

The Living Dead

I had toyed with calling this article the very long-winded “From Sign to Image: The Obvious and the Obtuse and the Tripping Up of the Disorder of Power in its own Disorderliness.” It’s one of the section subheadings in Michael Taussig’s brilliant *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. In this particular section, Taussig talks about Claude Levi-Strauss’s essay “The Effectiveness of Symbols” and compares Levi-Strauss to a shaman, extracting order from a people who are “insistently questioning and undermining the search for order.”¹ Another of Taussig’s subheadings is “Vomiting the Envy of the Other.” Both titles strike me as handsome points of embarkation for a discussion about the work of Peter Madden.

For years, Madden has been wrestling with that most insidious Institution of power, the *National Geographic* magazine. I say insidious because *National Geographic*’s hallowed pages offer the purest form of seduction for folk like me. In second-hand bookstores where my friends gravitate towards tomes on art, literature and philosophy, I’m squatting by the box at the door, with the 50c *National Geographics* that I’ve probably already read. I’m looking for that lost issue from the late 60s with the Hopi Indians that I prematurely cut up as a young art student. I’m looking for the issue that was printed in the month of my birth – and for those issues that correspond to the births of friends or relatives. I’m looking for any issue that features Peru, the Philippines, potatoes, bromeliads, the Caribbean, hummingbirds, the Aztec empire, Angkor Wat, Thai hill tribes, tree frogs, Amazonian Indians. I am not usually disappointed. In op shops, the same scenario is repeated, only replace books about art, literature and philosophy with clothes from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, which I couldn’t be less interested in when juxtaposed with the charms of *National Geographic*.

Madden’s reassignment of *National Geographic*’s pungent arsenal of power is the work I’d like to be making if I was making work. In the same way that *National Geographic* seems to be successfully about *everything*, so Madden’s redistribution of this endless possibility is all-encompassing, though without the intimidation of the irrevocably institutionalised Geographic. Madden strips power from this Institution as original thief-of-life by stealing back the frozen moments that the Geographic has locked in time (like the villains in *Superman II*, destined to eternal 2D free-fall in a *trapezoid*). Madden is, then, a Robin Hood with a scalpel blade. Power, as exemplified by *National Geographic* is revealed to be seething with Dionysian disorder beneath a well-kempt veneer of paragraphs, captions, and white space, and Madden’s project is the tripping up of the disorder of this power in its own disorderliness.

In the Colombian shamanistic rituals that Taussig



Peter Madden, *Untitled*, 2004. Photograph courtesy of the Michael Lett Gallery.

describes, envy is the common culprit for a range of ailments, and the only way to expel this envy is to embark on a series of ayahuasca – or yagé nights. (Ayahuasca contains the compound dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, which is naturally occurring in the human brain.) (Yagé rhymes with Yaweh – try singing “Yagé nights” to the tune of Jimmy Cliff’s “Reggae Nights”). The vomiting is quite literal – yagé makes you piss and shit and emit all night long. Of course, you get to see god(s) as well, and it’s the very fact that you can’t separate the divine from the shit that you’re mired in that makes yagé such a good teacher. Taussig thinks that yagé is a better teacher than the anthropologists (god(s)/shit) that he is mired in. Taussig says that yagé challenges the white man’s “ritual of explanation of ritual.”²

Taussig’s “vomiting the envy of the other” refers to the therapeutic emetic action of yagé. It is said that subjects actually vomit little snakes – a sure sign that one has been “enscorcelled” by an envious friend, neighbour or relative. This vomiting is the first stage in getting over the “maleficio.” In Madden’s case, however, I superimpose my own “envy of the other” – *the desire to be anything but white* – on his miscegenated vistas, his burgeoning babels, his technicolour *emissions*.

This article is not a review of a particular show by Madden, but rather a collection of thoughts that have been crystallising over a period of time in response to Madden’s own (self-professed) “time crystals”³ (works of art). In keeping with the artist’s montage technique, much of the assembled text is not my own.

Madden has had an exceptionally busy year; my first sighting of his industriousness was at rm103 in May 2003, where I fell in love with a work that hybridized a watch with the ghost orchid that is the star of the movie *Adaptation*. Madden showed various works at Michael Lett Gallery in June 2003, including *Municipality of*

Secret Silences Presents... which featured a cardboard skull with nebula eyes and a cranium pan full of bits of chewed chewing gum. *The Unbuilt Realm of Indeterminapolis* was an election of birds on a wire, among many other things; a tabletop diorama (live-orama?) with lots of (real) lemons. In *Follow the White Rabbit* at Artspace, August 2003, Madden covered a stretch of black wall in butterfly halves, as massy as the scales of a fish. All of which was redeployed at the end of the year for his MFA show at Elam.

Indeed, of late, Madden has been omnipresent in Auckland, but, each time, subtle changes safeguard viewer fatigue.

I commissioned Madden to make a small work in my home. There were no parameters, other than the corner where the work was to be installed, and the proviso that it would be “about \$200’s worth.” What the artist made was an exquisite menagerie, all gleaned, of course, from the pages of *National Geographic*. A deer stands next to the word “Behold.” A turtle’s negative imprint (in the sea from whence it has been plucked by Madden’s blade) and a swimmer of sorts. A rose. A wooden wheel. Two black swans’ necks cross and form a heart. (I saw black swans fighting in Western Springs and their necks formed an infinity sign). Objects are pinned or slide into grooves cut into the wall, or else they are hung with threads of human hair. Best of all, a hummingbird with a human skull pricks its beak into the centre of this paper galaxy, nudging a dancing speech (Hubble) bubble.

Just the day before I had been reading in Alphonso Lingis’ *Abuses* about Uitzilopochtli – the Aztec god of war, which can be translated as “The Hummingbird of the Left”. I spent a lot of time watching hummingbirds when I was living in Aztlan (the San Fernando Valley). They are the only bird that can fly backwards, and their dances of rubies and emeralds took my mind momentarily off the enslavement of the Aztec race (known euphemistically as “Southern California”).

“The Aztec civilization is singled out in revulsion for having made of human sacrifice a religious ritual. Bernal Diaz identifies Uitzilopochtli, “The Hummingbird of the Left,” with Satan, since, without promise of any afterlife, the supreme religious act of his worshippers is the shedding of human blood. Only brave soldiers killed in battle or sacrificed were promised a return, to the earth as hummingbirds, whose plumage was woven into the shimmering raiment of the presiding Aztec officials.”⁴

Lingis goes on to point out the hypocrisy of the Spaniards revulsion for sacrifice given that Catholicism is built on a similarly sanguinary belief system. Only, “on the pyramids of Tenochtitlan, sacrifice had nothing to do with human salvation, nor with attainment of deathlessness through death. The Aztec religion was a religion not of eternity but of time. All the deities were units of time. Each day had its deity, each day was a deity, a deity was a day.”⁵ Lingis calls this a “polyhedron of deities”⁶ and I can’t help thinking of Madden’s “time crystals.”

I did some reading on the internet about Uitzilopochtli – also spelled Huitzilopochtli (from huitzilin, “hummingbird,” and opochtli, “left”). “Because the Aztecs believed that dead warriors were reincarnated as hummingbirds and because the south was

considered the left side of the world, Huitzilopochtli’s name, therefore, meant the Resuscitated Warrior of the South. His *nagual*, or animal disguise, was the eagle.”⁷

So, the eagle is just a hummingbird with a mask on.

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Madden has quite an obsession with the signifiers of death. In a visit to the artist’s studio I see death all around me: in the real fly carcasses which he has painted with skulls, the poorman’s death’s head moth; in a series of collages in which skulls float over cityscapes; and in the proliferation of mummified butterflies and memories of roses. There are butterflies and roses on spikes and stalks, over chairs and stuck in pools of paint, under glass in specimen jars, and being eugenically measured by articulated wooden rulers. These masses of “perfect moments” rustle and bounce in the breeze – the living dead. Recently Madden’s three-dimensional forms, usually black, have agglomerated into towers and cities, which sport the word, in case there was any doubt “Necropolis”, over and over.

“In *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin notes that “portraits were very popular when the camera was first invented as part of a “cult of remembrance,” a kind of ancestor worship.” The *National Geographic* portrait may likewise be related to what Renato Rosaldo calls imperialist nostalgia, that is, mourning the passing of what we ourselves have destroyed.”⁸

“This space of death has a long and rich culture. It is where the social imagination has populated its metamorphizing images of evil and the underworld: in the Western tradition, Homer, Virgil, the *Bible*, Dante, Hieronymous Bosch, the Inquisition, Rimbaud, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; in northwest Amazonian tradition, zones of visions, communication between terrestrial and supernatural beings, putrefaction, death, rebirth, and genesis, perhaps in the rivers and land of maternal milk bathed eternally in the subtle green light of coca leaves. With European conquest and colonization, these spaces of death blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conqueror with that of the conquered.”⁹

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It turns out Madden and I had both read *Reading National Geographic* by Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, an anthropologist and a sociologist. The book thoroughly investigates both the reading habits of the consumers of *National Geographic*, and the editorial policies of the Institution, as it has changed since its founding in 1888. Reading *National Geographic* is an even-handed, if a little dry, study of the magazine, and though the authors never vilify the *Geographic’s* editorial team, they ask many pertinent questions about audiences and power. The magazine’s greatest crime seems to be the sin of omission. For example, the authors gather data on *National Geographic’s* coverage of various countries through certain eras and find that coverage of the Soviet Union was absolutely non-existent from 1945 to 1959. China, which had been a popular subject before Communism, was covered rarely between 1950 and 1976, but returned after Nixon’s famous visit. Likewise, “controversial” articles, for example, on South Africa or Cuba, weren’t a feature until after 1977, when a new editor with a new policy came on board (this also coincided with



articles on environmental degradation).

Anticolonial struggles were never mentioned, rather, “images of Westerners were politely removed from colonial and neocolonial contexts, thereby avoiding uncomfortable questions about the nature of their presence, obscuring the contexts and difficulties of the photographic encounter, and creating a vision of the cultures in question as hermetically sealed worlds – captured only in the sense of captured on film.”¹⁰

The magazine’s emphasis on ritual in the third world is held up as suspect, for, polychromatic exotic appeal aside, ritual is hardly a realistic portrayal of daily life. “The non-Westerner comes to be portrayed as a ritual performer, embedded (perhaps some would read encrusted) in tradition and living in a sacred (some would say superstitious) world (...) this focus on non-Western ritual can be consistent with a view of the other as superstitious or irrational and might be responsible for contempt for the native mind.”¹¹

National Geographic is seen as upholding “classic humanism”, but “the message that we are all alike under the skin takes on new meaning in a social context which denies that discrimination exists or that race has been used to consolidate the privilege of some and oppress others. (...) The tranquil racial spaces of *National Geographic* can only contribute to this willed ignorance.”¹²

The “tranquil racial spaces” in *National Geographic* are made for white people by white people, and “The *Geographic* photographer has always been

This page and following page: Peter Madden, *The Unbuilt Realm of Indeterminapolis* (detail), 2001-2003. Photograph courtesy of the Michael Lett Gallery.

and predominantly remains, both literally and symbolically, a white man. And not just any white man, but the whitest and most masculine version possible: the great hunter/adventurer, free to roam the globe in search of visual treasure, flamboyantly virile in his freedom from observation and evaluation, and his bravery in entering the dangerous realms at the ends of the earth, in continents still dark for most of his audience. While the photographs that we find in the magazine are often gentle, beautiful images of people construed as feminine, the imagemaker – at least as many viewers imagine – looks out on this exotic world from that Marlboro Country where the jaws are all square with a tough growth of stubble and the Indians are all gone.”¹³

Appropriation of appropriation does not necessarily equal liberation, yet I feel confident that Madden has partially solved a difficult equation by making it more difficult.

Madden has always been and predominantly remains, both literally and symbolically, a white man, but not just any white man. With his moustachios and beret, Madden has simultaneously parodied the artistic stereotypes of bygone eras while exhibiting a genuinely shamanistic persona. For the magic and madness that issues from his scalpel has the poetry of ritual. Real ritual, not the stuff contrived for the



vampiric camera. Not since van Gogh lopped off his ear has an artist's knife been put to such good use.

* * *

OK, so it's corny to equate artists and/or schizophrenics with shamans, *but*:

At dinner one night in Tanuki's Cave, a friend of mine said he'd seen something on Australian TV about schizophrenia – and how anti-depressants shut down perception because schizophrenics see more than “normal” people are able to perceive. He said that DMT, a compound which already exists in our brains and is stimulated by ingestion of the Amazonian vine ayahuasca or yagé, has similarities to the schizophrenic world view in which many more “channels” are open than in the “normal” (ie more closed) brain. What was interesting about the programme, according to my friend, now onto his fourth Kirin, was that at no point were any value judgments made as to the irreality of the perceptions of schizophrenics or of those on DMT trips. In fact, if you read between the lines, so said my friend, with a sly smile, the implication was that these other realities do exist concurrently to our own, but in order to maintain equilibrium, our brains block out the unnecessary information.

My partner had read a whole book on DMT trips called *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* by psychiatrist (and weaver!) Rick Strassman, and occasionally he would describe one of the book's weirder encounters to me. For example, one of the male volunteers had hallucinated that he was being raped by giant alligators, a piece of “unnecessary information” which I relayed to the dinner party with great glee. We opined that there should be a new kind of reality show on TV – an *alternate* reality TV show, featuring dramatizations

of DMT trips. Of course, the narrator would be the Crocodile Hunter – that most *baroque* of TV presenters. “Crikey! Tim's getting raped by alligators! Look at the size of that one!”

So how does being raped by alligators relate to Madden? “The Baroque artists know well that hallucination does not feign presence, but that presence is hallucinatory.”¹⁴

Baudrillard has this to say about how technology is turning us all into Schrebers¹⁵:

“...today we have entered into a new form of schizophrenia – with the emergence of an immanent promiscuity and the perpetual interconnection of all information and communication networks. No more hysteria, or projective paranoia as such, but a state of terror which is characteristic of the schizophrenic, an over-proximity of all things, a foul promiscuity of all things which beleague and penetrate him, meeting with no resistance, and no halo, no aura, not even the aura of his own body protects him. In spite of himself the schizophrenic is not, as generally claimed, characterised by his loss of touch with reality, but by the absolute proximity to and total instantaneousness with things, this overexposure to the transparency of the world. Stripped of a stage and crossed over without the least obstacle, the schizophrenic cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks.”¹⁶

Once I saw a Buddhist monk give a lecture about the process of building a sand mandala. Apparently, before any of the work begins, permission is first asked from all the various entities occupying other dimensions. I like this idea. A lot.

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I thought that an article about Madden would be the perfect time for me to revisit a book that has been sitting on my shelf unread for the past four years. *The book is The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque* by Gilles Deleuze. I don't know anything about Leibniz but it struck me that the idea of the fold might be analogous to the thousands of cuts that Madden makes in *National Geographic*; the concatenation of space in which people and places and creatures are folded in on each other.

"The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds... Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity."¹⁷

The first paragraph says it all. And then I got lost. Although, I did enjoy the constant use of the term "invagination" and the suggestion that the word labyrinth is related to labia. Madden's recent rose works have left behind other, inverse works – the books from whence he stole their images have become catalogues of absent blooms, tunneling vortexes of labial "lack". These very feminine "gashes" have become wormholes into other dimensions...

Madden's infinite redeployment of a finite set (the oeuvre extant of *National Geographic*) is a Baroque conceit. It reminds me of a scene in the movie *Amadeus* (admittedly, Mozart was a classical composer, but this anecdote comes early in his career, when he still sported Baroque influences). The rather fruity Emperor Joseph II likes Mozart's latest composition, but says that there are "too many notes!" Mozart sarcastically asks the Emperor to specify which notes he would like him to cut. The *intricacy* is precisely the point.

(I imagine an editor saying to me about this piece of writing, that there are "Too many quotes!")

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The *Geographic's* ubiquitous coloured female nudes are discussed in Reading *National Geographic* (apparently Richard Pryor used to call the magazine the "black man's *Playboy*."). "In addition, black women have been portrayed in Western art and science as both exuberant and excessive in their sexuality. While their excess intrigues, it is also read as pathological and dangerous. In the texts produced within white culture, Donna Haraway writes 'Colored women densely code sex, animal, dark, dangerous, fecund, pathological.'¹⁸

This reminded me of one of the DMT experiences I had read about in an interview with Rick Strassman. "He was right in the beginning of a giant DMT flash, being confronted by a large black female warrior with a spear, who was enraged and astonished to find him in her space. She said something like, "who the hell do you think you are bursting in on me like this?" when the alarm bells started going off on the blood pressure machine. His eyes popped open, terrified."¹⁹

And then I read this the same day (*not in National Geographic*) "A woman steps forward, black, beautiful, naked, her breasts are two enormous overturned flowers, whose cut stems exude a milky sap. Her belly, soft and voluptuous, dances towards me. She lies down on smoking coals and I possess her. Insensible to the pain, she nibbles me, her fluttering lashes sprinkle me with glances. She pants. Claws me and screams her orgasm. Writhes on the ground while, with me still erect inside her, we much viper bones and broken bottles. The sound of our chewing mingles with the clapping and stamping of the onlookers. She vanishes. Trance."²⁰ This is from Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, a one-hit-wonder from postcolonial Mali. It's a violently surreal novel that raised a great deal of ire for its direct plagiarism of many Western novelists – which was seen as duplicitous rather than stylistically intentional (whereas William Burroughs' contemporaneous cut-ups were celebrated as genius).

(Interestingly, the electronic music genre Trance is the most "baroque" music being made today, and its detractors frequently complain of "too many notes.")

Ouologuem again: "Dougouli held out his right arm and instantly Tambira was spellbound. He struck the ground with the end of his amulet: from it arose a mortar full of grain and, wielding the pestle, a woman as powerful as a man, with the calves of a mountaineer.

"Hold out your hand, woman."

Tambira held out her hand and the sorcerer touched it: from it fell a dense rain that upset the mortar and emptied out its grain.

Dougouli struck the ground with the end of his amulet: a white lamb rose up with a look of startled innocence.

"Hold out your hand if you are a woman!"

Tambira held out her hand and the sorcerer touched it: from it arose six hyenas which chased the lamb and brought its torn carcass to Saif."²¹

The sorcerer continues to conjure images and Ouologuem does not differentiate between hallucination and presence. Madden's reassignment of the folds of *National Geographic* is a microcosm of a sorcerer's reassignment of the folds of reality. Madden reinjects liminality back into the sanitized rituals depicted by *National Geographic*. He is the Dionysian artist wreaking intoxicated havoc upon this fine upstanding Apollonian publication.

"Wildness also raises the specter of the death of the symbolic function itself. It is the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly, loose in the forest encircling the city and the sown land, disrupting the conventions upon which meaning and the shaping function of images rest. Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol, the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents. Wildness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified. Wildness makes of these connections spaces of darkness and light in which objects stare out in their mottled nakedness while signifiers float by. Wildness is the death space of signification."²²

Tessa Laird lectures in Contextual Studies at the Manukau School of Visual Arts, and writes whenever she has the time. One of the founding editors of *Monica Reviews Art* and co-founder of *Log Illustrated*, she has also written for the *New Zealand Listener*, *Art on Paper*, *Eyeline* and *LIKE*. Tessa has just started studying again, for her Masters in Intermedia at the Elam School of Fine Arts.

Notes

1. Taussig, Michael, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp.389-390.
2. Ibid, p.443.
3. Conversation with the artist, 4/4/04.
4. Lingis, Alphonso, *Abuses*, University of California Press, 1994, p.9.
5. Ibid, p.11.
6. Ibid.
7. <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/3430/AZTEC.HTM>
8. Lutz, Catherine A. and Collins, Jane L., *Reading National Geographic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p.97.
9. Taussig, op. cit., p.5.
10. Lutz and Collins, op. cit., p.39.
11. Ibid, pp.90-91.
12. Ibid, pp.165-166.
13. Ibid, pp.184-185.
14. Deleuze, Gilles, *The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque*, Trans. Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p.125.
15. There's plenty of information out there about Daniel Paul Schreber, but a good place to start might be Giovanni Intra's review of Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* in *Bookforum*, Summer 2000.
16. Baudrillard, Jean, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Autonomedia, New York, 1988, p.27.
17. Deleuze, op. cit., p.3. I always used to mock people who quoted Deleuze and Guattari in their articles, and their footnotes would say "page 3" because that's as far as they'd gotten. And now I'm doing it myself.
18. Lutz and Collins, op. cit., p.172.
19. Kent, Scotto and James, *Rick Strassman Interview: DMT Research, Elves, Aliens, and More*, <http://www.tripzine.com/features.asp?id=strassman>.
20. Ouologuem, Yambo, *Bound to Violence*, Heinemann, London, 1968, pp.98-99.
21. Ibid, p.127.
22. Taussig, op. cit., p.219.



Peter Madden, *The Unbuilt Realm of Indeterminapolis* (detail), 2001-2003. Photograph courtesy of the Michael Lett Gallery.