

Before, within and beyond the artwork

by Noemi Adinolfi

During a series of lectures held in Frankfurt between 1959 and 1960, poet Ingeborg Bachmann stated that art provides us with «the possibility of understanding where we are or where we should be».¹ In the exhibition *Earthly Communities*, hosted at Merano Arte, three works that make this possibility, this invitation that art extends to the beholder, especially explicit and urgent.

Amanda Piña's sculpture *To Bloom () Florecimiento* - a gigantic sea urchin made by weaving rattan fibers - hangs four meters high and descends into the viewer's space. They, in turn, observe it from below, in a sort of carnivalesque reversal in Bakhtinian fashion where this ancient marine organism, now at risk of extinction, becomes a metonymy for the natural world and reconquers and dominates the human environment. Similarly to what philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin claimed, the objective of this inversion is not to simply subvert the existing order of things, it is rather a strategy to open to a point of view alternative to the anthropocentric one.

In the dual channel video *The Telling of the Stones*, by Etienne de France, legendary tales, first in Garifuna² and then in Icelandic, dialogues with a visual language that alternates between the fantastic and the documentary. In a symmetrical fashion, long landscape sequence shots give substance to the narration. The artist, however, does not relieve the spectator through a final catharsis or a conclusive scene: the screen turns off and we remain suspended, in that state of creative and emancipating indeterminacy that Novalis, an important philosophical reference for this work, found in unfinished stories. The beholder is not entrusted with the responsibility to find a coherent conclusion rather, they are solicited to grasp and cultivate the interpretative richness that comes with incompleteness.

In one of her two works displayed in the exhibition, *Preguntando a árboles, pajaros y fantasmas sobre imágenes y sonidos futuros*,³ Eliana Otta uses a technique which is rarely seen in artistic video productions and, at the same time, perfectly coherent with her

¹ Bachmann, I. (1993). *Letteratura come utopia. Lezioni di Francoforte* [Literature as Utopia: Frankfurt Lectures]. Adelphi.

² The language is spoken by descendants of the Arawak who in the 18th century were forced to flee from the island of Saint Vincent (Caribbean) and settled on the coasts of Central America. Currently, Garifuna is spoken in Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and in some regions of Nicaragua.

³ The work was created with video material shot for a 2022 project titled *Virtual Sanctuary for Fertilizing Mourning*.

proposition of a global community: a 360 camera captures a slow walk through the Amazon forest, along its rivers as well as its fire-devastated territories. This kind of visual language is commonly associated with virtual tours, and its effectiveness lies in the envelopment of the viewer, in their incorporation in the environment. As a response to the cosmic vision conveyed by the camera, poems composed specially by local authors are recited, sung, intonated with the regular cadence of magic formulas. The artwork proposes a holistic or rather - to use anthropologist Stefano Varese's words - a cosmocentric outlook⁴; this concept envisages overcoming the reifying and materialistic biocentrism of colonial character.

An interesting correspondence emerges between the technical point of view employed in each work and the respective artist's ideological positioning regarding decolonization and personal relationship to colonial histories.

Amanda Piña and Eliana Otta, both direct witnesses to the oppressive legacies of colonial times and, for this same reason, stronger proponents of a retrieval of integrated and post-anthropological community models, work with endoscopic points of view: it is the piece that stares at the viewer, that interrogates them. These artworks do not envision a spectator *in front of* them, but rather within them. Etienne de France conceives a different viewership: he rehabilitates the idea of the picture (or the screen, in his case) as a window onto the world and, alongside it, the distance that is structural to a frontal gaze, one that is utterly foreign to what is being shown. By doing so, he avoids reiterating exploitative dynamics that come with practices of artistic extractivism.

The three artworks provide grounding in decolonial discourse: they offer the beholder a visual - and in Piña's case, also material - vocabulary that enables us to imagine a future detached from Western capitalist societies' logic and principles. The potential of these works lies in this: beyond the image's surface, there is a reference to an imagery, an indication of what is not, but potentially could be.

⁴ Varese, S. (2022). Amazonian Communities: Shaping the Ethics of Cosmocentrism. *HALAC – Historia Ambiental, Latinoamericana y Caribeña*, 12(3), 108-139.
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