

ON RITUAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES

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On September 10, 2019, in Espai 2, Galeria Angels, as part of the collective exhibition "Sugerir és insinuar amb prudència" in Barcelona, a *perritencia*¹ was held. This practice, as indicated by the artist Issa Tellez, consists in a cathartic ritual and a search for reconciliation with one's sexuality and body through confession and *perreo*. Based on article 265 of the Mexican Constitution, which indicates the length of sentence for convicted rapists, the performance comprises three processes: the cleansing of the performance space; *conciliare* for the confession of the violence suffered by the body; and *perritencias*, which consists of disinhibiting and re-appropriating the body through *perreo*.

The confession and cleansing ritual took place in a closed space at the back of the gallery, where the artist's work for the exhibition was located. The installation consisted in a video projected onto a screen in front of a ceremonial clay bowl and a circle of salt under a roof from which were hung lavender branches. Nailed to the wall opposite the video were ten rosaries in metal, pink quartz, amethyst, obsidian and pyrite. The lower part of the crosses had been filed to a sharp point by the artist, turning them into home-made weapons.

On the day of the *perritencia* the artist invited attendees, who had previously been explained what the performance would consist of, to tell her about a moment in which they had experienced sexual violence in the closed space of the ritual. The situation could be verbalized or not, and the cleansing varied in accordance with this. When the confessions were verbal, she asked them to think of fire and then visualise their thoughts turning to ash. Those who preferred not to confess were cleansed with stems of lavender and water. She then offered a hug in thanks for the attendee's trust and whispered an invitation into their ears to expel the energy accumulated during the ritual and end it off by dancing with the rest of the attendees.

Throughout the ritual the music video "A new religion" was projected. In it, images of the artist dancing naked on the dome of a church submerged in water alternated with recent images from the Mexican media, such as the

moment when Jesús Orta Martínez, secretary of citizen security for Mexico City, came out of the building of the Attorney General's Office and was covered with pink glitter by feminist organizations demanding justice following the wave of public rape cases by police; or images of feminist groups protesting in front of the *Ángel de la Independencia* monument, and viral videos of people desecrating Catholic images.

In addition to water, earth, fire and air, the work of Issa Tellez articulates different elements imbuing the political and social atmosphere of their time, as happens with artistic practices attentive to their closest reality. On the one hand, the presence of aspects of Catholic imagery seek to subvert it: crucifixes turned into weapons, and *perritencias* versus penitence as practices of disinhibition and enjoyment as opposed to punishment, remind us that in Mexico the church continues to play a role in the fight for the control of women's bodies and that it becomes even more reactionary as it loses ground.

A paradigmatic example could well be the widely-circulated image in Mexican media in 2017, when the president of the Catholic, ultra-conservative Mexican Family Council, Juan Dabdoub, covered the mouth of a woman who tried to question him during the "Bus of Freedom" tour; a transphobic initiative from the Spanish organization CitizenGo, whose demand was for the federal government to eliminate a booklet on Adolescent and Youth Sexual Rights for the sake of protecting "the natural family". Predictably, the same organisation eventually positioned itself against abortion, claiming that legalization could "make society irresponsible".²

The other aspect in Issa's work that functions as a seismograph of contemporary artistic practices' sensitivity to their *Zeitgeist* is the presence of rituals as the backbone of her performances. The artist herself explains that she learnt many rituals from her grandmother, but also others from her friends who see themselves as witches and with whom she constantly exchanges spells and rituals – forms of orally shared knowledge. At the same time, shamanism and *santería*³ have been part of the cosmogonic baggage which she has been most interested in, frequently returning to these themes in her work, particularly *santería* because of its relationship to dance and secrecy.

Recent years have seen a growing presence of what some have called "new spiritualities". This may seem a very general term, which may be due to the broad range of possibilities it embraces. The sociologist Michel Maffesoli has repeatedly spoken about this contemporary phenomenon as a return of archaic values in the social realm that modernity believed it had surpassed.⁴ Obviously, there is not a single modernity, and this tendency cannot be

applied as a template for each context, but from this perspective one could understand generally that, from the saturation of hegemonic modern rationalism, a certain religiosity beyond dogma might begin to resurface.

The scope of contemporary artistic practices attests to this interest. One just has to look at some of the exhibitions in recent years in spaces ranging from the macro-institutional to more independent ones. A controversial example could be the Pavilion of the Shamans at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and the Ernesto Neto installation "Um sagrado lugar"; a giant tent designed to evoke the sacred spaces of the ayahuasca ceremonies of Amazonian tribes. Or this year's exhibition "I remember earth" at the Magasin des horizons arts center in Grenoble, where an open call was made specifically for rituals inviting collective practices and experimental proposals combining care and divination.⁵

Perhaps the emergence of the new spiritualities that give rise to this wave of artistic practices is a response to these times of upheaval, and the constant proclamation of an immobilizing fatalism in the face of the ongoing crisis in civilization which impels a search for worldviews outside the historically hegemonic. It could also be, to quote Maffesoli once again, that the recent forms of cosmogonic syncretism have gained force in opposition to the purported universalism of the Western vision of the world which prioritizes cognitive forms of knowledge over other forms whose fundamentals differ from the all-too-familiar dichotomies of mind/body or nature/culture.⁶

However, although we encounter a variety of coexisting religious practices, beliefs and worldviews of dissimilar origins, the subject of ritual practices in contemporary art presents at least some precautions to consider; most obviously, the fetishization of the spiritual and the exoticising of communities and cultures bearing this knowledge, many of whose territories, it is worth noting, continue to be devastated by the prevailing forces of neo-liberal colonialism and neo-extractivism.

Going back to the example of Ernesto Neto, it is certainly paradoxical that two years after "Um sagrado lugar" was presented in Venice, the Amazon suffered its worst forest fires in recent years, caused by the ultra-right wing government's dismantling of the protection of the jungle in favour of deforestation for agricultural expansion to create new pastures for livestock.⁷

Max Weber, in his 1905 text "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", coined the term "disenchantment of the world" to refer to the process by which the technical and rationalistic processes through which Western societies have sought to advance their scientific knowledge have

been substituted for magic and religion as ways of explaining the world. In the words of Yayo Herrero, in this process "Nature is stripped of its divine character, its unpredictable and mysterious condition, and ceases to be considered a receptacle of magic... to become a clock governed by a mathematical mechanism that the scientist must discover."⁸

The presence of new spiritualities in contexts or psychogeographies where the passage from the cult to the cultural took place long ago could indeed be a response to the search for a re-enchantment of the world via the emergence of the irrational, in association with worldviews in which ritual plays a central role. If the disenchantment of the world is linked to technological advancements seeking to master and exploit nature for economic benefit with no consideration of its material limits, then this could explain the search for ways of existing which are less dominant over nature and others. The implications of this are huge. From an ecofeminist perspective, it would mean that interdependence and ecocodependence are immediate and vital dimensions to consider for our survival.⁹

This search is clearly manifested in contemporary artistic practices, which are not lacking in contradictions and may also display the impotence of distancing oneself from the struggles of the present in a form of fetishization of the ritual or anachronism; as well as the limitations presented by art spaces like museums and their historical relationship with colonial looting and the decontextualization of symbolic and ritual objects.

This leaves us to consider the possible role of art in the ever-urgent need for the re-enchantment of the world.

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Notes

¹ *Perritencia* is a word used by the artist in her work that combines the words *penitencia* ("penitence" in Spanish) and *perreo*, a type of dance associated mostly with reaggeton.

² De León, Nicolle. Legalizar el aborto puede volver irresponsable a la sociedad [El imparcial]. [cited 3 October 2019]. Accessed: <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/mexicali/Legalizar-el-aborto-puede-volver-irresponsable-a-la-sociedad-20181108-0011.html>

³ *Santería* is an [Afro-American religion](#) developed in [Cuba](#) that preserves some of the cults of the Orishas, divinities of African (principally Yoruban) religion, through cult images of Catholic saints.

⁴ MAFFESOLI, M. El instante eterno: El retorno de lo trágico en las sociedades posmodernas, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005.

⁵ E-flux. *Open call for rituals* [online] [cited: 4 October 2019]. Accessed: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/267573/open-call-for-rituals/>

⁶ For Maffesoli, the dominion of the Western or Jewish-Christian vision of the world goes hand in hand with a process of separation or abstraction which tends towards homogenization and the marginalization of otherness. These aspects would explain the effectiveness of Modernity, but also the reasons for the disenchantment of the world"; MASSEFOLI, MICHEL. 2002. El reencantamiento del mundo. *Sociológica*. 2002, n. 17, pp. 213-241.

⁷ Ferreirim, Luís. ¿Qué tiene que ver el consumo de carne con los incendios en la Amazonia? [Greenpeace website]. [cited: 13 October 19]. Accessed: <https://es.greenpeace.org/es/noticias/que-tiene-que-ver-el-consumo-de-carne-con-los-incendios-en-la-amazonia/>

⁸ HERRERO, Y. Miradas ecofeministas para transitar a un mundo justo y sostenible. *Revista de economía crítica* [online] 2013, 16. 268-307. [cited: 11 October 2019].

⁹ Ecodependence and interdependence, from an ecofeminist view, refer to each person's dependence on nature and other people for living. These aspects have been lost in the consciousness of Western societies, creating an "ontological chasm between human life and the planet in which it unfolds"; HERRERO, Y. Apuntes introductorios sobre el Ecofeminismo. Boletín de recursos de información [online]. 2015, June, 43. 1-5 [cited: 3 October 2019].