A Sustainable Approach to the Threatened Landscape Through the Visual Arts

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Abstract. During recent decades, global warming and rapid climate change have led to an increase in forest fires worldwide and especially in the territories of south-central Chile and Chilean Patagonia, modifying the landscape of these areas. These events generate a fracture in the aesthetic perception of territories. The natural, ancestral landscape is threatened by imminent transformation. Fire destroys its ancient forests and its biodiversity. Paradoxically, this dramatic, catastrophic action generates an image of rare beauty; an “aesthetic of devastation”, born of its ineluctable disintegration. Everything is transformed from live plant matter to the inert remains of what was once a dense, flourishing, ancient forest. The green woodland is transformed into charred trunks, charcoal, and finally ashes. Erosion threatens to change the image of our landscape and the life that inhabits it. Ada Lombardi says of this “Fire has transformed the image, the form and the substance of forests and landscapes, taking away their organic form and replacing it with an inorganic one. Changing even the chemistry of living nature into latent nature; plant DNA is changed into a mineral compound” [1]

1. Introduction

During recent decades, global warming and rapid climate change have led to an increase in forest fires worldwide. In Chile, the south-central territories of the country and Chilean Patagonia have been especially affected, modifying the landscape of these areas. These events generate a fracture in the aesthetic perception of territories. The natural, ancestral landscape is threatened by imminent transformation.

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The different disciplines of contemporary art, and the artists who work with this environmental catastrophe, reflect, expose and denounce through their work this implacable, headlong process – how nature is changed, dynamically and uncertainly, into something new. Their works and conceptual concepts manifest the transformed material image of postmodern landscapes, the contaminated devastation of their territories, waters and skies; they seek to show delicate, fragile cyclical processes, understanding the scale and transcendence of events.

Faced with obvious climate change, we observe how a large part of the world's population reacts with incomprehensible indifference to this disturbing process; at the same time we note with concern and anxiety how this phenomenon is transforming our civilisation and our culture, and how it is affecting the natural evolutionary processes of our planet. We are faced with the great challenge of reacting in time to find practical solutions to respond adequately to this difficult process. In the face of these social and natural events, the contemporary artist seeks to expound the phenomenon and provoke reflection.

Our natural landscape, with its delicate, sustainable equilibrium, has undergone dramatic, progressive transformations, caused especially by the actions of the humans, who – voluntarily or involuntarily – have triggered forest fires which destroy huge areas, especially of land with the greatest species richness and biodiversity. These areas are converted into huge zones of eroded land, abandoned or suitable only for monocultures.

Today violation, systematic destruction, waste of resources and the lack of concern to protect our environment are a powerful argument for contemporary art to use its various expressive disciplines as an act of reaction-creation, the representation of which can help to show the loss of the delicate equilibrium of nature and express the progressive vulnerability of our environment and its inevitable perdition. The contemporary artist, ready to manifest and reflect on human events in the different spaces in which they occur, throws this phenomenon into relief, trying to sound a warning on the danger to which we expose ourselves by seriously degrading the sustainability of our natural surroundings – the territory and the landscape in which we live.
Culture is a polysemic concept, very dynamic and widely discussed. We are facing clear, profound changes in the whole of our culture, driven by a globalization process characterised by its magnificent advances in technology and communications, but also by mass migration and complex climate change, all immersed in an uncertain and wavering macro-economic scene.

As M. Urzúa and I. Depretis, say: “the essential categories of modernity are in crisis just at the time when nature itself, on which the extractivist economy of Latin American countries is based, is once again being devastated by human intervention in the global context of climate change, obliging us to re-think ecological problems in terms of their biopolitical consequences” [2].

Cultural practices and art, with their intrinsic potential and the different languages that they possess as means of expression, have been and will be social instruments for reconfiguring the socio-cultural space in which we live, rearticulating new ways of observing and interpreting the horizon around us. The importance of using art to talk about the problems of sustainability and the environment is that art makes aesthetic experience possible; it can therefore have greater repercussions on humans’ collectives, causing surprise and offering a new way of seeing and conceiving our surroundings.

2. Territories in Ignition

Figure 2. Im-permanencia II (Im-Permanence II)
Acrylic, inks and polychrome pencils on cloth. Variable dimensions /2018

According to the Chilean National Forestry Corporation (CONAF):

“In the summer of 2017, the south-central zone of Chile was affected by a mega forest fire which lasted from 18th January to 5th February, principally in the O’Higgins, Maule and Bio Bio regions. Experts from the European Union (EU) maintain that the unusual severity of these fires is caused by global warming. This event became recognised as a world level episode; prior to this fire, the world fire measurement scale only reached so-called “fifth generation” fires, the most destructive known. The “fire storm” is the first of the “sixth generation” in terms of intensity of the fire line and velocity of propagation” [3].

The impact of forest fire events, which are occurring with increasing frequency and also devastate extensive areas of endemic native forest, cause a dramatic change in the local flora and fauna, altering
the natural equilibrium and configuring a new natural scenario. The astonishing spectacle which
envelopes our landscape in flames does not just affect wildlife, it jeopardises the very existence of many
species which inhabit the territory, and thus the fragile ecosystem in which we exist. The acceleration
of global warming, unprecedented in the last two thousand years and exceeding the levels of CO₂ in the
atmosphere that have existed in the last three million years, exceeds the natural warming of the planet.

Rising global temperatures bring drought or rain scarcity over large areas of the earth, increasing the
probability of fires with devastating consequences for the human race. Large-scale fires are occurring
not only in remote areas like Siberia, Australia or Chilean Patagonia, but also – more and more
frequently – in urban zones with human populations.

The indiscriminate burning of the forests of the Amazon in Peru and Brazil to clear land for
production, and also in other extensive zones around the world, drastically reduce the possibility of
nature maintaining, sustaining and developing its natural equilibrium; quick regeneration is limited, with
a short-term impact on our relationship with our environment.

According to scientific studies, at least 100 cities close to the equator are experiencing a climate
which has no precedent in human history; this will inevitably lead to mass displacements and migrations.

The territories currently inhabited will change definitively, and with them the image of the landscape
over vast areas of our planet.

“The natural wealth of Chile is protected in the National System of State-Protected Wildlife Areas,
administered by the National Forestry Corporation, CONAF. The System currently includes 101 units,
consisting of 36 National Parks, 49 National Reserves and 16 Natural Monuments. Together they cover
approximately 14.5 million hectares, or 19.2% of mainland Chile. One of the principal agents which
disturbs vegetation in Chile is fire. The degradation or elimination of plant resources increases emissions
of GHG and impoverishes the quality of life of the population in social, environmental and economic
terms, as well as increasing its vulnerability to climate change” [3].

The recurrence of forest fires can be expected to continue to rise, posing a serious risk to the
sustainability of our natural surroundings.

3. The Threatened Landscape: A New Horizon

Figure 3. Fogos III (Fogos III)
Acrylics and inks on cloth. 32 x 84 cts./2018.

Historically, the human being has been the repository of a cultural tradition that incorporates memory
of his past and of his spatial environment as a heritage of time; this forms a reference for his existence.
In the 21st century, postmodern man has a new relationship with the space that he inhabits: no longer
simply with his nation and territory, but with a virtual, extensively globalised landscape. The immediacy of information and images connects the individual to a network which embraces all human activities, knowledge and narratives in vertiginous succession, determining a new scenario in which landscape no longer specifies identity. It is a diffuse landscape, of absence and change. The new horizon before him relates not with the earth that he inhabits, but rather the virtual space that is the reference for his existence. The natural landscape is threatened not only by pollution and continuous devastation, but by the loss of meaning and memory. This new landscape, which differs from the natural one, brings a new dimension to its own representation, the dimension of abandonment. A new horizon has opened, that of a landscape threatened by oblivion.

4. Impermanent Landscapes: The Art and Aesthetics of Devastation

From the perspective of art, according to Lombardi, fire is:

“a pretext for understanding how the succession of life and death is also the succession of forms and their transformation. It is the mystery of life which calls on art for an understanding of the simplicity of cycles and of the succession of being and not being, of organic and inorganic, of figure and abstraction. It calls on art and not on man because it is already known that man would not understand, would not be able to read its negative, destructive side, would not seize on the novelty of transformation into a possibility and a resource for change; he would remain annihilated by the sense of loss, to which he is in any case doomed by the time limit set on his existence” [1].

Using art to represent the natural landscape in danger implies a work of reflection in the face of the disturbing and successive changes wrought in it; it is an exercise that inescapably reveals its antithesis. Historically, nature has been portrayed and thrown into relief by images showing a virgin habitat in permanent harmony and sustainability, where societies interacted placidly with a friendly environment. Today this image stands in contrast to the dramatic tension between different macroeconomic interests which appear irreconcilable. Today violation, policies of systematic exploitation, waste of resources and the lack of concern to protect our environment generate an aesthetic which identifies our postmodernity. We could define it as an “aesthetic of devastation”, the antithesis of natural equilibrium, which reveals the progressive vulnerability of our environment and its possible, but avoidable, destruction.

The impermanent, the image of change, that which alters: a landscape in a process of successive transformation and destruction. Fire destroys species that have existed for millennia. The disaster generates an image that in turn becomes natural, with which contemporary man must coexist; an
aesthetic that tells of continuous devastation, born of its inevitable disintegration, which masks the dark side of the wound through forgetfulness and ablation. Thus the anti-aesthetic plays with an image disfigured and warped by successive catastrophes, leaving man to face the alternatives of indifference or reaction to danger and pain: “In fact, from a human point of view the destruction wrought by fire is catastrophic and irreparable, while from the point of view of nature fire produces a transformation which is only temporary and introduces another state, and so proceeds by continuous transformation” [1].

5. Recovery of the Lost Image: Landscape as Cultural Heritage

Contemporary man observes his natural surroundings, appreciates and enjoys them, but at the same time he sets them aside, ignores them or commercialises them. This is a transaction which generates a new order, turning our exercise of survival into a path of depredation in which we do not consider a space for the conservation of our biosphere. For decades our modern culture has exploited natural resources, to the point where we have upset the balance of the environment. Our natural surroundings are part of what has been called “cultural heritage”; they have enabled us to improve the quality of life of our population and to allow sustainable development – both in the material (concrete) and the intellectual (abstract) dimensions.

García Canclini: “Contemporary interest in traditional heritage resides in "spiritual" benefits which are hard to measure but on the existence of which the health of today's population depends. In the context of the "catastrophes" of modernisation, new technologies and anonymous cities, the countryside and its traditions represent the last hope of "redemption" [4].

Our territories, with their different landscapes and “places”, are a valuable heritage which characterise and identify our culture. If we can recover and maintain the spaces that allow the construction of our contemporary society in equilibrium with its environment, we will be able to keep alive the lost image of man in harmony with nature, and in this way imagine spaces with better relationships of coexistence.

For Carolina Maillard:

“cultural heritage is a social construction: it is not given by nature, however subjects attribute cultural values to certain goods. This attribution of value always operates from the present, so cultural heritage is created and recreated permanently, and its production embraces not only the historical or artistic past, but also the production in the present of material and immaterial goods which reflect the variety of cultural manifestations” [5].
6. Art and its Relationship with the Environment: New Visual Discourses

![Debris / Obra panorámica (Debris / Panoramic work)](image)

Art, as an expression of the human spirit, has been and will remain a medium for communication and for provoking reflection from aesthetic experiences. Contemporary art works by approaching the events and discourses of the contemporary world in all its dimensions, based on its visual discourses using metaphor, poetics, imagination and exploration. It reacts to the activity and thought of 21st century man, showing his imaginaries and utopias, his struggles, injustices and horrors. It contributes through its different languages, showing us what we are, what we do and what we feel, independent of any convention. Art allows us to dialogue, confront and argue issues that by any other path would be unapproachable. Binary contrasts form part of its arguments, allowing the artist to visibilise what we would prefer not to see. It breaks moulds and manifests freely the concerns of a society in constant transition.

Art uses strategies to show postmodern man what characterises him as a mass-produced subject navigating through virtual spheres where he spends most of his time, abstracted from objective reality. A subject, as Álvaro Cuadra says, who lives in a context of “cultural hyperindustrialisation within a wider context of the modernisation of modernity, Hypermodernity” [6].

Art, in this context, explores and reacts to global problems from a critical perspective, executing particular strategies to denounce imminent environmental disaster, where climate change is a concern. The persuasion exercised by the contemporary arts, as active warnings to our societies of the threats to which we are exposed, have made them significant instruments that display the most important aspects of our culture and warn of the probable destiny of contemporary man. The use of virtual languages, videos, installations and performance actions, added to traditional visual languages, are strategies which can effectively captivate masses. They offer us new ways of addressing political and ecological problems and opening new spheres of discussion.

“Artists explore amphibious territories, hybrid spaces where the landscape is no more than a ‘surviving trace’ of nature in their works – which, however, do not record only the breakpoints or crises. Fluidity can be considered productively as a destabilising force that – when channelled through the arts – promotes reviews of history, and also of the future, of relations between man and nature” [2].
Art exposes ideas and exposes itself through image, text, sound and movement, and in doing so generates the reaction of audiences avid for utopian worlds and responses to the emptiness of existence. Thanks to the internet and social media, art today has access to global audiences that it could never have reached before. The discourses of contemporary art help to generate reflection, questioning of the status quo, determining social changes insofar as artists, as producers of aesthetic experiences, trigger emotions and promote critical thinking. From this perspective, art helps to visibilise the current state of our global culture and our ecosystem, provoking a reaction to a horizon full of questions and uncertainties. In this way, contemporary art favours the creation of a critical mass which could generate a change in the attitudes and actions of societies faced with the urgency of the universal effects of climate change on our lives, determining how we can help to stop the imminent collapse of equilibrium.

For M. Urzúa and I. Depetris:
“beyond the great divide between nature, culture and space, there are artists today who reflect the dialogues between different imaginaries. Artists who think, write and re-write, using different media, the natural and how it relates to the human; the place of ecological postures and the role of nature in contemporary life, beyond the nineteenth century narrative which thinks in national boundaries, or conceives of a romantic landscape as an object of contemplation” [2].

The works of many contemporary artists reflect climate change and the critical state of the environment. Our natural environment is being converted into the waste of a civilisation incapable of balancing its development with the sustainability of natural resources; a civilisation that is leaving behind it the image of an aesthetic of devastation, with which we coexist surprisingly naturally.

7. The Sustainability of Landscape: The poetics of Art, a Contribution to Reflection

The representation of our natural environment and its degradation has been and is one of the ways in which the arts show the relationship between man and nature; it questions man's public policies, his modes of production, and how his macroeconomies – which are leading to environmental collapse – are conceived. The arts question the established order; using metaphor and its poetic dimension, they contribute to critical discussion on events and human thought, reflecting on the characteristics and logics of contemporary man.

Talking about recovering, caring for and conserving the environment sustainably does not mean talking just about its tangible aspects – climate change and its devastating consequences – but also talking about generating new and innovative strategies to recover man's affective relation, his sense of
belonging to the biosphere. Questioning the role of humanity in its own existence, in its different dimensions, is a task requiring a cooperative spirit, acting and creating towards a specific end: the preservation, not just of our species but of the ecosystem to which we belong.

Although natural disasters, like forest fires when they are not started intentionally, are part of the natural cycles of our planet, manipulating them, or not controlling them, brings consequences for our environment and for the survival of countless species.

The capacity of art to “re-think our actions in different territories and re-question the identities that arise from them” [2] allows us to anticipate events and encourage actions to safeguard cultural goods and to imagine a happy coexistence between man and nature, supporting sustainability in both cultural aspects and the various natural resources of our planet.

We may conclude that art exposes our contemporary culture and at the same time influences it, confronting us with our intrinsic selves. It can affect our understanding of ourselves and the way we can make a more sustainable space in order to improve the coexistence of man with his biodiversity.

Figure 8. Brumas I, II, III y IV (políptico) (Haze I, II, III and IV) (polyptych) Acrylic, inks and polychrome pencils on cloth. / 2018.
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