



Nottingham
Contemporary

Rights of Nature
Art and Ecology in the Americas

24 January – 15 March

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Rights of Nature

Art and Ecology in the Americas

24 January – 15 March 2015

Curated by TJ Demos and Alex Farquharson,
with Irene Aristizábal

Facing catastrophic climate change, runaway global warming, and environmental destruction, modern society appears locked in crisis. This exhibition reflects that crisis — a crisis that is at once ecological, economic, political, and cultural. It concerns our fraught relationship to the world around us — including the myriad life forms threatened with extinction, biodiverse habitats befouled by the fossil fuel industry, and the planet's atmosphere filled with greenhouse gas emissions. All of these are putting life as we know it at grave risk.

Viewing Earth as an infinite supply of natural resources to be freely exploited by multinational capitalism has, however, been increasingly challenged in recent years. Today, the rights of nature to subsist in a state free from destructive human practices are increasingly being recognized in environmental law as a means to save our fragile existence — even if many legal and political challenges remain.



Allora & Calzadilla, 2 hose petrified Petrol Pump, 2012. Stone.
Photo courtesy Allora & Calzadilla and Lisson Gallery

The Americas, in particular, are the site of intense legal, political, and cultural activity that links indigenous movements, political activists, legal theorists and ecologically-concerned artists. Bolivia and Ecuador have recently enshrined the rights of Mother Earth in their constitutions and legal systems. A cultural-political-philosophical revolution is redefining our relationship to the world.

Rights of Nature reveals how contemporary artists are contributing to the global project of rethinking our species' relationship with other living things. The exhibition is an immense journey across the Americas. The works of 20 artists and artist-collectives are in

loose geographical sequence, from the Southern Andes in Gallery 1 to Alaska in Gallery 4.

Geo-historical narratives emerge along the way. They begin with the European conquest of indigenous people and the extermination of their cultures and habitats.

This Spanish and Portuguese colonial era was characterized by brutal economies that extracted and exported mineral wealth — a pattern of plunder that continues to this day. The neo-colonial eras that followed in Latin America — British domination in the 18th and 19th centuries, and US later in 19th and 20th centuries — led to US-backed military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s. These served as laboratories for the development of neoliberal capitalism, re-shaping societies in the interests of markets. This remains the world's dominant political-economic model today.

This long history stems from the European idea that humans are separate from, and have mastery over, all other life on the planet, reflected in both secular and religious beliefs. Ultimately this has led to an “economic model that is at war with life on Earth”, as Naomi Klein wrote in her book *This Changes Everything* (2014).

Rights of Nature contrasts the destructive philosophy that puts humans at the centre of everything, with indigenous cultures who understand our species as belonging to the great continuum of life on the planet. Their example may offer the rest of us our best hope.

Gallery 1

Regions around the Andes mountain range

In **Harun Farocki's** (Germany, 1944 - 2014) *The Silver and The Cross* the camera focuses on details of a painting by Gaspar Miguel de Berrío of Potosí in Bolivia.

Potosí's Cerro Rico ("rich mountain") was the largest silver mine in Latin America. Its excavation by enslaved indigenous people produced untold wealth for the colonial masters of the Spanish empire. Farocki uses the painting, together with his own commentary, to narrate the structure of society in Potosí at that time. The other screen shows Potosí today, its mountain diminished.

Walter Solón Romero (1927 - 1999) was one of Bolivia's leading artists of the last century. In his art and his life he critiqued the violence and corruption of the military junta, highlighting the suffering of the majority indigenous population. His drawings, made on traditional bark paper, show people and land violently subjugated by Conquistadors. The Fundación Solón in La Paz combines the preservation of Solón's work with climate activism and indigenous rights.

Ala Plástica (Argentina) is an art and environmental organization active in Río de la Plata since 1991. Their map drawings, made for this exhibition, present their recent investigations into regional alliances amongst multinational corporations. These alliances disrupt the sovereignty of nation-states, continuing the long history of colonialism in South America.



The Silver and the Cross © Harun Farocki, 2010

Jimmie Durham's (Naples/Berlin) hybrid sculptures send up ethnographic conventions while conveying ironic critiques of the European colonial worldview that underpinned the mass genocide of North American native peoples in particular, and indigenous peoples in general. Durham is Cherokee, and was a prominent leader in the American Indian Movement of the 1970s. His work can also be seen in Galleries 2 & 4.

Darren Almond (UK) presents large photographs of views of the Patagonian region of the Andes, made under a full moon with long exposure times. Although made at night, the landscapes look as if they have been photographed by daylight. Despite their seductive, almost classical beauty, they suggest a world without us — perhaps a world after us.

Gallery 2

The Amazon region, mainly artists from Colombia and Brazil.

Marcos Avila Forero's (Colombia) life-size wood carving of a manatee is the focus of this filmed performance. This large mammal, found in the Amazon River, is sacred to indigenous people, and threatened with extinction. Forero asked a young shaman to use it as a raft for an eco-spiritual allegory — a journey up the Amazon to Colombia's sacred Tarapoto lake.

Abel Rodríguez (Colombia) is an elder of the Nonuya people with special expertise in the plants of the Amazon Basin. His intricate drawings and paintings record the Nonuya's holistic environmental knowledge, passed down through generations.

Miguel Ángel Rojas's (Colombia) *El Nuevo Dorado* (The New Eldorado) resembles a large abstract painting. It is made of square sections of coca leaves, from which cocaine is derived, on which the Amazon River is shown in gold leaf. This is an allusion to the clearing of large areas of Colombian Amazon rainforest for informal coca farming and gold mining.

Mabe Bethônico's (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) *Mineral Practices* is an installation of information that relates to her ongoing research on mining in the state of Minas Gerais in south-east Brazil. Seeking to open up debate, her counter-archive exposes the state-backed industry's



Marcos Avila Forero's, *À Tarapoto, un Manati I. The Travel*. 2011.
(Film still). Courtesy of the Galerie Dohyang Lee and the artist.

record on environmental degradation, workforce conditions, and the seizing of indigenous people's lands.

Paulo Nazareth's (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) art takes the form of long distance walking, retracing the footsteps of history. For *Noticias de America* he walked and took buses from the favela where he lives in Belo Horizonte to New York City, where he washed the earth of the Americas from his feet in the Hudson River, before turning back and retracing his footsteps. His photographs of modest, impromptu performances, made along the way, reflect a reciprocal relationship with grass-roots social and ecological systems. Nazareth's current project is to walk the world's slave routes.

Gallery 3

Mexico. Also Ecuador's Rights of Mother Earth.

Minerva Cuevas's (Mexico City) Hyrdocarbon Series is a museum-style display of real and invented relics from the devastating Pemex oil spill near Ciudad del Carmen in the Gulf of Mexico in 2009. Many of the objects are covered in chapopote, tar which is used to decorate craft objects by indigenous people in Mexico.

Cuevas often appropriates and subverts advertising. For Rights of Nature she has created a new mural in our front window that parodies a famous chocolate bar. It describes the situation of poor cocoa farmers in southern Mexico on the Atlantic coast. Their lands and livelihoods are being destroyed by the oil industry, monocultural agribusiness, and Mexico's terrifying drug cartels.

Eduardo Abaroa, who also lives in Mexico City, presents part of his Project for the Demolition of the Museum of Anthropology, a bitter conceptual satire. He hired a detonation specialist to develop a plan for destroying the iconic museum which houses the world's greatest collection of Mesoamerican art. The museum was built to promote a modern post-Revolutionary national identity for Mexico — one that privileged mestizo identity (most Mexicans are of mixed race) over both purely indigenous and European descendants. Successive Mexican governments have dispossessed indigenous people of their lands, customs and languages.



Beatriz Aurora, Nunca más un México sin nosotros:
Congreso Nacional Indígena, 1997. Courtesy the artist.

Fernando Palma Rodríguez recently returned to San Pedro Atocpan in Milpa Alta, a region of great ecological and spiritual value to the Nahuatl people. Atocpan is now just a few miles away from the growing sprawl of Mexico City. The artist and his family run an environmental organisation that reclaims the Nahuatl language and culture. Palma, who trained as an electrical engineer, uses robotics to re-animate animal species made from recycled industrial materials. Tocihuapapalutzin, Nahuatl for Monarch Butterfly, is dedicated to the declining migratory species that travel between Mexico and Canada each year.

GIAP: Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política's (Chile & Italy) installation is based on the Zapatista Army of National Liberation — the leftist revolutionary movement based in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Mayan people and local farmers united in 1994 against the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement which devastated their livelihoods. The installation includes a cycle of paintings by Zapatista artist Beatriz Aurora.

Ursula Biemann & Paulo Tavares's (Switzerland & Brazil) video, documents and soil samples allude to the Sarayaku people's legal defence of their ancestral lands in the Ecuadorean Amazon from oil and mining interests.



Medium Earth (film still) 2013 by The Otolith Group.
Courtesy and copyright the artists.

NC Logo by Chris Evans



Gallery 4

North American regions, Earth and its atmosphere

Amy Balkin, San Francisco, uses Conceptual art strategies to prompt debate on the science and politics of global warming. Public Smog is a project to create a “clean air park” in the atmosphere by purchasing carbon offset credits to expose a discredited trading system that allows polluters to “pay” by buying up clean air projects and areas. Balkin will also present a public reading of the Synthesis Report of the Assessment Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, by scientists who are the most trusted source of information on climate change.

Claire Pentecost's (Chicago) imaginary banknotes are drawn in graphite and soil. They show environmental pioneers such as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, eco-activist Vandana Shiva, and Felix Guattari, author of *The Three Ecologies*. Bees and earthworms are also honoured. She has also composted a US flag.

The Otolith Group's (London) film essay, made in Southern California, treats seismic activity as a language spoken by our planet. It includes the community of human mediums who foretell earthquakes through sympathetic sensations in their bodies.

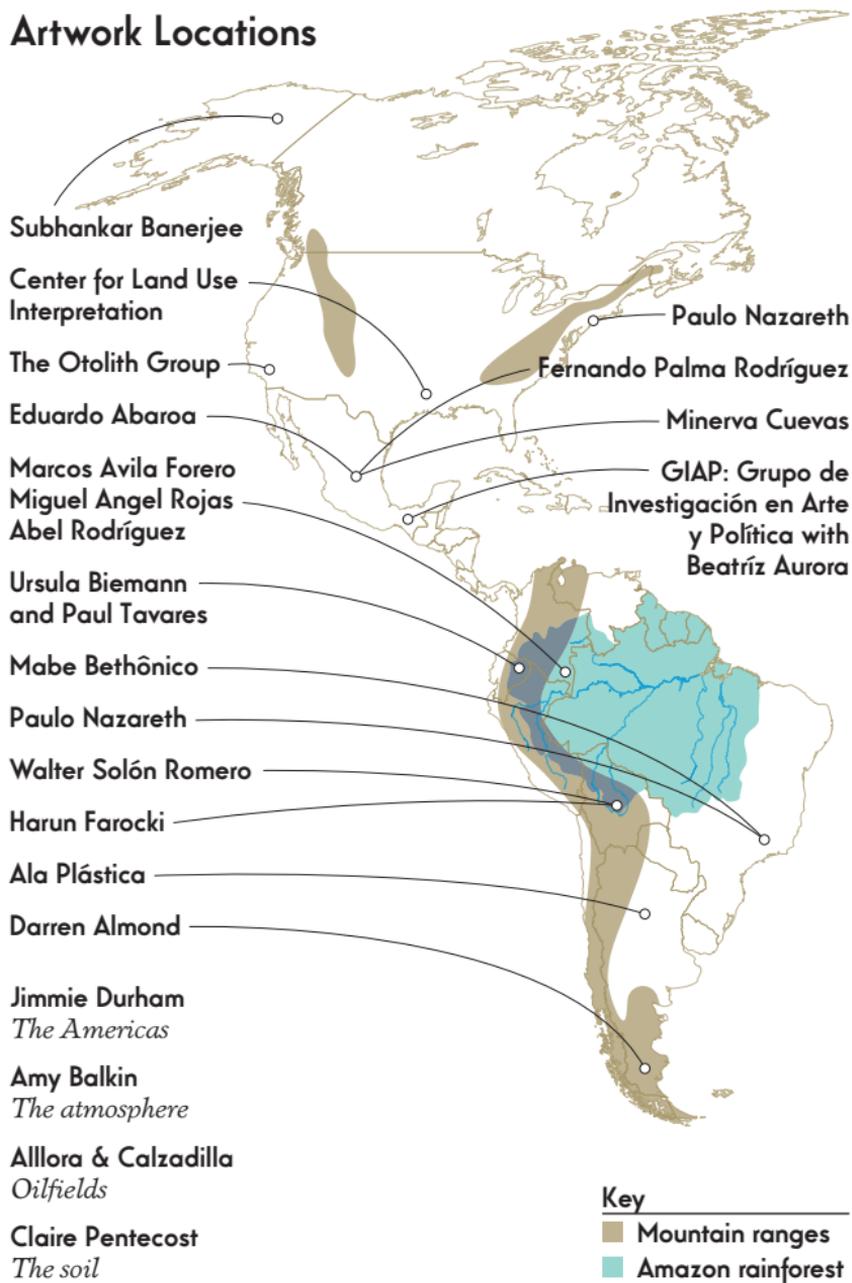
Center for Land Use Interpretation, an independent research organisation based in Los Angeles, is

“dedicated to the increase and diffusion of information about how the nation’s lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived.” Houston Petrochemical Corridor Landscan is a 14 minute video of Houston’s seemingly infinite petroscares.

Allora & Calzadilla (Puerto Rico) present 2 Hose Petrified Petrol Pump, a life-size sculpture of a petrol pump in stone — a post-apocalyptic monument from the future, to our fossil fuel age. Many geologists now argue we are in a new, unprecedented geological epoch — one in which the actions of humans have a greater influence on the formation of the Earth’s strata than the planet’s own natural forces.

New Mexico-based artist and ecological activist **Subhankar Banerjee** presents epic photographs of caribou migration in northern Alaska, now marked by the conflicting interests of endangered species and indigenous culture, and the fossil fuel industry. The caribou’s numbers are dwindling as ice in the Arctic recedes through global warming. Ironically the melting of the Arctic ice-cap — a consequence of burning fossil fuels — is leading to a new Arctic oil rush.

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Front cover image: Darren Almond, Fullmoon@Patagonia, 2013
© Darren Almond. Courtesy White Cube

Back cover image: Jimmie Durham, A Dead Deer, 1986.
Courtesy collection MHKA.



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