when we leave our bodies at night, and we join the spirits of the dead, of other alive peoples thinking about us, of animals, plants and all kinds of entities. There are also two dimensions in life named *Witianu*: one of life and one of dreams. What we obtain from dreams in which we connect with the spirit of the earth and other spirits is *Shimaka* which means wisdom or knowledge. There are also certain very subtle techniques to modify dreaming, for example *tsutanu* or laughter which balances us, and *Nmunu* which is our own air that we blow to disperse bad spirits or energies. For the *Sapara* it would be absurd to conceive that dreams are the product of just one individual isolated mind. *Sapara* dreaming tools change people during sleep, they permeate their

communities, they change the world one soft and weak dream at a time. This community of Amazonians is aware of the power this activism through dreams has, since it is, according to their interpretation, a direct way to connect to the cosmos.

Plants, *yachags* or chamanas and artists, a triad that learns from each other in an invisible alliance, ushers with it a venue for resistance to metaphysical domination. Thinking-with the beings that plants are, learning from the travels of healers and chamanas and the performative rituals of contemporary artists, a weaker, softer world is enabled. Each artist I am considering in this chapter provides this possibility to their public, to reflect upon their environments and the fabulations of lands and stories. Ernesto Neto with *Um Sagrado Lugar* borrows heavily from the ritual of the *Huni Kuin*, thus enabling a channel for art Biennale goes from all walks of life, to reflect on what it means to heal with the earth through dreams and plants. Cecilia Vicuña with her *Quipu Mapocho*, an entanglement of threads that drive people's stories through their own opacity, Bernardo Oyarzún's *Werken* which enlivens the spirits of Mapuche people with their traditional last names and gives them voice and meaning in a renewed time and place. Finally, the work of Cuenca Biennial artists Juan Zamora and Sandra Nakamura, who are on the antipodes of relating to plant as beings, both initiate a series of questions on the ethical motivations of artistic-scientific approaches to nature, and the possibilities of rhizomatic engagements with works where the voice of the author has disappeared. All this tweaking offers a weak but powerful way of changing our worlds.

4.2 Maloka

Ernesto Neto, the Artist in Nature-Culture, Contiguity or Fragmentation?



Fig. 23 Ernesto Neto, *Um Sagrado Lugar*. Venice Biennale, Padiglione dei Sciamani. 2017

Summer 2017, the 57th Venice Biennale is open to the public. As I enter the *Padiglione dei Sciamani*, I encounter an enormous crocheted tent (fig. 23). Inside, there are cushions and plants. People are gathered lively in groups of two or more, engaging in quiet conversations, breathing or sipping tea. I recognize the site as Ernesto Neto's net sculpture. I entered the space that breathed a calm atmosphere and it was lovely and comforting. However, soon many questions assaulted me. One of the premises of Descola's work *Beyond Nature and Culture* is that in Amerindian communities across the *Abya Yala*, the notion of nature is not fragmented from that of culture since there is a point of view or perspective that each entity holds, being an animal, a plant, a river or even an inanimate object. As a presumption, the contiguity between

nature and culture is not something we see as clear in a cartesian western conception, where the production of culture is an activity created only and exclusively by humans, and where nature is altogether a different realm. Descola writes: “In the Far North, as in South America, nature is not opposed to culture but is an extension of it and enriches it in a cosmos in which everything is organized according to the criteria of human beings” (14). This is an extension or contiguity, a metonymy that expands the world of beings to “beings in worlds” always already in continual exchange. As I wander into the Shamanic Pavilion, I am curious to see if the world of shamanism and the forests is able to be fully implemented as a work of art in an art Biennial. I have doubts *a priori* because I know that knowledge of this type is held as sacred rituality in Amazonian communities. A work of art in contemporary terms is able to speak to the public and provide experiences that are fully ritualistic even in the art institutional arena. However, I believe there is an impossibility to bring all components of the sacred plant ritual to a foreign territory, because the knowledge and dreaming of the *yachag* or *pajé* blossoms in connection to the land, the plants and the spirits which inhabit that land. As *yachags* from the *Siona* and *Sapara* nations say, each territory has its own master spirits and sacred knowledge or *shimaka* can be attained only in the territory of the shaman. I cannot help but wonder if the ritual is as powerful here in the Venice Biennale as it is on *Huni Kuin* land.

At the Biennale site, first I saw various different artists’ approaches to notions of shamanism, and their encounter with the Amazonian forest. Then I was surprised to read Neto’s statement: the *Cupixawa*, which he has named *Um Sagrado Lugar*, serves as a gathering place for fraternal peace and reflection. My surprise grew as I learned this tent stands for the sacred space of the ritual intake of sacred plants where Amazonian shamans give out plant medicine. I also learned that the *Huni Kuin* shamans or *pajes* were in the inaugural ceremony of the Biennial

and performed a *nixi pae* (*yagé* or *ayahuasca*) ritual. In the Amazon, under typical conditions, traditional *nixi pae* ceremonies are held by the *pajes* of the *Huni Kuin* community from the Acre zone in Brazil and Perú in a *Cupixawa* of this type. The great crocheted tent is described in the Biennale's short guide as: "[A] polyamide structure suspended from the beams of the ceiling. Ernesto Neto adopts the form of the *Cupixawa*, a place of sociality, political meetings and spiritual ceremonies for the *Huni Kuin* Indians of the state of Acre in the Amazonian forest" (38). In this big tent, shamans along with Neto gathered to perform a ceremony that resembled in some way the traditional drinking of the powerful entheogen. Afterwards the tent was open for visitors to gather and pray, meditate, nap, rest, etc. As part of the *Padiglione dei Sciamani*, or "Pavilion of Shamans", Neto's installation is well ingrained into the concept of *Viva Arte Viva* which gives a voice to the artist and provides a sort of eclectic new age vision of the world. According to the Biennale's Short Guide *Viva Arte Viva* "is an exclamation, a passionate outcry for art and the state of the artist" (38). To further complicate the matter, the use of the *Cupixawa* as a negotiable site for meditation-prayer-leisure and the allusion to the use of the ancestral master plant *nixe pae* for ceremonies, seems a palatable way to introduce an ancestral ritual to the western Biennale goers, with all the problematic assumptions this implies.

Namely, appropriating the *nixi pae* ritual and ceremony and transposing it into an art biennial context brings an element of ventriloquism to the work, where the voice of the indigenous shaman, the plant and the vitality of the *Cupixawa* get objectified and devoid of its function as ritualistic vehicles. It is important to know that while artists of the center are using contemporary languages derived from the western canon to put in place a *mise-en-scene* of the peripheral world and its very complex navigations, the indigenous artists of such worlds are continually ignored and their artistic manifestations considered of little or no interest, for they

seldom utilize western canons considered contemporary art, thus, being worthy of gaze in the great art world sites. This was not a ritual performed as a work of art by the very indigenous *pajés*. There appears to be always the necessity of a mediation of the western trained artist. In this light I ask various questions: Who is speaking in Ernesto Neto's piece? Is it germane to appropriate a sacred ritual of ancestral origin and place it in a site that confers it a different significance? Furthermore, is it pertinent to use the name and attributes of the ritual sacred medicine within an art Biennial construct? Although sanctioned and enacted by the *Huni Kuin* themselves who traveled with Neto to the opening of the Biennial, the ritual, no doubt, loses some of its power outside of Amazonian territory.

For an object to retain its ritualistic power it must remain within the territory of the ritual. Its extraction strips it off the functional qualities of its "ritualness" which makes it a site for the ceremonial use of sacred plants. Although Neto claims that art has the same powers as other spiritual paths, and the collaboration with the *Huni Kuin* was voiced as cooperation or alliance, the decision to bring his name upfront (not he *Huni Kuin*) to the Biennale seems suspicious.²⁰ It is a high form of exoticization, although presented as sharing the power and knowledge of the *Huni Kuin*. Neto seems to have acted much in the sense that Anzaldúa suggests artists in western societies often act, like the Promethean myth, stealing the fire from the Gods. She posits: "In other stories, the artist surrenders to the creative process, the creative urge—in other words to god—and allows the story/artwork to be channeled through her" (40). Other artists who have taken this spiritual path with much responsibility have declined to participate in the superficial bric-a-brac of such art gatherings precisely because the depth of a profound experience is washed away. The house of art, is often unfortunately a house of commercial endeavors in which speculation, stardom and egotistical interests are at play. The house of plants, on the other hand,

with its secretive demeanor has no place in the house of art, unless the spectacle of the work of art is ditched altogether and the artist is able to meaningfully engage in the quest for the protection of sacred land and spaces for ritual. A ritual, in its true sense, if it is to be carried for the art world would have to be carried outside the auratic space of the gallery and museum and should be open to everyday people, not only scholars or socialites. On the other hand, maybe this is the only way to bring *conocimiento* to European and other inhabitants of the global north whose own ancestral knowledge has been forgotten and eradicated by monotheistic practices and exacerbated by the ideologies of capitalism. Hence, Neto's piece could potentially help to bring awareness of the fragility of such worlds.

Claude Levi-Strauss was the first anthropologist to conduct fieldwork and record at length his experiences in the Amazonian basin. In *Tristes Tropiques* he foresees precisely the type of exploitation that the European conquest dawned on these magnificent worlds. He writes: "A few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveler as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see" (43). There is wisdom in his words, for what we are seeing in Neto's piece (and other artists who claim to bring shamanism into the global contemporary art scene) is a bleak *mise-en-scene* of that which belongs to a sacred ritual for specific communities and cannot be translated properly into the shallow accouterments of the jet-set art world.

As time pass we see more and more works of art in great artistic showcases, such as the XV Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador, that deal with the world of plants, the biocene and shamans, *pajés*, *yachags*, *taitas* or *curacas* from the Amazonian forest as ambassadors of these other worlds. The work of artists like Oscar Santillan, Paul Rosero, Pamela Cevallos, Fabiano Kueva, Angélica Alomoto and Archivo Visual Amazónico, to name a very few, showcase the

possibilities of the human and the more-than-human to interact in cooperation in order to achieve a different place for ourselves within our planet.²¹ The proposal of a Biennale for the Biocene questions our very ways of living in this world. It definitely has a role in the dissemination of artistic practices that speak and think with earth beings, human and nonhuman. It takes into account plants as beings (although not always as beings with the same rights as humans) and provides seeds for propagation into other realms. The great risk that exhibitions, like the 2017 Venice Biennial or presently the XV Cuenca Biennial, run is to be accused of greenwashing, which is a term coined in 1986 by environmentalist Jay Westerveld and is defined as a process of giving a false impression about a company's products as environmentally sound. In Neto's case, his work was one of the very first attempts to mediate the sacred ritual of *nixi pae* in a Biennial, if we do not count the already grandiose *Magiciens de la Terre*. In 1989 Jean-Hubert Martin curated the great exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* precisely to give artists from the peripheries the same place and treatment that was given to western artists. Thirty years later great art gatherings such as the Venice and Cuenca Biennials are exercising the same distinctions that *Magiciens* hoped to cure, between western trained and indigenous artists.

Although there are many mediations from artists who speak for the Amazon forest communities and for the shamanic cosmovision, what is absent is the real presence of indigenous artists. However, and as a discount to the XV Cuenca Biennial, I did not see anything that tries to bring actual shamanic knowledge and rituals to the art arena. In the Ecuadorian context, people seem to know very well how dangerous it could be to play with these powerful energies and attributes, for in the shamanic world everything has its own *dueño* or master and indigenous knowledge is feared and respected at the same time. As Viveiros de Castro states:

To describe this multiverse, where every difference is political (because every relation is ‘social’) as though it were an illusory version of our universe—to unify them by reducing the inventions of the first to the conventions of the second—would be to decide for a simplistic and politically puerile conception of their relationship. (63)

New Age postures with their eclectic spirituality appropriate the rituals and ceremonies of Amazonian and Andean communities, staging them as exotic performances of otherness in order to give consolation for what Gomez-Barris rightly calls “eco-depression”. In her own words: “The Andes has been reductively constructed, a place where the fantasy of leaving behind the stress, consumption, “eco-depression,” and generalized dissatisfaction of late capitalism ends up exonerating the foreigner from local injustices and playing into new age settler colonialism” (43). In effect, participating from *ayahuasca* tourism does not render the indigenous world more familiar or comforting, as de Castro writes it is a good idea to “stress against fantasies of the narcissistic paradises of exotic peoples (a.k.a Disney anthropology)” (63). For the Amerindian Amazonian world does not cease to be altogether unknown and it should be approached with much respect and vigilance. I argue that a well lived Neto installation would be to bring his public to the *Huni Kuin* territory in the Brazilian Acre. There, in harsh conditions, both physical and political, the experience will be complete. Although not in an artistic pursuit, the *Dream World* program run by Manari Ushigua offers specifically this type of experience to students of his newly established *Shimaka* school: to be able to study dreams under the use of sacred plants, mediated through the *yachag*, within the forest context. This type of art-life program seems to take away the spectacle component from such works as Neto’s and proposes a very interesting site for artists and others alike to learn from and experience with Amazonian plants and healers. My last question remains, is this a possible role for art nowadays? Is it possible to take art out of

the circuit of commercial art interests in order to experience a different ontological realm in the house of plants? The contiguity of the artist as *yachag* remains in that ability to bring these experiences out of the territory of ritual and into the territory of art without the loss of meaning. As I have argued before, it remains questionable if the art institution is capable of retaining or providing such sacred ritualistic environments: the idea that other works of art that share the same characteristics of totality may also be providers of ecstasy. The frontier between art and life is more and more porous every day and maybe that is the shift needed for the public to understand art and life in a contiguity rather than in excision or isolation.

In the case of *Um Sagrado Lugar* since the first time I saw it, I have reflected on the real potential of this work to usher a different public close to the notion of a new philosophy, a new way of seeing the world of reality and dream in a different perspective. The sheer contact Neto establishes with a culture that lives a good part of their lives in altered states of consciousness, is an eye and heart opener for the public who have been accustomed to perceive art only through the retinal organ and most often through a Kantian notion of beauty. In Kant's own words: "There can be no objective rule of taste by which what is beautiful may be defined by means of concepts." (63) The experience Neto offers is quite different from any other fruition from a work of art that such publics may have had, nevertheless, as Ushigua says, higher levels of knowledge are only to be achieved within the jungle. In Lydia Cabrera's words it is *El Monte* itself who teaches the pupil: "Todo se encuentra en el Monte -los fundamentos del cosmos- y todo hay que pedirselo al Monte, que nos lo da todo." "Everything is in the forest –the foundations of the cosmos– and everything has to be asked from the forest which gives us everything" (13). It is the plants, the spirits localized in every single being that inhabit this universe we call forest or jungle, which give out the learning process. Specific rituals which entail preparation and rigor

might not be made outside of the ritual context or the territory they belong to, because some knowledge only lives in situ. Not in vain anthropologists and ethnographers are dependent for their research in what they call fieldwork: they go and live with the peoples, beings or communities they want to learn from (at least in traditional anthropology). As two years of the Covid 19 pandemic have passed, the world as a whole has realized that it is not “our planet” any longer, that decisions over it cannot be made for all beings, and that finding sustainable means to engage with the work of art is a matter of enormous responsibility.

As a purveyor of seeds for dissemination, Neto’s *Cupixawa* could actually be a great pollinator for it may act as the bee that escorts pollination much needed in other flowers and sites. The dissemination, as we can see from the 2017 Venice Biennale to present day, has taken place all over the world. There seems to be almost no art exhibition that does not engage the biocentric turn and its respective interpretation through the eyes of artists. The extensive dissemination and dispersal of these seeds has meant, unfortunately, that the mediatory and ventriloquist voice of the artist has also been dispersed. In his essay “Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory” Arjun Appadurai writes:

But in field work, there is a curious double ventriloquism. While one part of our traditions dictates that we be the transparent medium for the voices of those we encounter in the field, that we speak for the native point of view, it is equally true that we find in what we hear some of what we have been taught to expect by our own training, reading, and cultural backgrounds. (1)

Expectations that could pose a very problematic stance when translated into the art field.

Contemporary artists most often talk about or speak for another subject who traditionally does not have a voice. This is usually the case with the weak, indigenous communities and presently,

plants and animals. In the case of indigenous communities, more and more they are raising their own non-mediated voices. Nevertheless, the plant will not speak if it is not through human speech. As I have stated before, plants speak through Amazonian *yachags* who ancestrally have retained the knowledge of communication with them. More and more artists, though, are devising ways, not ritual or sacred, to communicate with plants. Some artists, as is the case of Ernesto Neto, proposed for the Venice Biennale a specific site in order for participants to savor and taste teas or different herbs, (plants) translating, thus the nonhuman plant experience into a human relational experience. However, it is important to wonder, because the time will come when these practices will fall into disuse, what is and will be the role of the artist if she turns into a mediator of the unvoiced. I wonder if there is still a place for the practice of the artist who relentlessly seeks the modern notion of artist-poet in pursuit of her own voice. Or is that placement confined to the realm of written poetry only? Theodor Adorno believed there is another positioning of the role of the artist that is found in works that obey a constant poetic investigation. As he states in his letter to Benjamin "...—that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical law of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be produced and made" (528). He may speak of the artists' freedom in found worlds, a sort of distinct search that reaches into the artist's most imperative questions in relation to the world. According to Deborah Danahay in her work *Auto/ethnography, Rewriting the Self and the Social*: "The term (autoethnography) has a double sense - referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. Thus, either a self- (auto-) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto-) ethnography can be signaled by "autoethnography" (2). Nevertheless, in an era of so many memoirs, social media self-portraits (selfies) and plain

autobiographical self-consciousness, it is important to remain cautious of too much mediation or too much self-awareness. As a popular Cuban saying goes: “*Ni mucha vela que queme al santo, ni tan poca que no lo alumbre.*” Not so much light that may burn the saint, and not so little that may not illuminate him.

4.3 Mask, Earth, Animal, Plant:

Bernardo Oyarzún: The Sacred Meaning of the *Werkén* or Holy Messenger



Fig. 24 Bernardo Oyarzún, *Werken*. Installation, 1500 Mapuche masks and led sign. Venice Biennale 2017

Werken (fig. 24) is the installation by artist Bernardo Oyarzún at the Chilean Pavilion of the 2017 Venice Biennale. It consists of one thousand and five hundred Mapuche masks standing on fine metal lines, and six thousand and nine Mapuche last names that appear in an intermittent

red led sign along the walls of the room. Entering the room where it is installed, an eerie sensation of lost worlds and lost names and faces, nonetheless present in the invisible space of evocation, is conveyed. The installation, according to Ticio Escobar, art critic and curator of the Chilean exhibition “...works the notion of concealment/ unconcealment of the Mapuche subject.”

(5) In the curatorial text for the exhibition he writes:

On one hand, it faces the truncated social and political representation that disdains their names and their faces, undermines their management in the game of power and relegates their place in the distribution of social places. On the other, it assumes the ignored aesthetic representation, whose expedients of sneaking and displacement allow the reintroduction of issues that better operate from the detour of what is missing. (5)

What is missing is the displaced Mapuche people, but not as subjects, more as intensities, as what is there but is not visible: a ghost, what Ann Braude calls “radical spirits.”²² In Bernardo Oyarzún’s own words, he is interested in the poetic rescuing of the language: “I’m interested in the political power that the Mapuche cultural resistance movement has, and the curious fact that it fails to be erased from any of the most powerful territorial items: the toponymy and the anthroponymy” (3). Chile, through the voice of its governments, has been interested in providing a whitewashed idea of names and places where the idealized Mapuche lived, as if they were no more. As something that was, but is no longer: a magical act that replaces what is, for what is not any longer. If there is a presence we cannot touch, nevertheless we sense, we talk about spirits. And this is what the masks and the red led sign’s last names conceal, a veiled presence that constantly unconceals throughout the manner that the installation suggests. The presence of such ghosts surrounds the audience, perhaps subtly, perhaps not so subtly. In Escobar’s words: “Provided with the ability to show by hiding, of visualizing (not visibilizing) the absent, images

can restore, by an instant at least, the place of the event: a vacant place. There, the evicted names can shine” (4). The atmosphere that the masks and shining last names provide, are, invariably as in a game of occultations, an uncanny sensation that is lurking in the shadows to be only partially sensed at times. That is, unfortunately also the place of the Mapuche community present now in Chile: they have been so utterly invisibilized that they no longer know if they are or not Mapuche. Because of the game of occultations, many Mapuche last names have been changed to enter into the group of socially accepted Spanish patronymics. Escobar writes: “The set of masks also suggests a menacing multitude; a quiet, expecting audience” (11). Quietly expecting what? I would dare to say reparations, visibility, the place they were displaced from.

Oyarzún is able to provide this place of reparations for them. Although not a government authority, he is an artist who chooses to speak from his own locus of enunciation as a Mapuche himself, not an artist-anthropologist speaking for the other since he is actually that other. He explains:

The significance that a development like this could posit is very simple, to work what is mine, what is linked locally, trying not to be external to the thing, I avoid anthropological processes about others as if they were external to me, in those conditions artistic production is possible without falling prey to fetishism or illustration. (1)

In other words, speaking about his own culture he is speaking about himself; he indeed, works a sort of autoethnography that happens to place himself in the very center of research. His place of enunciation in that way is unique, because he not only speaks the language of the master, as Audre Lorde would say, but he also is able to dismantle “the house of the master with his own tools” (1). If there is concealment of the spirits in the masks, there is unconcealment of their voices in their ghostly presence.

Werken in Mapuche language means messenger. The messenger that in present times carries a message across time and generations. It is quite fascinating to find the concept of messenger, as hermeneutical hinge, in its propriety. In Vattimo and Zabala the word hermeneutics, "...refers to the discipline's origin in Hermes (whose name points back to his winged feet), the messenger of the gods renowned for his speed, athleticism, and swiftness and who exercised the practical activity of delivering the announcements, warnings, and prophecies of the gods of Olympus" (80). However, every time and again the message found different interpretations: "Hermes was often accused of thievery, treachery, and even anarchy, because the messages were never accurate" (Vattimo and Zabala 80); In this same vein, the *werken*, a messenger of the *curacas* or kings, was to deliver messages to the subdits, or other *curacas*. Across time the message comes to us viewers of Oyarzún's installation as an invitation to view the Mapuche in their own extinction voyage, almost a plea to save a language and a people, from oblivion. Escobar sustains that "...the ritual is a social *mise en scene*, a representation that functions coalescing society and also renewing its social contract, thus, alleviating it from tiredness" (11). But ritual is also performance and as such the mask signals the chance to represent the unrepresentable.

Ann Braude speaks about American 19th century women from the northeastern United States, who were part of the spiritualist search, and who, at the same time were radical feminists dedicated to promote women's rights such as suffrage and abortion. They communicated with spirits who, in the same way as with the artist Hilma af Klint, guided them towards their accomplishments. I suggest that the masks we see in Oyarzún's installation have that quality of ritualism which calls to the spirits of Mapuche peoples who fought and still fight for their rights. Braude writes: "Feminist witchcraft, goddess worship, and a variety of New Age spiritualities incorporated feminism and spread it into new arenas" (xxiv). I am, thus collaging the

spiritualism of 19th century women radicals with ancient Amazonian spiritualism and Mapuche beliefs to convey a notion of spirits as protectors and communicators with the more-than-human. In *Werken*, Oyarzún is justly providing us Biennale visitors with the eerie and at the same time luminous experience of perceiving spirits long gone but alive in the names of the Mapuches of today.

The name *werken*, also implies a character, as Escobar writes “[a] complex character, purveyor of social words” (13). He was in charge of representing his community and the most important political figures. He continues: “These ministries required special abilities that included rhetorical eloquence, expressive potential and oratory faculties. According to Painemal Caro, the *werken* had to be able to transmit information with ‘emotional intention’” (Escobar 13). Moreover, the *werken* was a very special messenger that took on the potential to turn his words into new interpretations for the *lonkos* (most important authorities). In the same way the god Hermes was in charge of delivering messages to the different deities but was accused often of treachery because the messages were never accurate. Vattimo and Zabala write: “More than error, this alteration is the real contribution of interpretation; unlike descriptions (which pursue the ideal of total explanation), interpretation adds new vitality to the meaning” (80). The *werken* had to possess that gift of emotional intention precisely because he was to interpret messages between important political figures. His interpretations, far from being called treacherous, were welcomed as parts of the stories of the Mapuches. Oyarzún applies this perception to the masks communicating an excess of messages from every perspective possible. I would venture that a glossolalia of sorts becomes apparent when the installation acquires life by way of being experienced by the public speaking different languages and dialects. This glossolalia acquires the power of disseminating the voices of Mapuches, their stories, their longings. The cacophony

becomes exasperating while the extinct last names appear and disappear in red shiny letters. Oyarzún himself becomes a trickster messenger, a *werken*, officializing a ritual that names those not present, nonetheless calling their absence to witness an identity ceremonial. In Escobar's words "The *werken* has the ability to announce the possible time of an expectation that historic reality seems to have closed: a virtual politics capable of envisioning beyond the social, its irrepresentable side" (14). That emergency of the expectation of a possible change is what seems so akin to weak thought in Oyarzún's *mise en scene*. By naming the six thousand and nine Mapuche names and invoking the spirits with the void masks of the messengers, the artist also invokes their existence and gives them recognition. Even if the Chilean state does not acknowledge damages and has not given any reparations to the Mapuche nation, this gesture introduced by Oyarzún is already a prospect of tweaking and changing weakly, the profound invisibilization and decimation of this southern Amerindian nation.

In a palpable gesture, the *Werken* is an act of dissemination of the subtle revolutionary act of being a Mapuche and carrying a Mapuche last name; it is a gesture that prevents loss and oblivion. It marks the senses of the viewer and carries the seed that gentle naming and seeing provides. And then there is the very formal presence of the mask, that fetish of the other, so dear to modernist art. In Oyarzún's own words:

And then, the theme of representation...I found that the Mapuche mask is in itself a unity, a work of art, it has an impressive synthesis, has no color, two points, a line, a project of a nose a bit *picassean*, the horse hair mustache, it has synthesis and also amazing expression, so I think it fulfills all the challenges of contemporary art: it reflects the world, represents a subject and it does it through an aesthetic operation, very delicate and unbelievably fair. (8)

The mask is a unity but not only in the modernist placement Oyarzún finds for it. In implying a *picassean* abstraction, the *puissance* of the ritual mask is erased, invisibilizing the obvious multiplicity of the installation. The aesthetic operation he speaks of is obliterated by the sheer magical ritual of placing these spirits of the masks in a gallery to disperse their force and energies throughout the Arsenal. In this case it is not the *mise en scene* of the Mapuche *machi* or *chamana* but its interpretation through the eyes of an artist who identifies as a Mapuche messenger and effectively achieves his goal of conveying the message to the Biennale viewer. I cannot help but wonder if those spirits present in the jungle and the Chilean forest are able to travel with the masks to inhabit the places they are summoned to. Oyarzun refers to the *kollong* who are the spirit protectors of the *werken*s themselves and who are summoned through special rituals like the *Machitun* where the *machi* or *chamana* cures or liberates her patients from evils; these spirits act against malefic energies. They can be sensed in the installation, whispering, blowing, and dispersing the seeds of a different kind of knowledge throughout the Arsénale.

In this placement of the absence of those for whom the masks were made, phantasms, there is a component of ritual but also of the “popularization” of the mask itself; the mask is a work of popular or folk art that has been designed by a conjunction of modes of production clearly in disavowal of the great art object. In *The Way of Masks*, Levi-Strauss writes:

Considered under a semantic perspective, a myth does not acquire sense but after it has been brought back to its transformational group; equally a type of mask, considered only under the plastic arts perspective, replies to other types, which entasis and colors it transforms assuming their own individuality. (18)

It is clear that the sense of the mask in Oyarzún’s *Werken* is provided by its relationship with the other masks, the same way that a myth is part of a group of myths that tell the tale not by

individuality but by multiplicity. The fifteen hundred masks are able to produce a “cluster of masks” and by this virtue, they are afforded entering into a contemporary art context in which the mask is no longer an exotic object to be admired in the vitrines of the museum, but has acquired voice and last name, in short: a singularity. The manner in which Oyarzún places the fifteen hundred masks finds a way to dissipate their use as folkloric pieces for they stand *in lieu* of lost Mapuche people. In combination with the six thousand, nine hundred and nine Mapuche last names that keep happening within the red led they make a powerful mixture of low-tech and crafty popular wisdom. None of these components are to be called formalist or contrived because the artist himself is well immersed in the language needed to be part of a contemporary art context. I can see why it is so prevalent that those other manifestations called “arte popular” (folk art), supposedly formalist and contrived do not gain access to the main art gatherings of the world, maintaining an invisible glass ceiling that seems almost impossible to break for indigenous artists not trained in the western contemporary art canons. Oyarzún is able to bridge this impasse and does it with the authority given to the Mapuche artist by the *machi* who had to be consulted to find out if the spirits of the masks gave Oyarzún permission to use them. In the same way that plants, animals and rivers have masters of their own, also objects like masks are imbued with the spirit of their master.

In the case of the Mapuche masks, they are representations of those long-gone ancestors who are watching their people from their own time and space and thus are backed also by their master, who needs to give permission for them to be used outside rituality. The ceremonial ritual attributes are to be used only as the *machi* sees convenient, for this purpose she consults the *kollongs* who give their blessing for the non-ceremonial use of the masks. The passage of the ceremonial object to an art context, from ritual to art, is a complicated negotiation that needs to

be taken in accordance and compliance with the spirits in question. This kind of respect, unknown to us in the art world, is finding more and more ground as we shift the ways we relate to the nonhuman. It enlivens a position that is in no manner formal, it is in no way “disinterested” in Kantian terms, but it takes into account the notion of relationship and connectedness to all: earth, fire, wood, light, wind. It speaks of a different approach to art and life perhaps so different we are not able to recognize the traditional notions of art in any object or creations any longer; only complex life happening within every art context.

For one, stripping away the rituality of the mask and placing it in a folk art or modernist context, turns the mask into a completely different set of semantic signs. It becomes a spiritless object, vitrine ornament, exotic accoutrement of strange peoples. As Levi-Strauss suggest when speaking about Picasso’s own appropriation of the African mask:

With the difference, however, that those dangerous exercises of a lone man that have left us breathless during thirty years, have been practiced by an indigenous culture for fifty or more years. Because we have no reason to doubt that this multi morphous art has not been developed at the same rhythm of its remotest origins, which are occult. (12)

Piccaséan, as Oyarzún himself calls the synthesized line nose of the Mapuche mask, is a way of saying that the cultural heritage we derive from the *Demoiselles D’Avignon* is a lot more profound than the origin itself of the masks depicted by Picasso. Other than *piccaséan* the line nose is a rigorous resource of the ability for abstracting forms the Mapuches used in the making of the masks. But that is the power of dispersal that the mask has had over the continents. Occult and hidden behind the “genius” artist, is the work and the myths of many peoples, themselves the magicians of the earth. Furthermore, it has taken us a whole century to demystify the man behind the masks of the *Demoiselles*. It has taken us a century to give back the exotic paraphernalia and

objects to their owners, after centuries of misappropriations. In this light it is actually very powerful to see Oyarzún's respectful use of his own people's masks and the reparations given to an entire nation through the invocation of those six thousand, nine hundred and six patronymics. The *werkens* have brought their message in the installation that has stayed with me for years now, laboring its work of dissemination of the cry and the fight of the Mapuches of the 21st century.

4.4 Quipu Mapocho: Opacity and Predatory Alterity in Cecilia Vicuña's Work



Fig. 25 *Quipu Mapocho*, Cecilia Vicuña. Textile Installation traversing the Mapocho river in Chile. 2016

Thousands of years ago a nine year old boy was sacrificed to the god *Viracocha* lord of the *Mapocho* river in the high Andes of Chile to prevent drought and ensure the waters to generously give the Inca people their share of life.²³ His preserved body was found at the very

top of *Cerro el Plomo*, recoiled as a seed inside earth's bosom, where his spirit was hidden from sight for thousands of years protecting the people and the waters of the river.²⁴ Artist Cecilia Vicuña learned about this discovery when she was a child, and she felt called, her spirit relating to the boy, united with him by the sacred thread of life, summoned to continue the work of this sacrifice to ensure the generosity of the waters for generations to come. *Cauri Paccsa* or *Niño de El Plomo*, as the preserved body has come to be known, performed a strong calling to her, specially, when years later, she discovered that the red thread she had been working with most of her life was running between the boy's petrified fingers. She imagined the thread to be an extension of the boy, himself an extension of the mountain and water, the fluid that runs through earth. The boy was like a seed, the hidden embryo that needs the obscure bosom of earth to sprout, opacity is its cradle and alterity is its soil. How to imagine seed without obscurity or opacity? How to imagine sacrifice without alterity? I contend that opacity is key to incubation and the seat of life's process. However, it is not possible to understand opacity if we do not grasp the notion of alterity in its thread: "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics" writes Edouard Glissant, and he adds: "To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components" (190). Vicuña's *Quipu Mapocho* (fig. 25) a woven, knotted textile is alike the texture of the flows of the river as well as the thread in the boy's hands and different in its "irreducible singularity" to all its components (Glissant 190). Opacity, in its singularity, seems to be the ability to remain in wonderment towards the questions of the cosmos that are not answerable.

To remain in the expectancy of that which is passed through storytelling from one generation to another, and has no scientific basis. The *Quipu Mapocho* in its strange voyage down the waters of the river that traverses down the Andes, knows no end or beginning, nor does

it know, or the artist, what entanglements it will approach.²⁵ As Glissant writes: “For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.” (190) When Vicuña first met *El niño de El Plomo*, she just stayed with his image for a long time, not knowing how, or not wanting to discover what lies at the very bottom of his body and his story. She dwelled with the possibility of his image to disentangle knots and obscure sacrifices staying with the trouble for years and years. The preserved boy had been a sacrificial rite to the river *Mapocho*, and this sacrifice in its opacity along with the signifying violence of his death are to be understood under an “economy of predatory alterity.” Viveiros de Castro writes about the idea that the integral core of a social body is constituted by many other beings, “... symbolic resources –names and souls, persons and trophies, words and memories—from the exterior” (144). Thus, in this case, opacity and predatory alterity are a continuation, making it almost impossible to understand one without the other. It is Levi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind*, which provided Viveiros de Castro with the concept of metonymic contiguity in sacrifice, a trope that points to the sacrifice of the boy as an equivalence to divine grace for the people of the river banks, as we can read it in his words: “The scheme of sacrifice consists in an irreversible operation (the destruction of the victim) with a view to setting off an equally irreversible operation, on another plane (the granting of divine grace), which is required by the fact that two ‘recipients’, situated at different levels, have previously been brought into communication” (Levi-Strauss 225). If we expect to understand in terms of concepts and scientific explanations the reason behind the sacrifice of the boy, we would be trying to operate a transparency that would overload the very fine notion of the story of the *Niño de El Plomo*.

Vicuña, a Chilean mestiza artist, intuitively deeper than to exploit and mine the delicate significance of such a sacrifice, intending, instead, to continue its thread so the exposed seed of

the boy's body would not decay due to light and transparency. She has an epiphany of sorts in which she hears the call of the spirit of the river inviting her to continue the work initiated by the sacrifice. This continuity of sacrifice-labor-grace is a metonymy in which the preserved body of the boy, once hidden in the bosom of the mountain, now naked to the profane eye, is turned into life by Vicuña's labor and becomes the grace granted in the performing installation of red thread that swims down the *Mapocho* river. The predatory alterity that is at the cradle of the ritual is understood in its opacity by the continuation of the sacrifice. The myth of the *Niño del Cerro El Plomo* is in this way able to give us a hint, just a thin opening into the opacity and predatory alterity of the Inca rites in the High Andes. Viveiros de Castro, in his deconstruction of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* cites them in explaining why return to myth:

Resorting to myth is indispensable, not because myth would be a transposed or even an inverse representation of real relations in extension, but because only myth can determine the intensive conditions of the system (the system of production included) in conformity with indigenous thought and practice. (157)

For this reason, to be able to at least make an attempt to elucidate what the rites of this sacrifice that took the life of the small boy at the mountain meant, the myth is able to explain something that concepts would not. Moreover, if we did not have the myth at the base of sacrificial rituals, we would completely misunderstand the *puissance* or the power behind the ritual the Incas performed at the banks of the *Mapocho*. It is important to understand that the supposed lack of concepts does not entail a lack of intricacy or ability to philosophize from the indigenous groups. In Viveiros de Castro's words: "This absence of the rational concept, that is, could be taken as a positive sign of the existential disalienation of the peoples in question – the manifestation of a state in which knowledge and action, thought and sensation, and so on are inseparable" (80). As

a matter of fact, the possibility of a state of knowledge and action, through sensation is comparable to the most advanced notions of intelligence known to humans.

The myth tells that the god *Viracocha* had to be given in sacrifice every year the most beautiful and healthy child from the towns of the *Collasuyu*, the southernmost territory of the *Tahuantinsuyu*, for the ceremony of the *Capacocha* or the feeding of the river.²⁶ The child was prepared with rich accessories, to later undergo the long road to the top of *Cerro El Plomo* where he was to be buried alive. He was fed coca leaves and *chicha*, an alcoholic beverage made of fermented corn so he would fall fast asleep before death arrived in his frozen grave. It is difficult to say if the unburial of the boy's body is as terrifying as his sacrifice. The search for transparency that science and money driven archeological endeavors represent, are always at odds with the desire of leaving things in opacity for them to retain their mystical state intact, and the sacrifice still in place. Vicuña's installation is a reenactment of the value of the sacrifice of the child to ensure the flowing waters of the river. It is then both in opacity and predatory alterity that we find the nuanced path to understand complete and utter otherness, not otherness that results from seeing myself in the mirror of the other, but true otherness, so other that we cannot even conceive. Such is the difficulty that the predatory alterity of the sacrifice of *El Niño de el Cerro de Plomo* presents us with; to such overbearing ethical and cultural discomfort I offer the words of Glissant:

I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) not to 'make' him in my image. (193)

It will not be necessary then, to understand why the Incas sacrificed the boy for the god *Viracocha* in the manner they did. It would be enough to feel in solidarity with them; for which the work of the artist opens a possibility. In placing the red thread of her *Quipu Mapocho* on the waters of the river, she is conceiving the opacity of the other without being reproached for her own opacity. The metonymic contiguity that the triad sacrifice-labor-grace enacts is then the passage for the artist into her own opacity and, why not, predatory alterity. As Oswald de Andrade declared in his Cannibal Manifesto: “Cannibalism. Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into a totem. The human adventure. The earthly goal” (43). As an invitation into an anthropophagy that mimics the well-known “model of inspiration” the Europeans served themselves from the Americas, Africa, etc. For every culture which has been cannibalized by conquest, *Quipu Mapocho* in its own fluid textures provides a continuous translation of that predatory alterity. It is not difficult to search for identity when it is understood through the power of myth’s opacity.

The words of Glissant illuminate the moment: “The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror” (17). Decolonizing the mind would be then to go truly beyond the limits of decolonization itself, a task that seems impossible at times. However, when translated by the voyage that Vicuña embarks on with the red woven thread floating down the river, the waters seem to contradict an overwhelming desire for transparency. On the contrary *Quipu* navigates the *Mapocho* in search for the opacity that lies at the seat of life, in continuity with the notion of predatory alterity and its woven textures. The red thread textile floating on the river becomes one more island, a poetic addition to archipelagic relations. The *Mapocho* is also a giver of voyages and purveyor of communication. In his own way it

disseminates the seeds that carry along voices, tales and remembrances. It goes from place to place dropping seeds that will become another on the way. Not all rivers flow into the ocean though, some are contributors to other waters perhaps mightier. Vicuñas *Quipu Mapocho* carries into other waters seeds that inspire encounters and other works of art that sprout from its threads. The work of art that voyages down the river brings then the possibility of dissemination like seeds do. The work of art that is seen in this way, as a facilitator of conversations and generator of ideas and tales to share, evokes the labor of the seed to start a new seedling, a plant, a forest. Vicuñas *Quipu* is also a poetic endeavor of the artist: like seeds, her words spread a poetic use that is contagious. I have seen her words being used in marches as inspirations for women and indigenous peoples in their fight for the use of the water and the land. This ability for dissemination makes her work even more poignant nowadays when she herself is reaching old age, becoming ripe with wisdom and preparedness for a different moment to ride the waters. It tweaks knowledge and brings it forward from a different perspective, perhaps a way of non-metaphysical domination.

4.5 Art Against Metaphysical Domination

The New Freak Show in Artist Juan Zamora's Experiments with Plants

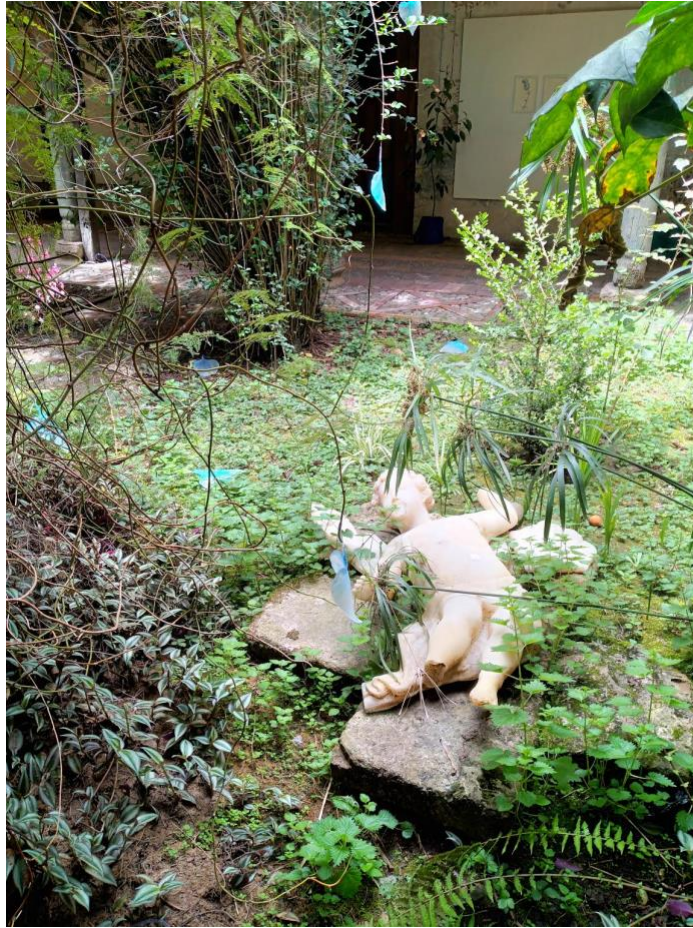


Fig. 25 Juan Zamora, Installation view of *Cambiar el verde por azul* at the XV Cuenca Biennial 2021

Cambiar el Verde por Azul (fig. 25) is the installation piece that Spanish artist Juan Zamora has at the XV Cuenca Biennial 2021. His proposal uses *noctiluca*, microscopic organisms with a voluminous spherical body and flagella, which are abundant in the sea and in certain decomposing substances. Its protoplasm has fat droplets that, when oxidized, produce phosphorescence. Zamora injects these organisms through a syringe in plants. He observes the

phenomena produced in them, as the plant declines, saddens and dies, he draws them and installs the deadened and stiffened plants as depressed specimens in a gallery. Then he collects the data and produces drawings with the same liquid, which in some way, are translations of the suffering of the plant under such stressful conditions. Plants are used in every corner, in a sad state of being, as sagging corpses of what they were once. This is one of those works of art that engage the discourse of planetary destruction with the same tools of the destruction itself: from the metaphysical space of scientific experimentation and instrumentalization of plants, rivers and animals, art pretends to provide a way of understanding other beings by translating them into a language humans can understand. There is a tremendous contradiction in this way of trying to perceive the world from another point of view, and also extreme danger of again instrumentalizing weak beings by trying to translate their experiences, their emotions and thoughts into human canons.

Artists may be at risk of pursuing scientific experimentation just to try new ways to create an interesting artifact. As the reign of the Anthropocene declines and the bio-ontological turn takes precedence, there is an abundance of experimental approaches to the artist-scientist relationship, sometimes producing a deadening insufflation of even more destructive behaviors of the human towards the nonhuman. An alliance that was supposed to induce the weakening of scientific metaphysical methods instead has given courage to some artists to undertake methods of experimentation with the goal to prove, measure and describe a factual and isolated reality that may apply to all. The idea that through tortuous experimentation with plants humans will understand what happens to them or to the *noctiluca* algae, when manipulated, is utterly cruel and wasteful. Alternatively, Marder proposes:

Proximity to the aesthetic ideal is henceforth measured not by an accurate representation of objective perfection and precision of symmetrical arrangements, but by the triumph of artists over the imposition of organic and inorganic nature, a criterion tantamount to enucleating the vestiges of plant life from their works. (126)

Enucleation of the organ of the plant itself in Zamora's body of work means the prerogative of an inability to understand plant as being. The aesthetic ideal is far from the experimentation with plants as instruments of human desire. Relating to plants as beings, means to respect and learn from them, to relate to them in equal terms, to develop ways to speak through haptic language with them. The stance of human beings does not imply to instrumentalize one species and then, once it is understood, then proceed to instrumentalize another. Again Amazonian, Andean, and other Amerindian communities tenderly show other human groups the path to collaborate and learn from plants through the bare human senses, dream and sensibility.

The objectification and instrumentalization of plants have its epitome in Juan Zamora's installation, for it inscribes itself deeply in the Biennial's title *Cambiar el verde por el azul* (to exchange green for blue). His experiment actually and in a strangely condescending way literally changes green sap for deadly blue *noctiluca*. The lament of the plant ends when it transforms into a sort of plastic corpse of that which was before. The system of classification and the regime of descriptions has its peak in this piece: a mixture of the human freak show and the zoo, it leads a new class of slavery for plants: the newly inaugurated plant freak show. Strangely, in the centuries that precede, differences turned the "othered" into slaves. Michel Foucault writes in *The Order of Things*: "To observe then, is to be content with seeing –with seeing a few things systematically. With seeing what, in the rather confused wealth of representation, can be analyzed, recognized by all, and thus given a name that everyone will be able to understand"

(134). To observe and then to inject an organism that colors the specimens of plants themselves is parallel to tracing a blueprint of them, ready for human consumption, measurement, instrumentalization and entertainment. This order of things perpetuates metaphysical domination and is in the antipodes of works of art that promote and engage weak thought.

The notion of dissemination in works of art of this kind is utterly dead. The ideas and the implementation of methodologies of torture are perhaps opposite to the possibility of multiplicity and propagation. The plant is turned into a corpse, unable to bear flowers or fruit, and obviously not seed. What remains is most probably thrown into the trash can without contemplations. Zamora's installation suffers from an irredeemable explicatory syndrome, where the concept of "changing the green for blue" is explicated through the very obvious process he subjects the plant to go through: to change from green to blue. Explication is utterly descriptive. Heidegger states "Metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp" (106). This is why explication over beings describes them to enframe them. Enframing leaves beings as "standing-reserve," despoiled from their beingness. (Heidegger 332) By being enframed beings are at a risk of becoming standing-reserve and remain in no other position but as an orderer of standing-reserve. Being enframed prevents beings from enabling their own process which is put aside in favor of a technological telos always present in absentmindedness. Though artworks as Zamora's are tied to technology it is hard to find *poiesis* in them, and for that matter, *technè*. How to find that essence in technology that is not technological though poetic? How to operate tools and contraptions in a manner that does not disturb "striatedly" the rhizome? Deleuze and Guatarri write: "Smooth space and striated space —nomad space and sedentary space—the space in which the war machine develops and the space instituted by the state apparatus—are not of the same nature" (474).

Striated space, as in Zamora's installation, is not molecular and it is not like mycelium. How to act as mycelium that populates the nutrients from plants in order to create? The banality of the artworld has replaced the spirit of art, it's very being which is *poiesis*.

The plants that served as standing-reserve in Zamora's experiments may well explicate the repercussions of a substance being injected into the green, color characteristic of the process of filtration of sun rays to produce chlorophyll, to turn it into a blue corpse that is no longer a living being but an object deprived of any cultural agency (if we take Descola's notion of contiguity of nature-culture). This approach to "vegetal torpor" writes Marder "...is the aftermath of civilization; it is what remains of plant life after its thorough cultivation and biotechnological transformation into a field of ruins" (128). Moreover, it condemns humans to an eternal role of enslavers of life.

There is nonetheless another component to Zamora's experiment. It is not data in the traditional sense, it is drawing. As part of the installation and perhaps in a less contrived manner, the artist draws various stages of the plant transformation. This more poetic component ushers an interesting though strange feeling in this atmosphere of conceptual violence since: "...it is the aesthetic approach alone that will be able to hold the detached flower in this state of indeterminacy and suspension, granting it, freedom from the concept, from an imperious teleology, from practical usage, and from the root ..." (Marder 123).



Fig. 26 Juan Zamora. *Cambiar el Verde por Azul*. Drawings. Photo Ana Fernández. 2021

These series of drawings (fig. 26) do, in actuality, free the plant from its incarceration in the chamber of experimentation that plants themselves experience within Zamora's installation. The fine depiction of stages of plant and *noctiluca* interaction, and the becoming-object of the green leaf takes on a different mode of existence as if the drawing itself, once the most traditional form of art, would be the only one able to provide a respite for the violent crystallization of plants already dead in the gallery. If vegetal freedom seems an impossible task for the immovable plant, plant slavery is definitively the only life they can live within the laboratories of experimentation, no matter how greenwashed their facade is.

The unfathomable task of dissemination is utterly impossible from the blue corpse of what was once a living being. Chained to the inability of this option is the disposability of the remnants of the installation. Once conceived as the solution for works of art in far latitudes, the

disposal of the remains turned to be problematic and is a question that has nested in my mind: I wonder what will become of the plants that turned blue? Would they be able to live beyond this inception they have been subjected to? Is there really a biocentric turn in this type of game played with creatures? I believe not. The only thing that will remain is the data of the experiment and the drawings themselves preserved as precious archives of what once was.

4.6 *Kay Quritachu Mikhunki? ¿Es Este el Oro que Comes?*

Sandra Nakamura's "*Is This the Gold you Eat*" and the Poetics of a Body Without Organs

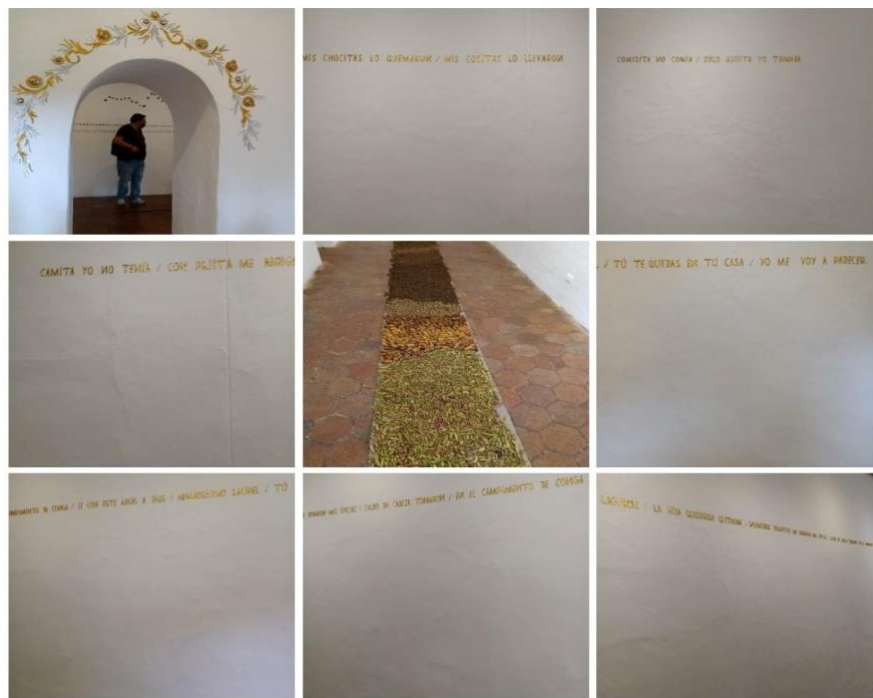


Fig. 27 Sandra Nakamura. *Is this the gold you eat?* Bienal de Cuenca 2021. Photo Ana Fernandez.

Posited in the antipodes of Zamora's work is Sandra Nakamura's *Kay Quritachu Mikhunki, Es este el oro que comes?* Is this the gold you eat? (fig. 27) a humble and exquisite installation made with golden embroidered letters attached to the walls, and a variety of potatoes

displayed on the floor. The golden letters are a poem by an indigenous woman Máxima Acuña who was, along with her family, harassed and abused by Newmont Mining Company for defending her land and their sources of water. Nakamura is Peruvian from Japanese origin and to the call of the Biocene Biennial she intuitively responded with a call from the soil from a woman who fought for it. The golden text speaks of the ambitious means of great mining companies which undermine all resources. The question that the title poses is basically: after having mined all the gold and finished all other resources, will you eat the gold? The text written in golden glitter letters reads:

Mis chocitas lo quemaron / mis cositas lo llevaron / Comidita no comía / solo aguita yo tomaba / Camita yo no tenía / Cola pajita me abrigaba / Por defender mis lagunas / la vida quisieron quitarme / ingenieros seguritas me robaron mis ovejas / caldo de cabeza tomaron / en el campamento de conga / si con este adiós adiós / hermosísimo laurel / Tu te quedas en tu casa / yo me voy a padecer...

My house was burned / my things were taken away / food I did not eat / just water I drank/ bed I did not have/ with straw I warmed myself / for defending my lakes / they wanted to take my life / security engineers robbed me of my sheep / they drank broth of sheep's head / in the conga encampment / with this goodbye goodbye / beautiful laurel / you stay at home / I will go away and suffer...

The plea written in golden letters is contrasted with the potatoes and beans installation on the floor. Opposing the mining of the land to extract her resources is the gift of life that the earth shares with those who cultivate her with love and care. Potatoes are dirt and water, care and time, nourishment that makes life for a whole community. Gold is shiny and beautiful, though it depletes the earth once it has been mined. Words are written in Spanish, the language of the

conquerors of the land and its resources, but Acuña's song is also cultivated and written on the land that bears fruits.

Potatoes are original tubercules from the Andes region from where they were exported to Europe upon the conquest of the Americas. They are produced in the coldest and highest mountain climates. However, it is mainly a crop that has been guarded by indigenous producers. Peru counts four hundred varieties of potatoes, the most amazing and diverse in the region. Potatoes are also a crop cultivated by indigenous women who are impoverished and many a time suffer systemic violence. Nakamura responds to the confinement of pandemic times with a statement finely entangled and written in golden letters in the walls of the gallery, also a confined space like a tunnel with an arched entrance that leads to another installation where a video plays Acuña singing the text. It is a small room which seems damp and somehow underlit. Although not in the information text, this confined space, speaks loads about the solitary act of cultivating the land by Andean women. The variety of seeds produced by this land, is contrasted to the limited lives of women of the region. Confined to husbands, territories, families and the destiny to serve, women seldom see diversity in their days, months, years. However, the bond to the land is unearthed in every harvest, the joy of creation is celebrated in the meal that nourishes the body, an alliance of the human and the potato plant. None of this is seen in the extraction of gold by gigantic mining companies. The process of mining is absolutely opposite to the dissemination of the seed: the potato which is fruit and seed at the same time. Gold, a greatly appreciated mineral lives hidden under the earth. It gives to the land its demeanor and composition. It belongs inside the earth. As the Aztecs said, "the gold was the feces of the Sun" and as such it belongs inside the depths of earth. Mining means to unearth the compost that the earth needs in order to be nourished. When planting potatoes, Andean farmers bury the seed deep

within the sweet and dark moisture of the soil and then they take care of it until it bears the fruit. Thus, gold and potato are both fruits of the earth, though when harvested, one nourishes and the other depletes.

Giorgio Agamben's text *The Coming Community* states in its final appendix: "The Irreparable is that things are just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being" (89). Vegetal beings, thus potatoes, in their generosity are irreparable as they are, in acceptance of the elements: soil and atmosphere; a pure being "*thus*". "Being able to see it simply, irreparably, is love" (Agamben 105). The potato, a vegetal being, lives within the land a state of irreparability, transforming rain, light, and soil into a momentous flesh with the ability to feed others. Plant becomes fruit and fruit becomes the body of other creatures. It is this tremendous ability to become-human that plants have which turns them into a machine of desire, a metamorphic notion that transforms plants into humans and vice versa. In *Metamorphoses*, Emanuele Coccia writes:

Food is the contemplation of life in its most terrifying universality: this life that digests and absorbs everything, that sustains everything and destroys everything, seemingly never content with the form in which it has been received. It seems to have no limit. Indeterminate and omnivorous, it is reluctant to renounce the possibility of further change. Open and indecisive, it is incapable of renouncing any potential future form: a chicken becomes a human being, a human being becomes a worm, a worm becomes a pigeon, etc. (97)

Thus, a metamorphic quality is embodied in every single cell. Gold, the mineral that seems to be inert, is also a metamorphosis of the rock and the sedimentation of layers and layers of earth's components. Seers or *yachags* from the Napo River in the Amazon contend that the minerals

contained in the earth are the bones and flesh of it, and unearthing them is akin to de-boning a sentient living being. The beingness afforded to the mineral ore, the bones of earth, is overridden when mined. In Nakamura's installation both potatoes and ore are given equal values as signs of a semiotic positing of the earth. They signify food and riches, nevertheless the unearthing of a potato field embodies the potential of becoming-other, contrary to the unearthing of ore which serves the only purpose of exploiting the land, the people who mine it and exponentially growing the inequality between those who have and those who have not. Nakamura brings to the exhibiting site the voice of the dispossessed through Acuña's text and song. However, this question assails me again: why does Nakamura appropriate the voice of an indigenous woman in the reclaiming of her soil? What is the artist's own voice? Is it relevant for a 21st century artist to find her own voice, or is she a poetic mediator? These questions remain open without one answer; the artist may act as an ethnographer, scientist, chef or dreamer; nevertheless, there must be some degree of wonderment or bewilderment that she brings into the art arena, which is able to provide the alchemical transformation from "just another job" into a locus of quickening for the soul, parallel to the irreparability of love.

The mediatory nature of works like Nakamura's permits us to forget the artist completely and bring us into the particulars of the problematic and lamentable state of the soil and the people in mining communities. Foucault writes "The author-function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society." (950) Thus, he forwards the awareness of a mode of being that is afforded an author. In Nakamura's work the author has apparently "disappeared." It is in some way an ideal state of authorship in which the author is no longer present, just as Foucault intended: "All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected,

would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur” (953). The question posed "who is speaking?" interchanges for "does it matter?" and, subsequently, when we are able to answer "it does not" we have really arrived to the overcoming of authorship and consequently to the notion of the work of art as a murmur, a multiplicity of overlapping texts or the "body without organs" that Deleuze and Guattari propose. “This body without organs,” they write, “is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles” (40). This is perhaps the most interesting proposition of works of art like Nakamura’s in the XV Cuenca Biennial: they become texts that continue each other; books, images, manifestations, myths, masks that become parts of a larger discourse in which the visitor is the interpreter, the hermeneutical actor who translates among languages, texts, signs.

Nakamura’s work extends a dialogue with the next installation, and the next, murmuring in this way a weaving of signs, motions and intensities that transpose the viewing of the work of art into the meanderings of a body without organs. “As an assemblage,” write Deleuze and Guattari, “a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs” (4). In this plane, Nakamura’s work acts as a text that connects with other texts as installations, with other murmurations in the same gallery, infinitely rhizomatic in its line of flights, intensities and haecceities. As a body without organs this installation is able to disseminate through voices heard and not heard, the liminality of the encounters the seed must maintain in order to actually be capable of in-planting itself. Many a time in the higher Andes the potato seed remains *pasmada*, (stunned); it is a seed locked in itself without the possibility of becoming-potato because of the harshness of the winds, the chilly rains and the feared *helada* (frost). This stage, nevertheless, does not mean the seed is unable to be planted again. Its process

may be halted, but as a little machine of desire it conserves intact inside the possibility of becoming-plant and fruit, again. It only needs the right moment to sprout in the moisture of soil to be able to once again disseminate throughout the land. As I walk away from Nakamura's work at the Biennial, I wonder what will become of the potatoes used in the installation, will they have a chance to become-human or become-animal through the eating process? Will they be cooked and fed to the Biennial workers? Will they be planted to be disseminated again and become-soil? This possibility of metamorphosis is immense for the potato, perhaps never ending. For the golden letters, conversely, they will probably be returned to Nakamura's studio. The gold of the mines of the high Andes of Perú notwithstanding, is most probably adorning rich necks or accumulating value in some dusty vault. The song that Acuña sang remains in the audience's memories. Her land is also in the memories of those displaced by the mining industry.

4.7 Overcoming Metaphysical Domination

Undoubtedly art is a mode of weak thought. Its ways are feeble perhaps, not always understood, not always a seed that lands in fertile soil. Nevertheless, its nuanced cadences are means for societies to reach other understandings. Creatures such as the pangolin, the potato, the mask, the plant and the river most often are spoken of in a ventriloquial manner. However, at times the artist is able to provide a locus of interrogation that despoils her audiences from their hardest protections and excuses. Is the plant-*yachag*-artist triad a means to dismantle metaphysical domination? I believe so, for it is only in the very small tweaking of the systems that meaningful change is found. The dream, the mediatory nature of some artistic performances, the radical spirits living in masks come alive, all those spirited creatures are enablers of weak thought that wreck the enframing of systemic oppression. Decentering the metaphysical stand of

humans, which for centuries has reigned over all the nonhuman is one of the tasks of post-metaphysical thought; as such in this hermeneutic possibility of interpretation of one of the weakest, most subaltern beings known, we find a manner of being, dwelling and thinking that is altogether other. One of the questions I asked at the beginning of this research was: where lies the possibility of vegetal democracy in the alliance plant-*yachag*-artist? In what ways these three systems of haptic, mythological and epistemological clusters communicate?

Marder proposes a Heideggerian approach to the existence of vegetal life making a distinction between the ontical nomination and instrumentalization of plants as opposed to their ontological recognition as Being. Plant ontology shepherds the notion of agency and community organization (which is culture) that vegetal beings have. Because of the constant instrumentalization they have undergone as human and animal nutrition or as nominalist objects to be named and classified by science, their inconspicuousness as beings has been perpetuated. In spite of their strange familiarity most humans have not been able to recognize in vegetal beings traits of themselves. They remain the closest and the farthest. Vattimo and Zabala introduce a very important and poignant terrain: “Metaphysical democracy is a system sustained by those who find themselves at ease with its order of facts, norms and institutions” (37). It has been the thought of the winners, those who have written history, but the weak, which have nowadays become the vast majority of the population of planet Earth, are not those who write history. In this line of thinking the notion of weak thought talks about the respect for minorities, differences, and especially the weak. In their own words “It is important to emphasize that the negative connotation of the term “weak” does not allude to a failure of thinking as such but rather to the consequences of the transformation of thought brought about by the end of metaphysics, hence as a possibility of emancipation” (97). Weak then, refers to those who do not control the means

of production, who are left out and do not have a voice in the media, who are continually discriminated and unheard. They define the weak as “the discharge of capitalism, that is of metaphysical realism, and they are what Heidegger called 'Being'; Derrida, the 'margins of philosophy'; and Walter Benjamin, 'the tradition of the oppressed'” (7). In this case I am speaking not of humans but of the beings of plants, those spirits that inhabit forests, *montes*, botanical gardens, cities and nowadays are the concerns of artists and art venues around the globe.

I began this chapter with an epigraph by Georges Bataille. I end it in the same mode citing him: “[i]t is the very separation of Man’s being, it is his isolation of Nature, and, consequently, his isolation in the midst of his own kind, which condemn him to disappear indefinitely” (191). For it is man, human being, who has thought of him/her as apart and different from *phusis* existing only in a notion of *lex natura* which dominates nature and stands apart from it. If there is any presage of fortune in the future, if there is any future possible at all for humankind, it is in human’s inclusion within the notion of Bataille’s Nature, not in his/her exclusion and the hubris of dominating other kingdoms, which has proven to be a dead end. I can’t avoid wondering if the notion of Amerindian indigenous communities of a contiguity of nature/culture is a passage for other human groups to attain another placement towards the more-than-human. Some artists, for one, are working on that line, where it is difficult to separate what has been done by humans and what has been made by the nonhuman. People from colonized lands still struggle with such concepts, because as it is difficult to decolonize the gaze and the mind, it is difficult to dehumanize it. By dehumanizing I mean something different but also analogous to what Ortega y Gasset called “dehumanization”. As he writes in his essay “The Dehumanization of Art”:

When we analyze the new style we find that it contains certain closely connected tendencies. It tends (1) to dehumanize art, (2) to avoid living forms, (3) to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art, (4) to consider art as play and nothing else, (5) to be essentially ironical, (6) to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization, (7) to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence. (26)

What I mean by de-humanizing art in a nonhuman context, is to imagine that art might not only avoid human forms, but would be entirely the creation of nonhumans and thus nature would be an agent creator with a point of view, thus with perspective, which I imagine is not something completely far from what some communities are accomplishing already. It would mean play and nothing else, it will be of no transcending consequence, and clearly, it would be essentially ironical. The possibility these works of art have to give the viewers or participants a sense of perplexity, those not seeking truths but asking themselves questions about other worlds and other visions, is a probability, even remote, that art finds a way to be disseminated and potentially brings a subtle change to societies.

As I write these final words I encounter and learn about a little plant: *pakunga*, a humble and somewhat unknown weed of the northern Andes. It is used to encourage growth of scar tissue both inside and outside the body, good for gastritis, and also an antioxidant. The entire plant can be used for different purposes. She disseminates in a most eccentric way: attaching itself to the skins of animals, bird feathers and human clothes in order to disperse and proliferate. After a brief walk to the fields, my pants are full of *pakungas*. I patiently sit and pick them out of my clothes as I blow the seeds encouraging them to disperse and make many more little plants that will help heal superficial wounds and create strong hides to bear the coming seasons.

Chapter 5 Mapping the Soil

5.1 In the End it Was the Beginning, Towards a Phenomenology of the Ends of Worlds



Fig. 29 Maria Sybilla Merian. *Pineapple*, 1705 From the *Insects of Surinam* Volume

Pineapple (fig. 29) is one of the magnificent botanical illustrations of Maria Sybilla Merian, a German born artist, the first woman naturalist, botanist and entomologist, to be recognized as such. In 1705, she traveled to Suriname in the company of her daughter to conceive the *Surinam Volume*, a compendium of the flora and insects of Suriname. The above illustration depicts a pineapple plant which has a very peculiar style of reproduction: it is *parthenocarpic* which means that the production of the fruit does not depend on the setting of the

seed.²⁷ As members of the bromeliad family, pineapples are a world in themselves, harboring a myriad of beings within it. The pineapple itself is a very strange fruit that almost appears to be some kind of animal. The pineapple was one of the most exotic creatures that ever traveled across the Atlantic upon the conquest of the Americas. It brought with it the relentless tropicity of the new world, which opened a vision of an upcoming revolution for all worlds. This historical change upended old Europe and transformed it into something unknown. A world ends and another one is born, and the one which ended turns into a different one altogether. When Spain and Portugal stepped on the Americas or the *Abya Yala*, their intrusion meant an end of various worlds; it was not only the Aztec, Maya or Inca worlds ending, it was also the end of Cortés' and Pizarro's world as they had known it: a clash of many visions, many cultures and many ways of settling the earth that collided. Worlds ended and worlds began. The tasty pineapple became the favorite fruit of European kings, *maize* changed how the world baked bread, potatoes saved lives, and tomatoes found uncanny new modes of being. Mutated viruses traveled from the old continent to the new and harrowingly killed entire populations. It was the end. And it was the beginning.

Present days resemble those of the past. It is a moment quite like the conquest when too many things were so new, many terms were created, such an abundance of new experiences happened, that humans of the old and the new worlds found no way to explain anything any longer. A "semiotic inflation" where there are too many words and very little meaning. As the "infosphere" or "...the sphere of the intentional signs that surround the sensible organism..." (Berardi 40) has conquered the minds and days of most peoples on planet earth, the idea of the fold and the rhizome explain some of these phenomena, concatenated one with the other, on a loop without end. In *The Fold*, Deleuze quotes Gottfried Leibniz: "Each portion of matter may

be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish. But every branch of each plant, every member of each animal, and every drop of its liquid parts is in itself likewise a similar garden or pond” (9). One contains the other, a world may seem in itself a container but is contained within another one and again another world. So, the end is not an end.

The time of the conquest of the Americas, a baroque moment, was a fold of this kind, a fold so entangled that the inhabitants of the Iberic peninsula were attuned to a mode of thinking that contained many other folds. A “multiplicity of folds” as Deleuze would call it, a labyrinth of the mind (3). A phenomenological approach to this end or beginning has also no beginning or end, it is rhizomatic in nature, it may take the facade of social media, but may also be a virus infecting all of humanity, the vaccinated and the unvaccinated alike. No longer able to go on living as they did once, inhabitants of the earth in the XXI century may extinguish themselves rapidly. Vast portions of those humans find themselves addicted to synthetic opioids, cannabis, cocaine, psilocybin and other plant-based substances which seem to provide some relief and answers to an otherwise unanswerable world. The gods are silent; the silence is so profound that only *piedras madre*, mother rocks or perhaps clay and sap could respond.²⁸

In this phenomenology I propose, different knowledge or *conocimientos*, apparently disconnected, find sensitive concatenations with each other. Berardi’s writes: “Sensibility is the sense-driven creation of conjunctions, and the ability to perceive the meaning of shapes once they have emerged from chaos” (14). Thus, the knowledge of plants, its multiple interpretations through the Amazonian *yachag* or *chamana*, and the ability to connect all these worlds that the artist in trance has, finally finds a boiling point in an alembic of sorts. Primarily disconnected things have found a way of providing resources and roads to imagine what another world may look like. Terrans are at the edge of the abyss and there is not one road open but hundreds and

thousands of ways to reach the other side. A labyrinth, rich in multiplicities. Not one path is correct, although governments and parties of all kinds offer formulas. In George Didi-Huberman's words: "It consists of a funeral lament on the moment, in Italy, of the disappearance of fireflies, those human signals of innocence annihilated by the night—or by the "fierce" brilliance of spotlights—of triumphant fascism" (9). Small tweaking again will be the best way to find *chaquiñanes* or little paths to encounter the remaining fireflies.

Not one recipe is the answer, not one language is *lingua franca*, not one way but a rhizomatic network. How to sit at the table and engage in conversation? In the same way pineapples are able to reproduce without a seed, concatenations can sprout from other endings and mark other emergencies. Once shamed and subdued knowledge emerge as a response that brings not only one answer but myriads like the cell divided domes of a pineapple shell which harbors tiny seeds, or the big crown of the pineapple fruit which serves as the birth cradle of another plant. Terrans of the earth: philosophers, artists, leaders of indigenous communities, plain clothes people and many other nonhuman partners may sit at a *parthenocarpic* banquet where there are not one but so many possibilities to grow, that there is a risk of getting lost even before sitting down. Following the knowledge of plants, adaptive behavior finds fertile soil. Translation takes place, comprehension even when various tongues are spoken, conjunctions and connections are found, searching the rhizome and entanglements appropriate for the moment.

Some banquets find people working at the intersection of western metaphysics and ancestral shamanic knowledge. Artists and engineers, entomologists and clay potters sit via a ritual that seeks to find alignment between different ontologies. Entanglement seems to be the way of the future, seeking unknowable interpretations. Metamorphosis entangles every single conception Terrans have of how to inhabit that future. Becoming is a metamorphosis at all times,

where a pod becomes a plant-becomes-pineapple. In Maria Sibylla Merian's illustration, various tiny arthropods which thrive in the rich exterior and sweet interior of the fruit, live in joyous concupiscence and are relentless in their affection for the plant: they never leave it, even if killer pesticides are used to exterminate them.

According to an article in the *Entomologist's Gazette*: "Thirty-six species of arthropods have been intercepted on this commodity, which is low compared to other types of imported tropical produce; furthermore, pineapple is unusual in that the majority (64%) of arthropods found were not phytophagous" (Christopher Malumphy 66). Thirty-six species of arthropods is quite a formidable army of insects that may affect other crops and other species wherever the fruit is exported to. Entanglements of this sort abound and exponentially grow the level of interspecies contagion experienced at a planetary level. The ability these species have, and their resilience to exile themselves into a pineapple fruit-plant traveling across the Atlantic is accompanied by their tenacity to cling to life and prosper in other climates. After their short life is exhausted, they will probably metamorphosize into an exoskeleton, soil and rain will most definitely absorb them turning each creature into another being. The be-coming is a coming out of something into something else. In Marder's words:

For their part, plants come out and are eventuated differently, because in germinating and growing they do not cut themselves loose from their source; do not die in an instant of transcendence; do not displace themselves in order to face the world; do not reach a destination. These differences are neither trivial nor merely biological; they carry a profound ontological significance. (2)

The life of seeds exceeds any expectation of what life means, even if it is an exteriorization of being in its most evident, the interiority is given but hidden. Although it does not correspond to a

Hegelian notion of the psyche's life, the plant and the seed have an interesting interior life that turns out to be secretive because of the silence of seed and plant, nevertheless not absent in that silent eloquence. In his *Introductory Lectures* Hegel writes: "We may, however, begin at once by asserting that artistic beauty stands *higher* than nature. For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born – born again that is – of the mind" (4). In nature nevertheless, beauty is encountered in every being; the secretive eloquence of the seed turns out to be a future in motionless upheaval: the whole excitement of a forest in a tiny kernel. Seeds are endings not in a teleological landscape, but in an unexpected becoming without telos, without end: it affords life a continual chance of turning into something different every moment. Destruction is not a possibility, only change and metamorphosis over and over. Interiority is, paradoxically, extended into an exteriority that flourishes outside of that sort of exoskeleton that is the shell of the seed. As species humans have reserved for themselves a superiority that drives them to avoid the idea of metamorphosing and becoming-other even beyond death. In Coccia's words:

This refusal to recognize that our life is the same life that passes through any other body is not just a theoretical matter: the claim 'to be different and superior to other creatures', to be made of 'mental matter', has not only driven us to threaten the real extinction of all the great predators and to transform predation into 'something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us.' (105)

Western metaphysics has been in charge of thinking about the world. It has taken away from other living creatures the great gift of thought and pondering, utterly unable to concede to other nonhumans the ability to think and wonder. Until just recently scientific minds of the global north called all the incredible technology used by animals and plants "instinct" and released the processes of plants to mechanical happenings of beings considered inferior. Their demise as part

of humanity should happen as an unremarkable event in the history of the earth. However, perhaps just as in some Katun of the Mayans, humans might not even be able to remember their own existence. They might not remember themselves and perhaps that would be the ultimate place of wonderment that philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Freud have praised in their theories. What Freud calls sublimation of the senses through art and what Schopenhauer calls the conquering of the will is what they perceive as the salvation for their relentless pursuit of truth and happiness: a moment of disconnect.

The plant's seed which is the most secret interiority and at the same time the most open exteriority is able to keep to itself when nothing in her environment shows signs of welcoming its sprouting. Thus, it is time to do without doing, a time to not force anything. Just to wait, in this way acting like the jaguar who waits in earnest for its prey to make a move in false, to then attack. Becoming-animal or becoming-seed, however, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "is never imitating" (305). One becomes not by imitating the animal, or the seed in this case, but by becoming-animal or becoming-seed. "The painter and the musician do not imitate the animal, they become the animal at the same time that the animal becomes what they willed, at the deepest level of their concord with Nature" (Deleuze and Guattari 305). Becoming is also a pact, a sorcerer's pact with the animal or the seed of the plant. It in itself is a becoming of a becoming, a turning into what we most desire and fear. Becoming-seed means hiding in place, which is not at all the nature of humans of this century. There is an unequivocal desire to be seen, to be shared, to be followed, to be consummated that is intrinsically opposite to becoming seed. Seed necessitates dark and humid soil in order to grow, just like the fetus of any animal, or the egg; encapsulated, egg, seed or fetus live a life of hiding until they become whatever it is that they will. Peter Sloterdijk writes in *Bubbles*: "Clearly the thesis that everything is outside is no less

delirious than the longing to have everything on the inside” (87). Thus, the notion posed by Deleuze that everything is exteriority seems delirious indeed, and then the notion posed by Freud that all is inside the psyche is also delirious. A becoming is ever in process, taking place under our eyes without being seen, inside and outside. A seed lives in concealment until it sprouts: to the sun, to the rain, to the winds, to the ever present becoming-plant, until it dies, and invariably continues to perform a cycle of metamorphosing into seed again. Why does death then curtail human processes in such a tremendous way? Humans are the only species who mourn and bury their dead; they are not able to become-seed and plant for that would mean an end to their never ending process of making sense which is thinking. Human beings from all the planet think, and thus, judge, elaborate, ask, and speak. They are invariably doomed to the life of the ever-present human brain and body. In order to stop this machine that thinks without truce day and night they intoxicate themselves, grow addicted, and their brains change and only then they are able to step into a new world. Addiction then could be a human being's passage into a new world. Do humans resemble a seed when they are intoxicated? Do they become seeds when dead? But where does the seed of a human being reside? Perhaps it is situated in the brain; the brain presents the appearance of a walnut which is the fruit and seed of the *junglans regia* tree. Or perhaps the human seed is the fetus in which case it is formed from the metamorphosis of both sperm and ovule, both reproductive vessels of human propagation.

Brain and uterus are two powerful creative machines which generate life, thought, emotions, feelings, a relationality that is sentience, or as Coccia puts it in botanic-philosophical terms: “The flower, the plant turns the insect into a geneticist, a breeder, a farmer: it entrusts another species belonging to another kingdom with the task of making a decision on the genetic and biological basis destiny of its own species” (162). In such terms, being the beings that they

are, humans are and exist only in terms of a relationality with all the interspecific opportunities that the cosmos provides them with. Sloterdijk states:

In reaching this insight, psychology initially assured the agreement of cultural anthropology: only through secession from their old nature have humans become an ontological fringe group that disconcerts itself. They cannot be adequately explained by what is natural, or rather old-natural, about them—despite the abundance of attempts to portray cultures as emerging continuously from natural processes. (84)

In other words, the insect is a geneticist that affords interspecies connection and proliferation. Most societies in earth are, nevertheless, baffled by their own sexual behaviors like no other creature has ever been. The continuous interiorization and questioning that psychoanalysis has provided as *tabula rasa* for western civilization has created a society that is doubting and mulling incessantly over the past, constantly. It is no doubt important to have memory, but it is precisely the task of dream states to erase trauma from the brain's amygdala. When it is reiterated over and over again through language the trauma abounds and remains within the individual. Western thought has understood that traumatic events are intimate private affects of individuals, not public happenings of communities. Thus, the role of psychoanalysis has been one of recreating oedipal complexes, reifying parental trauma, birth and all kinds of self-pitying tools for humans to become fully interiorized with no hope to enact in the outside world, their exteriority. When the seed is completely reverted into its interior there is no possibility for it to become plant and to come to fruition. In Deleuze and Guattari's words:

No sooner does Freud discover the greatest secret of the unconscious, this art of molecular multiplicities, than we find him tirelessly at work bringing back molar unities, reverting to his familiar themes of the father, the penis, the vagina, Castration with a

capital C... (On the verge of discovering a rhizome, Freud always returns to mere roots.)
(27)

Moreover, for almost a century, Freudian theories populated the minds of most humans from the global north who attributed every single tribulation to a lack of penis complex, to the incantation with the mother and the need to kill the father. Lacan in his mirror face goes even further in accomplishing the terror that the analyzed feels paralyzing her when unable to utter in human language the problematic nuances of her entire humanness, lacking even the very first instinctual surprise of recognizing herself in the mirror. According to Sloterdijk: "It is well known that Freud placed the fateful necessity of this kind phase above everything else, because he was convinced that genuine individuation takes place as a development of sexual subjectivity in the resolution of the triangular Oedipal conflict" (292). Thinking this way envelops human beings in a world that has never existed before, when they were a fantastic creation of a unique godhead. Arriving at this moment then, there is no world that ends and another that begins, only the intermediation of other ways to relate with it. Furthermore, humans finding themselves at the very brink of the abyss of uncertainty, may choose to let themselves slide down the slope expecting nothing but knowing that after hitting bottom, there will be other slopes to climb. This seems to be the way to translate one world into another one, where there is much failing, which means all earthlings are involved in a diverse process. The ad may say: "Beware, world in construction, some elements may fall."

5.2 Maps

To Recognize the Land After Catastrophe: How Plants, Indigenous Knowledge and Artists Lead us Through the Ends of One World and the Beginning of Another. The Story of Malinalli.



Fig. 30 *El Sueño de la Malinche*. Antonio Ruiz. Oil on canvas. 1939

Invoking la Malinche is the best way to speak of the end.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

The oil painting *El sueño de la Malinche* (fig. 30) by Mexican painter Antonio Ruiz “el Corcito,” from 1939, shows an indigenous woman lying in a voluptuous bed of blankets, from

which a Spanish colonial city erupts tremulously. Malinche's Dream depicts the realization of the intuitive prowess and predictions of Malinalli, also called Malinche, the Nahua lover of Capitán Hernán Cortés, conquistador of Mexico, and the mother of the first mestizo of the Americas. Malinche was able to predict and sense the end of her world, the world of Mexicas and Aztecs and the birth of another world, the world of the conquest. In Berardi's words: "Humans have already experienced an end of the world, or the end of a world. A world ends when signs proceeding from the semiotic meta-machine grow undecipherable for a cultural community that perceives itself as a world" (331). This unity of patterns and experiences that conform a world is fragmented and approaches an end when all meanings stop resonating and seem to have no projection into the future. When a world ends, nothing seems to function the way a human conglomerate expected, because rules, patterns and regulations have changed. If that world is to survive it needs to accommodate, reform, exchange and grow into another skin. Malinalli was the translator and lover of Cortés. She was the daughter of a Nahua nobleman who died; as a consequence, her mother remarried and Malinalli was given as a slave to traders. Afterwards she would be offered to Cortés as an interpreter. In her book *Malinche* Laura Esquivel writes about the world of that child who had to bear the dawn of her civilization. Esquivel imagines Malinche in her poetic demise from being a happy little girl to becoming the lover of one of the most violent men in the conquest of the new world. Being very smart and with a gift for languages, she aptly learns different tongues like Aztec and Maya; when the Spaniards arrived, she was already proficient in the various dialects of the zone. It was not difficult for her to learn Spanish she was also gifted with great sensibility to perceive the essence of what was being said. An interpreter not only interprets signs and language, she also interprets herself.

As Heidegger writes in *The Anaximander Fragment*: “We are bound to the language of the saying. We are bound to our mother tongue. In both cases we are essentially bound to language and to the experience of its essence” (19). In translating the tongues of the Maya and the Aztecs, Malinalli translated the world and the spirit of her own cultures; in translating from Spanish to Maya, Aztec and Nahuatl, conversely, she translated a foreign world of which only speech (language) was available to her. For her ability to swiftly traverse between worlds, generations of Mexicans have called her *La Chingada* (the raped one) and accused her of treason. Octavio Paz in his essay “Los hijos de la Malinche” (Sons of Malinche) writes:

If *la Chingada* is a representation of the raped mother, it is not strange to associate her to the Conquest which was also rape, not only in a historical sense, but mostly in the body of indian women. The symbol of surrender is doña Malinche, Cortes’ lover. True, she gives herself to the lover, but he discards her as soon as she is not useful anymore. Doña Marina turns into a figure that represents indigenous women, fascinated, raped or seduced by the spaniards. (1)

The Mexican mestizo according to Octavio Paz is ashamed to be the product of rape, and in a sorry turn of fortune instead of siding with the victim, the raped mother, he sides with the conqueror, the father. For this mestizo, La Malinche, the translator, is a double traitor: “Not only did she betray her own people, creating a link with the invaders, but she also betrayed her lover himself” (Berardi 335). However, Berardi, also points out that she did not technically betray her own people, since she had been sold to slavery in the first place.

There is another interpretation of the role of the Malinche, and it comes from “Las Nietas de la Malinche” the granddaughters of the Malinche, feminist scholars who do not see Malinalli’s mediation as betrayal, but a positioning of herself as someone who was able to see

beyond what she was permitted to see. As a mediator Malinche is the seed of the new world that was opening up, the plant sprouting out from the fertile soil of Aztecs and Mayans. Malinalli is represented by corn, the ultimate food of the new world, the golden fruit that accompanied her everywhere. It is told in Esquivel's book that the night before she was going to be given away she worried: "What would become of my cornfield?" (21) she pondered, as she carried the corn seeds with her. Some of these seeds not only grew into a whole nation of peoples, but also into the voices of the Chicana movement, a double meaning of the migration of those seeds into new lands. As Marta Lamas writes in her essay on "El Laberinto de la Soledad": "La Malinche has *metis* (the cunningness of the weak confronting the strong) in forming an alliance with the spaniards she seduces Cortes and influences him beyond being his translator, Malintzin is being faithful to herself, to her own desire" (1). Lamas argues that Octavio Paz is unable to see Malinche as a woman who is able to desire and have agency. He personifies her as the slave who was victim of men first and then went from one to another peddling sex and support. He does not see her for what she truly stands for, thus, ends up reifying the patriarchal myth of the oppressed without desire and agency.

Malinche is an expression not only of mestizaje, but also of the vision she herself opened, as a seed of corn, the birth of a coming-world from the ashes of the old. As mediator she not only translated one language to another, her own culture to the Spaniards and vice versa, she was also able to foresee the plant, the leafy stalk of *maize* in the tiny kernel of the corn she held in her sweaty palms. In Berardi's parlance: "But foremost, she is the expression of the consciousness that her world is over: she knows that her world as a system of consistent cultural and semiotic references has disintegrated" (335). Disintegration does not mean the end, the kernel that is the seed of *maize* disintegrates in the soil before sprouting into the October rains as tiny grass. "Only

when one is able to see collapse as the obliteration of memory, identity, and as the end of a world can a new world be imagined.” Berardi continues: “[t]his is the lesson we must learn from Malinche” (335). As a mediator she epitomizes the role of the contemporary artist, a translator between worlds, a becoming-Malinche in the broad meaning of the Deleuzian term. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari women are the essence of becoming; a man first has to become-woman in order to exert any becoming at all. This way of becoming-woman is something of this nature: “There are women on the other hand,” they write, “who tell everything, sometimes in appalling technical detail, but one knows no more at the end than at the beginning; they have hidden everything by celerity, by limpidity. They have no secret because they have become a secret themselves” (289). Thus, becoming-Malinche is to possess all the secrets by being the secret itself. To possess in itself the future is what a seed does; the volatile seed of *maize* is already a plant, bread and meal, it is the secret itself; that is why Malinalli wanted to preserve those little seeds: in preserving the harvest, she carried the old world into the new one.

Running now the second year of pandemic times, 2022 is the year which entails an assessment of the new world that is coming to conquer the old. Berardi notes: “The bio-info automaton takes shape at the point of connection between electronic machines, digital languages, and minds formatted in ways that comply with their codes” (336). Communities from the whole planet have been inoculated with a type of bio-info contained in a vaccine that is supposed to prevent contracting the deadly coronavirus. Thousands of people protest around the world what they see as the inevitable mark of those who comply with the codes: the vaccinated. Apocalyptic images abound, religious cults and agnostic groups alike predict the end of times. There is also a tint of sublime-mongering in the predictions of these groups. In *Necropolitics* Achille Mbembe writes:

The general atmosphere of fear also feeds on the idea that the end of humanity —and thus of the world — is near. Now, the end of humanity does not necessarily imply that of the world. The history of the world and the history of humanity, although entangled, will not necessarily have a simultaneous end. The end of humans will not necessarily lead to the world's end. By contrast, the material world's end will undoubtedly entail that of humans. (32)

Thus, if humanity ends, the planet will continue to live its cycles, seasons will come and go, the tremendous force of *phusis* will overtake every single edification and manmade contraption. However, this end probably will not happen just yet. Human beings are still alive trying the latest technologies, the “automaton's flow of enunciation” in Berardi's words will keep creating a world incompatible with “five centuries of humanism, enlightenment thought, and socialism” (336). Plus: viruses, love, compassion and laughter. This new world which is coming to be is clearly able to model itself according to the voices, desires and yet unacknowledged whims of communities of the entire planet. However, if a becoming-Malinche is put in motion, this new vision will betray the old world and the coming one too. Will the artist become-Malinche first of all? Maybe so. There is already a sense of permeability in artists that is likely to plant contagion by nearness.

Some artists are applying a *Seance-sorium* approach, in which spiritual seances with plants are enacted in order to hear and apprehend with vegetal beings just by being close to them, listening and learning from them like we would do with any other being. No machinery or mechanism mediates, because the human body possesses the tools necessary to do everything needed. “But the unbridgeable difference” writes Berardi, “between the conscious organism and the automaton—as complex and refined as it may be—lies in the unconscious” (337). Where is

this unconscious that has not been contaminated with bio-info? Most probably in dreams and desire. The dream of Malinche in Antonio Ruiz's painting is a bridge towards a new world. Although her dream seems to be confined to a dreadful room where a world seems to have ended and the new one appears to have been constructed right over her own body, Malinche walks towards this new reality with the fear of a nightmare unfolding. It is in this unconscious state where she is able to foretell the beginning of that specter of a world. Anzaldúa's poem and blessing, acknowledges *La Llorona*, *La Chingada*, and *Guadalupe*, as "the madres" of Chicana writers and activists:

Moving sunwise you turn to the **south**:

Fuego, inspire and energize us to do the necessary work,

and to honor it

As we walk through the flames of transformation.

May we seize the arrogance to create

outrageously

soñar wildly—for the world becomes as

we dream it. (157)

Anzaldúa asks the mothers, the Malinches, those who dare to envision, to give her clarity and strength to dream of another world. Is it not then that our worlds are ending all the time? Is it not that everybody reinvents and recreates these worlds, metamorphosing again and again? In the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan book of the dead, men and women's creation took place every other day, "[t]hen there was the creation and formation. From earth, from mud they made the flesh of man" (Ivanoff 27). The Anthropocene seems to have lasted a long time, the time it took humans from every walk of life to extinguish various species, discover many others as some vanished under

their very eyes, turn the earth upside down to extract all kinds of minerals from her, and the time it took man to become a super inhabitant of the infosphere, cohabiting a world with automatons and computerized realities. The unconscious lives, nonetheless, within that veiled spirit or soul, in the night adventures called dreams, within the voices heard by hallucinating individuals that psychiatry pathologizes as dis-orders. The unconscious is what changes with trauma, addiction, habit, and grace.²⁹ This sense of ending that the world has experienced during these past two years has given way to a sense of apocalyptic necropolitics that seems to saturate the air.

Mbembe writes: “A time whose nature is to come to an end, will do so in order that another time, an unending one may come. Passing over to the other side will be possible at last. It will be possible at last to leave behind, from this side here, the time of finitude and mortality” (32).

Invariably there will be the announcers of the end from every religion prompting their subjects to repent and embrace the new era. Amazonians often say that if humans saw themselves as any other creature of the universe, they would realize there is no end nor beginning. They will metamorphosize into compost, into butterfly, sap, flower, seed. The seed will produce other beings, just beings in the presence of fires, earthquakes, landslides and heavy flooding. None of which is dedicated to them in particular. Earth continues her voyage across the firmament and around the sun.

Mapping the soil in such dangerous times equals planting, caring for a seed, hiding it like Malinalli kept her corn seeds, until she found a fertile soil in which to plant. Grieving is part of this process, staying with the trouble, not flying away to another planet, but working to fix this one. The entanglements of such times prompt humanity in a different and more mature way. Paraphrasing Anna Tsing's words, Donna Haraway writes: “to living and dying with response-ability in unexpected company” (38). Thus, the bat, the pangolin, the different viruses and

bacteria that inhabit humans invite infection and contagion in the most interesting levels, not exempt from grief, nevertheless sobering. In Haraway's words:

Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think. Like the crows and with the crows, living and dead, 'we are at stake in each other's company.' (39)

When one world ends the grieving is devastating: the California fires, Hurricanes Katrina, Marina and Ovidio in the Eastern United States, Sobradinho and Petrópolis in Brazil, La Gasca in Ecuador, are some of the disasters an ending world is experiencing. Going back to how things were does not quite work for where there is no remembrance there is an absence of thinking. Staying with the trouble means to dwell and linger in the grieving moment, living with ghosts, elucidating a different way of dwelling and translating into the future.

5.3 “Las Carabelas de Colón Aún Están en Tierra”

Artist Amaru Cholango and the *Wak'a* Aesthetics



Fig. 31 Amaru Cholango. *Las Carabelas de Colón aún están en tierra*. Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Quito 2013

*Ahí yace –muerto/ Sus manos no alcanzan el cielo
y/ Sus raíces no alcanzan/ El fuego de la tierra.*

Amaru Cholango

The epigraph reads: “There it lays/ his hands do not reach the sky/ and his roots do not reach/ the fire of the earth.” It is the beginning of the poem *I am a tree and you are too* by Ecuadorian artist Amaru Cholango. He is an Otavalo artist from the northern region of the

Ecuadorian Andes. As a member of his community and by his own choice he is an artist *yachag*, for he approaches art making as a healing process for him and through him for the extended society he is part of. According to Cholango's Andean cosmovision conception, everything has spirit, even a rock, any object that is invested with sacred energy through a ritual acquires the quality of *wak'a* (sacred site or object). And as such is protector and giver of goodness and creation. "Contrary to the concept that Adolph Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) had of aesthetics," recounts Cholango in an interview, "that of taste, the *w'aka* provides a sense of energetic creativity that stems from the very earth or *pachamama*." ³⁰ Thus, the *wak'a* is a rounded concept of place and object, that not only obeys to what the senses perceive, but is integrated with the relationality that is developed with it. In his text "From Baumgarten to Kant, On Beauty" Herrman Parret writes:

Baumgarten was not interested in the poetics, which means the formulation of technical rules for the production of works of art, nor in making psychological observations over the effect beauty has on the spectator. This means he was not occupied by rules, nor observation, nor description. Neither in other more general questions as what could have been the relationship between art and other spheres of intellectual life. What Baumgarten was interested in was discovering the criteria that would permit distinguishing aesthetic faculty and other faculties like understanding, reason, will, etc. In short he coined the term aesthetics, even if he was not the inventor of aesthetics. (213)

Baumgarten is a referent for the notion of taste in Kant who bases his own *Critique of Judgment* in his theory and which served as reference for aesthetics for German and French philosophers. Cholango poses a critique to Baumgarten's aesthetics, adds and corrects it and then develops his own *wak'a* aesthetics.

The installation *Las carabelas de Colón aún están en tierra* (fig. 31) shows fourteen *pangas* or canoes in the traditional use of Amazonian tribes, which he calls *Carabelas*, alluding to the great caravels that brought Christopher Columbus to the Americas. The *Carabelas* installation was built in collaboration with people from an Amazonian community, the canoes which are in place of Colon's ships were filled with petroleum oil, dead fish and trash. They were first made for the Cuenca Biennial in 1994. Petroleum oil is the fossil carbon that humans use across the world to fuel engines, planes, cars, etc. Nevertheless, in Andean philosophy it is the charred bones of the earth which live deep within her and should not be unearthed. In 1994 the installation was received with indifference. The signs of climate change were not yet pressing and most curators, critics and the general public at the time, found the piece especially disgusting. Filling the boats with oil, dead fish and trash, exposing them to the public was an experience in toxicity; it was an effort to share the toxic heritage of the conquest that has not ended: as the artwork's name says it, clearly it is still in land. Cholango's philosophical stance places the *wak'a* as a sacred space that has been consecrated to the forces of wind, fire, soil, light and is a provider of energetic strength. As much as a *wak'a* gives strength to its visitors, the *Carabelas* installation was on the contrary a place of toxicity. That was indeed the intention of Cholango, to bring into the attention of the participants in the exhibition a sense of deluge and discontinuity, a sense of the end of a world.

According to philosopher Josef Estermann, in his book *Filosofía Andina* the concept of *pachasofía* or the Andean philosophy of the earth,

[C]onsiders the universe as a set of integral relations, within a correspondent and complementary order. This relationality is something 'sacred' which reflects the divine; relationality is, genuinely, 'religiosity' ('connection'). For the Andean *runa/jaqui*

(man/person) the divine is not something altogether different from lived experience ('profane'), but its sacred and sacramental dimension. (302)

Thus, Cholango imbues this concept of sacramentality to the work of art. In the contemporary conception of a work of art, materials themselves are the work of art, they carry symbolic meaning; contrary to its modern use as surface, like in painting, the material itself is one of the components that gives meaning to the piece. This notion is in fact what resonates with the concept of *wak'a* in the Andean cosmovision: the rock, the clay, the seed or the plant that are in the soil are themselves the work of art, a sacred material. For the Andean indigenous artist *yachag* that capacious and englobing concept of materiality is the bridge that unites art and ritual, and the ability to bring them together acting as an artist-*yachag* or artist-chamana. Moreover, it is the topological dimension of the work of art in the *wak'a* which interests the artist-*yachag*, for it provides the locus where the work is situated, it is the substrate of which the *oeuvre* is conceived upon. This understanding establishes an ontological difference between the notion of aesthetics that comes from the perception of the senses towards the immanence that stems from the place-soil-material itself of which the work of art is made. This other understanding of that containment of place is what the *wak'a* aesthetics consists of. Beyond the notion of beauty and or taste lies the topological rituality of place invested in the art object itself. Moreover, the topos itself becomes a work of art, in other words, the site where the caravels are placed upon is as much part of the work as the objects themselves.

Global art practices shifted tremendously from the decade of 1960s to 1970s, as the notion of art itself was completely revolutionized by practices like Fluxus, performance and happenings. The notions and conscientious shifts towards material practices that made sense from a

topological stand point opened roads to explore and shatter traditional surfaces. In his text “A Sedimentation of the Mind” artist Robert Smithson writes:

The fact remains that the mind and things of certain artists are not ‘unities,’ but *things* in a state of arrested disruption. One might object to ‘hollow’ volumes in favor of ‘solid materials,’ but no materials are solid, they all contain caverns and fissures. Solids are particles built up around flux, they are objective illusions supporting grit, a collection of surfaces ready to be cracked. All chaos is put into the dark inside of the art. By refusing ‘technological miracles’ the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos – in the strata of esthetic consciousness. The refuse between mind and matter is a mine of information. (879)

It is in this same line in which Cholango’s realization that contemporary art contains in itself the spirit which he is looking for, and which is looked for traditionally in his Otavalo kichwa community: the porous communication with materials such as soil, steel, plant, mountain, etc. Contemporary art, through the practices of artists pushing boundaries in all senses, arrives at the place of ritualistic realization: the place of the artist-*yachag* and her dealings with the *wak'a* the sacred place and the sacred object. In art, Cholango finds a way to remain truthful to the path of the *yachag*, although not traditionally trained as an artist, he notices a parallel running of the magical, mythical ways of the *yachag* and art. At some point in his development, he discovers he was not an engineer and decides to opt for the path of the healer as was bestowed upon him by his own mother. He purposely turns away from the line of influence of Joseph Beuys because he believes that what he is striving for comes directly from the knowledge of traditional Andean shamanic practices that interestingly enough seem to be what contemporary art is also looking

for. There is a crossing of paths of the artist and the sorcerer. In this way it is evident what Deleuze and Guattari write:

Sorcerers have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or between villages. The important thing is their affinity with alliance, with the pact, which gives them a status opposed to that of filiation. The relation with the anomalous is one of alliance. The sorcerer has a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous. (246)

The artist-*yachag* is a sorcerer hunting in the fringes, making objects, sacralizing spaces or sites through rituals.

However, the object of a sacred site of ritual and magic properties may become a fetish. What is the difference between an art work and a fetish? The word fetish itself comes from the portuguese *feitiço* meaning an object used in the magical practices of the slaves brought from Africa to the Americas. Objects that are imbued with sacred powers to dispense and subtract energies are thought to be the work of the devil in Christian religions. Nonetheless, the work of art itself becomes a fetish in a capitalistic economy, as philosopher Karl Marx pointed out in his work *Das Kapital*:

In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (44)

Thus, the work of art in the *wak'a* is not primarily a fetish form of value in capitalistic terms but it has a value in energetic exchange. Furthermore, the artist-made site of the *wak'a*, in this case the *Carabelas*, acquires a powerful significance in light of the artistic essence it carries and at the same time the ritualistic connotation of the object or site itself. The notion/symbolism of the *wak'a* is materiality at the same time that it is a “sedimentation of the mind” and it permeates—opens the possibility of aesthetics of the *wak'a*, that is an indigenous trope for creation outside the realms of western metaphysics and seeding soil for an altogether different conception of art.

Actually, a new syntax and topoi that were not present within concepts borrowed from art history but rooted in the soil of the indigenous artist, emerges. This site is not the one imposed by art history’s canons and conventions but sprouted from the philosophical *pachasofía* that makes obsolete the practicalities of the imposed conventions that prevented the indigenous artist from entering the international art circuits. Cholango has constructed his own tools with which to make his own house. No mediation is necessary, no ventriloquism is in place for he comes into the art arena to speak from a different space-place altogether. His work recognizes “the colonial chip” that is so prevalent and rooted in art systems and institutions that are not even able to mirror themselves in it. It is not without irony that the installation itself had to be removed because it was causing illness to workers on site.³¹ As of now it is known that the canoes were burnt in order to avoid any further problems, and the only vestige of them is the photographic registry. As for the exchange value of the installation in the market of commodities, the canoes are no longer inland; nonetheless the work of art as a symbolic concept exists in those publics who were able to experience it. Colon’s caravels are still inland because colonialist prejudices are still part of the Latin American colonial heritage. Even as the show was taken down, the controversy stirred by the indigenous artist and his detractors, although none of them consider it

a racist dispute, is still in the air. The perception that the artist has been given privileges just because he is indigenous prevails, turning the artistic quarrel into a racist altercation. Rivera Cusicanqui writes,

It is a matter of recognizing colonialism as a structure, an ethos and a culture that reproduces itself every day in its oppressions and silences, even beyond the successive attempts at radical transformation predicated by the intellectual-political elites, either in its liberal or populist Marxist/indigenous versions. (25)

Decolonizing the mind implies a thorough exercise of looking at oneself in the mirror of mestizaje, or even better, becoming-*chi'xi* ready to dig into the mixed roots for what is needed in order to comprehend a shifting world. In this very aspect the work of Cholango shines as a lighthouse in the middle of a vast ocean of questions. His methodology which comprises dreams as is customary in kichwa culture, and the technology to bring together the specific site, time and objectuality of the *wak'a*, place him as a decolonizing tonic that could be used to propagate a possible transition into another way of being in relationality to the region.

Cholango shows a side that is tremendously controversial and uncomfortable for political power. Embodying the *yachag's* capacity for spiritual, cultural and political performance he often shows himself in the public square at the very center of Quito's *Centro Histórico*, a working arena for his performances and very close to the government's headquarters. His performances often question censorship and lack of civil liberties which are his trademark banner. Paraphrasing his words, freedom is the only thing worth fighting for, even if it carries a good deal of sacrifice in terms of solitude. He is an artist always looking for something, a seeker that has taken the path of art to look for sacred sites and revelations. He carries the seeds of curiosity and freedom with him, these seeds are his dreams which appear at night and show him

the road to follow the next day or next year. Much like a plant that grows with care and then drops its seeds, at some point they seem ready to be propagated and turn into new plants or processes. Art critic Jaume Reus in his article “Amaru Cholango: Amaneció en Medio de la Noche” writes:

This work comes in a very special way from the spiritual world and also from the visions that the artist “lives” at night. Every morning in solitude, Amaru gives himself to the interior and methodic work of writing and drawing these images and sensations for long hours. It's a time for spiritual research, reflection and meditation. The beginning of the day serves to start up visions, memories, impressions... Cholango exercises his memory, his remembrance potential and his ability to capture between dreams.³²

Dreams are much like seeds in the obscure interiority of the earth, developing entanglements and creating in the dark. They germinate in the morning when the artist draws and writes them in his sketchbooks, every morning more plants are out there sprouting from the seeds of a dream.

Although Marder writes: “Plants, on the other hand, do not require such self-deceptions to keep growing, since their meaning and sense lie elsewhere. The secret is that there is no secret” (18).

Mainly because they have been made into strange beings, supposedly lacking communication abilities, and the intimate space of psychic life, there is a certain opacity in plants that is possible to be perceived in the voyages of the *yachags*. Most teacher-plant voyages are taken at night and in this sense, they share with dreams the dark time to sprout and grow. Perhaps this is only an apparent lack of understanding of the ontological being of plants. However, during sacred plants ceremonies, in the dark, the glowing of the colors and the energetic components of plants are absolutely exhilarating. According to *Sapara* knowledge every color in a dream means something different and we are to be guided by the colors in the dream in order to interpret them.

Plant colors and voices in the *yachag*'s voyage are glowing and keep nothing secret; daylight nonetheless turns plants shy and introverted again, so there is a secrecy component that makes them perhaps not so different than human beings: a hidden interiority that shows a very different exteriority.

The seed is interior and also exterior, but there is no doubt that it keeps an opacity that is within like the walnut, protected with a hard shell from inclement weather conditions. It is a world inside that does not portray outside its containing future.



Figure 32 Amaru Cholango *Amaneció en Mitad de la Noche*, installation with cornfield. Museo De la Ciudad. 2012

Amaneció en Mitad de la Noche (fig. 32) shows artist Amaru Cholango with his installation of a corn field. This is a *wak'a* he created within the installation; art and philosophy together, art and ritual at the same time. Estermann explains the neologism of *pachasofia* or Andean cosmology that favors a philosophical syncretism, merging the etymological component

of *sophia* from *philosophia* and the “quechumara” (kichwa and aymara) term *pacha*. In his own words:

In the term *sophía* is still present the integral ‘knowledge’ with respect to the ‘reality’ that not only includes the intellectual *dianoia* or the epistemological *noësis*, but also the sensitive *aisthesis* (in Castilian Spanish, ‘knowledge’ is an equivocal logico-sensitive word) and the lived *empireia*. The *sophos* or *sophé* is an experimented and authoritative person who possesses integral and integrated ‘wisdom’ (*sophía*). (164)

For the term *pacha* he states that it is a bit more complicated. It is a term pregnant with meanings and connotations.

The dictionary affords the term a meaning that is close to *logos* but can also be adjective, substantive and adverb. It has spatio-temporal connotations such as ‘short’, or ‘short height’, or ‘under’. As substantive it signifies ‘earth’, ‘globe of the earth’, ‘world’, ‘planet’, ‘space for life’, but also ‘universe’, and ‘stratification of the cosmos’.

(Estermann 165)

Estermann and Cholango both coincide that this earth or cosmos is always already in a relational quality. Thus, the term *pacha* implies a “cosmic relationality” (165), any event that is presenced has a relational quality in which all entities (presences) act in relation to each other. In the artwork of the *wak’a* of planted corn, the plant has a particular voice and so has the soil and the pieces of cloth hanging in the back. Each spirit has its own master or owner and it has to be spoken to in that capacity, permission has to be asked and relations have to be appeased.

The artist-*yachag* again follows the path of a “cosmopolitical diplomat” (Viveiros de Castro 151) that appeases each spirit, explains the purpose of such an event and, in advance, prevents what will happen at the site. Because it is a ceremonial site, the *wak’a* always needs a

certain sensitivity and care to be addressed and walked upon. It is in a sense a becoming-woman of the territory that is placed on site, because of its secret qualities and the soft, weak-thought requirements for its handling. At the crossroads of paths when entire communities need to learn to walk lightly on this planet or *pachamama*, they find themselves guided by the knowledge of these artist-*yachags* who have found ways to relate to her in less destructive ways. Asking permission to be on the land that hosts them, establishing sacred sites and rituals, making alliances between them and nonhumans without assuming they are owners or unique creatures, are some of the actions taken nowadays in conference sites, universities and events across the world. Acknowledging the ancestral territories where they are standing and the soil which they step on as the same soil their ancestors took care of, gratitude is shown for what has been handed to them. There is a growing sense that the stepping stones are being set for a map which will show others how to recognize the land in catastrophic times.

5.4 Seeds

Art as Seed for New Beginnings, the Work of Artist Angélica Alomoto.



Fig. 33 Angelica Alomoto. *Retorno*. Installation with lizam plants. Photo El Universo. 2019

Kichwa communities from the high Andes give meaning and human-like value to all creatures, animals, rivers, plants and rocks. So sacred these rocks are, they are called *piedras mama* or mother rocks. From these rocks, clays of different colors and textures are produced to give life to the dreams of people upon awakening. Sacred rocks, sacred dreams. Such are the sources that inspire the work of artist Angelica Alomoto. Her work *Retorno* (fig. 33) is made from the materials of the land she cares for, *paja toquilla* plants or *lizam*, which she uses in her rituals just before creating or in order to heal.³³ For her, there is no distinction between being a

curandera or healer, and being an artist. An art healer I would call her, for her potions and rituals are often given to participants in art spaces. Before getting here though, she battled a long road in the white-mestizo culture she lives in. Dussel states that the critics of our cultures must be Latin Americans from our own cultures, born and trained in the thought and philosophy of these lands.³⁴ This is the case of Alomoto, an indigenous woman who trained in art school in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and against all predictions has been able to bring into the mainstream her artist-healer practices.

In his book *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* Alexander Kojève writes: “Perfection (which is always conscious of itself) can be attained only in and by work. For only in and by work does man finally become aware of the significance, the value, and the necessity of his experience of fearing absolute power, incarnated for him in the Master” (23). Such perfection is in Alomoto’s every performance and installation, hard work and the ability to subvert “the tools of the master” (Lorde 1) to her own advantage.

She struggled with the idea of bidimensional image because her images come from dreams, which are the school of thought of indigenous Andean and Amazonian communities. For her, copying a still life or the human figure are almost sacrilegious acts that leave imagination and dream world aside. She was able to incorporate her dreams and the materials she had been introduced to as a child, only when she was given the theoretical tools to dismantle the master's house. From then on she has been unstoppable in her quest to bring into the art scene a different way of conceiving art that is contemporary in essence but also retains her people’s traditions and uses. *Retorno* (fig.33) is the interactive installation made with the cut leaves of a type of tall grass called *paja toquilla* or in kichwa *lizam* that grows in the Otavalo region where her family is originally from. The leaves were cut in *minga* or collectively, by indigenous women, then they

were woven as a giant basket with a large hole for entrance and a smaller one to exit. The experience of entering the leafy womb is equivalent to returning to a cavernous mother, the earth, which is able to contain and embrace her children. She explains that the piece has been around for twelve years, since 2009 and now that the sap of the plant has dried, the wooden plant is another state of the mother womb. “The plant is like us humans, when young we are full of life and energy, like fresh sap; as we age, we become like wood, enlivened by experience and hardened by the passage of time” she states.³⁵ In her work Alomoto gives credit to every single person that participated in the cutting of the leaves, the weaving, the ritual and the making of the basket. “Even the spirits that help”, she says, “I want to include them in the list of assistants.” Her work is communal and relational. She does not have a studio in the traditional sense that an artist keeps a studio. Her work is mainly done in the fields where she goes with the *minga*. She jokes saying she is also a curator but of the healing kind; in every piece she brings into the art gallery or museum, she performs a kind of healing for the land and for the people in the art world, “so we can go beyond gossip and treachery” she argues. This is a quality Alomoto shares with Cholango, they are not looking only to heal themselves but also their communities and the world at large, the cosmos itself or *pacha*. As healer for the earth, she not only carries the burden of making ends meet but implicates herself in the dealings of the world and in such a capacity she also becomes a cosmopolitical ambassador. She is stepping into the terrain of the artist-*chamana* in the same way as Anzaldúa, af Klint, Hincapié, and Ayón: looking into art as a way to influence her cultural-natural milieu. In doing so they are truly becoming-animal, becoming-plant and becoming-soil with the implications that such becoming may produce, for they are of the nature of affects and the power of the pack. In Deleuze and Guattari’s words: “For the affect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic, it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that

throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel” (240). Although implicit in a becoming, becoming-plant is in the order of contagion and epidemic, which means that packs of plants and humans become one in the alliance they establish through the apprehension of the other, generally by ways of feeding and foraging.



Fig. 34 Angelica Alomoto, working on her installation *Retorno* with youngsters from her community. 2009

A becoming-plant of the *yachag* or *chamana* is parallel to a transfusion affected (and effected) during a drinking or feeding process. Alliances are established with plants when they are eaten, drunk or sat with; apprehension of the other's secrets, limits and potentials, is confirmed by eating them. The case of Alomoto's work *Return* (2009) is a sitting-with-plant. In other words, it is a return to the vegetal womb in order to apprehend the secrets of the mother plant *lizam* or

native *paja toquilla*. It is a sound installation that invites the audience to enter and return to the womb of la *pacha*, the cosmos or earth. In her work portfolio she writes:

Different ways of conceiving and representing images have been a constant exploration in my artistic practice, initially because in my cultural realm there is much importance given to images in dreams and visions, the conception of body and therefore of ritual.

The techniques, objectives and materials with which I construct my work contain various symbolic layers that respond to aesthetic, social, cultural and political questions, as much locally, regionally and at a worldly level. (1)

The plant itself is a material that brings meaning to the work; even by itself as material, it provides a history of natural-cultural elements. Alomoto is adamant on crafting every single part of her work, be it plant based, ceramics, painting, printing, etc. She finds her materials depending on the context and the uses she has for it. Her use of images comes from dreams and visions, they are not void attributes used for fashion or trendy purposes, but powerful mediations between the world of spirits and everyday life. In this way she establishes what she calls a “technology” that allows her to limit and expand in various ways via poetic measurements and calculations the size, scope, height, and duration of her pieces. She imposes this rigorous method on her work as part of a ritual of spatio-temporal relations, which again could be paralleled to the concept of *pachasofía* and then to the Heideggerian concepts of *techné* and *poiesis*. The concealment and unconcealment, what comes into unconcealment is the previously concealed space and time revealing themselves. This bringing-forth is present, “*Technè* belongs to bringing-forth to *poièsis*; it is something poetic” (Heidegger 318). It is in the origins of the word *technè*, not only in the dexterity of the craftsman but also in the fine arts and the arts of thinking.

Alomoto works in the intersection of different ontologies, those of the kichwa and western philosophy. Curator Ana Rosa Valdez states: “she finds the term ‘indigenous’ conflictive because it is founded in the incomprehension of the other and is traversed by a western gaze that has subsumed originary peoples and nations” (3). In the interview she conducts with the artist, Valdez transcribes:

Maybe having interiorized (the term indigenous) its cultural definition previously to my rational understanding of it, has allowed me to have an ethical use of knowledge wherever it comes from. Thus, I do not use a practice, symbol or line of thought with the aim of decreasing, criticizing or hierarchizing. It is instead a discursive need where I choose materials, symbols and sites which need to be revisited, healed or simply explored, citing especially ritual actions proper to every living being. (3)

Using this system of high ethos, she is prone to consider herself a curator of the land and a healer of her worldly community of which humans and nonhumans take part. “Because the forms of representation in art tied to earth are not only the competence of originary nations, they concern all of us indigenous and non-indigenous, it's our responsibility for the right to life” (Alomoto 5). This responsibility towards art making as a form of healing of the earth, concerns all human beings. Alomoto knows this is the path to enter into the conversation, to sit at the dinner table not to be cannibalized in a game of appropriations, but to dine with others and enjoy the conversation afterwards. Her work and her making-thinking process shepherds an understanding of what is the present and future of a becoming-*chi'xi*, when mestizos finally go beyond fragmented attitudes towards the world. Rivera Cusicanqui writes: “From here and now we could exorcize the binarism and with that the colonial disjunction that prevents us from being ourselves: a thinking able to activate liberating energies through a sort of conscious and self-

adscriptive re-indianization” (31). The brilliant and humble work of Alomoto clears a path to understanding art from a different optic that cultivates the seeds of a possible and creative decolonized territory.

Sacred *W'aka*

The Interior World



Fig. 35 Amaru Cholango, *¿Miran tus ojos la realidad?* 2011. Installation. Image courtesy of the artist.

Plants and mycelium are not ruled by human ethic codes. They can be *koya* or *pharmakon*: what so readily can heal human and animal, may also as quickly kill them. Being made ill or killed by an unknown plant or mycelium is a given as we are part of nature, the universe or however this sphere that contains life may be called. Notwithstanding, humans are ruled by codes of ethics in their different manifestations. As Viveiros de Castro points out, “[t]he amerindian principle of precaution: a world entirely composed of living foci of intentionality necessarily comes with a large dose of bad intentions” (74). No matter how much humans

romanticize the world of plants and shamans as wonderful creatures with great intentions, the combination may prove to be lethal, for there is a “predatory economy” being enacted at all times and whoever does not eat its enemy runs the risk of being eaten by it” (Viveiros de Castro 151). There must exist an awareness of the risks involved in being part of the earth. That is why, in the western civilizing endeavor since Cicero, outlawing *phusis* and dominating nature has been the law of the land. Nature is indeed *phusis* controlled by man: an immense force deceptively tamed by hu-man in his ineffable naivete. The power of the *wak'a* comes perhaps from that uncontrollable desire man has sensed all the way from his beginning as a species, to be able to understand the designs and caprices of the *pacha*: the earth. Earth is *terra*, *tierra*, *territorio*, *terreno*, *terroir* not very different from *terror*, perhaps the terrifying sense of being buried under the earth. The *wak'a* is consecrated in any site under the sensing of the *yachag* or *curandera* who feels the terrain and extracts a rock, earth, stick from it and gives to it sacrality through a ritual of dance, meditation and asking the protection of *pacha*. In her essay “The Wondrous *W'aka* World”,³⁶ Lisa María Madera, an Ecuadorian-American biologist proposes that contemporary events worldwide might be *wak'a*: maybe even Covid 19 is a *wak'a* that calls humans to refrain and retreat, to confine themselves and look within the earth and soil. She writes:

Seventeenth-century Andeans described as *w'aka* those things that provoked love, terror, and awe. *W'aka* included the beautiful and the monstrous, the horrifying and the strange. The term captured objects of art, exquisitely wrought offerings made and laid with respect and love at sacred sites. It described springs and mountains, *pacarinas* that gave them birth. It described ancestors and primordial beings who later transformed into

revered features of the living land. *Wak'a* traced out the pulsing, interwoven fabric of sacred life, the vibrant flow of kinship across the quilted earth. (6)

To live a life without sacred sites implies a desacralization of the land and of every being; if beings are desacralized, they stop being treated with respect, and as a consequence they can easily be enslaved, exploited and extinct. The concept proposed by Cholango and his work as *wak'a* aesthetics, serves to point towards the sacred nature of sites and objects, and brings forth the notion of protection and respect to every single being in the planet: a rock, a stick, moss and lichen as teachers of lessons to live by: resilience, resistance, metamorphosis, photosynthesis, reducing, rescaling and a whole array of transformations of the relationship to the apparently inert. In Cholango's own words "The *wak'a* is not only a space or time, it can be a person, rock or object which can change its atoms, in other words, transform into a state of better vibration that can positively affect its surroundings. It is not only a physical phenomenon but also a magical one".³⁷ This transformation is achieved by a ritual of meditation, prayer and dance. Each *yachag* or artist achieves her own ritual making performance. This is not a social or public performance since it is mainly done in the seclusion of each healer's domain. In such a case, the obliteration and transformation of the atomic energy that a site, person or object possesses is key to its transformation into a *wak'a*. It is precisely in this aspect that the *wak'a* aesthetics differ from Baumgarten's or Kant's concept of aesthetics: it is not a matter of *a priori* exercise of the senses, nor is it an *a posteriori* thinking process, but a relational quality between members of the *pacha* soil/terrain, that is the *yachag*/healer/artist and her surroundings.

It is easy to romanticize these altered states of consciousness or confuse them with a psychiatric condition. Many of the so-called personality or schizo-affective disorders are seen in other cultures as psychic predispositions because of the ability of some people to see visions,

hear voices and sense presences. The psychic channels are always said to be opened by an episode (called psychosis in western medical terms) that prelates said visions and voices. In the shamanic voyage as Cholango states: “The altered state of consciousness is achieved only by ritual chanting and meditation”.³⁸ There is no teacher plant ingestion involved; only the smoke of *salvia*, tobacco and other plants are used as space cleansers. The *wak'a* site is found specifically by using the senses and perceptions that are usually not involved in the daily functioning lives of a city dweller. The artist-*yachag* has a different time and space; an operative allowance to behave differently and as such not call attention to himself as a deranged individual. The industrial capitalist system does not support the different and the non-functioning; those unable to be part of such a system, thus, unable to produce, are discarded rapidly. The artist title serves him to disguise such special abilities. Nevertheless, in order to be inserted in a productive capitalist society the artist has to show something for himself either in sales or grants or recognition. Cholango is at a point in his life in which it is becoming more and more difficult to compete with younger artists. The fine line between the *yachag* and the artist is becoming thinner: he is a *taita* or father because of his age and wisdom, however, he is not a showoff and certainly not a pseudo shaman who uses divination and plants to lure eco-depressed lost souls. He remains a street teacher, he preaches his *wak'a* aesthetics to whomever wants to listen in the streets of the *Centro Histórico* of Quito, gathering people around him who are interested in his teachings. This venue can be seen as an extension of his performative work which before consisted of actions and nowadays is mainly relational as in the exchange of words and phrases between artist and audiences, both in kichwa and Spanish.

In a distinct turn, Alomoto uses the notion of *wak'a* to instill sacredness to her own works of art. She begins with a ritual blessing of the space when and wherever she will install or

perform. Her installation-performance *Ri-ri-ri-ri* (fig. 36) is a ritual sacralization with dance and music by women collaborators which initiate the ceremonial task of consecrating the site. Thus, the site itself and the objects are given the status of *wak'a*.



Fig. 36 Angélica Alomoto. *Ri-ri-ri-ri*. Performance ritual with music and objects (*wak'a*) Photo of the artist. 2018

The ritual consecration of the objects, the site and the people who participate act as the magical tool to pull together a distinct awareness of work of art: one that serves not only for the purpose of recreating one's vision, or the senses, as in a Kantian notion of aesthetics but as a magical instrument with gathering abilities of good feelings and omens. It is in a sense the reproduction of an interior space, like the hidden grottos of the earth, a womb of sorts, better said in Sloterdijk's words:

The category of the intimate discussed here deals exclusively with divided, consubjective and inter-intelligent interiors in which only dyadic or multi-poled groups

are involved—and which, in fact, can only exist to the extent that human individuals create these particular spatial forms as autogenous vessels through great closeness, through incorporations, invasions, intersections, interfoldings and resonances (and, in psychoanalytical terms, also identifications) (98).

As a particular spatial form, the *wak'a* is an intersection, a pocket or fold of interiority that holds the sacralized notion of spirit that its maker wishes to imbue it with. It is a multi-poled site-object-being that is capable of holding that interiority and is also able to express it in exteriority. Thus not only all exterior, nor all interior but both at the same time and place, an expression of multiplicity unfolding, always already unconcealing itself. This rare emergence of *conocimiento* and concept seems to have been achieved by both indigenous artists at the crossroads of contemporary art and ancestral traditional practices, which apparently work very well together. It seems that the research tools needed for the excavation of what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges” have been provided by plant and Amerindian ontologies as post-metaphysical resources to understand the planet from a distinct point of view, a “weak” point of view.

Seeds are *wak'a*. They harbor in them the magical potential to become, to sprout, to transform. They are all magical since they are the bearers of a new life; they are also sacred since they hide inside the spirit of the plant, the fruit and the being they will become. *Wak'a* as seed turns the gardener into a guardian. The *yachag* becomes the guardian of teacher plants who are able to open up other possibilities of knowledge. If the seed is *wak'a*, *wak'a* is seed; not necessarily plant seed, but seed in terms of potentiality and interiority that expresses itself exteriorly. The magical *wak'a* that artists Cholango and Alomoto refer to is a *wak'a* that carries its own spirit. Sloterdijk writes:

The spaces that humans allow to contain them have their own history —albeit a history that has never been told, and whose heroes are *eo ipso* not human themselves, but rather the topoi and spheres as whose function humans flourish, and from which they fall if their unfolding fails. (90)

If their unfolding fails, if that strong carcass or mask that is the ego which protects, fails and is no longer in place, then the human falls. Unprotected, the human is destined to roam through campuses of voices and visions, auditory and olfactory hallucinations, an ectosphere outside of the interior. If she finds a *wak'a* she can come to inhabit the site, then a terrestrial *runa* (person) would have been consecrated. All this is imagined/played at night during dream state. During waking hours these images can be arranged so the dreamer will not have to dream again and again the same thing. As Marder writes: “The entire philosophical and theological tendency toward interiorization, respon-sible for the production of the withdrawn noumenal realm, which includes the soul, may be grafted onto the difference between vegetal exposure and animal concealment” (5). So, what is the great divide between the notion of interior for seeds, because they are supposedly a secret inexpugnable realm, and that of exterior for plant foliage, flower and fruit? Are they not the fruition of the same being just in different times and places? If the interiority or intimacy of a seed is uncovered and the language of plants deciphered, through scientific laboratory experiments, what is the place for dreams as a tool of discovery? It is the sorcerer-artist then, who finds those possibilities as cosmopolitical diplomat between worlds, to decipher and find the secret *wak'as* of its meaning. The concealment and unconcealment of the seed as the stance of the being of plant is a *wak'a*.

Certain seeds have been guarded in the ritual consecrations of grains that happens every solstice in the province of Imbabura where artists Cholango and Alomoto are originally from.

Grains of different proceedings are offered to the Inti or sun at the folds of mountain Imbabura, the *taita* (father) and *mama* Cotacachi at the beginning of the summer solstice, in order to preserve them for the next sowing that will take place with the next rains in September. This yearly festival is full of dances and ritualistic demonstrations of gratitude to the sun that helps the seed open within the soil. Those seeds that are consecrated turn into a *wak'a* that is in this way, carried by the guardian of the *chakra* or garden for its tending and husbanding of the grains, the land and the soil. Three seeds are planted together every September: the gourd or *zapallo* (*cucurbita ficifolia*), the corn and the beans. These three seeds become plants that together form an alliance of vegetal cooperation; the corn grows as a cane over which the beanstalk curls and grows, while the *zapallo* is a nitrogen fixer of the soil. Seeds sprout into the soil rotating towards completion in an attraction play, in Sloterdijk's words: "The maximum of attraction magic naturally lies between the second and third acts of the drama, when the bodies separated in the second act begin preparing for reunification" (210). The first act would be the seed, corn, cucurbit or bean, by itself, the second would be seed in soil and the third would be the sprouting, completing the magical act of being born to the sun. The *Inti Raymi* kichwa celebrations are a celebration of the power of the sun to elicit the seed to open and give birth to the plant. Such a feast is a human interpretation of vegetal joy and precipitation into the abyss. The journey of the kernel into the womb of *pacha* in order to become-plant is a voyage through a dark passage. It is probably very dark and humid: if plants conceive the human notion of interiority, it must be pretty scary and lonely. The womb of mother earth is immense, void and pregnant with life and death as no other creature has ever been. This rotund sphere, container of all life and lives, contained within a group of other spheres shiny and obscure at the same time, ever presently rotating without truce, shaking the ingredients of effervescent cyclic cocktail, is also the site of

all decay, death, disease and damnation. But who is the only creature capable of feeling this insideness as a presence? Only humans are able to record it at least in written language or oral tradition. The languages humans perceive from other nonhumans may be haptic and non-verbal, however its ableness to be shared and opened remains in the secret which is contained in its interior: drinking the plant, eating the mycelium, manducating the knowledge is the only way possible to be inhabited and spoken by it. In anthropophagy the only way to get to know the enemy is to eat it, thus, the Tupinambá from Brazil were in disposition to eat and be eaten always. That is the possibility of the eruption of knowledge from the plant world: to communicate through the senses, specifically through food and beverage the secrets reserved to one. The role of political ambassador that the *yachag* performs, enables the community to which he transmits to apprehend the lessons learned in plant voyages. In dreams the three seeds of corn, gourd and bean would speak to the people and break the opacity to offer some light into its dimly lit world.

Brian S. Bauer quotes in his book *The sacred Landscape of the Inca*, the definition of *wak'a* (or *guaca* as it is called in the book, and as it was called in traditional Spanish writing) from Garcilaso de la Vega and historian Bernabé Cobo: “Cobo’s definition for the word *huaca* (or *guaca*) adds an important additional dimension: ‘...the Peruvian Indians used the term *guaca* for all the sacred places designated for prayers and sacrifices, as well as for all of the gods and idols that they worshiped in this places” (5). He relates that the sacrifices made to the *wak'as* were many and of very solemn nature “...because when the earth quaked children were killed, and ordinarily sheep and clothing were burned and gold and silver was buried” (Bauer 23). *Wak'as* helped guard against death, evil air, and *susto* (terror). Also, springs received offerings to prevent them from drying up, offerings for safe journey and of course offerings to the major deities: Inti

and Viracocha (the Creator). Although they are sanctified sites and were sacred to the Inca and indigenous groups before the conquest, *wak'as* have been looted extensively because they contained offerings of gold, silver and precious stones. It has been a major source of revenues for *huaqueros* or treasure hunters to dig up entire shrines in the Cusco region (which comprises Perú and Ecuador). The very complex *ceque* system of *guacas* that Brauer refers to as shrines of devotion and architectural constructions crosses the highlands of the septentrional Andes, which means that wherever we lay foot we might be stepping over a *wak'a*. However, not everything is *wak'a* either. Both artists written about in this chapter make a very conscientious effort to differentiate among interesting objects or sites and a *wak'a* site. For this reason, both Cholango and Alomoto ritualize their practices in order to consecrate a site or object as *wak'a*. First there is the “feeling” or “sensing” of the place or object, then there is the ritual. In Cholango’s case he makes it a solo performance of dance and chanting, a mediation of sorts with the masters of the site or object he is consecrating. In Alomoto’s case, she calls other women from her collective to a group ceremonial that sacralizes the site with chants in kichwa, dancing and offerings for health and amity among the presents. The *wak'a* is somehow an affect that offers longitudinal and latitudinal connections:

On the plane of consistency, a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude). Nothing but affects and local movements, differential speeds. The credit goes to Spinoza for calling attention to these two dimensions of the Body, and for having defined the plane of Nature as pure

longitude and latitude. Latitude and longitude are the two elements of a cartography.

(Deleuze & Guattari 261)

A cartography emerges from the dimensions of longitudinal and latitudinal connections noted in the *wak'a* shrines of Cusco that provide a very specific order to the world. It was not something made at will in spur of the moment. The connections made were topological and intended a concatenation with one another and with a variable dimension of the outside world. "They are haecceities" write Deleuze & Guattari, "in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected" (261). The *wak'a* affects those who come in contact with it. It displays a series of vibrations that affect the space and time, and probably other dimensions that go mostly unnoticed. If the connections or the coordinates are correct it is probable that some sort of spark may be elicited; perhaps time steps in a different direction as space and vice versa; different haecceities as wind, air, odors, speed or heat enable occurring factors that send these lines of flight in disparate directions.

Wak'a can be an affect or a seed, and both can turn directions upward or inward, exterior and interior turning light into various shades of dark, and dark nights into a multiplicity of colors, voices and smells. Olfactory hallucinations occur in this plane of haecceities where the *wak'a* lives. Suppose various lines encounter each other stemming from the four corners of the universe of the Inca system: *Chinchasuyu*, *Collasuyu*, *Antisuyu*, *Cuntisuyu*. Each one of these lines occurs in many shrines or *wak'as*. In Bauer's words "Cobo, repeatedly used the indigenous terms *Coyana*, *Pallan*, *Coyao* to enumerate the *ceques*" (1). These *ceques* contained the *w'akas* or shrines, in a very orderly sequence of longitudinal and latitudinal lines. "The distribution of Inca shrines surrounding Cusco is known as 'the Cusco ceque system'" (Bauer 1). So, both are intertwined because these systems of shrines had to be taken care of by the people of Cusco and

surrounding areas. In the Inca world of shrines, *wak'as* and *kipus*, places, objects and beings had a tradition of sacrality that imbued all things with a spirited sense. As Descola and other scholars state, in the amerindian worlds from Alaska to Patagonia all beings have spirits that inhabit them; in such a world it is almost impossible to enact transactions or even projects without the permission of those spirits deemed sacred. In the 20th century *huaqueros* started digging tombs and *wak'a* sites around all the perimeter of Cusco, Ingapirca, and the coastal towns of Perú and Ecuador. The newly acquired archaeological interest of foreign researchers on the look for interesting sites for exploration, drew a crowd of local helpers who learned to dig and look for objects of interest. An extensive part of the treasures was extracted and sent to museums and collections abroad. The diggings were made without any sense of respect for what was buried under. Legends, local and global, tell of the horrible deaths and mishaps that occurred to people who did not respect those sites. Nevertheless, the *huaqueros* were initiated in the ambition and interest for archaeological loot by outsiders who understood the idea of “discovering” them to the world. Although foreign archaeologists and *huaqueros* gave the world the privilege of learning about the ancient inhabitants of Cusco and the Andes, they also extracted the “spirited” *wak'as* from their original sites.

This extraction is equal to the extraction of gold, latex, petroleum oil, and spiritual knowledge. There is something immeasurable in the curiosity of humans to dig, excavate and find. It is as if the earth would exercise herself a tremendous gravitational pull into her profound darkness. Could it be the womb calling Terrans back to her? To be buried means to be dead. In the knowledge of the ancient *yachags*, *runas* (people) only “know” when they see death, the ultimate teacher. Life and death are intimately connected within the womb. In Sloterdijk's words:

The dual possession by the soil and genealogical compulsion drove the settled peoples into the arms of the possessing Great Mothers. As the soul binds the living and the dead to itself equally, some start to believe that the mothers want to keep their loved ones forever with them, and in a sense also within them. Now the hearth and the landscape, the womb and the field become synonymous. (271)

Relating to the territory is relating to the mother womb or soil, excavating her in order to find what she is made of is the constant pursuit of humans who are relentlessly searching for answers, “the interrogation of the dead and rebirth—in short, for the sake of self-identification” (Sloterdijk 272). The womb/soil is thus a place where they go seeking what is most important: their truth.

The relationship of the ancient Amazonian *Siona and Sapara* cultures to sacred plants afforded them precisely the knowledge of that place of truth, without the literal excavation of the earth. The voyage, as with many myths of origins, of the hero is the voyage to the confines of self where she will meet death. “Dasein is being held out into the nothing” (Heidegger 103). In anxiety humans are held onto the abyss looking at the very entrance of the mother from whom they were expelled at the beginning of life. “All truth-seekers in metaphysical times are therefore returnees to the womb.” writes Sloterdijk (272). The fascination with the entrance and return to the womb seems to have taken the world and its inhabitants in a frenzy of returning to its deep cavities in order to “know”. Spiritual extractivism is the latest quest into the womb of earth in order to extract the knowledge she seems to harbor within. What is that knowledge though? Is it her fire that fascinates people seeking redemption? The darkness within? The protection and peace that she offers? Most spiritual seekers seem to only achieve that knowledge through tremendous hardship, the hardship that comes with the face-to-face encounter with death, with soil, with seed. They become seed again only when fully returned to the womb of *pacha* earth.

Then the cycle is complete. Metamorphosis has been achieved completely. The composting process begins when maggots make their way into the wounded cavities of corpses, when vultures eat what is left of other predators, when soil returns to soil.

Conclusions

This project focused on the premise that plants are sensible beings able to engage in alliances and cooperation with other beings, such as the Amazonian *yachag*, and as a continuum, with the artist in trance, an artist who is able to incorporate ecstatic trance and the ability to go beyond the nullity of life in order to preserve a more equal and livable planet. The aim of this project is to establish an understanding of Amazonian philosophy as a path to enlarge our knowledge of the plant world and other ontologies that forward the notions of respectful coexistence with every being on the planet by giving them personhood. I contend that it is the artist-*yachag* or artist-philosopher who is placed in the role of translator of worlds and is able to shine some light in the coming transformation of one world (or worlds) into another.

Through Heidegger's concepts of *Dasein* and a hermeneutic line of thought I proposed that Amazonian communities like the *Siona*, *Secoya* and *Sapara*, in the Putumayo and Napo rivers, model a philosophy of their own based on intricate and thoughtful communication with guiding spirits from plants, animals, mountains and rivers. Michael Marder's approach toward "vegetal democracy" opened a path to understand the ability of plants to speak to humans through their non-verbalized language. The concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism from Viveiros de Castro served as a key to offer nonhumans personhood and thus agency, trespassing the frontiers and hierarchies reserved only for humans in western metaphysics. Amazonian *yachags* offer a plethora of knowledge by which their communities are enabled and guided. Some *yachags* are their community's political leaders and as such they guide their people and offer ways of achieving social justice and welfare. I find these two options especially important and very different from industrialized capitalistic societies from the global north, since Amazonian small scale societies have communal wellbeing, or what has been called *Sumak*

Kawsay, or the art of living well, as their main scope and goal to achieve. They make their decisions in a plant mannered way, so to speak, all together, consulting with the root and the stem, the pistil, the flower and the fruit, all bearing the same voice and weight of power. In all decision-making processes these amerindian groups have shown us that no choice can be made by individual leaders; all choices are consulted with the *bases* or the base of the movement. Although this way of thinking is also proper to communist societies, we can pair such behavior to a plant's metonymic inception: all is indebted to the water, soil and sun that feeds the rhizome: from then onwards, all growth spurs. Time as well as resources all come together in an organic fashion, without forcing any occurrence; all that needs to be is begotten in one way or another. It is such that it seems that a notion of fluidity is enabled: nothing is done and without doing everything gets done, as Kohn suggests.

However, even if the feats and great healings of Amazonian *yachags* are remarkable, it is also important to state that *yachags* are men and women just like any other. They make mistakes, they can cause great harm and also great healing. But no miracle or unbelievable fate should be expected, nor the advice of the *yachags* taken literally, since it is pretty much always a metaphoric way of interpreting moments and happenings. *Yachags* will never say "no," when prompted to answer a question of great importance; instead, they answer *tranquilo*, which means "do not do anything," "stay put," "calm down." Advice for which we have no clue, since *tranquilo* also means "quiet". It is precisely not to act, what the *yachags* are advising: be steady, do nothing, say nothing. Some *yachags* have been known to cause great harm to enemies of their communities. "Plants are great, yes, but just as potentially dangerous or beneficial as any other being" (Duchesne 3) is the saying offered by *vegetalistas*. In the same way, the *yachags* who heal can take away health, calm and even life. Therefore, there is no such thing as good or bad in

Amazoning, binary projections are useless, nothing is black or white, everything is as nuanced and strange as in dreams. Nevertheless, *yachags* and, lately, plants have been romanticized; the first as healers with no further or personal interests and the latter as beautiful, sunny beings, incapable of anything other than beauty, goodness and truth, faculties that follow the Kantian categorical imperative. These categories are not relevant neither for the plant world, nor for the Amazonian conception of life. This being said, the realm of Amazonian *yachags* and their communities is a complex web of negotiations, a spiral journeying between worlds.

These journeys are vessels of predatory alterity, opacity, sorcery and other subtle ways of transiting realities hinged by hierarchical rituals and ceremonies that cannot be trespassed without risk. The conclusion is to not romanticize the feats of *yachags*. To remain in a state of surprise and bewilderment of their powers is advisable, for their accomplishments may be as faulty as any other human beings'. More than being terrorized by their superhuman powers, we may remain respectful of Andean and Amazonian leaders' capacity to move masses and to appeal to the power of unity as in a plant. In the words of Mama Dulu, Dolores Cacuango, the great leader from the Pesillo region of Cayambe, Ecuador:

Nosotros somos como los granos de quinua, si estamos solos, el viento lleva lejos. Pero si estamos unidos en un costal, nada hace el viento. Bamboleará, pero no nos hará caer.

We are like quinoa grains, if alone, wind blows us, but together in a sack, winds won't do anything. They may sway us, but will not make us tumble.³⁹

The quinoa plant holds its grains together like many fingers in a hand, they are all part of the same community, never separated, not as the metaphor, but in its continuity, and thus a metonymic power, not a magical one that operates without any logic, but rather a loving magic of the masses working together.

The artists and artworks I have chosen as illustrations in this dissertation are paradigmatic of the concept of “the artist in trance.” These artists fulfill the notion of translators of worlds or artist-*yachags*. Each chapter has been a voyage through certain concepts as well as a journey aided by specific plants or a quality these plants possess. I have named each chapter after each one of these qualities: Hostedness, Proliferation, Blossoming, and Dissemination. The last chapter “Mapping the Soil”, offers a possibility of retracing our steps, renewing the path we have already walked as communities from the *Abya Yala*, in order to find new ways of living on planet earth. The challenges are many and varied, from Belkis Ayón, to María Teresa Hincapié, Gloria Anzaldúa, Hilma af Klint, Cecilia Vicuña, Sandra Nakamura and Angélica Alomoto, these artists-chamanas share the passion and adherence to believing that only art is the fine link between life and nothing. Only art offers them the great prospect of becoming-other while creating, thinking the world from a different perspective or perspectives: the understanding that the way of art and artifacts is brought on by the beings our *Pacha Mama* (cosmos) is populated with. These artifacts are in turn conductors to ways of doing and thinking that may no longer be available or at hand. Allied with other beings, human, plant and animal, inhabiting all different houses, however, capable of cooperation, pollination and contamination in order to endure as beings, these artists follow the interconnectivity that plants generate. Being open to learning from other beings enables the artist in trance to show others in their own communities how to make small tweaking that change softly the worlds we inhabit.

As I write these words, June 2022, Quito, the capital of Ecuador, underwent eighteen days of protests lead by the indigenous movement, feminists, transfeminists and young artists’ collectives trying to make small changes that would bring less inequality and some possibility to stop extractivist practices in Andean and Amazonian communities. The conservative

government, composed of men who follow the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, disdain and ignore the native Andean and Amazonian populations, with a total misunderstanding of their stance as translators of worlds and caregivers of the soil. There was extreme persecution, military repression and many young protesters killed as a result. Nevertheless, if there is resilience in plants, it is evidenced in the indigenous populations who learn from planting and harvesting seeds, the patience needed to wait for blossoming and proliferation. They will remain as seeds waiting for auspicious weather to sprout.

Learning from the Amazonian *Siona* ceremonials and rituals has been an immense lesson, equal to that of understanding Kant, Heidegger, Foucault or Kristeva. The learning I have undergone is tremendous for it has taken me to a place where I have been able to start shedding the colonial chip; in Eduard Glissant's words: "Whereas the Western nation is first of all an 'opposite,' for colonized peoples identity will be primarily 'opposed to' —that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit."

(17) Nowadays, and in spite of all obstacles, Andean and Amazonian communities are able to see themselves in the mirror without winking and are able to recognize the face of the other in themselves, which for *chi'xis* or mestizos is still painful to acknowledge. Going into uncharted territory in this exploration of plant ontology in concatenation with the Amazonian *yachag*, the Andean *chamana* and the artist in trance, has meant to look into previously unknown realms, to research into the being of plants and their many metaphoric and metonymic semblances. It has taken me into the opacity of the Amazonian *yagé* ceremony and rituals which carry unprecedented consequences. However, this journey has meant a renewed outlook on the work of artists previously unknown to me or whose practices did not mean much without the knowledge of plants as beings and the nearness of the Amazonian *yachags*.

I proposed that the artist in trance is capable of going beyond the tragic condition of life and in spite of it, bears the ability and possibility of creating poetically while thinking philosophically, posing for themselves the ontological question of Being. As this project unfolded, I was able to show through these artists' works, and the questions they pose, that they are indeed artist-*yachags* who can interpret the many interrogations of the cosmos for their communities and in some ways predict and heal certain maladies through the art process. This is all fairly speculative, as Donna Haraway writes, it is “speculative fabulation” (10) a midway between criticism and romanticizing, both the world of plants and *yachags*, remaining in bewilderment and still holding many queries for future investigation.

Future research may be in the line of ritual and ceremonials in art making, protest as social performance and plants as beings in communities, without the burden of hierarchical domination by humans. I am particularly interested in art and protest as ritual cathartic collective performances that enable societies to change and softly tweak towards greater change and reform. Plant ontology entails a complete diving into what it means to become-with-plants, a different meaning of becoming-plant which at times seems a long shot. However, this work leads me into a profound relationship with the more-than-human world and it marks a point of departure for broader possibilities in post-humanist research.

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Glossary

1. Ayahuasca: The name given by the Kichwa to the concoction of different plants and vines such as the Ayahuasca or *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, the Floripondio or *Brugmansia Suaveolens* and the Chacruna or *Psychotria Viridis*. *Aya* means death and *wasca* or *huasca* means vine, the vine of death.
2. Abya Yala: Is the name given to all the Americas by the *Kuna* Indians from Panamá, it means Continent of Land. Nowadays many scholars, intellectuals and artists use this name as a vindication of the pre-Columbian lost land.
3. Ceque: The ceque system consists of a series of ritual pathways leading outward from Cuzco into the rest of the Inca Empire.
4. Chamana: Anzaldúa calls the women artists and healers chamanas, which would be equivalent to female shaman.
5. Chacruna: From the kichwa, to mix. It is one of the plants used to make the entheogen potion along with Ayahuasca, it is the second ingredient. Scientific name *Psychotria Viridis*.
6. Chakra: the plot of land used for cultivating vegetables and food
7. Chi'xi: In the parlance of author Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, it means stained or mixed. She uses the word to name mestizos from the Abya Yala.
8. Conocimiento: Spanish word for knowledge, used by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Light in the Dark* where she employs various Spanish language terms.
9. Cupixawa: A round house where Amazonian tribes get together, perform rituals, and gather for important events. Usually made in a concerted effort by all the community. In other parts of the Amazonian forest it is called maloka.
10. Cuyá: Name given to people of mestizo or white heritage, or anybody who is not a *Siona*.
11. Fluido: A strong mixture of healing herbs such as basil, thyme, chamomile and others, mixed with liquor and Agua de Florida. It is made by the women of the yachags or *Mamitas*.

12. Icaro: Sacred chants that the shamans perform during ceremonies. Each shaman develops his unique style of *Icaros* and they become quite virtuous. The shamans lead the ceremony participants through the night with their chanting.

13. Kichwa: Language spoken by the Inca conquerors of the lands of the Septentrional Andes which was imposed on all other tribal groups conquered. It is often written Quechua, although, since before the Spanish, Inca written language had not been translated, present indigenous groups state that the closest written form and pronunciation would be Kichwa.

14. Kipus or Quipus were a mnemotechnic and registrar system used by Andean elders, linked to textile art and the abstract significance of knots and colors.

15. Lizam: Plant from the family of the monocots which grows in the highlands of the Andean region of Otavalo. Also known as *paja toquilla* it is the material from which baskets, hats and boats are woven.

16. Maloka: Same as *Cupixawa*, gathering space, usually round, made of local materials. Used for ceremonial rituals or political gatherings within the Amazonian basin tribes like the *Siona* and *Secoya*.

17. Naranjilla: A plant originary of Ecuador and Colombia, its scientific name is *Solanum quitoense*, the last name because it is specially found in and nearby Quito. Also named Lulo. Its leaves are anywhere from 10 inches wide to 12 inches long, green and purple, often full of small purple hair or trichomes. The fruit is much appreciated, sometimes described as a mixture of rhubarb and lime.

18. Nepantla/Nepantleras: As named by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Light in the dark*, nepantleras are women who are able to traverse between worlds, in Nepantla, an indigenous word in Maya meaning the afterlife. Nepantleras traverse between worlds and cultures.

1.

19. Nixi Pae: Name given by the tribe of the Huni Kuin from Brazil to the concoction of different plants and lianas such as the Ayahuasca or *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, the Floripondio or *Brugmansia Suaveolens* and the Chacruna or *Psychotria Viridis*.

20. Pacha Mama: Mother Earth in Kichwa. Pacha is soil, earth or cosmos and Mama means mother.

21. Pinta: The visions seen by participants in ceremonies of *Yagé*. They usually include marvelous colors and figures that seem to be painted in space among a gaseous airy quality.

22. Plantas maestras: Teacher plants, a name used for plants such as the *Yagé*, San Pedro, Peyote, etc. Also believed to be teacher plants are Ajo sachá, Floripondio, Huayra, Chacrúna, etc. The taitas and mamas are experts in the use of all the teacher and healer plants in order to cure patients.

23. Remedio: The sacred *yagé* is called *remedio*, a word in Spanish for medicine.

24. Siona: Xio-bain or people of the soil. Is a group of Amazonian people descended from the Tukano and Omagua who inhabit the margins of the Putumayo River between Ecuador and Colombia.

25. Secoya: Is a group of Amazonian people neighboring the Siona

26. Totorá: A plant from the family of the *monocots*. Its fibers are used in boat and house building. It is mainly found in rivers and lakes in the High Andean regions of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

27. Taita: The shamans of many South American Amazonian communities are called taitas in Kichwa which means Father.

28. Um Sagrado Lugar: A sacred place, name used by Ernesto Neto for his work at the 57th Venice Biennale.

29. Wak'a: is a site, place or object which is sacralized through ritual dancing and singing by the yachag or chamana in order to be turned into a sacred space. Some authors use the word w'aka and some others use wak'a. I use the second spelling as is used in Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's texts.

30. Yachag: Is the traditional Andean name for seer or healer. I use it instead of shaman, because it better describes the healers, seers and *vegetalistas* of the Andes and the Amazonia.

31. *Yagé*: Name given by the *Sionas*, *Cofan* and *Secoya* people to the concoction of different plants and lianas such as the *Ayahuasca* or *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, the Floripondio or *Brugmansia Suaveolens* and the Chacrúna or *Psychotria Viridis*.

Notes

¹ Piaguaje, Humberto. Personal communication with the *yachag*. According to this *yachag* from the *Siona* community, the *Siona*, *Secoya* and *Cofán* nations from the upper Amazon basin are tribes that descend from the Tukano people and claim to have lived there for 7000 years.

² According to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, soul: “also called spirit, an entity supposed to be present only in living things, corresponding to the Greek *psyche* and Latin *anima*.” 866. I use the term soul as Andean and Amazonian communities do, giving personhood, thus soul, to every nonhuman, and, differing from the Greek, to apparently inert things such as mountains, lakes, rivers and rocks; in a word what Viveiros de Castro calls “Perspectivism” 56. I use the term “vegetal soul” as it was conveyed to me in a ceremony with the master plant *Ayahuasca* in which I sensed a luminous vision depicting a vegetal entity living within my body and a voice saying the words: *Alma Vegetal* or vegetal soul, thus conveying the notion of a vegetal entity taking possession of my body through ingestion. In the composite term Vegetal Soul, I imply the notion that plants, *yachags* and the artist in trance bear this commonality.

³ In the *Anaxágoras fragments*, the entire quote reads: “And since the portions of the great and of the small are equal in amount, for this reason, too, all things will be in everything. Since it is impossible for there to be a least thing, they cannot be separated, nor come to be by themselves; but they must be now, just as they were in the beginning, all-together. And in all things many things are contained, and an equal number both in the greater and in the smaller of the things that are separated off.” 6

⁴ These are notions taken from conversations with the *Taitas* HP, SP and PM after *yagé* ceremonies in the Putumayo and Quito, Ecuador, 2016.

⁵ See Coccia, Emanuele in his book *The Life of Plants*: “Plants are not only the most subtle artisans of our cosmos, they are also the species that have given life to the world of forms—they are the form of life that has made the world a site of infinite figuration.” 12.

⁶ See Marder, Michael. Various books on plants and vegetal democracy include: *Plant Thinking*, *Grafts*, *The Philosophers Plant*, *Dust*, *The Chernobyl Herbarium*.

⁷ Personal communication with *Taita Humberto Piaguaje*: “The *Sionas* have inhabited the Putumayo basin for 7000 years and have been living in alliance with plants and animal spirits since then.” 2016. See Trujillo, Jorge Nelson in *Mundos Amazónicos*, the *Sionas* (then *Omaguas* or *Tukanos*) have inhabited the basin since at least 1558, when they are described for the first time. 163

⁸ See Vickers, William in *the Sionas and Secoyas, Su adaptación al medio ambiente*. He explains *Siona* spiritualism and describes the Celestial River *ume siaya*, as a river that flows near *Siona* and *Secoya* communities and is full of natural riches, animals, plants and peaceful meadows; it is usually accessed through *yagé* ceremonies. 166

⁹ See Ayón, Belkis. <http://www.ayonbelkis.cult.cu/en/home/>

¹⁰ See Matheus, Carolina, et al. *Plantas que sanan*, a booklet published by the Ecuadorian Oil Company Petroecuador, precisely about plants from the Limoncocha UB15, a block of the Amazonian forest where petroleum wells were being dug. Its texts are beautifully illustrated by local artists and the endeavor is part of a plan of “social responsibility” that ex-President Rafael Correa advanced in Amazonian territories. Paradoxically (later in his cycle he decided to keep exploitation of oil industries) it was Correa’s government the one to introduce special rights for nature in the Ecuadorian constitution, taking the lead in South America along with Bolivia’s ex-president Evo Morales. The translation from Spanish to English is mine.

¹¹ See Kirchoff, Bruce K, and Regine Claßen-Bockhoff. "Inflorescences: concepts, function, development and evolution." *Annals of Botany* vol. 112,8 (2013): 1471-6. doi:10.1093/aob/mct267

¹² See *Annals of Botany*, for a complete guide to inflorescence and other botanical terms, vol. 112, 8-9

¹³ Piaguaje, Sandro. Personal communication with the *Taita*. Putumayo 2016

¹⁴ A very well-known proverb in Hispanic America.

¹⁵ See Bauer, Brian. *The Sacred Landscape of the Inca. The Cusco Ceque System*. 11

¹⁶ The three philosophers have an interest in discussing the feats of human behavior when confronted with powerful questions of life. In *The World as Idea* Schopenhauer writes: "It has often been remarked that genius and madness have an aspect in common and even converge; and indeed poetical inspiration has been called a kind of madness: *amabilis insania*..." 114. In his seminar "Psychosis" Lacan writes: "Psychosis is not dementia. Psychosis are, if you will —there is no reason to avoid indulging in this word— what corresponds to what has always been called, and legitimately is still called, *madness*." 12. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva writing about rites of defilement in Indian society: "A split seems to have set in between, on one hand, the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play —the order of the phallus." 74.

¹⁷ See Ivanoff, Pierre, et al. *Civilizaciones Maya y Azteca*. The *Popol Vuh* is the book of the dead of the Mayas. 23. The translation from Spanish to English is mine.

¹⁸ See Ushigua, Manari. *Dreamworld* online classes.:
<https://www.dreamworldprogram.com/espanol>

¹⁹ *Sapara yachag* Manari Ushigua teaches a dream workshop where participants learn to interpret their dreams in that nation's divinatory tradition. His teachings are oral although some have been recorded in Eduardo Khon's book *How Forests Think*. The lessons received and recorded in this section are the fruit of a workshop I registered for, *El Mundo de los sueños, Dreamworld*. The workshop is held through a website which is enabled by mediators in San Francisco and Berkeley, California; Manari Ushigua transmits from *Sapara* territory to the world.

²⁰ See Neto, Erneto: Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin ~ Aru Kuxipa | Sacred Secret - Interview with Ernesto Neto <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewSKCSU4p9k> June 23, 2015.

²¹ Oscar Santillan is an Ecuadorian artist working with the development of languages derived from objects which translate perceptions of plants and animals through those of the Amazonian shaman. Paul Rosero experiments with inorganic recycled materials to create fantasmagoric plants and fungi. Pamela Cevallos inaugurates a whole different meaning for the imaginary archive and collection of pre-columbian pieces of archeology. Fabiano Kueva redefines Alexander Von Humboldt's archive and reorders it in a fictional way to give a tweak to history and create a fabulation on the strange notion that it was him who "discovered" the plants and specimens from the New World. Angélica Alomoto speaks of plant use in her own indigenous community. Archivo Visual Amazonico is a website where various artists collect pieces of information and images of all kinds of artistic displays and agencies from the more-than-human world of the Amazonian forest.

²² In *Radical Spirits*, Ann Braude writes: "Among the more audacious claims in *Radical Spirits* is the assertion that spirit mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership." xix

²³ Viracocha is the name for the god Inti or sun, also is the name given to a lord by the Incas of the Andes. The river Mapocho is located in the southmost end of Chile.

²⁴ Cerro El Plomo is one of the elevations of the Southern Andes in Chile.

²⁵ Quipu is the system of counting and writing used by the Incas of the Andes, made of knotted string. Vicuña uses the cultural device *Quipu* for many of her works.

²⁶ See Bauer, Brian in *The Inca Ceque System*. 1

²⁷ See <http://www.botanydictionary.org/parthenocarp.py.html>

²⁸ Mother rocks or *piedras madre* are named by both the artists I write about in this chapter: Amaru Cholango and Angelica Alomoto, as sacred *wak'as*.

²⁹ See Malabou, Catherine. "Not Mandatory, When Addiction Replaces Law." Reimagining the Human Symposium. [REIMAGINING THE HUMAN – DAY I](#)

³⁰ Cholango, Amaru. Personal communication with the artist. March 2022.

³¹ "The Colonial chip" is a colloquial Iberoamerican slang to reference an extinct servilism proper to colonial times.

³² See Reus, Jaime <http://www.riorevuelto.net/2011/11/amaru-cholango-amanecio-en-medio-de-la.html> The translation from Spanish to English is mine.

³³ Alomoto, Angelica personal communication with the artist February 9, 2022. Quito Ecuador.

³⁴ See Dussel, Enrique. Seminario *Filosofía Política en América Latina Hoy*. Disco 3, Debates 3, "De la Política a la Estética. Quito: Julio 2009-2012. The translation from Spanish to English is mine.

³⁵ Alomoto, Angelica personal communication with the artist. February 9, 2022.

³⁶ Lisa Maria Madera utilizes the spelling *w'aka*, while I have chosen to use Rivera Cusicanqui's spelling as *wak'a*.

³⁷ Cholango, Amaru. Personal communication with the artist March 7, 2022. Translation from Spanish to English is mine.

³⁸ See Cholango, Amaru, personal communication with the artist, March 2022.

³⁹ See Cacuango, Dolores quoted in Mandrágora Teatro. <https://mandragorateatro.org/dolores-cacuango-2/>

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