

ART AS TECHNOLOGY: OREGON DESERT SRI YANTRA

Bill Witherspoon, P.O. Box 1735,
Fairfield, IA 52556, U.S.A. E-mail:
<bwith@theskyfactory.com>.

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This article chronicles a series of experiences and observations that have emerged from several years of exploratory art projects. Necessarily, they are personal. The experiences resulted from events that were intuitively directed or were the response to some environmental stimulus. Because of this, things often were done without preconceived intellectual rationale. Often I had questions and was seeking answers, but at other times I did not know the questions and seemed to be engaged in activities that were following some barely perceivable thread. It was often months or even years before I “understood” the reasons and purposes of the projects and the way they arranged themselves. And, even with a feeling of understanding, it has often been difficult to verbally explain or place actions in the context of a commonly acceptable model of how the world works.

In this chronicle, I have attempted to relate some of the facts and simple observations that accompanied this project without attempting to describe the delight of the exploratory process.

The Sri Yantra

The Sri Yantra is a traditional design from India that is thought of as an instance or occurrence (rather than a symbol) of the deepest laws and forces of Mother Nature or Mother Divine. I spent a few months doing extensive library research on the Sri Yantra and also spoke with people who had experienced its use in India as part of the spiritual tradition of Sri Vidya. Then I decided to make one from gold leaf and transparent pigments, as I felt this was consistent with its traditional use.

The process of research, and espe-

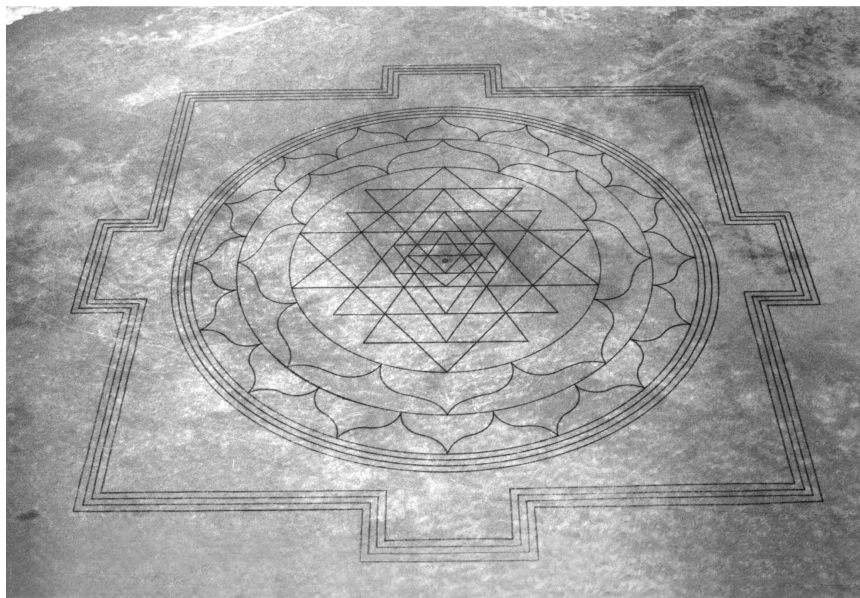


Fig. 1. Bill Witherspoon, *Desert Sri Yantra* from 9,000 feet, Mickey Basin, Oregon, 1990. (© Bill Witherspoon)

cially the construction of the gold leaf Sri Yantra, produced a powerful influence on me. It restructured my awareness and perception. My sensory experience and understanding of deep laws and forces of Nature began to rapidly unfold.

1990: Oregon Desert Sri Yantra

In the summer of 1990, a group of friends, one of my sons and I went to a remote alkali lake bed in the high desert of southeast Oregon to inscribe a large Sri Yantra in the earth. It was to contain a central point large enough to live in. The site was chosen because of its beauty and remoteness. Almost no one, except a few ranchers, ever went there. Inscribing lines in the alkali surface would not disturb any vegetation and it would be a transitory event, eventually disappearing back into the surface through the natural action of wind and the occasional water that floods the lake bed every few years.

The design was made without machines or modern tools except binoculars and a simple hand plow. We used only ancient principles of geometry and long wires and sharpened poles as tools. When completed, the Sri Yantra was $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile across, covered

over 40 acres and contained over 13 miles of lines (Fig. 1 and Color Plate A No. 1). The lines, plowed with an old-fashioned garden cultivator pulled by three crew members and steered by the fourth, were about four inches deep, with the hard alkali-crust dirt cast to both sides of the furrow.

During construction, we were careful to minimize the disturbances to the land. We chose to walk several miles daily from camp to the site rather than use vehicles, and we refrained from using other motorized devices such as a tiller. We did not want to leave tracks or other marks, not to preserve anonymity but out of respect for the purity of the process.

The Sri Yantra took 10 days to complete. As soon as the last line of the design was plowed, heavy clouds began to collect in the south. Within an hour, our valley was filled with high winds, intense lightning strikes and about half an inch of rain. The result of this storm was that the desert playa was “resealed” into a thin crust of alkali silt so that all traces and footprints from our working were dissolved and only the plowed lines of the Sri Yantra remained. Like a finished painting, it was as if the surface had been varnished. Remarkably, the lightning and the rain were

limited only to the small valley where we were working, a fact that was the source of much speculation by a nearby rancher who wanted the rain on his land.

In the three weeks that followed, I lived in the 9-ft central circle of the Sri Yantra. During that period and on several occasions during the following years, I and others observed remarkable changes in the workings of Nature within the design and in the valley where it was situated.

One of the more interesting subjective changes was a modification of the “feeling” within the valley. While a difficult parameter to describe or measure, this change in feeling was noted by ranchers and other people who have known the area for a long time. People reported experiencing qualities of energetic peacefulness, harmony with nature and enhanced intuition when they were in the design and the valley. Another influence was a radical change in the quality of meditation that would consistently be experienced if a meditator moved a few feet out of the central circle into the surrounding innermost triangle of the design or vice versa. The experience ranged from that of sustained unbounded consciousness within the bindu, or central point, to subtle and uniquely differentiated impulses in the outside triangles.

Changes in the environment were also observed. Within the design, which had been inscribed in a highly alkaline silt incapable of supporting any kind of vegetation, there were remarkable changes in the direction of increased fertility.

Two years after construction, even though the lines were disappearing, the structure of the soil had changed from a highly compacted mixture of silt and salts to a loose, crumbly soil that smelled and tasted more like normal soil. The surface of the soil also was significantly changed. Instead of the flat, layered and often cracked surface that had characterized the

lake bed before the inscription of the Sri Yantra, the surface became “rumpled,” formed into a 3D configuration of regular ridges and valleys that arranged themselves in the pattern of hexagonal close packing, much like an egg carton. The pattern was caused by modification of the surface soil into a physically expanded, more adhesive and resilient material.

The soil changes were due to an extraordinary proliferation of soil microorganisms and the resulting increase in soil organic matter. The soil changes were limited to the 40 or so acres of the design and were most pronounced in its center.

In other respects, the entire 50-square-mile valley was different. The ranchers noticed a continued increase in the valley’s rainfall. This was accompanied by increased vegetative growth, as well as increased populations of several plants and three animal species that were not previously common in the valley.

Because of these observations, I began to speculate about possible mechanisms by which the geometric structures might bring about change. The most interesting observation was that there appeared to be an inverse correlation between the gradual disappearance of the design as it melted back into the lake bed and the increase in the presence or influence of the enlivened laws of Nature. Other analogous situations seem to exist as in homeopathy, where increasing levels of dilution are said to represent or impart increasing levels of strength. An even more striking parallel may exist with the principle of Sangyama. Sangyama, as described by the Indian rishi Patanjali, is a process in which the mind generates an impulse at the deepest level of consciousness and then allows that impulse to settle back into the field of pure undifferentiated consciousness from which it had been drawn. The result of this process is the appearance of a new impulse that has enormous power

and direct support of fundamental forces of Nature.

The construction of the Sri Yantra was also accompanied by other events that gave rise to new understandings about how Nature might operate. Going into the valley for the first time, I was driving a converted bus and towing a pickup truck. I stopped and got out to open a barbed wire gate. Sitting on the gate post was an adult golden eagle. The eagle looked at me squarely, swished its tail back and forth several times, dropped a tail feather and flew off. In the next several weeks, I had occasion to go through the same gate many times and there was no eagle. Then, on my homeward trip, as I passed through the gate for the last time, a golden eagle was sitting on the same gate post. It waited for me to get out of the bus, looked at me squarely, swished its tail, dropped another feather and flew off.

Back home, several weeks later, the U.S. National Guard discovered the Sri Yantra, and the media, not knowing its origins or implications, created a greatly exaggerated hoopla. I was in the position of needing to decide whether to speak publicly about the project or remain anonymous. In order to clarify the rapidly growing misunderstandings, I decided to speak publicly. Immediately upon making that decision, I walked outside my rural Iowa home and looked up into the sky. Directly above the house were 14 circling bald eagles.

A year later, I had occasion to tell this story to a Vedic scholar. He told me of a traditional yagya, or ceremony, infrequently performed in India to honor the Divine Mother. The ceremony is considered to have been successful only if it results in the appearance of an eagle.

Readers interested in obtaining the full-length version of this paper or learning more about the work of Bill Witherspoon are invited to contact the author: <bwith@theskyfactory.com>.