

This conversation between Ernesto Neto and Rirkrit Tiravanija took place in July 2026.

RT: I was looking into the philosopher from the book that you mentioned you were reading.

EN: I don't know how I first came across Vilém Flusser's writing, but *The Philosophy of the Black Box* completely fascinated me. I ended up buying four copies to give to friends so we could discuss it. I also tried reading *The History of the Devil* a couple of times without much success. Then, about a month ago, I picked it up again, and suddenly it just flowed. It's an incredible book, written in 1965, yet it feels remarkably current. I love the way Flusser approaches the subject.

There is something very strong about this dimension, between Western and Eastern society from Vilém Flusser's point of view, and many things from Eastern society that he brings to the table in a way you can pretty much connect with the Indigenous people from Brazil. I think there is a kind of education about living, about good things in life. Enjoying the time you have breathing, which is not valued very much by Western society. Nowadays, a lot of production time and all these objects that we begin to add are needed, more and more. For example, we didn't need cellphones 20 years ago. Now we can't live without them.

RT: We still don't need the cellphone. But you know, what is interesting is that Flusser used to work in the radio factory. He was like a worker in the radio factory, and that's when he became interested in technology. That was part of the introduction I read, which was saying that he's interesting because he talks a lot about the effects of technology on life.

EN: *The Philosophy of the Black Box*, is all about that. This idea that we have the photographic machine, photographic apparatus, we are its users, and then there are the people who programmed it. And basically, they believe that they are in a superior situation in relation to us, because we can only do what they've programmed us to do. But on top of them are the company executives, and on top of them there will be the owners, and then the industrial park, and these big economic fields. Until you get to people like Elon Musk, or Jeff Bezos, those kinds of guys that think that they run the world. But in reality, the position is that the machines are already running the world, and we are all a bit like puppets in this machine world.

But *The History of the Devil* is written in a very poetic way. There is an objectivity, but the writing is very much subjective. There is a flux of life and we are alive, but there is a situation where we become trapped by this world of technology, and this would be the world of the Devil, who invented time and the phenomenological world. He would be the guy who really drives Progress, and Lust would be this flux of life. This fountain of desire. Life lives from life, desire is life and brings passion. At some point, it also arrives at a kind of nationalism, as nationalism would be a kind of sublimation of sex. But at the same time there is always a kind of duel between Lust and inhibition. Then, this situation of Lust at some point arrives at Anger, another of the seven deadly sins. As I understand it, Flusser says that in that time we were in a strong spiritual connection with nature, and to mediate that relationship, we developed gods and spirits, through respect, dances and prayers and things like that.

And then humanity or at least one part of humanity, begins to question this flux and begins to develop Science, which is the fruit of the Anger. And with science comes technology and along with a massive production of different tech objects, comes Gluttony. And then people

begin to eat everything, and producing more technology and more machines, and then we become more dependent on all these machines. You know, it's funny, because I say that, but we're having this conversation through a machine, through a satellite, so we wouldn't be able to have this conversation without technology. Where are you, by the way?

RT: I'm in Chiang Mai [Thailand]. But I was just in Mongolia, which is kind of the total opposite of everything, right? First of all, they don't have that many people. Second, the population is quite young. And third, most people live concentrated in the main city. So people outside of Ulaanbaatar are nomadic, they live in tents and move around with the cattle and other animals. It's kind of amazing because it's a completely different idea of what life is. Which is like, in the morning you take the animals out, in the evening you bring them back, and milk them. And basically, from the milk, you make things to eat, you make soup, you make alcohol, you make yogurt. They have cars and things, but there are no roads. You just drive out in the field, it's quite an experience.

Anyway, I shot a film when I was there seven, eight years ago. And I asked a young musician student of mine to make the soundtrack for the film, which I had never done before. But I felt like she didn't really understand, because it's the sound of the wind in an open field, in a big, open place. And I don't think she really understood. So I said, "Okay, then we have to go there, so you can understand what it's like". Because if you've never been there, you can never understand what it's like to hear almost nothing but the wind. So we went and we made some recordings of sounds, music, people singing, traditional songs and things like that.

EN: You know, the word shamanism comes from Mongolian.

RT: Yes, we also had a shamanic experience, which was really interesting. I'd never done anything like it before. Well, maybe ayahuasca is somewhat similar, but in a very different way. With ayahuasca, you take it and the experience sort of comes to you on its own. In this case, a spirit appears and tells you something. First you have to go to the place where the spirits are. And, as a way to show respect to the spirit, you have to go up on top of a mountain that is really hard to get to. Then you come back down and the shaman begins the ceremony. And of course, the spirits come to them. The interesting thing is that it's not just one spirit, it's like a few. So there are different moments, with different spirits arriving. In fact, the shaman who led the ceremony said that since we were a group of people who were quite well preserved in our spirit, so the spirits came very quickly. He said that when people are surrounded by a lot of trouble, sometimes it's really hard for the spirits to come and deal with the problem. And I mean, we all had some kind of question, but the feeling was that we were pretty stable people, and it was not very difficult for the spirits to come.

EN: Also when you move, when you walk, going up to the top of the mountain, in a way you are already being treated just by arriving there. But does the spirit come through him? Does he speak in the name of the spirit?

RT: He talks, he speaks. And of course he's speaking in the local dialect, but there are also spirits from other places, further away. It's very near Russia, so there was a spirit speaking in a language that the shaman doesn't really speak. But in a way, he understood.

EN: A shaman is a shaman, right?

RT: Yeah. So after that he could tell us what it meant, its gestures, its movements.

EN: This story you're telling me reminds me of when I was in Thailand, giving a class at the Silpakorn University. It brings together two things. First is that I felt a sort of animism that seemed present in the work of many people there. At one point I was telling them a story about things related to scientific phenomena, like black holes, the Big Bang, perhaps mixed with some kind of genesis narratives. Adam and Eve, probably, the Boa [serpent]. Then I asked them to form small groups and come up with a story together, it could be whatever they wanted. But in one group of three, each one brought a shamanic story from their own family, from a grandmother or an elder, from different parts of Thailand. It really struck me, and I felt, there was a close relation to Brazil. But we went through a violent colonization. The Portuguese arrived here totally against the Indigenous people, causing a strong cut in our society. And I felt that, in Thailand the situation is much closer. You understand what I mean? In this transition from shamanic times to modern times there is no rupture, there's a link, a relationship, a conversation. I may be wrong but I felt that the rupture that happened here, didn't happen in Thailand.

RT: Yeah. I mean, no, here we never had that kind of rupture with spirituality. It's just part of everyday life to also live in the spirit world. For instance, when local workers came to build this house, at lunchtime they would stop to eat. But before they ate, they would put little portions of rice around different places. I don't do that. I mean, I usually put it in one place, but they do it as an offering to the different spirits of the land, as a gesture of respect. And I find that interesting because I think this kind of animism is also about the spirit, about a more respectful relationship with nature, because you're aware that there are different beings, or entities, or forms of life inhabiting all kinds of places that are not in the same plane as we are. And what really caught my attention in your work is that, at a certain point, it became much more overtly spiritual. You really went into that. And now I feel you're coming out of it a little bit. Is that right?

EN: Yeah. Because through my encounter with the Huni Kuin, I came to understand Indigenous cultures much more deeply, especially in Brazil. Which was very powerful, and completely different from anything I could have learned from reading books. It was a lived experience. And when I was doing my sculptures, or drawings, or whatever I was working on, I always felt that I was not doing it for somebody, I was making them for the infinite. In a way, nothing can be hidden, everything should be given. Because there is something bigger than us. In fact, you can hide things from others, but you cannot hide things from yourself. So this relation between the gods and yourself is pretty much the limit. But even before this encounter, my work already had a strong relation with nature, this kind of "animism", even without me thinking consciously about it, there was always the presence of plants and animals. Pretty much because of my criticism of this separation between mind and body, because there is this overvaluing of the mind now, in modern society.

But anyway, on my second day I had this ayahuasca ceremony, they call it *nixi pae*, which means "strong vine". I felt all the scientific knowledge that we generally have, inside a leaf, together with all the history of my work. If you stop and begin to meditate, if you begin to sing, you feel something that is not that far away. Or even smoking marijuana. Marijuana was a great teacher for me. Smoking it naturally brings you closer to nature, to dreams.

Here, in Rio de Janeiro, we have these gigantic mountains all the way to the sea. So one day I said something like, "The eternity of the mountain, the infinity of the sea", plus the symbiosis of the forest. So when I was with the Huni Kuin, the overwhelming dimension of nature, and the chanting... Man, I always enjoyed chanting and improvisation. Which always

happened in my private life, with friends. So hearing the Huni Kuin chants, I couldn't believe where they were coming from. That's when you begin to realize that they don't have any separation between themselves and nature. Because every time we say "nature", we are placing it outside of ourselves, but the Huni Kuin don't talk about "plants" in general, each plant has a name. Or wood, wood for them, is the wood that you would buy in a wood shop. But there you're going to have *Cumarú*, *Jarina*, *Samaúma*. Because the plant has a spirit, the plant has a name. It isn't an object. They don't objectify life, or the elements around them. Everything is part of a family.

I was 49 years old when I first met them, and I'd been making art since I was 19. So I've been involved with this kind of dance for 40 years now, this kind of devotion to nature, trying to understand how I could bring all that into the art scene in a certain way, or even to my own life. And suddenly there were these people who know every insect, where everything has a name. They know that they can use this plant for this and that. It's fascinating. And when something gets so deep inside your life, it's natural that you sweat it, you express it, you bring that tenderness. And everything that came to me through the Huni Kuin and also the Yawanawa, Tukano, Guaraní and Krenak people is still here with me, and is still being digested. Life is a long digestion, a mix of consuming and digesting. It's like a wind, it's a flower, it's a smell that is inside me forever, together with many other things. Now there is the drumming, the samba, that in the end always were inside me and around me. And I think that our society would benefit from studying and listening more to Indigenous people, also to Afro-spirituality, that is closer to us through samba and many other Brazilian rhythms, but also to Eastern spirituality, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism whatever, all these traditions that care more about day to day life, you know?

RT: I have a question, actually. Do you feel like your attitude toward the work itself changed after that experience? Before the shaman and after the shaman? I mean, it's not as if the work completely changed, but I wonder if there was some kind of shift. I mean, maybe it dealt more with objects, with things, and now it's more about people.

EN: Before, a lot of my work was already with people, all the *Naves* and these mattresses in environments where people could stay. I was feeling very much like "My time is not money", and taking or giving the time for people, creating places for people to lose their time, in a sense that they could lose track of time and become more connected to their own time, and sometimes even connected to other people through the fact of being in a strange place together. What came with the Huni Kuin was this need to discuss the time we're living in now, singing together, playing together. Actually when I began to play in the *Balança Mas Não Cai*, the drumming group I am part of, I started playing *agogô*, then the *surdo*, this big drum, then the *cuíca*, *reco-reco*, different things. But my first instrument was a *maracá*, singing in the ceremonies while playing the *maracá*. That was probably something that just needed this moment to be able to sprout. It also led me to work much more with cotton. I was already working with crochet, but now I almost only work with crochet. It feels closer to the hand, so it's closer to your body. And this thing of wanting to work with raw, natural materials became very important. Ethics has always been present in my work, pretty much because of the heavy time of the dictatorship in Brazil.

There was always this idea —that I said in the beginning—, that nothing can be hidden. But there was also this political context, that we were living in a very hard dictatorship when I was a child. It began in 1964 and lasted for 21 years. So during all my childhood and youth, we lived under this oppression. At the same time, we were living under the pressure of the Cold War. I remember that, as a child, a teenager, every night before going to sleep, there was a war. Perhaps because of my father or my mother too, this psychological

mixing together. In my imagination, I was a scientist that found a kind of metal that survived an atomic bomb. And there was this war, and we created a tank that could fly into space. My laboratory was inside of Pedra da Gávea mountain, and there was this big box, like a trailer made of this metal, with friends, fathers, mothers, and people inside, to create new worlds. In the end, the planet would explode and we, my friends and I, who were "fighting for peace" inside the tank would go pick up the trailer box with the people so we could go somewhere else to live. I made drawings of all these scenes. So I think that the Cold War, together with the dictatorship in Brazil, all those paranoid times, gave me this feeling of letting the dice fall and not try to hide things in the work that I was showing. Creating this kind of balance, in which everything should be in balance but in a state of tension. Which brings us to the knowledge of the street vendors. Street vendors have to make things that they can set up quickly, take down quickly, and carry away. Probably we wouldn't be talking about this if my work did not carry this spirit and this knowledge of the streets. These large works, you can put them in a bag, in a metaphorical sense, we can ship them, and open them up somewhere else. My work has always had this sinuous organic movement, this spirit of the serpent, which resonates with the Huni Kuin, known as the *jiboia* people, the *boa constrictor* people. The boa is their connection to spiritual life. When you drink ayahuasca, you're drinking the boa. If you ask Dua Busê, this great *pajé*¹, "Dua Busê, are you the *pajé*?" he'd say, "No, the *pajé* is the boa, I'm a student". And then, back to Flusser's book, in *The History of the Devil*, he approaches this scene not from a negative point of view. For example, Envy could be the force for revolution, against inequality and the social imbalance we live in society. There is a moment where he says, chance and miracle are almost the same thing. I always laugh when I think about that because it reminds me of Hans-Ulrich Obrist, he says "Miracle" all the time...

RT: Yeah, "milagro, milagro!"

EN: Yeah, it brings the miracle into everyday life. And that's what he's saying, chance and miracle are the same thing. So how come, through all of this, we arrive at the Huni Kuin? I mean, it's a miracle and also a chance. This is what my work is about. When I meet you and we shake hands or we hug, there is a way of doing that. When you touch someone's hand, that's a passageway. You are passing your energy to that person, and they are passing that energy to you. When you put something together, whatever it is that you do, that's also a passageway. At the same time we live in this crazy art world, with all the art fairs, all the galleries. It's wild, this art world.

RT: That reminds me of something you wrote in the text you shared with me before our conversation, where you said something about being between these white walls [in galleries, or museums]. Maybe it's as if the snake needs to crawl out of the white wall.

EN: Yeah, this white wall is compressing us all the time. Every time you have a gallery exhibition, you have these white walls to deal with. In many exhibitions I did, I began by covering the white walls, painting them brown or covering them with a textile, or something like that. Even with the *Naves*, what I wanted to do was a mix of things, because it's a work that you could enter, but at the same time it was this kind of gallery, with these drops or these

¹ A *pajé* is an Indigenous spiritual leader, healer, and knowledge keeper found in many Indigenous peoples of Brazil and other parts of the Amazon. The role varies widely from one person to another, so "pajé" is a Portuguese umbrella term rather than the name of a single office shared by all Indigenous cultures.

organelles that would be the work that I was doing. It was a way of trying to escape this kind of white frame, white walls, white cube. I remember when I did an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery², I began to think about the "white institution", which is a name that I hate, but I began to feel like it. Because you have an institution, you have a floor plan, in this case I had three different rooms and three balconies. I work a lot with the floor plan, as a kind of canvas. Many times, if you look at a floor plan, it looks like an animal. Animals in the sense of microbes, protozoa, amoebae, in the sense of cells, this microscopic universe. And in an institution, there is a flux of people, people who are going to come anyway. Whatever exhibition there is. If you go to MoMA, Tate, *Beaubourg* [Centre Pompidou], or even if you go to a gallery, there are people coming through every month to see what's going on. So you already deal with the architecture, you deal with the spirit of the institution. Who is the curator, who is working there, even the people who work at the entrance, and where it is located in the city, what the energy of the place is like. But you're also dealing with the audience that is going to go there anyway. It can shift a little bit between different exhibitions, but there will always be a public in some kind of way. Then there is the fact that my work is interactive, and it deals with the energy of the people. When you open up the space, when you open the energy, when people can touch the work, lie down and even sleep in it. I have received messages from people saying: "Oh, Ernesto, thank you very much, today is going to be the last day that I'm going to sleep in your work, the exhibition is going to close. I've been coming here every day after lunch to nap".

But there is also the violence that can emerge when you give that freedom to people. People are very repressed. So when you open things up, they can become violent too. And that very much represents our relationship to nature itself. Nature gives everything, but we also take so much from it that we become violent, we destroy everything. So at the same time that I have this encounter with the Indigenous people, there is also this awareness of the violence that we, as modern humanity, are acting out in the world. So it's a dance. Maybe there's a reason, maybe there is an order behind it all, who knows? And we are influenced, and we can say that we are being shaped by the industry, that there are these machines controlling us. But maybe it's something even bigger than that.

RT: Yeah. I mean in Mongolia it's quite interesting, because people see the environment they're in as a world. So every yurt, every house is a world, and the world is like the earth, which is what's underneath you. And the sky, which is above you. So you always understand that you are positioned in the world, which is quite nice.

EN: When I met the Huni Kuin and we began to dance, in a way I thought we could save the world. Save the world for what? For us, human beings. This is an idiotic idea, in my opinion, because I don't think people want to be saved. There is this sentence from Duchamp in which he says that "there's no solution because there's no problem". I think about that a lot. Maybe we keep believing that the world has problems that can be fixed, but what if they can't? A problem implies that there is an underlying solution, and perhaps that is not how the world works. What we can do is simply try to make things a little better. Getting closer to what we are doing and less about what others are doing. The healing begins inside of us.

² *The Edges of the World*, Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2010)

RT: As you said, it's become more of a discussion between you and your audience, or the people who come to experience the work. And that's always a good thing, isn't it? It's good to have the discussion.

EN: When we had the exhibition in Vienna³, we invited scientists, intellectuals, anthropologists, and artists, alongside the Huni Kuin group to talk to. At *GaiaMotherTree*, an exhibition I did in Zurich Main Station⁴, in 2018, we also organized this kind of conference with the Huni Kuin and other Indigenous spiritual leaders, with scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, farmers and artists. There was also Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a Buddhist Lama, and we went even deeper. So this idea of discussing things pretty much came from that too. Because at the end of the day, if you go to one of our ceremonies and you drink the tea, you don't need to say much of anything because *medicine teaches us*. But in society you need to discuss things. I like it, but to be very honest I got a little tired as well. I think I'd rather concentrate on my work and let it create space for discussion, instead of trying to have the conversation myself. Because the reality, at least for me... It's raining beautifully here now... You know, art is, in a way, beyond us. If you have an idea and you make it, and in the end you say: "Oh, that's exactly what I wanted", then, at least for me, I think nothing really has happened there. Art is not even in the artwork itself, in my opinion. It is in-between us and the artwork, it's in between us and the world. Art is this spirituality, and somehow you can condense it in an object, a dance, a proposal, or even into a sentence, I don't know, but I feel that it's never the object itself. And then there is language. So many people are speaking now and I think that's fantastic. We need to speak. We are the animal that speaks. Maybe that's the tragedy, you know?

RT: Everybody speaks, we just don't understand. Well, you know... you've always spoken anyway, you've been speaking the whole time. But I think it's a kind of flow, which is also, in a way, about being connected, and it's not an explanation. You're not explaining anything. Actually, you are just going through places and connecting with things, and touching things, and understanding through that something which then becomes maybe a place, or a sculpture or, you know, a show. But it's not so much about explaining what it is.

EN: Yeah. Because we cannot explain what it is, it's something that is unexplainable.

RT: Yeah, I know. So, what are we going to talk to each other about, if we're not going to explain anything?

EN: The idea of talking is the idea of pleasure. We like to talk to each other, it's part of being human, we talk all the time. Sometimes it's good to be silent too, to breathe, to listen. But here we are, people are like birds, they are talking to each other all the time. And then sometimes we find subjects to talk about, then we get swallowed by this universe, or something that you are reading.

RT: When you said you want to change the world, I think that's right. We all want to make the world better, even probably the worst person in the world wants to make the world better,

³ *Aru Kuxipa – Sacred Secret*, TBA21 - Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (2015)

⁴ Organized by the Fondation Beyeler, the gigantic tree-like installation was made from woven cotton, approximately 20 meters in height, with a canopy spanning 40 × 28 meters. The environment also harbored *Assembleia MotherTree*, a forum open to the public for interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange between members of the Huni Kuin, Yawanawa and Tukano communities, with scientists, researchers, activists, and artists from across the globe.

but for themselves. In their own mind, in their own picture. But then, to be able to have been touched by something that you can then pass on and share, I think that is a way to change the world. It doesn't have to be a big thing, but I think it's a generous thing, it's a kindness to give to other people.

EN: This word is beautiful, *kindness*. I like this word, to spread kindness is something that's beautiful to do. And that's what I think about when we do an artwork, sometimes this relational attachment is a kindness that you try to connect from one thing to the other. And of course there is a mission, you don't make an artwork just because you do, there is always a mission. Maybe it's not one with such objectivity that the world we live in proposes, because I think art is a kind of detour in this world of objectivity, productivity and all these things that contemporary society charges us with. It's a beautiful word, kindness. Perhaps we can stay with kindness, no?

RT: Yes. That's a good place to be. I think we need to be there.

EN: Yes. Floating in kindness, living in kindness, breathing, smelling, blowing kindness. Find kindness where it is, and even where it's not, if it's hidden try to take it out. Everybody has kindness inside of them. Oh, even nature. Nature is violent, too. Let's not be naive that in nature everything is pretty, not at all. But kindness is there, it's very much alive on this planet. God, this planet is really something magical, it's a miracle, a complete miracle. The rain falling here, you in Chiang Mai, on the other side of the world, little house that we are... You know, the same wind that's blowing there is going to blow here.