

5 From the forest to the museum: Notes on the artistic and spiritual collaboration between Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin people¹

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Crossing paths through ayahuasca and art

The Huni Kuin people, also sometimes known as the Kaxinawá,⁴ speak a Pano language and live in Peru and Brazil, close to the border between the two countries. Their population numbers approximately 11,500 (Lima, Kaxinawa, Matos & Ferreira, 2014). Traditionally, ayahuasca consumption is frequent among Huni Kuin men in rituals that may last all night. The singers possess a special power, guide the ceremony, and are capable of amplifying the effect of the beverage.

Liminal visual events – experienced by the Huni Kuin in dreams, feverish states, and especially when under the effect of this psychoactive – allow people to participate sensorially in a cosmos in continual metamorphosis. Barbara Keifeinheim emphasizes the link between ayahuasca consumption and the visualization and production of images among the Huni Kuin (Keifeinheim, 2004). According to the author, the images are accompanied by acoustic alterations and increase in intensity through the co-occurrence of sounds. The effect of the song derives less from the texts than from the rhythm, volume, and tone.

This synesthetic nature of the experience of ayahuasca consumption among the Huni Kuin, which, as we shall see later, so fascinated the Brazilian contemporary artist Ernesto Neto, is reiterated by anthropologist Els Lagrou:

The songs are very important to producing visions, to guide the people who participate in this ritual, and to teach them to see what they are seeking to see and, above all, enabling them not to become lost . . . The vine is considered the substance of the boa constrictor's body, it came from the vine but it is the transformation of the boa.

(Lagrou, 2015, p. 1 [our translation])

While preparing the ayahuasca is a male task, the *kene* designs present in body painting, clothes, and the adornments that cover the Huni Kuin are an entitlement of women. The *kene* signal the “continuity with the world

of non-human beings,” allow the “connection with the world of invisible beings,” (Lagrou 2009, p. 88), and are intimately associated with the boa. Ayahuasca alters people’s vision, and they start to see their body, the world around them, the utensils used, and the spirit of the drink, covered with painted designs (Lagrou, 2013).

All these elements – rituals with ayahuasca, geometric graphic designs, songs, the omnipresence of the boa, the relation to alterity and the possibility of becoming Other – comprise the ingredients of Ernesto Neto’s artistic creations subsequent to his encounter with the Huni Kuin.

Born in 1964 in Rio de Janeiro, Neto is the author of a corpus of three-dimensional work situated somewhere between sculpture and installation. He has received substantial institutional and market recognition with individual shows at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, the Paço Imperial in Rio de Janeiro, the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico, and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, among other institutions. He has taken part in collective shows at MoMa in New York City and the Venice Biennale, among dozens of venues. According to a report published in the weekly magazine *Época*, Neto’s works can fetch up to \$400,000 (Padilla, 2010).

Ernesto Neto’s basic raw materials tend to be elastic fabrics suspended from the ceiling like drops, little polystyrene balls that fill sections of this fabric, and spices that fill the spaces with aromas. He uses these elements to build enveloping spaces evocative of living organs, like tonsils or viscera. The Fortes Villaça Gallery, which represents the artist, describes his poetics: “The spectator is invited to become involved, touching, smelling or entering the space of the sculpture. The organic forms are related to the observation of the body as a representation of the inner landscape of the organism, creating an analogy between body and architecture.”⁵

In 2014, the artist held an individual show at the world-renowned Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, called “The body that carries me,” where, for the first time, Huni Kuin shamans participated prominently. According to our field research, the young Txana Bane and his father, Siã Sales, performed a shamanic session during the opening. Ernesto Neto first met the pair while accompanying an editor friend on a book project: *Una Isi Kayawa: Livro da Cura* (Muru & Quinet, 2014).

The book *Una Isi Kayawa* records 109 plant species with their respective medicinal applications, and was the brainchild of shaman and plant expert Agostinho İka Muru, who died before the book was completed. For three decades, he made notes and drawings in his notebooks, and also trained indigenous researchers. The bilingual text was transcribed on the basis of oral explanations. Alexandre Quinet from the Botanical Gardens in Rio de Janeiro provided the bridge between indigenous knowledge and Western science, helping identify the species. The work was printed on paper covered with plastic, resistant to the forest humidity. Neto visited Acre as part of the book project and has subsequently returned several times since 2013, later, also participating in ayahuasca sessions in Rio de Janeiro. He was so struck

by the experience that one of the rooms in the Bilbao exhibition evokes the trees of the Amazon rainforest, while one of the installations took the form of a suspended snake.

In short, the *Livro da Cura* (Healing Book) project, in which Ernesto Neto was not directly involved, led to a White artist crossing paths with indigenous shamans,⁶ prompting a collaborative process still in progress today, and which we intend to explore here. The chapter that follows collects information that provides a basis for understanding this phenomenon and formulating questions generated by this exchange, capitalizing on the viewpoints of two anthropologists from distinct academic backgrounds: one with a focus on the study of psychoactive substances, the other with experience in the area of visual arts and museums. The objective is to explore the complex intersection between art, spirituality, and the internationalization and reification of indigenous cultural practices. Our aim is not to exhaust these topics but to enable them to shed light on each other, helping us understand the cultural exchanges, identity inventions, and challenges emerging today.

The incorporation of the indigenous element into the art circuits

Generally speaking, indigenous arts and artists are still rare, both on the exhibition circuit and in the art market. One of the factors behind their exclusion is the Euro-American premise of the primacy of form in detriment to the ritual or utilitarian dimensions of objects and performances. Another obstacle to the circulation of indigenous works in the arts system is the modern premise of constant innovation, which is accompanied by a disdain for repetitive patterns. It should also be observed that, until very recently, indigenous objects would typically be displayed in ethnographic or natural history museums. Anthropology was born coupled to these scientific museums, which held the “material culture” of the peoples studied by the discipline. The majority of ethnographic museums, such as the National Museum in the Netherlands (1837) and the Peabody Museum in the United States (1866), flourished at the end of the nineteenth century under the influence of the evolutionist paradigm (Schwarcz, 2005). For decades, one of the main objectives of the field research conducted by anthropologists was to expand museum collections. The exhibitions of these objects had informative and educational content, pushing aesthetic concerns into the background.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, though, the modern avant-garde approached a number of the “artifacts” kept in ethnographic museums with a new gaze. This new attitude, later dubbed “primitivism,” served primarily for the artists to critique the canons of their own society. The same primitivist inclination is behind the angular faces of Picasso that echo African masks (Perry, 1998), Gauguin’s sojourns in Haiti, the acquisitions of pieces from Africa and Oceania by Matisse and Vlaminck, and the incorporation of

shamanic objects and shamanic themes from Greenland's indigenous peoples in Kandinsky's canvases (Weiss, 1995).

Although "primitive" objects provided a reservoir of new forms for modern artists (Clifford, 1998), this does not signify that they were interested in comprehending the meanings possessed by the objects in their original contexts. The artistic avant-garde was distrustful of any anthropological approach; Picasso, for instance, said that just looking at the African works gave him all the information he wanted (Severi, 2009).

For most of the twentieth century, the objects produced by indigenous individuals and collectives remained with the status of artifacts and left outside the art museums. Isolated temporary exhibitions are exceptions that prove the rule. In the 1980s, two shows explored connections with indigenous creations: "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," organized by MoMA, in 1984, obliterated the history and meaning of the "primitive" pieces on display by treating them solely from the viewpoint of their formal similarities with works by modern artists. A few years later, the exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre" (Magicians of the Earth), which was displayed at the Center George Pompidou and the Parque La Villette in 1989, innovated by identifying the artists involved, but nonetheless mixed together completely different works without any kind of mediation, taking a supposed "magical" aspect as a common denominator (Karp, 1991).

In 2006, the inauguration of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris perhaps signals the emergence of a new model: the "artification" (Shapiro & Heinrich, 2012) of what were previously categorized as ethnographic artifacts. Objects were transferred from scientific and historical museums to a new building designed by the renowned architect Jean Nouvel, located next to the Eiffel Tower. With dramatic lighting and few explanatory texts, African masks, Xinguano headdresses, Amazonian pottery and many other pieces became, as Jacques Chirac put it on the day of its inauguration, "works of art from the world's cultures" (Price, 2007; L'Estoile, 2007).

Here we should mention two countries where indigenous arts and artists have acquired a surprising institutional presence. In Canada and Australia, a new wave of indigenous artistic production emerged, as contact with non-indigenous people intensified over the final quarter of the twentieth century. The governments of both nations provide subsidies to indigenous art, seeing it as a source of income and a means to strengthen identity. Museums and commercial galleries display and sell indigenous works as art (Berlo, 1999). In addition, indigenous artists in Australia and Canada alike tend to organize themselves in self-managing cooperatives (Mitchell, 1993; Morphy, 2008; Goldstein, 2013).

In other countries, like the United States, indigenous artists have stood out at an individual level. The 2010 São Paulo Biennale featured an installation by the Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham, presented as an ethnographic pseudo-museum. In the midst of wooden shelves and labeled objects,

Durham inserted newspaper articles reporting massacres of indigenous peoples in Brazil. Beneath a photo of the Monument to the Bandeiras, sculpted by Brecheret, he attached the label “an ode to genocide.” However, indigenous artists with the visibility of someone like Jimmy Durham are few and far between and, indeed, until recently, were non-existent in Brazil. Nor does Brazil have any systematic policies supporting the artistic production of indigenous peoples, despite the enormous potential of the expressive forms originating from the country’s ethno-cultural diversity.

One final important aspect to highlight in this brief panorama of the interfaces between the arts systems and indigenous peoples is the “ethnographic turn” in contemporary art, observed in the 1990s, when some Euro-American artists began to utilize ethnographic procedures and discuss the politics of representation in their works. Lothar Baumgarten, for example, exhibited copies of photographs taken by himself of a Yanomami group in Venezuela at the X Documenta in Kassel, 2007. The catalogue referred to the work as “poetic anthropology.” Obviously, this did not entail the systematic production of knowledge based on scientific paradigms, but free experimentation with the unfamiliar, the juxtaposition of perspectives, and the interaction with marginalized groups.

In the academic circuit, one of the themes of debate has been “the end of art history,” as announced by Hans Belting (1987). The author argues that, under modernism, a barrier protected Euro-American art from “contamination” by ethnic and popular art. Today, by contrast, “global” art interpellates post-ethnic, indigenous, ex-“primitive” art, or whatever we wish to call it. In order to examine this contemporary setting without glossing over the power asymmetries shaping the international arts system, Belting argues that interdisciplinary dialogues, such as the one sketched here by us, are essential.

In the specific case of Brazil, where the encounter between Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin took place, a complete history of the exhibitions of indigenous arts still remains to be written. We shall examine three indispensable events. The 17th São Paulo Biennale, held in 1983, played an innovative role by including a section on “The Featherwork Art of Brazil,” which merited its own separate catalogue. Another pioneering initiative was the “Indigenous Arts” exhibit held in an *oca* (indigenous long house) at the same venue, the Ibirapuera Park, in 2000. Forming part of a larger event, called “Show of the Rediscovery,” it was curated by the Portuguese anthropologist José António Braga Fernandes Dias. More recently, Brazil saw “Mira!” – a compilation of indigenous arts from Latin America with an emphasis on the Andes, organized by Maria Inês de Almeida, from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, which toured Brasilia and Belo Horizonte between 2013 and 2015.

There are a few indigenous artists with individual careers in Brazil, albeit without much market presence or visibility, such as the Wapixana artist Amazoner Okaba. The Macuxi artist Jaider Esbell and the Pataxó artist

Arissana Braz were both nominated for the PIPA Contemporary Art Prize in March 2016, which may represent the start of their inclusion in the institutional art circuit; however, very few Brazilian galleries sell indigenous works.

Commercial partnerships can be observed involving indigenous and non-indigenous collaborations in the areas of design, fashion, and architecture. For example, Kadiweu potters made tiles that today decorate buildings in Berlin, designed by the Brasil Arquitetura office, while Kayapó graphic designs were printed onto clothing sold by the Rio de Janeiro label FARM; and Kisêdjê body paintings covered Gisele Bündchen in a campaign run by the Grendene sandal company (Souza, 2012). Even so, given Brazil's size and ethnodiversity, the initiatives seem modest and highly sporadic.⁷ Hence, the fact that some Huni Kuin have been participating in events promoted by leading contemporary art institutions drew our attention.

One of the few indigenous people to have stood out in the national art circuit is the Huni Kuin artist Ibã Sales, born in 1964, in the Rio Jordão Indigenous Land (*Terra Indígena*), in Acre State in the Brazilian Amazon. Ibã learned to read and write in indigenous teacher training courses and, in the 1990s, began documenting the knowledge contained in the ayahuasca songs in collaboration with his father, from whom he says that he learned "everything." In 2006, he published his first book, *Nixi Pae. O Espírito da Floresta* [Nixi Pae: The spirit of the forest] (IBÃ, 2006). This was followed by *Huni Meka. Os cantos do cipó* [Huni Meka: The songs of the vine], a book accompanied by two CDs and a DVD (IBÃ 2007). Ibã coordinates Mahku: Grupo de Jovens Artistas Desenhistas Huni Kuin (Huni Kuin Young Designer Artists Group), which translates ritual music into a visual language.

In 2012, Mahku was in Paris, taking part in the exhibition mounted by the Foundation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, "Histoires de Voir: Show and Tell." Another artistic commission arrived in 2014, when the group was invited to work on an intervention at the Hospital Matarazzo in São Paulo. A total of 111 Brazilian and foreign artists displayed works in the corridors, pavilions, and gardens of the deactivated hospital complex. The event – free and widely publicized in the media – led to big queues. For this intervention, his son Bane and his son-in-law Isaka assisted Ibã. They painted a large boa constructor on the walls and ceiling of a 150m² hall. The invitation came from the Belgian artist Naziha Mestaoui, who made the "Sounds of Light" installation in the same space. This involved a mechanism that transformed the vibrations of recorded Huni Kuin songs into waves on water and variations in the colored lighting. The travel and accommodation expenses of the indigenous artists were covered by the event, but only the Belgian artist was remunerated, since she had been the only one officially invited. We learned from the exhibition producers that Naziha Mestaoui decided, at her own initiative, to make a donation of 10,000 Brazilian reals to the Mahku.

That same year, the Huni Kuin artistic collective participated in the "Mes-tizo Histories" exhibition, conceived by the anthropologist Lilia Schwarcz

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and the art curator Adriano Pedrosa, which was shown at the Tomie Otake Institute in São Paulo. The exhibition avoided separating art and document, popular and modern, “primitive” and contemporary. The curators’ proposal was to display artists from different periods, regions and ethnic groups side-by-side. On a wall in the central corridor of “Mestizo Histories,” lyrics from the *huni meka* ritual songs were displayed among multicolored drawings made by members of the Mahku community; these tell of how the ancestors managed to find the ayahuasca vine and how they learned its music. They refer to the myth of the primordial boa, revered by the Huni Kuin and other Amerindian peoples. The Mahku designs were exhibited in front of Ernesto Neto’s installation, which also referred to the Huni Kuin traditions. Nonetheless, the partnership with Ernesto Neto did not directly involve the Mahku artists.

Another form of exchange between Amerindian universes and the arts system has also been acquiring momentum in Brazil: the curatorships and works made by non-indigenous artists addressing indigenous issues. Cláudia Andujar, who lived with the Yanomami in the 1970s and 80s, is the author of a series striking photographs playing with light and shadows that resulted from this experience. In November 2015, a pavilion was inaugurated to display her photos at the Inhotim Institute in Minas Gerais, one of the largest contemporary art collections in Latin America. A few months earlier, at the Paço das Artes in São Paulo, the curator Moacyr dos Anjos organized the show “A queda do céu” [The falling sky], a title echoing the book of the same name by the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, written in collaboration with anthropologist Bruce Albert. Directly or indirectly, these works referred to land issues or to the conflicts provoked by contact.

Also in 2015, Alfons Hug designed the installation “O Papagaio de Humboldt” [Humboldt’s Parrot], first shown at the Ibirapuera Park, and later at the Venice Biennale. Hug’s proposal involved 15 Latin American artists who made recordings of people speaking indigenous languages that were played back on loudspeakers arranged in a circle. Next to the loudspeakers were texts translating the spoken words, which ranged from denunciations to myths, historical accounts, recipes and so on. There have also been some other similar and more recent examples, many of them collated in Calabi (2016). But those cited here already help us to outline the setting in which the collaboration between Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin became possible and acquired meaning.

The exhibitions of São Paulo and Vienna and ayahuasca’s mediating role

As we mentioned earlier, the curator Adriano Pedrosa was in Bilbao when he heard that an ayahuasca ritual was set to take place in Ernesto Neto’s installation at the Guggenheim. He decided to invite him to mount an

installation in the “Mestizo Histories” exhibition that he was organizing. In this second installation, entitled *Em busca do Sagrado: nixi pae e a jiboia* (In search of the sacred: Nixi pae and the boa), Neto created a room to host the ayahuasca rituals that would occur twice in the early morning in the Tomie Otahke Institute.

Leopardo Kaxinawá, and the other indigenous collaborators, assisted Neto during the ceremonies by singing, blowing tobacco, playing the maraca gourd, and serving ayahuasca to those people who had previously enrolled. To take part in the ritual at the museum, the participants had to be interviewed first to assess their mental and physical state; they also signed a release of responsibility.

This penetrable space, filled with light colors, with seating on the floor, and the smell of carnations, provided a rich sensory and bodily experience. The gallery took the form of a boa constrictor, with the entrance through its mouth. The fabric hem surrounding the boa was lined with colored bottle tops that made a sound like a seed rattle as people brushed past, like the one suspended in the center of the boa-tent. Colored bottle tops also formed a maraca gourd rattle on a curved marble table on which a bottle of ayahuasca was placed. The visual design of the installation was by Neto, connecting with his earlier research, and was highly consistent and characteristic. The main contribution of the indigenous collaborators was to hold the rituals within the installation.

In this context, ayahuasca mediated the relationship between Ernesto Neto and the indigenous people involved in the project, the exhibition curators and the press, the ritual participants and the shamans and artist, as well as reconciling artistic aims and spiritual experiences. But how is the beverage able to acquire such a central role in the heart of the city? As it happens, there is a long history of syncretism and the circulation and expansion of ayahuasca use with which those who participated in the ritual performances in Bilbao, São Paulo, and later, Vienna, were probably unfamiliar.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the syncretic religious groups of Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV), both Amazonian in origin, were directly associated with ayahuasca consumption. It was through these two churches that the drink began to reach Brazil’s urban centers at the end of the 1970s. In the final years of the twentieth century, urban neo-ayahuasca branches started to multiply, combining diverse elements like Umbanda, Buddhism, New Age, esoteric psychology, and shamanism (Labate & Coutinho, 2014).

In the twenty-first century, indigenous peoples themselves have started to organize rituals, presentations, and workshops for non-indigenous groups, both in their villages and in large cities. One of the emblematic cases is that of the Yawanawá. Aline de Oliveira (2012) relates that the Nova Esperança village in Tarauacá, in Acre State, has held the Yawa Festival since 2001, where non-indigenous visitors can take part in songs and dances and consume ayahuasca. According to the author, the Yawanawá network has already reached the United States and Europe.

Since 2002, Fabiano and Leopardo Yawa Bane, sons of Siã, an important Huni Kuin leader, have organized rituals in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo involving the application of *kambô*, a secretion extracted from the *Phyllomedusa bicolor* toad. The brothers are pioneers in the expansion of the indigenous use of ayahuasca in Brazil, influencing the arrival of other ethnic groups in the country's urban centers. Fabiano Huni Kuin,⁸ who currently lives in Berlin, used to conduct *nixi pae* rituals every month in Rio de Janeiro (Coutinho, 2015). The rituals were held on weekends in green areas of the city. The *pajé*, or shaman, as his followers call him, wore a headdress, bead bracelets, and face paint, and sang until sunrise, inducing visions of the boa constrictor and evoking curative energies. Participants tended to be people with high levels of Western education seeking to rebalance their lives physically and mentally. The organizers of the ceremonies, known as "Huni Kuin Guardians," were responsible for publicizing the events, processing payments, transportation and conducting the screening interviews (Coutinho, 2015).

Over recent years, indigenous representatives have begun to have a voice in the public debate on ayahuasca, as well as a greater presence on the esoteric and alternative therapy circuit. The indigenous element, previously silenced, are now welcomed both by IPHAN (the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute)⁹ and by the ayahuasca groups themselves, as reflected in their discourse. The indigenous origin of ayahuasca has been increasingly associated with ideas like ancestrality and authenticity. Curiously, it was people from the New Age and urban circuit who brought the indigenous element into public debate. As we can see, like the processes described in the artistic field, there has been a slow and gradual inclusion of the indigenous element in the universe of alternative therapies and religions, frequently with the support of non-Indians, fascinated by otherness and in search of a purity felt to have been lost in the capitalist world.

In a debate promoted by the Tomie Otahke Institute, for example, Ernesto Neto stated that Christian religiosity seems oppressive to him on account of its use of a cross as a symbol, an "icon of suffering." He also described his discovery that he was not "Western" in France when he was asked how he felt about exhibiting in the West (in Paris, in other words). Finally, he repeated that his "interest resides in bringing the Indians to the center stage and allowing them to speak. Everyone has an Indian within but is unaware" (E. Neto, personal communication, September 17, 2014).

Ernesto Neto's proposal in "Mestizo Histories" blurred the boundaries between artistic performance and religious ritual. Generally speaking, the response was positive. The exception was a report in the *Folha de São Paulo*, where the reporter used quote marks to refer to the "therapeutic ritual" with ayahuasca that she witnessed at the Tomie Otahke Institute, and proceeded to describe the attitudes of the surrounding participants ironically (Baloussier, 2014).

Another artistic collaboration between Neto and the Huni Kuin took place in Vienna at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA 21), where a Huni Kuin meetinghouse was built for the exhibition “Aru Kuxipa | Secret Sacred” in 2015. In place of straw thatch, the ceiling was made from a crochet structure woven by Neto with his characteristic droplet shapes. He also decorated the walls with graphic designs similar to the kene. Two benches were included in the shape of a boa. In this space, entitled *KupiForesUniX-awa*, the Huni Kuin conducted medicinal practices, including inhaling rapé, applying ointments, ingesting plants, singing, and smoke blowing.

The Vienna exhibition also contained a winding sculpture evoking a drawing with the letter A for Adam and E for Eve, the serpent, and a space provocatively displaying books by famous anthropologists and philosophers, such as Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, alongside the *Livro da Cura* (Curing Book) by the Huni Kuin. During the event, the museum store sold craft objects produced by them.

Parallel to the show, a seminar was organized in Vienna on healing, ethnobotany, and traditional medicinal practices. One of the authors of the present chapter followed all the group’s activities, including an audience with the city’s deputy mayor, accompanied by the Brazilian ambassador, as well as songs, dances and “cleansings” open to the public, who had a chance to talk to the shamans and buy craftwork.

Ernesto Neto was accompanied by a delegation of eight shamans. The organizers of the show recounted that they had traveled to the Jordão River along with Neto and visited several villages. They said that, during their trip, they had encountered some problems from FUNAI (*Fundação Nacional do Índio*, the Brazilian National Indian Agency, the government agency responsible for issuing permits to visit indigenous areas), as well as the resistance of other local actors; evidence, they claimed, of the attempt to “mediate or block their relations with the indigenous people.”

Also present in Vienna were the “Huni Kuin Guardians,” young Rio de Janeiro professionals or university students keen to use ayahuasca (Coutinho, 2015) as well as the two editors of the *Livro de Cura*, speakers, staff, the show curator, and the founder of the TBA. The Guardians accompanied the shamans, helping them sell work and translating for them. Most had already taken ayahuasca with them and seemed to be on friendly terms. The shamans were treated with considerable reverence.

A team from Venice was brought to cook, offering a sophisticated menu that included a living mandala of food representative of Amazonia. The Guardians, indigenous participants, and the artist were given accommodation at the TBA itself, which became a singular space with people dressed in indigenous clothes, covered in painted designs, using rapé, wearing Haviana flip-flops, and socializing. The Huni Kuin seemed at ease. Anthropologists, art critics, museum staff, scholars, and curious members of the public gravitated there to wait for the official activities, chat informally, acquire face



Figure 5.1 Statement by shaman Sabino Dua Ixã from Novo Segredo village, Rio Jordão, Acre in the installation replicating a traditional meetinghouse, decorated with kené designs in the background. TBA 21, Vienna, 2015.

Credit: Beatriz C. Labate.

paintings, and take rapé. Shamanic sessions were held in the evenings in which the authors did not participate.

Many faces of a complex phenomenon

The proactive establishment of alliances between indigenous people and artists, NGOs, activists, and the New Age movement can be interpreted as a survival strategy within a national context of marginalization and a mode of adaptation and transformation of ayahuasca shamanism in the contemporary world. In diverse Amazonian contexts, there are signals of a vigorous process of cultural reinvention in dialogue with new Others, given that the incorporation of the Other has always been of central importance to

Amerindian peoples (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). In this setting, shamanism plays a central role.

The Huni Kuin especially have fought to rebuild themselves as indigenous people, possessing rights and endowed with a renewed “cultural self-esteem,” since the 1970s. The alliance with Ernesto Neto can be seen as a continuation of this process. The Huni Kuin identity – like any cultural identity, in fact – is dynamic and permanently under construction. In fact, the ethnographic feeling evoked by the São Paulo and Vienna exhibitions is that of a vibrant and captivating environment in which the Huni Kuin are able to use the opportunity of the various trips and contacts in order to rethink and reestablish their identity.

At the same time, though, the questions and tensions generated by such a complex scenario are multiple. It is true that the appropriation of anthropological methods and themes by people from the art world, as well as the incorporation of practices and values of other peoples or social classes in an exhibition, amplifies knowledge about the diverse Others who occupy peripheral positions in the contemporary society of the artist or who belong to distant cultures. Sometimes, these procedures, central to the already cited “ethnographic turn of contemporary art,” have led to questioning the very system of Euro-American arts, exposing its mechanisms of exclusion and its arbitrary nature.

However, these kinds of ventures also contain several dangers: 1. they can slip into a naive neo-primitivism in search of an imagined authenticity, 2. they tend to reify identities, 3. and they are more interested in self-estrangement than knowing the Other (Foster, 1994). Indeed, these are impressions that we ourselves have had at some moments while observing partnerships like those discussed in this chapter.

Although artistic events and discourses have the merit of reaching a wider public and media than academic texts, and in a more poetic and seductive form, they do not always have a solid empirical basis to their enunciations; indeed, this is not their purpose. When it comes to representing indigenous peoples, there is a risk of stereotyping them, idealizing their way of life, projecting one’s own frustrations and fantasies onto them. Behind the scenes, and in the official presentations in Vienna, we overheard more than a few remarks exalting “the magic, purity, and kindness” of indigenous peoples like the Huni Kuin who “live harmoniously in the forest, pursuing a healthy life.” At some moments, the specificity of the Huni Kuin seemed to evaporate and stereotyped views surfaced, such as the idea that indigenous peoples offer some kind of redemption for the planet and contemporary civilization.

Although any primitivist aesthetic postulates the universality of art, it typically discards anthropological views of the works and their contexts (Severi, 20092). The disinterest in anthropology – and the lack of awareness of what anthropologists do today – became apparent in a statement made by the Austrian curator Zyman to the *Folha de São Paulo*: “We [we Whites and the Indians] are experimenting together . . . Were we to do everything

without them, ‘in their name,’ we would fall into the same trap as anthropology. The idea was to cut out the mediation, allowing them to speak for themselves” (Neves, 2015, para. 13.).

During the week spent in Vienna, one of the authors noted criticisms of anthropology made by various different people involved in the exhibition on seven occasions, all of them repeating the idea that these initiatives “did not involve the intermediation of anthropology,” as though anthropologists speak “in the name of” indigenous peoples, and that the art exhibition or the book (*Livro de Cura*) did not involve outside mediations. Ironically, during the period of the Vienna seminar, the indigenous participants spoke much less than the other people present, who explained life in the forest, the symbolism of the rites, and their own experience with ayahuasca.

We should also not forget the tricky legal questions, such as the fact that, in Brazil, ayahuasca consumption is only permissible in religious contexts, while in some other countries, its consumption is banned entirely. The ritual held during the São Paulo exhibition was situated in a kind of legal limbo. A superficial and exoticizing report by the *Folha de São Paulo* on the rituals held in Ernesto Neto’s installation for “Mestizo Histories” ended up having a negative impact on the ongoing campaign to make ayahuasca use in Brazil more legitimate. Along the same lines, the open publicity given to the sessions in Spain upset the delicate balance with the local authorities, since ayahuasca use is not officially permitted in the country. In Vienna, the public announcement of the wish to conduct a session seemed to adhere to the same logic that expanding the consumption of ayahuasca and making it legal is necessary, whatever the cost.

Still, on legal issues, an additional challenge is to ensure that indigenous knowledge and expressive forms are safeguarded. From the moment the vine songs, ayahuasca fabrication techniques, curing practices, kene designs, and myths start to circulate in museums, catalogues, the press, and urban rituals, they can, in principle, escape the control of their traditional owners. Publishing and publicizing “culture” ensures the continuity and valorization of particular practices and knowhow. However, undue use can also occur: There is a risk that non-indigenous people, whether aware or unaware of the fact, can appropriate what they have learned without asking for permission or paying for the privilege. And, in this area, there are no laws protecting indigenous people.

It is worth recalling here that, concerned with the use of their graphic repertoire by third parties, the Federation of the Huni Kuin People of Acre went to IPHAN in 2006 and 2007 to ask the institute to register their kene designs as cultural heritage. IPHAN has been carrying out consultations in the villages since 2011, but so far, the registration has yet to be finalized. The biggest obstacle is the controversy among the Huni Kuin themselves about the real gains of state protection. After all, registration by IPHAN does not in itself prevent falsifications or unauthorized reproductions of the designs (Lima et al., 2014). This possibility arises from the fact that the

legislation relating to intellectual property is based on the idea of the author as an individual. In the case of indigenous knowledge and expressions, ownership is collective.

Another problem is the distinction found in the law between discovery (unprotected) and invention (protected). The international TRIPs Agreement (Trade Related-Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) states “a patent may be obtained for any invention (product or process) in all fields of technology . . . on condition that the invention is new, involves an inventive step, and is capable of industrial application” (Barbosa, Barbosa & Figueiredo, 2010, p. 8, our translation). This situation thus privileges scientists and industries in detriment to the owners of immemorial empirical knowledge.

In the case of artistic partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous collaborators, the questions become more complicated. We are not referring here specifically to the collaboration between Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin, but to initiatives of this kind in general: Who should take credit for the work of art? The artist already recognized by the mainstream art institutions, who is usually the one invited to exhibit by the curators and the one responsible for obtaining space in museums and galleries? Just the indigenous people with whom the artist directly shared his or her experiences? The entire ethnic group to which these individuals belong, given that we are dealing with collective forms of knowledge and expression? Who should speak about the work produced in partnership? What are the risks of publicizing, via an exhibition, information normally limited to the indigenous groups in question? To what extent are we faced with “inauthentic” representations of cultural commodification? This is thus the final point of tension that emerges: the reification of indigenous cultural identities and practices, amplified by processes such as the expansion of ayahuasca in urban centers, and the inclusion of indigenous art works and artists in the international arts system.

Final considerations

Registering and publicizing a portion of their traditions through media and spaces like books, videos, and exhibitions is a contemporary strategy, observed in various countries, used by many indigenous collectives to reaffirm their identities and occupy a political vantage point vis-à-vis national society and other indigenous peoples. At the same time, it is inevitable that traditions are stylized and reinvented in these encounters.

Ernesto Neto embarked on an audacious project with few precedents in Brazil or abroad, a venture that will still perhaps involve adaptations and adjustments.¹⁰ A series of subjects are involved, each with their own distinct view. Divisions exist among the Huni Kuin themselves: some are opposed to Neto’s work and the *Livro de Cura*, others have a deep appreciation for such initiatives. Still others simply observe, somewhat resigned, that “there aren’t

many people who care about the Indians, so we like those who try to do something for us.” Neither can we forget the differences in the perspectives of curators, organizers, the public, the media, and the participants in the ayahuasca sessions. Even the terms of this partnership are continually shifting. We can take as an example the question of authorship. In Bilbao, one of the installations was called “The body that carries me” and was attributed to Neto alone, without the Huni Kuin. In São Paulo, the installation “In search of the sacred” was again attributed to Neto. In Vienna, by contrast, the exhibition as a whole was entitled “Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin.” We can perceive a change in the nature of the collaboration and in the way of attributing authorship, although the Huni Kuin remain designated as a collective whole, without identifying those participating individually.

The collaborations, publications and exhibitions involving indigenous and non-indigenous artists, Brazilians and foreigners, anthropologists, members of the New Age movement, and individuals from the art world represent opportunities for exchange and learning, as well as raising the profile of indigenous wisdom, traditions, and creativity. They also represent ways for indigenous identities and practices to be transformed and revitalized.

The interpenetration between art, ritual, and spirituality expressed in works like those of Ernesto Neto is a fertile field, which we do not claim to have exhausted by any means in this chapter. The ayahuasca rituals conducted in this context invite us, for example, to rethink the watertight and reductionist separation between the “recreational use” (playful, aesthetic, pleasurable) and “sacred use” (traditional, ritualistic, religious) of “drugs,” as well as the limits of contemporary drug policies. At the same time, Neto’s work, following a current trend, throws into question the boundaries between contemporary art and anthropological practice that seem to be becoming increasingly tenuous. Our hope is that this chapter can contribute to the emergence of new research in this same direction.

Notes

- 1 The present chapter is a revised and altered version of an article first published at Goldstein, Ilana S. & Labate, Beatriz C. (2017). *Encontros artísticos e ayahuasqueiros: reflexões sobre a colaboração entre Ernesto Neto e os Huni Kuin. Mana*, 23(3).
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- 4 Until a few years ago, the term most frequently used to refer to this people by anthropologists and public authorities was “Kaxinawá.” Another (self)designation has become employed recently at the initiative of the indigenous peoples themselves: Huni Kuin, which means “true people.” However, various peoples

- known as *nawa* – a subgroup within the Pano family – consider themselves Huni Kuin, which is why some anthropologists opt to retain use of the ethnonym Kaxinawá (Lagrou, 2004). Although we are aware of this complication, over the course of this text, we utilize the self-designation Huni Kuin.
- 5 Description taken from the gallery website: www.fortesvilaca.com.br/artistas/ernesto-neto, our translation.
 - 6 This Huni Kuin editorial project ended up having two other repercussions in the metropolitan art circuit. The launch of the *Livro da Cura* was held at Parque Lage, a famous visual arts school in Rio de Janeiro. An indigenous house was built on site, providing accommodation to 17 Huni Kuin for a few weeks. A few months later, Itaú Cultural, a leading São Paulo cultural space, awarded the *Livro da Cura* funding via the Rumos open competition, enabling its continuation.
 - 7 The Maracá Institute in São Paulo is one of the few exceptions in this relatively arid landscape: The institution believes that the “arts and other forms of expression can facilitate the approximation and communication of indigenous issues with the public, contributing to the transmitting of information on the reality of indigenous cultures.” It also aims to “work, whenever possible, alongside indigenous representatives” (Calabi, 2016, p. 13).
 - 8 Fabiano was the first to publicly assert the indigenous origin of ayahuasca, claiming to a weekly magazine that his grandfather had presented the beverage to Master Irineu, founder of Santo Daime. In 2012, it was the turn of Benki Piyanko, an Ashaninka man from a village in Acre, to tell *Carta Capital* that his grandfather was the one who offered the brew to Master Irineu (Labate & Coutinho, 2014). The dispute over its “paternity” takes on another dimension when we recall that ayahuasca is currently in the process of claiming heritage status in Brazil and that its registration involves identifying those possessing traditional knowledge of its use (Goulart, 2016).
 - 9 In Portuguese: *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*.
 - 10 Ernesto Neto’s work with the Huni Kuin will be shown in new countries in the near future. In an interview with the ArtRio website at the end of 2015, Neto revealed that he would be sending “a tunnel-serpent called ‘Boa River’” to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, and that he would take Huni Kuin friends to perform a ceremony in a museum on the shores of the Reno in Germany. Source: www.fortesvilaca.com.br/artistas/ernesto-neto.

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