

WORDWORKS 2

Reread an occasional series re-viewing books which were maybe missed first time around begins with a new proposal linking the tradition of the modern with the archaic techniques of the shaman

Dream people versions

Dreaming With Open Eyes by Michael Tucker (Harper Collins, London 1992)

Imagine such a dream: the whole story of twentieth century art being retold in a new language. Here the energies pulsing through much of modern art are turned around and informed with the same archaic spirit as that of the healing shamanic search for vision. It is a reevaluation far from the terms of the “shock of the new”. This is the dream which Michael Tucker envisioned in his 1992 book, “*Dreaming With Open Eyes*”.

Modernism, it has long been recognised, has had a complicated relationship with Primitivism. Susan Sontag has noted that the “most frequently travelled imaginative routes from Western High Culture...” to, as she calls it, “another form of civilisation” have been in three forms. First, the turn to the East, in which recognition and discovery of the cultures of the East has quickened across the Western World since the early nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth. Next a retracing back into the suppressed part of the Western past, the various middle ages, (neo-platonism, alchemy, rosicrucianism, hermeticism) with which high Modernism has identified. And last, out to the “exotic communitarianism of pre-literate tribes”. In this book it is the connections of the last of these imaginative trails, the pre-literate, the pre-historic, the primitive, primary, original archaic cultures and their relation to twentieth century art that are explored. This is a popular and at times controversial linkage in the history of art. The further step “*Dreaming with Open Eyes*” has taken is to link modern art explicitly with the esoteric and interdisciplinary field of shamanic studies. The book suggests a strong and meaningful connection between representatives of the archaic, oral cultures, shamans and modernist art. This is not to say that twentieth century artists are actual twentieth century shamans, but rather that what such artists do, particularly in the moment of creativity, is shamanic. Tucker makes clear that anyone reading his

book ought not to infer that the archaic tribal shaman’s world and cosmology will necessarily be refound in twentieth century art. What will be found is art exhibiting definite shamanic qualities. It is, as it stands, an evocative imagining, and although easily dismissable, the question remains how credible the thrust of such an imagining is as a new version of the story of twentieth century artistic activity.

Shamanism is principally a northern rim phenomenon of the Earth’s continents, primarily Siberia and central Asia. The word derives from the Manchu-Tungus “saman”, to know. This in turn originates from the verb “sa” which contains an expanded meaning of “to know in an ecstatic manner” Apart from Siberia, the shamanic technique of ecstasy is also found in the cultures of the North and South American native Americans and the Aboriginal peoples of Australasia as well as in other parts of the world. Its origins are old, shamanic activity having been found from the upper-Palaeolithic on. A nutshell description of the shaman’s life and role would describe him or her as being at the core of tribal life, being an individual particularly marked out to ensure the psychic health of the tribe. The shaman’s particular and unusual skill is to enter other dimensions or realms of consciousness, often through trance, and often though not always through the rhythm of the drum. In this other world, the shaman is in personal contact with spirits and is able to aid people of his or her tribe. In this animistic world the whole world is alive. The shaman flies, or at least his animal and often bird soul flies, within an inner invisible landscape – and ascends or descends the great world tree, axis mundi, to paradise or the underworld. It is in these worlds that the shaman comes into contact with the spirits who may be affecting a member of the tribe. How much credence you give to the reality of the shaman’s viewpoint is up to you.

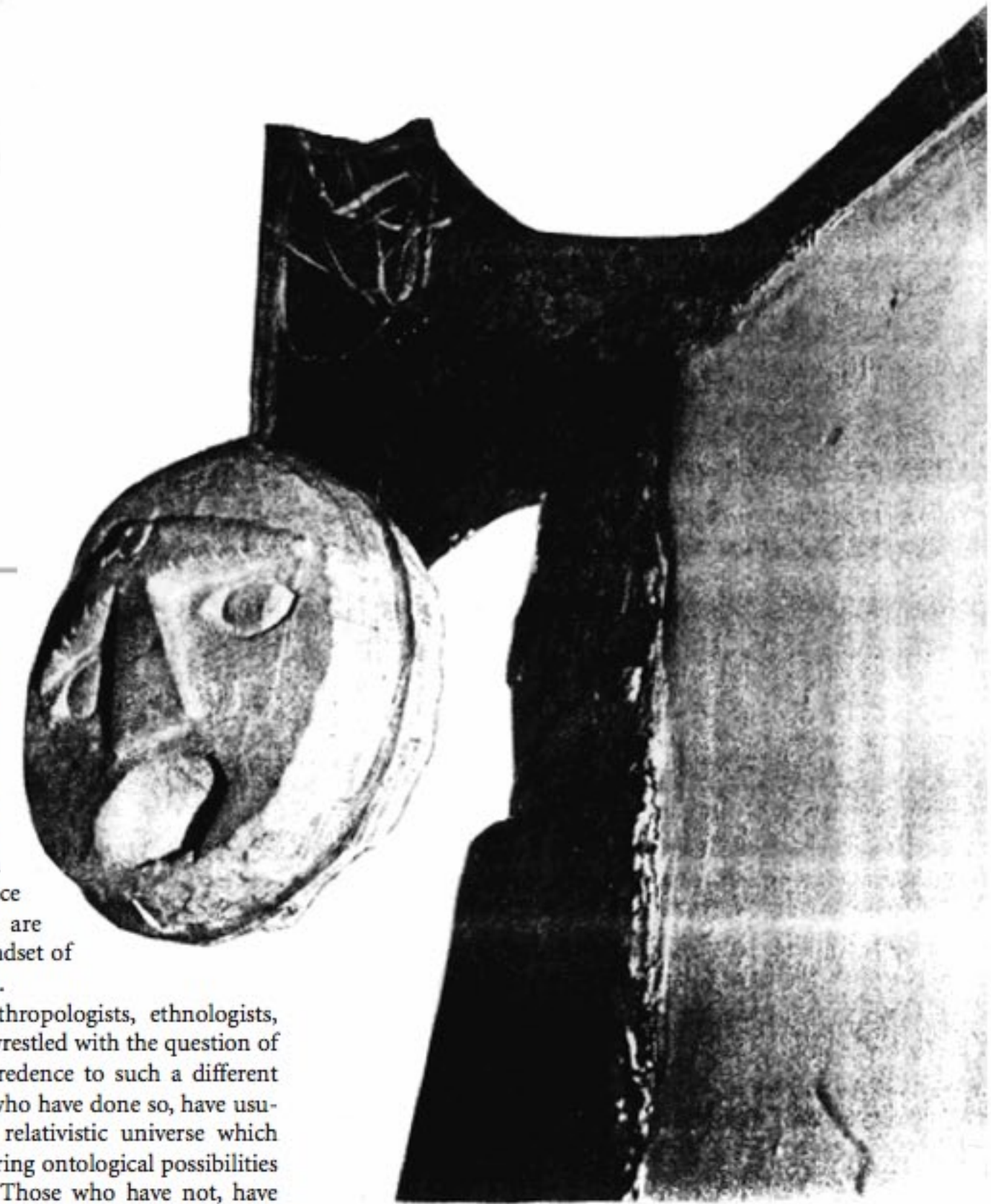
This original primitive world has exercised the

attention of considerable sections of the Western world for much of the twentieth century. Modernist Art, it could be argued, has been only one response to the West’s confused incomprehension when coming face to face with world views which are wholly different to the mindset of Enlightenment rationalism.

Scientists, medical anthropologists, ethnologists, and psychiatrists have all wrestled with the question of how or whether to give credence to such a different measure of reality. Those who have done so, have usually accepted a far more relativistic universe which accepts that there are differing ontological possibilities to meaning and “reality”. Those who have not, have mostly taken refuge in the supremacy of the rational to explain the mind and the universe. They have not given credence to the possible dimension of other realities; instead the language of abnormality has been conferred upon this dimension, demarcating at the same time the boundaries to legitimate realities.

The areas where the academic acceptance of shamanism and the crossing of reality boundaries have most fully occurred have been in psychology, mythology, and the history of religion. It is out of these relatively esoteric disciplines that Tucker constructs the body of his argument. This makes it a book which is in part a result of the dynamic ferment experienced by these various and related interdisciplinary fields. This includes the humanistic field of psychology, Jung and the Post-Jungians, the Laingians, and the Humanistic Psychology of Abraham Maslow, to name but a few.

Shamanic consciousness is a well-represented and respected point on such a humanistic grid. Shamanism



has been gaining visibility during the last few decades, helped particularly by the remarkable success since the late sixties of Carlos Castaneda’s “Don Juan” books. How much this phenomenon has to do with an interest and involvement in a deeper apprehension of the shaman’s world is questionable, however. The term has been appropriated by a number of sources, for instance The New Age Movement. It thus loses all but the skin of its original meaning.

Jungian and post-Jungian Depth Psychology is one of the three main sources of Tucker’s thesis. Jung’s work, in spite of the fact that he disliked modern art and believed it to be pathological, is brought within the remit of twentieth century shamanism. Tucker finds a much more sympathetic voice in the post-Jungian community, that of Erich Neumann. From this, Tucker seems to conclude that Jungian individuation is as