

Admiralty Sound Expedition Report

CHRISTY GAST



Christy Gast, *¿Onde va la lancha?*, 2016. Video still

I have been working in Tierra del Fuego for five years as part of the research collective Ensayos, which brings an international group of artists and social scientists together with ecologists and locals to think through environmental and sustainability questions in the region. Ensayos is more focused on process than outcome, although we have made exhibitions, films, experiments, and even perfumes, combining our knowledge and work styles in a way that goes beyond “interdisciplinary.” Often, the work we do together feels *undisciplined*—artists conduct field research, scientists practice aesthetics in galleries and museums, and disciplines begin to unravel as we seek new approaches to ecological and social questions that have a global resonance.

In Tierra del Fuego, where the Atlantic meets the Pacific, land

and sea are not so much interwoven as fractured—splintered and shattered. At the southern terminus of the Andes, it is as if the mountains are using the remainder of their geological force to dive out of the deep and frigid sea. This is the water that surrounded me this past February, when I was invited to join an expedition of marine biologists and veterinarians as they navigated through the Fuegian fjords in a creaky fishing boat, studying the elephant seals and albatross that live there. It was the Wildlife Conservation Society’s 7th Marine Expedition to the Admiralty Sound, and I was to be the expedition’s artist in residence.

Bárbara Saavedra, the director of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Chile and an Ensayos collaborator, offers the concept of a niche as a metaphor for how we work together. In an ecosystem,

each organism has its niche, the particular set of resources that support its life. Although we share part of our resources with other organisms, no two lives share exactly the same niche. Here, I offer excerpts from the journal I kept on that expedition, a view of my own niche (and its intersections).

February 8, 2016

Today at 8:15 am, promptly, a crew of scientists and park rangers from the Wildlife Conservation Society's Punta Arenas office picked me up to embark on the expedition to Bahía Jackson. The night passed with a lot of wind, which put me in an anxious state of mind regarding the twenty hours we'd be navigating through the Strait of Magellan to Tierra del Fuego. But the morning proved to be warm, dry, and sunny. We loaded our gear into two trucks and headed west toward Bahía Mansa, a very small port that serves as the home base for a fleet of artisanal fishing boats. There we met Hugo, captain of the *Marypaz II*, a 38-meter boat of wood and Fiberglas made in Chiloé. Bahía Mansa is small and sheltered; the water was calm and clear. It was a rare windless day. We loaded our gear and then ourselves into a small inflatable Zodiac, which ferried us from shore to the boat that would be our home and field station for the next ten days. There is no dock at Bahía Mansa, so the fifty or so boats harbored there are tethered together snugly side by side, and moored to three points on the shore via long ropes suspended in the surf.

The bay was glassy as the sailors rolled in the anchors, cutting away long clumps of kelp from the rope with a gleaming knife. We exited the quiet bay and encountered the rolling waves, shifting currents, and strong winds of the Strait of Magellan. As our craft proceeded slowly forward at about eight knots, it seemed we were always heading toward a cacophony of animals just at the edge of the horizon—whales, sea loins, and dolphins in the company of gulls, cormorants, and terns looping in and out of one another's worlds as they rounded up a school of bait fish. Two Antarctic terns swept past the boat, their flight so balletic that my stomach lurched, not from seasickness but from a wall of emotion elicited by their dizzying movement through the airspace. Our boat labored through the waves, but the terns breezed by in the blink of an eye. We navigated through the tight, deep Canal San Gabriel behind Isla Dawson, keeping its thrusting mountains between ourselves and Tierra del Fuego's Isla Grande in order to avoid the punishing winds off its western coast.



February 9, 2016

We cruised through rough seas until late last night. Some time after everyone was lulled to sleep by the boat's rhythmic creaking—we sleep shoehorned into wooden bunks below deck—I awoke to a commotion and went up to investigate. The water in the small bay where we sheltered for the night was placid, and even under cloudy skies it emitted a milky turquoise glow, the moonlight reflected in the suspended mineral particles released by slowly melting glaciers. The sailors were tethering a smaller fishing boat to ours. Yesterday we saw many of these small vessels, heading to the same fjords as us to collect ostione, a local variety of scallop. Since the fishery was legally opened last year, men—always men—free dive in thick neoprene wetsuits as deep as twenty meters into the frigid water to collect this culinary delicacy with gloved hands. Back on deck, they warm up next to wood stoves in the homemade crafts' tiny cabins.

My own contact with the water is mediated. I have brought along a small submersible video camera that is attached to a two-meter-long pole, which I hold over the side of the boat to film at the surface of the water and below, allowing it be consumed by waves and spray. A few weeks ago, a bit farther north, I used it to film a pod of humpback whales. The cetologist I was sailing with at that time, Juan Capella of Whale Sound, studies that pod both in their breeding waters off Colombia's Pacific coast, and at their summer feeding home here in Tierra del Fuego.

Each year the whales sing a new song, which Juan calls their "disco hit." During breeding season, individual whales begin to sing strains of songs remembered from years past, building into longer compositions until one takes precedence. When this tune catches on, it is learned by all of the whales and sung for the rest of the season. Low oohs and high squeaks alternate with moos and crackles, making distinct A, B, and C parts that remind me of sea chanteys passed on through oral tradition. This morning on the *Marypaz II*, Héctor, one of our expert mariners, burst into the cabin singing a folk song from Chiloé. He called, "¿Onde va la lancha?" Without missing a beat, his cousin Oscar bellowed, "¡A Quehui va!"

Men from the Chilean Pacific island of Chiloé captain and crew most of the boats here. Chilotes make up one of several settler diasporas in Tierra del Fuego, including Spanish, English, and Croatian populations. They were first drawn here by a gold rush and a developing sheep ranching economy a little over a century ago. This tide of settlers, with an explorer's thirst to exploit "virgin" territory, wreaked havoc on the Selk'nam, Yámana, and other semi-nomadic ethnic groups who inhabited the archipelago for ten thousand years. Through corporate- and government-sanctioned extermination and forced relocation, the Selk'nam were largely disappeared from the Isla Grande of Tierra del Fuego by 1930.

I remember Cecilia Vicuña's poem "Lolaá," an ode to Lola Keipjá, the last Selk'nam shaman, who died in 1966. Lola took with her songs that carried the power of invisible arrows, capable of beaching whales, providers of months of sustenance. In contrast to what I see today, the waters of Tierra del Fuego were once the domain of women. Yámana women, who lived for months at a time in open wooden canoes with their families, navigating through the channels, learned to swim and dive at a young age. Instead of neoprene, a layer of whale fat applied to the

skin insulated them from the cold as they collected the same ostione that we bought from the boat tethered to ours. Like these divers, they kept fires burning in their open boats.

The sea was too rough for us to reach Bahía Jackson today. Instead, we anchored at Caleta Toto, again with fishermen, who dove into the water and swam to the beach with their anchor lines, where they tied their boats to trees. We spent the afternoon preparing the scientists' equipment for the next few days' work. We uncoiled and assembled plastic tubing, containers, filters, and hypodermic needles, which will be used to collect the scat, blood, and whiskers of elephant seals and albatross. On deck, the sailors are shucking ostione in preparation for dinner. We have our own means and reasons for getting close to animals.

February 10, 2016

We passed the night here with ten small fishing boats bumping against one another to our left and right. After a quick breakfast, we took advantage of the calm sea to head to Bahía Jackson and begin fieldwork. The sun was just rising behind the mountains of Karukinka, bathing the fjord in a heavenly light. We knew that when we left our sheltered bay, the waves of the Admiralty Sound would increase in size. I was sitting with Marcela and Cati, two of the expedition's veterinarians, on top of the main cabin on the boat's highest deck as we made that transition. When the waves began to roll, our bench snapped and we sprawled gracelessly across the deck. Unlike the terns, the whales, and the divers, our bodies feel ill-suited to the sea's unpredictability.

Later I filmed during a squall as we passed by a small island. Its cliffs were battered by waves. The captain steered us up and down the whitecaps, as deliberately as when I steer the 4-wheel-drive pickup truck through rivers and up rutted coastal roads on land. I was alone in the bow, gripping my camera's pole with arms stretched overboard, balancing my body on the deck as I allowed the camera to rise and fall with the boat. This moment must have something to do with Turner's desire to be lashed to the bow of the ship during a storm, but my experience of the sublime is tinged with a visceral layer of disgust. Isla Dawson still hulks to our port side, gorgeous in



Christy Gast, *¿'Onde va la lancha?*, 2016. Video still

the storm, its glaciers releasing cascades that trace brilliant white tendrils to the sea. But this beast of an island is associated with Tierra del Fuego's invisible, brutal histories. I can hardly look at it; I feel ashamed by its beauty. This is where the Selk'nam who had

survived the bounty hunters were interred after being herded to the Isla Grande's west coast and shipped across the channel. On the Isla Grande, their human bodies were replaced with those of cattle and sheep.

Later the Salesian order of missionaries attempted to assimilate the indigenous captives on Dawson, building a replica village (I say "replica" because they were not free—the island was a prison) complete with a church, school, and farm. In the Maggiorino Borgatello Salesian Museum in Punta Arenas, there is a life-size diorama of the room where Selk'nam and Yagan women learned to spin, weave, and knit the wool from Tierra del Fuego's newest immigrants, the sheep that are so ubiquitous today. The women on display are so degraded that they seem to match Darwin's doubt of their humanity. Clothed in Victorian castoffs, they are hunched over their work, a nun and priest towering over them. These are caricatures. I think the scene actually depicts the erasure of millennia of knowledge of a world that I myself, as I slip and stumble across the boat's deck, struggle to grasp.

February 11, 2016

Yesterday we finally arrived at Bahía Jackson, passing Islote Albatross as we neared the terminus of Admiralty Sound. Alejandro Villa, the expedition's lead scientist, pointed out hundreds of the enormous seabirds' bowl-shaped mud nests, stacked in nooks and platforms on the island's northern cliff face. The albatross above us barely moved their enormous wings in flight. They remained impossibly still as they rode the stiff wind above the sea. Héctor and Oscar moored the Marypaz II to a wind-bent tree reaching out from the rock face of a tiny island, and soon we were aboard the Zodiac with a lot of gear, zooming across the waves to survey a colony of elephant seals. Alejandro and Marcela Uhart, a veterinarian, lead the team that will tranquilize two elephant seals and affix satellite transponders to their heads.


We disembarked and carried our gear along the beach toward the seals, crossing a massive band of tangled driftwood that had been pushed ashore by a storm. We made the day's basecamp under a large erratic boulder, shoving our slickers and life jackets under its base so they wouldn't be blown away. Alejandro and Marcela went ahead to survey the terrain and identify the elephants to be tagged. The most striking aspect of this landscape is the marine plastic. Shredded blue and white ribbons cling to every driftwood log and thorny calafate bush like zombie rags. I have heard of the garbage patches, swirling gyres of plastic in the open ocean, and I imagine a fragment replacing the lone, dancing strand of kelp I filmed under water yesterday. The camera caught the sun streaming through its ridges and through the ripples of the crystal clear water, which distorted the trees on the cliff above. By 2050, there will be more plastic than life in the world's oceans. I film the zombie ribbons flapping in the stiff wind, and double-check the settings on my audio recorder to make sure the microphone level is right for the wind.

As a sculptor, I look for metaphors in objects. Filming the plastic zombie rags, I think of Duchamp's *Unhappy Readymade*, a reference I borrow from my collaborator Denise Milstein, a writer and sociologist. The windblown, sun-bleached geometry book, suspended by a string, was installed on a balcony in Buenos Aires

in 1919. A few weeks ago, seventy miles up the coast from here, Denise remade this piece, suspending her PhD thesis from a cattle fence on a beach across the channel from Isla Dawson. Denise's thesis is about popular music, counterculture, and authoritarianism in Brazil and Uruguay in the 1960s and '70s. During Chile's authoritarian Pinochet regime, Isla Dawson was again a brutal prison, holding political activists. As the pages of her thesis flapped wildly in the wind, fragments of songs and quotes from musicians came briefly into view, animated against the backdrop of Dawson. The sound of those pages' staccato slapping and crackling, a ream's worth of paper propelled rapidly by the ceaseless Fuegian wind, is impossible to replicate. Even with the fuzziest wind muff on my microphone, its sensor was thrown off and my recording was silent. I thought of that impossible silence, which echoes the haunted feeling I get from Isla Dawson, as I recorded the flapping plastic.

From my boat mates, I learned that the shredded blue and white bags are associated with the region's fishing industries. Bearing the mark of the multinational conglomerate Cargill, they were used to transport bait for king crab traps and salmon farms. Among the driftwood I also see men's shaving razors, wrappers for the same types of food we eat on the boat, the mesh bags and nets used to carry ostones, and motor oil jugs. These are artifacts of men's work. I imagine how easily they are tossed by wind and waves off the decks of these small boats, and wonder how many tons have landed on this beach. I remember the enormous number of puppies clumped at the teats of one small mama dog at Bahía Mansa. They romped and played in trash that looked much the same as what I see here, blown from two lidless dumpsters sitting next to the spot where we first loaded our gear into the Zodiac.

When Alejandro and Marcela returned we all headed through the scrubland toward the seals, crossing a river of glacial meltwater barefoot because it was higher than our rubber boots. On the other side, a group of twenty young male seals were piled atop each other, resembling blobs of clay but with the squishy consistency of marshmallows. Framing them through the lens of my camera felt like an exercise in abstraction, gently rolling shapes and gradients occasionally rocked by a burst of testosterone—guttural snorts and trumpet brays—an animated Lee Bontecou relief. Marcela explained that, once the transponders are affixed to the seals' heads, their movements will trace a map through the fjords. Those maps will be used to make a case for policy change, for a new Marine Protected Area to be created in the Admiralty Sound with limits on fishing and tourism.

I think of those seals joining the riot of animals we saw on the horizon our first day at sea, their antennas sending a signal to satellites above. The seals' whiskers also contain data—DNA impressions of the fish they've eaten. I ask Marcela if we humans, too, become the food we eat, if the ostones will be detectable in my DNA. I have looped into this world, its life has mixed with mine. When I return to my studio with all that I have written and recorded here, how will that mixture evolve? 

Christy Gast is an artist based in New York. *Ensayos* is a nomadic research program based in Tierra del Fuego. It was founded by Camila Marambio in 2011.