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The Thinking Forest Tendrils of Sylvan Thinking

EDUARDO KOHN

The claim I made in my book *How Forests Think*—namely that forests think—is a psychedelic one. From the Greek roots *psyche* and *dēlos*, psychedelics are literally mind manifesting. I was saying this without really knowing that I was saying it. Since then, my work has become more explicitly psychedelic, in the sense that the collaborative research methodology we use with the communities with which I am now working includes psychedelics. When I work on documents with the community, when I try to help them express in writing what they want to say about their relationship to the forest and its many beings—plants, animals, and spirits—and what the forest spirits themselves want to express in these documents, we do so through many means. This is part of my current work to capacitate the kind of thinking that forests express, in the many valences in which it can become manifest.

Part of this collaborative work is with the Sapara Nation, whose home is in the South Central portion of the Amazon region of what today is Ecuador. One of these collaborative projects involves the Sapara political leader and healer Manari Ushigua. With him I've been thinking a lot about sylvan thinking and its relation to esthetics and ethics—the ways in which sylvan thinking helps us see how esthetics and ethics are linked. Sylvan thinking, the kind of thinking that forests do, the kind of thinking that conjoins us to the rest of life, is essentially an imagistic form of thought. I've become convinced that sylvan thinking is a good thing—that we should struggle to hold open spaces for its flourishing. But this leads to the question: what makes a good image?

A few months ago Manari was in Montreal to take part in a research project bringing indigenous leaders and academics together to discuss issues of environmental and

territorial conflict. As part of his visit Lisa Stevenson and I organized a workshop where we screened an experimental film by a really amazing Quebecois artist named Philippe Leonard. The film was about the 2016 Fort McMurray fire in Alberta. He was there during the fire and made a powerful experimental film, one that to my mind went directly into sylvan thought. No context, no explanation, it just took you directly into what it feels like to be a forest under assault. You could sense the spirit-being of the forest as well as the obdurate agencies of the forces of its destruction. I wanted to hear Manari's thoughts about this film because I felt that Philippe, through his film-work, was making an eco-political argument at the level of spirit.

I was excited to hear Manari's comments on the film because I took it to be an instance of image manifesting spirit in the context of environmental destruction. But I realized just how naïve this was of me. Manari's reaction to the film, as he told us, was the sense of becoming literally disembodied: he felt one arm flying off across the room in one direction, another in the other direction, his head floating above, his legs dispersing. Since then I've been reading one of Peirce's lectures on pragmatism in which he discusses the relationship between esthetics and ethics (you might say between art and politics). Peirce thinks of ethics as nested within esthetics. For him, a "good" image is one in which parts come together to form a larger emergent whole. What became interesting for me was that this film that Philippe Leonard showed was clearly a powerful and a good film artistically, and it also certainly had an important—albeit dark—political message. But Manari was saying that it was a *bad* film. It was a bad film in the sense that it was doing bad spirit work, because it was conjuring images/spirits that dissipated the self, ones that were not allowing for the manifestation of a larger self. They were literally breaking Manari

into pieces. This is the opposite of the kind of integration that he is seeking in his spirit eco-politics. I was naively content with seeing the animacy in the film. Manari was concerned with the ethics within this animacy and he insisted that as important as this film was, it should not stand alone. It requires that we find an aesthetic resolution and in practical terms should, in any screening, be followed by another film that would do this. Esthetics, for him, carries an ethical content. For him, art-work and spirit-work are the same thing. The thinking that is happening in the spirit world is imagistic thinking.

This question of the "good" image guides my current work. I've argued that forests think, but now I want to argue that such thinking is good. A thinking forest is a good thing. Of course, forests are good. But I'm explicitly saying that a *thinking* forest is good. It's the kind of thinking that they do and the kinds of thoughts this kind of thinking can generate that makes them good. The important attribute of what a forest is is its thinking quality, and that's what's good. So the question is how do you hold open spaces for that and how do you allow this "sylvan" kind of thinking to flourish? How do you hold open spaces for it in a very practical sense? Part of this involves supporting the kinds of struggles that people like the Sapara face in keeping extraction out of the Amazon. But, at another level, how do you allow sylvan thinking to continue to move through us? This does not necessarily involve literal forests (nor does it necessarily involve psychedelics). It could involve listening to our dreams, being in touch with all these forms of sylvan thought that we as symbolic creatures need also to be able to ignore. So at one level there is an ethics to allowing sylvan thinking to flourish, but at another there still remains the question of how to think ethically both within and around a sylvan mode.

DANIEL STEEGMANN MANGRANÉ

This is something that's concerned me lately. We need to overcome the paradigm we live in, with its Clear-cut division between mind and body, culture and nature. The modern paradigm is clearly exhausted: we are all facing this ecological crisis, but we are not going to overcome it if we don't start thinking differently, no?

E.K.

Absolutely. This is exactly where the project is going. Ecuador is a hub for another kind of eco-political thought. I'm working with a diverse group of people there — artists, activists, lawyers, shamans and political leaders — who are all in some sense saying that re-grounding thought is the way to go. This is a radically different way to think. One of the communities I work with, Sarayaku, calls this change a "*tiam*." *Tiam* is like a flip, a mind flip.

Sylvan thinking ultimately is a form of re-grounding into something more capacious. Ayahuasca can access this ground. You can see the thinking forest and you can see your connection to it. Ayahuasca is impractical. When you take it you become detached from your everyday practical life. It dissipates the self. But that in and of itself is not the end but a rather a means to something else. This Break-up can allow for a semiotic re-grounding in all of these other forms of communication that are embedded ecologically. But the problem is that you still have to do the everyday work of maintaining those embedded relations. Ayahuasca is neither necessary nor sufficient for the creation of this broader relational or ecological self, but it can be an "ally" in this attempt. But I worry about the current Western fascination with psychedelics. Our quest for it might lead us to forget that we already have what we are looking for. So, is it a symptom of the illness or part of the cure?

D.S.M.

I would like for you to talk a bit about your relationship with the rainforest itself. It's clear reading *How Forest Think* that you are very interested in biology. I wanted myself to be a biologist before becoming an artist... Did you want to be a biologist before becoming an anthropologist?

E.K.

Yeah, my fascination with the forest began as a discovery, somewhat by chance. When I was living in Ecuador in the 1980s a friend invited me to a field station in the Amazon and I was mesmerized by this dense, quiet, cool, living network. Then I realized that this is what I really wanted to understand. I have always been interested in biology and have studied it a fair bit. I think certain limitations in my form of thinking and inabilities as a youth to overcome those limitations have kept me from being a biologist. But that's probably for the better because as an anthropologist I have more freedom to think and to think more freely about the kind of thinking that biological life manifests. I see scholarship as art. I see myself as an artist and I think what artists can do is very similar to what anthropologists and scientists can do. Lévi-Strauss says something wonderful in *Tristes Tropiques*. He says that the only "true" disciplines are anthropology, art, well, he says music - and mathematics. All of these allow you to derive the properties of the world from yourself and from your engagement with the world.

What I like so much about the possibility of poetic engagement that science, math and art and anthropology can give us is that they allow a tremendous freedom in the sense that they encourage us to dispel any kind of supposition that we have about what we're engaging with. I think this is somehow harder to do

in some of the natural sciences — although I think good scientists always do it. It's somewhat easier perhaps in mathematics and in anthropology and in art in the sense that you're less constrained. The social sciences need to understand complex social structures. We know just how constrained by them we are and our work is to critique them. But anthropology says: "go have an engagement with the world and allow that engagement to radically disrupt your thinking," right? And I think art does something like that, too.

D.S.M.

What I like about working with art is that it can reconfigure your relationship to reality. The important thing is not what happens inside the show but what happens when you face reality after leaving the exhibition. Art seems to operate in a state of openness.

E.K.

Art is constantly breaking the rules. It's a form of thinking aimed at freeing us from the constraints society places on thought. Of course artists are steeped in their representational traditions and a lot of artistic energy is directed toward reflecting on these traditions. But its freedom from societal constraints lies in its ability to resonate with the world. That's why I think artists can be at the avant-garde. My work resonates with artists because they are already thinking with and like forests. They have the pulse of the planet because they know how to dream. They are the psychic avant-garde. They resonate with what's going on and they know what the problems are.

D.S.M.

It's funny because the title of the show is *Dreaming Awake*.

E.K.

Exactly! That's what art can do because it's unconstrained in that sense. I mean obviously it is constrained. There's good art and there's bad art. Art has its traditions and standards just like any other endeavor. It requires skill and talent and there are power structures to contend with and all that stuff. But nonetheless it privileges resonance and this sylvan mode of thought with which it always operates opens it to sylvan kinds of thoughts.

D.S.M.

I got to know about Peirce while I was doing the Phasmids film. Talking to a friend I realized just how connected biology and semiotics are. Since then I've been thinking about the differences between a fragile and a strong sign. A swastika or a Christian cross is a strong sign in the sense that its meanings are highly historically determined. But you are thinking of signs that are much more fragile.

E.K.

Yeah, I think we are trying to tap into emergent meanings—before they are stabilized. Dreaming traffics in just these sorts of fragile signs. I had a powerful dream a couple of nights ago [see image] What it means is still not fully clear to me. I try to create the conditions to continue to dream with it—often through other imagistic registers like drawing.

D.S.M.

[Laughing] That's a nice dream!

I would like to quote two passages in your book. In one you write:

A more complete understanding of representation, which can account for the ways in which that exceptionally human kind of semiosis grows out of and is constantly in interplay

with other kinds of more widely distributed representational modalities, can show us a more productive and analytically robust way out of this persistent dualism.

And the other reads:

The Amazon's many layers of life amplify and make apparent these greater than human webs of semiosis. Allowing its forests to think their ways through us can help us appreciate how we too are always, in some way or another, embedded in such webs and how we might do conceptual work with this fact.

E.K.

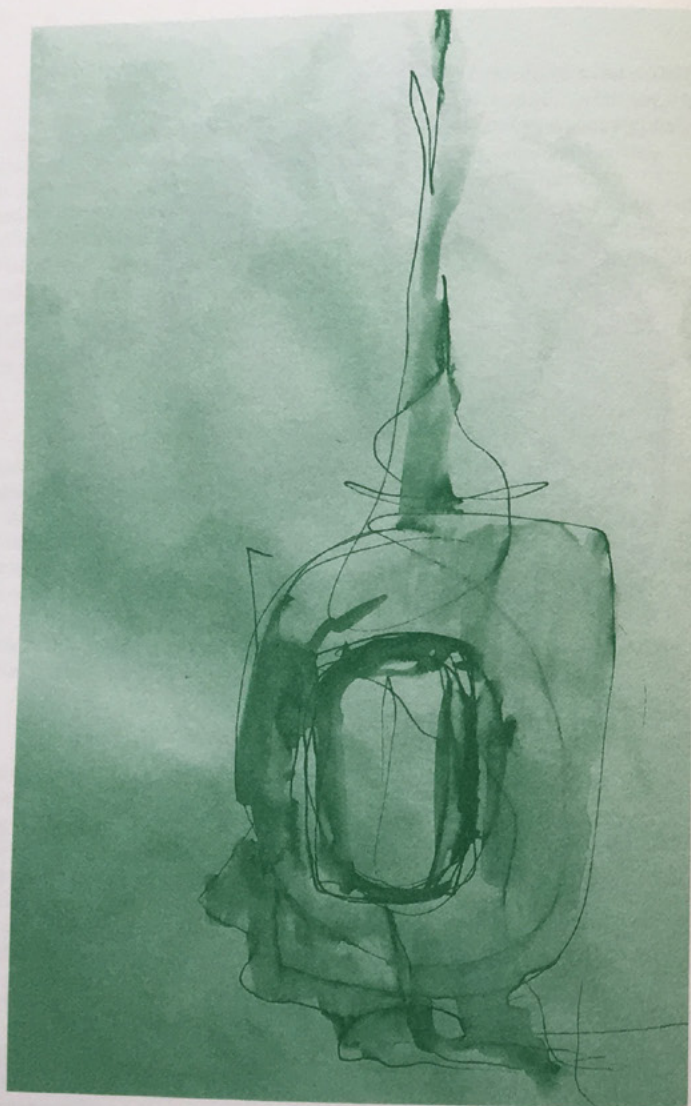
Yeah, the idea here is not to do away with the human, but to understand that what we take the human to be as a particularly special emergent possibility is actually grounded in this larger field of semiotic processes. Any appropriate way of actually thinking new thoughts is always part of this process of immersion into these other forms. When we analytically ignore that we get into trouble. Forests are wonderful reminders of that larger form of thinking. Because they do so much sylvan thinking, they literally come to manifest sylvan thinking. Forests are literally psychedelic—they are mind manifesting. Sylvan thinking exists wherever there is life—human and otherwise—but in a tropical forest you can't but notice it. Such forests make it obvious.

D.S.M.

I was talking with a specialist about the Brazilian Mata Atlantica, the coastal rainforest that is one of the most diverse ecosystems ever known and it's endangered because it is on the coast where everyone lives. To my surprise he told me that this is a super resilient rainforest. It's very difficult to reforest because of its dense web of interactions and interdependencies, but at the same time there



Drawings by Eduardo Kohn



Drawings by Eduardo Kohn

are so many forms of life that it's very difficult to kill it. You can obviously cut it down and then it's gone, but even with all the pressure of millions of people living around, it's still relatively healthy. But what really stuck to my mind is the resilient strength of these "million forms of life," even as they are also all individually quite fragile.

E.K.

This is an interesting thing about what we can call weak semiosis. There's a sense that the symbol is strong and in fact that's why you can still use words that no longer refer to anything real. They're dead but they're still alive in a certain way. But on the other hand, you've got this other form of thinking whose individual threads are much weaker. Dreams are like this. Oh, you had a dream? If you manage to remember it you are still left with figuring out what it means (if anything). But if you pay enough attention to the weak signs that make up a dream, maybe you can understand something. A forest is sort of like this. It has many layers and at some point it achieves a sort of solidity. It is a dense tangle of tendrils of thought that, collectively and in their mutual resonances, becomes quite strong.

D.S.M.

One of the things that really struck me about your book is how it makes clear the ways we create significance through a web of signs that do not belong completely to us.

E.K.

Yes! This gets at my quibble with how in the academic world we usually think about reference. On the one hand there is a world of signs, and on the other the world of things to which signs refer in a contingent and arbitrary fashion. But in this other way of understanding

an animate life-world that I'm proposing, humans are interacting with a whole set of entities that themselves are communicating, signifying, representing. And part of the game is to get that, to enter into that world which is not made by us. And the way to enter it is to listen. It's the listening—not the speaking—that's important. You have to learn to open yourself to something that is not part of your world or way of thinking.

D.S.M.

This also raises a complex question. We start to realize how thought is not only something that happens in our head, but that it is always part of a larger ecology of thoughts, as you describe so beautifully. But how, when we are inside this network of thoughts can we represent this network to ourselves?

E.K.

One of the insights of Amazonian animism is that we are not the only thinkers; we are not the only persons. We are not alone. One of the insights of the Peircian semiotic framework is to insist that all thought is a semiotic process and indeed the self is also a semiotic process. Selves are not thinkers; they are the outcome of thinking. They are fleeting stabilized waypoints in the flow of thoughts. I don't want to completely dissolve the self. I think the self is something real. But the self is the product of semiotic interpretation. It's not the other way around. So it's not like in the Saussurean framework where you have the famous diagram of the talking heads from which thoughts flow. It's not that way. The thoughts think the thinker. When you and I come together in this wonderful conversation, something new emerges in the sense that you are affected by what I say, I am affected by what you say and that new thing—a new self a new us—has emergent properties. You

say something and I'm not a machine that is simply transmitting what you say. If I do, I'm not thinking, right? But when you say something and I digest it and I re-say it in the way that I understand it and thus re-interpret what you're saying in a way that allows you to understand it anew, then all of a sudden there appears an emergent mind., at all sorts of levels A psychedelic moment is the moment of seeing that thought in its emergence, seeing that process and celebrating that as what life is. It's the moment when the emergence becomes manifest to us. A shamanistic esthetic is after this: it looks for the places where disparate things come together and emerge as part of a larger whole. And this matches Peirce's definition of the esthetic: our appreciation of what happens when different things come together as parts of a larger emergent whole. Our sense of being a living self is the feeling of this happening.

D.S.M.

Regarding this idea of thinking together, or thinking with, or being thought through, my experience as an artist is that art objects are somehow alive in and of themselves. They are independent and have their own agendas and they always end up being something that I didn't plan them to be. They resist my attempts to frame them analytically.

E.K.

This is something that I've struggled with a lot. The semiotic framework that I have adopted allows me to say that thought is much larger than the human. It allows me to consider selves in relation to all sorts of dynamics. It allows me to understand something real about the presence of the dead and spirits who all have a certain kind of selfhood. But in my own work, I've been very careful to limit this. Partially I do this intellectually because

I think that the way that agency has been handled academically is to basically extend it to everything. Just because this table in front of me resists my ability to push it or to represent it well in a drawing doesn't give it the kind of agency that I'm talking about semiotically. So this all works very neatly in my theory and I can argue it very cleanly. But it doesn't really fit ethnographically or phenomenologically. In fact, many Amazonians wouldn't necessarily agree with what I am saying. Amazonian animists will consider many kinds of things to be animate that I, speaking semiotically, would consider inanimate. This is a problem. But I reject the anthropological solution. Since Boas and Durkheim, anthropologists have insisted that their task is, as Malinowski put it, to grasp the natives' point of view. That is, we are trying to understand the historically and culturally constructed systems of meaning that people use to make sense of the world. You don't ask whether a spirit is real, you ask how people understand it to be real. Those are two very different questions. So the proper title of my book in that vein would have had been, 'How the Runa *Think* Forests Think', not 'How Forests Think'.

I want to do something else. I want to be able to say that I can think with forests, and those thoughts will not always match up with the thoughts of other humans — because if they did, they would be thoughts fully framed by human culture. In my work it's very important to try to arrive at a certain conceptual closure. Thinking semiotically about sylvan thinking helps me understand things in a new way. I can speak in very precise terms about the semiotic properties of things and I can work with those properties. But I don't have everything fully worked out. I haven't worked out the animacy problem. Although I can tell you why I think so much of the Science and Technology Studies literature is wrong about agency, I also have to confront my very real psychedelic experiences involving

communication with stones! I'm still trying to understand the emergent esthetic position from which this will all make sense.

D.S.M.

I'm talking to stones all day long!

E.K.

That's the thing about being an artist, right? You don't let our limited thoughts about the world stop you from thinking with the world. I always joke with my students that anthropology, in its ability to resonate with the world, is a flaky science. Well, art is an even flakier science and that's good! It's empirical. It's a product of engagement, actual engagement with the world.

D.S.M.

But what about what we could call new subjectivities? In the West we've done so much work to disenchant the world, to remove agency and subjectivity from the world, but now things like Gaia are coming back to haunt us with their own agendas. I'm thinking here of climate change but also of things like the algorithms that are basically ruling our lives, as well as artificial intelligence, which is growing exponentially... What about these "abiotic selves"?

E.K.

Let me first address this from within this semiotic framework; there's also a way to think about this shamanistically. But just in terms of the semiotic tradition, a lot of what we try to delimit as a unit of thought is actually more accurately a distributed kind of thought. The British anthropologist Gregory Bateson, for example, in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* would always emphasize that when you

think of a human thinker as the thinker you're missing the relevant environment. He asks us to consider a blind man walking with a stick, tapping to see where the path is. Bateson asks us to consider where along the stick does the man end and the world begin? His answer is that it's the wrong question.

D.S.M.

It's the wrong question?

E.K.

He says it's the wrong way to approach the question because you can't locate this in any one particular place along the stick.

D.S.M.

Right, it just doesn't end.

E.K.

Bateson also makes a very important distinction between what he calls *pleroma* and *creatura*. *Pleroma* refers to entities that affect and are affected. And *creatura* are those entities for which differences can make a difference. Think of a rock; I'm not talking now in shamanic terms but in semiotic terms. A rock can make a difference for us. We can use it. We can be affected by its properties. But differences don't make a difference to it. They don't affect its internal dynamics or how it acts in the world. Take an organism. Why does it have a skin? Why does it have digestion? Why does it have a head? Why does it have eyes? All of those things — they are the product of differences making a difference that make it what it is. So, even when you are talking about a distributed kind of a mind, there are places where mind-like ways of thinking are appropriate. Think of computers. They are mind-like things. But they're mind-like things

within highly distributed networks that include humans and corporations and capitalism and all these kinds of things. In this sense they are like the blind man's stick, which only becomes a cane in his hands. We still don't know exactly where mind begins and ends, but without that man, there would be no mind there. Computers are still sort of like that. Canes and computers both are and are not like the distributed networks of a forest ecology. The difference between my iPhone and a plant is that even though the iPhone has algorithms that increasingly addict me and destroy my ability to think, nonetheless, it was designed in a very traditional way by someone. It was built. iPhones are completely dependent on that. But a plant is not designed. Its design emerged. It's the thinking that thought it.

D.S.M.

You're ambitious enough to propose a new cultural paradigm that advocates an open world. This comes with its own political beliefs. In this regard, I would like to quote a passage from your book again:

The property that most interests me here is hierarchy. The life of signs is characterized by a host of unidirectional and nested logical properties—properties that are consummately hierarchical. And yet, in the hopeful politics we seek to cultivate, we privilege heterarchy over hierarchy, the rhizomatic over the arborescent, and we celebrate the fact that such horizontal processes—lateral gene transfer, symbiosis, commensalism, and the like—can be found in the nonhuman living world. I believe this is the wrong way to ground politics.

E.K.

If you don't recognize how some of the world's dynamics are nested then you won't be able to understand or work with its properties.

Semiosis is nested; you cannot have symbolic thinking—human thinking—without having the larger, sylvan thinking out of which it emerges. Yet, you can have sylvan thinking without symbolic thinking. This is neither good nor bad. It just is. There are many kinds of dynamics like that in the world. So my point is that, although we strive for a certain kind of equality politically, naming everything as equal in the world is not the way to get there. Yes, we must fight racialized, gendered, and species-specific forms of supremacy but not by appealing to a flat ontology.

That said, I think one very interesting thing about psychedelic politics is that it can disrupt the kinds of hierarchies that get stabilized when we get too caught up in our human nests. Psychedelics break the hold that language has on our sense of who we humans are as selves. They allow us to reground in a denser ecology of thought. In this sense states are similar to human minds. They too are ecologically nested in deeply democratic processes that involve humans as well as nonhumans. But they too can get too caught up in their "nests." Psychedelic politics can disrupt this as well.

So for example, I have been working with indigenous activists from the Amazon. Amazonians have never fully been incorporated into the nation-states in which they now live, their forests have never been fully domesticated, and somehow these two facts are related. A sylvan psychedelic politics, one that grows out of the thinking that forests do can provide a way to disrupt and then reground these "higher" forms—whether they are individual human minds or nation-states, thanks to the relatively more entropic, self-organizing, or anarchic thinking that they encourage. In this sense dreaming is also anarchic. It's auto-poetic. I'm not saying we should do away with our human symbolic capacities. And I am not saying we should do away with the state. I don't think

we can and I don't think we should. But I do think that we can ecologize the state, which would mean to radically democratize it. The goal would be to reconnect us with the playful diversity of all the things that make us a new kind of us. Top-down organization of any kind can kill this potential. Totalitarian regimes at the political level are what depression is at the psychological level. Both are instances in which a higher order mind becomes disconnected from the larger ecology of thoughts that make it mind. They are instances of mind becoming matter. The goal of a psychedelic politics is to break this with the hopes that these selves can re-emerge in a way that is more connected with the sylvan thinking that holds them.

D.S.M.

That's the political question per antonomasia. Who is included when we say "we"?

E.K.

Within an Amazonian ontology of predation as the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro describes it so well, the self, the *I*, is also formed in relation. It's not always clear who is who. Jaguars are not always the predators.

D.S.M.

The perspectival idea that what you are depends on the point of view that frames you is dear to me. Who you are is the product of how you are seen by others. Subjects and objects are not fixed and you are at the mercy of the dynamics of possession and transformation. If you translate this idea to the art world, you have to dispense with the opposition between artworks and viewers. And I think this is a more interesting way of thinking about art and how it operates in the world.

E.K.

The artist's goal is to inculcate—I'm thinking about this a lot in terms of an exhibit that I'm developing in Quito which seeks to capacitate the animacy inherent to a collection of prehispanic ceramic figures. José Gualinga, a brilliant Amazonian philosopher from Sarayaku, likes to say that if the greatest European contribution to the world is the machine, the enduring Amerindian one is the development of a series of technologies for recognizing the selves in the world. Animism encourages a sense of undying curiosity. You never know where the animacy is and you don't know whether it's good or bad. A shamanic ethics involves the inculcation of techniques that can help us try to figure out these things. My goal in creating this exhibit is to create for a viewer the sense that things that seem to be objects may not be objects, that you can learn to listen for the possibility that there may be a person in those figures and that they might—*anachronistically*—have something to say for our times.

D.S.M.

Are you thinking of yourself as an anthropologist when you're doing this exhibition?

E.K.

Well, first of all, I think anthropology *is* art. Let me be clear. And—I'm going to make a claim about what art is and maybe you can correct me—I think art is a particular vehicle, a set of techniques, for engaging with poiesis—not a poiesis that we impose but a poiesis that we can capture, that can capture us—one that we can channel. As an anthropologist I do have my biases. I expand the borders of the human, but I stay with human problems. I'm not a mycologist. I'm ultimately thinking about the role humans play within something

larger. I celebrate the anthropological method—ethnography—a method that involves techniques for immersing oneself in a world that can change how we think. Now of course I expand that because I think dreaming, psychedelics, drawing, film, all of these can be ethnographic techniques that open up how you can listen. I often find myself much more interested in talking to artists or biologists than I do to anthropologists. And these conversations, and those dreams and visions do radically change what it means for me to be an anthropologist and a human, but I'm still an anthropologist (and a human)....



Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 2017.