Technoshamanism: Symbiotic Techniques of Art and Healing

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Abstract

Technoshamanism combines traditional shamanic technologies with emerging technologies based in silicon (dry), biology (wet) and hybrid (moist), in the service of healing and sustaining life. This paper explores how contemporary artists pursue expanded forms of consciousness by symbiotically joining technoscientific tools and shamanic techniques.

Keywords

Shamanism, Technoshamanism, Art, Consciousness.

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

Introduction

Mircea Eliade defined shamanism as "techniques of ecstasy." He noted that, across cultures, it is fundamentally a technology of healing that is "at once mysticism, magic, and religion."[1] Anthropologist Michael Harner claimed that shamanic traditions around the world have developed a broad range of technologies - from sonic drivers (drums) to plant medicine rituals—in order to achieve trance states that offer insights beyond those available to typical waking consciousness.[2]

Shamans are both of this world and of the world(s) beyond. They communicate with spirits and ancestors in other dimensions, learn from them, guide members of the community to them, and harness their power to heal and protect individuals and the community. The shaman can embody the consciousness of other beings, including other animals. A shaman also can release an errant spirit that has stricken a member of their community with illness, sending the uninvited "hitchhiker" on its way. This can be dangerous, so shamans must be very strong, capable of self-healing, and masters of their practice.

Shamanism may heal at scales ranging from the individual to the global. Indeed, following the Huni Kuin concept of *Xinã bena*–"New Time"—some shamans/pajés of the Amazon have decided that the preservation of the Earth demands sharing their cultural insights and healing technologies more widely than in the past. This strategy has even led to the creation of *Huni Kuin—Beya Sina Bena*, a videogame about the ancient stories of these indigenous people, scheduled for release in 2024. The developer, Philosophical School of Games, claims that the game was produced in collaboration with the Huni Kuin communities of the Jordão River, in Acre, Brazil.

Brazilian cultural critic Fabiane Borges notes that "apart from any possible encounter between technology and shamanism, shamanism is itself a technology for the production of knowledge.[3] Similarly, I take technoshamanism to join a combination of traditional shamanic technologies with emerging technologies based in silicon (dry), biology (wet) and hybrid (moist), all in the service of healing and sustaining life.

The same can be said of art, historically interwound with *techne*, the Ancient Greek word for art and the etymological root of technology. To risk stating the obvious, the use of shamanism for healing vastly predates the application of science to allopathic medicine. The recent decriminalization of plant medicines and the legalization of psychedelic-assisted therapies in some jurisdictions demonstrate increasing acceptance of ancient indigenous technologies and marks a merger of diverse healing methodologies.

In a parallel manner, the engagement of contemporary art with shamanic traditions bridges knowledge domains and augments art's potentials to heal and to envision the future. These goals characterize a wide range of artistic practices, from Ernesto Neto's *A Sacred Space* to Roy Ascott's "shamantic web" of dual consciousness, to Anandha Ray's *Covenant VR* virtual reality ceremony/performance. A shaman was even part of Refik Anadol's cohort of artists and software engineers at the Google Artists and Machine Intelligence program in 2016.

Nonetheless, there is a dearth of literature that addresses the nexus of contemporary art and shamanism. Until recently, the work of Joseph Beuys dominated these discourses, with a few notable exceptions. Jack Burnham's "Artist as Shaman" (1974) applied a structuralist method to interpret shamanic aspects of Dennis Oppenheim's work. In "Art in the Dark" (1983) Thomas McEvilley interpreted performance by artists from Gunter Brus to Kim Jones as shamanic acts of expression and catharsis. "Weaving the Shamantic Web…" (Ascott, 1998) claimed that "this ancient ritual mirrors our contemporary artistic aspirations using digital technologies."[4] Further essays by Ascott and his circle, especially Lila Moore and myself, have followed in the 2010s and 2020s.[5]

In 2017, Christine Macel curated The Pavilion of Shamans, one of nine "trans-pavilions", bringing shamanism into the center of mainstream contemporary art (MCA) discourses at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Notable works included Juan Downey's *Circle of Fires Vive* (1979), Jeremy Shaw's *Liminals* (2017), and Neto's *A Sacred Place* (2017), the centerpiece of the pavilion. Despite scant media attention directed to this pavilion, art critic Tess Thackara (2017) highlighted it and discussed many additional international artists, indicating broad interest in the topic, if not by MCA critics, then by makers.[6] Indeed, my 2020 Facebook post about technoshamanism yielded over one hundred comments, primarily by artists about works of new media art (NMA) that fit the term. More recent MCA scholarship includes critiques of Mircea Eliade's and

Michael Harner's universalizing of shamanism and Claude Levi-Strauss' and Burnham's psychopathology of the shaman, and is informed by Viveiros de Castro's concept of "equivocation," offering a more nuanced and theoretical approach to shamanism and contemporary art. [7]

Borges and others use the term "technoshamanism" to problematize the destructiveness of western technoscience and its incursion on indigenous technologies of shamanism, which, by contrast, honor the sanctity of the Earth. Technoshamanism names the messiness of cultural hybridity and the commodification of shamanic traditions, including ayahuasca tourism and the gamification of Huni Kuin culture, resulting from colonization and globalization. The visual arts of indigenous cultures, including Shipibo textile patterns, Papunya Tula dot paintings, and Vodun rituals, are also being hybridized with, and appropriated by, international contemporary art and visual culture. Such appropriations raise vital questions about Technoshamanism as a form of aesthetic practice: How are contemporary artists engaging with the cosmologies, technologies, and intellectual property of shamanic cultures in ways that honor and benefit the indigenous and mestizo peoples that have cultivated and preserved shamanic traditions? How are indigenous artists engaging with shamanic (and postindustrial technologies) in ways that strengthen their communities and contribute to the discourses of contemporary art?

Mindful of these issues, my research is primarily concerned with the following speculative prospects:

1. How can artists embrace visionary consciousness?

2. How can art support entheogenesis (becoming divine together) by joining ancient shamanic techniques and contemporary technoscientific tools?

3. How can art catalyze greater awareness of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing (the unity of all things) to help heal the Earth?

Early Technoshamans

In 1997, British artist Roy Ascott participated in ayahuasca ceremonies in Brazil, which has had a profound impact on his praxis. He theorized parallels between the dual consciousness that emerges in shamanic ceremonies and the expanded field of consciousness afforded by emerging technologies. "In many respects," he wrote in 1998, "this ancient ritual mirrors our contemporary artistic aspirations using

digital technologies." Claudia Jacques claims that this dual consciousness can only be manifested through "indirection, shared participation, and metaphor," core tenets of the telematic art that he pioneered. This is the realm, she adds, that "visionary thinkers, creative artists, and shamans alike aspire to experience and explore." [8]

Ascott (1998) describes the shaman as "the one who 'cares' for consciousness, for whom the navigation of consciousness for purposes of spiritual and physical wholeness is the subject and object of living." He witnessed the pajé "passing through different layers of reality, through different realities..." The shaman inhabits a state of dual consciousness, of "seeing at once both inward realities and the outward surfaces of the world."

Although it predates Ascott's participation in shamanic plant-medicine ceremonies, his 1989 telematic artwork, *Aspects of Gaia: Digital Pathways Across the Whole Earth,* embodies a technoshamanic, dual consciousness. This installation integrates the global relationality of digital technologies with the shamanic commitment to healing the Earth. *Aspects of Gaia* took its inspiration from atmospheric scientist James Lovelock's holistic *Gaia Hypothesis* (1979), which proposes that the Earth (Gaia) is a living organism, a self-regulating, complex system that maintains the conditions for life on the planet. Artists, scientists, shamans, musicians, visionaries, and indigenous artists were invited to participate by sharing their feelings and beliefs about Gaia, which became work's content. Ascott likened the participants to healers who access the meridians of the earth's nodes and creatively interact with the flow of data to perform a type of "global acupuncture." Their contributions suggested, for Ascott, a telematic "noosphere," an emergent field of consciousness generated from interconnected individual consciousnesses, which might help harmonize and heal the planet." [9]

For American composer and electronic music pioneer Pauline Oliveros, cultivating expanded forms of consciousness was the primary focus of her career. For this early technoshaman, the wisdom of the body is crucial to accessing expanded states of consciousness. "I have progressed through many changes in music technology from the end of the 1950s to the present," she wrote. "Along the way I developed a bodily relation to machines for making music. It has always been necessary.... because of the essential knowledge of the body that is preconscious and nonverbal." [10] Her experience of performing improvised music parallels shamanic double-consciousness: Oliveros became a channel through with spirits from other dimensions could communicate with and heal us: "This altered state

of consciousness in performance is exhilarating and inspiring," she explained. "The music comes through as if I have nothing to do with it but allow it to emerge through my instrument and voice." [11] Oliveros' ideal attributes for a future artificial intelligence "chip"—with which she could make music—are refreshingly expansive. They include abstract psychic abilities, that seem to parallel shamanic intentions of achieving unity and healing on a cosmic level. These include: the ability to understand the relational wisdom that comprehends the nature of musical energy; the ability to perceive and comprehend the spiritual connection and interdependence of all beings and all creation as the basis and privilege of music making; the ability to create community and healing through music making; the ability to sound and perceive the far reaches of the universe much as whales sound and perceive the vastness of the oceans. This could set the stage for inter-dimensional galactic improvisations with yet unknown beings.[12]

Wake me up when ChatGPT can offer these features! For Oliveros, expanded consciousness on a galactic scale was the foundation of healing, a form of service that she performed within the frame of a feminist ethics of care.

Chilean-American artist Juan Downey is another early technoshaman. His 1979 video, *The Laughing Alligator*, resulted from the many months he and his family lived with the Yanomami people in southern Venezuela, on the border of Brazil. He participated with his Yanomami hosts in rituals using yopo, a plant medicine that contains a variety of DMT alkaloids. The artist came to regard shamanism as one of the most powerful elements in the bond that linked the Yanomami to their surroundings, to the earth, and to each other as part of a larger unity. As he wrote, A white and round place opens up in the front of my brain. Excretions of light that vaguely align into circles, the intensity of a spiral or the infinite peace of a mauve color. [...] I want to enter into the white space of my empty consciousness. [13]

From spending a lifetime in trance-like states, Downey expanded his consciousness. He tuned into the consciousness of others. And he helped others do the same. As a result, his work plays an important role in stimulating new ways of thinking that are the prerequisite to healing society's pathologies and to recreating the world in a more sensitive, inclusive, and caring way.

Contemporary Technoshamans

American dancer and choreographer Anandha Ray's virtual reality screen-dance, *Covenant VR* (Figure 1), was a revelation. Joining shamanic healing rituals, modern choreography and dance performance, and exquisite VR cinematography by Gary Yost, it created a unique container for embodied catharsis mediated through virtual reality.

After putting on the headset, the next thing I knew, BAM! I was suddenly transported to a dance rehearsal studio, at a virtual distance no more than a meter from a striking, dark-skinned dancer (Linda Steele II.) I felt right there in the action, far closer than front row seats, inhabiting a perspective and proximity typically seen only by other dancers. Because this is a 360-degree VR experience, one's view is not limited to a frontal perspective.

Figure 1. Anandha Ray, *Covenant VR*, 2019. ©Anandha Ray.

As viewers enmeshed in the VR environment, we witness the shamanic ceremony from a privileged vantage, so close that we can virtually touch the protagonist, a proximity that heightens our sense of being there, of feeling the healing and of experiencing it ourselves. Yost's cinematographic wizardry is the ideal match for Ray's shamanic approach to dance, which "allow[s] movement to open portals of inquiry to better understand the state of being human." [14] This *tour-de-force* of Technoshamanism offers an enthralling and cathartic experience.

Korea has a rich, living tradition of shamanism that continues to inspire artists, including technoshaman Kim Jeong Han. His high-tech multimedia installation *BirdMan* (2005) is deeply informed by Korea's shamanic and Buddhist traditions. The artwork asks fundamental questions: How do human beings conceptualize the world? How do birds conceptualize it? Can a hybrid world that joins human and nonhuman qualia (the internal, subjective physiological component of sense perceptions) transform perception beyond the limits of human physiology? If, as Donna Haraway claims, new

perceptions create new metaphors, can the experience of another species' perceptual reality help create hybrid perspectives, marked by greater empathy and ecological sensitivity?

The concept of a hybrid bird-man appeared to Kim in a dream. Due to a traumatic childhood experience, even as an adult, Kim's fear of birds prevented him from helping a one-winged bird that was suffering and dying. He dreamed that he learned bird language from a monster with a bird head and only one wing. The dream and the artwork can thus be interpreted as an effort by the artist to attain catharsis and heal a trauma through aesthetic and shamanic means. As Kim and his co-authors noted:

"In Korean tradition, some shamans can share their own bodies with the deceased soul. Whenever a shaman is possessed by the spirit of the dead, s/he acts, speaks and senses like another person, as if borrowing the perception of the deceased. This moment looks like a coexistent state of the living body and the dead in which perception and identity of the two is hybridised." [15]

The Buddhist idea that "the 'Self'" is not different than the "Other" is another prevailing concept in *BirdMan.* The work offers the audience an opportunity to experience a form of hybrid perception that joins human and avian "qualia." (internal and subjective physiological component of sense perceptions). Kim's work does not explicitly represent accoutrements or scenes of shamanic healing. As a result, the audience is not likely to visually identify shamanic elements in it. Rather, *BirdMan* is driven implicitly by a shamanic perspective. Kim leads his own ritual of self-healing through his artistic practice. By enabling us to metaphorically become one with bird, by offering us an experience of hybrid avian-human perception, his work enables us to expand our consciousness beyond the limits of our embodied human minds by joining self and other. It enables us to create new identities in between humans and non-humans. And, as a result of this, it enables us to create new metaphors to live by and to live *with*.

Such ideas echo Donna Haraway's eco-feminist theories of multispecies worlds. She advocates a concept of kinship or "making kin" that joins all beings: "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense [...]. All critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically." She applies the term "sympoietic" to emphasize the collective process of poetic emergence in which all beings are collaborators in the process of the Earth's becoming. "Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become- with, compose-with [...]." Taking care of the Earth, for Haraway, demands caring

for the diversity of beings, and "multispecies ecojustice" must be not only a goal but a means to living well, together, as kin. By "staying with the trouble," she proposes, "[m]aybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans [inhabitants of Earth], flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible." [16]

Buddhist luminary Thich Naht Hanh has taught that, "Our own awakened consciousness is what can heal the Earth." Indeed, the pressing and enduring concerns of global warming and the abuses of technology demand that we expand our perceptual domain in order to heal ourselves, our kin, and our planet. To do so, we must expand our metaphors and our means and channels of communication. We must summon the full power of art and technology, while we equally harness ancient shamanic technologies and other modes of entering trance, expanding consciousness, experiencing ecstatic states, fostering communication among all beings. If we want to have a future, the artists of the future must serve as beacons of hope and as active participants in healing the world and our relationship to it. Art, as a "psychic dress-rehearsal for the future," to quote Jack Burnham, must embrace kinship and harmonious co-emergence with all beings. We must become divine together. Today there is no greater artistic calling, no greater aesthetic necessity than helping to heal and preserve Earth/Gaia's biodiversity for posterity. Technoshamanismis a potent strategy to move in that direction.

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