

From Amazon to Ganges: Visual Arts for Communication of Water-related Issues

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Abstract

This paper discusses the communicative potential of art concerning environment, focusing specifically on artworks and exhibitions related to water issues. It presents the use of art to raise ecological awareness of sustainable management of water resources, including artworks created by the author in India and in Brazil.

Keywords: environment, visual arts, water, sustainability.

Visual Arts as Environmental Communication

In the last few years, the environment has been one of the main subjects discussed in culture and communication. Throughout the twentieth century, man has become increasingly distant from nature and created new environments in the in-between spaces of technological and natural worlds. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, nature is no longer an intact idyllic place, but rather a negotiating space between culture and technology. Marshall McLuhan (1964: 214) has already warned us that "our proliferating technologies have created a whole series of new environments", and so, "men have become aware of the arts as 'anti-environments' or 'counter-environments' that provide us with the means of perceiving the environment itself". Nowadays, culture and nature are no longer seen as opposites, but can be understood as continuity, where the conceptual borders are not well defined. The very idea of the Anthropocene¹ places humans as the main producers of reality, either cultural or natural. Several contemporary authors, such as Vilém Flusser (2011), Bruno Latour (2014) and Cary Wolfe (2000) among others, discussed the entangled relationships between culture and nature in contemporary society. At the same time, ecological discourses have shifted from restrictive preservation of nature to the context of sustainable development. Even the word ecology has broadened its meaning, to signify a system that includes not only natural elements, but also technological, cultural, social, scientific, economical and political issues.

In the context of sustainable development, communication and arts have important roles to raise environmental awareness. According to Milstein, Pileggi and Morgan (2017: 02), environmental communication "is understood as a powerful social process that not only reflects but also does work in 'constructing, producing and naturalizing' particular ecological relations and realities". Mark Meisner (2015), Executive Director of the International Environmental Communication Association, corroborates

¹ Definition of Anthropocene: the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth regarded as constituting a distinct geological age. (Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Anthropocene>)

this view, affirming that environmental communication is at the same time "a practical, and indeed essential, tool for action" and it "plays an important role in creating meaning", shaping how we see and value the world.

Communicating issues about environment is not only transmitting related rational information, but it must include emotional appeals to involve the audience and promote engagement. There is a "gap between scientific knowledge and pro-environmental behaviour" (Barker, 2011) and to bridge this gap one must make use of images, emotional narratives, sensory appeals and persuasive language. Communication can use multiple tools and resources to involve individuals to increase their environmental awareness, such as journalism reports, advertising campaigns, public relations events, graphic design, etc. Art exhibitions can also be an important way to communicate and to generate empathy towards environmental ethic, and in this sense, art can also be understood as communicative. Nowadays, with the advent of technological media, the limits between art and communication are becoming less defined. Although communication and art can have, in some cases, very distinct goals, they can also work together, fostering creativity and emotional engagement.

Art has always had a communicative element, even when it seems to be obscure and indirect. John Dewey called art the "most universal and freest form of communication" (Stroud, 2007). Art can evoke aesthetic experience, and by doing so, it can delve in the most profound affections of an individual, communicating its message in a very special way. Although art cannot be reduced to its communicative effect, as its potential goes beyond that, we cannot deny that it can be a very effective way of communicating.

From Amazon to Ganges

Water is probably the most important natural element for human life and one of the most prominent in cultural history. The search for water and the attempt to dominate it unleashed several political, social, technological and cultural processes. Water is important for nourishment, transport, science, health, climate, construction, defence, rituals, etc. It is studied in the most varied fields, such as physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, nutrition, ecology, hygiene and urban sanitation, transport, warfare and navigation techniques, agronomy, architecture and engineering, economics, cultural studies, sports, religions and esoteric theories. (Fortes, 2006)

In the last two decades my work as an artist was concerned with water-related issues, specially regarding fluvial landscapes in urban areas. My early artworks were aquariums with water, paraffin wax, clay and other materials, that simulated aquatic ecosystems. They were a kind of artificial landscapes, in which physicochemical processes, like floatation, transparency and dissolution acted as transformative forces. These artworks look like melting icebergs and remind us that time is fluid.

After 2003, I started to create installations that looked like artificial rivers, made with a great quantity of aquariums with earth and water. Several of these installations dealt with river pollution problems, discussing the artificial relationships between man and landscape in contemporary cities. They were site-specific installations that addressed real rivers, such as the Tietê River and the São Francisco in Brazil, or the Chattahoochee River in the United States. Some of these rivers from urban centers were represented as architecture, as the water inside the installation was shown in separated glass boxes, so that it could not flow in its natural way anymore.

The first one was built in the Brazilian city called Ribeirão Preto, which means Black Creek. This is a large city in Brazil and the river cannot be seen there anymore because the metropolis swallowed it. In

this work, contemporary rivers in urban centres are represented as architecture. The water is divided into boxes and cannot flow along its natural path. Each aquarium looks like a cold and artificial skyscraper, although the water and the mud remind us of an archetypical river.

The work "Pirapora," the second installation of this series referred to the pollution of Rio Tietê, in the town of Pirapora do Bom Jesus, close to São Paulo, Brazil. The strong industrial pollution in this river provoked the emergence of large blocks of foam floating on its surface, which started to invade the city. In the artwork, this was represented through the use of lime and white clay in aquariums full of water. The rectangular aquariums formed a continuous and rigid line, but fragmented the water, making the flow impossible.

In another installation, called "Where", I was concerned about the artificial diversion of the course of the river São Francisco, which was happening at this time in Brazil. This river was turned aside from its regular course in order to benefit the agricultural industry of some areas in Brazil. It was a very controversial project. To accomplish it, landscape was changed, provoking environmental damages and the native population from some regions had to be removed. To represent these displacement events, I added transportation boxes to the installation, symbolizing ideas of transience and uncertainty and making the artificiality of landscape even more visible.



Fig. 2. Chattahoochee, Art Installation by Hugo Fortes, 2014. Photo: Hugo Fortes

In 2014 I was invited to participate in a one-month artist residency at the Columbus State University, in Georgia State, in the United States. The campus was located very close to the Chattahoochee River. Working together with the local community, I could develop a large multi-media installation that discussed the important role of the Chattahoochee River in the development of the region, defining its identity and taking part of its history. In this piece, not only the natural environment was addressed, rather the whole social and historical context around the Chattahoochee River. The installation included some texts about the local history, which were cast in wax and ceramics. It also included a performance, developed together with the artists Sissi Fonseca and the students from the Columbus University, in which the participants represented their important roles in the definition of landscape throughout history.



Fig. 3. Amazonia Insomnia, Video-Installation by Hugo Fortes, 2018. Photo: Bruno Zanardo

In 2018 I participated in the Labverde Art Immersion Program in the Amazon, an artist's residency in the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest. After 3 days traveling by boat on these rivers, we stayed for a week in the Adolpho Ducke reserve, immersed in the middle of the Rainforest, near Manaus. The site had very precarious conditions of telephone network and internet. The connection happening there was rather more intense with nature in its deepest aspects. To capture the essence of this experience through images seemed to me almost an impossible task, for however beautiful the photographs and representations of the forest were, they seemed unable to transmit the intensity of being there. This

made me think about the mythical power of nature and the ways that the original peoples use to access it.

The rivers in the Amazon Region are not only important for fauna, flora and climate preservation and community survival, they play also a fundamental role in spiritual and cosmogonic narratives of the local indigenous people. To evoke this mythical power, I created the video-installation *Amazonia Insomnia*, in which I projected edited images of water reflections on the bed where I slept while living at the Adolpho Ducke Reserve, where the artist's residency took place. The bed was covered with leaves and branches found in the forest. The images were duplicated and mirrored, so they looked like a kind of mandala. The work evokes the spirits of the forest in a contemplative atmosphere of dream and visual delirium.



Fig. 3. *Amazonia Insomnia* (video still), Video by Hugo Fortes. 2018

After the presentation of the work as a video installation at the Adolpho Ducke reserve, I also started to show the video *Amazonia Insomnia* as an autonomous artwork regardless of the installation. The first version of the video was presented without sound, however, later, I was able to edit the soundtrack from sounds captured in the Rainforest, which were distorted and intensified to create an even more mysterious atmosphere.

The electronic capture of images and videos of the forest and its subsequent edition does not represent, in my view, a detachment from nature, but rather a possibility to try to access the invisible, the immeasurable and the inapprehensible. The digital language of the video, because of its fluidity and malleability, allows us to give wings to imagination and to achieve worlds full of sensations. The native peoples of the Amazon seek to achieve these spiritual worlds beyond our earthly bodies through

shamanic rituals, which involve the consumption of Ayahuasca and through the arts of body paintings, pottery and basketry. In my work *Amazonia Insomnia* I sought, by using technology and sensitivity, to approach these ethereal planes that hide beyond the reflections of the rivers, behind the souls of the trees and in the interiority of the spirits of the animals. I believe that one of the most effective ways to communicate ecological issues is by connecting environment with spirituality, respecting the traditions and beliefs of the local communities. In this sense, landscape must be understood not only as an abstract piece of nature that must be preserved, but as a real site where people and animals inhabit and carry on their lives.

In early 2019 I also participated in an artist's residency in India and I got in contact with the Ganges River. The experience in India was also concerned with spirituality, but the way the Indians relate to their river is totally different from the Brazilians. In India, the river has an even stronger commitment to spirituality and religion and plays a very strong role in the relationships between life and death. The river is a kind of a portal to eternity. The ceremony of cremation occurs in front of the river and the Indians believe that by burning the body goes back to the primary elements that are mixed together again. During the cremation, smoke, air and water flow free and there is no symbolic hierarchy between life and death.

To approach such a different culture as the Indian is not easy for a foreigner. We have to work out our beliefs, values and personal biases. And we have to be aware that the perceptions that we get during an artist's residency are limited and it is impossible to access the culture in profundity. One must be careful not to make hasty judgments. We cannot arrive in India and just accuse the people of polluting their rivers. In fact, the rivers of our industrial western metropolis may be even more polluted than the Ganges, where the pollution seems to be more organic than chemical. In order to raise environmental awareness to water-related issues in India we should not only use scientific and rational arguments, but rather evoke the sacred meaning of the river using emotional involvement.

In my artistic residency in India, I developed the video "Here and There" in which I explore these relationships, seeking to approach to the local culture and reflecting also on the contrasts with my own culture. Although the video is not only about water, it plays a very important role in the narrative. During my stay in India I noticed that it was important to understand the Ganges River in a wider context, which includes different religions and habits, economical, cultural and social issues. In short, the video seeks to establish a complex reflection about otherness, nature and society.

Although the artworks cited in this paper communicate environmental issues in an indirect way, they can evoke deep feelings from our relationships with nature, offering sensory experiences that go beyond the rational transmission of a message. The artist communicates ecological issues in a different way from the scientist. As Vernon Dame wrote:

This type of ecology does not lend itself to the precise and technical descriptions of the scientist. It must be communicated on an entirely different level. Let the scientist work on the level of developing the precise, technical understanding of what is happening. This is not the arena of the artist, nor is it the arena in which the problem will be solved. The real problem is an ethical one. It has to do with morality and emotions. It will not be solved by restrictive laws or by improved technology but by awakening in individuals of a personal awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation for the problems facing mankind - exactly those attributes the artist is most capable of communicating. (DAME, 1970:54)

Art experience doesn't need to provoke immediate active responses, but it should instill reflection and environmental awareness. Art must keep its dubiety and freedom of interpretation. Art, with its emotional and sensory involvement and creativity can be one of the most powerful tools in communicating environmental issues. Although art is an important tool to awaken eco-friendly awareness, it must keep its autonomy as creative language, and cannot be reduced to marketing objectives. A responsible artist or curator should seek for a balance between the transmission of the artistic poetics, in its autonomous power, and the commitment to environmental communication. Art can help us to regain the lost connection with nature, and so it is an important way to raise environmental sustainability awareness.

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