

THROUGH YOUR TRACE,
THROUGH YOUR SHADOW.

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With this exhibition, Loudgi Beltrame continues his exploration of types of human organization through the history of modernity. His film research has taken him to heavily charged locations such as Hiroshima, Chandigarh or even Brasilia, but, today, the artist is interested in the magic practices of healers in the coastal desert of Peru. In 2015, he met the *curandero* José Levis Picón Saguma, whose work is part and parcel of the continuous story of pre-Columbian healing rituals. His activity as a *curandero*, meaning “healer” in Spanish, might be included in the broader practice of shamanism. José Levis practices this form of vernacular medicine, which verges on something clandestine and secret, in places on the outskirts of cities, at healing ceremonies called *Mesas*. His key plant is the San Pedro, a psychoactive cactus whose earliest traces of ritual use date back some 3000 years.

MESA CURANDERA

— Meeting the healer
José Levis Picón Saguma

It was in 2012, during the shooting of the film *Nosotros también somos extraterrestres*, at the Nazca lines in Peru, that I first visited *El Brujo* (The Wizard), an archaeological site on the Pacific coast which would involve me in arranging an on-screen meeting between the Peruvian healer José Levis Picón Saguma and the French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud. The topography of the site immediately conjures up for me that of the Normandy beach featuring in the final sequence of *The Four Hundred Blows*, where, 57 years earlier, François Truffaut filmed the escape from a reform school of his hero Antoine Doinel, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, then aged 14. The image of Léaud as he is today is gradually formed in my mind, making his way across that vast sandy necropolis, along with the need to re-enact in it the film’s original scene, at the antipodes in space and time, shifting from North to South, and from 1959 to 2015.

Jean-Pierre Léaud agreed to re-enact the role from his early years, but on the sole condition, dictated by his fondness for magic and the

occult, that he could get in touch with a Peruvian healer (*curandero*). This is how Léaud’s wish radically altered the course of the film, and led me to encounter José Levis Picón Saguma, a shaman conducting *Mesas*—collective healing ceremonies organized around the ritual use of the psychoactive San Pedro cactus. A health problem forced Léaud to cancel his trip a few days before filming began, so I called on Picón and asked him if his shamanistic practice would enable him to physically make up for Léaud’s absence. By way of response, Picón invited me to take part in a *Mesa*, during which he undertook a series of actions intended to restore the actor’s health and invoke his presence. After the session, the healer agreed to represent Léaud in the reconstruction of the film’s famous final sequence, bringing an unexpected ritual dimension to the project. Back in Paris, I filmed a once again healthy Léaud in a mirror sequence, from Place de Clichy to the Gare du Nord. The meeting between the two characters, Jean-Pierre Léaud and José Levis Picón, finally materialized on screen in the film *El Brujo*. This is how I became a vector between two subjectivities: that of the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud and that of the healer José Levis Picón, who would in his turn prompt me to question his activity and embark on a lengthy collaboration.

— Experimenting with José Levis Picón's healing practice: *la Mesa*

In 2016, I thus returned to Peru to spend time with José Levis, talk about his practice, and take part in various *Mesas*. During that stay, I suggested that I film his work. Despite the necessary secrecy surrounding the practices of the *curanderos*, Picón agreed. In his view it was time to record a practice and a system of knowledge suffering from the “vogue of shamanism”, and from the growth of psychedelic tourism driven solely by the lure of profit, and not involving any real apprenticeship.

The practice of the *curanderos* interests me as a form of post-colonial resistance. The syncretism that hallmarks it can be analyzed as an adaptive camouflage developed by people to help them survive first the inquisition, and then colonial repression. The current use of key plants and the pre-Columbian pharmacopoeia can also be read as one of the manifestations of this resistance. The contemporary form of this traditional medicine is typical of the successive cultural influences which have been present in this territory, thus shedding light on the permanence of pre-Hispanic elements associated with shamanistic practices, which are based, in particular, on the use of psychotropic plants.

The collective *Mesa* ceremony is based on a very precise choreography led by the healer and his assistants. It is performed for **seven hours in total darkness** with a group ranging from ten to forty patients who have ingested the San Pedro decoction. It is based on a variety of performative aspects: the **performativity of language** at work in the diagnoses and invocations of the *curandero*, as well as in his whistles and chants—words, song, music, and whistles all heal; and the **performativity of magic objects** handled by the assistants throughout the session. Various contemporary and pre-Columbian objects, images, minerals, shells, and plants are set on a sheet spread on the ground before the ritual, following the maestro's instructions. The space formed by the arrangement of these active objects is also called a *Mesa*, a Spanish word meaning table; as well as on the **performativity of the bodies**—the dances and magic gestures construct an organized **choreography**. Each participant ingests the San Pedro decoction, prepared by cooking the

Trichocereus Pachanoi cactus, which is the **key healing plant**.

The ceremony takes place in complete darkness, because the slightest source of light, be it a candle, cigarette, or wood fire, hampers the *curandero's* vision and the circulation of the active forces within the ritual area. It was important for me to deal with an initial paradox: how to represent what takes place outside the field of representation? If the *Mesa* is a performative space/time-frame which does not correspond to any system of representation, unlike a play or a religious mass, how can the invisible be recorded? When I put this question to José Levis Picón, he replied that the technique was my business. He suggested I spend two months with him and his community at Chincha, in southern Peru, to shoot the film *Mesa curandera*, and travel around with him, his assistants and a small group of patients in the Huancabamba mountains, in the northern Andes, near Ecuador, where 25 mountain lakes have been venerated since the pre-Columbian period. Mountains and lakes are personified. Certain stones, water, and a wide variety of medicinal plants which grow in this region are endowed with therapeutic and magical virtues. We agreed to meet up again in 2017. Meanwhile, it was up to me to find the technological wherewithal.

— Filming the invisible

I did not want to involve to any military imagery or any other dominant viewpoint, so I ruled out the idea of working with a night-time surveillance camera. I ended up by modifying an HD camera as a “full-spectrum” camera and developing a system of infrared lighting invisible to the naked eye, enabling me to film without affecting the darkness shrouding the ceremonies. I filmed the *Mesas* for two months. The first nights of filming were overwhelming. The healer duly recommended that I alternate filming with healing nights during which I would take an active part in the ceremonies, without filming. That helped me to switch perspectives, as well as develop my relations with the community of patients and assistants, by sharing intense dance moments and conversations. I filmed for twelve nights.

— Photographs

So, I travelled to Huacabamba in northern Peru with José Levis Picón,

who wanted to let me have access to a “comprehensive knowledge” of his practice. We swam in the sacred lakes and took part in a *Mesa* conducted by another healer. Those regular trips to Huacabamba give José Levis Picón a chance to be cleansed and recharged. With a medium-format analog camera I photographed the powerful *lagunas* as well as the healer's garden, with its mixture of medicinal plants and active objects. That photographic equipment was complemented by pictures taken at Chincha in José Levis Picón's ceremonial area, in particular recording the preparation of the San Pedro cactus and the arrangement of objects for the *Mesa*.

— One Mesa in twelve nights

Back in France with that important material, including more than 80 hours of rushes, I mixed the twelve night in the editing and emerged with a film of two hours and fifty minutes using the typical structure of the *Mesa* ceremony. The pink colour of the image accentuates the immersive dimension of the film, whose length considerably surpasses the time it takes to visit an exhibition.

— Documentary drawings

It took a long time to edit the film. During those interminable hours spent viewing and analyzing the image and the sound, I took lots of notes. Those notes sometimes turned into drawings, documenting from memory the visions, enchantments and other arrangements of the *Mesa*.

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