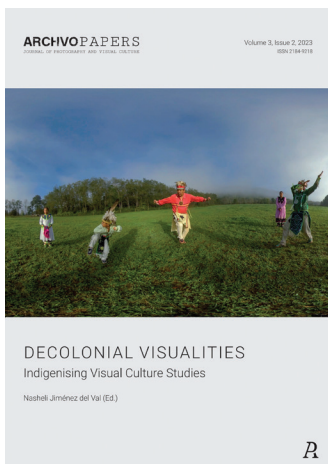




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REVIEW

WE LIVE LIKE TREES IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS

GABRIELA SAENGER SILVA *Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom**We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*

Artists: Marianne Hoffmeister Castro, Jeannette Muñoz, Renata Padovan, Maya Watanabe

Curated by Dr Mariana Cunha (University of Westminster) and Dr Marianna Tsionki (Leeds Arts University)

12 May - 22 July 2023

Blenheim Walk Gallery at Leeds Arts University, Blenheim Walk, Leeds LS2 9A

Drawing inspiration from Vito Apüshana's evocative poem, "Kataa—Ououta (To Live—To Die)",¹ the "We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors" (Leeds Arts University, 2023) delves into the themes of ancestral ties, environmental degradation, and the urgent need for a revaluation of our human-nature entanglements. It sounds like we are looking into something and having our attention called too many times to turn it into an unquestionable practice within our Earth. The first lines of Apüshana's poem set the tone for the artworks in the exhibition that try to capture the delicate balance between permanence and transience in our connection with land and kinship, keeping the concepts of an unheard land and the tone of emergency. "We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors" gets from the poetry of the Indigenous philosophy of the Wayuu people on the Venezuela-Colombia border the ability to transfer the audience into their place of recognition and reading of the world. The exhibition aims to amplify this cosmovision, deep-rooted bond with nature, and profound understanding of the environment. By diverging from colonial legacies and challenging capitalism's fixation on material accumulation, the artworks spark the dialogue on the exploitation of resources, extractive practices, and the division between nature and culture.

The four artists participating in the exhibition (Marianne Hoffmeister Castro, Jeannette Muñoz, Renata Padovan, Maya Watanabe) offer a sense of mapping of South America through a diverse range of media, including mixed-media installations, sculptures, and audio-visual works. The four women challenge conventional colonial and anthropocentric ideologies, inviting us to contemplate alternative perspectives and embrace radical coexistence. All artworks offer considerable research to provide a final format, approaching different themes and practices, from economy to environmental sciences, opening dialogues about the impact of human actions on the natural world and the possibilities of a more harmonious future.

Marianne Hoffmeister Castro's contribution to the exhibition delves into the consequences of introducing beavers to Argentina's Tierra del Fuego region. Settlers believed that the area's vegetation and temperatures were suitable for North American beavers, which were highly valued for their fur. However, this decision was made without a holistic understanding of nature and its delicate balance, leading to severe ecological disruptions. The artist takes an unconventional approach by adopting the beavers' perspective. Through her narrative experiment titled "A Study of Beaverness or How (not) to be a World-Destroyer," she challenges the prevailing notion of beavers as invasive creatures. By presenting the beavers as "cute" characters, she tries to find a language that could represent or translate the beavers' voices throughout this journey. In this form of characterisation, she tries to read the possible discomfort and obliged adaptation that those animals had to suffer, redirecting blame towards the human factor responsible for the ecological imbalance. Castro's artwork includes a 2-channel video installation and research materials, part of an ongoing research-based project. In the videos, she incorporates the gestures of these animals, trying to identify which would be the indication in nature of their passage. From embodying the beavers, the artist explores speculative fabulations and alternative environmental futures through multidisciplinary methodologies, urging reconsideration of non-human animals' historical agency. From the marks left by the animals, she creates a typeface that could mean a form of translation of the animal's voices. Those registers became a series of images and developed posters that could be letters of expression from the beaver's diaspora. By doing so, the artist invites us to envision new futures of survival and coexistence.

Hoffmeister Castro's approach prompts us to examine our actions and the larger systems of exploitation and extraction that have shaped our relationship with nature. She challenges our perspectives on invasive species and encourages a reimagining of our interactions with non-human animals and the environment. Her work highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of ecological systems. The artwork reminds us of our responsibility to consider the far-reaching consequences of our intervention. What forces animals into a commodity-driven diaspora pushes an ecosystem into conflicts and unknown effects and advocates holistic and sustainable approaches to environmental stewardship. As a result of the author's artwork, we are encouraged to rethink our relationship with nature and strive for a more harmonious and interconnected



Figure 1.

Exhibition overview of Marianne Hoffmeister Castro's installation "A Study of Beaverness or How (not) to be a World-Destroyer". Photo by Jules Lister Lau, 2023.

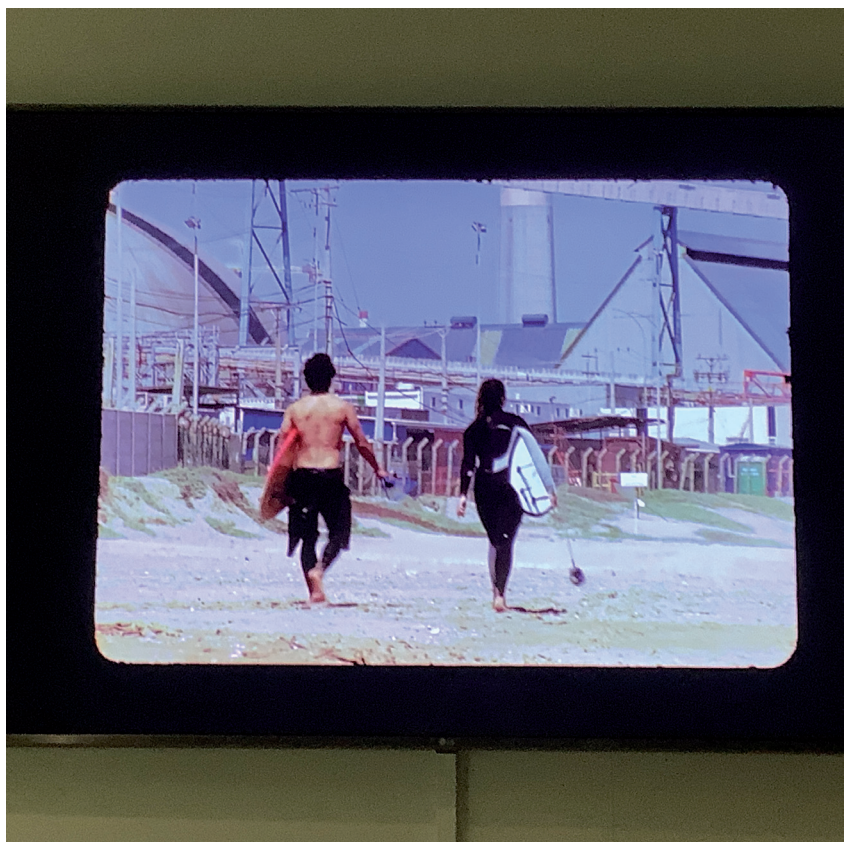


Figure 2.

Still from Jeannette Muñoz's two channels 16 mm film to video "Punchucavi". Photo by Gabriela Saenger Silva, 2023.

coexistence; we are not the only narrators of this history.

Jeannette Muñoz's artwork in the exhibition shows the intricate relationship between extractive infrastructure and the lived experiences of Latin American communities. Her voyeur-like videos from 16 mm original capture remind me of the seminal book by Nestor Garcia Canclini, "Hybrid Cultures, Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity" (1995), on the distinct trajectory of Latin America's modernity in between the constant extractivist from the coloniser and the impossibility of reaching a modernity state by its diverse and hybrid Indigenous cultures. Canclini's thoughts on the challenges those countries face are shown in the artist's videos, which offer a unique perspective on the progression from the extractivist process to infrastructure construction. Muñoz's artwork effectively captures the shift from one practice to another, from the heavy industrial buildings with pipes and smoke to the population trying to reach the nearby beach, always privileging the colonial power. Captured in Punchucavi, Chile, which gives the videos its title, the artist portrays these infrastructure projects that promise benefits to the countries whilst they perpetuate extractive mechanisms favouring the colonisers rather than the local communities. This cycle of extraction and exploitation forms the backdrop of the videos.

Throughout the narrative of the two short films, Muñoz's artwork shows the impact of extractivist infrastructure on surrounding communities' portraits. It is a stark reminder of how these communities must constantly adapt to a state of adaptation and precarity. Despite the discourse surrounding the economic value of these structures, the local inhabitants residing nearby do not reap the anticipated benefits. Instead, they endure environmental pollution as their natural surroundings become tainted by industrial chemicals and the looming presence of smoke. These infrastructure projects' illusory promise of professional opportunities and economic prosperity rarely materialises for the affected communities. Instead, they face the harsh realities of pollution and environmental degradation. Muñoz's artwork unveils the glaring disparity between the rhetoric of progress and development espoused by the colonisers and the harsh truth experienced by those living near these projects.

The artist challenges prevailing narratives surrounding those colonial structures through her artistic exploration. Her work sheds light on the environmental and social costs of marginalised communities, underscoring the contrast between the superficial economic gains claimed by the colonisers and the lived experiences of the local inhabitants. By questioning the sustainability and ethics of extractive practices, her work advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to development that prioritises local communities' rights and well-being while embracing environmentally sustainable practices.

Renata Padovan's work, "Irreversible" (2019), presents a captivating juxtaposition of images that initially create a fantasy-like environment. With pictures of tree branches printed into light and transparent fabric, suspended like curtains, we visit the installation, passing through the images like we are transported to this magical place. However, the viewer realises the profound connection to a bereavement site upon closer examination. The artist's careful selection of

materials resembles a spiritual realm, as if we are venturing into the souls of the trees that no longer exist. The poignant beauty of Padovan's work gradually unveils the brutal reality of what transpired in this non-human realm. It slowly dawns on the observer that these mesmerising images are, in fact, a visual representation of a cemetery for these fallen vegetal beings. The artist skilfully guides us through this transformative journey, where the enchanting visuals initially captivate our senses



Figure 3.
Still from Jeannette Muñoz's two
channels 16 mm film to video
"Punchucavi" Photo by Gabriela
Saenger Silva, 2023.



Figure 4.
Installation detail of "Irreversible",
by Renata Padovan. Photo by Gabriela
Saenger Silva, 2023.

before leading us to confront the tragedy that unfolded within these landscapes.

"Irreversible" explores explicitly the repercussions of a large infrastructure project on the Amazon Forest. The photographic installation centres around images of snags—standing dead tree trunks emerging from the waters of a flooded forest. These haunting photographs invite to confront the profound impacts of extractive activities in the Amazon. The Balbina hydroelectric dam and power plant, constructed in 1981 during the military dictatorship in Brazil, holds a significant place in Padovan's work. Evaluated as one of Brazil's most substantial ecological disasters, the hydroelectric project is (as always was) controversial. The dam flooded an extensive forest area spanning 2,360 square kilometres, causing the vegetation to decompose within the reservoir. This catastrophic event destroyed biodiversity and violently displaced Indigenous groups, such as the Waimiri-Atroari, from their ancestral lands. The reproductions of Padovan's photographs are printed on voile fabric, adding a sensory dimension to the installation. As viewers traverse this visual narrative, they are immersed in the effects of this ecological disaster, bearing witness to the destructive impacts of "irreversible" developments like the Balbina project.

Maya Watanabe's work, "Stasis" (2018), takes viewers on a mesmerising view into a realm that is not easily accessible to the naked eye. At first, it may seem the enlarged video takes us into a fascinating exploration of a different world. However, as the audience delves deeper into the layers of the artist's proposal, it becomes apparent that the work's true complexity and conceptual depth are revealed through the accompanying text rather than solely through visual observation. There is a conflict between the complexity felt on one side and the limited accessibility on the other, "Stasis" offers an immersive journey into an almost phantasmagorical space that blurs the boundaries between life and death. This state of near-death that the artist presents resonates with the constant precariousness experienced by cultures, as depicted in the other artworks within the exhibition.

"Stasis" explicitly explores the survival strategies employed by the crucian carp. The video installation closely examines these fish's steady reactivation of metabolic operations. Filmed at De Waag's 17th century anatomical theatre building and guided by a scientist, the work disrupts conventional notions of scale and rhythm. It captures the almost imperceptible inactivity of the fish as it activates its self-regulating system for cryogenic preservation. Through this exploration, Watanabe delves into the physiological knowledge of the carp, existing in a state between living and non-living, while prompting us to question biopolitical conventions surrounding life and death.

While the complexity of Watanabe's work may challenge the audience, the immersive experience and thought-provoking concepts offer an opportunity for introspection and contemplation. "Stasis" transports us to a realm where the boundaries between life and death are blurred, urging us to reconsider our perceptions of existence and the profound interplay between organisms and their environments.

Reflecting on the artists' artworks, one can witness the profound impact of colonisation on Latin America and the erasure of ancestral knowledge.



Figure 5.
Overview still from the video installation
"Stasis", by Maya Watannabe. Photo by
Gabriela Sanger Silva, 2023.

These artworks serve as powerful mappings of the Latin American perspective, highlighting the multifaceted ways colonisation has shaped and conflicted with local knowledge systems. The artists' works poignantly illuminate the fragility of ancestral knowledge in the face of the dominant capitalist world imposed by this. Through their artistic expressions, they confront the brutality and erasure that have unfolded due to this process, sounding a clarion call for preserving and revitalising these threatened forms of wisdom. The exhibition serves as a testament to the resilience and endurance of ancestral knowledge, even as it is pushed to the limit, confronted by the forces of industrialisation, capitalism, and colonisation.

In contemplating the exhibition's title, "We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors," we confront poetically the profound impact of industrialisation, capitalism, and colonisation on ancestral knowledge. These works expose the pressing reality that this traditional knowledge is at the precipice of their existence, marginalised and pushed against a metaphorical wall, necessitating the need to conceal and protect themselves from the relentless cycles of repetition. The poignant reminder of the urgent need to address these pressing issues is the scorching sun and heat I face on the way out of the gallery, strolling down to the train station.

"We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors," wisely curated by Dr Mariana Cunha (University of Westminster) and Dr Marianna Tsionki (Leeds Arts University), reveals the lasting impact of colonisation on Latin America and the erasure of ancestral knowledge. This exhibition invites us to reflect on the fragility and resilience of this traditional knowledge, compelling us to embrace a future where the preservation of our planet and the revitalisation of ancestral wisdom take centre stage.

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