



Conversation with Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan

Ángela Bonadies

Reflections on their project "Paraje de Hornillos, Misky Mayu o Río Dulce, Provincia de Santiago del Estero"

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2019

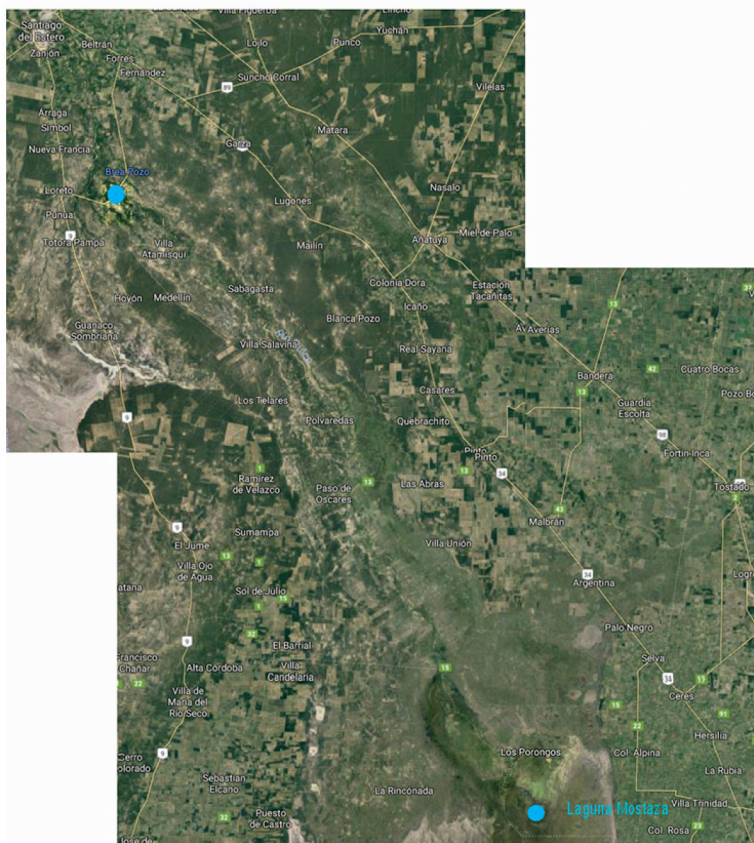
The following interview is the third of a series conducted by the Venezuelan artist Ángela Bonadies. Her conversations with Latin American visual artists and filmmakers continue the CPPC's tradition of preserving first-hand cultural testimony.

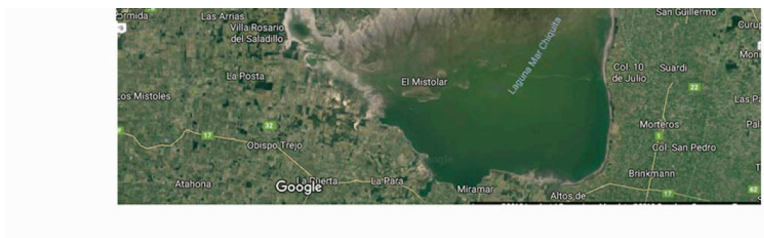
Introduction

Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan

In 1990, Juan Maidagan and five of his friends set out on a three month trip on the Río Dulce or Misky Mayu, in one of the least populous areas of Argentina. Their raft, which they had built themselves, got stuck during the last two weeks, and they were rescued at the mouth of Mar Chiquita Lake. Almost 20 years later, the trip was taken up once again by [Juan Maidagan and Dolores Zinny](#) in order to turn it into an art project, using the hours of footage filmed on a home video camera.

This region stands out in many natural science manuals that consider it the wildest area in the country, nestled almost exactly in the center of the Southern Cone. An imminent paradise, marked by water, by what the water erases. We had to get there to invent the image after taking inventory of the water's victory. As we drifted: the vast, open image of the horizon, cut into the infinity contained between the mountain of Santiago del Estero, the origin of lost cities, and those bathed by the Misky Mayu, north of the Mar de Ansenaua.





We will speak of this geographic itinerary, extended in time, using the following lines, emphasizing the narrative that transforms a vital odyssey into a work made by four hands that rescues what was heard, seen and lived. The conversation centers on the literal and metaphorical journey; on the temporal and affective movements of the creative act; on the abstract forms acquired by memory and landscape; and on a sense of belonging through the construction and reconstruction of poetics in national cartography.



In this conversation I include italics to set apart those paragraphs in which the journey is recounted as an experience of immersion in the landscape, as a descriptive way of living that circulates between water and mud, between distances and discoveries. So, in some way, I hope that the river crosses through this exchange and enables reading it as if it were another voice.

Ángela Bonadies [AB]: When we spoke, I was struck by the fact that the trip taken in 1990 followed, or was directed by, the water's time. That rhythm was registered in the video Juan made along the journey. At that moment, communication with Dolores was maintained by radio, once a week. In that same sense of time, almost 30 years have passed and now you take up the material once again to give it new life. In addition to all that that drifting and work can mean, there is an idea of "traveling in time" that in some way is a resistance to the madness of productivity; it's "letting yourself be carried away" and "taking your time."

How have these images traveled, these images that were not born as a work of art? You note: "This is the moment of initiating 'another trip', in which the re-reading of the raft's trajectory can couple with and add in new, induced images." Why or when did you feel that these images could be re-read and taken up anew?

Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagán [ZM]: Occasionally the landscape would become transformed into abstraction, into mirage, into document, into certainty. The river is the matter that allows you to pass, to move, to be in time and roam through space—it thickens, its banks are erased, it mixes with the earth, it's difficult to recognize; the raft gets covered in mud and stagnates.





Taking the production into account, as well as the insistence (almost an inescapable condition for everyone) on a narrative that defines a **singular** time passing in a **singular** place, that is to say, a **singular** reality, I think about how an era is characterized and defined, generally from a unique reading and from things that remain on the margins of this narrative that we believe to be unique: people living in houses made of clay, isolated, in the 90s, is not how that decade has historically been defined.

Watching the video of the trip, there is an evident separation of the partial reality of the one who films, Juan, his capacity for perception and the worlds that exist in this stretch of river and its banks. When I ask myself what this landscape has become today, a series of mental images appears, some reflective and others that have to do less with verbal language and more with the preconscious. The river changes, its contours turn swampy. The two trips are superimposed onto each other. And the two trips, the documented one and the imagined one, are inscribed with the impossibility of defining something as real. Matter changes like a monster that deceives us and time makes it so that words always arrive too late. Perhaps for this reason we never had the idea that this trip would have an end, a purpose, or any particular ambition.

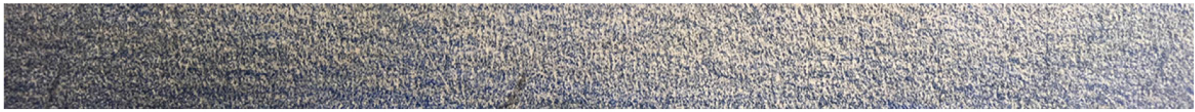


M.M. Hornillos 2 (1m)

from [studio zanny maidagan](#)

After a few days, following the question, the images are located where they hadn't been before. In the place where the delay transpired, the "before we had left." The idea that prevails: the illusion of the primitive facing our own willingness to relearn. To fulfill a wish and a ghost, to finally erase the palm tree, the colonial past, the postcolonial present, the dream of heroes. To film was not a meaningful idea for us until just a few days before departure, almost too late. In the same way we had agreed not to bring books; we had not considered bringing a camera.





What could the relationship be between these late-arriving image-ideas and the desire from the very beginning to not think of them? When everything was almost ready, when it was almost time to go, I got the idea to film and asked my brother to borrow his NTSC VHS camera. It was the best thing I could get at the last minute. I became the camera operator and I began to think of a diary, a document, a film about the water. Near the end of the trip, my obsession grew to film the horizon that surrounded me in 360 degrees, and I dedicated myself to this, even when the images come from similar, immobile time.

The images progress as we drift toward the wilderness in ignorance of that conscience. The image travels—I wrote during those days—toward the landscape where it remains in all its potency. Forces that transform the subject into mere spectator, invalid and inoperative, seated in his chair, pure colonial spirit. The white man's rebellion at not being from this place and at nature oppressed by his monetary economy.

Why or when did we feel these images could be re-read, taken up anew? Ever since that time the images need us, in the constancy of their cycle; they arrive and depart in the cycles of the water. By the conscience of nature's agony, by the mass extinction of species, by the absence of reaction, by the way we become defenseless. By social and legal inabilities, by the impossibility of reparation.

[AB]: How can "the potency" of the images and the experience be preserved? How does one speak from the margins about the unique and circular narrative without losing that potency? Many times, when I go into a gallery or museum, the impression is that many works have lost their affective charge, their potency: Giorgio Agamben speaks brilliantly about this in his book *Self Portrait in the Studio*. For this reason I really like to think about that work in which you installed your studio—or a reproduction of it—in the entrance of a museum. The studio is the potency, there it is concentrated.

[ZM]: The time to moor arrives each day after hours of floating. Before sunset, one of us, farther ahead in the kayak, was on a mission to choose an appropriate place and wait to moor us, after having spent the second night on a beach so full of mud it almost prompted the first mutiny. It was important to choose the place to go ashore after the hours spent on the raft, to find available wood to make a fire, to sit and drink mate, prepare dinner, breakfast, to walk and stretch, to observe the river...

The landscape's potency makes the image travel in the camera's viewfinder that frames and unframes. To lose one's self in recognizing and not recognizing the changing directions of a narrow, meandering river, from changing sides, surrounded on one side by cliffs and from the other, by the beach, by the thick vegetation of the mountain. A few times people signaled to us with their hands from the banks, sometimes we arrived at a house close to the shore, seen from the raft as we sailed.

Occasionally the questions return. Why film? And, above all, how was I affected by this specific task? As the one who held the camera, my image does not appear on the tape except very briefly, and this relieves me. Perhaps it was my way of not worrying about representation. At first everyone wanted to share an opinion; they were alert and willing to suggest how the take should be—how to shoot the action, the landscape, the interviews with inhabitants. Quickly I made them understand that their comments would not be taken in to account. Perhaps this task imposed upon me a mode of more committed attention, since at some point this way of seeing, that of the camera, would be what remained.



When we spotted what, at first glance, seemed to be a place to moor on a deserted beach, we stopped at what we would come to find was the site of Hornillos. We were at this site for two days and two nights. We shared time and our stories, among which I remember the warning from Mr. Carbajal, who, together with his father, mother, children, home, I identified as the authority in the group that welcomed us. When I expressed my desire to join them on a hike over the mountain, he pointed out the person from the group who stole, emphasizing that I could not leave the camera, nor the battery needed to operate it, alone on the raft, and carrying them over the mountain would be impossible for the hike. So I stayed on the beach the whole day while a group walked to the mountain. On the walk over the mountain, Carbajal checked the traps he left for pumas. His daughter said that her father had never caught a puma, but that every morning he checked the traps.

In the narration I confront this tracking with the intention to make myself known, to manifest, to trap the object of the chase in the holding of the camera, the ambivalence awakened in me by the obligation of staying attentive to everyone and adequately representing them. To recognize the distance sailed each day was practically impossible, different from that first calculation of 20 days to reach the city of Miramar, located on the banks of Lake Mar Chiquita. As time passed, I remember that there was a cake festival in Salavina, where we unexpectedly decided to depart, to my confusion, deaf to people's insistence that we stay. So it came to be that after sailing for a few hours at sunset, once we were moored, we met with groups of people headed to the festival we had refused to attend.

The camera is, and always will be, an interference, an indication.

There is a very relevant fact about water. When we did this trip, 29 years ago, while significant pollution already existed—urban drains, trash dumps, waste from mills—what did not yet exist was the Bajo La Alumbrera mine, which is located in the northwest of the Catamarca province, 320 kilometers from San Miguel de Tucumán.

"Bajo La Alumbrera" is a surface mine.

It is located 2600 meters above sea level.

Its water sources empty into the depression whose deepest point is at Lake Mar Chiquita.

Endorheic lake, which means it has no outflow of water.

Its eastern and southern borders are elevated like an angle.

Surface mines are highly contaminating.

Over 20 years, gold, copper, silver and molybden were extracted.

Central excavation seems to be close to ending its surface activity.

They would begin to excavate tunnels.

I found out about this pollution plenty of years ago.

La Alumbrera. The name is mind-blowing, right?

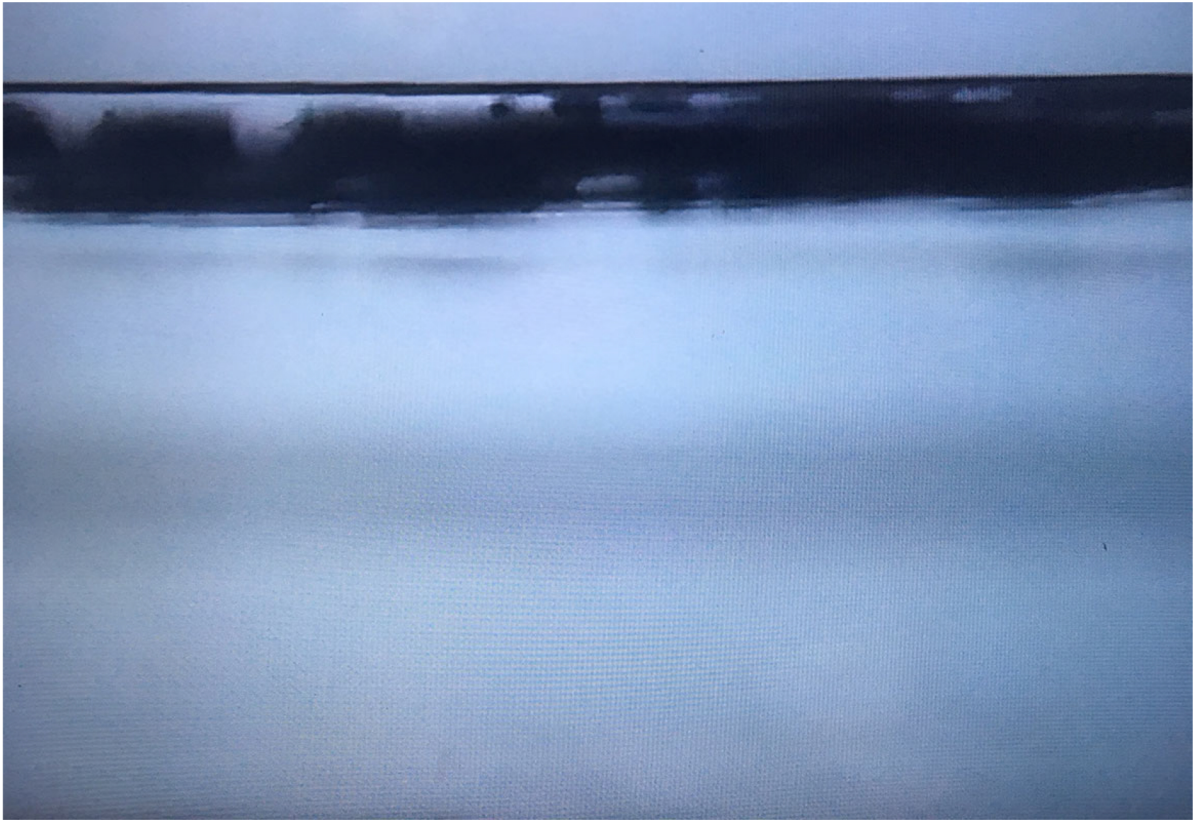
[AB]: Yes, it's a name that leaves an impression. On the one hand, it calls to mind a mine, a quarry, alum; it also sounds like light, that which illuminates. This whole experience seems like an adventure that newly manifests the myth of El Dorado and the promised land. To see how this land is "promised" to outsiders and is more truthfully "occupied land" or exploited land to those from that place, those who live there. Some images from your work recall the film *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* by Werner Herzog, but they also subvert and challenge it. In your film, El Dorado is the landscape, the place itself. But at the end of Aguirre, the devastation, death seems in some way to have been the sentence that has been passed in that land. How do the journey and the place transform into something else?

[ZM]: Belén's ranch. The raft with its sail unfurled but stuck in the middle of the flooded field. Ruins and skeletal remains. There was much more material of this, but this is all that is left. After spending the night moored near Belén's ranch, we left early. This would be the last inhabited ranch along the river on its path to the lake. With the help of Belén and her children we had estimated arriving at the mouth of the Mishky Mayu in two days, a little after noon, having sailed unimpeded along the deepest canal in the middle of the river, now practically without visible banks but for what looked like thin, elongated islets. Then, the raft stopped gently as we went toward the mud. The organic material that the river drags along its path through the mountain is deposited as it meets the salt water. This is called siltation: the river had silted, there was no way to continue, and after various maneuvers to free ourselves, we moored at the banks. The trip rushed to a close, to the relief of the population of Miramar, as they later confessed to us. We were approaching the real challenge, to sail the sea for 40 km, from north to south, to reach the famous seaside town of Miramar. We had already spent two months, more than we had calculated, and for this reason we would arrive at Lake Mar Chiquita in July, in the dead of winter. The pilot with the most experience in our group, a member of the crew from the beginning with whom we sailed the Manga-Pozo in the Paraná River, had gotten lost at some crossroads in the land route in the Santiago del Estero province, in his attempt to reach us before we entered the lake. To get stuck in the mud 20 km from Mar Chiquita was for the best. On the initiative of the people from Miramar, we spent the following days touring the area, almost completely covered in water, seeking another channel by which we could continue to Lake Mar Chiquita, the distance to which we did not precisely know. From Miramar they began to search for our location by flying over the area. On the second day of overhead searches they located us 16 km from the mouth of the Río Dulce at Lake Mar Chiquita. According to the pilot, we had veered away from the main route of the water. A few days later we received another suggestion from the people of Miramar: taking into account the strong wind blowing from the south, if it kept up and got worse, as it commonly did, the water level might go up, and if the flooding of the fields increased, we might be able to reach the lake. The proposal was to wait in place, and we decided to stay. We stayed for almost two weeks. We tried to drag the raft over the fields to a slightly larger bank, but we did not succeed and then wound up fully surrounded by water. From there we began to search for a possible path, thinking that we had gotten off of the river's main route. We continued and we extended our expeditions until past nightfall. One one of these marches, on a ledge at the banks of a river we identified as Lake Mostazas, 10 km from our location, we found the remains of two archeological moments: the ruins of a plantation house, old carriages lined up and framed by the remnants of a garage, sheds and tools. It was astounding to then discover human remains, suddenly visible after that first finding: three human skulls with their orbital cavities facing the sky. The bones looked white, very white, clean after years of flooding: the water coming time after time. Around there we found other parts of the skeleton. Now I remember the hand bones at a distance from the skull, I thought they were emerging from their grave.

That night we told the people of Miramar of our discovery. After communicating with the local archeological museum, they asked us if we could return and bring back one of the skulls. That is what we did. Studies determined that they belonged to individuals from the Sanaviron community, a local indigenous population. In this way, we found out that this population had preceded the Quechua, and that the Quechua, with whose descendants we had interacted throughout our journey, had arrived with the Spanish and had displaced the Sanaviron toward the mountains to the west.

The Quechua population had been turned away from that place before the arrival of the Spanish; they only established themselves in the company of the new colonizers. The displaced populations are perhaps an expanding wave: the displaced who then displaces. Santiago del Estero, Argentina's oldest city, is called the mother of cities. Expeditions departed from there, towards different cardinal points, and thus other cities were founded. The most advanced at their founding were commonly funded by a capitalist merchant committed to an investment of a certain term. The groups had a significant number of indigenous populations, in this case, Quechua. Santiago del Estero is something like the heart of Argentinean folklore, with a particular rhythm called "chacarera." don Sixto Palavecino, born in Salavina, Quechua specialist and violinist. At the same time, it is a province in which violence against rural people is unchecked. Absolute impunity, daily atrocities of power.

The film footage is direct; editing took place on the camera and was determined by the action.



[AB]: And returning to Agamben and his book *The Fire and the Tale*, which here we could rechristen as water and the tale: "Now we can comprehend in another way the relationship between creation and resistance of which Deleuze spoke. There exists, in every act of creation, something that resists and opposes the expression."

All images are from Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan's *Paraje de Hornillos, Misky Mayu o Río Dulce*, Provincia de Santiago del Estero. © Images courtesy of the artists and the [Henrique Faria New York Gallery](#)

[Ángela Bonadies](#)

Ángela Bonadies is an artist whose photographic work focuses on memory, archive, visibility and invisibility of cultural structures and urban space.