

Art, science and uselessness in Tierra del Fuego: A conversation with Camila Marambio


by Catalina Jaramillo



Photo: Christy Gast

This interview was conducted in October 2015.

Camila Marambio, 36, defines herself as a private investigator, amateur dancer, permaculture enthusiast, and sporadic writer; but first and foremost, as a curator. She was born in the US, raised in New York City and Santiago, and has lived in Amsterdam and Paris. She has an M.A. in Modern Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies from Columbia University and a Master of Experiments in Arts and Politics from Science Po, and is now a Phd candidate in Philosophy from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. She currently directs the nomadic residency program "Ensayos," that enables artists, scientists and local inhabitants to engage in experimental interdisciplinary practice as a way to deal with ecological issues in Tierra del Fuego. She's also a regular contributor for the *Miami Rail*.



Ensayos works in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), among other governmental institutions and NGOs, one of the oldest conservation initiatives in the world. The WCS, based in The Bronx, owns Karukinka, a 300,000 hectares park in Chile; manages five parks in New York— Bronx Zoo, Prospect Park Zoo, Queens Zoo, Central Park Zoo and the New York Aquarium— and develops over 500 field programs in more than 60 countries. In October and November of last year, the Ensayos collective held a one month seminar at BHQFU, New York's freest art school, and had a running exhibition at their gallery space in the East Village. In 2014, they had a one month show at the Kadist Foundation in Paris. Currently, they are developing a beaver scent in collaboration with the Institute of Art and Olfaction in California and a courtroom drama TV series based in Tierra del Fuego.

I don't remember exactly when or where I met Camila, but since 2013 I've interviewed her on several occasions for different publications (this is the first time in English). In 2014, I finally had the chance to visit and stay in Tierra for ten days at CAB Patagonia, a habitable museum located in Puerto Yartou. I was deeply moved by the experience. Since then, I understand why Camila has been working restlessly for five years raising funds and gathering thinkers and creators who want to contribute complex reflections and actions to the conservation of this very special territory at the end of the world. Tip: in Spanish, the word *curadora* means curator and healer at the same time.

What are you doing in Tierra del Fuego?

I direct a research program...(she hesitates.) Actually, most of the time I feel that the territory directs me. So, let me start again: Tierra del Fuego directs a research program, which I am the curator of. Tierra del Fuego's landscape is magnificent, desolate, and overwhelmingly diverse and complex: there are temperate forests, peat bogs, steppe, coastal areas, and the Cordillera de Darwin. But its complexity is not only ecological, but also political. It's a bi-national territory, divided between Chile and Argentina, which contributes to making Tierra del Fuego a very unique place on the planet. A sort of laboratory for observing how two groups of humans, each governed by different notions of national identity and laws, enact these identities in relation to territory.

I want to add that even though in Tierra del Fuego you tend to feel that you are the first one ever to be there, this territory has been inhabited, exploited and used as a refuge by many people.

Absolutely. There's a very strong contradiction that one experiences when visiting and/or inhabiting Tierra del Fuego. As you mention, it's easy to feel that you are walking into a pristine landscape, but in fact, it has a long history of colonization, and quite a violent one. There have been people living in Tierra del Fuego since some 13,000 years, as was recently discovered by local archeologists. These native peoples were living there when the first conquerors arrived and most of them were aggressively persecuted and killed. Soon after that, waves of Europeans came and established themselves, either in missions or as sheep ranchers, and this radically changed the landscape's appearance. But the dynamism of Tierra del Fuego is such that it has literally overgrown some of these interventions, so it's easy to miss them.

It's a very resilient territory.

It is. And so are the people that live there. The wind is incredibly fierce and it makes it very difficult to be outside for all the hours that one needs or wants to be. But, it's not more difficult to live in than places way further north, cities in the north of Norway or Canada. The fact is that since the South American continent narrows, and Tierra del Fuego finds itself at the tip of the continent, there is a conditioned sense ability that makes you aware that you at the end of the earth. And not everybody likes to live on the edge. I personally love that sensation, and that's one of the

reasons I'm drawn there over and over again. Many times I've come to think about what kind of people go to Tierra del Fuego and what sort of people stay there, and there are three personality types that I have come to distinguish. One is the conqueror: the one who wants to discover something so as to claim it. The second is the renegade: somebody who is running away from something and is looking for a place to hide [Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid, are among the most famous ones.] And the third is the adventurer: a person driven by curiosity and the desire to know the unknowable.

Tell me about the project that Tierra del Fuego is directing and you are curating.

It's called Ensayos, a word that can be translated as essays, trials or rehearsals. What Ensayos does is to explore different ways of being in Tierra del Fuego, by engaging with the ecological and aesthetic aspects of the territory. On Tierra del Fuego there are many conservation initiatives, NGOs from all around the world, each exercising a very different approach to conservation— employing unique methodologies, imposing different ethical perspectives and producing sometimes radically divergent strategies to care for the biodiversity of the islands. These distinctions mostly stem from the visions of the organizations, universities or governmental bodies that are funding them. That eco-political landscape concerns me. So I decided to pool together a collective of artists and social scientists to collaborate with the many natural science organizations at work there and to see if there's any space for art in the process of conservation.



What kind of role can art play there?

That's the question we have been asking ourselves for a couple of years now: what can art do? And the most recurrent answer is that art is useless in that context. But we think that points to its radical potential: to be useless! Art can be the way to incorporate uselessness into the active missions of some of these laudable organizations.

Wait, how can uselessness be important?

In the critical contemporary moment that we are living in, where everything is valued by its use and efficiency, to make a case for uselessness is really to advocate for an alternative way of understanding life. A way that reinforces the emergence of other values; ones that are perhaps not even new, but maybe inspired or related to the way people were living in Tierra del Fuego before modern civilization. Nomadism as a means of knowing and sustaining life requires an alertness that enhances deep observation and springs alternative ecological visions. Art offers a possibility of encountering what's available through the senses, and withholding from the urge to modify our surroundings to make them useful.

Your work with beavers could be an example of that.

Yes. The Canadian beaver was introduced into Argentinian Tierra del Fuego in 1946 as a way to create an industry there, but the project went astray when the fur industry collapsed years later. The 25 couples of beavers were left to their own and without predators they adapted very, very well. So 30 or 40 years down the line, there are almost as many beavers as sheep on the island and they heavily impact the territory. So when conservation efforts came to the land and resolved after years of study to eradicate them, Ensayos said, wait! Let's see if we can look at this situation from the point of view of uselessness. And poetic attitudes to the problem emerged. Through Ensayos we propose drifting attitudes, and considering imaginary and fictional solutions to the immediate problems.

That sounds fascinating. Can you give some examples of those solutions?

Well, we insist on "having a conversation" with the beavers— which is really to say that we insist on considering their being alive— by trying new ways of seeing and smelling. This communication helps to include them into the decision making of their own future on the island. This, of course, involves a lot of ridiculous or uncomfortable moments because it's an interspecies dialogue, something we are not used to doing because we don't share a language. For years, what we have been doing is hanging out on or around *castoreras*, dams where beavers live, and trying to allow ourselves to perceive their language.

This usually requires us to let go into a very different mental rhythm, easing into a sense— awareness of how our perceptions change as we try to decolonize the space that we are sharing, allowing us to hear the beavers and engage in a kind of awe-driven relationship. We've taken that practice to very playful extremes, such as actually wearing hand made beaver costumes (wearable sculptures of sorts) to try to move like beavers, and explore if they engage with their own represented image. As of late, we have developed a set of four scents that might entice them to get a little closer or to sniff out what our intentions are.

What kind of scents?

In early October we went to the Institute of Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles to work on them. We used *castoreum* as a base note— castoreum is a gland that the beavers have which secretes an oily substance that fixes other scents. And for our middle and top notes we used oils from bushes, berries, wood, flowers as well as some synthetics.

Have you been able to have any conversations with them so far? Are there any outcomes to the exercises you've been performing?

Yes. Through listening and speaking to the beavers I think that we've reached a new understanding of what it means to belong to a place and who gets to claim ownership of it. Beavers are excellent homemakers, and in that sense, they are similar to humans. When we arrive to a place that has ample resources to support us, we usually make a home there and begin to colonize. There are detrimental effects to this "spontaneous" voracity of ours, to this "capacity" of home making away from our "native" homes. What rights and responsibilities do colonies of displaced people and non-humans have? That's a question that we are all asking ourselves seriously at the moment. Once you see it in this way, it is very hard to continue thinking that eradication is the best way to deal with a whole population of beings that claim Tierra del Fuego as their home.

It's interesting, because you are working with scientists who are more used to working with facts and numbers. How has the conversation between artists, social scientists and scientists been going?

The conversations are not necessarily easy...it's not that they are difficult, but they are very demanding. We use the same words sometimes, but we understand them completely differently. We have different definitions of the same words. So we spend a lot of time, years actually, going over these words and exploring how we are using them, so that we can understand somewhat the same things. There are also a lot of prejudices to break. What we do, a lot of the time, is to continually remind each other of the disciplinary malformations that blind us to subtle difference and otherness.

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You are partnering with the Wildlife Conservation Society, do they take this seriously or is it just a fun thing to do with artists?

Oh, they take us very seriously. And I have to mention and thank Bárbara Saavedra, a brilliant Chilean ecologist and director of WCS Chile, who never stops surprising me and who was the one that opened the door for all of this to get started. She and I get into very intense conversations about what are we doing. Even though these are only *ensayos* or essays, and mostly we are only trying things out, at the core of it all, what drives us is a real conviction that the work that we're performing has the potential to influence the course of very important decisions that will shape the future of this territory. We are really working on the well-being of this place and its inhabitants. Well-being is both subjective and objective, so definitions vary, and that's when it gets complicated. So time and time again, we go over those definitions. But we continue to try to bring them together in a creative processes of interweaving knowledge.

First you considered the beaver issue, and now you are working with the coastline. Tell me about it.

Tierra del Fuego is an archipelago, so, how do we care for a territory that is mostly made of water? Who stewards the area where the water meets the land? Who uses it? Who should have rights over those territories? Who knows about it? Those are some of the questions we are asking, and we hope to influence laws that are being

made to protect those areas, to restrict or manage use and to commemorate those communities that have been living between land and sea for ages. Historically, these "territorial waters" were the ones most used by the *Yaghanes* and the *Kaweskar*, canoe peoples, and also by the *Selk'nam* and *Aonikenk* who came to the coast to trade. That's where culture was taking place in Tierra del Fuego since millennia. So we are very interested in looking at how that culture has developed and how now those waters are mostly in hands of fishing companies or commercial ventures. This coastal *Ensayo*, *Ensayo #4*, brings up questions of private ownership versus public use.

What are you working on now?

I'm mostly delving into human geography [a branch of geography dealing with how human activity affects or is influenced by the earth's surface] with a new group of researchers to study how the law, and the representation of a territory, has a strong impact of the use-value that territory is given. We are looking at four real legal cases to analyze the human geographical aspects and we want to make a TV series, a courtroom drama, to show these cases.



Photo (bottom): Christy Gast



Where are you planning to show it?

It will probably be independent. Maybe Netflix? *(Laughs)* We'll see. It's a long term project; I don't think we'll be filming until 2018.

We have been talking intellectually, but I know that this project has also taken you on a deep spiritual journey. I want to mention that you are a cancer survivor and that Ensayos has played a role in that too. Can you tell me more about your personal process?

Sure, thanks for this question. Ensayos is a pragmatic program but also a poetic and abstract one and I like to strive to bring these things together. Ensayos is really born out of a desire to give a platform to caring. To caring for a place, like Tierra del Fuego, but also for caring for everybody that cares for it, or wants to care. Caring is something that is not only about doing. To care for one's self you can do a lot of things: wake up, stretch, take care of your health, meals, etc. Yet, at the same time, all of those activities need to be routed in a more spiritual sense of self for them to add up to a life story. There is an undeniable need to constantly feel that we are connected, understood, or held by a much larger, enigmatic force. Our sense making organ, the brain, looks for meaning. Some people dedicate themselves to this curiosity by turning to religion, others to philosophy, etc. Tierra del Fuego is a landscape that has become a landscape for finding experiences that tend to my questions about care, about self, and about the dissolution of the self. For the coming to understanding that the self exists only in relation to a much larger network of

other beings, and non-beings, and that they all need to be well for you to be well. Tierra del Fuego is a place where my own struggles between life and death made sense.

Why do you think your soul vibrates so much with Tierra del Fuego?

I knew it was going to be a long journey the moment I had my first awakening there. I stood in the middle of the vastness, in an area that is called Caleta Maria (but it could have been in any other place there, really) and I knew at that very moment that I was being shown my size, my scale, my place on the planet. And that was so endearing, such a tender experience. It could have produced terror, because of feeling just how tiny I was, but to me it revealed the tremendous significance of just being present in that very moment, at that place. Therefore, that place is sort of an axis mundi, an access point that showed me the invisible structures of the planet and universe. So, naturally, I decided to honor it, consistently. It was a place where I, a kind of errant migrant contemporary human—having been born in the States and then having been raised also in Chile and then studied in Europe—felt like I could really belong if that is what I wanted, and I didn't need to call it mine, I could just feel belonging.

So are you the conqueror, the adventurer or the renegade?

Ha! I think I'm more the renegade. And sometimes the adventurer. And probably, to some degree, also the conqueror (*laughs*). But I like the renegades, and when I meet them in Tierra del Fuego, those are the ones that I get along with the most. ♦



Photo (next page): Laura Ogden



Ensayos colaboradores:

Christy Gast (US, artista), Karolin Tampere, Randi Nygård, Sossna Jørgensen y Geir Tore Holm (Norway, artistas), Denise Milsom (Uruguay, socióloga), Sofía Legarte (Chile, socióloga), Cecilia Vicuña (Chile, artista), Carla Macchiavello (Chile, art historian), Laura Ogden (US, antropóloga), María Luisa Murrillo (Chile, photographer) y Carolina Saquel (Chile, artista), Derek Carocan (ecólogo) y Georgia Gracis (biólogo), Barbara Saavedra (Chile, ecóloga), Alfredo Prieto (Chile, arqueólogo), Ivette Martínez (Chile, activista), Juan Pablo Langlois Vicuña (Chile, artista), Fabienne Lasserre (Canada, artista).

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