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CULTIVATING ONGOINGNESS THROUGH SITE-SPECIFIC ARTS RESEARCH AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In this article, I consider the contributions of projects in Latin America to the need “to think in the presence of ongoing facts of destruction”, and to imagine and design forms of “ongoingness” amid socioenvironmental challenges and conflicts. I focus on HAWAPI, Ensayos and EnlaceArq, three initiatives that have consolidated a decade of site-specific, practice research that departs from the arts to devise methods that bridge the arts, sciences, and communities to confront socioenvironmental pressures and enduring injustices caused by colonial legacies and continued extractivism. How does site-specific practice research seed and cultivate inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations around pressing socioenvironmental concerns affecting Latin America? How do projects establish critical relationships regarding the circulation of knowledges related to these issues and engage with diverse types of publics? And, insofar as the projects reviewed here often operate on the fringes of academia, what strengths and challenges does this generate for their sustainability over time and their impact on scholarly research, public conversations and the lives of specific communities?

Keywords: transdisciplinarity; site-specific research; arts research; curatorial practice; environmental humanities; Anthropocene

Slowing the fall

In his 2020 essay *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, the Brazilian activist for socioenvironmental and Indigenous rights Ailton Krenak conjured the current socioecological impasse as a fall into an abyss rife with divisions. “The end of the world is never so close as when you have worlds on either side of a divide, each trying to guess what the other’s doing”, he wrote, before calling on his readers to embrace the sensation of falling and “put our creative and critical capacity to use making some colourful parachutes to slow the fall, [and] turn it into something exciting and edifying” (2020, 64). Far from a negation of the severity of the Anthropocene, Krenak’s appeal was for a diversification of epistemologies and imaginative practices capable of rendering “the world in another register, another potency” (66). This, he suggested, would combat the entrenched alienation of the capitalist world system by creating opportunities for re-attachment to the multitudinous forms of life and for an openness to other ways of living and being in the world.

Over the past decade, ecopolitical arts have consolidated as fertile terrains for critical inquiry into the structural causes and pressing challenges of the Anthropocene, as shown by major exhibitions such as *Incerteza viva* (Sao Paulo Biennale, 2016), *Bodies of Water* (Shanghai Biennale, 2021) and *Rivus* (Sydney Biennale, 2022). Amid the increasing formal acceptance of practice research within the academy by virtue of its intrinsic scholarly value and capacity to engage public imaginations and traverse disciplinary divides (see Smith and Dean 2009), high-profile practice research platforms have emerged to grapple inventively with the environmental challenges signalled by Krenak, often moving in and out of academic milieux, into specific fieldwork sites, and inventing diverse formats for dissemination in public settings. Global networks such as *World of Matter* – a multimedia platform providing an open-access archive on the global ecologies of resource exploitation and circulation – and the cross-disciplinary exhibitions developed by the *Living in the Anthropocene* project led by Anna Tsing and Niels Bohr at Aarhus University are just two examples that bear out the research value of constellating creative methods and disciplinary dialogues that critique anthropocentric projects of human development and speculate about ways of living in temporality that Donna Haraway (2016) calls “ongoingness”.¹

These shifts in practice research parallel other broad, interconnected changes in the ways in which environmental challenges are being mapped across and beyond scholarly disciplines. Amid growing awareness of the ecological and climate emergency in public debates, there is increasing impetus in the academy for research projects that are interdisciplinary in their approach to environmental topics and public-facing in their dissemination strategies, and recognition of the scholarly value of public engagement work in the environmental humanities (Jørgensen 2022). Simultaneously, the creation of specialist journals, scholarly associations, and academic programmes in the field of the environmental humanities confirms the ground gained by this innovative and timely discipline predicated on traversing conventional divides separating the natural and social sciences and the humanities. All of this forms the backdrop to the rise of projects in Latin America that by learning “to think in the presence of ongoing facts of destruction” (Stengers 2013, 186) make valuable contributions to the environmental debates which have become more prevalent in Latin American cultural studies over recent years, as we contend in this dossier. These practice research projects depart from the arts to seed creative terrains that bridge the arts, sciences, communities, and institutions to confront socioenvironmental pressures caused by legacies of colonialism and extractivism, land-tenure conflicts affecting peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Latin American communities, post-conflict territories, and the rights of nature, among other issues. Many are informed by critical debates about decolonisation and the need for “ecologies of knowledge” that replace the monoculture of dominant Western thinking with diverse epistemologies that can inspire ethics of planetary belonging adapted to the present (de Sousa Santos 2008, 186).

A wealth of artists in Latin America are advancing practice research into environmental aesthetics that contributes to the collective challenge of imagining ways of being in the world otherwise. A growing list of publications intersecting Latin American Cultural Studies and Environmental Humanities is placing a spotlight on

the nexus of art and the environment (e.g. Andermann 2018; Lozano 2016; Page 2021), while recent academic projects are using public programmes and exhibitions to bridge gaps between scholarly work and public debates (e.g. Solano and Serrano 2021). In this context, in this essay I review three collaborative initiatives in arts-led research that make significant contributions to academic discussions, public conversations, and community action on socioenvironmental conflicts and justice. Focusing on HAWAPI, Ensayos, and EnlaceArq, three decade-old platforms active in Latin America and beyond, I consider how their direct engagements with territory, pursuit of transdisciplinary methods in working across diverse terrains, disciplines, and media, and commitment to public engagement foster an “ecology of practices” – the term Isabelle Stengers uses to describe malleable and inventive modes of research, which think through the milieu (understood as both middle grounds of knowledge and physical surroundings) to consider emergent attachments to shared lifeworlds that relinquish nostalgia for fixed truths (2013, 187). While not exhaustive in scope, the projects selected are representative of the consolidation of arts-based inquiry in the region, the diversity of process-driven methods that animate such projects’ pursuit of “response-ability” (Haraway 2016), and strategic approaches to interacting with academic contexts and cultural institutions that support autonomy and flexibility in working methods.² The discussion below asks: how does arts-led site-specific research seed and cultivate inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations around pressing socioenvironmental concerns affecting Latin America? How do projects establish critical relationships regarding the circulation of knowledges related to these issues and engage with diverse types of publics? And, insofar as the projects reviewed here often operate on the fringes of academia, what strengths and challenges does this generate for their sustainability over time and their impact on scholarly research, public conversations, and the lives of specific communities?

Accessing terrain

Access to land in Latin America is historically contentious and violent, with spatial dynamics and encounters in its “extractive zones” often ensnared in “the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out regions of ‘high biodiversity’ in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion” (Gómez-Barris 2017, xvi). From colonial *reducciones* and *latifundia*, through to mining enclaves and transnational industrial complexes, land formations attest directly to processes of usurpation, slavery, and exploitation enacted by colonialism and capital. How land is represented is imbricated with these phenomena. In the region’s territorial histories, colonial power, scientific surveys, and extractive enterprises converge to produce a complex and problematic visual culture (Bleichmar 2012). The expedition has been a key *modus operandi* in this setting, and one that directly involved artists in the production of taxonomies that instrumentalised nature-as-resource, and that cast Latin America’s landscapes in sublime and romantic registers that euphemised the violent encounters (Manthorne 2015). These traditions made art complicit with colonial and extractive dynamics, a notable example of which is the

Botanical Expedition of New Granada (1760–1808), whose archive of illustrations remains in the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid, Spain.

Confronting these territorial processes critically and evading the contemporary dynamics of both touristic and academic/cultural extractivism is a challenge common to site-specific projects that aim to engage territory directly, assembling – as the projects reviewed here do – groups of artists, curators, researchers, and community members to work together in the field. The complexity of access as a process for negotiation – rather than a right to be taken – is a central feature of the work of HAWAPI, a Lima-based independent cultural association that takes interdisciplinary artists to specific locations to conduct research and produce interventions in public space. HAWAPI was founded in 2012 by film producer Maxim Holland, running for its first two years under the name AFUERA. Since 2017, Holland has co-directed the project with curator and scholar Susie Quillinan, who also leads the platform’s editorial work. HAWAPI unfolds annually in a three-phase structure, which starts with a site-specific residency (termed the *encuentro*, which translates as “encounter” or “meeting”) of approximately ten participants who live together for one to two weeks. The residency is followed by curatorial work with the artists that results in an exhibition in an urban gallery held some months later, and a digital and print book, usually published a year after the initial *encuentro*. Participant artists are mainly Peruvian but also international; guest curators have also featured in the project since 2018. Residency sites have included the open pit and gold mining towns of Cerro del Pasco (2012) and Huetupehu, Peru (2015), the desert border area between Peru, Chile, and Bolivia (2017), and the Territorial Area for Training and Reincorporation (Espacio Territorial de Capacitación y Reincorporación) Amaury Rodríguez in Pongores, La Guajira, Colombia (2018), among others. During the *encuentro*, participants interact with site and local residents in various ways, including intimate collaborations (such as the residency that took place on the lands of Máxima Acuña and her family in Cajamarca, in 2019) or more remote experiences (as in the 2014 edition when participants were stationed at an isolated base camp created at the receding Pariacaca glacier in Peru’s Central Cordillera).

HAWAPI pivots on the intense, embodied, and relational experience the participants gain in the field. This experience is designed to instigate ephemeral artist responses to place that are informed by the complex configurations of territory they encounter. Rather than an exclusively environmental project, HAWAPI’s curatorial approach is to select sites of social, economic, and political relevance that demonstrate processes of abandon, fracture, and ongoing transformation. Participants do not engage with territory by following the trajectory of the expedition (which tends to pit human bodies against an environment to be conquered). Rather, participants stay rooted in the socioeconomic and material textures of each *encuentro*’s locale. This strategy seeks to generate depth and intensity in encounters, rather than ape the often-triumphant rhetoric of historical expeditions and contemporary tourist excursions. In this sense, HAWAPI’s conceptual framing is more akin to Robert Smithson’s mid-twentieth century call to attend to the rich “rubble of logic” that can be unearthed in direct interaction with human-altered geologies of infrastructural and extractive landscapes (1996, 110).



Figures 1 and 2. Linda Pongutá, *Ojos de tierra (Earth Eyes)*, 2019. HAWAPI 2019 – Máxima Acuña. Photos: Maxim Holland.

Indeed, in consistent dialogue with the tradition of Land Art, artist responses often emerge as temporary installations seen only by the artist and their immediate collaborators, emerging through direct engagement and collaboration with the community hosting the artists. This occurred in the 2019 edition when the Colombian artist Linda Pongutá sculpted a ring of earth around a large stone on the land belonging to Máxima Acuña and her family (Figures 1 and 2), noting that “This rock is a place that something or someone might inhabit, it is a source of fertility and is related to the remote, it is a mountain” (Quillinan 2020, 21).³ To the artist’s gesture of creating a microcosmic interplay of vulnerability, enclosure, and protection, Acuña’s son, Daniel Chaupe, responded: “This stone is protected, which leads us to conclude that stones are also alive” (Quillinan 2020, 21). This slow process of hand-sculpting the earth reflected the dynamics of other participants who offered their labour to the everyday tasks of Máxima Acuña’s land, demonstrating the ethical disposition of the project insofar as it recalls Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s assertion that: “Caring is more than an affective-ethical state: it involves material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds, labours that are often associated with exploitation and domination” (2012, 198). A further

example of collaborative work occurred in the 2015 edition in Huepetuhue, when activities unfolded in a temporary cultural centre in the town's main plaza, which served as an open-air meeting point and venue for workshops, film screenings, and performances. There, Peruvian artist Philippe Gruenberg worked together with a local confectioner to create a vast cake depicting the extractive landscape which was exhibited and eaten by the community. Considered by curators Holland and Quillinan an exemplar of the HAWAPI ethos, the intervention created a literal opportunity to metabolise collectively (and playfully) the incursion of artists into the site and to digest how mining is transforming the local environment.⁴

What lasting impact such experiences leave on communities that host artist residencies is a question notoriously difficult to gauge in arts research since (to the frustration of funding bodies) it does not necessarily deliver immediate or quantifiable results. In HAWAPI's case, there is no pretension to enduring collaboration with site or community, and the curators are self-reflective and critical about the dangers posed both by contemporary art existing in a "bubble" and the "artificial hells" (Bishop 2013) that superficial participatory art can create (conversation with the author, 4 November 2021). Rather, the curatorial wager is better understood as the aspiration for what Holland terms a "ripple effect" ("Lima Conversations" 2016) generated by the temporary activation of communities engaged in intense debates and activities in specific sites, and the subsequent cultivation – in the latter phases of exhibition and book – of spaces for reflection, studio art practice, and the development and exchange of ideas. The protracted metabolism of each edition, as it moves from sitework to studio, and gallery to book, confronts publics in urban centres with the problematic terrains HAWAPI probes and then – through its open-access publications – offers these terrains up for further research and reflection around practice research, territory, climate, extractivism, and community.

One particularly significant research contribution that emerges from HAWAPI's decade-long practice is its cumulative cartography of regional territorial conflicts and the production of artworks and texts reflecting on them. Amid the commercialisation of Peru's local art scene (Borea 2021), HAWAPI has taken an alternative not-for-profit route that encourages artists to engage in site-specific practice away from the capital city. It thus fosters embodied methodologies in contemporary art research that cultivate "the art of paying attention" (Ingold 2017) to the dynamic factors and processes that shape contemporary landscapes of the Capitocene. In a broader sense, this contributes to critical debates around landscape conceived not as an object for representation but as a dynamic "contact zone" (Pratt 1991) and site of "friction" (Tsing 2004) shaken by myriad economic, social, aesthetic, and material forces into states of "trance" (Andermann 2018). Ultimately, as HAWAPI brings remote territorial conflicts – from receding glaciers to campesino resistance – to cultural spaces in diverse cities (Lima, Bogota, Santiago, Cusco, Tacna, and Vaparaíso, to date) it contributes to raising public awareness of a range of socioenvironmental and politico-ecological problems and insists, to quote Timothy Morton, on the entangled nature of ecology where "[h]ere – is always *there* too" (2007, 200). In contemporary Peru, with its dependence on mining and tourism, and the fractious divide between urban centres and

rural communities, this insistence on the interconnectivity of territory can be understood as a political gesture that creates opportunities to think with the fractures of the nation's "imagined community" (Anderson 1983).

Nomadic essaying

Much further down the Pacific coast from Lima, another collaborative platform that recently marked a decade of site-specific work is *Ensayos*, founded by the Chilean curator Camila Marambio in 2010 with its first iteration, *Ensayo #1*, held in Tierra del Fuego in 2011.⁵ *Ensayos* is a collective research practice whose strands of inquiry are rooted in Chilean Patagonia but move nomadically across continents, convening collaborators of diverse nationalities, and manifesting themselves in various forms, including exhibitions, films, performances, publications, theatrical work, a web series, and even a perfume. The collective departs from a critical approach and sensory attunement to the physical and geopolitical conditions of territory, grounding its work in an ecofeminist, transdisciplinary ethos that seeks to contribute to existing biocultural preservation efforts, and to grapple with Tierra del Fuego's enframing as a land to be conquered, exploited, and commodified, whether through its historic role as a beaver-fur colony or its contemporary status as global tourist destination. The group confronts dynamics of place and expresses commitment to honouring the Indigenous Selk'nam, Yaghan, Kawéskar, and Haush peoples, the ancestral occupants of the lands and waters through which *Ensayos* moves. On the project website, *Ensayos* features an acknowledgement of the indigenous lands its research moves across, and of its decolonial perspectives and engagement with indigenous peoples and knowledges that inform its research.

The curatorial premise proposes that interdisciplinary collaboration and transdisciplinary methods can support biocultural preservation. To this end, it instigates the participation of artists as researchers in existing ecological and cultural conservation initiatives. *Ensayos* constellates *ensayistas* who feature scientists, curators, artists, members of indigenous groups hailing from Australia, Chile, Norway, and the United States, who collaborate on ongoing projects that involve periodic meetings and materialisations of research in different latitudes, including Patagonian cultural festivals, European exhibition spaces, and academic conferences.⁶ *Ensayo #1*, the overarching structure and thematic strand that guides all the group's activities, emerged from site-specific conversations in the inaugural 10-day excursion co-organised with the Parque Karukinka Wildlife Conservation Society in 2011. There, artists, scientists, and locals came together to consider what ecopolitical work an artist residency might do, and what lines of ongoing inquiry could "transform the extractivist models of human interaction with Tierra del Fuego and other archipelagos" and inspire emergent forms of eco-cultural ethics ("*Ensayo #1*" n.d.). It thus set out to feed back to territory and community, rather than take from them.

This first *Ensayo* produced five further strands of research approaching topics of extinction, human geography, coastal health, repatriation, and peatland conservation. Each *Ensayo* features a different set of participants, rationale, aims, and

envisaged outcomes published on its host page on the digital platform. This links to a subsequent archive of posts that document and comment on the ongoing activities, enabling each *Ensayo* to unfold as an open-ended, iterative process, rather than follow an outcome-oriented logic. The global connections that *Ensayos* establishes through its web of fieldwork sites, participants, and venues for dissemination do critical work on two important fronts. First, they interrogate the ocean-crossing, settler colonialist dynamics of “capitalism-in-nature” by addressing territorial formations shaped by the long project of modernity (Moore 2015), such as through the historical revision of the 1940s project to turn Tierra del Fuego into a fur-producing beaver colony. Second, through ongoing dialogue and collaboration between international and local researchers and stakeholders, *Ensayos*’ global connections eschew essentialist or nostalgic notions of place, identity, and nature criticised by scholars as politically reactionary and philosophically stunted (e.g. Morton 2007).

Framed as a series of ongoing “essays”, *Ensayos* signals the importance of process – as opposed to the production of objects for the white cube gallery setting – in its wager for “the regenerative potential of open-ended, undisciplined, creative research that carefully assembles independent researchers with indigenous communities, local organizations, institutions, governing bodies, and more-than-human entities” (“Intro” n.d.). The groups’ projects draw from philosophical debates around interspecies ecologies and ecofeminism but respond to actual sociolegal and biocultural problematics of contested lands. This strategy demonstrates curatorial commitment to intersecting academic and social realms through theoretically informed arts practice that bypasses conventional modes of knowledge circulation (such as academic papers) that are so often unavailable to non-specialist audiences. Many of *Ensayos*’ projects embrace the ludic and inventive spirit of “speculative fabulation” (Haraway 2016) to open spaces to think otherwise. An example of this is a sub-project in *Ensayo #2*, which focuses on the introduction of Canadian beavers to Tierra del Fuego. This *Ensayo*, which began in 2011 and is ongoing, features a recording of the live performance *Asunto Castor* at the Festival Cielos del Infinito at the Museo Martín Gusinde in 2014 (Figure 3). There, artist Christy Gast and Marambio dressed in human-sized beaver suits to share with the public insights from the interdisciplinary work being done by *Ensayos*’ researchers



Figure 3. Video still from *Asunto Castor*, a performance by Camila Marambio and Christy Gast, presented on 22 February 2014, in Puerto Williams, Isla Navarino, Cabo de Hornos, as part of the Festival Cielos del Infinito at the Museo Martín Gusinde. Courtesy of *Ensayos*.

through discussion, diagrams, and movement, and to encourage public contributions. They invited (initially awkward) audience members to become beaver by putting on the suit and sharing reflections on the impacts the animals make on the local ecology. This ludic mode of “making kin” with the beavers – considered by some to be an invasive pest – mobilised contemporary debates on interspecies collaboration in post-anthropocentric affective configurations of community that are not limited to human lives.

The collective’s most recent project, *Pabellón Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* (part of Ensayo #6’s research on peatbog ecosystems), addresses the urgency of peatland conservation and is in preparation in direct collaboration with environmental and indigenous organisations, such as Wildlife Conservation Society and Fundación Hach Saye, which defends Selk’nam culture in Tierra del Fuego. The project will represent Chile at the Venice Biennial in Spring 2022, before which the organisers are running a programme of outreach events about peatbogs with local communities and Chilean institutions. The curatorial text sets out the focus on an approach to socioenvironmental justice that demonstrates from the entanglement (rather than separation) of human and non-human lives:

All over this increasingly hot and dry world, these wetlands are imperiled. Their conservation is intrinsically linked to the future wellbeing of humankind and, in Patagonia, to the rebirth of the Selk’nam people. Peat bogs are clamoring to be represented as a living body, as the Selk’nam people are also clamoring to be recognized as a living culture. (“About”)

As well as indigenous cosmovisions, the recognition of peat bogs as *living bodies* resonates with new materialist theory (e.g. Bennett 2009) and non-representationalist theories of performativity (Barad 2003) that question the human/nature, subject/object binaries and seek conduits to attune to the vibrancy and “thingyness” of matter as “active participant in the world’s becoming” (Barad 2003, 803). However, the most compelling and potentially generative aspect of the project is its emphasis on the mutual dependencies of the legal recognition of indigenous communities and the conservation of endangered peatlands as two lifeworlds made vulnerable by the historical and ongoing colonial-extractive dynamics.

Through its name “heart of peatlands” (from the Selk’nam words Tol, “heart”, and Hol-Hol, peatland) its core assertion is the parallel between the vitality of the peat and that of the Selk’nam people, who inhabited this austral territory for 8,000 years before colonisation. The notion of heartland, in this sense, is more than a metaphor: it names a living, affective territory of decolonial resistance and responsiveness to climate change. The project website anticipates how this interconnection informs the project in the work shown in Venice through its section “*Rumores*” (Rumours), a sound channel that hosts recordings of human-and-non-human conversations (conversation with the author, 14 January 2022) which is broadcast online and can be downloaded in the form of experimental disciplinary-crossing texts that strive for a more-than-human agency in their environmental aesthetics. Each recording mixes territorial sounds and human voices, featuring different collaborators’ conversations with and responses to the peatlands, along with the “voice” of bogs themselves, present through a series of squelching noises. This

aspect indicates the aspiration that practice research and public engagement work can contribute concretely to the struggle for intertwined forms of socioenvironmental justice through legal recognition of the Selk'nam people and of the peatlands as a vital ecosystem for carbon capture and storage. This method of intersecting arts and science research, inter-institutional and community collaboration, and public imaginations and debates, all oriented to social justice, biocultural preservation, and climate emergency action, signals the consolidation of an effort of ten years ten years of an effort of ten years inventing and *essaying* a creative method that enables transdisciplinary work (conversation with the author, 13 January 2022). The production of articles co-written with Selk'nam community representative Herman'y Molina Vargas exemplifies the commitment to close collaboration (Molina Vargas, Marambio, and Lykke 2020) and intention to disseminate the project in scholarly arenas. At the same time, the question of whether a national pavilion at a global art biennial can effectively contribute to tangible juridical outcomes will be a future point for analysis and discussion.

Relational design

As elsewhere in the Global South, throughout the twentieth century the developmentalist ideology of fast-paced industrialisation and urbanisation radically transformed Latin American territories. Contemporary urban and peri-urban landscapes attest to the asymmetries and inequities inherent in the imposition of this worldview, with the emergence of informal settlements that are blind spots of the modern landscape. In the false dichotomy of the formal/informal city, self-built homes and communities are still regularly left off official maps and out of centralised infrastructural and sanitation services, creating enduring dynamics of precarity and marginalisation. In *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), Arturo Escobar writes with optimism of the emergence of a field of critical design practice oriented to just transitions and a reinvigoration of communal life that would mitigate the social and territorial fractures of developmentalism. Set against a critique of the top-down design logic linked to extractive and industrial economies and speculative capitalism, he posits the urgency of asking:

Can design's modernist tradition be reoriented from its dependence on the life-stifling dualist ontology of patriarchal capitalist modernity toward relational modes of knowing, being, and doing? Can it be creatively reappropriated by subaltern communities in support of their struggles to strengthen their autonomy and perform their life projects? (2018, xi).

Rejecting the top-down logic of modernist and formalist architecture, the Venezuelan design initiative Enlace works in the porosities of formal and informal spaces and ways of life, creating projects that respond to marginalised territories and communities through interdisciplinary research, design practice, and participatory dynamics, collaborating with other cultural organisations to raise awareness of spatial inequality in territories shaped by precarious urbanisation, environmental pressures, and socioeconomic

injustice. Since 2007, through Enlace Arquitectura and Enlace Foundation – partner initiatives founded in Caracas – the American-Venezuelan architect and scholar Elisa Silva has advocated a notion of “the complete city”, critiquing discourses and practices of marginalisation and re-centring the *barrios* as integral to urban formations (Enlace Arquitectura 2015). Enlace’s recent projects, presented at the Venice and Chicago architecture biennials in 2021, are rooted in specific locales shaped by tense socio-economic relations, conflictive experiences of infrastructure, and complex relations to “nature”. From the initiative’s name (*enlace* means link), Silva signals the ethos of connecting communities through design, citing as inspiration the dynamics of artists’ studio-based work, where responses to research questions and formal challenges emerge through process and negotiation (conversation with the author, 12 November 2021). Moving between stints teaching in the North American academy, site-work in Latin America, and curatorial projects in the United States and Europe, Silva practices a socially engaged, multi-disciplinary approach to architecture and design, eschewing a formalist approach by working closely with students, researchers from different academic fields, local activists, and members of community organisations. This approach researches and devises tangible design solutions to challenging climatic and urban conditions, informed by scholarship on the economic, social, and political features of the terrains where the projects are run and the lives of communities there.

In 2018, Silva began a project in Oaxaca, Mexico, which aims to connect the local mezcal industry to ecological health and environmentally friendly urbanisation, bearing in mind the economic disparities and northwards migration that shapes the region. In a studio taught in Landscape Architecture that year, Silva took students from Harvard University to Oaxaca, Mexico, to research the environmental effects of the growing mezcal production on the Central Valley. She used a second design studio with students from University of Toronto as a platform to design instruction booklets on the sustainable building material pioneered by Mexican architect Alejandro Montes, who produces adobe bricks using waste products from the mezcal industry, sequestering an acidic by-product of mezcal to prevent it from going into the ground. Now, working in collaboration with the Instituto de la Naturaleza y de la Sociedad Oaxaqueña (INSO), the government programme *Sembrando Vida*, and other local stakeholders, the project has entered a third phase that is led by the Rethink Foundation (co-founded by Silva, and on whose board she serves) with support from a grant from the David Rockefeller Center at Harvard. The project is now pursuing reforestation work to enhance soil health and creating water catchment devices to feed water back into aquifers.

This is a method also applied in a project with the *barrio* La Palomera in Caracas which started in 2016. This collaboration with the Caracas-based civil association Ciudad Laboratorio included, among many other activities, four art projects celebrating the traditions and life of La Palomera, a spontaneous settlement established in 1937 but not acknowledged as part of the city.⁸ Over 18 months, the project “organized multiple events and excuses for citizens to get to know La Palomera: walks, ball games, celebrations, dances, concerts, mapping exercises and an exhibition that seek to recognize La Palomera (and all the neighborhoods) for what they are, an active part of the city” (“La Palomera”). These included a procession to sing *décimas* written with the *barrio* in mind, a celebration of the *barrio*’s founders,



Figure 4. Before and after of the waste collection system in La Palomera. Photos: Courtesy Elisa Silva, EnlaceArq.

and traditional commemorations of the Cruz de Mayo. Botanical research runs transversally through all Enlace's projects, and in this case the collective mapped La Palomera's green areas (led by Gabriel Nass and Ambar Armas), identifying 24 gardens in residents' houses, then compiled as a public tour attended by scientists, including the head botanist of Caracas's Botanical Garden. Research into the 260 species identified in the gardens was then collated into a publication entitled the *Diccionario etnobotánico de las plantas de los jardines de La Palomera* – a systematic typology of specimens that borrowed the extractive epistemology of economic botany to nurture the rootedness of La Palomera's community.⁹

The local knowledge and customs charted through the project were disseminated in an exhibition at a private art space in Caracas, where members of the *barrio* saw themselves reflected in a space usually reserved for contemporary art, and in the Venice and Chicago architecture biennials in 2021, which presented the community gardens, public spaces, and stairways connecting the *barrio* (Silva 2021). Now supported by a civil association set up as part of the project, La Palomera has benefited from tangible impacts, including changes to how waste is collected from the *barrio* (Figure 4). Whereas household waste used to be taken by residents to the end of the road for collection by a rubbish truck, now door-to-door collection has been implemented and the former waste collection space and an adjacent abandoned structure have been recovered for community use, with permission to use the property granted by the municipal government for five years and plans under way to make it a centre for art, culture, and conversations about ecology. Enlace and Ciudad Laboratorio are supporting the community-led process, while designing methods for capturing rainwater from the building's roof for use in the community space (Figure 5).

Enlace's most recent project, started in 2020 in another collaboration with Ciudad Laboratorio, convenes a multidisciplinary group around the River Guaire, which flows through Caracas.¹⁰ The project seeks to inspire *caraqueños* to rediscover the river that was the original reason for historical settlement of the valley of Caracas but now receives untreated sewage and solid waste in addition to rainwater along its course. Its digital platform departs from a manifesto that states this



Figure 5. Participatory workshop on rainwater collection in La Palomera, organised in collaboration with Lata de Agua, Cauce A.C., and the French Embassy. Photo: Courtesy EnlaceArq.

aim to recover the body of water, and serves as a dynamic hub for emerging articles about the river’s history, present, and future, and documents of the eight walks the group carried out in 2021 to chart the course of the river. Again adapting the expeditionary method, the walks traced the Guaire along its easterly course, from its entry to the city, along its increasingly polluted banks, to its point of exit from the valley of Caracas at the eastern barrio of Petare. Project members took part in the walks, but these were also open to anybody who wanted to participate, serving to integrate other stakeholders and potential collaborators into the initiative.

The project remains in progress and as well as commissioning research articles that reflect on the river’s past, present, and future, it has educational and outreach components. From October to December 2021, Silva convened the online lecture series *Confluir con ríos* organised with the Universidad Simón Bolívar and the Universidad Central de Venezuela, which featured representatives of river-related art and design projects working across Latin America (“Confluir con ríos” 2021). The team has also led activities with local schools, taking into classrooms a board game designed together with two participating artists (Malu Valerio and Gerardo Rojas) which creates a speculative setting for children to play at defeating the evils that have befallen the Guaire and to strategise how to alleviate its contaminated state (conversation with the author, 2 November 2021). Through archival work tracing how the river was impacted by urbanisation and through public-facing activities oriented to enabling alternative riverine futures, the project intersects with a broader move to reignite public imaginations and connections to bodies of water.¹¹ In this sense, the Río Guaire project contributes to critical debates around the instrumentalisation of bodies of water as infrastructure for waste removal, the technoscientific invisibilisation of water through hydroengineering, and the loss of a symbiotic relationship between human and non-human bodies of water that has

proved detrimental to water cultures the world over, joining ongoing discussions of the “hydrocommons” (e.g. Neimanis 2009; Blackmore and Gómez 2020).

For Arturo Escobar, a reconception of design in critical terms might do theoretical and political work in re-imagining relationality on a planet fraught with longstanding socioenvironmental conflicts and injustice. In this sense, it is significant that rather than just receiving international attention in cultural settings, Enlace’s work is generating concrete outcomes *with* and *for* local communities, and it is catalysing the formation of autonomous civil associations responsible for the “ongoingness” of the design-led community relations incentivised through its collaborative work. Enlace’s work in Venezuela is just one of a series of initiatives increasingly supported in their long-term sustainability by the creation of independent, local associations that oversee ongoing work, exemplified by Silva’s foundation of a civil association in La Palomera. It is this aspiration for sustained and community-led work that aligns Enlace’s *modus operandi* to the values of autonomy and social justice that Escobar identifies as the core of the pluriverse.

Sustainability in practice: strengths and challenges

In *The Life of Plants* (2019) philosopher Emanuele Coccia notes that botanical existence can help us rethink the epistemologies best suited to the ecological present. Reflecting critically on the modern compartmentalisation of academic disciplines and the subsequent channelisation of specialist knowledge, he posits immersion and porosity as generative alternatives that can be learned from the dynamics of vegetal life. His assertion that “[t]he structure of universal circulation is fluid, the place where everything comes into contact with everything else and comes to mix with it without losing its form and its own substance” signals the affordances (and challenges) of generating transdisciplinary, collaborative research methods which cultivate common forms of expression that are *trans*-versal to all (human and non-human) parties involved yet allow, critically, for difference and divergence (Coccia 2019, 27).

The three projects reviewed here generate dynamics of mixture that respond to fractures and conflicts in specific sites by seeding encounters for diverse knowledges, inventing adaptable, organic forms for collaborative work, and nursing the relationships that sustain it. The value of practice research is evident in the projects’ contributions to imaginative, transdisciplinary, and publicly engaged conversations about, and responses to, socioenvironmental justice, a success also borne out by their endurance over time and growing international exposure. At its strongest, practice research does not just put *into practice* ideas that are now common currency in the critical-theoretical bibliography that informs much environmental humanities research. Its transdisciplinary and collaborative ways of working in and with specific terrains itself models and enacts modes of “thinking-with-many” and “thinking with care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 200) in relational worlds. These projects, then, are encouraging signs of bridges between academic scholarship, art practice, and ecosocial worlds, whose conjunctions can create tangible responses to

socioenvironmental conflicts by engaging proactively with the situatedness of knowledge, while generating food for thought about broader global processes.

It is worth noting that these projects' strengths also come from the strategic way they maintain connections with the academy without becoming subsumed by its infrastructure. This tangential, flexible relationship is a strategic choice on the part of Marambio (conversation with the author, 14 January 2022), who notes that academic affiliations (through research and teaching) can be an asset when seeking collaboration with other institutions and obtaining external funding that should not be underestimated. This safeguards against the often-siloed infrastructure of academia and the continued emphasis on knowledge economies (rather than knowledge ecologies) which continues to privilege papers and peer-reviewed articles and often requires them as corollaries to creative practice even as the research value of the latter is increasingly recognised.

Within the resilience and resourcefulness of independent projects, however, challenges remain. Initiatives like those discussed here ultimately rely on funding to operate over time. While culture ministries, national and international institutions, and philanthropic organisations are sources of grants, the lack of secure, ongoing support can test the sustainability of small teams. Moreover, the digital infrastructure required to ensure access to publications and provide visibility to projects also comes at a cost and exposes projects to vulnerabilities in terms of the lasting impact they might make on audiences that engage with projects on site or online. In the latest edition of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, its editors recognised the importance of artistic interventions and public engagement work to the field, the time and energy demanded to cultivate “community connections and on-the-ground programming”, and the need “to actively cultivate scholarship of this type” (Jørgensen 2022). Practice research makes valuable contributions to environmental debates, producing insights into specific terrains, developing environmental aesthetics that shed critical light on extractive approaches to “nature” and envisage more just and sustainable relations to territory, and seeking to facilitate long-term positive solutions to local socioenvironmental challenges. The recognition of the value of practice research within Latin American Cultural Studies opens a route for reciprocal relationships which, in lending support and drawing attention to interdisciplinary research from the arts, can also positively contribute to the sustainability of its creative terrains and the role they can play in cultivating ongoingness in wider communities in the region.

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Notes

1. World of Matter comprises visual practitioners and theorists conducting long-term research on material geographies, whose core group includes Mabe Bethonico, Ursula

- Biemann, Uwe H. Martin and Frauke Huber, Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörtenböck, Emily E. Scott, Paulo Tavares, Lonnie van Brummelen, and Siebren de Haan; see <http://worldofmatter.net/>. Based at a former coal mining site in Denmark, the *Living in the Anthropocene* project is part of AURA: Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene, which forges trans-disciplinary fields of research, producing exhibitions, online research environments, and scholarly texts. See <https://anthropocene.au.dk/profile>.
2. Numerous existing and emerging projects across Latin America engage in site-specific collaborative work, territory-based arts research, and public-facing curatorial, educational, and editorial projects. It is not feasible to include an extensive list here, but some examples are: Más Arte Más Acción (Colombia, founded 2011), <https://www.masartemasaccion.org/>; Liquenlab (Chile) <https://liquenlab.cl>; entre—ríos (UK–Latin America, founded 2018), <http://entre-rios.net>; and Centro de Estudios del Agua (Chile, founded 2019), <https://centroestudiosdelagua.org>. The recent turn to ecopolitical art is evident in artist residency projects and major exhibitions in Latin America, including, among many others, *Magallanes y las geografías de lo (des)conocido* (curated by Rodrigo Andaur, 2020–21), *Bienal del Bioceno. Cambiar verde por azul* (curated by Blanca de la Torre, 2022), *Inaudito Magdalena 46 Salón Nacional de Artistas* (curated by Jaime Cerón Silva, Ximena Gama Chirolla, Yolanda Chois Rivera), *Polygonal Forest* (curated by Maya Errázuriz for Fundación Mar Adentro, 2021).
 3. For photographs see, Susie Quillinan, ed., *HAWAPI 2019 – Máxima Acuña* (Lima: HAWAPI, 2020). <https://www.hawapi.org/hw2019-m%C3%A1xima-acu%C3%B1a>.
 4. For a record of this, see *HAWAPI 2015 – Huepetuhe*, available at: <https://www.hawapi.org/hw2015-huepetuhe>. The curators expressed this stance in an interview with the author in November 2021.
 5. See *Ensayos*, <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/>.
 6. “Intro”, <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/ensayos/intro/>.
 7. The project is curated by Marambio, in collaboration with Carla Machiavello, Ariel Bustamente, Alfredo Thiermann and Dominga Sotomayor, and Juan Pablo Vergara. See <https://turbatol.org>.
 8. On the project process and outcomes, see <https://en.lapalomera.org/>. On the collaborators Ciudad Laboratorio, see <https://ciudlab.com/>.
 9. This is a critical strategy that also informs the work of the Colombian collective *echando lápiz* (sic), which has run botanical expeditions and participatory drawing workshops in informal settlements since 2000, when it was founded by artists and educators Graciela Duarte and Manuel Santana.
 10. See <https://www.rioguaire.org/>.
 11. In the region, a shift in public policy has seen cities like Bogota and Sao Paulo undergo official clean-up plans that aim to restore ecological health to the urban rivers. A host of arts- and design-led projects in Latin America are leading attempts to reignite public connections to contaminated and often forgotten rivers, an example of which is the Ecoducto Río de la Piedad lineal park in Mexico City – a public walkway over a piped river that began with the citizen initiative “Picnic on the River”.

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