

School of Visual Art
Crossing the Borders

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Slide 1:

**Raids, Fantasies and Bi-Lateral Border Crossings
by First and Third World Artists**

Introduction: This paper deals with reciprocal conundrums as First World artists seek shared and collective identities, while indigenous object makers increasingly go the other way, toward individuality and validation as “artists”. The situation results in bilateral “border crossings”, particularly between so-called shamanic influences in First World art and in indigenous communities becoming increasingly acculturated through tourism. I will cite examples from 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 *mastate* bark cloth paintings and *diablito* masks, contrasted with the rather more traditional use of *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 *to act* as a shaman, as did later influential figures, such as Joseph Beuys and Jackson Pollack, nor did Picasso and others of the earlier generation (as Gablik did later) advocate a return, the performance art enactment of ersatz ritual performances to “re-enchant” the world.

Slide 3: Contemporary pop culture celebrates *self-expression* as the *sine qua non* of healthy living. Self-expression is understood as a given in art. It is hard for us to imagine it any other way. (The images 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 self expression has, in fact, little to do with the art of tribal people.

Slide 4: 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 primal self-knowing and self-healing. The popular assumed equation art=self-expression, the more radical the better, constitutes a cultural *meme*, unexamined and yet cherished and assumed, unexamined and yet at odds with a deep longing to be part of a collective.

Slide 5: That in our zeal to self-express some artists free to appropriate from established cultural patterns foreign to their birth, we tend to think, their 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, crossing borders of all kinds. 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, ironically the same ones we look to for inviolate pre-industrial, ancient and green 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, I contend, 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” renders 56,000,000 hits. The same done with “shaman artist” gives you over 10 million links, for “urban shaman” over 5 million. I have come to believe that legions of artists detached or alienated from the contemporary culture, or perhaps the art scene, are hungry to associate themselves with something they hope is more authentic, more passionate; perhaps more humane as they seek to heal themselves vis-a-vis existential malaise. They, we, 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 swim in primordial waters but to become wise and famous, holy.

Slide 8: 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 abstractly and globally to other indigenous tribal cultures. Generally, the idea has worked to show broad anthropological patterns in a useful way. At worse, however, it flattens actual cultural facts and offers a distortion that plays into the conundrum I am trying to articulate. The idea of the shaman, selfless, primal and wise, 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”.)

Sometimes, the manifestations are simply poignant. 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 the campus

lawn. As essentially *participant-observers*, a term I draw from anthropology, we were to draw in charcoal on the canvas. It lasted less than ten minutes. It was, we concluded, too short to invoke trance and perhaps too contrived to feel adequately engaged. I confess that I did similar performances thirty years ago with similar results. The same student announced this week that he wants to do another interactive performance piece in which he would lead us in drumming circles and ecstatic dance. Perhaps it will work better this time, moving from ersatz sand painting to ersatz Sufi twirling and, as he explains, drumming circles as our ancestors surely once did. What does this say about artistic identity? Are there perennial desires at work here?

Slide 9: 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 First World 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 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, and then, I contend, integration.

Slide 11: Those who might legitimately object to cultural trespassing do not. They are simply 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. 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 artist and writers in popular culture who have contributed to stereotypical thinking about shamanism, about primal aspects of art, 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. 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.

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 as you sit around the table chewing on webcast HD video.

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 artist*.

The underlying ontological 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, 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, in this sense, alone, radically so. Perhaps for the first time in history artists are generally deprived of community, unified art movements or schools of shared artistic intent in which to practice. There is little or no identifiable shared tradition within which to construct meaning *beyond agreeing that there is none*. Some thrive in this rarified and free air, but it is heavy. 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 cannot return to what is simply not ours, nor can we conceptually or ethically ignore or bridge the yawning chasm between celebrity careerism one hand, and submersion into a collective on the other. We really do want it both ways and, increasing, indigenous “artists” do too.

Slide 15: In Central American indigenous communities, for example, pop definitions of what it is to be a shaman break 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: Cabécar “shamans” 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, as it is believed, 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 and social function. None make objects of aesthetic contemplation, though virtually all make things for ritual or healing use with no intrinsic value after they are used.

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 as picture compositions. Keep in mind the people don't usually have walls, per se. Their huts are made of sticks and so to make "art" destined to be framed objects of interior wall decoration constitutes a big cultural leap.

Slide 24: Soon collectives were founded in the mold of agricultural and weaving collectives to fabricate bark cloth "paintings" in groups. A tourist market was developed and trees fell in the fabrication of more and more mastate bark cloth works of "art". The cooperatives were usually groups of women, at least in the early years, passing pieces down long tables factory.

Slide 25: Nothing was signed, only the names of the participants recorded for equitable distribution of income. Within two years, however, individuals sought a greater percentage of gain and so worked along. Those whose work sold the most gained not only income but tribal prestige. They signed their work, first in pen on tape on the reverse, later in ink. Individuals 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" copied imagery from newspaper and magazine printed imagery.

Slide 26: In urban San José, Guaymí "paintings" are marketed in shops and offered to wandering tourists. The new economic activity quickly became an important source of income for this marginalized indigenous group, particularly during parts of the year, particularly between harvesting seasons.

Slide 27: Another case from another Costa Rican tribe: Since the Conquest, Borucan males participating in the very pagan, very phallic, Play of the Little Devils (*Juego de los Diablitos*).

Slide 28: 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 29: 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,

Slide 30 teaching generations of students and at the same time creating a lucrative touristic industry.

Slide 31: Quite wonderfully, it seems to me, he gave renewed impulse to a starkly pagan and often violent festival and has vitalized what it means to be Borucan.

Slide 32: An entire cottage industry of carving has emerged that constitutes an important source of income for many Borucan families.

Slide 33: Soon middle-men shop keepers from the United States and Europe encouraged new and ever-more elaborate decorative non-functional “eco-diablo” masks and even sculptural forms entirely unrelated to mask-making to be made on commission, thereby rendering the once-ferocious mask a benign, toothy but toothless adornment. Borucan art and the role of artist/carver/painter has by commodification developed into something inauthentic and sappy. (One has to expect this general pattern is now global.)

Slide 34: 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 35: 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 36: 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 37: These are among the few art forms 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 who produced magnificent art before the Conquest.

So where does this leave us?

(pause)

Slide 38: Let's borrow some optimism from Joseph Beuys who, by the way, was famously influenced by the very Siberian shamanic group that Eliade based his work on. Beuys 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.”

I believe the solution to this conundrum, the identity issue, is to integrate rather than to borrow, to invent playfully rather than to quote doggedly, to bravely articulate our simultaneous existential solitude AND embeddedness in social life with authenticity, passion and sincerity.

Thank you