

«LES INFOS DU PARADIS»

“YANOMAMI, SPIRIT OF THE FOREST”

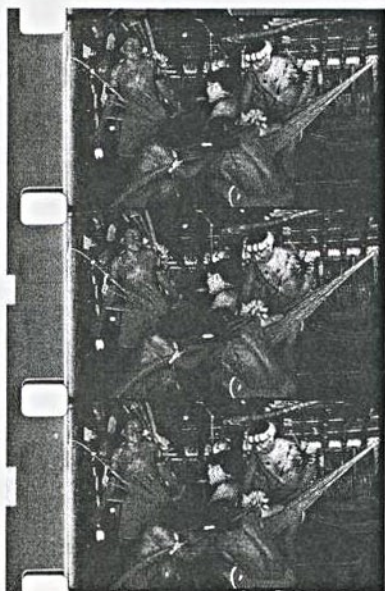
JAY MURPHY

& THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The artists in “Yanomami, Spirit of the Forest,”¹⁾ have all, to a greater or lesser extent, opted for what Flemish critic and art historian Jeroen Boomgaard has called “exchanging the cynicism of the code for the optimism of the contact.”²⁾ Until what was to be a devastating encounter with the *chercheurs d'or* and other typical representatives of the

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“outside” world (missionaries, military, and development planners) beginning in the eighties, the Yanomami Indians along the Brazilian-Venezuelan border in the northern Amazon region were the most populous, still intact indigenous people in South America who had retained their customary way of life. That included sorcery, a ritualized existence based on interpretation of the myriad malefic and benign gods and spirits teeming in their midst, as well as consumption of the pulverized bones of their dead ancestors, contributing to the Yanomami’s reputation as cannibals. The exhibition was organized by the Cartier Foundation with anthropol-



RAYMOND DEPARDON, CHASSEURS
ET CHAMANS, 2002, film transferred to
DVD, stills.

ogist Bruce Albert, who speaks one of the four Yanomami languages and has spent several months with them each year since his first visit in 1973, along with Survival International (where Albert is vice president) and the Brazilian NGO *Comissão Pró-Yanomami*. The exhibition was conceived in cooperation with the Yanomami shamans themselves, especially Davi Kopenawa, a prominent national and international spokesperson for the Indians and his village Watoriki. Their purpose was to provoke a "confrontation" and comparison between their cosmology and visionary experience, and the "savage mind" at the heart of our own artistic enterprise. Five of the artists traveled to the Amazon to develop their works *in situ* with the Yanomami, three worked from materials provided by the Indians whether texts, drawings, or video, and three

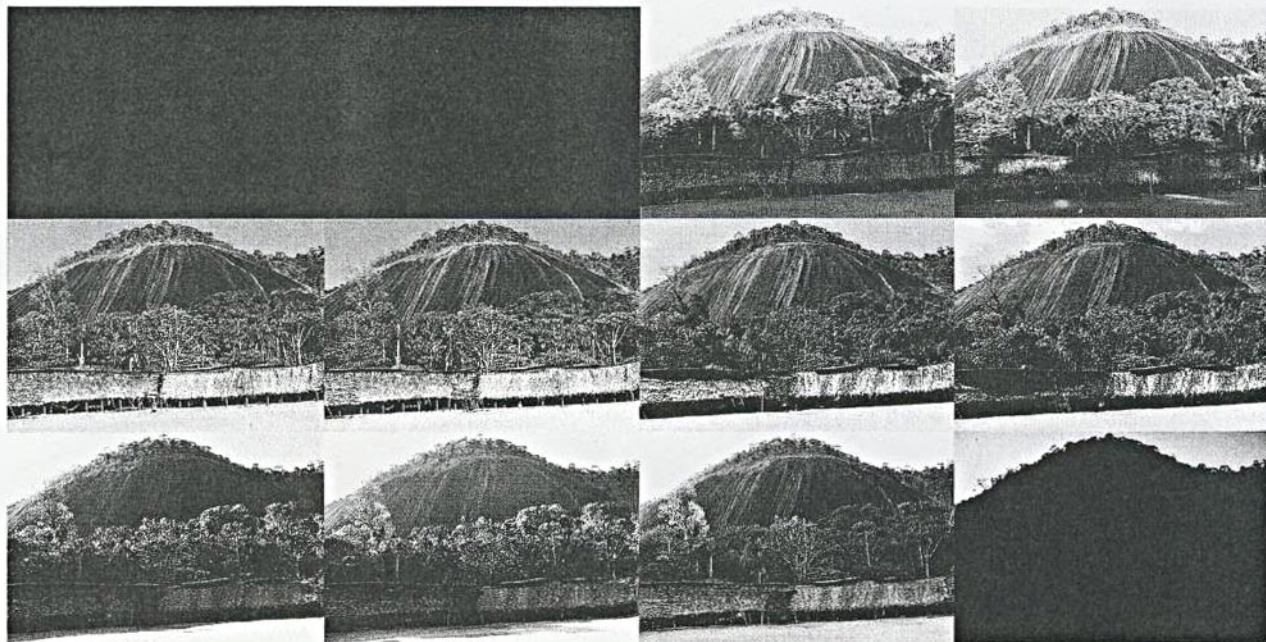
others had already spent considerable time with the Indians making works that predated the exhibition in some instances by more than twenty years.

To its credit, much of the catalogue details the cosmologies and facets of life of the Yanomami, their shamans' séances and relation to animal and ancestor spirits, their relationship to their rich ecological habitat, and traumatic meeting with the "whites" which included a massacre of 16 Yanomami in 1993 in Haxima. Having shamans from the village work with each artist, the exhibition disavows presentation as another "Amerindian" art or humanitarian/documentary exhibit, rather it banks on the interchange of "free associations" between the shamanic visions and the image-making of contemporary artists from the "developed world." The great virtue of "Yanomami, Spirit

of the Forest" is the immersion of experience afforded many of the artists, and the variety of their sensibility and means of interpretation—ranging from Claudia Andujar's extremely sensitive and dignified photographs of the Yanomami (her later works through multiple exposures highlight the metamorphoses and absorption of shamanic trances) that draw on the humanist, documentary tradition to the more high-tech artistry of Gary Hill, Tony Oursler and the celebratory, dynamic video installation made largely from Yanomami drawings of Issey Miyake protégé Naoki Takizawa.

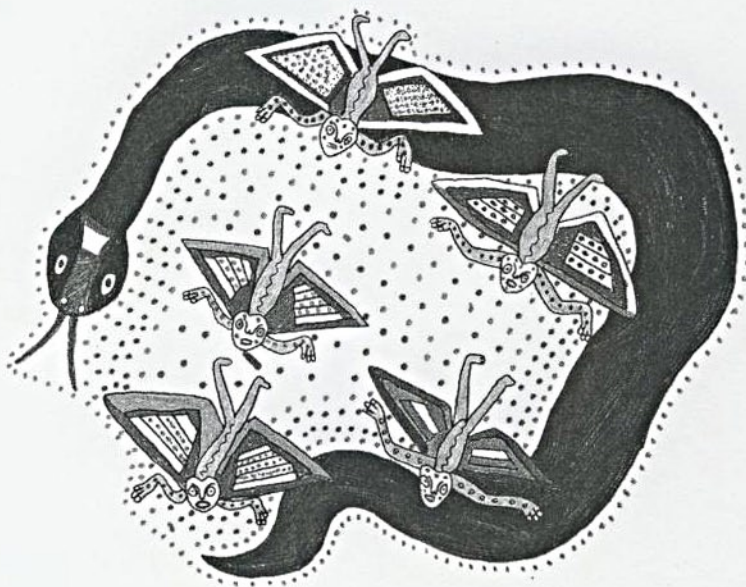
At their best, the ensemble of works in this exhibition illustrate the polyvalent, multi-leveled "feedback" loops that constitute our wider ecological relations, here enacted by artists of the "First World" with those of the "Fourth

WOLFGANG STAEHLE, PAREAKIKI (AYNO HARANI), 2003 / MOUNTAIN SEEN FROM THE HOUSE-VILLAGE,
24-hour color film / BERG VOM HAUSDORF AUS GESEHEN, 24 Std. Film.

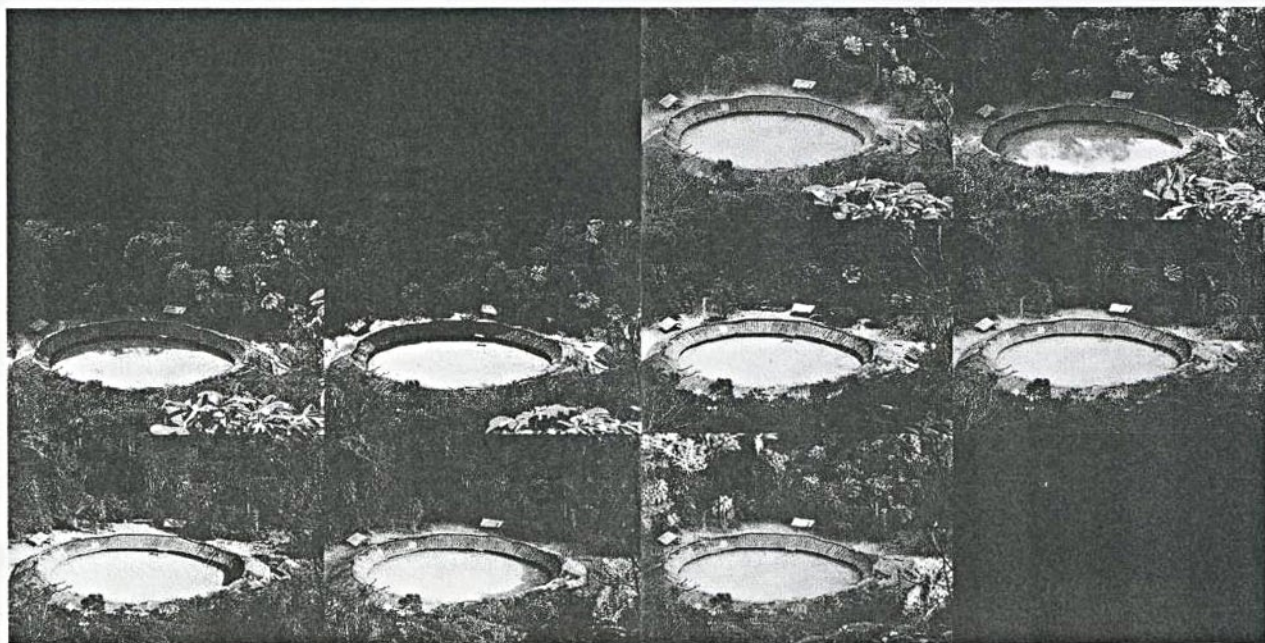


World," not just of the "natural" world or social-economic groups, but of image-blocks, states of feeling, and perceptions, keeping in mind Félix Guattari's notion that "an ecology of the virtual is just as pressing as ecologies of the visible world."³) The exhibition is filled with abstracted or virtual analogues of Yanomami experience. In a Warholian representation, Wolfgang Staehle provided dual 24-hour video-cams broadcasting complementary views of Watoriki village seen from its mythical *La montagne du vent*, and the mountain seen from the village. Tony Oursler, long preoccupied with fraught, disembodied psyches and mental disturbances translated through projective technology, uses a bestiary from Watoriki children's drawings and art of shamanic ceremonies, which overlay his signature eyes in his video

JOSECA YANOMAMI, OKARIMARI, 2002, *THE SPIRIT OF THE ANACONDA AND ITS SONS-IN-LAW*, drawing /
DER GEIST DER ANAKONDA UND SEINE SCHWIEGERSÖHNE, Zeichnung.



AYNO A (PAREAKIKI HARANI), 2003 / *HOUSE-VILLAGE SEEN FROM THE MOUNTAIN*,
 24-hour color film / *HAUSDORF VOM BERG AUS GESEHEN*, 24 Std. Farbfilm.



projection MIRROR MAZE (DEAD EYES LIVE) (2003). Gary Hill brought his concern with testing the limits of the body and of language through an ongoing catastrophe theory using video and other technologies, attempting to represent in IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE (2003) his drug experience with the Yanomami elders. Others, who had extended experience working with the Yanomami, sought to present their history to the world, as with Volkmar Ziegler's feature-length film *La Maison et la Forêt* (1994). While Adriana Varejão's oil and mixed media paintings seemed to truly partake of a similar itinerary to Yanomami shamanism in her Baroque, hybrid exploration of out-of-body experience, bodily dismemberment, cannibalism, and shamanic initiation, cut in with a history of the Americas. Vincent Beaurin's sculptures pointed out the more dubious and superficial aspects of contrasting the semiotics of contemporary art with the Yanomami or aboriginal "dreamtime."

This enterprise of comparing the artistic visions of avant-garde/modernism or now post-avant-garde/post-modernism with the works of non-Western cultures of course has a long and problematic history. As old as Toulouse-Lautrec's fondness for Japanese woodcuts or Paul Gauguin's move to Tahiti, this always-controversial tendency has recently been expanded exponentially by processes of the international art market's "globalization." In describing the "return to the real" in the nineties, critic Hal Foster characterized the decade as that "of the itinerant curator who gathers nomadic artists at different sites."⁴ This trend that critic Peter Schjeldahl dubbed "festivalism" was often explicitly a part of the new eco-

nomic order's global trouncing of frontiers and breaking of barriers, putting into exchange all that had remained foreign, and it accompanied the opening of art biennials celebrated in such previously inaccessible spots as Kwangju, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Lima, and Abu Dhabi. A key statement of this was the 5th Lyon biennial of contemporary art in 2000, where the curators Thierry Prat and Thierry Raspail announced their theme of "Sharing Exoticisms" (*Partage d'Exotismes*), explaining that the term "art" played the same role in regard to individual works as the term "globalization" did in respect to economics.⁵ They claimed the success of this "expansionist principle"—"the victory of modernity"—leaves no room for further expansion but is rather a "sharing of exoticisms." To this end, they brought in as guest curator Jean-Hubert Martin, who takes this thinking to its logical end by proclaiming the end of art in a globalized *la ronde* of anthropology—"the prepossessing dominance of strictly artistic categories has faded out in favor of more general values deriving from the human sciences and anthropology."⁶

Martin had ushered in much of this art world "globalization" in a big way with his 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" at the Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande Halle de La Villette. There, in the interests of world dialogue and reciprocity, *objets d'art* collected from around the globe, were juxtaposed on the basis of visual criteria, excitement, and novelty, and united by a common spiritual search, as Martin adumbrated in interviews. "Magiciens de la terre" claimed a true universality, gathering so many works from formerly "marginal contexts." In shades of the Yanomami exhibit, Law-

rence Weiner was sent to Papua New Guinea. The show opened with Zulu dancers. In the catalog for the exhibit, it was left to two critics, Guy Brett and Jean Fisher, to point out that the "marginal contexts" were often due not to what Martin termed "Western contamination" or spiritual pollution, but to land struggles and brutal economic exploitation, a crucial subtext missing from the exhibit. The show's slighting of the extremely heterogeneous modernisms alive in say India, or Brazil, led artist and critic Rasheed Araeen to ask, "If all things were equal and the same, why was nobody sent to the villages of Europe? If the purpose of the exhibition was to question distinctions between modern works of art and folk or traditional art, why was this not done also within or in relation to Western culture?"⁷ For Araeen the show merely duplicated the reigning view of the "West" as dynamic/modern and the "Other" as static/traditional. Araeen's criticism pointed to some of the rocky terrain of these projects that slip from artistic into socio-anthropological or ethnographic realms. They must of necessity interrogate themselves, circling back into questions of museology and the circumstances of the West's dominance. Otherwise, they risk becoming what analyst Slavoj Žižek denounced as yet another form of racism—"it 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position."⁸

Another representation of these quandaries is exemplified by French author Michel Leiris, an early pioneer of the tendency that put so much into question, which James Clifford dubbed

"ethnographic surrealism." Clifford notes the obsessive character of Leiris' remarkable journal of his African expedition *L'Afrique fantôme*, its "dada ideas of data," its disenchantment, as well as its "strange childlike innocence emerging somehow, each time, after experience ... No moment of truth: *Afrique fantôme* is only a pen starting up every day." Clifford leaves us this intriguing image of the "surrealist-ethnographer": after a long, intense period studying *zâr* possession in Ethiopia, a sacrifice is made especially for Leiris. He tastes the animal's blood but does not perform the *gourri*, the dance of the possessed. Seated with the *zâr* adepts in a room thick with incense, sweat, blood, and perfume, Leiris' head is covered in butter, and "the dead animal's entrails are coiled around his brow. He does not, however, interrupt his note taking."⁹

One of the morals Clifford draws from this is that "Perhaps there's no return for anyone to a native land—only field notes for its reinvention."¹⁰ That, strangely enough, also seemed to be one of the meanings from another visitor to the Yanomami, Juan Downey, in his 1978 video *Laughing Alligator*. At one point in the video, Downey's guides turn on him with their bows and arrows, as if to ask who is "shooting" whom? Perhaps "Yanomami, Spirit of the Forest" also asks if, despite looming conditions of ecocide and the vast increases in destitution since Downey's video, at last we can approach more of a semblance of mutual cooperation and negotiation.

1) "Yanomami, l'esprit de la forêt," May 14–October 12, 2003, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris.

2) Jeroen Boomgaard, "Theory Today" in *Conventions in Contemporary Art. Lectures and Debates Witte de With, 2001*, ed. by Valentin Byvanck (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2002), p. 65.

3) See Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, transl. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); *The Three Ecologies*, transl. by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London/New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 2000).

4) Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The Return to the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), note 44, p. 282.

5) Thierry Prat and Thierry Raspail, *Partage d'Exotismes*, vol. 1 (Lyon: Réunion des

Musées Nationaux, 2000), p. 20. The artists Chris Ofili and Hassan Musa refused to share their exoticism, the latter writing to the curators that "African art" was only a European category that hindered appreciation of his work.

6) Jean-Hubert Martin, *ibid.*, p. 46.

7) Rasheed Araeen, "Our Bauhaus Others' Mudhouse," *Third Text* 6 (Spring 1989): 3–14, p. 11.

8) Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (1997): 28–51, p. 44.

9) James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 172, 168.

10) *Ibid.*, p. 173.

LOTHAR BAUMGARTEN, RIVER-CROSSING, KASHORAWETHERI, 1978,
from a series of 6 gelatin silver prints, 14 x 11" / FLUSSÜBERQUERUNG,
aus einer Serie von 6 Gelatinsilber-Abzügen, 35,5 x 28 cm.



(ALL IMAGES FROM THE CATALOGUE "YANOMAMI,
L'ESPRIT DE LA FORÊT," FONDATION CARTIER, PARIS.)