

Esther Schipper

CHRISTOPH KELLER
EXPEDITION-BUS AND
SHAMAN-TRAVEL



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EXPEDITION-BUS AND SHAMAN-TRAVEL

The installation Expedition-Bus and Shaman-Travel examines a parallel between the shamanic and the ethnographic journey. Mircea Eliade describes shamanism as the basic form of human culture (English edition: Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) and the shamanic journey as its central element. Stimulated by trance or ritual, the shaman embarks on an imaginary journey to the mythic world of the gods, to metaphysical places inaccessible to the community as a whole. He returns with an image or a parable, a message from the gods as it were, that provides instructions on the formation or reformation of the community.

The installation is based on the assumption that the ethnographer in Western science – without being conscious of it – does something very similar for his society: he travels to distant corners of the world and reports on occurrences from beyond civilization upon his return. This image of the “other” decisively contributes to the formation of the mythic “we” as Western “civilization”.

The installation consists of a mirrored Volkswagen Type 2 Transporter, a camping van of the 1960s. The mirroring points to the reversal of the view that occurred when the ethnographer encountered foreign cultures as a seemingly objective observer. The viewer himself is simultaneously reflected in it. Excerpts from scientific ethnographic films from the 1950s and 1960s documenting the activities of shamans during divinations, sacrificial ceremonies and trance rituals are projected as double projections from the inside onto the windshield of the van.

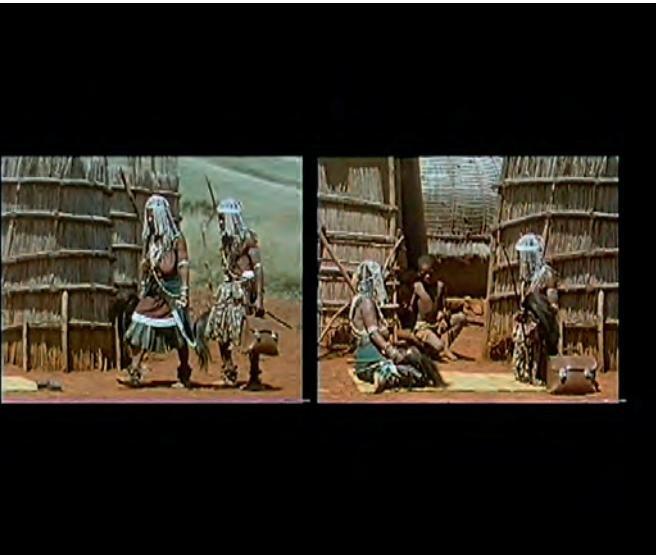
Each of the two halves of the double projection shows an excerpt from the same film lasting for about one minute. Subtle time shifts were worked into the film material that circumvent the didactic logic and narration of the original educational film. In a certain sense, the viewer who enters the mythic vehicle of the expedition bus and watches the films after taking a seat becomes the third traveller of the installation alongside the ethnographic and the shamanic travellers.

CHRISTOPH KELLER born 1967 in Freiburg, studied mathematics, physics and hydrology in Berlin and Santiago de Chile. Further studies at the University of Arts, Berlin and the Academy of Media Arts, Cologne. Æther – de la cosmologie à la conscience at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2011) was his first international artistic and curatorial exhibition. Selected solo exhibitions: Kunsthalle Detroit (2012); Observatorium at Kunstverein Braunschweig (2008); Voyages Extraordinaires, CRAC Alsace Lorraine, Altkirch (2010); Encyclopaedia Cinematographica at KW, Berlin (2001). Selection of group shows: A Terrible Beauty Is Born, Biennale de Lyon (2011); the Bienal del Fin del Mundo, Ushuaia (2009); You have been there – departures, bifurcations, Marian Goodman New York and Paris (2011); L’Institut des archives sauvages, Villa Arson, Nice (2012), 7th Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2009). The Cloudbuster-Projects (first 2003 at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center New York, thenceforth at many other sites) involve re-enactments of Wilhelm Reich’s experiments for influencing the atmosphere with orgon energy. Awards and grants: Ars Viva-Preis for art and science, P.S.1 studio-grant, New York, Residences Internationales aux Recolets, Paris and BM-Suma in Istanbul. Christoph Keller lives and works in Berlin.

Front side:
Christoph Keller, Expedition-Bus and Shaman-Travel, 2002
Installation view Sprengel Museum Hanover, 2002
VW van, video/DVD, double projection on windshield of a reflective camping van, 20 min.,
Installation about the parallels between ethnography and shamanism using excerpts of scientific films from the 50s and 60s
Photo © H. Felix Gross, Karlsruhe

This Page:
Expedition-Bus and Shaman-Travel, 2002
Video stills, double projection and film stills, TV screen

Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin



CHRISTOPH KELLER
IN THE BEGINNING EVERYTHING APPEARED SO INNOCUOUS ... –
ON THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE
AN INTERVIEW BY THOMAS SPRING

THOMAS SPRING: Christoph Keller, the key element of your project for the exhibition “science+ fiction” is a reflective camping van. In the van there is a video installation that presents scientific films on shamanism, which you have re-examined and revised. You have also set up a kind of camping or fieldwork situation near the van where visitors can look at videos from an ethnographic film archive. In this project you have made a scientific topic the starting point for an artistic statement. How is this done?

CHRISTOPH KELLER: I often use scientific contents in my work. This has also to do with my biography. Before becoming an artist, I studied hydrology with mathematics and physics. Of course, the experiences from this period have influenced my work. In recent years, a number of my projects have explicitly explored scientific fields. However, when I examine or analyse a topic from an artistic perspective, I have a completely different approach and will arrive at entirely different results from those of a scientist. I will be walking along the borders of sciences and the arts, and perhaps other areas too. I have certain possibilities of leaping back and forth between these spheres.

THOMAS SPRING: Are these possibilities more of a personal matter or do you believe the spheres are themselves in motion?

CHRISTOPH KELLER: Obviously, something is in motion. The rigid academic structures, which existed until the late 60s, when faculties were bound to strict traditions, no longer persist today in the same manner. A lot has happened since then. Nowadays people have come to realize that scientific correspondences have always been a component of artistic approaches; and, conversely, that in science an aesthetic-philosophical or a socio-political project is pursued as well and, to a certain extent, even a religious one. Today it is obvious that certain things converge, and that the arts and the sciences are taking on new roles – though this does not occur according to any clear set of rules. It is undoubtedly a process, which will go on for a longer period of time and which goes along with a shift in society.

THOMAS SPRING: The starting point of your project involved an intense exchange about the phenomena of globalization, and the cultural definition of the self and the other. How did you get from there to shamanism?

CHRISTOPH KELLER: What I found interesting was the possibility of being able to take an artistic project simultaneously as an extended research project. In fact, that was my initial idea. But then, while I was contemplating globalization, and the relationship of the other and the self as a scientific topic, the field of shamanic studies emerged. There are an astonishing number of ethnographic films from the 50s, 60s and 70s addressing magic and shamanism in so-called “primitive” cultures. This was what interested me. I wanted to investigate the relationship between Western ethnographers to shamans as the “scientists” of the other cultures. This was the research task, which I went on to set myself. The outcome is the video installation seen in the van.
This project is one in a series dealing with fringe sciences and charlatanny, and it fits very well into the topic of the self and the other in science, because it actually deals with the other, to be precise with the cultural other on a level which is not directly describable but only by way of misunderstandings.

THOMAS SPRING: Your reflective van seems conceived as a fairly strong metaphor. But is the van actually an image making a statement about science or is the whole thing rather a kind of experimental set-up for dealing with the visitor, one in which he becomes involved in a reflective world where it is not a matter of interpreting the van as a statement, but rather of perceiving himself and the films he sees in this situation from a new perspective?

CHRISTOPH KELLER: In my video works I often create situations that enable the visitor to see the filmic material, a way he would not have otherwise. In this respect I see here a continuity with my other works, for instance with the installation “Encyclopaedia Cinematographica” (2001) in which through the arrangement of the monitors in a space, the films can be perceived not just via the surface of their images but also as conceptual units, in other words, in a very different way than if they would be shown for example as a cinematic projection or in another kind of installation. The spatial and physical relationship into which the visitor enters in the process of approaching and engaging with the work is important.
There is a kind of field study situation outside the van, where the visitors themselves are given the opportunity to research the original ethnographic film material which I use in the installation and, if they want and have the time, to watch the films in their entirety. I have made my research material available to the visitor so as to give him the possibility of discovering something completely different in it, and of assuming the role of the researcher instead of remaining just a passive user.
In “Expedition Bus and Shaman Travel”, the central topic of my installation is the shamanic journey. The outstanding feature of shamanism is that the shaman can go into an ecstatic state or trance in order to travel to another world or level. It may be an underworld or a heaven – this may differ from culture to culture or from mythology to mythology. Nevertheless, there is always the motif of a journey and it is also a fact that forms of shamanism have existed in nearly all cultures. In the case of ethnographic film material, the shaman’s journey is accompanied by a second one, and this is the journey of the ethnographer who has also set off to other regions. And when the visitor takes a seat in the van and watches the material, a third traveller, so to speak, joins in.

THOMAS SPRING: What in particular interested you about ethnographic films? These are not the most recent scientific films to investigate shamanism. What picture do they give of shamanism?

CHRISTOPH KELLER: Many of the ethnographic films, which I have used are from the 60s and 70s, that means from the period in which I was born. I am able to work on this material as I do because it has attained a certain distance from the present – as also the case in other archive projects of mine, where I deal with materials that are in an intermediate stage of history. There is no classical figure of the shaman portrayed in the films. What is interesting about this project is that everything which is to be filmed, namely magic or what the shaman does – shamans travel to underworlds, speak with spirits and alter things there or go into ecstatic states and ascend the tree of life, and so on – is not filmable. So from the very start, there is a certain impossibility to document it on film. And this was what made the work appealing to me. I did not go to the jungle myself and I do not report like an ethnographer would about other cultures. Instead I reverse the view and look at the legacy of my own western culture and then take this as the starting point for my investigations; that’s where I discover specific patterns and try to understand them.

The interview took place on the occasion of the exhibition science + fiction at Sprengel Museum, Hanover (2003).

"Die Gefahr, sich in diesen verbotenen Regionen zu verirren, bleibt immer groß, doch geheiligt durch die Initiation und mit seinen Schutzgeistern bewehrt, vermag der Schamane als einziges menschliches Wesen dieser Gefahr zu trotzen und sich in die Abenteurer einer mystischen Geografie zu begeben."



"Eliade entdeckte, daß die hervorstechenste Eigenschaft eines Schamanen die ist, daß er in andere Weltgegenden reist. Hier liegt der Eckstein für den Schamanismus, für seine ernsthafte Praxis. Denn durch die Reise lernt der Schamane oder derjenige, der sich in Ausbildung befindet, die Geister zu kontaktieren: direkt von den Geistern zu lernen und deren Hilfe zu bekommen."