

FROM THE EXPLORATION OF DIVERSE AND PLURAL AESTHETIC NARRATIVES TO THE EMPATHIC CAPACITY OF ART TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

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Abstract

The interest in finding new languages and narrative formats to connect people with climate action led Fondo Acción - a Colombian fund promoting sustainable investment in the environment and children - to explore the creative and transformative power of art and culture.

Under the premise of promoting the virtuous circle of "Head - Heart - Hands," Fondo Acción has recognized that information on climate change and our understanding of this phenomenon and its causes are not enough to achieve the goals required to stabilize the climate and increase our resilience to its changes. In addition to information, if people connect with the emotions that climate change evokes in them, it will be possible to inspire action through changes in the mentality and behavior of individuals; in this way, the solutions are not limited to the adoption of public policies and transitions in the economic model. Instead, the day-to-day and responsible actions of citizens become indispensable.

For nearly eight years, Fondo Acción has developed capacity-building processes and the production of artistic and cultural works, framed within the formulation of national strategies to address climate change and the implementation of projects with local communities. In these processes, partnerships with governmental and private entities - both in the environmental and development planning sectors and the cultural sector- have been fundamental, along with the contribution of international cooperation agencies.

One of the most relevant processes and products has been the design of a diploma course in creative writing for Afro-Colombian storytellers in partnership between the Ministry of the Environment, the Caro y Cuervo Institute - an academic entity attached to the Ministry of Culture - and Fondo Acción. The final product, the *Maletín de Relatos Pacíficos* (the Briefcase of Pacific Stories), an anthology of forest stories, was distributed to all public libraries in the country, research centers, and academic institutions. From the outset, the primary purpose was to transform educational and communication materials to raise public

awareness of the value of forests and the need to combat deforestation. Literature and works of high aesthetic value have made it easier for the message to reach wider audiences and have inspired other creative processes.

The principles of Fondo Acción's approach to art and sustainability include embracing plural and diverse aesthetic narratives; incorporating into artistic practice the questioning of its forms and scope; moving towards art as a *horizontal community practice*; integrating local cultural experiences and knowledge; fostering scientific dissemination to bridge intellectual distances and volumes of information; stimulating expressions, artworks, and experiences of a multisensory order; approaching the artistic experience as a widening of our sensory ranges; and beginning with the empathic capacity of art to invent or renew forms of sustainable connection with nature. The expected result is that, within the framework of systems thinking, we as a society can respond to climate change beyond reacting to events such as natural disasters or water shortages, but ultimately, and in a profound way, by transforming our mental models.

1. The common substance: Why look for the encounter between art and nature?

We live immersed in a metaphorical structure that usually contrasts the notions of art and nature. Art tends to signify *construction*: created by “sublime subjects”, representatives of our species. On the other hand, Nature typically refers to the realm of the above: that which was here before the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. Nature is that which is essential and real, the substance in the physicochemical processes by which our planet Earth is made.

Remaining submerged in this dichotomous opposition means radically impoverishing our conceptual horizon. As long as we view artistic – or scientific – practices as creations of human beings, and nature's ecosystems as *independent systems*, separate from the creations of the *H. sapiens* species, we will continue to inhabit physical and emotional landscapes that are alien to us.

The metaphorical structure that paves our experience of reality by sharply opposing the realm of “what is built” by human ingenuity with the domain of “what is provided” by the goodness of nature is a conceptual scheme with deep historical roots and permanent practical consequences. Metaphorical scenarios are, before anything else, modes of operations, that is, procedures which guide how we act and exist.

We build and act in an unhealthy relationship of exploitation at the cost of the so-called “resources” or “services” of nature. This behavior is a product of the history of this metaphorical structure, with which we have been operating for centuries (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the cultures in question). This structure removed us from that “other kingdom,” it *differentiated* us, laid claim to *exceptional* animals, it made us conceited and fascinated with ourselves and the scope – truly unique – of the creations of our minds, both individual and collective. We are both the artists and the blinded admirers of our own masterpiece.

The question of the (re)encounter or rapprochement between art and nature, the conceptual and metaphorical spirit of tearing down the binary above, a historical and stagnant opposition, and thus enlivening both notions – or realms – points to an intellectual and creative effort to enrich our conceptual and sensitive horizons, which in principle could

lead to the blossoming of our practical and political imagination. Enliven: to make the flow of relationships between one realm and another more alive and vibrant; thus *softening* both worlds and, in this softening, explore the ordinary matter.

The value of this enrichment of horizons and exploration of the common can be justified in several ways.

On the one hand, the rapprochement between these two worlds necessarily leads to a better understanding of the idea and experience of "the natural" as a cultural construction. (Before the 16th century, for example, there was no notion of "landscape;" it emerged with the advancement of geographical science.) In the same way, their convergence promotes dialogues and contagions that destabilize their political and historical roots, exposing them and thus prompting urgent reflection on the forms or notions of Nature promoted by, or at the service of, power interests. (Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the botanical, geological, landscape, animal, and cultural documentation of the enlightened European expeditions was translated into a cataloging of the world, aimed at bettering knowledge and exploitation of it.) Finally, enlivening the flow of relationships between artistic expressions and understandings of nature can contribute to substantiating the new socio-ecological and diverse paradigm that the *H. sapiens* species will inevitably have to create to abandon the path of domination over the biosphere (Carbonel 2018; Maderuelo 2005; Wulff 2016).

Today, the twin global crises – climate change and biodiversity loss – have made the present a shocking and strange time. We are operating, perhaps as never before in the history of our species, with a global understanding and a sense of urgency that is not just taking shape; it is already our guiding principle. We run and start running, all the while deciphering what it means to *start running*.

Few things, among the rich body of human knowledge, know how to operate in the logics of urgency, such as *artistic expression* (perhaps not as different as we might imagine from *scientific exploration*); unique, fleeting, and timeless; capable of surpassing a human being's lifespan yet unable to exist without this crucial period.

We run, we start running, and we need to do so hand in hand with artistic expression and aesthetic experience because no other human knowledge simultaneously encrypts, with such complexity, the continuous and expandable richness of our sensory and conceptual horizons.

We need new paradigms and procedures for action; that is, we need new vocabularies and new metaphorical structures. The exploration, dynamization, and discovery of these new vocabularies and new metaphorical structures is a conceptual and creative practice that no other form of human knowledge possesses with such a breadth of scope as art.

2. Forms of sustainable connection: How to seek the encounter between art and sustainability?

Throughout the twenty-first century, no human problem will be more relevant than the construction of new socio-ecological paradigms capable of transforming the dominant worldview: consumerism, plastic pollution, exponential economic growth, the fossil fuel energy regime, food waste, extensive livestock farming, and the uncontrolled exploitation of nature's goods and services.

Given the urgent framework in which this social, political, and economic necessity is inscribed, many voices of all kinds have been clamoring for "revolutionary models" of change. There are also, of course, voices that defend the kind of transformational path that "reforms" produce, which tends to be slower and more established.

The need for drastic ideological and systemic changes in a crisis of catastrophic biogeochemical dimensions may lead to scenarios where such revolutionary and reformist models are found. In either case, or in the likely combination of the two, a general cultural risk arises: the urgency of radically influencing the emotional and behavioral dimension of the large *H. Sapiens* social group could give rise to totalitarianism that utilizes artistic discourses and practices as tools to impose uniformity. (Albelda and Sgaramella 2015; Harari 2016; Benjamin 1970).

This would then have to be the negative possibility around which to build a foundational consensus: the socio-ecological paradigms at work, ecological sensitivity, and reflexivity that urge the species to reorganize its relationship with the planet based on *principles of sustainability*, rather than productivism, must inevitably arise from and feed on the plurality and diversity of aesthetic narratives and artistic practices. Art, creativity, or certain aesthetic principles at stake should not be presumed to be 'beneficial' due to their mere playful or expressive nature. The form and scope of certain chosen artistic practices must also remain an ongoing question.

Let us suppose it is true that the common cause of which we need to persuade ourselves is the cause of a *culture of sobriety and self-restraint* ("to dominate not nature but the relationship between nature and humanity," in the words of Jorge Riechmann). In that case, it is also true that the way in which artistic expression will contribute to these processes – it already does – will transform them. This will occur in directions that are being explored, and that can be deepened: artistic expressions and languages that align with the moral principles of sustainability must be – are – forces distanced from the *tutelary art* produced by the "genius individual" and instead move closer towards art as a *horizontal community* practice, which incorporates local cultural experiences and the knowledge of individuals from the respective territories.

In addition to being a moral problem, the question of how to bring together art and sustainability is also an epistemological question, the core of exploration of which can be formulated as follows: how can we extend our practices of empathy and our sensory scope – what we can perceive with the senses – to the natural community?

The industrial society to which we belong collides with the biosphere's limits and is beginning to destroy it. Still, as individuals, we can hardly experience, given the limited range of our senses, the global damage that we collectively cause (and the subsequent threat to the survival of thousands of species due to the imminent substantial transformation of the Earth's biogeochemical cycles). How can we expect to experience or feel – truly understand in our beings – the urgent need to act?

Experts in the type of climate knowledge we have built in the last fifty years agree in pointing out a critical problem - the fact that such knowledge is practically impossible for a human being to experience in the course of their existence or within their sensory range. We are able to notice that our village has warmed up slightly compared to the town of our childhood, but not another immense number of decisive factors: the nonlinearity of the

climate system; critical thresholds, beyond which slow and digestible changes become rapid and unpredictable transformations; the porous assembly of contradictory entities, and so on (Edwards 2010; Latour 2012; Riechmann 2000).

It is almost an epistemological paradox: *H. sapiens'* knowledge has surpassed the individual or social group to such an extent that the information we receive from ourselves is wholly disconnected from our existences. (Scientific specialization taken to the extreme.) Faced with this distressing abyss, what can mediate – or redefine as transitory – the artistic or aesthetic experience? And also, what kind of creative and aesthetic experiences are they– from the perspective of both the creator and the viewer?

We can then imagine the art of ecological inclination – to give it a name – being built and contributing in at least two dimensions: to help us bridge intellectual distances and volumes of information (which is essentially what metaphors do and what scientific, narrative, auditory, plastic, or audiovisual dissemination has been doing for decades); and to throw ourselves into the expansion of what we can experience with or thanks to our senses and in connection with nature.

We know the empathic capacity of art to convey experiences (we place ourselves in the understanding of the other even though it is not our experience), and perhaps that is why we are confident in facing the climate crisis at their side. We think about the possibility of promoting a sense of biosphere consciousness based on the idea that the Earth is like a living organism composed of interdependent relationships. If art – or a specific type of art – has managed, to one degree or another, to extend our empathic sensitivity to our entire species and some other species (exemplified in the case of the "song of the whales"), we believe that the same extension can take place with the entirety of nature (Rifkin 2010; Burroughs 2018).

However, will it be as simple as talking about empathy with ecosystems? Is it enough to "humanize" a forest's energy flows or nutrient cycling for us to begin to recognize forests or rivers as subjects of rights? Why do we use categories such as "subject of rights" for entities of nature? How can we think of mechanisms – or artifacts – that widen our sensitive capacity to experience nature, not in the same way we empathize with our peers, but that invent or renew forms of sustainable connection with the immeasurable entity– nature – in which we cannot place ourselves, but in whose existence we are a part of and owe it to ourselves to re-understand?

3. Sorts of action (possible ways): What fields or forms of action continue to operate in the encounter between art and sustainability?

The reflection presented in this text is based on the experience of Fondo Acción, a Colombian organization with more than 20 years of experience in sustainable investment in the environment and children. Fondo Acción's work consists of four steps: *listening* in order to understand the territory, its people, its customs, and its habits; *thinking* about what we have, what we can improve, and how we can build together; taking action with a plan and a common goal; and *inspiring* through learning and knowledge sharing.

The first attempt to establish a virtuous connection between art and climate action was made, in 2015, with the work "Recreando a Vivaldi," a performing arts performance in chamber orchestra format based on the work "The Four Seasons" by Antonio Vivaldi,

which was performed in collaboration with the Fundación Orquesta Sinfónica de Bogotá (FOSBO) and the French Development Agency. Everything indicates that in 1721, Vivaldi wrote four sonnets to represent the relationship between human beings and the cycle of the four seasons. He then made a musical version of four concertos for violin and orchestra. Each concerto depicts scenes in which man and nature coexist in a particular state of equilibrium. The adaptation made by Fondo Acción and FOSBO was presented at the annual Climate Finance Event in Colombia, a technical space for dialogue between the government, the financial sector, the private sector, academia, and civil society. The presentation of the work in the middle of a technical space changed the context of the whole conversation. It connected the attendees not only with their ideas and projects about climate change, but also with their emotional responses.

The same year, Fondo Acción developed a positioning strategy for the Financial Management Committee of the National Climate Change System – the organization for inter-institutional coordination and public-private dialogue on finance and climate change. In this exercise, and recognizing the need to promote creative thinking to increase climate action, the CambiARTE contest was created. The initial objective was to expand the dissemination and impact of the Climate Finance Event by making art and its different expressions a vehicle and tool for education, knowledge transmission, awareness, and behavioral change in public opinion regarding environmental issues and climate change. The purpose, since then, has been the sensitization of citizens motivated by the possibility of evoking emotions that generate connections with ideas about climate change, thereby increasing receptivity and willingness to act.

Seven versions of CambiARTE have been held, each with variations that have shared the common element of selecting artists to develop an awareness project through the creation and dissemination of their work. Two interpretations have been made, one in 2018 and the other in 2021, as an exploratory exercise. The first consisted of a one-year artistic residency and training in climate change with a group of artists in order to select the contest winners. The artistic expressions explored include the performing, musical, visual, and literary arts, in a broad concept that has allowed both professionals and non-artists to draw on language and material forms to communicate the urgency of climate action. The contest has been guided by the conviction that what passes through our body remains in our memory and, therefore, if the ideas we have about climate change are connected with what we feel about the phenomenon, from an optimistic and creative perspective, a transformative action of mental and behavioral models can be triggered. This is the virtuous circle of Head – Heart – Hands.

In 2016, Fondo Acción supported the national government in formulating the national strategy for deforestation control and forest management. On this occasion, through communication efforts, the goal was to ensure that different audiences recognized the value of forests in the life of our society, not only as material sustenance and suppliers of resources, wood and fibers, water and clean air, and a refuge of biodiversity, but even as part of our culture and spiritual life. One of the ideas, which was discarded, was to produce pedagogical materials in the traditional formats of guides or manuals. However, as a result of a virtuous alliance between the Ministries of Environment and Culture, mediated by Fondo Acción, a diploma in creative writing was designed to create new stories about the forest of the Colombian Pacific region and bring the academic offer of the Caro y Cuervo

Institute to the territory. From the outset of the idea, the final product – the *Maletín de Relatos Pacífico* – was conceived as a collection of stories of such high aesthetic value that they become desirable objects, surpassing publications that are often neglected in libraries.

For the selection of writers, a contest was devised based on the operating modalities of Fondo Acción that encourage the competitive participation of people and organizations. This contest was aimed at people who self-identified as Afro-Colombians and were interested in writing about the forest, territory, deforestation, and culture of the Pacific. Twenty-four narrators were selected, who traveled with professors from the Caro y Cuervo Institute and representatives of Fondo Acción to four terrains, deep in the forest and near the ocean, mangroves, estuaries, rivers, and local communities. In this way, the classroom was expanded to encompass the territory.

The collection was presented at the Bogotá Book Fair in 2017 and 2018. It was also distributed in the network of public libraries across the country and in Bogotá, as well as in research centers and higher education institutions. It has served as material for environmental education plans and workshops. Four of the stories were adapted into audio format, with the participation of some of the narrators.

The creating writing diploma and the *Maletín de Relatos Pacíficos* allowed us to address certain weaknesses in education, training, and public awareness of climate change, as identified by the national strategy. According to the strategy, in Colombia, the technicality of the information disseminated makes it difficult to access and apply for decision-making. Furthermore, editorial projects do not translate scientific and academic knowledge into relevant and contextualized information for non-specialized audiences. Moreover, there is a lack of spaces that allow for the dialogue of knowledge.

Another significant experience in partnership between Fondo Acción, the Caro y Cuervo Institute and the National Library was the "Peace to the Forest" project, held in 2018. It consisted of a series of creative writing and community editing workshops in six public libraries for Peace, located adjacent to six Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces which were built as part of the Peace Agreement between the national government and the FARC guerrillas. It was a commitment to building peace in territories affected by armed conflict and deforestation. The orientation of the workshops was based on the idea that publishing, expressing, and articulating ourselves is an urgent matter. In a whirlwind four days of gatherings, community participants conceived, designed, wrote, and printed community publications they deemed necessary. These were spaces to appreciate life stories, foster trust in collective work, and think about the form and scope of the conceptual and material construction of the stories. The content produced by the participants, some of whom were former FARC combatants, remained within the communities that made and chose them.

In 2022, within the framework of the implementation of the Colombian strategy for low-carbon development, Fondo Acción supported the exhibition of the work "Mal de Tierra" by the artist Juliana Correa, who, in her professional career, ventured into the Colombian textile industry before going on to create her own brand. In her work, she questions the negative environmental and social impacts of fashion and, in particular, fast fashion. Through the recovery of textiles and their transformation with thread and needle, the work

confronts clothing as waste, dyes as pollutants of rivers, and the wear of materials and memory. It invites us to rethink the relationship with the damage affecting the Earth.

In these experiences and projects carried out by Fondo Acción, the core of the work has been fundamentally artistic. In each of these projects, it is easy to identify the main form of action and the connection of that form of action with artistic practice or aesthetic experience.

In "Recreating Vivaldi," for example, he highlights the high-impact strategic setting for which the adaptation of Vivaldi's piece was planned. In the case of the "Pacific Diploma," it is clear that the main focus was training in narrative practice and the story's significance as a cohesive community leadership process. The "CambiARTE" contest calls for professional, amateur, or local talent to generate climate action. In the case of "Peace to the Forest," it is clear that it was an exercise of co-creating or constructing community experiences of cultural production. Finally, with "Mal de Tierra," an artist's voice is raised, and her gaze is strengthened through dialogue with climate experts.

However, just as the central concept of these encounters between art, territory, and sustainability is palpable, it is also a fact that their actions or areas of impact are not limited to these core purposes and instead also involve several other aspects. The works created have stimulated the creation of pedagogical tools and the promotion of the value of forests for the country and efforts towards the sustainable development of local communities. They have also raised awareness among the general public about the climate emergency.

4. Conclusions

The analysis developed up to this point therefore yields a series of minimum principles – or logics of action – to begin to draw, confirm, correct or imagine a specific operational horizon. The following statements express the principles of action that have guided the convergence between art and sustainability in Fondo Acción:

- Embrace plural and diverse aesthetic narratives.
- Incorporate into artistic practice the interrogation of its forms and scopes.
- Moving towards art as a horizontal community practice.
- Integrate local cultural experiences and knowledge.
- Promote scientific dissemination to bridge intellectual distances and volumes of information.
- Stimulate expressions, works, and experiences of a multisensory order.
- Approach the artistic experience as a widening of our sensory ranges.
- Beginning with the empathic capacity of art to invent or renew forms of sustainable connection with nature.

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