Early in the morning on April 18th, 1999, just before dawn, I was on my way to the flea market at the local regional market. As the light changed to allow me to cross Erie Boulevard, I looked both ways and there was no sign of light or movement. My mind turned to the find I was just sure I would discover . . . perhaps a really interesting painting.

Then a sensation of bumps, blows, explosive sounds! Spinning, weightless. Silence. Stillness. “I think she’s dead.” I opened my eyes but was not sure where I was . . . it was now light, and I was facing towards the hill, not north, where I had been headed.

Why talk about this event of the near past? Well, it has the elements which I believe to be at the root of the human drive to give form to the unformed. Darkness, loud bursts of sound, random movement, disorientation, chaos. In the stillness which follows, one seeks meaning, understanding, and order.

Now we name this event a “trauma,” and the reaction to it is “post-traumatic disorder”. The victim is talked to and gentled and even offered medications. But the trauma can be dealt with because society views it as being in a context which is not quite totally random in effects and affects.

On September 11th an entire nation went into a state of trauma. Thousands experienced horror at first hand, and millions were transfixed by images of death and destruction in an endless loop of video transmissions. And the populace turned to prayer, to each other, and to the symbol of the flag.

Let us borrow a technique from the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The application of the senses tells us to imagine ourselves in a particular place and then use all of our senses, smell, sight, touch, hearing, and even taste. Shall we make it night . . . How dark it is, except for lights far above us in the sky. Is there a moon on this night? But then the pale round light disappears as a curtain of darkness is drawn across its face. The wind blows damp and chill by contrast to the warmth of earlier. Water pours down so heavily it bounces on the hard earth. A jagged line of light streaks down from above, followed by a boom so loud it feels like a hard blow to the head. There is a smell of smoke, then curls of black appear in the sudden hot light of fire which roars almost as loud as the first boom of thunder.

Just to describe this scene of a lightening strike starting a forest fire, I have used words and concepts which would have simply not existed for a human at the dawn of our time on earth.

Nonsense, no sense, sensory overload, anxiety, panic. This seems to be a reasonable progression of emotions when faced with the unusual, the out of order, the non-working events which can occur. The bible says that God created us in his own image. If I think about this statement and go back to the very opening verses of scripture, I read that God looked out over chaos. And
then for six successive days, working from large to small, the universe to the individual, God creates order.

If indeed we wish to pursue the theory that God created us in his image, it makes sense that the desire to impose order on chaos was also built into our systems. But as fragments of God, we possess only fragments of power. I am sure that even to the earliest humans it was evident that they could not order the heavens, or the rains, or the seasons. But they could try! They could experiment. They could attempt to fashion a small imitation, or a sign which could suggest the event or phenomenon they wished to influence.

The forms we currently consider the oldest sacred or shamanistic forms were apparently derived from observations made very close to home. With pregnancy, the female would swell in belly and breasts, and then thrust out new life. The earth also seemed to change and grow and divide and provide. It seems a fairly easy gesture to gather some clay from the edge of a river and mold a small figure which could be a miniature fecund female. Holding it, stroking it, could surely help to recreate human birth.

It is not too large a leap for the imagination to go from this physically based, touchable phenomenon to a concern with the events which seem to be more untouchable, such as the wind, the rain, heat, earthquakes, volcanoes and all the other cataclysmic twitches of the sometimes not so terra firma.

Without electricity, without television, without phones, the early wanderers of the earth in their small bands still needed to form some sort of connection. Remember how on September 11th we all rushed to the phones to try to contact all of our loved ones. The tangible is very much a basic human need.

I feel that little by little a pantheon of gods arose from the collection of symbols which represented the major forces surrounding early humans. And the maker and guardian of these images gradually gained in power compared to the rest of the group. Magician, manipulator, interpreter, healer . . . the power which compelled the formation of early images transmuted into the images and then by explicit and implicit progression into the maker of the images.

Sometimes I think that there is an atavistic memory of this process which underlies the status we give to the image makers of our times . . . the news commentators and film producers and directors of the mass media. We search for gurus, for spiritual leaders, for those who can interpret, mediate, and explain to us phenomena which seem beyond the control of the individual.

Just after Vatican II a New Catechism for Adults was published in Holland. The section dealing with occupations was of interest to me because there was some notice of artists. As I recall, it stated that the life of the artist had to be informed and moral because the artist, like the priest, interprets God’s handiwork to others.

It strikes me that the three great Western religions arose out of the desert in a very finite area of the earth. The first and the third . . . Judaism and Islam stress not only the oneness of God, but also interdict any attempt to use human imagery to shape God who is indescribable because so totally all encompassing. Only as Christianity extended its beliefs to those who came from
different traditions and with different memories do we have a reinterpretation and updating of pagan imagery into a system which refers to the transcendental power of God using the Incarnation as the visual as well as the metaphysical bridge.

And gradually images of saints were added. These saints personified various attributes which the Church with both a large and small “C” considered vital to the well-being of all. Some people who do not have imagery as part of their worship environments will sometimes accuse Catholics of idol-worship. As a maker of images such as the Shrine of the Blessed Mother at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Syracuse, NY, I explain that the image serves as a focus of concentration, and that it helps direct the thoughts to God or to the attributes of saints who in turn lead to God. And yes, there are some souls who do seem to mix this up. I am surprised sometimes at what people say to me about my own work in this area.

Not everyone can find the non-physical as real as the physical. Not everyone can break free of time and place and allow the spirit to wander over the universe. I don’t believe it is up to the artist to judge those who don’t have the same gifts as we who work with hands and hearts to give shape and substance to the will or the wind. It is part of our task to help as circumstances find us.

Ever since I lived and worked in Nigeria and carved a three-ton statue for the Nigerian government, I have been collecting the art of Africa and more recently the art of the Sepik River peoples of Papua New Guinea. Much of this art is tied to animistic belief systems which arose at the dawn of human time. The forms and shapes however are highly plastic and sophisticated. Certainly western art of the last 150 years has been strongly influenced by the expressionistic emphasis and uncluttered forms of African tribal art. As I have written elsewhere, this art was never simply for decoration, but was for religious expression and social control. I do feel that this higher purpose added to the strength and power of the carvings.

The other large and varied bodies of work grew into existence first with Hindu imagery and then with various regional forms depicting Buddhist beliefs and practices. The calm and massiveness of form of many Buddhist carvings appeals greatly to me, as do the meditative practices used in making Zen art. And there certainly is no interdict preventing contemporary artists from allowing the tools both mental and real of artists from other times and places to become part of our own tool boxes.

In my teaching I stress that once one determines just what it is one is addressing in a particular endeavor, whether it is a work of art, an automobile trip, or launching a new product, the first order of business is to set firm parameters and establish a consistent scale. Next comes identifying major parts and finding the relationships between them. Once this is established, a series of sweeps of the entire area of attention and/or activity are needed. As each overview is completed, physical and psychological space are required to allow the critical faculties to assess progress towards the vision or end goal of the particular total exercise. Each sweep makes available to notice and thus to action smaller and smaller parts or increments, until finally some inner voice tells the artist the work is finished, or ta-da, your car pulls up in front of your hotel.

This process mimics the creation story found in Genesis, even to God admiring His handiwork at the end of each working stage or day. For me the implication is that if the work had not been pleasing, God would have tweaked it until it was indeed good. The ability to be self critical of
one’s own effort, to be pro-active, rather than passively allowing expression to drool out of one like involuntary excreta, seems to me to be at the core of creativity.

This much overworked word has come to express a kind of over-all feel-good state of activity which can encompass absolutely any human activity or thought. The key element appears to be the presence of a euphoric sensation of well-being accompanied by self-esteem, which I take to be a form of self-congratulation echoed by the limited society of school and street.

And so I return to the original thought about chaos and the drive to impose order. This drive is so deep that the account of God’s relation with the earth starts with God’s giving order to the universe. Arranging the forms in balanced relationships, starting with the very biggest, predictability can arise. And the need for order continues through our activities as artists. It is not without reason that the activities of the academy are referred to as disciplines. Although aestheticians have rightly discovered the charms of the accidental and non-intentional, the basic forward spiral of human growth does need the order of intentional direction.

By the way, I find it charming that Teilhard de Chardin describes a spiral universe, but then so does DNA reveal itself in spiral form. And how we love the spiral underlying such beloved images as the pose of Michelangelo’s David.

This has been a brief introduction to the subject of the transition of human awe and amazement into the tangible forms we call art. As I work and develop and arrange the images of the past on the canvas of my mind, perhaps new forms will develop which will help others to experience the wonderful and the awful aspects available all around us.

DIGITAL SHAMAN

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Historically, the shamans role within a culture was that of the healer, spiritual guide and one who performed visual magic. There have been parallels made between this shaman role and what would be later known as the artist. In early cultures, the artist in a sense did perform magic. Mysteriously depicting animal imagery which was sacred to that culture, this was an extremely important responsibility in tribal sustenance. Generally, as the artists role in society became more defined, his contributions to visually capturing of physical reality expanded.

In contemporary society, the bombardment of mass media technology has created an immunity to visual stimulus, unfortunately requiring more visual impact to impress and yield this magical experience.

Digital technologies in art have contributed to new possible magical experiences through new forms of art and courses offered in university art departments. This can be seen with the
dynamic participation by artists in these new genres. It may also be witnessed with the growing numbers of students enrolling in digital art and design curricula. Obviously, as one observes a student's face while a digital demonstration takes place or as that student creates a work through digital means, there is an expression of awe.

Note: The remainder of this presentation was a computer projected Director file which demonstrated the labs which I direct and the students working within the Digital Arts Center environment.
In another time or another place, the artists of my study might well have been called shamans—people of extraordinary vision, people with shining eyes who see ecstatically. In our own time we call these people “artists,” and we call their vision “artistic.” The error is ours. The vision is religious; it is analogous to the shaman’s; and, it is not one easily dismissed.

For the shaman, the controlled trance state of the vision or dream creates a unitary way of seeing the world. Like many artists, the shaman knows any part of the world, seen clearly, reveals the whole.

Both shaman and artist are stereotypically perceived as being weird, wonderful, wild, strange, intense, and intensely creative people of whom others are somewhat wary. People seem to be sure that shamans and artists are not only “different,” they even look different. They have different eyes.

So, let us consider these “eyes”—the so-called artist’s eye and the shaman’s eye. What is it? What do they see? Assuredly, not a world removed, separate in some blue heavenly hereafter as a Christian mystic might. Afterlife beliefs do not predominate in shamanism as they do in belief systems centered on creator gods and stories of personal salvation. The shamanic vision is earth-centered, here and now.

SHAMANISM

In the literature of ethnology, the shaman is called a “talented ecstatic,” a person with paranormal skills, whose role it is to bring forth hidden realities—percolating, powerful, sacred realities—so that others become aware of them. Shamanism is much more than a set of techniques to be learned in a weekend workshop. The shaman’s social role is critical to the group’s survival. The shaman is a seer.

Thus, the shaman heals others—always psychically, sometimes physically—by means of vision, trance, dream, and journeys to other realms of being. Some artists today display a similar inventive and creative intelligence.

STUDY DESIGN

In 1989 I constructed an exploratory study of artists in order to find, among other things, a few artists, two or three I hoped, who would talk to me about their visions.

I mailed out 225 questionnaires. I asked impertinent questions—about dreams, visions, paranormal experiences and if or how these related to artistic practice. Please explain. That sort of open-ended questionnaire. My response rate was unexpected, and extraordinary; 120 artists completed the questionnaires, 54.7% of the mailout.
All of the study participants were professional artists—half with American addresses, half-Canadian. Half the questionnaires went to women and a fourth, over all, went out to self-identified Amerindian artists. “Thank god!” wrote Alex Janvier, a Canadian Chipewyan artist, “someone is finally asking the right questions.”

Apparently so. The responses of many, 81% of the artists, fit the shamanic model—the artist as dreamer, storyteller, healer, and keeper of the myths.

Study Results

Ten years later I am still trying to understand all that I stumbled upon. Many of the study participants remain in touch (artists keep the best mailing lists). I have interviewed and talked with others since then. The analogy—artist as shaman—holds up.

Let me tell you about two of the 120 artists. Their experiences are representative of the study outcomes. American artist Betsy Damon is 60 years old. Canadian artist Kathy Gillis is 66. Both are clear-eyed visionaries. For a very long time their work has been informed and influenced by paranormal and visionary data. In their use of this data to make art, the artists are attempting to heal or redress perceived imbalances in society and the world around us.

BETSY DAMON

Betsy Damon has long been a community-activist artist. She achieved early fame, or notoriety, with such well-known New York street performance works as “7,000-Year-Old Woman” (1977) and “Blind Beggar Woman” (1979).

All that changed, however, with a knock-your-socks off visionary experience in 1984. Late that summer, while driving eastward across the United States to New York City, Betsy Damon began to see lost watercourses. There, in the contemporary super-highway landscape, the artist could “see” lost rivers, streams, swamps. She knew where collectors and dispensers of rainwater and groundwater had once been. The vision lasted days. It was life changing.

One year later, the artist made a remarkable 70m paper casting of a dry river bed in Utah, a river destroyed by uranium tailings, fertilizers and other toxic wastes. To make the casting Damon crawled on hands and knees, learning the site intimately. Her casting became the sculpture “A Memory of Clean Water.” The work was exhibited widely over a seven-year period.

I first interviewed Betsy Damon in 1989 in New York City. That afternoon she told me of her initiating vision five years earlier, and she said: “All of my work now is about water.” The artist also showed me her drawings of a garden she had dreamed: “I know I will make it one day. It’s really nice. I mean, I actually know it’s going to be built. I just don’t know where.”

Six years later, the artist was building her garden. In China. In the city of Cheng-du, Sichuan province.
Not long after our first meeting, Betsy Damon left New York and moved to Minnesota. There she formed an association called “Keepers of the Waters,” a group bringing artists and scientists together in creative collaborations with local communities.

In 1989 she visited China for the first time, returning in 1993 to study the use of water in traditional Chinese medicine, returning again in 1995 when she created a series of performance pieces about the foul, dead local river water with a group of Chinese artists. Surprisingly, the performances were broadcast nationally. And, were much discussed in the Chinese press. In 1996, the city of Cheng-du asked Betsy Damon to design a riverfront park. The artist accepted the project as one appropriate for Keepers of the Waters. Cheng-du’s Living Water Garden was completed in 1998. It is a park of 24,000 square meters cleaning and purifying river water through a natural cleansing system of aeration, filtration, botanical and microbiological interactions. It is China’s first water purification garden.

The entire design was scrutinized, then approved, every step of the way, by a Cheng-du feng-shui expert. The artist’s design is elegantly site-sensitive. Human activity is balanced and harmonized within the orbit of nature. The cleansing properties of carp, gingko, and wetlands are featured in the work.

Wheels lift river water into the pumphouse. The water is then pumped into a settling pond, 8m in diameter, where sediment and oil are separated out. The eye of the carp is a fountain.

Water then travels through a series of flow forms (here the series changes from abstract shapes to birds) and into a constructed wetlands environment where plants and fish further clean the water. Water continues flowing through more flow forms (here in the shape of gingko leaves).

Now the water is clean enough for fish and, further on along its 500m journey, clean enough for children, too. There is an amphitheater (here children are receiving an ecology lesson), a teahouse, and paths for strolling. The Fu River is always within plain sight. Lastly, we see the fish’s tail, where clean water, living water, is returning to the river.

“Clean water is nothing less than water creating and sustaining life,” says Betsy Damon, and, of course, we know she is right. That is why water is sacramental everywhere.

KATHY GILLIS

For a period of nearly 15 years Kathy Gillis collected dreams from people who were willing to dream on assignment, record the dream, then send the narrative to the artist. The artist had not planned a 15-year project. A stunning, revelatory dream about a schoolmate who had died, a schoolmate she had long hated, initiated her first dream collection. Kathy Gillis wanted to see if there was a way to use dream knowledge to make community-based art.

Hoping for a handful of volunteers, the artist placed notices in neighborhood Laundromats and convenience stores in Ottawa. People volunteered in droves. For that first “dream night” in 1980 more than 100 people asked to be dream volunteers. Weeks and months later, letters kept arriving from people asking if it was too late to dream? It never was.
With each dream night, Gillis followed the same procedures. Volunteers were sent notes, announcing the date of the next “dream night,” and the topic for dreaming. Dream narratives were circulated among the volunteers as an anonymous collation.

What began to happen was this: dreamers saw their own dreams being completed and commented on by others dreaming that very same night. From the collation of dream stories, the artist pulled out common threads then translated them into simple line drawings on paper. She worked the “dream-glyphs” into installations that were almost “readable.”


“Healing Ceremony,” 1990, was a set of landscape paintings layered with dream glyphs and the shadows of bodies lost and found. In her artist’s statement, Kathy Gillis wrote of it: “We are all intense, alert and aware that although everything is still, in actual fact a great deal is going on.”

From dream collection to map making and dowsing was a short step for the artist. If dreams had a hidden grammar, perhaps the land did, too.

And, it does. Meanders, loops, swirls, and rings. Some sites are more potent than others.

“Found Patterns,” 1996, is the record of three different, repetitive movements of the divining rods at a place where the grass grew differently. Kathy Gillis charted the area carefully, using three colors to distinguish three different movements of the divining rods. The pattern the earth revealed was a set of four graduated, elliptical rings arranged in an eccentric orbit about a single point.

The artist has found similar patterns elsewhere–archaeological digs at ancient sites, places with temples, for example. But, Little Cataraqui Creek Conservation Area in Ontario is not thought to have ever been an inhabited site by anyone. The ground is supposed to be anonymous.

Is this a problem? Not for Gillis. In her words, “I want people to understand that whatever moves the dowsing rods (we can call it energy) is something that affects us all, our bodies respond to it. It is an earth connection. We ought not to ignore it, but we do.”

Kathy Gillis now teaches dowsing to her drawing students.

CONCLUSION

For the most part, neither the art historian nor the historians of religions have considered the artist to be a religious figure, a visionary. We admit an interrelationship of art and religion, we consider some art historically to be sacred, but we have somehow omitted the artist and the artist’s visions from the discussion.
Nevertheless, artists who fit the shamanic model are three times more likely to report a combination of paranormal experiences as significant in their practice as artists. They are twice as likely to report instances of out-of-body transport, and twice as likely to report visionary experiences, which are directly related to their work as artists. They are vision-driven. Not just two or three, but 81% of the 120 study participants that I found almost by chance alone. That was the stunner. There were so many who saw with shaman’s eyes.

Forty years ago Tal Streeter, one of my study participants, interviewed Louise Nevelson for his MFA thesis. He sent the thesis to me because he had asked Nevelson this question: “What does it mean to be an artist?”

This is what she told him:

I think it is as important as any religion. It’s a different way of saying the same thing. They [priests] say it by allegory and words. We say it in a visual way, which is much more immediate, much more direct. . . . You’re given a gift to fulfill. You did not bargain for happiness; you bargained for something else. You bargained for revelation. You bargained for a closer concept of reality. And you bargained for your own sanity, I think, half the time. You’re really right down with the elements.”

That is exactly it. I can add only one thing to Nevelson’s statement. In the main, artists who are vision-driven do not talk about their visions. Theirs is a practical caution and there is good precedent for that caution. Sometimes visionary power goes negative. Sometimes even the shaman’s power overwhelms the shaman. An out-of-control shaman is a fearful sight—and a danger to all. When that happens, the community rises up. . . and murders the shaman.

NOTES

2. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment 1934 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). According to the authors, their study is a “sociological interpretation” of what makes the artist an exemplary figure in society. Their thesis, p. 4, is: “. . . from the moment when the artist made his appearance in historical records, certain stereotyped notions were linked with his work and his person-preconceptions that have never entirely lost their significance and that still influence our view of what an artist is.” Kris and Kurz identify twenty recurrent themes in the biographies of a great number of artists, always male and mostly Western, from Classical Greece to modern times. The themes are:
   1. The artist’s gifts were self-evident in childhood.
   2. The artist’s work is so realistic it is deceptive to other people.
   3. The artist is self-taught, but is himself an inspiring teacher.
   4. The artist, not unlike a culture hero, is inventive.
   5. The artist is made and/or divinely possessed.
   6. The artist’s artistic vision is one divinely inspired.
   7. The artist rivals God in his ability to create (see item 2).
   8. God may use the artist as a conduit, a medium.
   9. The artist’s gift creates only an illusion or reality.
10. The artist’s gift makes him admirable and dangerous.
11. Artists understand secrets of nature.
12. Artists are mentally superior.
13. Artists are forgers, fakes.
14. Artists are witty.
15. Artists are sexually prolific and promiscuous.
16. Artists have sole power over their artworks.
17. Every beautiful woman painted by an artist becomes invariably the artist’s mistress.
18. Artists will kill opponents or critics of their work.
19. Artists use hallucinogenic drugs or intoxicants in order to create.
20. If the artist’s work fails or if the artist is unable to create for some reason, the artist dies (physically, not just psychologically).


4. Jean Houston, “foreword,” Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality, edited by Shirley Nicholson (Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), p. xii: “The gaze of the shamans all over the world is described as being uncomfortably intense, burning through the culturally acquired veils of others, shocking them into a remembrance of who and what they really are.” Tal Streeter, telephone interview with author, September 17, 1989: “There’s no way an artist can hide. Artists look strange no matter what they do or don’t do to fit in.”


7. Marie-Francoise Guedon, “Critical Workshop on Shamanic Method and an Exploration of the Athapaskan Shamanic Method,” Department of Religious Studies Colloquium, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, March 2, 1989: “The exploration of the shaman is worthless unless there are people to whom your exploration matters; you have to make something out of your experience of value, something makes sense to your community.” In other words, what results is both uniquely visionary and enculturated

8. Peter T. Furst in “The Roots and Continuities of Shamanism,” artscanada, issues 194-187 (December 1973/January 1974), p. 57, notes what happens when the shaman no longer has the social role of “true guardian of the physical and metaphysical equilibrium of his society. It is thus no accident that in observing the accelerating process of acculturation and social and psychological disintegration of traditional native societies, scholars of the eminence of Claude Levi-Strauss have remarked on the fact that in South America, for example, Indian communities with strong shamanism have fared psychologically far better under the ideological and material impact of encroaching white civilization than those under whom the traditional shamanistic system has already been weakened or otherwise deteriorated.

9. For example, as A. P. Elkin in Aboriginal Men of High Degree (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), concluded in his study of Australian aboriginal groups, although all members of the tribe could possess healing skills, the karadji or clever man, p. 10: “was definitely an outstanding person, a clear thinker, a man of decision, one who believed, and acted on his
belief, that he possessed psychic power, the power to will others to have faith in themselves.” [My underlining.]

10. Carlos Castaneda, The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), p. 21: “I have called them ‘states of nonordinary reality,’ meaning unusual reality was opposed to the ordinary reality of everyday life.” Michael Harner in The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1980), p. 27, characterizes what he terms the “shamanic state of consciousness” or SSC (in order to specify it within the broader category of altered states of consciousness ASC) as a visionary state of awareness in which one is suffused with an ineffable joy, is amazed at reality in front of oneself, and gains knowledge about life, death, the meaning of things, and other important matters. Marie-Francoise Guedon, however, in “Tsimshian Shamanic Images,” Tsimshian Images of the Past Views of the Present edited by Margaret Sequin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 185, states there is “. . . no such thing as a shamanic trance state” because the methods used to achieve trance state are so various worldwide and the degree of trance to be obtained just as variable—both personally and situationally.”

11. In the language of psychiatry, the shaman creates controlled states of disassociation, or states of metanoia, to obtain vision. As defined in Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis, 1968 (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 167-168: Trance: “State of disassociation occurring in patients under hypnosis and in mediums when they are purporting to be in touch with the spirit world. Trance-like states occur in hysteria, although these are usually called spells, seizures, or dream-states; and in childhood, in the form of sleepwalking. The feature common to all these is that some part of the ego (or self) is out of action, so that the subject either surrenders his will to another or acts on wishes and fantasies that are otherwise inhibited.” For the purposes of my study, trance states are simply states of disassociation, forms of metanoia. According to Joseph Chilton Pearce, The Crack in the Cosmic Egg: Challenging Constructs of Mind and Reality (London: Lyrebird Press, 1973), p. 10, trance states are “temporary restructurings of reality orientations.” Trance states are not forms of possessions (which is what Rycroft is emphasizing in his dictionary definition), nor are they in any wise pathological. Trance states range from light to deep trance and are forms of focused concentration, both waking—light and medium trance—and sleeping, deep trance, which it is possible to learn to control. According to Marie-Francoise Guedon, “Dream in Northern Athapaskan Shamanism,” public lecture, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, March 2, 2989, the words “vision” and “dream” may be used interchangeably in certain contexts for similar experiences of altered states of consciousness. A visionary dream (as opposed to a non-visionary dream) is known by the import the dream has upon the dreamer. The dreamer knows the dream matters. It is a vision. Similarly, the visionary knows the vision matters, that it is not a mirage, some trick of the light. Visions are waking-dreams. See also Guedon, “Tsimshian Shamanic Images,” pp. 183-185: “When they practice their art, shamans are not acting from their everyday point of view or their normal mind. They have to enter on the “other side of things,” the “other side of the world,” to use the terms of a shaman’s song. This is not a matter of cosmological definition. It is a very practical problem of leaving for a while one’s normal habits modes of thought, emotions, and other responses. . . . Psychologists describe these states as disassociation states. Dream is one of these states. Trance, with its many different levels and orientations, offers a series of other states akin to dream although usually experienced while awake . . . in Tsimshian, as in many other languages, the term for dream also means vision and the term sleep is applied to any deep state of disassociation.”
12. The study was intended as a working document. With the artists’ permission, all the questionnaire data (120 participants) and all the interview transcripts (19 interviews, of whom only one interviewee is anonymous at her request) were collated and comprise volume two of my doctoral dissertation—Maureen Korp, “Earthworks: Shamanism in the Religious Experiences of Contemporary Artists in North America,” Ph.D. dissertation in Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, 1991.

13. I note, gratefully, the artists supplied their own postage for the return envelopes.

14. My study demonstrated three things: one, it is possible to study artists as a social group, using techniques from the social sciences—statistical profile methods and data collection—in order to identify shamanic experiences in a group of artists. Two, it is appropriate to consider the making of some art to be a religious discipline and some artists to be religious specialists, albeit wondrously unchurched and iconoclastic souls. Three, shamanism, as a religious construct, is a truly useful model for explicating the visionary experiences of certain contemporary visual artists.

15. Castle Valley, Utah, 1985. The project was funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts through the Danforth Museum.


17. Ibid.

18. Cheng-du, a city of 9 million at the confluence of the Fu and Nan rivers, had been famed for the purity of the Nan, its “brocade river”—a river once so pure, silk washed in it became brighter. Yet within only 30 years, the rivers were dead, their color black, the scent foul. The rivers’ despoliation was the outcome of rapid population growth and industrialization.

19. In January 1993 in response to middle school students writing letters to the city about water pollution, the city government committed itself to restoring its rivers and riverfront heritage. According to Angie Yuan, “Finding the River at its Source,” *Shanghai Talk* vol. 4, nr. 8 (August 1997), pp. 1,4: “Through it still has a long way to go, the reconstruction of the Fun and Nan rivers (involving flood control, waste treatment, infrastructure development, and an extensive park system along the rivers’ banks) will bring back memories of a city that lived and prospered by its river.” In 1995, Damon returned again to Cheng-du. This time she directed a Keepers of the Waters event during the summer. Artists from Lhasa, Shanghai, Beijing, and the United States joined with Damon and the people of Chengdu in three public performances: “Washing Silk,” “Washing Ice,” and “Washing Face.” Each performance was visually stunning, graphically honest, and scientifically accurate. Each performance incorporated traditional knowledge of the river and of water as source of life, as healer. Each performance also dramatically displayed the despoliation of the rivers and the disjunct between what should be and what now was. The performances were televised nationally. Noting the success of those performances, in March 1996, the city of Chengdu asked Betsy Damon to design a “Living Water Garden” along a portion of the Fu riverfront. Most of the funding came from the city itself. With the city’s full cooperation for the project, the park was built in two years.


21. Ibid.


24. The topics Kathy Gillis chose for dreaming were both familiar and inconsequential—apples, houses, flags, bunny rabbits, for example. Sometimes Gillis sent her dream night volunteers
small objects to be tasted (a cookie), or smelled (scented paper), or felt (a stone) before turning out the light for the night.

25. First shown at the Ottawa School of Art Gallery, Ottawa, Canada, “In Search of . . .” was shown regionally three more times over the next five years.


27. The artist’s first public use of dowsing was something of a secret. She dowsed a gallery floor in 1993, then designed and built a paper labyrinth en site but told almost no one how she had sited the work. See description in Maureen Korp, Sacred Art of the Earth (New York: Continuum, 1997) pp. 15-18.

28. Kathy Gillis, Ottawa, personal communication, September 7, 1998. The artists chose this site for her work because the grass grew differently there. She had been offered a choice of several sites in the Little Cataraqui Creek Conservation Area.

29. Personal communication: Kathy Gillis, Ottawa, September 7, 1998. Gillis does not know what pattern if any, is being revealed at any site until she has finished mapping the entire site. The artist speculates some form of dowsing as a sitting tool has probably been in use since the Neolithic period throughout Europe because the tradition of “water-witching” or divining is so widespread and consistent in its practice everywhere in Europe.


31. Korp, “Earthworks, op. cit. The study’s parameters, including distribution and analysis scheme, are fully presented along with statistical tables of results—both quantitatively and qualitatively.


33. According to anthropologist Marie-Francoise Guedon (personal communication, Sept. 6, 2001), the Tlinguit bury the shaman’s body and all the shaman’s gear in a burial place away from the community, high on a mountain and, if possible, looking out towards the sea so the shaman can see far and continue to travel. The shaman’s power does not decay. It stays right there, in that place, and it is so vibrant, the power sensitizes those who walk nearby. That is how shamanic power is conserved and transferred through time, according to the beliefs of the Tlinguit and Tshimshain nations of Canada’s northwest coast.

34. In more recent times, communities have discharged their obligation to murder the shaman by committing the shaman to the nearest state hospital for the insane. That was the fate of Hole-In-Sky, a great Ojibway shaman of the 1940s and 1950s. See: Ruth Landes, Ojibwa Religion and the Medewiwin (Madison: University Wisconsin Press, 1968).
THE SHAMAN AS ARTIST AND THE ARTIST AS SHAMAN

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A shaman heals. An artist creates. Are they connected? A shaman dreams. An artist envisions. Is there a bond between them? Universal religions have placed images of the sacred in cathedrals, temples or shrines. Christian, Buddhist or Muslim, these icons have inspired large groups of people to worship and follow doctrines. But as an art historian who specializes in the native arts,

I believe that the work of some contemporary, mainstream artists approaches more closely the intent of the shamans of non-western societies.

In the traditional cultures of native North and South America, the shaman as healer has connected small-scale communities with the supernatural, leading them from discord to harmony. The shaman’s powerful arts have magically linked individuals with the spiritual world on a one to one basis for physical and spiritual healing. The shaman may have been chosen for a facility in memorizing myths and chants, for an ability to cure through medicinal herbs, or for a talent in depicting sacred images.

As a shaman or medicine man of the Navajo people of the Southwest, you would return a sick person or an entire community to harmony, called Hozho. The opposite of Hozho, chaos or evil, tends to revisit, so you perform a curing ceremony. In this painting, with sand and other dry pigments such as corn pollen and crushed rock, the medicine man has depicted images of the Holy People from one of the sacred myths. This ceremony is called “Whirling Logs.” In the middle are the four cardinal directions, stemming from the traditional house or Hogan at the center. Crossed by a white four directions symbol, topped by the sacred cornstalk, the result is rotational symmetry, forming a sacred circle. The elongated yei or nature gods rotate also, producing a whirling effect. Encircling all is the protective female Rainbow spirit. Other yei arise from the arms of the stable black cross, counter-clockwise, creating what appears to be a swastika—actually a sign for harmonious migration from the sacred center in ancient native America.

This sand painting is part of a nine-day ceremony held to cure illness. The shaman chants stories from the origin myths that everyone knows; therefore the sand painting design tells no narrative but is a sign of the yei propitiated for help. Sand from the painting is sprinkled over the sick person, and then ritually returned to its source. The person is considered healed and conditions of Hozho are restored.

In other indigenous traditions, as a shaman, you drank the liquid of boiled herbs, stems, or roots of plants to induce an altered state of consciousness. You might ingest psychotropics such as peyote cactus to enter the spirit world. Afterwards, reflecting over what you had seen, you would create healing messages from the origin myths in newly envisioned or repeated patterns.

The Huichol people of northwest Mexico portray their religious beliefs in visions gained through peyote. A shaman has made this painting by pressing yarn onto beeswax. It is called a
Nierika, a Huichol sacred work since pre-Hispanic times. The shaman uses peyote for the ability to “dream,” and to “come close to the heart of God”—for the health and prosperity of the people. The resulting visions are believed given by gods and ancestors to teach the myths that hold lessons for the next generation. This Nierika, made by shaman Jose Benitez Sanchez, is the story of shamans traveling to the coast to make offerings to a female spirit, Mother Haramara. The sea is to the west, the direction of the mythical land of the dead, so the yarn painting also honors the ancestors. The offerings of sacred plants, animals, fish and inland spring water, are backed by the sun. The design of a sacred peyote is at the center of a four directions symbol with power rays emanating from its arms. At the bottom left, rocks on the shore are struck by a sacred votive arrow, signifying the fulfillment of a vow. Altogether, the typically symmetrical Huichol composition holds designs outlined with pink, orange, and sparkling white.

Huichol women also become shamans and their arts appear in weaving, embroidery and beadwork. This embroidery shows at the top center the eagle symbol of the male shaman in his spirit flight, with outstretched wings. Flanking butterflies are minor spirit flyers. Striking opposite colors accent a geometric design in the needle-workers running stitch. As shamans, the women prepare as arduously as the men, together with cooking and childcare; and there are husband and wife shamans who work together. Their visions make them, “keepers of knowledge,” which they feel obligated to pass on. Folk art Nierakas are sold to tourists, the symbols mixed up, but sacred ones like these are mounted on wood and set on altars proclaiming healings and the power of the shaman to heal.

Today, thousands of petroglyphs exist that are believed to have illustrated lessons from myths also – as well as assisting in weather control. In south-eastern California, rock art is protected from vandalism by its location in the China Lake Naval Weapons Center at Ridgecrest. Rock faces at canyons in the Coso Range are are filled with images created by scraping through the desert varnish. They date from around 11,000 B.C. to the beginning of the 20th century. As a shaman of a hunting and gathering society you might have traveled a good distance to acquire the spiritual power available in what was both a curing and rainmaking-power-place. To tap into power shaman and initiates made a vision quest, later carving the designs that range in sizes ranging from a few inches to about 2 feet.

Anthropomorphic or human-like figures are thought to represent the shamans in geometric patterns as seen in a vision quest. Shamans’ heads are concentric circles, have quail topknot feathers or sunrays, probably indicating the supernatural power of the shaman in a trance. Sometimes horns on the head alone could symbolize this. A bighorn sheep may have been the shaman’s helper or alter ego in the spirit world, since he would be transformed into his spirit helper in order to access the animal’s power to aid him in curing or inducing rain. Some images are heavily incised, indicating that shamans or their initiates may have underscored them after seeing the same vision. Interviews with native American elders in the early 20th century revealed that the ubiquitous geometric shapes, circles, mazes, spirals, parallel lines, and so forth, told stories of the origin myths in patterns, each region having its own myths with their own idiosyncratic meanings.

As a shaman today in the upper Amazon, in Ecuador, you would create paintings primarily for healings in the community, complex fantasies that play a central role in the religious and cultural life. In a trance from a plant called ayahuasca the shaman or vegetalista confronts the
sorcery behind illness in order to cure his people on his return to the natural world. This two
by three feet painting, probably oil on canvas board, called “Gradation of Powers,” is a vision of
the reign of the invisible world in luminous rays. At the lower left, flying concentric circles
around the house represent guardians that transmit the visions.

The first ray in light green shows humans, animals, and plants that the shaman has at his
disposal. The 2nd ray, in greenish yellow, signifies the topaz, birds, roses, and dark people. The
3rd ray, in reddish purple, depicts humans, animals, sphinx-like rays, black roses, fortunetellers
and sibyls. The 4th ray in neutral gray presents a superior grade that few proceed beyond due to
lack of spiritual preparation.

In the 5th ray, turquoise blue or sapphire, angels roam the universe in galaxies for a while, as
extrasensory wisdom guardians.

The top ray is carbon and silicon of witches—the opposite of light and enlightenment. The
shaman who is healer and painter, Pablo Amaringo, says that through wordless communication
wisdom is bestowed on the beholders. But he also warns that these plants are too dangerous for
anyone but the shaman to use.

Shamans of certain cultures may ingest psychoactive plants to reach the spirit world, or have no
connection with them whatsoever in their ancient cultural heritage. But all feel a divine
mandate to heal the people and their community. I see in certain contemporary artists’ work
inclinations toward shamanism rather than to their established historical or religious worldview.
With freedom of choice, pluralism of styles, and a wide array of media, you, as an artist in the
second millennium can create a bond with your audience through materials, ideas, and a
mutual quest for transcendence. As an artist, you may give counsel through beauty, symbols
and meditative guidance. The psychodelic drug-induced art of the ’60s, however, without
religious or ceremonial context, created mainly cartoon-like, banal work. Drugs were not a
cultural norm of our western artistic paradigm. In the following works of three San Diego
artists, none relied upon psychotropics, yet the works contain shamanic elements of
transcendence, teaching, healing, and harmony.

The work of Cliff McReynolds presents the Biblical suggestion of another world beyond. In this
oil on panel called “The Garden,” he imagines a heavenly new world—visually, in a stunning
and detailed technique. This is a paradise that intrigues us with ambiguity in size
relationships—a sudden fountain swells behind a sea plant and like sized water drops, the crane
stands in its lush wonderland as a minute world drifts by. It calms us with high key, subtle
greens and violets. While the painting is only 10-1/2” by 12”—it is a visionary glimpse into
God’s joy in creation.

“Forest Fountain,” is larger at 30 by 42 inches, but as meticulously painted in detail. Many
planets float through an Eden where size relationships demonstrate the artist’s realization that
all creation is interconnected. Spiritual wisdom appears in the painting’s conviction of St.
Paul’s that “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard the wonders that God has for those who love
him.”

The four by five feet middle panel of a 5-part work is titled “Life.” It portrays a rising of
inmaterial figures “in new bodies” from an earth of lush forests and lakes, dotted with
diminutive planets and like-sized sparkling water drops. Figures appear magnetized toward an all-encompassing, all-loving God. Critics have defined his highly polished oil paintings on panels as “visionary” or “magical realism” in “a dazzling technique”—while a recent viewer simply said: “Thank you for shining your light in this world.”

Grace Gray-Adam’s art has helped to heal people on the spot. Her installation called “the Parents Project,” made between 1986 and 1990, fills four rooms. The first room holds memorabilia of a difficult childhood. The second room, shown here, displays “the Wall,” sized 10 by 16 feet. An almost barbed-wire barrier separates drinking parents from us—the invisible child. Signs warn not to talk, or feel, or trust.

In the corner of a 3rd room called “The Crosses,” a huge cross looms over smaller ones heaped together. But crosses turn out to be made of beer cans and bottle caps. Large, 8 by 10 feet, they glitter like gold, but their glitter is a false dazzle lighting up the room. Even so, resurrection and redemption seem close by.

In the final room, a huge wooden cross, 8 by 6 feet, lies on the floor. Called “The People’s Cross,” those who enter the room may write in a book the name of a loved one whose death was alcohol-related. Then the mourner hammers a tiny cross onto the large one. Amid writing and hammering can be heard the soft weeping of adults—healings in process.

Luke Tomlinson is a college senior in art. His ink on canvas visions deal with moral issues common to people everywhere. He probes deeply into his soul and deals with dilemmas of every spiritually oriented young man. In the 2 by 3 feet “Purgatory,” devilish faces taunt and jeer, foreboding shapes stand their ground. Tiny scales weigh good and evil—asking the question, can you escape?

The second ink on canvas, “The Struggle Within,” is 4 by 3 feet. Satan lurks as a part of a youth’s muscular and able body, taunting and insinuating, testing a youth’s ability to endure. The inner battle rages.

In Luke’s intense visions, self-deprecating humor is close at hand. “Permanent Tooth Decay” is at once agonizing and comical: in the center of a bleak desert, screws tighten a vice on a head whose malevolent tooth arch vows to destroy—will you die? As you suffer, a buzzard waits nearby.

From beauty to symbolism to irony, artists find a way to touch the soul and to heal. And finally, the only mainstream art I show induced by psychotropics is my own, from a self-experiment made accidentally.

Since I love trekking through the desert, it was bound to happen. A few years ago, on a moonlit hike, balancing over a rocky ledge, I unintentionally grabbed onto a large cactus and, piercing a finger with its thick needles, I involuntarily self-investigated apparitions seen in a shaman’s vision quest. I would prefer to say that as a sophisticated scientific experiment, I planned this spirit travel, but it’s not true. Six hours later, kept awake by intense pain, I began to hallucinate. It wasn’t frightening, so I decided to study the mesmerizing visions. Overwhelmed by the beauty of images that lasted probably less than 10 minutes, in the next year I researched shamanic altered states. Archaeologists and psychologists explained the phenomenon: a psychoactive
plant induces several stages: in the first stage I saw quick flashes of geometric shapes, swirls and lines over a bright background. In the second stage, the people I had seen earlier in the evening sitting around the campfire were in simplified form and outlined with brilliant pink, yellow and blue—they moved and I could control their movements. In the third stage, the plants and rocks seen on the hike appeared as photo-realism—natural, sharp-edged and vibrant, appearing separately, one in my left eye, another in my right. They demanded inspection. I had time to scrutinize each one: agave, prickly pear, sage and many-faceted rocks like sculptures glowed in color; behind them the desert was simply an uneventful background pushing each icon forward for examination. Obviously, this is no more than disturbed optical processing, as during extreme pain and stress, where the mind is deceived by the eye. But like the shamans, I accepted it as a special gift given to me. I also reneged from further experiment due to a week long, painfully swollen ring finger. Likewise, it is not in my cultural zeitgeist. But the more I remembered the visions, the more they seemed like a gift, pictures pressed close to each eye, as a force to assure me I could see if—I REALLY LOOKED.

I found my oil paints hidden away in the garage, and after a 25 year hiatus from painting, began recording these visions—from MY cultural point of view—cactus plants and desert rock set in the heat, haze, and vast space of the great deserts. I realized quickly that I would never be able to capture the glory of what I had seen—but I would have endless material for the rest of my life. But more than that—a condition that plagued me was healed—what to paint and why to paint. I had healed myself! A shaman uses metaphor and performance to create renewal. In his art he magically connects the people with the supernatural world, and heals. So does the spiritually oriented, contemporary artist. Through visionary intercession, shaman becomes artist, and artist becomes shaman.

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