

Edward Shanken
Pushing the Limits.
Surrealism,
Possession, and the
Multiple Self:
Juan Downey and
The Laughing
Alligator

Juan Downey 1940-1993.

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We may say that “mind” is immanent in those circuits of the brain which are complete within the brain. Or that mind is immanent in circuits which are complete within the system, brain plus body. Or, finally, that mind is immanent in the larger system—man plus environment.

—Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*,

I dream of a future environment that harmonizes the act of perceiving with the self’s projection on the culture. On that field where both overlap we find nature radiating the presence of a consciousness, and conversely the culture/the artificial producing an environment of codified icons.

—Juan Downey, *Architecture, Video, Telepathy: A Communications Utopia*

I

Juan Downey burst into this world and pushed its limits (and his own) for fifty-three years, until he left this sphere of existence in 1993 and burst into other dimensions, undoubtedly pushing their limits as well. He had been practicing for his departure from reality on Earth for most of his life. As an architect, he made art. As an artist, he made invisible architecture. His conceptual, electronic and interactive art installations from the late 1960s were shown at leading experimental and mainstream venues, ranging from the Judson Memorial Church in New York City to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.¹ As a video artist, he worked like an ethnographer, offering critical insights into art. As an ethnographer, he made art that questioned and analyzed ethnography.

An educated, cosmopolitan, and well-traveled Chilean expat of Spanish and indigenous Mapuche origins, Downey compulsively examined the complexity and hybridity of individual and collective identity, demonstrating the impossibility of representing or even self-representing identity as a fixed construct. As Nicolás Guagnini has noted, his “experiments and

* I would like to thank Marilys Belt de Downey for two fascinating and informative conversations and Javier Rivero Ramos for his excellent editorial suggestions, which greatly improved this essay.

1 Other exhibitions that included these works were the solo shows held at the Smithsonian Institution and the Howard Wise Gallery, and the legendary group shows *Some More Beginnings: Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)* at the Brooklyn Museum, and *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Downey’s early interactive electronic works were made in collaboration with engineer Fred Pitts. See Juan Downey, “Electronically Operated Audio-Kinetic Sculptures, 1968,” *Leonardo* 2:4 (October 1969): 403–6.

experiences revealed and exploited a fault line inherent in the attempt to liberate possibilities of being and otherness via the methodological and technological tools that had suppressed those possibilities in the first place.”² Just as he was driven to push his own limits, his art pushes the limits of perception and cognition, driving us to push our minds beyond scientific rationalism, to expand consciousness, to reconfigure our sense of self in relation to others, and to transfigure the larger systems of which we are a part. Downey pushes us to push the limits of our conception of what *is* and of what *is possible*.

Downey was inspired both by the trope of heroic, soul-seeking road trips and also by indigenous mythology pertaining to the vital importance of traveling: Hopi myths; Antonin Artaud’s 1937 expedition of self-discovery and healing through peyote among the Rarámuri in Mexico; and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), a jazz-inspired, beat manifesto of his travels across the U.S., to name a few.³ As the diaries he kept during the filming of *Video Trans Americas* reveal, the 1973 military coup in Chile (which was backed by the CIA), generated both personal distress and professional challenges for Downey who moved to the U.S. in 1965.⁴ The rise of increasingly authoritarian regimes in Latin America further complicated the transit of the Chilean artist armed with a video camera. In Lima, his equipment was seized by a customs officer who claimed that “the law does not allow electric gossip.”⁵

Although *The Motorcycle Diaries* was not published until after Downey died, Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s 1952 journey of personal and political self-discovery across Latin America may also have been an influence on the artist.⁶ Like Guevara, Downey went on extensive excursions throughout North and South America with his family and Sony Portapak in tow, living with indigenous people in their own conditions. During his travels he spread the gospel of video, enabling members of his host tribes to record themselves and their traditions, and also documenting them himself. He then spread those videos across cultures, offering a scathing and ironic critique of Western bigotry and prejudice wherever he encountered it.

Whereas Guevara was a militant ideologue concerned with making political change to improve the material reality of living conditions, Downey

2 Nicolás Guagnini, “Feedback in the Amazon,” *October*, vol. 125 (Summer, 2008): 91–2.

3 Juan Downey, artist’s diary, December 28, 1973.

4 Although the U.S. government officially denies it, historian Peter Winn and policy analyst Peter Kornbluth independently have revealed evidence of the CIA’s complicity in precipitating the coup.

5 Juan Downey cited in *Juan Downey: With Energy Beyond These Walls*, ed. Juan Manuel Bonet, (Valencia: IVAM, Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, 1998), 108.

6 Indeed, in the mid-1970s Downey accompanied curator James Harithas on a trip to Nicaragua, where they slept on straw mats with sixteen teenage Sandinista rebels, in a hut that had a picture of Che Guevara on the wall. Valérie Smith, “Interview with James Harithas, September 29, 2010,” in Valérie Smith, ed., *Juan Downey: The Invisible Architect*, (New York and Cambridge: Bronx Museum of the Arts/MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2011): 128.

operated in the realms of spirit, energy, and symbol. The artist's guerilla tactics deployed video as a shamanic device to expand consciousness and reveal alternative realities. In August 1974, after some jarring encounters with the Chilean military, he wrote: "I put myself and others in danger with the conviction that video can prepare a million people to share the unconscious."⁷

Well-versed in continental philosophy, which was a major influence on and frequent subject of his work, Downey chafed at the hubris of Western ontology and epistemology. He responded to this conflict with the help of systems theory and media technology, with which he, in turn, drew parallels to meditation and spirituality. "Ironically, the man-nature chasm can only be closed by technology," he wrote in "Technology and Beyond," published in the magazine *Radical Software* in 1973. This breathless, visionary manifesto described "a post-political, erotic, mystic, electromagnetic, level of reality," in which "brain waves are symbiotic with natural phenomena: communication with others and with the environment is total." In this "process of reweaving ourselves into natural energy patterns [...] an attitude of total communication" emerges "within which ultra-developed minds will be telepathically cellular to an electromagnetic whole." As these passages suggest, Downey had a remarkable ability to entertain and sustain apparent paradox, juxtaposing seemingly incongruous elements to destabilize convention and to create new meanings that were themselves unstable and impossible to pin down. His artistic practice joined technology and intuition, the rational and irrational, as a means to access and push the limits of consciousness, while problematizing how knowledge is produced, how it is distributed, and how it gains authority. As Julieta González has demonstrated, these currents span all of Downey's work, including his early interactive installations, his ecological works, and videos.⁸ A similar mindset and approach was shared by many experimental artists in the U.S., including Downey's co-authors in *Radical Software*, who embraced video as a revolutionary form of communication that had the potential both to expand consciousness and to subvert the military-industrial complex and the mainstream media that served as its handmaiden. Similarly, electronic musician and composer Pauline Oliveros whose improvisational *Sonic Meditations* propounded cosmic telepathy, wrote that, "humanity has been forced to a new frontier by the accelerating rate of change instigated by technology. This frontier is the exploration of consciousness: all forms of consciousness and especially human consciousness."⁹ In 1970, British artist Roy Ascott drew parallels between "...two apparently opposed spheres: cybernetics and parapsychology. The west and east sides of the mind, so to speak; technology and

7 Downey, artist's diary, August 1974.

8 Julieta González, *Juan Downey. Una utopía de la comunicación, A Communications Utopia*, eds. Julieta González, Arely Ramírez Moyao (Mexico City: Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, 2013).

9 Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1968-80* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 180.

telepathy; provision and prevision; cyb and psi.”¹⁰ Like these artists, Downey sought no unequivocal resolution to seemingly irreconcilable states of being or methods of understanding. Rather, he recognized the paradoxical nature of knowledge and the contradictions inherent in formal epistemologies. Like an appropriate response to a koan, which cannot be resolved by logic, his work reveled in the enigmatic, revealing inherent conflicts in the knowledge regimes that construct meaning and in the systems of power that reify it.

A strong surrealist streak is evident in the artwork that Downey made in Paris, in the artist’s affinity for the writings of Francis Picabia and André Breton, and in his taste for ironic and generative juxtapositions. Downey befriended the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta during his first European sojourn between 1963 and 1965.¹¹ Matta, who was inducted into Breton’s circle of Parisian surrealists in 1937, introduced Downey to more seasoned expatriates such as Julio Le Parc and Takis, and offered him insights into the workings of the modernist “isms” that had attracted the younger artist to the French capital. Downey’s works from this period, populated with polychromatic homunculi both organic and machinic, reveal his proximity to Matta and his investment in surrealism and futurism.

Downey’s subsequent video work possesses (or is possessed by) this surrealist spirit as well as by the pataphysical irreverence of playwright Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). Jarry has been an enduring influence across the arts on both sides of the Atlantic, from Dada and Surrealism to the writings of William Burroughs and the earthworks of Robert Smithson. The spiral that adorns the robe of Jarry’s character, Father Ubu, frequently appears in Matta’s paintings and is a recurring theme in Downey’s work as well.¹²

Jarry and Downey insistently joined sense and nonsense, art and science, religion and perversion. For Jarry, “science was an adventure, domestic and transcendent.”¹³ Likewise, Downey was fascinated by science and technology, especially cybernetics, computers, and telecommunications, but he was also fascinated by Western popular culture, indigenous shamanic rituals, and telepathy. They both sought out and articulated an alternate reality, a new system of values in which the “imaginary nature of things as glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real.”¹⁴ Downey’s

10 Roy Ascott, “The Psibernetic Arch”, *Studio International* (April 1970): 181–82.

11 Matta and Downey both studied architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

12 When Downey was a young artist, Jarry’s work experienced a resurgence among those associated with the Theater of the Absurd and was performed by the Théâtre National Populaire in Paris in 1958. In 1962, a compilation of all work related to the character Pere Ubu was published in Paris, and in 1966 *Ubu Roi* was performed at the Royal Court in London, with stage design by David Hockney.

13 Roger Shattuck, “Introduction,” in Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel* (Boston: Exact Change, 1996): XIV–XV.

14 *Ibid.*, 9.

seemingly paradoxical combinations of forces (technology-telepathy; artificial-natural; foreign-indigenous) are closely aligned with Jarry's pataphysical pursuit of "imaginary solutions" that examine "the laws governing exceptions" and describe "a universe which can be—and perhaps should be—envisaged in place of the traditional one."¹⁵

Paving the way for Dada, Jarry deployed shock tactics to unsettle bourgeois expectations: The first line of *Ubu Roi* (which opened and closed in Paris on December 10, 1896 after inciting a riot) was "*merdre*," a homophone for the French word for "shit." Although no riots have ensued from screenings of *The Laughing Alligator*, Downey's alleged pretext for the video was no less shocking. Less than two minutes into the piece, the artist, gazing straight at the camera and with a completely dead-pan delivery, announces that having grown bored with shooting scenes of Americana, "[He] discovered that [he] would like to be eaten up by some Indians of the Amazon rainforest." But while Jarry's *épater la bourgeoisie* was rooted in absurdism that strove to exceed the limits of Western science and philosophy, Downey's sardonic take on ethnography sought a form of physical and spiritual transcendence.

The Laughing Alligator is one of Downey's three Yanomami videos, which are part of the artist's larger project *Video Trans Americas*. The Yanomami people, with a population of about twenty thousand, inhabit a region of the Amazon basin located between the borders of Venezuela and Brazil. Considered one of the indigenous peoples that have been least impacted by Western influences (despite a long history of exchange and conflict), the Yanomami have been the subject of extensive research by anthropologists and ethnographers, with the resulting analyses revealing at least as much about the social scientists as they do about the subject of their inquiry. Contrary to a mistaken observation that was still widely held when Downey lived amongst them, the Yanomami are not cannibals. They practice a form of endocannibalism that involves consuming the ashes of the deceased in order to ensure that their spirit lives on. Downey imagined this ritual as "the ultimate architecture: to inhabit, to dwell, physically as well as psychically, inside the human beings who would eventually eat me." These ideas recall a passage from Jarry's *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*:

And behold, the wallpaper of Faustroll's body was unrolled by the saliva and teeth of the water. Like a musical score, all art and all science were written in the curves of the limbs [...] and their progression to an infinite degree was prophesied therein.... Faustroll, finding his soul to be abstract and naked, donned the realm of the unknown dimension.¹⁶

15 Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996): 21–22.

16 Jarry, 99.

Jarry is frequently summoned in writings about art history and criticism, particularly with reference to surrealism and occasionally with respect to contemporary art.¹⁷ “Ethnographic surrealism,” theorized by historian James Clifford, is far less common in contemporary art discourses.¹⁸ However, there are very good reasons for considering Downey’s work in the context of ethnographic film, and ethnographic surrealism in particular. Ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch, one of the founders of *cinéma vérité*, was deeply impacted by surrealism, the influence of which can be seen in his “ethno-fiction” films. Jeanette DeBouzek notes that *Jaguar* (1954–67) and *Cocorico Monsieur Poulet* (1974) “appear to ‘document’ life in post-colonial West Africa, [but] are ethnographic fantasies built around historical and social realities, complete with a cast of ‘fictional’ characters.”¹⁹ In 1978, Rouch organized a three-day conference in Paris about Yanomami films, including Downey’s work, which was also shown at a visual anthropology conference at Temple University, in Philadelphia, that same year.²⁰ Oddly, the organizer of the latter event, anthropologist Jay Ruby, subsequently stated that “ethnographic film is too serious a thing to be left to filmmakers” and insisted that only “Anthropologists [with professional graduate training] are qualified to be ethnographers....”²¹

Downey’s work appears to have disappeared from ethnographic and anthropological circles for a couple decades until anthropologists, Michael Taussig and Hjorleifur Jonsson, revisited it in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Taussig offers a wonderful description of the video, which he interprets through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s theory of “mimetic exchange.”²² Jonsson, on the other hand, examines the progressive development and sophistication of Downey’s three Yanomami videos: *The Abandoned*

17 See William Anastasi, “Jarry, Joyce, Duchamp and Cage,” *Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, 1:2, (May, 2000) and Edward Shanken, “Broken Circle &/Spiral Hill?: Smithsonian’s spirals, pataphysics, syzygy and survival,” *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 11, no. 1 (2013): 3–14.

18 James Clifford, “On ethnographic surrealism,” *Comparative studies in society and history* 23, no. 4 (1981): 539–564.

19 Jeanette DeBouzek, “The ‘ethnographic surrealism’ of Jean Rouch,” *Visual Anthropology* 2, no. 3–4 (1989): 301–315.

20 Hjorleifur Jonsson, “Cracking Up an Alligator: Ethnography, Juan Downey’s Videos, and Irony,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 61–86.

21 Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture Explorations in Film & Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 39, 281, 243. Quoted in Jonsson, “Cracking Up an Alligator...,” 66.

22 Michael Taussig, “A Lesson in Looking and Laughter: Juan Downey’s Amazing Yanomami Video, The Laughing Alligator” in Valérie Smith, ed., *Juan Downey: The Invisible Architect*, (New York and Cambridge: Bronx Museum of the Arts/MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2011), 41–52.

Shabono (1977), *Guahibos* (1978), and *The Laughing Alligator* (1979), all shot in the Amazon in 1976–77 and completed in New York.²³ Both anthropologists applaud the artist’s highly original method of storytelling in *The Laughing Alligator* and the remarkable insights the video offers into the Yanomami. Jonsson, moreover, lauds Downey’s implicit critique of ethnography and argues, *contra* Ruby, that ethnographers and anthropologists could learn a great deal from Downey’s method, which offers useful tools “to learn to share, negotiate, and play with others.”²⁴ He bemoans but understands the lack of recognition that his discipline has paid to the artist’s films, and highlights the way Downey’s Yanomami trio “expose[s] the artifice of Western scholarly authority and subjects it to some serious playfulness,”²⁵ while undermining the “once-authoritative status of ‘classical’ ethnographic documentaries.”²⁶

As recounted by Downey in *The Laughing Alligator*, playfulness to subvert authority is, indeed, at the root of the Yanomami’s myth of the discovery of fire. The alligator had discovered fire, which it kept hidden in his mouth for his own exclusive use. Upon learning its secret, the Yanomami ancestors tricked the alligator by making it laugh: when it opened its mouth, they snatched the fire so that they could use it. Therefore, Downey’s strategic deployment of playfulness, tricksterism, and humor, in order to reveal secrets and usurp the exclusivity of ethnographic authority, parallels profound aspects of Yanomami culture itself.

As an art historian and critic writing about Downey’s work in the context of ethnography, I will, in a sense, play the role that Downey played as a video artist creating ethnographic films (though, regrettably without his remarkable irony!). By reading *The Laughing Alligator* through Jarry’s theory of pataphysics and Clifford’s theories of ethnographic surrealism, I hope to offer new insights into how Downey’s work challenges conventional aesthetic modalities, academic models and disciplinary silos, as well as epistemological constructs.

III

It is well to suspend disbelief in considering the practices, and the excesses, of surrealist “ethnographers.” And it is important to understand their way of taking culture seriously, as a contested reality—a way which included the ridiculing and reshuffling of its orders.... It is advisable not to dismiss surrealism too quickly as frivolous, in contrast with the *serieux* of ethnographic science.

23 Jonsson, “Cracking Up an Alligator...”

24 *Ibid.*, 79.

25 *Ibid.*, 65.

26 *Ibid.*, 63.

The connections between anthropological research and research in literature and the arts [...] need to be more fully explored.

—James Clifford ²⁷

Ethnographic surrealism was an interdisciplinary movement that emerged in Paris between the First and Second World Wars. Many of its proponents were dissident surrealists that left Breton's circle as a result of ideological rifts. Clifford identifies French sociologist/anthropologist Marcel Mauss as the guiding light whose theoretical work and teachings inspired these artists and scholars to develop and practice a radical form of ethnography. In addition to seminal texts, including *The Gift* (1925, reprinted with a new English translation in 2016), Mauss's extraordinary lectures at the Institute of Ethnology, which he co-founded in Paris in 1926, motivated students to put his ideas into action. Ethnologist Marcel Griaule led the Dakar-Djibouti Mission (1931–33) and poet Michel Leiris, a dissident surrealist, served as the mission's secretary-archivist. Traversing over twenty thousand kilometers, from the coast of West Africa to the Arabian Sea, the voyage yielded some 3,500 objects for the collection of the Musée de l'Homme, which was founded four years later, in 1937. Both men would later join the museum, Griaule as Deputy Director and Leiris as an ethnographer. Although Claude Lévi-Strauss was not a student at the Institute, he was deeply influenced by Mauss, whose ethnographic method he described as embracing “unthought-of comparisons” and deploying “antitheses, shortcuts and apparent paradoxes, which, later on, proved to be the result of greater insight.”²⁸ As Mauss famously stated, the exhaustive cataloguing of ethnographic categories would reveal many “dead moons [*lunes mortes*] and others pale or obscure, in the firmament of reason.”²⁹ Clifford notes that for Mauss and his followers, “reason” was not limited to “a parochial Western rationality but [encompassed] the full human potential for cultural expression.”³⁰

The main aspirations of ethnographic surrealism were to destabilize categorical hierarchies by shock tactics, to contest the systems of value and authority they represent, to challenge distinctions between the “sophisticated” culture of Paris and “primitive” indigenous cultures, and to “find oneself as Other.” These aims which also undergird Downey's *The Laughing Alligator*,

27 James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 543.

28 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “French Sociology,” in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, eds. Georges Gurvitch and Wilbert Moore (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 527. Quoted in Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” 547.

29 Marcel Mauss, “Essay sur le don” (1925), quoted in Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification* (London: Cohen & West, 2009): xxix. https://www.monoskop.org/images/4/4d/Durkheim_Emile_Mauss_Marcel_Primitive_Classification_2nd_ed_1969.pdf

30 Clifford, op. cit., 548.

were manifest in the journal *Documents* (edited by Georges Bataille in 1929–30), and later, were pursued by the informal Collège de sociologie (1937–39), whose membership of surrealist artists and intellectuals included Bataille, Leiris, and painter André Masson.

One of Mauss’s apparent paradoxes, “Taboos are made to be violated,” resonated powerfully with Bataille. It was an appropriate battle cry against the surrealist orthodoxy of André Breton, and the academic orthodoxy of ethnography. For Mauss and his followers, “the ethnographer, like the surrealist, is licensed to shock.”³¹ In this spirit, *Documents* deployed bizarre juxtapositions to contest the ontological structure of the ethnographic museum and of culture in general. “The proper arrangement of cultural symbols and artifacts is constantly placed in doubt: High art is combined with hideously enlarged photographs of big toes; folk crafts; covers of *Fantômas* (a popular mystery magazine); Hollywood sets; [...] carnival masks; [...] descriptions of the Paris slaughterhouses, and so forth.”³² Such juxtapositions served to denaturalize locally accepted hierarchies and relationships, to call attention not just to the exotic Other but also to the foreign preconceptions foisted unquestioningly on the Other by the ethnographer.

The second issue of *Documents* includes an ethnographic analysis of surrealist painter André Masson by critic Carl Einstein that is relevant to the surrealistic aspects of *The Laughing Alligator*. Einstein advocated surrealist methods for shaking up hierarchies of value and for destabilizing so-called reality. As Clifford notes, “Hallucinatory forces create a breach in the order of mechanistic processes; they introduce blocs of ‘a-causality’ in this reality which had been absurdly given as such. The uninterrupted fabric of this reality is torn, and one inhabits the tension of dualisms.”³³ Einstein’s essay manifests two principal elements of ethnographic surrealism: “first, the corrosive analysis of a reality now identified as local and artificial; second, the supplying of exotic alternatives.”³⁴

The Laughing Alligator embodies just such a “corrosive analysis of reality” and supplies compelling “exotic alternatives.” By juxtaposing conflicting perspectives and playfully mixing them up with irony and laughter, Downey’s work represents and “inhabits the tension of dualisms” while it tears the “uninterrupted fabric of reality.” With respect to “hallucinatory forces,” a key scene in *The Laughing Alligator* documents a yopo ritual, in which Yanomami men blow psychotropic snuff, laden with natural D. M. T., into each other’s nasal cavities, inducing hallucinatory, trance-like states. Two men, who appear to be possessed by animal spirits, walk on all four limbs and roar like jaguars, manifesting a hybrid state of being. Curator David Ross explained that Downey “did not want to change people’s minds or motivate

31 *Ibid.*, 551.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, 549.

34 *Ibid.*

them to action as much as he wanted to explore the limits and possibilities of consciousness.” The artist participated in yopo rituals with the Yanomami, drawing on the “hallucinatory force” of the experience to “create a breach in the order of mechanistic processes” and to investigate expanded forms of awareness that would permit access to alternative realities.³⁵ As Downey wrote in the journal he kept while making *Video Trans Americas*, “Our Attitude: To dilute oneself in the circumstantial forces. Understand the energy of the place and the occasion. Weave oneself in the invisible interactions of cyclic time.”³⁶

In *The Laughing Alligator* Downey deftly deploys juxtapositions as representational strategies to destabilize the narrative authority of ethnographic video. In his first appearance in the video, the artist is bare-chested as he undergoes a shamanic ritual at the *shabono* (communal dwelling). Next, he appears over-dressed in a suit and tie, presumably in his studio. He is on the phone, commanding authority, gesturing with machismo in front of shelves full of neatly-organized videotapes. Over that image, large, capitalized, pink text appears, informing us that this is “JUAN DOWNEY VIDEO-ARTIST.” Before launching on his Amazonian quest to be “eaten up by some Indians,” Downey says farewell to his New York artist persona with a deeply sensual goodbye kiss to his own video image on a TV monitor. But that persona doesn’t want to be left behind; he screams “Lemme outa here!” in a strange, whining Latino accent. Recalling Jewish American star Al Jolson’s iconic performance of “Mammy,” which he sang in black-face in the finale of the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, Downey appears in the video wearing face and body paint mimicking a Yanomami warrior but in a way that is perversely exaggerated. The artist’s wife and teenage stepdaughter also narrate the video, weaving together facts about the Yanomami with first-hand accounts of their personal experiences with them. Needless to say, these narrative strategies are far from sanctioned ethnographic or anthropological film practices. They strategically undermine the authority of the filmmaker’s narrative as an “academic” and “truthful” account of his subject.

The intellectual apparatus of ethnography is not Downey’s only target as he pokes fun even at his own quests for exotic transcendence. He is also able to laugh at himself and can accept others laughing at him—qualities that may have endeared him to his hosts. Indeed, he is the butt of a joke played by two Yanomami hunters, who, in the video, convincingly appear to threaten him with a shotgun and bow and arrow, cornering him. Downey’s narration explains: “the anthropologist had warned me about the ferocity of these Indians. I saw in my mind all the bloody scenes the anthropologist

35 According to Ross, Downey “had an amazing capacity for drugs” and gave a “fantastic lecture” on his work with the Yanomami to a sold-out crowd at the Berkeley Art Museum while “tripping on acid,” which enabled him to “put himself back in the space where he was doing the [...] hallucinatory drug he did down on the Orinoco.” In *Juan Downey: The Invisible Architect*, 119–120.

36 Downey, artist’s diary, July 20, 1974.

had described to me.” With a shotgun pointed at him, the artist realized that his only defense was his video camera: “Instinctively, I pointed the camera at my potential assassin as if it were a firearm, with that aggressive gesture, that imaginary threat, which we video artists use as a warning that the camera also is a dangerous weapon, as if bullets could come out of the lens.”

Although the narration suggests a situation of *détente* brought about by the mutual fear of each other’s weapons, in Downey’s video, one of the hunters approaches the artist, continuing to threaten him with the shotgun drawn, filling the frame, only to playfully vocalize a pretend explosion and lower his weapon, smiling. The video cuts to the *shabono*, where the story is recounted in native tongue to a young woman holding a child. The story elicits hysterical laughter and a short comment, translated in the subtitle, “THE FOREIGNER WAS AFRAID.”

There are at least two jokes going on here: One joke is played on Downey by the Yanomami and another joke is played by Downey on Napoleon Chagnon, an American anthropologist whose wildly popular account of the Yanomami as a fierce, warring people was widely discredited, in part by French ethnographer Jacques Lizot, whom Downey interviews in *The Abandoned Shabono*.³⁷ The Yanomami’s joke is also a test, an initiation rite to see how the foreigner would respond to a perceived threat. Would he behave like a warrior and earn their respect or would he show fear and lose it?

Downey shared his magic with the Yanomami and they shared their magic with him, forging a bond that transcended vast cultural differences. As Jonsson notes, “When video or shamanism are no longer alien and intriguing, but everyday, like fire, the question shifts away from whether people have it and toward what they want to create, share, or where they can or wish to go with particular other people.”³⁸ In a scene that shows Downey being treated by a shaman for malaria (with which he was seriously stricken), the artist narrates that a Yanomami friend said that “he loved me so much that he wanted to eat me up if I died of malaria.”

The Yanomami eat the ashes of the deceased, mashed in a paste made of bananas. Downey explains that this endocannibalistic ritual is performed “in order to keep their beloved immortal.” The artist and his family were also invited to join an endocannibalistic ritual, apparently a very rare opportunity for foreigners, in which they all consumed the ashes of a deceased member of the community.³⁹ The Yanomami appear to have accepted Downey as worthy of becoming an immortal part of their culture and also accepted his family as vehicles to convey immortality to a member of their community.

37 Since 2000, Lizot’s research, particularly on Yanomami sexuality, has also been questioned due to allegations of improprieties by the anthropologist with respect to his subjects.

38 Jonsson, “Cracking Up an Alligator”, 81.

39 Marilyns Belt de Downey, interview with the author, May 5, 2017.

Downey's openness to being consumed, to being possessed by the Yanomami, their culture, and their spiritual world, brings to mind a distinction that Taussig draws between Western culture and all other cultures. "The West seems to be one of the very few populations in [...] modern history which does not participate in much possession, if at all. So the question is not, 'How do people get possessed?' or 'Why do they get possessed?' but 'Why don't we?'"⁴⁰

Downey was more than an embedded ethnographer. He was interested in observation and communication in general, as opposed to a first-person observation of a local Other, which was to be communicated to a foreign audience. He was interested in how the Yanomami observed and communicated with him, how they observed and communicated with each other, how they observed, interacted with, and responded to video equipment and the recordings made by "Juan Downey with the Yanomami People," as the credit line of the video states. He was perhaps even more interested in how his own observations and communication strategies—his perceptions, worldview, consciousness, and telepathic transfers—changed as a result of these observational exchanges. Perhaps his prevailing interest in the Yanomami was to develop a communion with them, to transcend the "I- Thou" relationship. As Downey wrote in the epigraph, "I dream of a future environment that harmonizes the act of perceiving with the self's projection on the culture. On that field where both overlap we find nature radiating the presence of a consciousness, and conversely the culture/the artificial producing an environment of codified icons."

Clifford suggests that the converse of ethnographic surrealism, "surrealist ethnography," is exemplified by *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris's account of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission of 1931–33. Although Downey's *The Laughing Alligator* shares many strategies of ethnographic surrealism, it may be best understood as a propositional form of surrealist ethnography. As secretary and archivist of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, Leiris blended his official duty to provide a written compendium of facts about the expedition, with his personal and artistic struggles for self-discovery. The composite narrative performs ethnographic work using a surrealist collage method that eludes a seamless, totalizing discourse. Examples of "'found' evidence, [i.e.] data not fully integrated within the work's governing interpretation"⁴¹ are juxtaposed with Leiris's "personal obsessions, self-reproach, and agonizing soul searching [that] accompany him from village to village and even onto the boat back home."⁴² Leiris's surrealist ethnography does not dismiss those

40 "Mimetic Exchange: Michael Taussig on Juan Downey and Jean Rouch," lecture at Artists Space, New York, December 2, 2015. Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSDfUJcoBLU>

41 Clifford, op. cit., 547.

42 Phyllis Clarck-Taoua, "In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 167, 2002. <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/153>.

elements of a foreign culture that conflict with the epistemic foundations of the author's own culture. Rather, by embracing those disjunctions, it makes apparent that knowledge is constructed from a specific, culturally inscribed point of view. Further, it celebrates how the ethnographer is transformed by "those elements in the foreign culture which render the investigator's own culture newly incomprehensible."⁴³

The above description aptly describes Downey's video expeditions in the Americas. For Downey, one of the fundamental flaws in anthropology and ethnography was the prerequisite of never discussing oneself in an effort to build objectivity.⁴⁴ *Afrique fantôme* offers as much, if not more, insight into its author and his culture than into Africa, just as *The Laughing Alligator* arguably offers as much, if not more, insight into the artist and his culture(s) than into the Yanomami. Echoing Leiris's personal quest, Downey went to live with the Yanomami "in search of a new skin" in the hope of a "personal transformation by connecting with the wild child within."⁴⁵ As with Leiris's experience in Africa, the "quest was not only to discover the Other but to find [one]self *as Other*."⁴⁶

IV

Electro-magnetic energy is a modulated stream of wave-material.

This radiant nature is commonly shared by thoughts, artificial intelligence, video, and it accounts for the life itself of the Universe we inhabit.

—Juan Downey, *Architecture, Video, Telepathy: A Communications Utopia*

A shaman is a special individual, one who is partly self-selected and partly anointed by another shaman to play a unique role in a community. Shamans are at once revered and feared because of their powers, which can cure and harm. A shaman is both of this world and of the world beyond. Shamans communicate with spirits and ancestors in the beyond, learn from them and bring that wisdom back to this world in order to cure members of their community or to ward off evil. Shamans can embody the consciousness of other beings, including other animals, and in doing so gain insight into how, for example, humans can prey on large animals like panthers and alligators that might otherwise prey on us. Shamans can exorcise evil spirits that have overtaken a member of their community, absorbing that spirit and then purging themselves of it. This can be extremely dangerous, so shamans must be very strong of spirit, capable of self-healing, and very knowledgeable of their craft.

43 Clifford, op. cit., 564.

44 Juan Downey, Scott Patrick, "Closing the Magic Loop," *Media Arts*, (1987).

45 Clarck-Taoua, "In Search of New Skin..." 479.

46 *Ibid.*, 481.

So, was Juan Downey a shaman? Are any western artists shamans? The trope of the artist-shaman in Western culture has a long and complex history and has entered into the popular imagination, largely through the work of Joseph Beuys. However, as Javier Rivero Ramos notes, whereas Beuys's mythic account of being rescued by Tartar shamans generates a larger-than-life persona that foregrounds the artist himself, Downey's intention was "to recede, to dissipate into homeostatic networks of communication where the mythic self has no place."⁴⁷ Jack Burnham's 1974 essay, "Artist as Shaman," argues that society's pathologies can be overcome only by revealing its "mythic structures" and unfolding its "metaprograms." He saw art as a vehicle for such revelations and certain individual artists as the shamans that could liberate us from those metaprograms, for the shaman "magnifies every human gesture until it assumes archetypal or collective importance." Downey's work exemplifies the sort of "thoroughly original approach to the problem of presenting these psychic dimensions" that Burnham advocated.⁴⁸ Composer Sam Ashley, son of American experimental composer Robert Ashley, refers to himself as a shaman. In response to eulogies shared on the occasion of his father's death, he wrote:

I have been a mystic for more than forty-five years. An actual "shaman." That's not a word I toss around because it's cool. I'm sure I've spent at least one third of my actual lifetime in trance. Being a mystic for real just means one thing ultimately: trance, lots of trance ("meditation," whatever). Like hours/day every day. Everything that could be considered real "shamanism" flows from that.⁴⁹

During his time with the Yanomami, Downey came to regard shamanism as one of the most powerful elements in the bond that linked the Yanomami to their surroundings and to each other. In a text written for an exhibition of drawings he made in the Amazon, he narrates the story of Hukobatawe and the death of his mother in the hands of a vengeful shaman:

Far away, in the *Shamatari* territory, the chanting of a shaman rises. His erect body vibrates as spirits surge out of his chest, smudged with venomous red and green slime. He seeks someone to devour. He wants, with his shamanic power, to avenge the death of Warishewe. He travels through the wind as a spirit. In Bishaasi, the shamans run and revile the spirits that blow in the evil gale. Hukobatawe's mother (perfectly healthy, and at the moment, beyond any threat) is swinging in

47 Javier Rivero Ramos, correspondence with the author, July 23, 2018.

48 Jack Burnham, "Artist as Shaman," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 47, no. 9 (May-June 1973), 42-4. Burnham's essay focuses on Dennis Oppenheim's work but the ideas are equally applicable to Downey.

49 Sam Ashley, in "Remembering Robert Ashley," *New Music USA*, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/remembering-robert-ashley>.

her hammock when all of a sudden a death spasm paralyzes her.

“Mother! Mother! Mother!” Hukobatawe cries with the same note, each time with a different pitch. Other members of her family join the chant around the old woman’s dead body.⁵⁰

The text appeared alongside the dozens of drawings of spirals Downey made during his stay with the Yanomami. Although he had started his stay with the Yanomami determined to focus on video and avoid drawing, he soon found that drawing these spirals was the only way to access his visions after meditating each morning: “A white and round place opens up in the front of my brain. Excretions of light that vaguely align into circles, the intensity of a spiral or the infinite peace of a mauve color. [...] I want to enter into the white space of my empty consciousness.”⁵¹

Downey’s drawings of spirals are deeply meditative and demonstrate, moreover, the power of mind over matter. According to his widow, Marilys Belt de Downey, Downey had a visible tremor but when he was drawing the tremor completely went away. In the tradition of surrealist automatism, drawing was a form of meditation that drew the artist into trance-like states and allowed him to access forms of knowledge and wisdom that lie outside of rational, analytic thought.

From a lifetime in trance-like states, Downey expanded his consciousness; he tuned into the consciousness of others, and he helped others do the same. As a result, Downey’s work plays an important role in stimulating new ways of thinking that are the prerequisite to healing society’s pathologies and to recreating the world in a more sensitive, inclusive, and caring way. Whether or not Downey was a shaman is beside the point. He likely would have resisted any such labels. What is important is that his work performed many of the same functions that the shaman carries out in traditional cultures.

Drinking the energy of the universe,
Breathing along with the cosmos,
With each breath,
I am reborn,
Into a brand new existence
With each breath
The universe begins again
With a brand new wave.

—Ilchi Lee, excerpt from “Breath,” *Songs of Enlightenment*

50 Juan Downey. *Dibujando con los Yanomami*, Galería Adler Castillo, (Caracas, 1977), n.p.

51 *Ibid.*