
To Embrace Golden Beauty: An Interview from Around the Canopy

David Zink-Yi and Antonio Fernandini-Guerrero

Translated by Sara Smith

Antonio Fernandini-Guerrero is an activist working on finding solutions to socio-environmental problems which plague the Peruvian Amazon. Since 1994, he has been dedicated to the conservation of endangered Amazonian eagles through projects aimed at reducing the negative impact on their populations and since 1997 he has contributed to the Amazonian indigenous movement, supporting the Native Communities and Federations of Madre de Dios region, (Comunidades y Federaciones Nativas de la región de Madre De Dios) mainly as a facilitator of intercultural cooperation with First Nations communities in Canada. Fernandini-Guerrero is also an apprentice of Amazonian traditional medicine since and is in the process of creating the first heritage centre for the training of native entrepreneurs in the capital of the Madre de Dios region, as a base from which to actively create economically, environmentally and and socially just partnerships.

David Zink-Yi is a contemporary artist working across video, photography, and sculpture. A number of his works such as *Untitled (Architeuthis)* (2011) and *Around the Canopy* (2004) (pictured) explore expectations surrounding animality and habitat.

DZY: David Zink-Yi

AFG: Antonio Fernandini-Guerrero

DZY: When I first visited the jungle, in 2003, the Harpy Eagle was your work's point of departure. You placed it at the top of the Amazon's biological pyramid. I remember the search for it resembled the way Freud described his work with the unconscious: something that leaves traces and which is formulated, or defined, through these traces, but which never presents itself to you directly. In fact, during my visit with you in the jungle, I never saw the eagle and yet it took all of our attention. Today, almost 10 years since our walk through the Madre de Dios jungle, it would seem that the top of the pyramid has turned into the tip of the iceberg, and that the definition of a concept, the Harpy Eagle, has become that of a context, the Amazon. The latter, rather than a pyramidal hierarchy, represents an organic order, a series of significant relationships and dependencies.

Can you speak to us a little about how your vision and your relationship to this species has changed? How has the role of this bird been amplified in your work?

AFG: Since that time, when you carried out your work on Alrededor del dosel, until today, there is at least 4 times more population in the Madre de Dios area. We are talking about 100,000 new people whose only relationship to the jungle is commercial, or some kind of provision of services. This means that, in less than a generation, four times the amount of pressure is being placed on the forest's capacity for resource extraction. At the same time, we have only a quarter of the knowledge that existed back then as to what constitutes the jungle in its entirety. This is mainly due to the construction of the Interoceanic Highway, which extends from Brazil to the Pacific Ocean. And this is only the beginning. All of the jungle has been sold. This brings in more development megaprojects focused on high productivity at a low cost (biodiesel, hydrocarbons, hard wood "Huairo potato" prices). The government has made the rules of the game through the mask of sustainability. But these rules are only aimed at the aggressive exploitation of natural resources, and not the assessment of their actual value with a view to their long-term survival.

When I arrived here, people from the Andes came to practice agriculture and were, believe it or not, tied to nature's cycles and its elements. Today, people come to extract gold, transnationals to extract oil, and others to commercialize wood without any notion of what a living tree looks like. They have no idea what animals or species depend on this tree. Nor do they know how long it takes for the tree to grow to such dimensions. Therefore, today the urgency has changed, the urgency is not only to study and protect some areas, or species. Rather, it is urgent to raise awareness in the Amazon's new market populations, to assess the environmental cost as fundamental to its productivity. And I'm not necessarily talking about the area's immigrant population. Amazon settlers won't save the jungle, neither will our government. The world population must be involved.

DZY: The Peruvian government sells concessions in this region, where there are supposed to be intangible areas, or areas reserved for the protection and preservation of nature. This is a contradiction. Furthermore, it seems its role and responsibilities toward the communities living in this area end once concessions are ceded. The communities must deal directly with mining, oil, and forestry companies. However, one also supposes that the government is obliged, by so-called prior consultation with indigenous peoples, to seek dialogue with the communities before doing this. Is this not so?

AFG: Prior consultation has existed for less than a year and is called "free and informed." But absurdly, the process and the rules of consultation have not included the opinions of the actual peoples or communities concerned, during the decision making process through which this prior consultation was being established. The same principle of consultation should also take into account the arguments of the different peoples that cohabit this country. This hasn't happened. Moreover, prior consultation, which should give some rights to the communities, remains void by so-called Article 14, which says that if concessions or projects are of national interest there would be no way to detain them. In other words, in the name of "national interest," the destiny of Amazon territories, preserved for centuries by their original inhabitants, are

powerfully, and even dictatorially, decided. This was clearly reflected by Peru's former president, Alan García, when he said, while referring to the conflict occurring in Bagua, that 400,000 primitive Indians were not going to put the brakes on the country's progress. According to him, these were not first-class citizens and the progress of a developing country would not be stopped because of them. Today, in Brazil, to give another example, in the name of "national interests," hundreds of Kayapó communities are being flooded to build the Belo Monte dam. And here in the Peruvian Amazon there are plans to dam the River Marañón twenty times, as well as to dam another eight primary rivers to generate hydroelectricity, whose major volume of energy production will go to Brazil. The same is being planned for Inambari and Madre de Dios. Peru will be left with environmental liabilities that are greater than those that could be covered by remedial actions or the mitigation of environmental impacts. That is, the environmental costs and the future conflicts over water that will be left to Peru (or better said, to this area), after its resources are used up, will never be covered. It's also shocking that, nowadays, carbon cowboys come into native communities to seduce them and buy them carbon bonds at risible prices, in order to speculate with these certificates on the stock market.

DZY: Democracy and capitalism provide the best legal bases to continue colonizing. Where and who formulates a national interest and for whom? How does all of this affect the communities?

AFG: Democracy and capitalism are dirt and nails - they go hand in hand. And I would extend them to the Catholic Church, but, well, that's another story. Along with the main problem of divisiveness, which is being generated by both external and internal factors to the communities, we must ask ourselves, to try to understand what it is that debilitates and strengthens an indigenous community these days. I would say firstly that a community is tremendously debilitated by the imposition of the democratic system on a traditional system based on consensus. This community will always be debilitated by a democracy based on a 51% vote in benefit of a transnational company, or a project of "national interest." And with the weakening of the

communities, what legal material protects indigenous peoples? The constitution of Peru does not recognize their existence at a fundamental level, as this Peruvian constitution separates its territories into land, subsoil, air, and water. In contrast, an indigenous community, after much surviving, evolution, and cultural learning, understands its environment as a whole territory, a territory on which it is impossible to attempt to subsist separately, which is what is understood and carried out by the exploitation and devastation of its resources. The Peruvian constitution separates its territories into layers and says: you are the owner of the first half meter, and another will be the owner of your subsoil, and another person of your forests, and others of your waterways, etc. This, in addition to creating innumerable conflicts with hundreds of petitions over “foreign invaders,” creates endless bureaucratic problems over concessions in their territories with terms that are, needless say, disadvantageous. It is like a cancer that has been introduced into the communities.

DZY: The concept of nation and progress is such that nowadays in Peru there is an awful strategy of wanting to think of and promote the country in terms of a brand, a market strategy. The Peru Brand. Here, there’s no room for these concepts of territory...

AFG: Yes, that’s exactly right. These communities, from the beginning of their claims and proposals, are asking for a whole territory, or a comprehensive territory (territorio integral), as they now call it. Our country advertises itself as pluri-cultural, and it is precisely that which honours the basis of this category. Communities must be recognized as they define themselves: today the community is us, we are a people because of our ancestral territories: an indigenous person does not exist without his or her territory. This is an absolute conflict of opposing interests. Some want to sell the Amazon in the name of development and to increase the capital of a mere few, calling this a “national interest”; others try to defend their ancestral territories in the name of humanity. These peoples know very well that those forests are not only for them but are also for everyone, that they are the lungs of humanity, the last healthy places on earth. This is the breaking point: as long as indigenous

peoples themselves don't have documents with which to show the world why they are fighting in this way and why they are defending their interests, they will continue to be seen as insurgents, revolutionaries, terrorists, and primitives, as Alan García has called them. And they will continue to be treated like second-class citizens for defending their homes and opposing the sale of their territories to foreign capital.

DZY: What strategies can be adopted to counteract this situation?

Since the goal is to base everything on the democratic system and on statutes created by laws and lawyers, we should change everything at its root. The Amazon communities need to create their own constitution. This document should recognize their territory; it should include their world-view, that is, what their territory means to them, what their traditional values mean to them, and what their relationship to the water, mountains, land, plants, animals, etc. means to them. This constitution is necessary so that a new leader, an indigenous leader, who might otherwise be vulnerable to the temptations created by those who come to divide them, who has no experience in this ancestral knowledge, might have a foundation on which to govern and a mandate that the people respect, since nowadays, it is precisely the democratic system that makes this head of a community a non-expert, and therefore not a leader recognized by consensus, to carry out the people's mandate. Nowadays, with only 51% of the vote, you can be the leader of a community. And this 51%, in some cases, costs you four cows, or a thousand soles, which an oil, mining, or forestry company – that wants your trees – paid you and which allowed you to win the elections, so that you, in turn, grant them concessions for all the trees in your region, or allow them entry into your community so that they can kick-off their plans for extraction. A grandfather that sees this in these communities, and who, with all his knowledge and roots in his traditions, sees in the new generations people who are capable of selling their own territories. Committed to his own people, he sees this as a hecatomb: as total destruction. All this produces a lot of insecurity in these people.

This kind of constitution, I've seen it applied by First Nations in Canada, with whom I'm working as a bridge between Canadian and Peruvian communities, and whose proposal has been accepted by some indigenous communities in the Amazon. The idea is to understand and adapt their methods regarding governability and the creation of our own constitution. It is not about separatist aspirations. Rather it is about a self-recognition out of which we might teach the world about an ancient way of viewing development and which is an integral part of the Amazon. I am trying to strengthen the foundations for this idea and help to create the first Indigenous Constitution of the Amazon. If the former is achieved, let's hope that latter will follow suit, and that the communities begin to protect and articulate themselves in this manner.

DZY: It's interesting that peoples or societies that continue to practice indigenous traditions have to resort to a written constitution in order to subsist in the face of this threat. But beyond that, do you really think that this constitution will be tolerated and recognized by the national constitution? Where could dialogue as equals occur?

AFG: The International Labour Organization (ILO) convention 169, which recognizes indigenous peoples around the globe, and which is an international agreement also signed by Peru, recognizes first peoples' right to self-determination. A first people, through self-determination, can manage and develop its own constitution, and in its own constitution recognize the arguments that validate its territory as territory, in contrast to a territory as land, which is only one layer or fraction of the life that it harbours for humanity. They can recognize the constitution as the people, and not the opposite, which is how a country's cultural diversity is expected to be clothed, by a constitution that does not even recognize the foundation of that cultural diversity, which is territory, and which is an impossible paradox to support. At the same time, either a protocol must be established, or norms must be determined regarding how people might relate to the western world on equal terms. So that when an oil company or mining company shows up, it is no longer a question of the person in charge giving temporary instructions that

jeopardize the freedom of future generations. Rather, there are norms that exist in the community, which tell us how things need to be done, how this encounter must happen, and assure the *buen vivir* of those who come here, including the relationship they have with the forests.

DZY: A moment ago you were speaking about the problem of the rivers, the water... I was thinking that, like the eagle, which is at the head of or the top of the biological order, water, from the ground, is an invaluable element for the subsistence of this area. What can you tell us about the cycle of water?

AFG: As I was saying to you, nowadays different forms of speculation have been created through carbon bonds. However, water is still not considered an environmental service for humanity. To understand this, one must understand that having water in Belem (in the Amazon River delta) and is very different from having water at the source of that same river. They're totally different situations: at one extreme is where the water is received and, at the other, is the water's origin or source. The sources of diversity of the Amazon rainforest are in the misty forests, in the eastern parts of the Amazon rivers. And where are those rivers? They are not in Brazil, but in Peru. One must resuscitate and rethink the concept of the Amazon. When one speaks of the Amazon, on a global level, one thinks of Brazil, and not of Peru. Peru is associated with the Andes, Cuzco, Machu Picchu. Some of the primary sources of the great Amazon river, such as the Marañón and the Ucayali, are in Peru. And the Madre de Dios river, one of its primary southern tributaries, is also in Peru. Now they are thinking of damming all of these tributaries. And for whom? For a country that has already drained its own Amazon. The Brazilian Amazon is dry, dead, transgenic, and focused on the production of "consumer goods." The only Amazon rainforest left to Brazil is in its national parks, only there. Not even its indigenous populations have rainforest. If you see a photo of indigenous peoples in Brazil, for us that is called Purma, the secondary forests, where there had previously been a chacra, a forgotten plot of land. There are no longer any giant Shihuahuacos, and if there are some to be found, they measure maybe 30cm in diameter. There are no more hard wood trees, they have no more Cahobas left, there is no more living history in

their trees, not even in their national parks. They have demolished everything. They skimmed the fat off the forests (as they say in technical terms) and after that they created the national parks; they skimmed the cream off of indigenous peoples, and after that, they recognized them as peoples. It's not like that here. In Peru, as well as in the Andes – which constitutes a natural barrier between the coast and the jungle – appalling terrorism contributed to keeping the exploitation of the Amazon at bay. Terrorism has set Peru 30 or 40 years behind in terms of its exploitation of natural resources. This lag has allowed Peru to retain a certain quality of rivers and tributaries, which should be appraised and managed differently. There should be a reassessment of water, in the current context of the survival of the planet, that is, relying on river sources as the source of water and life, and not only as a source of hydroelectric energy. And we must recognize that these topics, which today are considered “externalities” of the capitalist socio-economic system, in a few years will no longer be “externalities” when the planet can no longer take the heat.

DZY: What other environmental proposals can you think of for this area?

AFG: Nowadays there are wood certifying bodies, such as the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) based in Germany, which work with various other affiliated and accredited certifying bodies, such as Smartwood – the WWF commercial forestry network – and the Rainforest Alliance. These organizations bring to the field the promotion of forestry certification in the form of a green star, which guarantees that wood bought from the Amazon is extracted in an acceptable manner. That is, they have all the ecological checks. These certification criteria are supposed to be aimed at turning the exploitation of the forestry resource into a sustainable practice in the eyes of consumer society. However, these criteria only help increase the volume of extraction of these species to the point of endangering them...

DZY. ... but, how can one sell a wild Shihuahuaco tree, certifying it as a fair or green felling? It's absurd? Maybe there's an FSC certification for ancient species or trees in natural parks or reserves in Europe or North America?

David Zink-Yi and Antonio Fernandini-Guerrero. “To Embrace Golden Beauty: 262
An Interview from Around the Canopy.” Trans. Sara Smith. *Inflexions* 7,
“Animating Biophilosophy” (March 2014). 254-265. www.inflexions.org

AFG.... Of course it's absurd, but it's that the western world is not aware of how the Amazon environment works. The criteria of certification, which are aimed at transforming the exploitation of forest resources into a sustainable practice in the eyes of consumer society, do not take into consideration the strength the natural world needs to regenerate hardwood species with marketable diameters. They impose measures required for softwood lumber, such as the conifers of the northern hemisphere, where there is a basis for these certifications. That is, they are trying to apply the needs of European forests onto Amazon forests, whose ecology is diametrically opposed to that of coniferous forests. And it's that, in a society whose vision is restricted to consumption, having an FSC certification works. In other words, it makes them feel like they are doing something for the Amazon rainforest. As you say: there are no certifications for the Sequoias of California, so why do they exist for the Shihuahuacos, which are trees that house the nests of the Amazon's endangered eagles? Western markets buy a Shihuahuaco with this "green star" without knowing that it had an eagle's nest at its top. It's illogical, that approach and pretense of wanting to convert a completely destructive activity into sustainable practice.

In environmental matters, we need the world to understand that the Shihuahuaco has another price for the Amazon rainforest, and that it should have another price for the world that consumes it. We also need institutions that sell the idea of protecting the Amazon to include in their certification criteria the relationship that the trees have with an eagle's nest. In other words, for example, one would not be able to certify a tree that has housed an eagle's nest. They must include programs for the conservation of endangered fauna in their certification requirements.

DZY: And isn't that impossible? They know that no tree is free of essential relationships for the ecosystem we're talking about.

AFG: Well, yes and no, because in reality that would lead to the FSC recognizing as a criterion of certification the inclusion of programs for the

conservation of species in danger of extinction related to the trees that they are certifying. That is, certain trees, such as the Shihuahuaco, become banned species, become protected species. What one must also know is that when a Shihuahuaco is bought from a farmer, or an indigenous person, the latter are paid about 100 soles per living tree. This tree, which can take from 500 to 600 years to grow, in the US costs about 30 or 40 dollars per board-foot, and in Peru is only about 4 soles per board-foot. That means that in other countries people are paying for a board-foot what a green star producer is paying the native communities for an entire tree! That tree will be an average of 3 thousand feet long, that is, outside of the Amazon rainforest they are making 120,000 dollars with that tree, against 38 dollars for the whole tree in the jungle. In general, the problem with Amazon trees is that the natural costs of production of that species have not been assessed. How are you going to increase the value of a tree that has taken 500 to 800 years to reach that size? In the same way you assess the value of a pine tree that took 30 years to arrive at its dimensions? The calculation doesn't work here, it's incongruous. Nobody is going to wait or assess the value of this time, just as nobody would sell us a European or American pine at a cheap price. These are sold at prices that account for their economic and social costs. These people, who know how to assess the value of their products, come here and want to pay a pittance for ours. Things are not measured by the same stick, just as not all laws are equal for all people. We need to raise awareness in developed countries to change the destiny of our jungle to a more just one.

DZY: Juan Javier Salazar, a Peruvian artist, always reminds me that we come from a country where gold is usually extracted, painstakingly worked, and ultimately placed back into the earth. I think this apparent contradiction or different valuing of things reflects the dilemma that we are talking about. If indigenous societies in the Amazon have to learn to work with a written constitution, what thought would you have for the people living in western societies?

AFG: Gold is precisely a good starting point. Imagine that gold stopped meaning what it means: that the word "gold" was no longer synonymous

with “wellbeing” and that it stopped meaning prosperity. The word “gold” should mean destruction, poverty, prostitution. Like on cigarette packets, where nowadays tobacco companies are obliged to put a picture of a person dying of cancer, each gold ring should have the image of a hectare of devastated or destroyed jungle. Gold should record all the destruction that it generates both at an environmental and a social level. I remember when I once arrived in Europe, in Amsterdam, and while I was looking around the Schiphold airport, I saw an ad with a picture of a beautiful woman covered in gold, that is, completely golden. The slogan said something like “embrace your golden beauty.” The association of gold as the most valuable, as a standard by which to measure your inner beauty, to understand your value, really caught my attention. And a little further over, almost in the same hallway, there was another ad for protected species or animals: an elephant’s head without ivory, rhinoceroses without horns, tiger, jaguar, lion or zebra pelts, hunting trophies. These advertisements also really make me think. It you want to protect animals, what’s the point of saving them if you are going to destroy their habitat? You’ll never achieve anything by declaring an animal, a tree or a plant a protected species if you are going to allow their entire jungle surroundings to be burned and destroyed. But like I was saying at the beginning, the problems generated by the extraction of oil or gold are not going to be solved here. The solution to the environmental problem in the Amazon will not be proposed by governments for their citizens, rather, by “inside” citizens for “outside” citizens. We need to be able to amplify the network of awareness about the reality and the environment crisis in our Amazon. We must work with the press and international public opinion to have them support us. I think that if transnational corporations arrive here buying and corrupting the leadership – and separating communities from their interests in order to obtain the necessary concessions – they will end these practices when all of their purchases and divisiveness is documented. When all of this is made public in the country where these companies pay taxes, and when these corporations begin to be questioned by their own members, then we’ll be able to achieve positive change for the jungle.