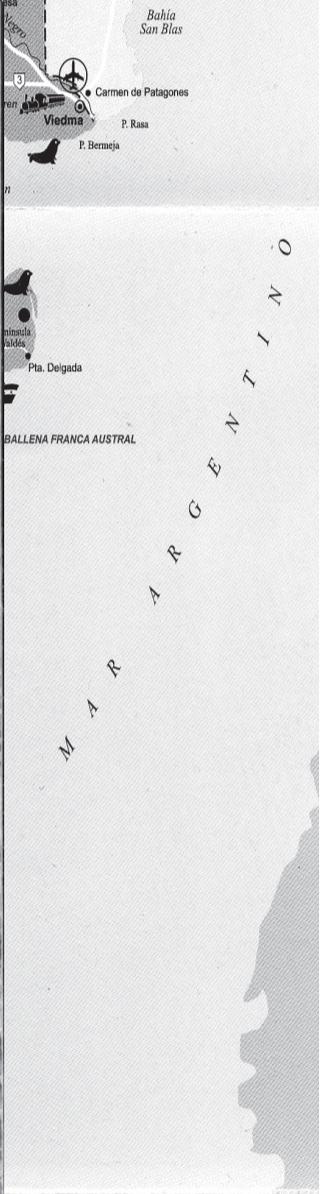
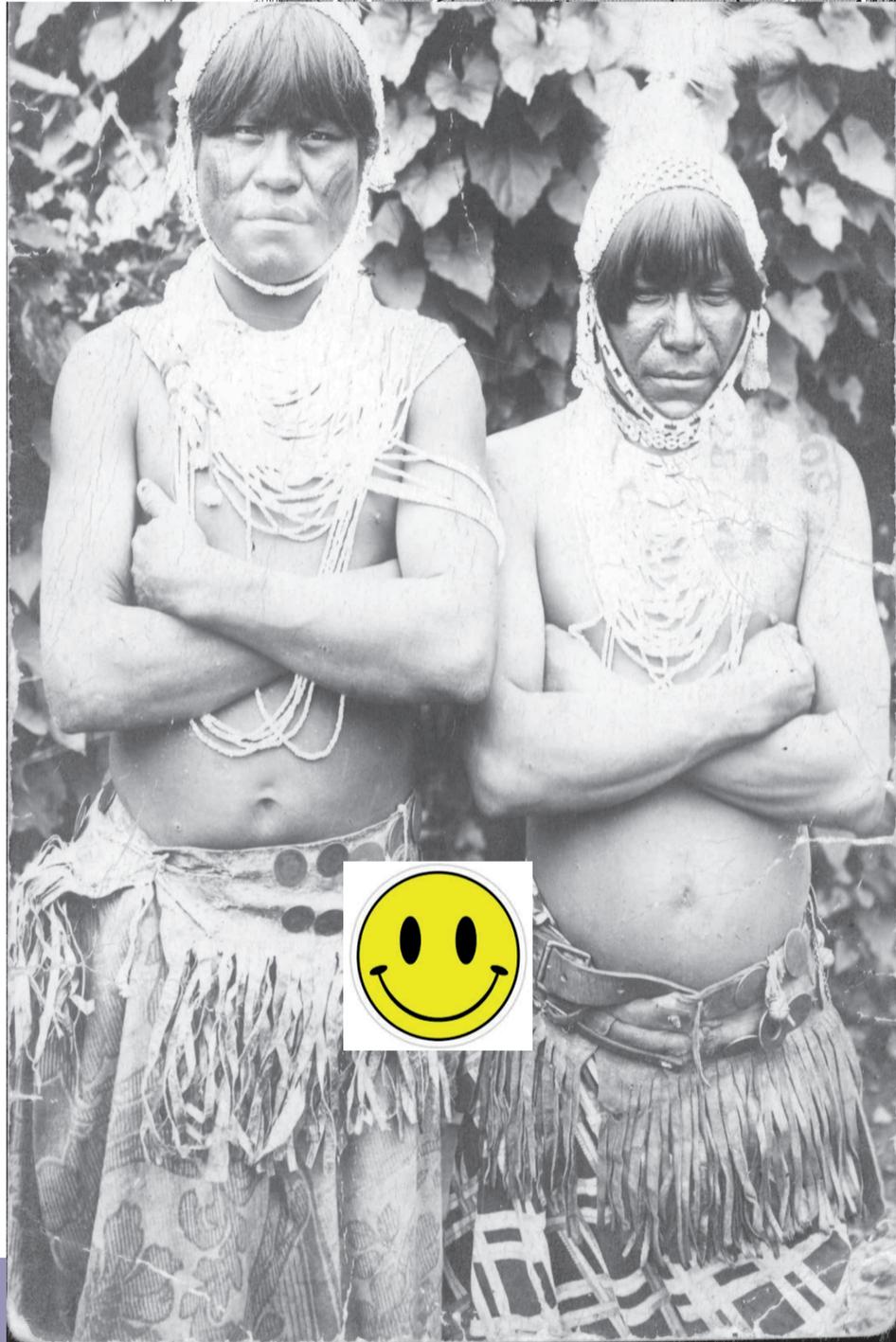
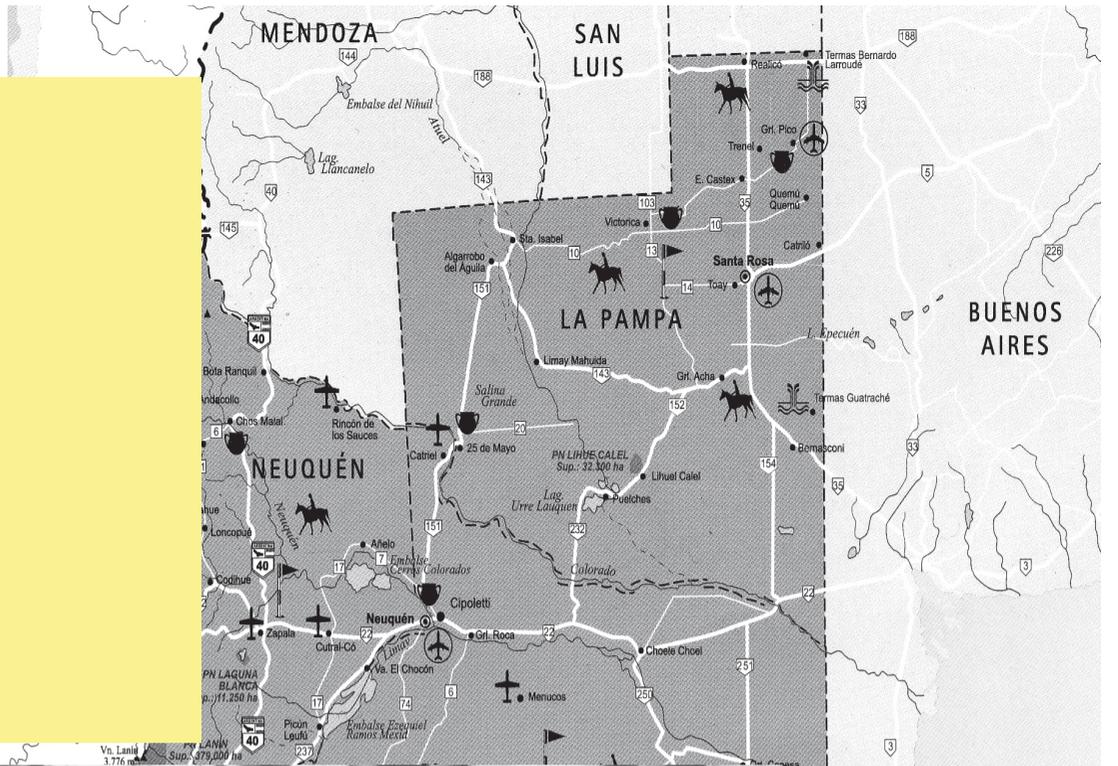


AQFM VOL. 2



Notes for photographic captions  
that do not exist.....



BUENOS AIRES 2014



PROVINCIA DE  
TIERRA DEL FUEGO  
ANTÁRTIDA E ISLAS

**Interview with Grace Ndiritu and Alice Peinado, Paris, March (2013)**

G.N: Speaking about anthropology. Yes, I guess, at the moment it is quite fashionable to talk about anthropology in art because there are a lot of artists using anthropology in their work or using archives. There are people who have been doing it for a long time like Marine Hugonnier and Manon De Boer, but then there is a new, younger generation like Taryn Simon and Kader Attia.

A.P: But why do you think there is this interest in anthropology? What does anthropology bring to art?

G.N: The thing is, generally people think that there are a limited number of ways of looking at arts, or making arts even if they don't admit that. Artists look at different fields to get new inspiration, and anthropology is one of them, because it involves many different things that artists do anyway – like the research and analysis of different cultures, globalization and politics. It involves many threads. It is a way of talking about otherness or different areas without having to be in anthropologist. You don't have to be legitimate or accurate. You don't have to have a conclusion. You just have to have a formal hypothesis. In the 90s there was a lot of documentary fiction in video art. and it made sense, because artists film, video, and cinema are about narrative and storytelling, and documentary. So artists began to mix the genres together which became a type of anthropologist sub-genre in video art which was more about storytelling, and myths and things like that. So, that's what I think

people like about it. It also sounds rigorous. It sounds like "oh I've done lots of research", because if you contextualise it, it can sound really profound even if it is really boring. If you quote a few anthropologists, and you say it in the right way it sounds like you've discovered something really new.

A.P: To quote French philosophers you know in order to get that kind of prestige.

G.N: Exactly because everyone is quoting. For me that practice, it can become quite self-referential. At the moment, you can guess what anthropologists are good to quote, or you can guess the methodology, or with an archive what artists are going to do with it. Because it is still within a western framework. It is not going to be that different, really. For me, I never really thought "oh I am interested in anthropology", it is just part of my way of relating to life. I am interested in comparative religions and creation myths. I am half indigenous (Masai), half settler (Kikuyu). So I am interested in that in my work. And I have travelled to many different countries, and looked at different cultures. And I have listened to a lot of world music for many years, and ethnographic film recordings but not just for art, but because I like it. I bring that into the work because it is part of my life. For me, that's just a natural way of being an anthropologist in a sense. I am more interested in Joseph Campbell or Aby Warburg, because in my work I am always trying to think of the overview. What joins human beings together, not what separates them. I am interested in shamanism for example. I had many shamanic experiences

as a child, and now as an adult I trained for the last 12 years in esoteric studies – meditation, yoga, many things, but also shamanism. And for me, I like shamanism because it is the first world religion; it was in all the areas of the world. It had different names, like animism in Africa but in Australia, in South and North America, in Siberia, even in Europe in Celtic pagan cultures. So for me, I am interested in why people in different geographic locations are connected to nature or have the same symbols or similar myths. That is the kind of anthropology that I prefer rather than just studying one tribe, or one culture. I also feel anthropologists always think that they have to have a distance. They can't get involved, otherwise they are not scientific or something.

A.P: We are changing.

G.N: Yeah, I hope so. But someone like Maya Deren, the filmmaker, you could say she was an anthropologist, cause she made all those films in Haiti.

A.P: She is considered an anthropologist, but she mingled with the community. She became a member.

G.N: Exactly. First, she is an artist and a filmmaker, then she went to Haiti and became this anthropologist. And then she became this voodoo queen, whatever. She just mixed them all together. So, she is an interesting example, I think, of people that mix different genres.

A.P: You pick up a lot of things that anthropologists look at. And it is interesting that I was looking over your work, obviously you are dealing with a lot of issues that anthropologists deal with. If you look back at the anthropologists

in the 60s and the 70s, they were very much into exploring one particular place in detail. But it is not like that anymore, and even then the beginning of what we could define as processual anthropology that comes out of places like Manchester; and where instead of looking at a particular structures and norms and rules, you are looking at a process of how it has changed over time. I am talking 60s and 70s; more static look at culture and looking more at processes and historical development; and the effect of colonialism as well.

G.N: But that is all that the art world is doing at this point now. Since the 90s similar conversations about globalization and international relations; and that is when relation aesthetics comes into it – social art projects with the wider community.

A.P: But in the 80s there was a turn towards reflectivity in anthropology. I don't know if you are aware of that. People like George E. Marcus and James Clifford who have written about art and others, they started questioning the position of anthropology and the authority of anthropologist field. There were also some people writing out of France. Jeanne Favbret-Saada who wrote about sorcery in the Bocage region of rural France. Her book is very interesting because before she chose it to become a book, people would talk about it informally. She then integrated it into her written work, where she talked about her own position when she studied sorcery, where essentially you cannot study sorcery; and you cannot start asking questions about sorcery without being integrated in that world of sorcery. So, either you are someone who is a

working with people who are considered to be sorcerers. And they started considering her one. So she talks about this in her work. And these were issues that were picked up in the States by people like Marcus and Clifford and others. And they integrated this notion, into 'Writing Culture' which was this sort of seminal-[corpus] which sort of started this or made it public at least, in 1986. So it has been over 25 years, and people are trying to revisit it. Now it is going in many different directions. And what is interesting is that there is this artistic appropriation of ethnographic or other anthropological methods, which is not necessarily anthropological by the way.

G.N: I think it is more to do with experiencing the world, because to me as an artist, I fundamentally believe as a person in experiencing things. I don't believe in just reading books. I believe you should go and do things. So I guess as an anthropologist, I'd be one of those anthropologists who would become a sorcerer. Because then you have something to make art about, something to write about that is not just an imposition of your gaze or your cultural point of view on top of the old accepted one. I am interested in hybridity– but I don't really like that word. My work and life is a lot about having two polarities or two distinct things and bringing them together and creating something I call it - The Third Zone" something between being nomadic and settler, or African and European. You are creating something new and this Third Zone to me is the most progressive state to be in. I think anthropologists should

function in that state really; because it can bring different traditions together. Joseph Beuys, was very keen on his own mythology of being this shamanic figure and having experienced surviving in the Ural Mountains in Siberia. This mythology and experience affected his notions of what art, nature, mankind and society – how these things relate to each other. So he is a massive influence on pedagogy of art schools, and what it means to be an artist today. Beuys and Warhol – those are two big influences really. So, Beuys definitely influenced a lot about post-modernism and globalization – all that stuff is coming from Beuys I'd say....I am looking at Africa and indigenous cultures, but this is the same as looking at the West because those people there are also looking for their indigenous (pagan) roots; and how this is possible in festivals like Burning Man in Nevada. To me, they are other side of the same coin. For a long time I collected a lot of African music, and then I started listening to Mexican, Arctic, American Traditional Folk music and then I went to SOAS in London to study Mongolian throat singing. The thing is I am very connected with certain lands. Sometimes I dream of places before I go to them. So I dreamed about Alaska a lot. I went on a trip to Alaska when I was 22, to hitchhike and travel in the summer. But I wanted to go back in the winter and to do film a performance where I would sing a song traveling from the North Pole to the South Pole. The closer you are to the magnetic pole, the more electromagnetic energy there is. My idea was that throat singing works on harmonic vibrations because it is overtone singing. So if you sing four

the same time. Thus it is healing for the body. My idea was to sing this song to the nature and for it to travel symbolically but also really travel electromagnetically from one pole to the other. So that's what I did in that piece. I was very inspired by late 19th and early 20th century ethnographic films like 'Nanook of the North', and how it constructed ideas about Native Alaskans we still have today. In that piece 'Journey's North: Pole to Pole' I also used a traditional Native Alaskan poem. I also hired a local man to drive me along the Trans-Alaskan pipeline for another piece 'Journeys North: Pioneer'. So, yeah, I was working with an idea of anthropology in many different ways.

A.P: But I remember you told me when you were in Alaska, the Native Alaskans they were very intrigued by what you were doing.

G.N: They were intrigued but they were quite standoffish in a sense. They were suspicious, because there are not many black tourists. The only black people there are those in the army. So they didn't understand why would I want to go there and film, and especially because I was traveling by myself. I would just go with my camera and tripod. But this is what I like about my way working I get more access. Like when I was taking photographs for my encyclopaedia 'A Quest For Meaning' in different museums in Paris. I went to the Louvre and Musee d'Orsay twice, when it is closed to the public. So I had a free pass. I could go anywhere. So I went to all different areas of the museum. I think I covered literally nearly all over the museum. And because it was just me and a security guy who came with me,

I photographed everything. And when you work like that, you get to know people. And that's what an anthropologist does. An anthropologist is meant to blend in, and be part of the cultural tribe that they are studying. But as an artist you can also do that. But there are some artists that exploit those situations like Renzo Martens' film 'Enjoy Poverty' set in the Congo. If you want to know about anthropology in art, that's an extreme case. At the Louvre the security man told me how underneath the Louvre there is a whole city where the Louvre people work. It is massive. It is like an airport down there. And he said "you can come back and photograph them." It is just like you get access in a way you wouldn't if you had a huge team with you. But the thing with me is I am not just doing because I am trying to do my art. I actually want to know, and I think that's what people like. They know I am not just studying them or using them for my art work. I am not exploiting them. I actually genuinely want to know. It is like a natural relationship.

A.P: Geology is an area of anthropology and gets its methods from geology. If you go and look at the history of anthropology, Franz Boas, the father of the American anthropology, was a geologist. He trained as a geographer and geologist. That's why fieldwork as such began. You see the development of this notion of observation within the sciences, and how eventually around the 19th century statistics, constraint and focus arrived.

G.N: Yeah, because I love geology, we went on two amazing field trips. So with my classmates I went to Iceland when I was 16,

and on the next year we went to the Grand Canyon.

A.P: It is amazing, because Iceland with the Icelandic sagas, and a lot of shamanistic cultural roots. And at Grand Canyon you had Pueblo Indians.

G.N: Exactly. But I am very connected to the environment. I am always sucking in the environment that I am in. In a sense, it is penetrating me. So for me, I am very interested in ones where there are not many people, that are barren. And it is very interesting because the project that I am working on now is called A Quest for Meaning and I am trying to basically photograph everything that has happened from the Big Bang until now. So it is a very complex project. It came out of the shamanic journey where I was taken to the upper world and I was shown different planets and planetary bodies from the very far away and very close up. It was like a zooming action of a camera. So I started thinking about how universe is made of many details of the world. Then I started this project, in which I am using a non-rational process – a shamanic journey – to make something rational, like an encyclopaedia method of understanding the world. Through that I was exposed to things like Aby Warburg, and I was interested in the fact that he was connected to the Hopi Indians and that he became initiated with them but he was this German guy living in Victorian England.

A.P: Yeah, I read about that. Very fascinating.

G.N: So, there are other people who are very interesting, like that French priest Teilhard de Chardin. To me, he is like an artist or something. All

the places that he went to visit, like you know he was in China, and he visited a lot of America. And being a priest he's got this other aspect. He was an interesting character.

A.P: There is this very interesting article I came across where it was about mathematicians like Poincare in the 19th century and then Einstein; and it talked about how they describe the moment they got their ideas and how they got their idea. It is very interesting because these moments are almost of mystical revelations.

G.N: Yeah, the Aha! moment. It is very interesting, because the reason I like Einstein is because Einstein came up with his "Theory of Everything", which is like trying to have a theory of the whole universe. In the end, he realised it was a failure because it is impossible to have a theory of entire universe. So, 'A Quest For Meaning' is my attempt on the theory of everything, in a sense. It is an endless quest. I can never photograph everything, but it is more the attempt that matters. Also this idea of having a complete database- digital cloud-system that is always being refreshed as well. I have been working on this idea for the last few years and for the rest of my life. I will add to this project.

*N.B. This text is being published on the occasion of AQFM Vol.2 TRASH being exhibited at La Ira De Dios, Buenos Aires 8th August to 16 August 2014. Reprint of Jorge Luis Borges 'The Library of Babel' published 1975, New Directions, USA. Reprint of Cormac McCarthy 'The Road' published 2006 by Borzoi Book, Random House, New York. AQFM Periodical Vol.2 La Ira De Dios, Edition 200, Grace Ndiritu 2014 ©*



The universe (which others call to time small caverns of  
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the upper or lower stories and ones lost and dead. By  
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