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<https://www.infobae.com/opinion/2023/02/01/la-resistencia-de-comunidades-originarias-a-la-extraccion-de-litio-en-una-obra-de-arte-en-la-puna/>

The resistance of indigenous communities against lithium extraction in a work of art in the Puna

An interspecies, intercultural and interdisciplinary performance led by the Berlin-based Argentinean artist Tomás Saraceno.

We are inside the light: in the meadow of the lamas of Don Luis, surrounded by mountains, almost four thousand metres from the sea. The sky is light blue, light blue. And the rocks, partly orange. And here and there, there is a little green. With these three colours, and the silvery, celestial white, reflection and origin in the Big Bang, of the Salinas Grandes and the basin of the Guayatayoc lagoon, he manages everything. To shine with beauty and to live. When they come out of their pen, the lamas look at us with their round, big eyes, with their long and very arched eyelashes. One by one they come out and stare at us. They run towards the pasture and get lost, but not Don Luis. Don Luis doesn't. He knows where they are even though they run in all directions, at full speed. I ask what those nylon bags are, hanging from the wires on a plot of land he fenced off. We went and I also saw a very elegant scarecrow. "It didn't work," laughs Don Luis. There are three or four bean plants left. "And how much does each plant yield?" asks the historian Bruno Fornillo. "Two tons", answers Don Luis, seriously. He waits for the joke to sink in, looks at our faces, then bursts out laughing.

Sociologist Maristella Svampa, a specialist in socio-environmentalism, and political scientist Melisa Argento, one of the people who knows the most about lithium in the country, chant. Claudia Aboaf, Argentina's foremost environmental science fiction writer, establishes crazy relationships between stars and animals.

And we are all inside a work of art. This - which is very real - is also part of a work: a sort of interspecies, intercultural and interdisciplinary performance led by the Berlin-based Argentinean artist Tomás Saraceno. Yes, the one who created a collaborative work with spiders at the Museo Moderno in Buenos Aires. Saraceno invited people from a wide range of disciplines to be there. The aforementioned and the essayist Graciela Esperanza, the gallery owner Orly Benzacar, the curator Inés Katzenstein, the lawyers of the Asociación de Abogados Ambientalistas, Gastón Chillier and Enrique Viale, scientists and space technicians and, of course, the most important people in this story: the Kolla and Atacama communities resisting the barbaric advance of lithium extraction - a fundamental element in the inevitable energy transition in the face of global warming and the end of fossil fuels - in their territories, which they have inhabited for millennia in coexistence with all the other beings that inhabit them. Verónica Chávez, president of the Tres Pozos community, a village in the basin, summarizes: "We have to defend ourselves from the abuse, there are communities here that want to live in peace just as much as the fox, the vicuña and the lizard".

As I was saying, this is a work of art, a work of what is called relational art which Tomás Saraceno executes with an impressive imagination, engineering and poetics. Some of this practice will be shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London in June this year. We don't know exactly what will be shown, but we have the utmost confidence in the artist. And something is not going to be seen anywhere, it is going to escape from any market, it is going to pass between those present and no one else.

The people present were very involved with what we did. We lived with the community in San Francisco de Alfarcito. We chatted, we were part of the workshops, we learned about their calm worldview, woven with the earth as life itself is woven, and the voracious ferocity they have faced for over five hundred years is almost unbelievable, incredibly resilient.

We hear about the apus: the protective hills that for them, are as animated as we are. Before you think that such thinking might be magical, remember that we are told daily about "the markets" as if they were gods. There is no doubt that the apus are more vital than the markets. We ate exquisite stews. We shared plates, cutlery, and jokes. We looked at the stars: dead cold, (the temperature drops a lot at night), sat with our backs to the (very few) lights of the village, saw the glittering milky way so full of stars and curved that, (Bruno Fornillo noticed it first), we felt the shape of the vault of the sky as the ancients must have perceived it, those from before light pollution. As it is still perceived by the people who live in territories that have not yet been completely destroyed by the West, which never tires of spitting out the bones of everything it swallows. We saw Nebulae. The southern cross as an inescapable sign. Shooting stars. We all wanted to see some: our own, everyone's, whatever. We saw them. And then we went into Saraceno and his team's house to sing and dance together. How do you tell the story of a gathering, when hours before we were all strangers, or almost strangers? How do I tell them that bridges flowed between each and every one of us?

Bridges of coming and going as if we were sailing in warm waters and, every now and then, bang, an embrace made of words or bodies dancing and singing or sharing things. Many things.

We brought back beautiful stories, like the one Levi (a very young writer from San Francisco de Alfarcito) told us, which his grandmother used to tell him: in the past, the *ojitos de agua* were very wild and swallowed the flames of the salt caravaners. There was one eye in the south and another in the north of the Salinas Grandes. Grandfather found out a way to retrieve the flames with the salt load: he had to find a very fast horse, faster than water. He had to enter the northern eye running so fast that the horse's legs would beat the water and make bubbles. Until the bubbles appeared in the southern eye. And then they would expel the stray flames. "Now," said Levi, "the little eyes are tame." "Of course," said Claudia Aboaf, "now everything wild, everything alive in this territory is at risk."

We attended the community assemblies - there were people from many villages from the Salinas to San Francisco de Alfarcito, the pre-Columbian venue of the meeting - who took each decision by a show of hands, by consensus. This is how, after two days of workshops, the slogan of the aerial sculpture that Saraceno created for this event emerged: a balloon, or rather

a rhombus, made of an ultra-light material that flies without burning or wasting anything. With the energy of the sun and the air. He had done it in the same salt flats in 2017: his aerosol sculptures came and went in this almost transparent sky. And he achieved a lot of records: it was the first time that a balloon that uses no fuel - nor, obviously, burns anything - flew in the Earth's sky. Operated by a woman. Saraceno and his team thought of everything.

Voted by the communities, the slogan for this year's balloon-rombo says: "In complementarity, we take care of the water". Complementarity: we are talking about a socio-ecosystem. For some, naming it an ecosystem might be to ignore the human societies that inhabit it. To call the land over which they advance like brutal conquerors a desert. A founding operating of our Argentine Nation. This is what the ruling party in Jujuy is doing when it decides to ignore the free, prior and informed consultation required by ILO Convention 169, to which the nation adheres. It must be noted that the national government does not seem concerned about the Jujuy's government decision.

Maristella Svampa defines what is happening in these terms: "We must insist on the existence of a corporate-type green transition model that is being imposed vertically on the lithium territories. It includes the Salinas Grandes and is being developed without genuine consultation with the populations, that is to say, without a social license". This means that our territory is being handed over as a sacrifice zone to guarantee the energy transition in the North, so that every adult citizen of the First World, or of China, can have their Tesla or a similar vehicle, powered by electromobility, luxury and individuality - instead of everyone using an efficient public transport. In other words, a colonial production model that guarantees that capital systems continue to accumulate. And in the same hands as always. On the other hand, the sociologist explains that our society "is a society that is still based on the idea that nature has no limits, and that we can indeed continue in this suicidal logic of infinite growth. There is no lithium that will be enough or rare minerals that will be enough if we continue to be inserted in infinite growth".

Communities must give consent, or refuse, to what can be done on their territories. Lithium mining is a huge drain on fresh water. In a context of drought. And in a socio-ecosystem of water scarcity. The underground flow of the water that comes from the mountain slopes is called veins. And they are right: the salina is alive and water is its blood. If you cut its veins, you kill it. What is ultimately being decided when concessions are given to the big international mining corporations, is to sacrifice a territory - and its inhabitants. In one of the workshops at the meeting, lawyer Enrique Viale pointed out an "eldoradist" vision: that ghost that has been haunting Latin America since the conquest. That all-golden place - raw material, commodity, basic product such as soya or oil and, of course, lithium - that is going to make us wealthy all of a sudden. It does not exist: GM soya with its poisons has not made us rich, Vaca Muerta has not made us rich, lithium is not going to make us rich. Moreover, the companies barely pay the province 3% of the value of the mine outlet - minus many of the costs they accrue - in royalties from what, according to their own sworn statements, they extract from the mines. Citizens, raise your hands if you would not appreciate paying taxes on your own income tax returns, with no further control. Well, the mining companies do. And they pay the national government an even

more ridiculous 1%. This should not be the case. You cannot decide to destroy a territory over the will of the people who have inhabited it for millennia. You cannot blithely decide to sacrifice the other. And it has always been the case for over five hundred years for the indigenous people. Nor should a country's resources be given away. To give just two examples: in Chile, the mining companies that extract lithium pay 40% royalties. In Bolivia, lithium was nationalised, and still remains so, at least for now. To add one more example: La Rioja has just declared lithium a strategic resource, suspending concessions to private companies. The right to health and to a healthy environment, among other human rights, as lawyer Gastón Chillier pointed out at the meeting, are among the first to be violated by extractivist companies. And the governments that support them.

And there we were all together. We saw the premiere of *Vuela con Aerocene Pacha*, the film that Saraceno made with director Maxi Laina. It is an open, endless film, as collaborative as all Saraceno's work. Like this very encounter. And like the ceremony of offering to Pacha Mama in the mornings, in the bitter cold, in the bright air, asking Pacha for the strength to continue the dialogue and the struggle.

The place of the offering looked like a film set: Tomás Saraceno's crew, German public television and Al Jazeera were filming. The same people who filmed, on the last day of the meeting, the flight of Saraceno's sculpture, carried like a kite by Verónica Chávez, in the pristine, wet whiteness of the salt lake. "In complementarity, we take care of the water" said the black, diamond-shaped aerial sculpture lifted by the sun and the wind. It floated in the most celestial sky I have ever seen in my life.