

‘Stepping Between the Worlds’ -

The Shaman in Contemporary Art Practice

Ali Lees - MA paper 2019

Introduction

My art practice is wholly informed by shamanism, which I have been studying since 1992, especially the practice of *stepping between the worlds*. As my studies open up new vistas, I am intrigued and frustrated that few people mention Spiritual practice in contemporary art, in which I include shamanism.

The artists I study produce extraordinarily inspiring work which often appears to derive from their Spiritual practice but without naming it, making me question why.

In shamanic practice, we have similar concerns to many current artists and thinkers. I aim to highlight these parallels, along with the disconnect we have with our feral shaman artist which mirrors the disconnect we have with our planet.

I will talk about several artists and their practice and look at current thinking on the Anthropocene.

The Cave of our Ancestors

A woman has her hand against the wall of a deep and dark cave. She grinds charcoal or ochre in her mouth and sputters the pigment against the surface to leave the outline of her own hand.

Concentration and persistence are required, so there needs to be someone there to hold a light. Also carved into the rock are images that seem to conjure the essences of animals and seem to come from the unseen world into the seen.

The woman has crawled on hands and knees into this deep cave in similar ways to the animals she was trying to summon.

This was ‘secret, sacred and raw creative process’ *Antony Gormley: How Art Began*, 2019) in action, taking place in the Upper Paleolithic period between 15 and 20,000 years ago in caves by painters who created some of the greatest art the world has ever seen. It is acknowledged that the representational skills with which these artists depicted the power of the animal realm have never been surpassed.

In the Trois Freres cave, in the South West of France, one can see the image of a half-human, half animal hybrid, with ears like a stag’s, a sturdy pair of antlers and a face distinguished by two large, round and seemingly astonished eyes, which stare into space with hypnotic force. This is one of the earliest images known to us of the Shaman.



Fig. 1 *The Sorcerer* (1920)

Michael Tucker, in *Dreaming with Open Eyes*, says, 'The shaman epitomises the human need to bridge worlds to fly beyond the everyday realm of the visual in order to conjure worlds of visionary presence and power.' (Tucker, 1992: xxii).

Shamanism and the Shaman.

The practice of Shamanism has roots going back 40,000 years. The literal meaning of Shaman is *one who sees*, coming from the Tungus people of Siberia. We all have our feet in shamanic soil wherever we come from.

Anthropologist Joan Halifax says of shamans, 'Their bodies can be left behind while they fly to unearthly realms. They are poets and singers. They dance and create works of art. They are not only spiritual leaders but also judges and politicians, the repositories of the knowledge of the culture's history, both sacred and secular. They are familiar with cosmic as well as physical geography; the ways of plants, animals, and the elements are known to them. They are psychologists, entertainers, and food finders. Above all, however, shamans are technicians of the sacred and masters of ecstasy.' (Halifax, 1991:4).

Ecstasy in its essence means to step out of oneself. The shaman is 'a person who journeys in an altered state of consciousness outside time and space' (Eliade, 1951:5, cited in Ingerman, 2000:2).

Mark Levy talks about Gordon Onslow-Ford, member of the Paris surrealists. 'For me, Onslow-Ford's definition of delight comes close to shamanic ecstasy. The shaman/seer/artist goes beyond looking and thinking in a state of deep relaxation, to explore the deep recesses of the psyche and the essence of the object. The experience of loss or flight from the self is quite exhilarating.' (Levy, 1993:68)

Anthropologist Michael Harner, who explored common shamanic practices around the world, found that the practice of shamanism is distinguished by what is called the *shamanic journey*. Shamans typically undertake such a journey by listening to repetitive, percussive sounds at a frequency that reflects Theta brain waves, which

are linked to a meditative state. The Shaman would ask questions relevant to their community's well-being and survival. This would involve learning more about animals' habits, nature and personalities. In my eyes this contributes to the ability to execute such sensitive and well observed images in the cave.

'We had to live by killing but we saw how the animals showed us our better selves.'
(*Antony Gormley: How Art Began*, 2019)

Gormley continues by saying, 'When these cave paintings were created only 50,000 humans lived in Europe. We were the vulnerable ones in this landscape. You would have heard a million hooves before seeing the actual animals, that rush of a million life forms. You were small ... You would want to become one with this and you'd want to be filled with that energy, that Spirit.'
(*Antony Gormley: How Art Began*, 2019)

I believe Gormley is talking here about merging with something in order to understand it better. This impulse originates from an innate human curiosity which has parallels with Shamanism and with creativity. The shamanic journey enables a better understanding of our environment and, as for the Shamans in the cave, this highlights the equal importance of the Seen and Unseen worlds.

Is this when we understood who we were as humans, when we began to make art to express our mortality?

The curious artists and shamans, engaging in their environment, connect to the sensual, the texture or the sound and remind me of the work of contemporary artists that I have seen as they explore and make sense of the world and themselves. The examples of the impeccable cave drawings show a deeply sensitive observation of the beings that the artist shared her home with and the shamanic merging that enabled her to understand them, herself and her community better.

Gormley says, 'if we look closely at the art of our ancestors then perhaps we can re-connect to something VITAL we have lost.'
(*Antony Gormley: How Art Began*, 2019)

The Cave Now

Let's leap thousands of years ahead to an artist, looking out onto a very different scene, Nature is succumbing to man's interference. This presents a chilling image. Not only is this scene drastically different from the view from our ancestor's cave, but we are, as some people describe, in the eleventh hour before extinction for life on our sacred planet. Extinction Rebellion movements are now shaking our news headlines and our communities as our school children take up the baton and protest for their future, in what is now known as the Anthropocene.

I often quote the words of Chief Seattle who, in the 1700s, and with the foresight that his spiritual tradition could bring, described the disconnect in his community and land: 'Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money' (AZ Quotes, (s.d)).

Donna J Haraway prefers to use the term Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016) to name the epoch in which man is influencing what is happening in the global environment. The name has the same root as *chthonic* which means 'relating to or inhabiting the underworld.' (Bing Dictionary, 2019), which is familiar shamanic territory.

Leo Rutherford of the Centre for Contemporary Shamanism says that:

'Anthropologists have studied shamanism ... all over the world ... it seems that all indigenous peoples shared a similar cosmology ... Today shamanism survives ... in spite of the relentless onslaught of Western scientific materialism, the treatment of the earth and nature as something to be dominated and exploited, and dogmatic male orientated religion. Now, as the unsustainable nature of Western civilization is becoming visible, more and more people of the industrial world are turning to the old cultures for help and guidance in finding a greater balance with nature, Planet Earth and with themselves.' (Thorsons Principles of Shamanism, 1996: 1-2).

Contemporary Shamanism has a place in today's society and is therefore relevant to today's artist.

Nicolas Bourriaud speaks about Mark Leckey's piece at the Venice Biennale in 2013 called *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* and interprets the core of Leckey's work thus - 'as far as possible by avoiding the human you get back to something that is a kind of pure sensuality' (*Art in the Anthropocene*, 2015).

In my experience a shaman makes sense of sensuality. When one does a shamanic journey, all the senses are presented with information.

Contemporary shamanic (?) artists

I feel that there are several artists who, in one way or another, explicitly or not, have connections to shamanic practice.

In the book *The Outlier* the author led a project with a community in Scarborough, inviting the participants to see the world from another's point of view. 'The text is based on participant's improvisations of object autobiographies, devised in workshops and through meetings with the artist. They explore the social world of a rock – those things related, materially or symbolically, to a glacial erratic found on the corner of Royal Avenue in Scarborough, UK' (Pope, 2018)

What interests me is how the project was not only about relationships but how the participant's focus on the rock led them into a collaboration with nature.

A participant said,

'Hot. Hot liquid.
Many, many things around me – connected to me.
We cooled. We cooled together.
Then ice came. Water pounded us. Ice scraped us.
But we were still together.
And then I broke away. I was taken away.
The ice carried me a great distance.
I was with other rocks, not like me.' (Pope, 2018)

I feel that as the participants attempted to write from a point of view outside of themselves, it would bring them more in touch with nature and therefore themselves. They would have merged, as I have described earlier, in a shamanic way with the object and therefore with the Earth itself.

Pope said 'they were speaking from the life of non-human objects' (Pope, 2018), which is another way of crossing between the worlds from a shamanic perspective. I wondered how the participants actually felt saying the words as the rock, that had been around for millions of years.

Marina Abramović has a commitment to repetition and endurance which is a feature of many classical shamanic ceremonies, for example *The Vision Quest*, a traditional part of many shamanic cultures where a person fasts and prays in a sacred place for up to 4 days and nights, laying themselves fully on the line, to pray for a vision and to reconnect with creation.

Abramović famously sat for 8 hours at a time and people came to sit opposite her in silence for her performance (*Marina Abramović: Live at MoMA*, 2010). It was like Darshan with Mother Meera (who is believed, by her devotees to be an embodiment of the Divine Mother, a living deity), whose presence people go and sit in for healing.

In the documentary film of Abramović's 2010 work, an interviewed member of the public says that 'Spirit and Art are not very different' (*Marina Abramović: Live at MoMA*, 2010). This is very reminiscent of Shamanic ceremony.

I feel Abramović has acknowledged this elsewhere, saying that, 'The function of art is the function of a bridge between the physical world and the spiritual world, or simply between 2 human beings ... I have to give tools to the public to experience their own self. The public are my mirror and I'm the mirror of the public too.' (*Marina Abramović In Brazil: The Space In Between*, 2016).

Artist Bea Bonifini works with carpet cutouts and pigment. Her work is informed by her Italian heritage and she has spoken about the impulsive and instinctive realms that she cannot control.

In an artist talk in 2018, Bonifini spoke about the place of art being the place of magic. About *Tomb Divers – Figures diving*, she said the Etruscan figure is ‘of a diver who is halfway between earth and the underworld ... in a transitional place’ (Bonifini, 2018). She says that the state in between is important. I find this connects directly with ‘stepping between the worlds’ in my exploration of Shamanism and Spirituality in art.

When asked if using the word ‘spiritual’ brings problems, Bonifini replied ‘no, it’s not limiting’ (Bonifini, 2018) and recognized the spiritual and ritual in her work. She went on to say ‘We are all becoming more individualistic. Spirituality can focus your thoughts. Your year can be punctuated by ritual’ (Bonifini, 2018).

Marcus Coates is an artist who speaks directly about shamanic practice. He says his work ‘employs shamanistic rituals in communication with the lower world and contrasts natural and man-made processes.’ (In Conversation: Marcus Coates, 2014). Coates was recommended to me as a reference by a tutor who knows about my shamanic practice. Coates is a multi-disciplinary artist who ‘becomes animal’ in order to see what being human is about. He uses the shamanic journey in various public situations in the way the shaman works for his/her community. He believes that, by giving the audience the bare minimum possible, he helps them to come out of themselves and to project a sense of ‘ok, this person believes that he is a slug or a butterfly, can I perhaps believe that I am too?’ (In Conversation: Marcus Coates, 2014). There is something of the Heyokah about him (Heyokah in Native American tradition is the sacred clown/trickster/joker/contrarian) and something of the true Shaman in the way he refers to his practice as ‘shamanistic’. I contend, however, that he does not embody shamanic principles in the purest sense of the word, since his intention is subordinate to the dramatic effect of his art practice.

Mariko Mori, a contemporary Japanese artist, comes from a Shinto Buddhist background. This is an animist tradition and is similar to shamanism in the way that it sees a life-force in all natural things.

The ritual element to Mori’s work is inspired by the connection with nature that arises, rather than the performance of the ritual itself.

It has been a rare thing in my studies so far to hear an artist speak about how the Nature god, the Water Spirit has lost its power in this society. Similarly, the artist in the cave would relate to Mori when she says, ‘The Natural world is already talking’ (Mori, 2019).

Mori has shown her work in Ethiopia, which is important to her because ‘it is the world of origin...where we originate from. The work in Brazil is because it is Life and the lungs of our planet.’ (Mori, 2019). This relates to both her own spiritual practice and to her shamanic relationship with the earth.

Mori received a round of applause when she emphasised ‘Life is Sacred’ (Mori, 2019) and concluded by saying that we need to create work to speak to future generations.

Conclusion

Frustrated as I am with artists not acknowledging their connection to their roots in shamanic tradition, I believe that people are taking steps into the other worlds, whether they know it or not.

Explicitly expressing this is taboo in contemporary art practice. Nonetheless, because artists have the same curiosity as our ancestors, I have faith that we will not forget, and that bodies of work are on their way that will serve, enrich and enable the whole community.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Photographer unknown *The Sorcerer* [Photograph of a tracing by Henri Breuil (1920)] At: <http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/CavePainting/CavePainting.html> (Accessed on 5 May 2019)