

School of Visual Art

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Slide 1:

Raids, Fantasies and Bi-Lateral Border Crossings by First and Third World Artists and Tribal Object Makers

This paper struggles with reciprocal conundrums as First World artists seek a shared and collective identity while indigenous artisans are going the other way, toward individuality and validation as artists. This results in bilateral “border crossings”. Cases I will discuss include the Guaymí, Cabécar and Boruca of Costa Rica who have, in recent years, undergone rapid acculturation, thereby dramatically altering the nature of their formerly collective art in the making of bark cloth painting, *diablito* masks and, to a lesser extent, *ulú* healing canes.

Slide 2: Picasso and other artists too numerous to mention famously borrowed *styles* of figurative abstraction from tribal Africa and other parts of the world, but they did not borrow or assume a tribal *identity*. Picasso did not claim to *be* or act as a shaman, as did later influential figures, such as Joseph Beuys and Jackson Pollack, nor did Pablo Picasso and others of the earlier generation advocate earnest fits of zeal, often expressed as ritual performances, to “re-enchant” the world.

Slide 3: Contemporary pop culture celebrates *self*-expression as the *sine qua non* of healthy living and a confirmed given in art. (The fd on the left are from popular culture and the art world. The image on the right are men dressed in drag in a Borucan ritual festival mocking the Conquest) It may be surprising, but it is not so in most indigenous cultures or likely the broad sweep of our anthropological past. Nevertheless, since Freud and Jung articulated collective and individual notions of the unconscious in the early 20th Century, art has popularly been defined by a personal and idiosyncratic notion of creativity, by the quest to be in touch with the personal unconscious with promises of self-knowing wisdom and self-healing.

Slide 4: The popular assumed equation art=self-expression constitutes a cultural *meme*, unexamined and yet assumed to be essentially equivalent. Ask Oprah.

Slide 5: That in the process we feel free to appropriate from established cultural patterns foreign to our birth is perceived to be our right because, well, it is in the air and so it can become folded into our being *through artistic self-expression*, the self having become expanded outward into the world. All of which, in simplistic terms, becomes the ultimate justification for *being* an artist. Not so, elsewhere, as hard as it is to imagine fully, though the First World model is rapidly spreading into acculturating micro-cultures, the same ones we look to for inviolate pre-industrial spirituality.

Unfortunately, both First World artists and tribal artisans are caught in deep ontological crosscurrents that yield no easy answers. It has been commonplace since the early 1970s to endure the quirky incursions and rather audacious appropriations of romantic tribal artist-wannabes and so-called “urban shamans”.

Slide 6: Likewise, Third World artisans have frequently and naively cherry-picked elements of First World artistic praxis and marketing by leveraging and slicking up traditional art forms in exchange for tourist dollars and celebrity standing.

In this we are not discussing a conundrum about pinheaded, over-parsed philosophic nuances by art world *literati*, but rather sweeping first principles of artistic identity and praxis.

Slide 7: An Internet search for “shaman artist” renders over 10 million hits, “urban shaman” over 5 million. Indeed, legions of artists detached or alienated from the existing art scene are hungry to associate themselves with something larger, greener, more authentic, more passionate; perhaps more humane as they seek to heal themselves and others of existential malaise. They cast about, often acting on naive fantasies about what shamans might be in order to foster another desire, one rooted in secret artistic hubris; namely to become not only wise and famous but also a holy man or woman with

privileged access to the great beyond.

Sometimes, the manifestations are simply poignant, pointing out how isolated contemporary artists really are. Last week one of my best undergraduate studio art students—a quite serious and intelligent young man who really wants to make a difference and to find his way as an artist—led us in one such attempt to create a sort of tribal community through drumming while inviting fellow students and faculty in a collaborative mark-making interactive performance piece on a large piece of canvas on the campus lawn. As participant-observers, we were to draw in charcoal on the canvas. It lasted less than ten minutes. It was, we concluded, too short to invoke trance, perhaps too contrived to feel adequate engagement he had intended. I confess that I did similar performances thirty years ago with similar results. He announced this week that he wants to do another interactive performance piece in which he would lead us in ecstatic, perhaps in response to abstract paintings, my paintings as it turns out. I am honored, and I am made nostalgic for more optimistic times. Perhaps it will work better this time, moving from ersatz sand painting to ersatz Sufi twirling, but I am not sure. When do these things become part of international culture? In any case, we see an intelligent artist seeking to fuse cultural and ontological principles that are often disjunctive yet too earnest and well intended to discourage.

Slide 8: I have been privileged to work with what is left of living tribal communities in Mexico and Central America, mostly Costa Rica, for nearly 30 years, and so appreciate the polar ontological differences between collective tribal identity and what it is to be a practicing artist.

Slide 9: The work I have been doing is really end-game, salvage anthropology. My life as a painter, and as an inquisitive human being has been enriched enormously by also working as a field researcher, though the effects are subtle, less borrowed than felt, more witnessed than re-enacted, more spiritual than religious.

Slide 10: While the abstract and existential principles involved in the appropriation of tribal trappings may be valid, timely and even useful in terms of rethinking fundamentals of art and artistic identity vis-a-vis notions of our own being as individuals and society at large, about man's place in the natural order, some serious border crossing *is* taking place that requires acknowledgement, caution and respect.

Slide 11: Those who might legitimately object to cultural trespassing do not. They are too busy struggling to survive, often in dire poverty. The issue is simply too abstract, too diffused and too much a part of a self-validating academic intelligentsia to really matter to them anyway. They have more urgent matters to deal with. Meanwhile, going the other way, those of us who might object to indigenous "artists" leveraging collective art forms, as if they are an individual's creations are typically not inclined to make a fuss, since the First World art community is vast and varied anyway. As we should, academics and artists tend to welcome border crossing as liberal and ethnic enrichment.

Slide 12: The uncomfortable fact is that much of what is popularly thought about tribal life and much of what is imitated is a rather silly fantasy and so, in many cases, one is not so much borrowing as *inventing*. I think many artist and writers in popular culture who have contributed to stereotypical thinking have been given a pass and a wave from a public largely ignorant of the profound ways in which traditional tribal identity and First World artistic identity and practice differ. Moreover, how differently the art of each is created and received. It is one thing to borrow a recipe from you neighbor; it is another to pretend to cook with it, and worse yet to pretend you are part of the family.

Slide 13: It is often forgotten that "shaman" and "shamanism" were terms Mircea Eliade borrowed from Siberian indigenous spiritual life in 1951 to denote patterns of social position and "archaic techniques of ecstasy", later extended globally to other indigenous. Generally the idea has worked to show broad anthropological patterns in a useful way. At

worse, it flattens cultural facts. The idea nonetheless gained public acceptance as a cultural meme that is rarely if ever examined or questioned. I fear Eliade would be appalled to find 5 million Google hits of “urban shaman”.

Slide 14: We tend to take it as a cultural fact that there is unity in tribal life and more particularly in shamanic practice, that it is somehow so primal, so basic to humanity as to require nothing more than the sincere will, a few minutes in an altered state of consciousness, and usually a bit—or a lot—of pretension to actually *become* an “shaman”, an “urban shaman”, essentially a reborn, reinvented and modernized noble savage with a website. It is apparently a short step from urban shaman to urban shaman *as artist*.

The underlying issue here, it seems to me, is that serious contemporary artists are essentially cults of one, each inventing his or her own artistic personality, professional approach, sensibility, grammar, syntax and justification for their work that hopefully connects to others in a way that is admired and considered useful. It is a daunting task that makes one sometimes yearn for company that is, by definition, not to be had in our time. We are ontologically and philosophically alone, radically so, even lonely sometimes. Perhaps for the first time in history artists are generally deprived of community, unified art movements or schools of shared artistic intent. There is currently little or no identifiable shared tradition within which to construct meaning beyond agreeing that there is none. Some thrive in the freedom, but it is heavy to bear. And so, when we cast about for new models, it is tempting to invent what we hope will re-connect us with a larger and more soulful collective. Tribal life, as it is imagined, seems to offer one such refuge. Sadly, that too is complex and accepts few if any converts. We have effectively bitten the apple and cannot return to what is simply not ours, nor can we conceptually or ethically ignore or bridge the yawning chasm between celebrity careerism on one hand, and submersion into a collective on the other. We really do want it both ways. Increasingly, indigenous “artists” do to.

Slide 15: In Central American indigenous communities, for example, pop definitions of what it is to be a shaman breaks down. Entire complex hierarchies of individuals may these days be called shamans, with some justification. Nearly all indigenous people embody some aspect of Eliade's definition. More strictly, those we are most likely to think of as shamans are related to healing, ritual and magic.

Slide 16: They range from the common herbal healer to doctors (*medicos* or *sukias*), some of whom heal with herbs and ritual treatments, some through animistic associations.

Slide 17: Then there are the guides of the dead and the sacred musicians,

Slide 18: then the *magos*, magicians believed to have dominion over the weather. Finally, to the lofty *Usékra* with additional powers, including the power to transport heavy objects by the force of their minds. All are *sukias*, roughly translated as "shaman", though each carries a very specific indigenous title and usually life-long vocation denoting very specific powers, knowledge and social position gained over years of service to others.

Most are among the poorest in their communities, not making themselves celebrities but nevertheless become so by dint of community engagement. Virtually all make things for ritual or healing use; such things are made to use and later have no intrinsic value.

To the traditional tribe, the interior psychological life and expression of the individual is simply *not the topic* in the making of objects or rituals. Only recently, under the influence of touristic marketing have those who paint bark cloth, make masks and carve gourds signed their work. *The point* of tribal expression has traditionally been to bind the individual in the collective, to connect them ever more tightly into the whole, or at least the cooperative with which they associate themselves.

Slide 19: Most tribal cultures worldwide are undergoing acculturation and commodification at an increasingly rapid pace. The once stark differences between Western artistic identity and that of tribal artists is fast becoming merely historic.

Slide 20: The Guaymí have, like many indigenous groups around the world, traditionally used barkcloth fiber, in lieu of woven fabric. The local term is *mastate*.

Slide 21: Out of *mastate* they make bedclothes, dresses and other utilitarian objects.

Slide 22: Bark cloth was and still is often painted with patterns and symbols from Guaymí myths and cosmological symbols with vegetal dyes with crude brushes or the finger.

Slide 23: In the 1980s I was first privileged to witness the seemingly spontaneous creation of rectangular pictures, *cuadros*, that began to develop in pictorial terms. Keep in mind the Indians don't have walls, per se. Their huts are made of stick walls traditionally, and so to make "art" destined to be framed constitutes a big cultural leap on their part. The tourist market caught on and a new industry was born.

Slide 24: Soon collectives were founded in the mold of agricultural and weaving collectives to fabricate bark cloth "paintings" in groups.

Slide 25: The cooperatives were usually groups of women in the early years, passing work down long tables with a degree of specialization according to skill and interest.

Slide 26: Nothing was signed, only the names of the participants recorded for equitable distribution of income. Within two years, individuals whose work sold the most became known and economic prestige. They signed their work, first in pen on tape on the reverse, later in ink. Individual artists tended to specialize in various ways, some emphasizing cosmic geometry, some genre scenes of daily life, some natural history, plants and animals, some magical and mythic beings. Others sought to invent means of diagramming space, and so rudimentary perspective was developed. Later, the newly

minted “artists” copies imagery from newspaper and magazine printed imagery. As individual fame and increased wealth redefined the medium, and with it the social position of the painters, scale was increased and so too did derivative impulses, leading to imitation.

Slide 27: Now in urban San José Guaymí “paintings” are marketed in shops and offered to wandering tourists. This economic activity is an important source of income for this marginalized indigenous group, particularly during parts of the year when they are not harvesting coffee or bananas.

Slide 28: Since the Conquest, Borucan males participating in the very pagan, very phallic, Play of the Little Devils (*Juego de los Diablitos*).

Slide 29: The participants made rudimentary masks, often decorated with leaves, feathers, vegetal dyes and cheap house paint. (I gave a paper on this festival at SVA several years ago.)

Slide 30: In the 1950s Ismail Gonzalez, a carver of toys and furniture, redefined the with fixed patterns, soon becoming an international artist-craftsman celebrity, a recognized living treasure in Costa Rica, teaching generations of students and at the same time creating a lucrative touristic industry. **Slide 31**

Slide 32: Quite wonderfully, it seems to me, he gave renewed impulse to a starkly pagan and often violent festival that has vitalized what it means to be Borucan vis-à-vis the dominant culture.

Slide 33: An entire cottage industry has emerged that constitutes an important source of income for many Borucan families.

Slide 34: Soon middle-men shop keepers from the United States and Europe as well as savy urban centers in Costa Rica have encouraged new and ever-more elaborate decorative non-functional “eco-diablo” masks and even sculptural forms entirely unrelated to mask-making, thereby rendering the once-ferocious mask a benign toothy but toothless character. Borucan art and the role of artist/carver/painter has, in this sense, developed into something inauthentic and sappy, I believe, as the result of international collaboration. One has to expect this pattern is global.

Slide 35: Yet not all tribal “art” is commodified, at least not yet. Case in point: In the high Talamanca Mountains of Central America the Bribri and Cabécar healers have for centuries used healing canes known as *ulú* . The process is complex and takes days. The *ulú* is drawn in charcoal with symbolic marking and cosmological diagrams of the underworld, Markings refer to the world of daily life and heaven, both of which are inhabited by animistic spirits and powers.

Slide 36: The *ulú* is additionally understood to represent the center post of the cosmic round house, an *axis mundi* and the spine of the patient. In the process of healing the cane is believed to become contaminated with filth (*nü*), requiring the healer, the *sukia*, to burn and or bury it in a special. Though the canes are fascinating as artifacts invested with rich symbols, they are not saved or regarded as having intrinsic value (except by trusted scholars and friends). They are destroyed, their utility having been expended.

Slide 37: Similar dynamics determine the use and temporality of the healing *seteé* collar. Though they are rather raw and esoteric as objects, scarcely collectible, they are nevertheless at the heart of *real* shamanism, *real* living animism and *real* indigenous spiritual life.

Slide 38: These are among the few art that have survived the ravages of tourism, poverty and exploitation in the remote Talamanca Mountains. Long gone are the skilled gold

smiths, the stone carvers and ceramists that produced magnificent art before the Conquest.

Perhaps we can borrow some optimism from Joseph Beuys who said:

“I don’t use shamanism to refer to death, but vice versa – through shamanism, I refer to the fatal character of the times we live in. But at the same time I also point out that the fatal character of the present can be overcome in the future.”