Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
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Exhibition *Becoming Earth* (2024, MUAC-UNAM): An Analysis about the Knowledge of the Territory and its Relationship with Nature

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ABSTRACT

This text analyzes the exhibition *Becoming Earth* by artist Ursula Biemann, presented in 2024 at the *Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (University Museum of Contemporary Art of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, MUAC-UNAM). The exhibition is framed within a type of artistic practice developed from an ethnographic and ecological perspective. Extractivism serves as the catalyst topic in Biemann's work, which bears witness to —or more accurately, responds to— the destructive impact it leaves across various geographies. Her projects seek to shed light on and engage in dialogue with ways of life and thought practiced in the southern regions, fostering a polyphony of voices from communities near the Amazon rainforest. Through the convergence of digital media, documentary resources, and a poetics of language, her work weaves a network of relational ties to the territory, ties that are, in essence, the people themselves.

KEYWORDS

museum exhibition, ecology, environmental crisis, narrative

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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by a global ecological crisis —visible and tangible in its devastation— we are faced with the urgent need not only to speak about and expose the world's deterioration and loss, but also to make visible and engage with other ways of living it. Throughout art history, we see a persistent pursuit of nature, approached from contemplative, inquisitive, analytical, and connective perspectives.

However, since the late 20th century, artistic practices have undergone a necessary shift, shaped by postcolonial, ecological, ethnographic, and cultural theories, such as Walter Mignolo's work on subaltern knowledge (2000), or the concept of perspectivism in anthropology (Viveiros de Castro, 2013). These approaches have brought visibility to a spectrum of imaginaries and ways of life that lie outside the boundaries of Western thought.

Although people living in the realities of the Global South or under conditions of inequality often lack access to visibility within the art world and its exhibition and representation spaces, we nonetheless find a wide myriad of inquiries and approaches that are articulated through artistic productions grounded in these realities and their inhabitants.

In contemporary artistic practices today, a significant number of artists —such as Carolina Caycedo, Fernando García-Dory, Marjetica Potrc, and Paula Tavares, among others— employ strategies of nomadism and draw on investigative, ethnographic, exploratory, and documentary tools to construct bodies of research that support artistic projects and artworks addressing contexts and issues largely absent from mainstream media narratives. Moreover, these works often seem to belong to worlds completely detached from the everyday rhythms and dynamics of urban life.

It is within this context that we encounter the work of Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, who has traveled to places that bear witness to some of the many overwhelming forms of environmental degradation occurring across the planet. Through visual recording tools —such as aerial videography of vast Amazonian landscapes— Biemann offers a detailed documentation of the transformations taking place deep within these territories, inhabited by deeply rooted communities, and who are sounding the alarm on the critical times we are living through.

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DIALOGUE WITH THE PLANET AND ITS INHABITANTS

The temporary exhibition *Becoming Earth* (2024) was presented from April 20 to October 13, 2024, in Rooms 7 and 8 of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (University Museum of Contemporary Art, MUAC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM). The exhibition featured five video installation pieces, each organized around a thematic axis: the rights of the rainforest, research on the hydrosphere and its repercussions on ecosystems, listening (the Earth's agents/sensors), epistemological boundaries, and, finally, the politics of knowledge.

This series of installations carries a documentary character, presenting large-format video works that include community narratives, as well as animations, photographs, objects, and documents. A voiceover weaves a poetic text that raises questions and reflections about the types of relationships and knowledge human beings have sustained with the world and all that inhabits it.

A diversity of voices is foregrounded, recounting stories and cosmogonies alongside representatives from Amazonian communities in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, highlighting various issues of today's environmental crisis. The work offers an exploratory vision of these territories from an ethnographic and ecological perspective. While it may be subject to critique that a Western artistic gaze —originating from a country as economically powerful as Switzerland— engages with and represents cultures from peripheral and resistant geographies, it is also true that since the second decade of the 21st century, these issues and contexts have gained visibility and, in some cases, greater relevance, due to the biodiversity and knowledge they encompass.

The curatorial approach invites the public to rethink how contemporary societies relate to the world and its ecosystems, as well as how we perceive their loss and transformation. This is explored through the lens of the Inga communities of the Amazon, who engage with the intelligence of nature. This reveals a way of knowing that surpasses the structure of Western, rational, and dichotomous thinking, proposing instead a horizontal and plural knowledge system.

Biemann's work not only offers a broad portrayal of the Amazon rainforest —its features, qualities, beings, and dynamics— but, through the voices and practices presented, her work also draws viewers into a reality woven among living beings, both human and non-human. Video essays are projected across vast surfaces of the walls and floor, as if seeking to release fragments of the forest from the projections themselves. At the same time, the sounds,

words, and faces of the speakers draw the viewer's body inward, awakening a latent awareness that emerges through the experience of sensing and imagining nature from different perspectives.

This is further deepened by documented accounts from the Sarayaku community (Ecuador), where the rainforest is granted legal rights and recognized as a living, integral being. For this group, there is no separation between humans and nature (Biemann, Tavares, 2014, in Roy, 2024, p. 10), revealing a worldview that does not objectify the natural world for domination or exploitation.

TERRITORY, GAZE, AND WORD

The thematic axis titled "The Rights of the Rainforest" opens the exhibition with the piece *Forest Law* (2014) (Figure 1), composed of two contrasting video projections and a set of documents addressing the problem of explosives abandoned by mining and oil extraction in Sarayaku lands, With the support of environmental groups, this community seeks to defend the rights of nature as a legal subject through legal frameworks. Here, one of the exhibition's key propositions emerges: the exercise of the right to life for a territory conceived as a sacred being that integrates all forms of life. In the room, a voice-over can be heard: "The forest is a vast ecology of sentient beings, the mother of all futures" (Biemann and Tavares, 2014 in Roy, 2024, p. 11).



FIGURE 1. Forest Law, installation, 2024 (Photograph: Karina Bermejo, 2024; courtesy: MUAC).

Narrated by the community's leaders, the story also introduces three ways of studying plants: scientific botany, Indigenous

chemistry, and traditional medicine. This juxtaposition contrasts a rational, objective framework of thought with another approach that studies nature from within —as part of it— as shown in a segment of the installation (Figure 2). In the artist's own words: "Knowledge is not a mental exercise; it is an embodied experience" (Biemann, 2022 in Roy, 2024). This leaves the public reflecting on different ways of engaging with nature, in which we may see ourselves mirrored.



FIGURE 2. Ursula Biemann. Becoming Earth, views of Forest Mind, 2024 (Photograph: Oliver Santana; courtesy: MUAC).

The second axis "Hydrospheric Research and its Repercussions on Ecosystems" is also displayed in the same gallery. It depicts disasters unfolding across the Earth in places distant from one another yet similar in their large-scale ecological imbalances caused by water pollution. Two videos, titled Deep Weather (2013) (Figures 3 and 4), reveal latent problems that trace the marks of voracious extractivism and its interaction with the environment, illustrating an altered state in the chemistry of the atmosphere. The work unfolds through a dichotomous relationship between two liquids —oil and water— and two polarized locations affected by technology and nature alike.

The first video shows oil sands in Alberta, Canada, transformed by petroleum extraction. Then, like a butterfly effect provoking hurricanes on the other side of the world, the second video takes us to a distant population laboring relentlessly to hold back the sea and prevent it from flooding their farmland in the Ganges Delta, Bangladesh, India.

It is worth noting that the museographic space feels compressed due to the proximity between the projection screen and the bench where viewers sit. This creates a sensation of invasion, as if the swelling sea might spill out of the projection and overflow toward the viewer.



FIGURE 3. Deep Weather, frame, 2013 (Courtesy: MUAC).



FIGURE 4. Ursula Biemann. Becoming Earth, views of the video Deep Weather, 2024 (Photograph: Oliver Santana; courtesy: MUAC).

The third thematic axis, "The Listening of the World", features the work Acoustic Ocean in the next gallery (2018) (Figure 5), a video performance in which the protagonist, a Sami[1] marine biologist, investigates underwater life around the Lofoten Islands in Norway. By capturing sounds imperceptible to the human ear, she creates an acoustic record of the living beings inhabiting the ocean depths. The exhibition space is arranged with various objects from the performance itself: the neoprene suit worn by the scientist, the suitcases containing the sound equipment, and even a simulated submarine porthole, immersing the viewer into the atmosphere of this underwater piece.

[1] Samis are an ethnical group which inhabit regions extending throughout the North of Norway, Switzerland, and Finland mainly.



FIGURE 5. Ursula Biemann. Becoming Earth, views of Acoustic Ocean and Forest Mind, 2024 (Photograph: Oliver Santana; courtesy: MUAC).

The fourth axis, "Epistemological Boundaries", presents the penultimate installation, *Forest Mind* (2021) (Figure 6). This work explores the possible relationships between Western science and its approaches to understanding nature, and the cognitive richness embedded in ancestral knowledge systems. It proposes an exploration of cognition in relation to how we store information and how it migh be genetically encoded. A latent intention within the piece is to give voice to the Inga culture's narrative and their way of communicating with the forest. The installation features a triple projection across a large wall, animations on the floor, and an animated *Tree of Life* that seems to vibrate and breathe through a play of luminescence.

Through scientific synthesis processes on the DNA from an Amazonian seed, the artist identifies a code of luminous elements present in all living matter, suggesting that these may be visible to shamans under the influence of psychoactive plants. This reveals a web of interconnectedness nourished by all beings that inhabit the forest.

The final axis, "The Politics of Knowledge", features Biemann's participation in a collective initiative titled *Becoming University* (2019–2023) (Figure 7), a bio cultural education project created for and with the Inga community. The video *Vocal Cognitive Territory* (2022) presents narratives that emphasize a way of life rooted in knowing and caring for the land. On screen, project participants appear —local leaders, elders, and healers—alongside photographs documenting the collaborative process, texts, and QR codes that

provide further information about the co-creative work between the Inga, scholars, botanists, and activists to build the Indigenous University. The piece aims to establish a foundation of knowledge based on the interdependence of nature and culture, grounded in the notion of the living territory.



FIGURE 6. Ursula Biemann. Becoming Earth, views of Forest Mind exhibition, 2024 (Photograph: Oliver Santana; courtesy: MUAC).



FIGURE 7. Ursula Biemann. Becoming Earth, views of Forest Mind, 2024 (Photograph: Oliver Santana; courtesy: MUAC).

Regarding the museography, the exhibition unfolds through darkened spaces where the video projections stand out. Certain thematic clusters employ a nuanced darkness, tinted by hues that relate to each piece. For example, in the installation *Acoustic Ocean* (2018), an indigo blue predominates. Thus, the surrounding walls are painted in a darker shade of indigo, creating an immersive space that envelops the viewer's gaze and enhances a sense of heightened expectation.

The large-scale projections display aerial imagery of vast, dense rainforests. With subtle, barely perceptible movements, they capture the curious gaze of visitors, who are drawn into images and stories rooted in those territories. The scale of the projections addresses the viewer not only through size, but also through the voices of those who offer testimonies and reflections throughout the experience. This approach suggests an intentional use of strategies that engage both the body and thought, inviting the visitor into the mystical world of nature. This proposal places the observer's corporeality in a liminal state, between the macro and micro dimensions of the world on display.

The curatorial commitment to this exhibition format reveals how contemporary visual codes are deeply connected to cinematic language. As a result, the exhibition space becomes a hybrid zone: resembling a cinematic experience while also encouraging audiences to interact as roaming spectators to approach texts, listen to audio recordings, and even engage with moving images.

The use of projection as a medium is particularly compelling, encouraging a degree of bodily interaction and experimentation with multiple visual formats, such as asymmetrical or mirrored screens, overhead projections onto the floor, and images that, through their subtle motion, seem to breathe. Throughout the exhibition, the video works are accompanied by either a diegetic or voice-over that functions as an inner monologue—narrating, conversing, and prompting reflection. In some cases, the use of ambient elements helps generate immersive atmospheres that invite deeper engagement with the work. In other words, the visitor is interpellated through a constant visual language that dialogues with space and multiple media. (Figure 8).

Finally, the video essays not only portray the density of the forest but also derive meaning through the presence of individuals who engage in actions such as walking along rivers, venturing deep into the forest to identify trees and collect medicinal plants, or recounting experiences following the ingestion of sacred plants. These stories are both sensitive and reflective, revealing a way of

living in and learning from the world and its living species —including those invisible to the human eye—. Thus, they reveal a close relationship of care and protection toward the forest, born from the awareness of being part of it.

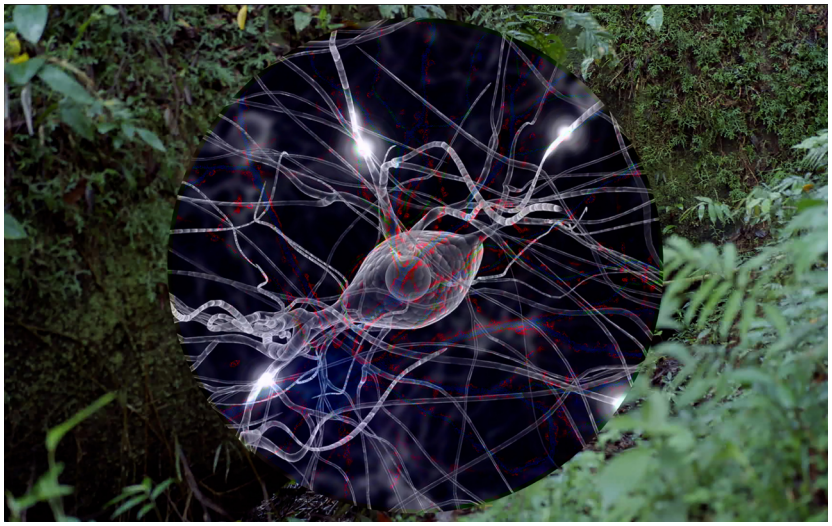


FIGURE 8. Forest Mind, frame, 2021 (Courtesy: University Museum of Contemporary Art, MUAC).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

A constant in Ursula Biemann's work is the shift in perspective within the stories she presents. Her strategy of continually complementing what is shown —whether through detail or other curatorial elements— redirects the narrative and proposes a multiple, diverse gaze.

The exhibition presented here led me to reflect on the possible ways in which the communities from these geographies might represent themselves, share their knowledge, and express their relationships with the territory, doing so within a museum context, but without the mediation of an artist from a Western European country.

This reflection sparked the following question: In what ways can museum spaces —understood as places for dialogue and the exchange of knowledge— meaningfully open themselves to other ways of engaging with territory? In the face of today's global crisis, it becomes essential to conceive of these spaces as platforms for openness and exchange, attentive to diverse voices that bring forth knowledge systems capable of transcending hegemonic frameworks.

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