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ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INSURGENT TERRITORIES. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK TO STUDY THE PERFORMANCE ART IN ROSARIO, ARGENTINA.

Movimientos ambientalistas en territorios insurgentes. Un marco antropológico para estudiar el arte performativo en Rosario, Argentina.

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Abstract: This article addresses forms of artist protest against the massive fires in the wetlands of the Paraná River delta. Citizens are fighting not only the unbearable smoke but also the commodification of nature (Svampa, 2014). A new wave of social environmentalism (Gutierrez & Isuani, 2014), organizations and actors has formed around these events. This heterogeneous environmental movement comprises actors ranging from citizens, university students, left-wing political groups, conservation activists, and feminists, who are attracting attention with massive acts of protests in which they express a repertory of new 'languages of valuation' (Martinez Alier, 2006). In this essay, we look at the artistic forms of protest of the Thigra Collective, which go beyond the nature/culture duality with their index based (Peirce, 1973; Gell, 2016) signs: artworks and performance actions. Our reflection on Thigra's performance work aims to show that anti-modern images and meanings are expressed in their artistic interventions, through which the group breaks away from modern ontologies (Latour, 2001; 2022). In addition, the artists' work stages the association of human and non-human elements (Latour, 2001), through which they generate an intrusion of objects and performative actions in the everyday life of the city.

Keywords: Street Art, Semiotics, Environmental Movements, Political Ecology, Anthropology



Resumen: Este artículo aborda formas de protesta artística contra los incendios masivos en los humedales del delta del río Paraná. Los ciudadanos luchan no sólo contra el insuportable humo sino también contra la mercantilización de la naturaleza (Svampa, 2014). En torno a estos acontecimientos se ha ido configurando una nueva ola de ambientalismo social (Gutiérrez & Isuani, 2014) organizaciones y actores. El movimiento ambientalista comprende una variedad de actores heterogéneos que van desde ciudadanos, estudiantes universitarios, grupos políticos de izquierda, activistas conservacionistas y feministas, que están atrayendo la atención con actos masivos de protesta mediante los cuales expresan un repertorio de nuevos “lenguajes de valoración”. (Martínez Alier, 2006). En este ensayo, analizamos las formas artísticas de protesta del Colectivo Thigra que transgrede la dualidad naturaleza/cultura con sus signos basados en indicios (Peirce, 1973; Gell, 2016): obras de arte y acciones escénicas. Al reflexionar sobre el trabajo escénico de Thigra queremos mostrar que imágenes y significados antimodernos se expresan en sus intervenciones artísticas mediante las cuales el grupo rompe con las ontologías modernas (Latour, 2001; 2022). Además, el trabajo de los artistas pone en escena la asociación de elementos humanos y no humanos (Latour, 2001) mediante los cuales generan una intrusión de objetos y acciones performativas en la vida cotidiana de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Arte callejero, Semiótica, Movimientos ecologistas, Ecología política, Antropología

Resum: Aquest article aborda formes de protesta artística contra els incendis massius en els aiguamolls del delta del riu Paraná. Els ciutadans lluiten no sols contra l'insuportable fum sinó també contra la mercantilització de la naturalesa (Svampa, 2014). Entorn d'aquests esdeveniments s'ha anat configurant una nova ona d'ambientalisme social (Gutiérrez & Isuani, 2014) organitzacions i actors. El moviment ambientalista comprén una varietat d'actors heterogenis que van des de ciutadans, estudiants universitaris, grups polítics d'esquerra, activistes conservacionistes i feministes, que estan atraient l'atenció amb actes massius de protesta mitjançant els quals expressen un repertori de nous «lenguatges de valoració». (Martínez Alier, 2006). En aquest assaig, analitzem les formes artístiques de protesta del Col·lectiu Thigra que transgredeix la dualitat naturalesa/cultura amb els seus signes basats en indicis (Peirce, 1973; Gell, 2016): obres d'art i accions escèniques. En reflexionar sobre el treball escènic de Thigra volem mostrar que imatges i significats antimoderns s'expressen en les seues intervencions artístiques mitjançant les quals el grup trenca amb les ontologies modernes (Latour, 2001; 2022). A més, el treball dels artistes posa en escena l'associació d'elements humans i no humans (Latour, 2001) mitjançant



els quals generen una intrusió d'objectes i accions performatives en la vida quotidiana de la ciutat.

Paraules clau: Art de carrer, Semiòtica, Moviments ecologistes, Ecologia política, Antropologia

1.- Intro.

This paper uses an anthropological lens to view the urban expressions of the environmental conflicts that have unfolded around the fires in the wetland ecosystem of the Paraná River Delta. As producers of knowledge and proponents of social cooperation, the environmental activists' urban expressions bring to the forefront the idea of 'languages of valuation' (Martinez Alier, 2006). Martinez Alier developed this concept in the framework of his critique of mainstream economists' cost-benefit logic, through which environmental destruction is attributed to negative externalities using a language that denaturalizes the environment and negates any responsibility of market forces. Artistic interventions with environmental content, such as those of Thigra Collective, contest such discourses.

The performance-oriented group Thigra Collective, based in the city of Rosario, came into being in 2017 but only began to enact performances and produce urban artwork as a response to increasing incidences of fire on the island, using the Paraná River as a central protagonist, in mid-2020. Their artwork and performative actions thematize the fire events and formulate in a singular way the socio-environmental problems related to the river, the fires, and the imaginaries of nature which are being disseminated.

Therefore, we start from the following working hypothesis: the performance art collective Thigra uses its art and collective action to transgress modern ontologies (Latour, 2001) and to elaborate an *anti-modernist language of valuation* (Martinez Alier, 2006). This language is embodied in their different artwork and performance interventions which stage a transgression of the nature/culture duality, bringing together not only human and non-human elements but also enacting environmentalist performative actions, with the use of art objects, in monuments of national history and other relevant buildings in the country.

Having framed our proposed analysis, the article is organized as follows:

We begin by setting the scene and introducing the geographical and political background of Rosario, the river delta, and the environmental conflict, from which the environmental movement and the artist collective Thigra emerged. Conceptual considerations and the materials and methods used in the research



are then elaborated. The disciplines of Anthropology, Political Ecology, and Semiotics provide us with an interpretative framework and allowed us to position ourselves to select and collect the material for analysis.

Our analysis of the art work includes texts, images and interviews with the collective's members. Using a material-semiotic perspective and ethnographic research tools, we use these representations, or plurality of valuations (Martinez Alier, 2000), to identify artistic expressions that unfolded in the context of the environmental conflict. Through the analysis of artistic expressions, we shed light on locally-generated alternative environmental thoughts, which we interpret as a form of critique of deregulation and withdrawal of the state from its caring responsibilities. In doing so, power structures become visible that reveal historical and transnational entanglements of market interests and haphazard economic growth.

2.- Background: Location and characterization of the environmental conflict

The delta, where our study is located, comprises 5.600.000 h. of wetlands across the Paraná and the Paraguay Rivers. The river delta is divided into three *ecoregions*: lower, middle, and upper delta (Burkart, 1957; Malvarez 1995 en Vizia et. al, 2010). The delta is additionally the final stretch of one of the most important waterways of South America: the Paraguay-Paraná fluvial corridor. With a catchment of 14,000 km² and a length of 320 km, these wetlands host one of the largest oilseed and cereal export complexes in the world. Rosario, the city close to the epicenter of the wetland fires and the origin of the manifold environmental movements, is the third largest city in terms of population in Argentina. It is located in the Province of Santa Fe, called "Pampa" in the central region of Argentina. Known for its fertile soils, it is the main area for industrial agricultural and livestock production in the country.

The city of Rosario is called the "cradle of the flag" since the Argentine national flag was hoisted there, for the first time, in 1812. The National Monument to the Flag is a historical building inaugurated in 1957. Rosario is known by and identified with this emblematic construction which is the site of numerous official, civic, and protest acts such as marches and artistic events. Furthermore, the ports of Rosario and its surroundings constitute the most significant port complex of the country and represent a fundamental enclave of the agro-export model that characterizes it.

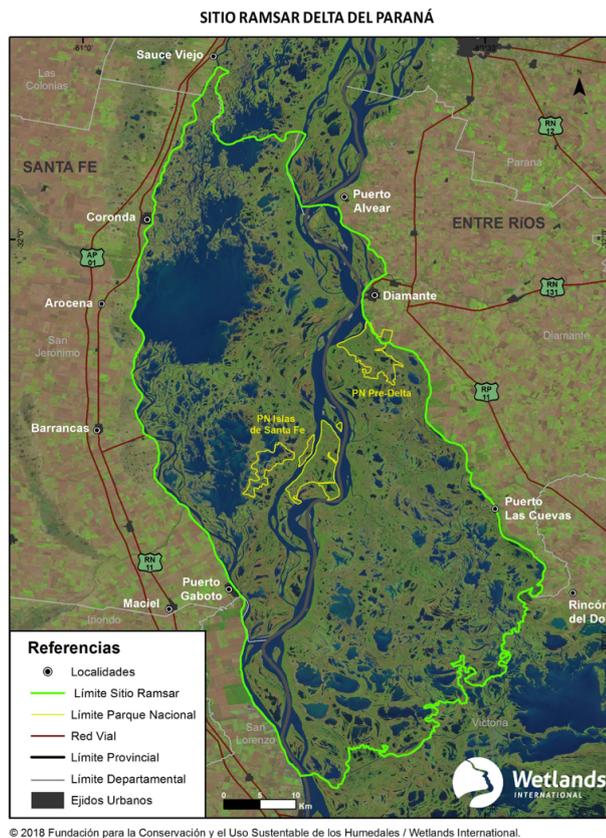


Fig. 1._ Sitio Ramsar Delta del Paraná. Source: Wetlands International, 2019

From parts of the city and its riverside one can look across a natural landscape; the wetland that constitute the middle delta. The delta region is subject to multiple environmental conservation units including three National Parks (two of them can be seen in Fig. 1) and the “Delta del Paraná” Ramsar Site. The wetlands and islands of Victoria, in the region Entre Ríos, have been a municipal protected natural area since 2003 and also a provincial protected natural area since 2019. Other areas under environmental protection include the Isla Botija Multiple Use Nature Reserve.

The Delta and its historical socio-productive transformations

The islands of the Paraná River Delta were earlier inhabited by indigenous communities, who were displaced by new settlers during the colonial period (Balandier, 1980) and later during the expansion of the Argentine nation-state. The territory of the delta constitutes an area that, in the current era, is difficult to manage for the Argentinian state. Conflicts exist around the creation of National



Parks as a response to environmental destruction, because they often result in the displacement of people from their territories (Ferrero and Arach, 2019). The origins of the fires in the wetlands are also disputed, with some claiming that such fires are started by local inhabitants pursuing their livelihoods.

Besides the narrative on the rise of the fire, there is a broad consensus among environmental organizations and emergent umbrella organizations like “Multisectorial Humedales”, “Autoconvocados Humedales” and “Asamblea Socioambiental Rosario”, regarding the socio-productive transformations of the Paraná River Delta. The environmental NGOs and state institutions with different sources of financing generate scientific, academic, and even ethnographic information about the territory, accounting for both the transformations of the territory and social identities.

The building of the Rosario-Victoria Bridge is considered by a group of academics, belonging to different environmental NGOs, as one of the most important events that led to the deep transformation of productive activities in the delta. The number of cattle increased considerably between the creation and inauguration of the Rosario-Victoria Bridge in 2003 and the great fires of 2008. In the first few years, extra-local actors such as the “puestero” (day laborer) and the “arrendatario” (cattle breeder) multiplied, and fences were erected to the detriment of hunting and fishing (cf. Vizia et. al., 2010). The fires in the Paraná River Delta’s wetlands almost immediately became an environmental issue (Nogueira, 2016; Oszlack y O’Donnell, 1995). They spread in such a way and magnitude that the problem was extremely visible and couldn’t be overlooked, such that the island ecosystem became the focus of Rosario’s citizens. Thus, the bridge is an important link between the city and the wetlands.

In interviews with environmental activists and representatives of social mobilizations, a pejorative vision of the bridge was expressed. To the bulk of the environmentalist movement, the bridge represents “...a way to transport commodities to be taken out of the country” (nature transformed into commodities). Also, “The bridge is the door of the wetlands, which is why we sat there to protest against fire” and “The bridge cut at the middle of the wetland”.

Two controversial perspectives on the delta exist (Malvárez, 1997). The first recognizes the biodiversity of the ecosystem and accentuates flood dynamics as factors that hinder and impede the creation of new construction sites and thus the expansion of the city. This vision propounds strict nature conservation and argues against human presence while rejecting social developments because they are negative to the environment. The second perspective portrays an image of floodplains with a low agricultural productive capacity, in which infrastructure interventions would always be profitable. This vision of islands that still need to be conquered, is used by the municipal government itself in order to



attract investors. In fact, this vision ignores the realities of the people who live there. “Ambas imágenes tienen un denominador común [que] es la simplicidad del enfoque, que ignora la heterogeneidad de la región y la relación funcional entre comunidades y su régimen hidrológico (Malvárez, 1997, p. 5 en Tomassi, 2022, p. 103)”.

3.- Conceptual considerations and methodology:

Before revealing our methodology and research perspective, we briefly discuss our academic backgrounds, which are important for understanding the structure and content of this article.

As researchers with interdisciplinary training on the one hand, and inspired by our work with various social movements on the other, our academic work cannot be seen in isolation from political contestations and socio-cultural struggles. One of us is an academic employed at a German university, who has for many years researched and worked in Latin America on various local conflicts, mostly related to the environment, while the other author is locally based and directly affected by the environmental conflict in discussion. His work is guided by his connection to the University of Rosario and by his research interest in the human-environment relationship conflicts that surround wetlands. In his doctoral studies he researches the environmental discourses emerging from the fires in the delta wetland, the territorial transformations of the region, and the public policies of development and conservation that affect the human-environmental relationship.

In our selection of the corpus of material for analysis, we first identified those self-organized NGOs which entered the public scene in the context of the fires on the delta islands. We then conducted interviews with members of these NGOs and selected some of their works and performative actions to relate with anthropological, semiotic, and political ecology approaches. The works and artistic interventions by the Thigra Collective were identified and selected because of their expression of alternative understandings of human-environmental relationships. Another justification for their selection was our intuition regarding an interesting cross-cutting semiotic operation in their works. Drawing on Peircian semiotics (Peirce, 1974), we observed the use of objects from their socio natural surroundings (Paraná river, Flag monument, etc.) to equip their performative action with a set of signs through which they re-signify the relation between nature and society.

The open interviews conducted with the members of the Thigra Collective were guided by a list of questions linked to individual and collective trajectories of environmental militancy. The interviews further sought to investigate the objectives, motivations and resources used by the performance art collective.



We depart in political ecology from the contributions of Martínez Alier (2006), Escobar, (1999), Merlinski (2022), and Svampa (2014) in order to interpret the emerging movements around the environmental conflict located in our study region. The contributions of these authors in relation to their visions of environmental conflicts allow us to frame the social mobilizations around the fires in wetlands in a broader framework of conflicts and mass protests in societies of the so-called Global South suffering from ecological degradation and extractivism. Enrique Leff proposed to talk about the environmentalization of social struggles (Leff, 2003; 2004) to address conflicts around the common management of territories and their components. Other authors introduced the concept of environmentalism *of the poor* (Martinez Alier, 2006), *social mobilization for re-appropriation and nature resignification* (Escobar, 1999), or *eco-territorial turn* (Svampa, 2013) to highlight the intersection of social and territorial contestations.

Many of the environmental groups question the official discourses that pursue an eco-efficient idea of development by putting the services of the natural system (ecosystem services) at the center stage. In this contestation the Rosario-Victoria Bridge, the large cargo ships that navigate the Paraná River, and even the fires on the islands become signifiers for the exploitation and extraction of the ecosystems' natural resources. The objects and material conditions that should symbolize the region's economic strength and the efficiency of the ecosystem are reframed by the activists and given a new meaning which rather describes the unregulated and exaggerated exploitation of the region. By mobilizing and performing against the extractive activities, an alternative language is produced. In this way, contributions from political ecology allow us to identify in these resistant performances a human-environmental relationship beyond the anthropocentric hierarchization of society over nature. By mobilizing and performing, a section of society identifies problems and solutions, redefines the relationship with the environment, and stages their artistic protest to dispute public policies of development and conservation in the region.

Finally, Bruno Latour's reflections on modern ontologies and problematizations in science and technology studies (2001, 2022) invited us to interpret the expressions of environmentalists from an Actor Network Theory perspective (Gutiérrez & Isuani, 2013). Looking at the Thigra collective, which presents a repertoire of discourses and performative action, one observes their dispute against established roles and ontological hierarchies between human and non-human in the course of modern history. By this, we refer both to the ontological separation of society from -what we call- nature (which the Thigra Collective tries to transgress through its work) and to the distribution of social roles, responsibilities, and rights with respect to the management, administration and use of environmental resources. The economic rationalities



that prevail in the modes of production are those that read environmental issues in terms of costs and benefits, with solutions generally linked to technological development and eco-efficiency. Such ways of dealing with contemporary environmental and social problems generally ignore the demands and needs of those directly affected by industrial production processes, extraction of natural resources (whether minerals, hydrocarbons, water or labor) or technological fixes. It is this unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of technological and economic progress that we refer to when we speak of asymmetrical social roles.

The unequal distribution of social roles with respect to a territory's resources is where we can find convergence between the above-mentioned postulates of political ecology and critical actor network theory studies. In a given environmental conflict, those who perceive themselves as immediately (and negatively) affected by the prevailing modes of social relations raise their voices, also through contestational interventions, in the public sphere.

4.- Analysis of Artwork. Results.

4.1. Analysis of the performance art “Tu Fuego Es Cómplice”. Criticism of state politics and Ecofeminism.



Fig. 2. Performative action by Thigra Collective and Multisectorial Humedales. 6/11/2020. Source <https://www.instagram.com/thigrra/>



On the 6th November 2020, when the pandemic was at its peak, Thigra Collective and the environmental movement Multisectorial Humedales organized a protest action in the form of an artistic intervention in the center of the city (Figure 3). The goal was to bring the act of firefighting on the islands of the Paraná River Delta to an inner-city place that is politically and symbolically characteristic of Rosario and Argentina as a whole. More than 200 people participated in the action to make a determined statement against the ongoing fires, called “Ecocide” by most of the environmentalist movement¹. In the process, a chain of people, more than 150 meters long, was formed to carry buckets of water from the Paraná riverside to the emblematic Monumento a la Bandera (National Monument to the Flag), which stands for Argentina’s freedom and independence. Our first interpretation of the message is the metaphorical extinguishing of the wetland’s fire, as if it was in the flag monument itself. Also, we reflect that the purpose of this performative action was to show firefighting volunteer work in the eyes of the state and society. The monument and the flag, which were installed there after a long planning period from 1943 to 1957, represent more than anything else the founding myth of the country. The monument is located in the Parque Nacional a la Bandera, in the place where General Manuel Belgrano hoisted the Argentine flag for the first time on the banks of the Paraná River in 1812. Simultaneously with the human chain of volunteer activists, three people climbed onto the bow of the patriotic structure and hung a flag there, which was unfurled at the climax of the action, revealing the inscription “Tu fuego es cómplice” (Your fire is an accomplice). This expressive and important action was particularly intended to denounce the complicity of the state and local government institutions.

In general, struggles against the fires are closely related to a criticism of the country’s development plans for the region, which call for more and more intensive agriculture in the mainland pushing cattle ranching to the fragile wetlands ecosystem. Any protection and stricter legislation, as demanded by the environmental movement, would stand in the way of these development plans. In Argentina, as explained in the environmental education booklet of the Municipality of Rosario (2021), there are about 600,000 km² of wetlands, which represents 21.5% of the Argentine territory. These floodplains have a biodiversity that produces unique landscapes. The attractiveness of this land area lies in the extremely high fertility of the soils, which promises high yields for agriculture and a good basis for feeding cattle herds. The necessity to transform these wetlands is historically justified and not further questioned. In the local language, there is even a term that describes the transformation of wetland ecosystems into

1. “Ecocide” is a good example of valuation language produced and used by the local environmentalist movements that emerged in the conflict around fires in the wetlands. We can say that Ecocide is more related to nature conservation logic than cost-benefit calculations and market visions.



productive land, called “pampeanización del Delta” (Galaffassi, 2001).

However, the burning of the wetlands are mostly illegal acts of arson that also plague the whole country and entire continent. For example, Juan José Remulcao, in his essay “The things we find in the Fire” (2021), states that fires in the wetlands of South America are destroying large areas of the Gran Chaco and the Amazon region, besides the Argentine wetlands. In each of these environments, he says, the dynamics are similar: agricultural companies intentionally burn supposedly ‘unused’ land to later buy it up at knock-down prices for cattle ranching or soybean production. Although this slash-and-burn has always occurred to open up new cropland, the soy boom in the late 1990s and the global growth of the cattle industry have led to such fires getting totally out of control (ibid: 22). Wetlands are also under stress from droughts and due to global climate change, so the fires pose an additional threat to the resilience of native species.

The complicity of the state, the municipality and the institutions, as suggested in ‘Tu fuego es cómplice’, is central to the feminist critique of the anthropocentrism of our modern societies, which refuse to assume responsibility and care for all forms of life. As a consequence, care activities are attributed to basic female characteristics. The policies and planning strategies of the nation-state and its institutions are attributed to the logocentrism of a male-eurocentric order. In a post-colonial reading this logic experienced further intensification of exploitative relations through the liberalization of the market. The critique of the belief in technology and progress in male-dominated societies and the oppression of women with their biologically based feminine characteristics is not explicitly addressed in Thigra Collective’s work, but parallels to ecofeminism can be seen in their self-description and self-perception. The performance art is conceived and produced from the body, because the problems of fire are experienced in the body. The bodies of people and objects of nature are associated in the artistic interventions, to merge into collective protest and draw attention to the destruction of the environment and health. The body stands for the burned, abused and destroyed territory. This analogy reveals “la existencia de vínculos profundos entre la subordinación de las mujeres y la explotación destructiva de la naturaleza” (Martinez Pita 2018)².

In this way, the artists also convey a fundamental critique of prevailing artistic practices, which they argue are individualistic and hostile to community, because each body is never just one, but must always be seen together with other human and non-human bodies and forces. The defense and care of the livelihoods of this world, which is inhabited by humans and also inhabits humans (animism), must and can only be undertaken collectively. In the spirit of Veronica Gago in

2. Translates as “the existence of deep links between the subordination of women and the destructive exploitation of nature”.

her writing “La Potencia Feminista” (2019), the Thigra Collective makes visible with its interventions “an organic relationship between patriarchy and extractivism”, giving a special meaning to the conceptual relationship of body-territory. In doing so, they share the ecofeminist and radical ecological perspective, according to which the accumulation of capital is based on the exploitation and subordination of women and men and the extractivism of natural resources in the so-called Global South.

4.2.- Analysis of “La Bajante” of Thigra Collective. Valuation language construction in anti-modernist art expressions.

The work “La Bajante” appeared at the end of 2021, after almost a full year of assemblies, demonstrations, encampments and artistic interventions by different environmental collectives in the City of Rosario. The performative act “La Bajante” condenses a large part of the environmentalist discourses that characterize this environmental conflict.



Fig. 3. Performative action by Thigra Collective and citizen-performers. 2020.

Source <https://www.instagram.com/thigrra/>

The Thigra Collective performed “La Bajante” as a contribution to the exhibition “Pintó Humedal” organized by the Municipality of Rosario. It exhibited works by Raúl Domínguez, a mid-20th century painter who lived and paint-

ed the islands of Charigüé, an island in the center of the wetlands. The work involved 16 citizen-performers who “impregnated with the river” a canvas of 12 by 2 Mts. The activists took the remains of the river from the shores of the Paraná River to the former Customs House of Rosario (ex Aduana), an emblematic building located in the ports area of the city. The performance began with the collective action of sinking the canvas on the shores of the Paraná River, soaking the artifact to finally take it “*as in a procession*” (interview with Marina of the collective Thigra, 2023) to the entrance hall of the city’s former customs office. The performance action ended with the reading of a statement while the canvas bathed in mud hung inside the Customs House, in order to introduce a disruptive object into a global scene that is alien to it. This serves to bring attention to a historical administrative building of the city, whose precise function was to regulate human activities in the river and the ports (transgressing the duality of nature/culture). Produced by the Multisectorial Humedales de Rosario and the Thigra Collective, “La Bajante” generates a particular situation, a kind of return or intrusion of the river into a human administrative entity that was created precisely for its regulation and management (Border Control and Custom). Thus the materiality of the river is added by means of a ritual act (performance)



that symbolically highlights the human control and management of the river: the customs and the ports.



The intrusion of the materiality (remains of the river) inscribed on the canvas, into the hall of the City of Rosario's former customs office, can be interpreted as a transgression of the "modern agreement" (Latour, 2001). It sought to break into an area of culture and law (Customs Control) through the insertion of an object that represents the river and nature in its chaotic composition (remains of mud, sticks, branches, leaves), as stated by one of the members of Thigra: "...these materialities, enter them" (Marina of the collective Thigra, member Interview, 5/16/2023, p. 13). It is interesting to note that the art object that symbolizes the river and nature (the canvas) makes use of the persistence of fragments of the river in its interior, giving rise to an existential connection or contiguity with the river. In this sense, we can infer that there is a dimension of continuity in the construction of the canvas object, where the continuity or contiguity between the canvas-object and the river-object predominates in the construction of the performance art work. That is why we state that the relationship of the sign "La Bajante" (canvas artwork) with the river is a relationship of contiguity (Peirce, 1973; Valdetaro, 2015). Finally, the explicit question that inhabits the artwork "La Bajante", namely "How much is a river worth?", raises to the public sphere not only the issue of commodification of nature but also about its incommensurability (Martinez Alier, 2000).

5.- Conclusions

The aim of our examination of the artwork and performative actions of the Thigra Collective is to illustrate and make known the language through which these groups of artists and "citizen-performers" express the environmental conflict – a conflict initially stimulated by the presence of fire on the islands. By the construction of this valuation language they re-appropriate nature (Escobar, 1999) and encourage others to question the commodification of nature (Leff, 2003; 2004; Svampa, 2013). In the same way, the performance art "How much is a river worth?" constitutes an appeal to the incommensurability of nature (Martinez Alier, 2006). How can a river and its biodiversity be monetarily valued?

With the work of the collective, which presents itself in a form of protest that we call activism, we can follow on from the Barcelona School for Social Environmental Science, which for 30 years has been studying the discourses and linguistic forms of expression of environmental conflicts. This school of thought has given rise to the Atlas of Environmental Justice, in which the conflicts are densely described. Joan Martínez Alier, the founder of this approach, assumes that many environmental conflicts are actually conflicts over different linguistic ways of speaking about a circumstance. The linguistic expressions are used to assign a value to the environment, which is expressed in the course of the experienced unequal distribution of costs and benefits and in the context of current global transformations (cf. Villamayor-Tomas and Roldan Muradian 2023).



The school of thought embedded in political ecology and environmental economics requires three aspects to be addressed when examining the complex interrelationships between economy and ecology. Firstly, special attention must be paid to the biophysical dimension of our economic systems. Secondly, the political dimension underlying our current capitalist economic system must be taken into account when analyzing the impact on the environment. Finally, an emphasis on the inclusion of alternative forms of knowledge production, evaluations and multiple forms of organization of social life must be binding. Because, as Martínez Alier notes in a recently published appraisal: “The livelihood values, sacredness, relevance to future generations, and full ecological values cannot be translated into monetary terms.” (Martínez Alier 2023, 11).

This very generally articulated criticism of our natural conditions turns also the art of the environmental movement in Rosario into a protest, the artistic performance into a political event. We use the representations of resistance in urban spaces to elaborate on how the discourse surrounding the arson of the wetlands in the river delta and all the associated official assessments of the situation, are reinterpreted through protest. In turn, values, symbols and public monuments associated with the nation-state become veritable arenas of symbolic struggle and contestation over representations. That is to say, it is precisely in these enclaves of national identity where the environmentalist discourses rests. The activists challenge the commodification of nature, in which the State, by action or omission, plays a key role for the environmentalist groups. By bringing their bodies and sticks and mud from the river into historical buildings, the artists reconceptualize the relationship between society and the Paraná River as one between human beings and their environment, thus representing a veritable assemblage of humans - non-humans (Latour, 2001) that amalgamate to disrupt the modern ontological nature/culture separation. Stimulated by the conflict over “the fire on the islands”, Thigra’s artists achieve such disruption through the juxtaposition of interrogative expressions on giant canvases, the intrusion of riverside materiality into historical buildings, using a diversity of artistic repertoires of urban collective actions, assemblages of objects and citizens that are being embedded as performers (Marina interview, 16/5/2023, p. 9).

Thigra Collective associates ‘object’ and ‘sign’ to create a relation between the object “river” and the performance art to exalt the protagonism of the “river” as a main actor (Latour, 2001). Seeing the environment as an actor is not just a result of the ontological turn in social sciences, but also a claim by indigenous people which have a different take on the concept of nature and / or environment in two ways. These alternative forms of environmental thinking are based on the cosmovisions and ideas of those who are in direct contact with the environment, who live in their territories. Their livelihoods did not only emerge in exchange with the environment, but also take up responsibility for the preservation of life in the same way. And, these alternative forms of environmental thinking are



based on the assumption that the mentioned territories have a value beyond their economic exploitation.

With the collection of components of the river (mud, clay, sticks, branches, etc.) the Thigra Collective gives meaning, value and voice to nature, uses the river's components as "traces of the river" or indices of a violated nature. Without referring to the school of thought of critical environmental studies, references are automatically drawn, thereby establishing human-environment relationships. The public space is used as a medium that is accessible to all and thus enables communication between people and the environment, between the population, which is burdened by smoke, and the activists of the environmental movement.

In summary, we argue that the questioning of the mercantile valuation of the territory has been the spirit of the environmental resistance in Rosario, through which a plurality of values is mediated. These are expressed in the protest activities of the environmental movements, and in the daily dialogues of the affected, and should sensitize us to the implications of natural resource exploitation and the commodification of nature not only in Rosario's wetlands but everywhere in the modern world.

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