

Talking with Donna and Manuel Torres:

AllChemical Arts Conference Interview

Interviewed by Jon Hanna and Sylvia Thyssen

Jon: In Palenque you mentioned to me that you teach a course that specifically addresses psychedelics?

Manolo: Yes, I teach a course that I titled “Art and Shamanism.” What I do is I divide that course into plants. I first introduce classical Siberian shamanism. Then I start with peyote and its use by the Huichol, and then take peyote and its use by the Native American Church, and contrast them, that shift that happened from a more native shamanism to a sort of organized religion. Then I do art related to mushrooms. By “art” I mean whatever phenomenon manifests; like María Sabina’s story. From there I do snuffs—I cover native snuffs in different areas, and in pre-Colombian times; in archaeological and in modern, contemporary times. Then I do San Pedro cactus, and the art that related to that. It’s a whole overview of shamanism related to psychoactive plants in the Americas, and the art it generates. I get a lot of people taking that class.

Jon: I’m sure there would be a strong interest in it. How did your work with shamanic art lead you to produce the AllChemical Arts conference?

Manolo: It has been an interest of both of us to do a conference like this, for years. Then last year, in Palenque, I gave a talk on contemporary art and psychedelics, and after the talk, Terence said to me, “Well, let’s do it.” And I figured well, with the help of Terence, I can do it—we can do it.

Jon: Donna, your own background is specifically as an artist, and someone who is influenced by these plants, but your artwork is not really influenced in the same manner as someone like Alex Grey, as far as depicting the visionary experiences. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

Donna: Sure. What I am doing is using my artwork as sort of a learning experience, a kind of exploration. Right now I’m working on this series; each one will be about a specific plant. In a way it allows me to go and find out about the plant: to find out its history, the history of its use. I can incorporate the artifacts and so forth that were used for that plant—I can delve into contemporary use. So while there’s a final end-product, the *process* that is involved in getting to the final end-product is equally meaningful to me.

Jon: So there’s a learning experience about each plant. Your work to me seems based in kind of a documenting archeological or botanical...

Donna: Yes, but I always bring in the contemporary. It’s never strictly an archeological thing. Except, I guess it’s sort of an archaeological process, where I have to research the plant, to find out about it.

Jon: Some of your paintings appear as though they have several windows or scenes, that all relate to the central subject...

Donna: I definitely work a lot in narrative. There’s a lot of story-telling that’s going on, and it’s all brought into the final product. Right now I’m working on the project that deals with plants. But other times the picture is the complete narrative going on, all within itself...

C. Manuel (Manolo) Torres teaches History of Art at Florida International University in Miami. His wife, Donna, is an artist inspired by visionary plants. In 1999 Manolo, along with Terence McKenna and Ken Symington, organized the AllChemical Arts conference in Kona, Hawaii. Over lunch by the ocean, we discussed the creative influence that psychedelics can have on a variety of artistic pursuits.

Jon: Are some of the pictures inspired by your own experiences with the plants, as far as the narratives that they are telling?

Donna: Sometimes they relate to things that I have gone through myself, or just things that I want to find out about.

Jon: So in producing this conference you've pulled together an amazingly diverse group of people. And what interests Sylvia and me is *how* psychedelics can be so effective in the creative process in so many different areas. What inspired you to invite the people that you have here? Some of them seem fairly obvious, like Terence McKenna, Alex Grey, and Robert Venosa, but certainly—at least to me—others were much less obvious, like Bruce Damer and Mark Pesce, and the musicians Constance Demby and Ben Neill. People I haven't even heard of, or wasn't aware that their work had been affected by psychedelics.

Manolo: Well, I'll speak about personal interest. It's not a value judgement. But I think that there is an approach of art, let's say, of the so-called visionary art, in which you try to represent what you have seen in your experiences. And put it out for others to see. But, there is, I think, another way of using psychedelics, which is as a way of *working*. I mean, how has this influenced not only the appearance of things, but also your choice of subject, how you structure the work, ideas about what you are learning. The actual making of the art piece is not to show what you know, but more as a *way* of living what you know. And hoping that the process of viewing the piece will motivate the audience into making an inquiry for themselves. So that instead of being a passive viewer, where you stand there and say, "Oh, what a beautiful aesthetic impression I'm receiving," it can propel you into or provoke you into thought in different areas, where you say, "Oh, I want to know about that," and then you go and do it yourself, rather than just lay there like a cow in the pasture.

Donna: Also I think that the beautiful aesthetic is what draws you in, and *then* it's time to explore.

Sylvia: Do you think that psychedelically-inspired art inherently has a tendency to be more engaging?

Donna: No, but I think that all *good* art would have a tendency to be engaging.

Manolo: All good art would have a tendency to be engaging, yes. I think that you put it right. To be engaging, and to make you want to know more about it.

Donna: And to also spend time with it. Because if you are looking at a really incredible painting, you don't just look

at it and walk away. You have to be engaged into the different parts of it...

Jon: Somebody had said in one of the talks, I think that it was Mark Pesce or Bruce Damer, I can't remember which... when you are on the computer and in these virtual worlds [see www.activeworlds.com], all of a sudden you're no longer in your room. You're no longer in the place that you actually *physically* are, you're somewhere else. Your mind goes somewhere else, and it is interacting in those situations. And I think that's something that *good* art does, certainly, when you're viewing it—even if you're not the person who created it. I know that when I do art myself, I get into that state where I lose awareness of my surroundings and I'm only interacting with the painting. And I think that good art does that for the viewer also. You get lost in a state of unawareness of your surroundings, and only retain an awareness of your interaction between you and the image.

Manolo: Yes, but, to take it one step further; what happens when you disengage from that interaction, and then you proceed to go home?

Donna: Yeah, there should be almost like some kind of nutrition there, some kind of food.

Manolo: How does the art work inform the way you live? Generally in the West we tend to think of art as something like the people who go to church on Sunday. You know, you go to the museum, you go to the gallery, and then you go home. And so *what*? What else? What else is going on? Has it changed the way that you deal with your partner, with your children, with the people that you work with? I mean, how is this affecting the fabric of your life? Which I think is what psychedelics do, unto themselves. I mean as a drug, without necessity of the image. But if you are making images in this respect, how can the image, or whatever it is that you do, the music, provide an analogous effect?

Jon: I agree that an inspiration to action is of primary importance. There has been some talk of Burning Man at this conference, and I think that this is something, from being at Burning Man myself... that the whole event itself is very psychedelic. And I know that it's fueled by psychedelics in a lot of cases. After that event—coming home—I feel very inspired to do more creative works. For a lot of people it is a life-changing event. I see it as a spiritual pilgrimage, where you get recharged with all of these creative energies—from taking psychedelics, but also really just from being in an environment where there are so many people doing so many different creative things, and *not* for the love of money. They burn most of their sculptures after they have made them. And that's a cathartic experience also.

Manolo: And it is not only what you get out of it, but how is that going to provoke you into you yourself beginning to modify your life along those lines? Because I think that this is when the effect comes in... How, when you say—like after a big psychedelic trip—say, “How am I going to modify my life to fit into those parameters that have affected me so much?” Or am I going to just go home and go to sleep for a few days, when the effect passes away? What is the permanent thing here? You know, I ask myself, not what is the function of art in life in *general*; let’s restrict it to our own community. What function could art serve in this community, *beyond* illustrating altered states? How can we make it be as important as the work that Sasha does, let’s say? That’s what concerns me. I’d like to see how art can have, really, these practical applications the same way that a new substance that Sasha invents. Because, you know along these lines you could see Sasha as a sculptor. As a sculptor who is modeling that which is going to have a particular effect, and then it is going to go out and modify lives, and change things around. So how can art be that kind of vehicle? And have that impact—that’s going to make you change jobs. Change what you do. You know, however good the aesthetic experience is—it’s like I’d invite you here to a banquet, and all of the food is plastic. It looks good when you come over, maybe the arrangement is like sushi, or whatever, but then when it’s time to eat, there is nothing more beyond the surface appearance. You get a lot of that in the art world in general. I don’t mean in psychedelic art at all, but in the art world in general. There’s a beautifully done technical picture, let’s say, a painting or a photograph, or whatever. But what else? What are you using those skills for? Suppose you could teach a child that doesn’t know how to speak to enunciate beautifully. No language, just to beautifully enunciate and pronounce. But there is no language behind it. It is just beautiful syllables following one another, beautiful intonations that might be very pleasing to the ear, but you have wasted the biggest opportunity of all that that implies; that is *communication*, exploring ideas with that language. That’s where I think art fails many times. It just stays at the level of beautiful intonations, and it doesn’t use those beautiful intonations as language.

Sylvia: Well, one of the presenters mentioned the idea of artists mapping places that they go to. Maybe if more people were doing that, it could be like what has been happening for years with the Lycaenum or Erowid, where

people are encouraged to write trip reports. So, doing in the visual arts what people have been doing in words.

Manolo: Yeah. I think that a way where artists could be valuable in our area is as map makers. Imagine 16th Century cartographers who were setting out for the first time, venturing away from the coast, and beginning to triangulate their positions. I think that a big conceptual change that happened, is that before, you were just in your boat along the coast. But at one point you became an individual in relation to points—you have stars here, the moon there. And then you created in a certain way, your identity in space. Here you are in relation to the environment, and if you know this relationship to the environment then you don’t need the coast. You can venture out. And you became an individual. You became a person existing in that space, without then the need of maps, even. But in the beginning you need some cartographers, or adventurers, to go out there and effectuate this. I see that art in our area could have this function. People would venture out and try and establish physical relationships in the landscape, the psychedelic landscape in our case, and then provide a map—not a guide—because a map is an active thing that you use. A map is not a passive activity. When I give you a map, you have to locate yourself within that map, and work. It is not a matter of passive viewers, but of active viewers using the maps provided by these artists/cartographers, if you want to call it that.

What’s much more interesting for me than the activity of exploration is the actual creation of a world. Because of what I see when we look at archeological material. These people are not *only* observing what’s there, and then putting it in their art. The process of art making is the process of *also* creating the territory. I mean, not that the whole territory is created, but *part* of the territory is created by the process of art making. It is not only a process of observing and then recording, but it is also a processes of creating cultural values.

If you look at American art—you know, just like regular American art. Let’s take a really traditional artist like Edward Hopper. You know—it’s America. I mean, it’s not that he recorded America—he *made* America. That’s how we remember it. If you say, well... the US in the ‘30s, let’s say, or whenever. You know you don’t know any politicians. At least *I* don’t remember anybody that was there.

What function could art serve in this community, *beyond* illustrating altered states? How can we make it be as important as the work that Sasha does, let’s say? That’s what concerns me. I’d like to see how art can have, really, these practical applications the same way that a new substance that Sasha invents.

But you remember that Hopper was there, and Steinberg was describing things, and Faulkner was creating—*creating* the US, in their own literature. And *that's* what counts. The rest is... Well, you know. That's what I think we can do also, for our interest.

Jon: The creative process not so much as a mere historical documentation, but as actually creating the history itself. It's not *just* documenting it—it's an active part of creating what the history actually is.

Manolo: And integrating identity. I mean not only the collective, but individual identity.

Sylvia: In light of that, one of the exciting things that I've been seeing happening at *this* event is that presenters are getting turned on to what other presenters have been doing. And then they want to go home and disseminate that information in their communities. That's been really exciting, because it's a cross-pollination of all of these different media.

Jon: As well, this event has impressed me a great deal because the people that I've been meeting here are extremely creative; and this is not just the presenters, but the audience also. This is an incredible group of people that has gathered here. I hope that you can continue to do this event, and pull new faces in. There are many more people than I was aware of using the creative influence of psychedelics in a *lot* of different fields.

Manolo: I know. This is only scratching the surface. And as far as the diversity that you had asked about first—that was an idea that we had from the start. We didn't want to bring just painters, or just sculptors. We wanted to have as much of a scope of the arts as we could.

Jon: In the past with psychedelic seminars there's primarily been a focus on the science: anthropology, chemistry, and botany. And for me, one of the things that has gotten a little tiring with that is seeing the same faces, giving the same presentations. If you go to a few of these events you start feeling like you've already seen it. And then it just becomes a social thing, where you're going there because you can hang out with people that you enjoy having discourse with. But you're not getting very much new. The scientific world in this area seems to progress at a certain speed, and so—if you have a conference *every year*, maybe there isn't that much new to report on that has happened in all of those scientific areas. But under the rubric of creativity, there are so many more people who have been affected by these things. It's a *huge* pool of people to tap from, in all different areas. And I think that you have a much better chance of not getting stale with the event.

Donna: I'm also really happy that we have had such a good

amount of women participating, both as presenters and as audience.

Sylvia: Yeah. This is the most women that I have seen at one of these sorts of events. It looks to be about 50/50.

Manolo: And the presenters also—we tried to have as many women as possible.

Donna: And it's pretty interesting, this whole thing of "couples" that has kind of arisen out of this. Because so many people are working together, collaborative...

Manolo: There is Leslie and Tom Thornton, and then there's also Steina and Rudy Vasulka, and Martina Hoffmann and Robert Venosa.

Jon: And you guys. And that's inspiring to me, also. Because it seems like I've seen so many couples that are involved in this area—and maybe it's just a reflection of the world of divorce in general—but it seems like I've seen so many couples that are involved in this area that *have* gotten divorced, and don't stay together. Then to see something like this event where there are a lot of couples that really *are* committed to each other, and committed to this work... That's a nice shot in the arm, as far as getting the feeling like, "Lives *do* work out, and *can* work out."

Manolo: They do! Well, this is our 26th—the 12th was our 26th wedding anniversary. And Tom and Leslie have been together for 23 years. And Alex and Allyson Grey have been together for like 25–26 years. It's kind of odd in this day and age.

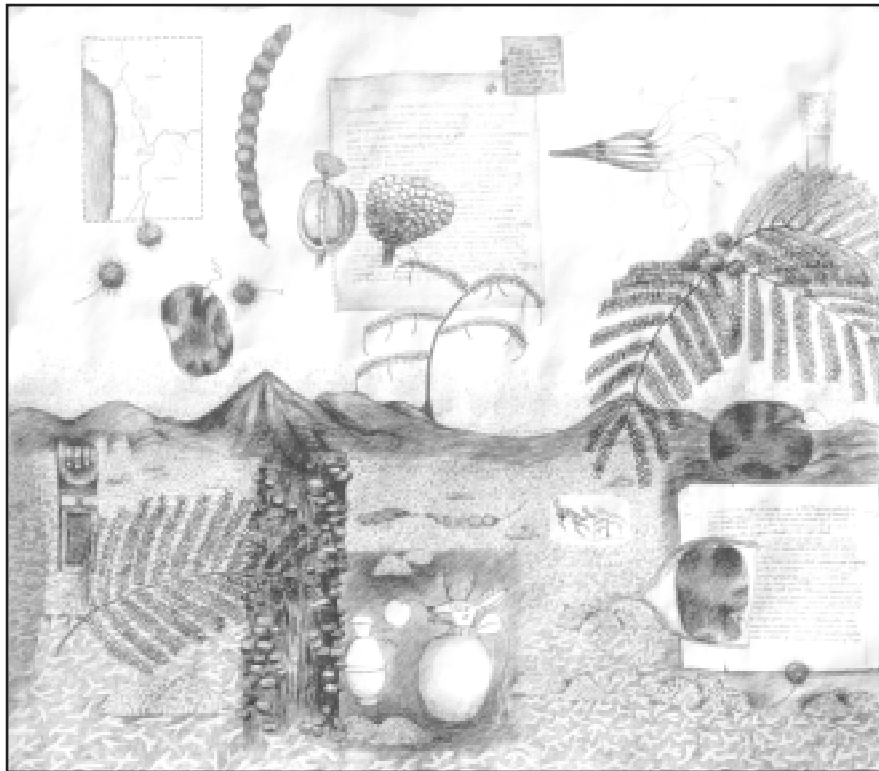
Jon: And part of what ties these couples together is the shared interest in the creative effect that psychedelics can have on their art. And of course that's what brought us all here—this interest.

Manolo: There definitely is an interest in the creative effect of psychedelics on art, perhaps in part because it has been a neglected aspect of psychedelic studies. Except for in the very beginning there was that Masters and Houston book. And it was basically poster art, I think, with a little bit of other things. But the emphasis was on psychedelic art at that time, which was graphic arts. Nobody has done anything since. But if you look out into the art world—like when you were hearing Ben Neill, let's say, talk about music—lots of musicians are on junk, and there are others who were doing psychedelics. We've talked to Leslie and Tom, and the same is true in the New York art world. Everywhere that you turn it's the same thing. One of the motivations that I thought is sort of like a side-effect of this conference; in a certain way it is sort of a political statement. Here we have successful people who have made important contributions to their fields, and psyche-

delic drugs have been an integral part of that contribution. They have taken drugs that are so maligned in the “War on Drugs,” and have made a positive contribution to culture. I think in that way, just as an example by demonstration, all of these artists here demonstrate the validity of drug use in relation to the creative act.

Jon: And *really* demonstrate it, in that—certainly with *some* of them—nothing that they are doing would have been done if it wasn't for this drug use. It's affected them that strongly. I mean you can't imagine that Alex would be painting the paintings that he is doing now, if it wasn't for his drug use. And the same thing with Mark Pesce. His use of psychedelics really solidified the manner in which he thought about creating the code for virtual reality construction. When we asked him about that, he said that it just wouldn't have happened if he hadn't done psychedelics. His drug trips were inexorably linked to what he was doing.

Manolo: And I think that those are the long-lasting effects; I mean the long-lasting effects that have filtered out into life. Another thought that we had in doing this conference, was the idea that we keep marginalizing ourselves. In a certain way we enjoy the margins, which is fine. I do myself enjoy the margins. But it is an easy position for us to take, and it makes it easier for the powers that control regular daily life. Because we are in the corner, and we are the freaks or the weirdos, and not the people who teach in the universities, who exhibit in the galleries, who invent important computer languages, and stuff like that. So they say, “Oh no, the only people who do drugs are those freaks over there, they are just the derelicts of society.” It's easy; we make it easy for them by allowing for that view to persist. But it's a lie. And I think that is an important thing. I think that one good element that we can have against the War on Drugs is to demonstrate that all of these contributions have been made. And that we are *not* just marginalized people. That we sort-of can live in the



DONNA TORRES
DRAWING I — ANADENANTHERA
FROM PLANTS I HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED, 1998
charcoal on paper

margin, and attack the center, and come back to the margin with these contributions that would affect everyone.

Jon: And that it's moral. There's so much of a feeling, I think, by the general public, that “drug use is immoral.” None of these people who I'm seeing here are immoral. Nothing that they are doing... In fact, they *are* moral.

Manolo: We are the *most* moral people! (laughs)

Sylvia: So what kind of surprises came up for you as this was coming together, maybe the first couple of days of the event. Because this is such a new kind of conference. Was there anything that you can think of?

Manolo: Not surprises, but more like wishes that were fulfilled. In that sense of bringing together—like what you said about the variety of people that have come—new people who are not known. Many people who are involved in artistic activities *are* in the audience, and how much audience participation there has been.

Donna: And also how much they are willing to share with you afterwards. People come up to you and talk to you and share what they are doing.

Manolo: Yeah, that has been the best surprise. How the “audience” interacts. That was the initial idea of having panels, was the basic idea that the audience could talk to the artists. Because at first we said, “Let's have workshops.” But workshops are very complicated in the sense of materials, and all that stuff.

Donna: We would have had to have different rooms. We would have had to then figure out whether to have simultaneous sessions, and that's always a drag if you

don't want to miss anything. So we just opted for this panel idea. What we had really hoped was that the speakers would enter into some kind of conversation first, and then the groups would come in. But it hasn't quite worked out that way, and it's probably also due to the fact that most of these speakers have met each other here, and so they haven't really had time to develop some kind of rapport that would lead to some kind of interesting conversation. But that had been our original idea—to have the presenters enter into some kind of conversation, and then open it up to the audience.

Jon: One thing that I think is nice too is the number of “audience” members who actually brought something with them to show, some of their own work—whether it's a portfolio, or slides...

Manolo: That's something that we decided to do with the free time—have a room available where conference participants could share their art with each other.

Sylvia: Well, it's been fabulous to speak with you both about the issues of art and creativity, and thanks, too, for putting on such a great event. We hope that you do decide to have another one in the future. •

The AllChemical Arts Conference speakers were Galen Brandt, Lewis Carlino, Bruce Damer, Constance Demby, Alex Grey, Martina Hoffmann, Terence McKenna, Ben Neill, Mark Pesce, Tom Robbins, Annie Sprinkle, Leslie Thonton, Manolo Torres, Woody Vasulka, Steina Vasulka, and Robert Venosa. For a pictorial taste of the event visit www.digitalspace.com/worlds/fan-terencem/allchem.html.

The interest in gatherings around the topic of psychedelics and creativity is not limited to North America. In April 2000, the theme of the IV International Congress on Entheogens convened by Dr. Josep M. Fericgla in Barcelona, Spain was “Modified States of Consciousness, Creativity, and Art.” For more on this event, see www.pangea.org/fericgla/jornadas.



A Fungal Foray

by Alex Bryan

AFTER TWO DAYS of traveling from the Florida Keys, I found myself in their geographic and social opposite: Colorado, at the Twentieth Annual Telluride Mushroom Festival. I had

volunteered to help Carla Higdon, MAPS' Director of Community Relations, distribute information and generate support for the Psilocybin/OCD study being conducted at the University of Arizona. And after the flat, hot, conservative climate of Florida, the cool verticality of the Rockies was a contrast that took some getting used to.

On Thursday night the conference opened with an invocation, music and poetry, dedications, and an orientation. The first thing on the schedule for Friday was the six a.m. foray. After almost missing my ride up into the mountains in the dark, I found myself picking my way through a dew-soaked fairyland at sunrise, surrounded by majestic beauty. The conditions this year were less than perfect for our fungal friends, so the fruits of my own search were minimal, but the seeking was as fun as the finding. Nevertheless, by the end of the weekend the specimen tables were overflowing with identified species of gourmet mushrooms. To our delight the talented chef incorporated them creatively into our evening meals.

The weekend progressed with presentations by renowned experts such as Andrew Weil, Paul Stamets, Sasha Shulgin and Ann Shulgin. Friday night there were spectacular performances of rap, didjeridu, tabla and sing-alongs, followed by the Mushroom Rave dance party. Certainly the highlight was the annual parade on Saturday afternoon when we took to the streets in full mushroom regalia—dancing, drumming and chanting our way down Main Street to the town park, where the festivities continued until dinner was served in the outdoor pavilion. The creative influence of psychedelic mushrooms was quite clear, to both participants and viewers of this celebration. The positive momentum of the festival peaked, and for one golden afternoon we were a happy mushroom family, gathered together in the summer sun to celebrate our mycological heritage.

We were quite successful in our own efforts to raise awareness and support for the University of Arizona study, collecting \$2,125.00 and many new MAPS members in the process. This money will go towards the purchase of the psilocybin needed for this project, and we are grateful for the generosity of those who are making it happen. •