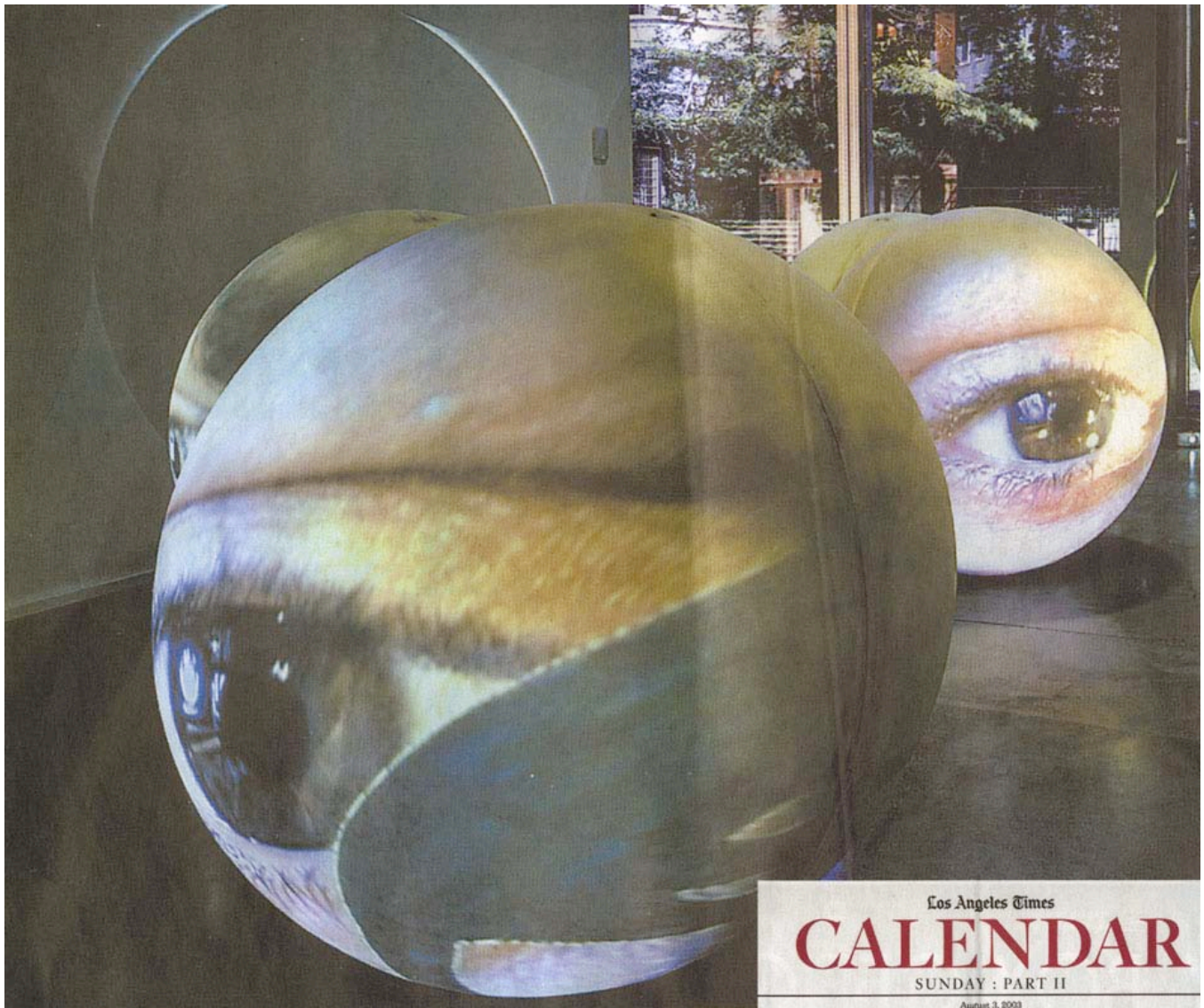


Muchnic, Suzanne. "Into the mind of the shaman." *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, 3 August 2003, p. E41.



ART

# Into the mind of the shaman

An adventurous show transports visitors to the Amazon home of the Yanomami.

By SUZANNE MUCHNICK  
Times Staff Writer

T

HE Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art can't be accused of being an ordinary place with a predictable program. Ensnared in a modern glass jewel box of a building on Raspail Boulevard, it's an institution where up-to-the-minute art can encompass everything from Matthew Barney's sculpture to robotic toys to Issey Miyake's knife-pleated dresses.

Even so, the current exhibition, "Yanomami: Spirit of the Forest," is quite a reach. The most complicated project undertaken by the foundation, the multimedia show transports visitors to the Brazilian Amazon, where — against all odds — the Yanomami Indians maintain their traditional lifestyle as hunters and gatherers whose visionary leaders invoke powerful spirits by inhaling *yakoana*, a hallucinogenic powder. The foundation's eclectic display of photography, video, film, painting, sculpture and acoustical installations by an international slate of artists presents sights and sounds of this ancient, primal culture.

Paris

Visitors get their first glimpse of it in a series of dramatic black-and-white portraits of the Yanomami by Claudia Andujar, a French-born photographer who has lived in Brazil since 1956. In an adjacent gallery, German artist Wolfgang Staehle's digital video of the village of Watoriki, shot over a 24-hour period, is projected as a three-screen, wraparound landscape. Nearby, a darkened room comes alive with sounds of the Amazonian jungle recorded by Stephen Vitiello, an American who lives in New York.

With birdcalls and insect choruses still in their heads, visitors wander off into Japanese designer Naoki Takizawa's corridor of colored light and forest-like imagery, projected on circular mirrors and reflected on surrounding spaces. Then comes French conceptual sculptor Vincent Beaurin's environment of glittery, yellow and black objects, meant to represent animal ancestor spirits and crystallize Yanomami cosmology.

But even in this highly imaginative terrain, the next gallery takes most people by surprise. Here they bump into an enchanted forest of giant eyeballs by New York artist Tony Oursler. The eyes are so big — each is a resin sphere about 6 feet in diameter — and they are placed so close together that visitors must wend their way through them and consider one at a time. That means gazing into a video projection of an enormous blinking eye, overlaid with dreamlike footage of tropical verdure or drawings of animals.

Part travelogue, part social history, the show, which runs through Oct. 12, is mostly a mind-bending journey to the shamanistic culture of Indians who live in the forest that stretches across northern Brazil and southern Venezuela. In Brazil, the Yanomami population of about 12,500 constitutes the country's largest indigenous community to have preserved its traditions.

But not without a struggle. The Yanomami had almost no contact with outsiders until the 20th century, but then missionaries, gold prospectors and road builders arrived, bringing contagious diseases and wreaking havoc on the environment. In 1992, an international campaign to save the Yanomami persuaded the Brazilian government to set aside 37,000 square miles of forest as a private reserve.

Some of the works on display, produced before the exhibition was conceived, deal with this history and provide a backdrop for newer artworks. In "The House and the Forest," a two-hour documentary film made in 1994 by German artist Volkmar Ziegler, Yanomami men construct a communal dwelling and lament the effects of outside encroachment. "River-Crossing, Kashorawetheri," a suite of 15 black-and-white photographs shot in 1978 by Lothar Baumgarten, also of Germany, follows a group of Yanomami on an arduous journey through a forest and across a waterway.

But most of the pieces were commissioned last year by the foundation as part of a collaborative experiment.

"This isn't an exhibition *about* the Yanomami. It's an exhibition *with* the Yanomami," says foundation director Hervé Chandès, who organized the show with French anthropologist Bruce Albert. The goal was not to do an ethnographic show, to romanticize the Yanomami or to portray them as exotic "others," Chandès says. Instead, the artists were asked to explore connections between their creative processes and those of Yanomami shamans.

In addition to sponsoring the exhibition and publishing the catalog, the foundation is financing a project that will produce a comprehensive map of the Yanomami territory. Made with satellite technology, the map is expected to expand Yanomami knowledge of their land and help them make better use of it.

## EXHIBITION'S ROOTS

**T**HE show began several years ago, when Chandès came across two of Andujar's portraits in a Belgian magazine. "I found them absolutely fantastic," he says. Determined to present an exhibition of her work, he contacted Andujar through Albert, who has worked with the Yanomami since 1975 and has a long-standing relationship with the people of Watoriki.

But when Andujar and Albert met with Chandès in Paris, a different exhibition began to take shape. "We talked about shamanism, which Bruce believes is the basis of Yanomami culture," Chandès says. "And then there was this question of images. We live in a society full of images. For the Yanomami, images come from inside and are often created by language." In the end, he says, "we tried to do something unique, not present the clichés or an idea of the past."

Chandès and Albert drew up a list of 12 artists, including four who had already worked in the area: Andujar, Ziegler, Baumgarten and Rogerio Duarte do Pateo, a Brazilian anthropology student and filmmaker. The others were invited to travel individually to Watoriki, where 11 shamans serve the community. Five of the artists — Staehle, Vitiello, French photographer Raymond Depardon, American video artist Gary Hill and Argentine painter Adriana Varejao — accepted the invitation. The other three — Oursler, Beaurin and Takizawa — couldn't arrange to go within the prescribed timetable, but they agreed to create pieces inspired by their own research and Yanomami materials supplied by the foundation.

The artists who went to Brazil each traveled individually and spent about a week in Watoriki. The idea wasn't to establish an enclave of outside artists, Chandès says, but to allow each of them to create a work based on personal

experience. The artists lived in the open ring-like structure that houses the villagers, slept in hammocks, participated in daily activities, hiked in the forest and observed the shamans' healing procedures. Albert and Davi Koppenawa, a Yanomami shaman and activist who speaks Portuguese as well as his native language, served as translators and facilitators.

Offered an extraordinary opportunity, the artists prepared as best they could. Depardon, who has traveled widely and eagerly agreed to take his first trip to the Brazilian Amazon, says he took a limited amount of film to force himself to be selective. His intimate 30-minute film puts viewers in the forest with hunters and in the Watoriki communal house with shamans, but Depardon says he kept enough distance to avoid intruding.

## 'SONIC IMPRESSION'

**V**ITIELLO, who is probably best known for recording sounds from the 91st floor of the World Trade Center during his 1999 residency there, says he was "stunned but also really excited" by the invitation. "There was no way I could become an expert on the Yanomami in a short period of time. The best thing I could do was go there with open ears and do the work the way I usually do, where it's about my personal response to the sonic world," he says. "I thought if I could learn more later, that would be great. But the immediate challenge was really, how do I get the equipment together, how do I know I can survive if I get stung by an insect or run out of batteries?"

Once he got to Watoriki, Vitiello learned that the Yanomami believe in the unity of the natural and spiritual worlds and perceive a complex web of connections in nature. The oldest shaman explained that animal sounds have particular meanings for his people. A woodpecker's tapping, for example, is thought to be related to human pregnancy.

Back home, Vitiello edited 17 hours of tape to 45 minutes for his acoustical environment, incorporating sounds of the wind, birds, cicadas and shamans' voices and the rhythm of daily sonic cycles. He also created a five-part headphone piece to convey the sound of more circumscribed experiences, including a performance by a women's chorus and a morning walk in the rain.

"I don't want to pretend to be a spokesperson for the culture or the forest," he says. "This is a kind of sensory sonic impression. But the shaman said, 'This is what you should listen for, this is the kind of meaning we find in sound.' It's not just some expert in sound standing on the edge of the forest; it's a privileged view that we were given, even if it was very limited."

Hill, who lives in Seattle, was also intrigued with the notion of bringing together artist-shamans from two very different cultures. Determined to get at the heart of Yanomami shamanistic practices, he was the only artist to try the hallucinogenic powder. His hosts tried to dissuade him, he says, but he felt that sampling the drug was the most direct way to gain insight.

The result: "immense pain," "white space" and a "sound-oriented" experience, Hill says. The effects were short-lived, and he spent much of his time shooting 15 hours of film. But none of that footage appears in the exhibition. Instead, he created a video installation inspired by his journey. The central component is a two-sided screen that portrays the artist hanging upside down and reciting a text backward. Additional images of sunlight, foliage and a rotating gyroscope are projected on mirror-topped pedestals. Reflections of these images swirl around the ceiling, creating a dizzying effect.

Oursler initially resisted participating in the project. "I didn't want to be some white guy commenting on the Yanomami," he says. "I do my own anthropology on our culture, but there was no way I was going to be so arrogant as to do that with another culture."

Once Albert convinced him that the show would be an open exchange of ideas, "it was just a question of research material," Oursler says. "I read about their mythology and learned about the images they produce and how the shamans, who are the official storytellers, paint with words."

Adapting his familiar video projections of human eyes to the new work, he enlarged them so that viewers would feel as if they are inside the eyes. Then he veiled those images with fleeting scenes of jungle-like landscapes and animal drawings by Watoriki youth.

For Andujar, who works with the Yanomami as an artist and a humanitarian, the exhibition is an opportunity to show photography that she views as "a work in progress" and "a way of communicating with the world." She began taking elegant portraits of the Yanomami in the 1970s but was temporarily forced out of the area by road-building authorities who considered her a hostile witness to progress. Her recent work takes a more expressionistic approach in scenes that suggest the fervor of native rituals.

The exhibition is "an honest effort made by the Cartier Foundation to create a culturally unique portrayal of Yanomami people," she says, but it "probably does not satisfy all. Some have looked for a more politically engaged show; others have looked for a more substantial component of Yanomami art."

But "art is a way of living, or life itself," Andujar says. "It's a way of expressing oneself in a unique manner, a prophecy, a wisdom put forth that usually carries the experience of one's culture. If the show makes others sensitive to the way of life of the Yanomami, I believe that it has served its purpose."