

MANUEL SUPEPI

THE TREE COMES WITH THE WATER.
IT DOESN'T COME ON ITS OWN.

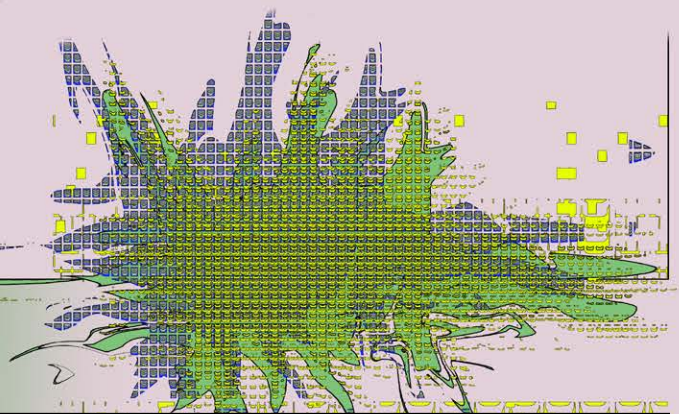
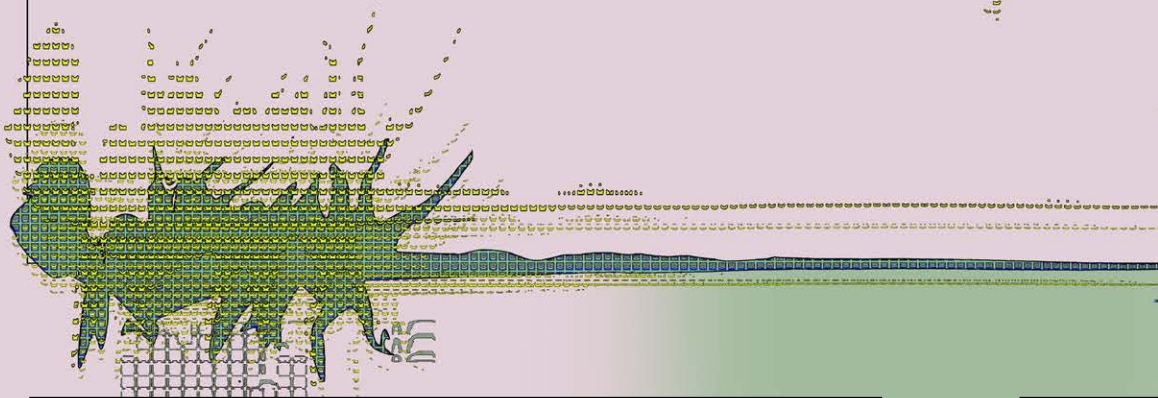
01 During the days of the civic stoppage, the main plaza of Santa Cruz was occupied by the marchers of the “Tenth Indigenous March”, who were protesting on behalf of the plants, the water and the animals of their territories in the jungle of Chiquitanía.

The interspecies army raised a flag with a *patajú*, a heliconia with a large flower of red, green and yellow buds. They say the colours of today’s Bolivian flag come from this plant.

31 days they marched, *bom bom, bom bom, bom bom*, their tread pulsed gently on the ground, *bom bom*, their drumming feet activated the force of their land.

I was in the plaza when they started to set up their tents. They came to plea for their burnt lands, invaded by agriculture and deforestation, and now sold to Evo’s sympathisers in return for their votes. The people welcomed them with food, sunblock, water and medicines while they waited for the governor to come and negotiate. Their feet were full of blisters.

The governor did not arrive, only a representative, a surrogate. The spirit of disillusionment was felt in the air among all those congregated in the plaza. When the surrogate left, a figure who called himself an ordinary (or perhaps honorary: I couldn’t hear proper-



02 ly just then) *Canvas*, as the people of the region are known, got up to speak. I heard him recite a poem on the steps of the cathedral in front of a small crowd.

*SEEING EVERYTHING IN ASHES
IN SAN JOSÉ DE CHIQUITO,
WHERE I HAD SOWN BANANA, YUCCA AND PUMPKIN,
HOW SADLY THE COCK CROWED
TO SEE MY LITTLE PIG AND MY HORSE
TRANSFORMED INTO FLAME!*

Alchemy of sorrow and fire. The crowd started to break up and the plaza was inhabited by the marchers for several days and nights. That evening I talked to Don Manuel Supepi from San Ignacio de la Chiquitanía. He spoke to me of his vision of non-accumulation and of

03 how the water comes with the tree. Seated in a hot plaza surrounded by cement and a few trees, this was the account he gave, which remains imbued in fire upon my memory:

We have walked, we have grown tired and exhausted, but even so we have managed to achieve our target, which was to come here to Santa Cruz to see if we could get a response from our authorities, whom we call upon to give us explanations about what has happened. We want the governor to explain to us in person where 10% of the HDI money goes, what it has been spent on, and why none of it has reached us for the benefit of our indigenous communities.

We come from the community of Peñas Altas. There are more than 40 communities marching. At the moment there are 300 of us on foot. There were 50 when we set out, and we had problems when we left. The political party in power just now intervened and tried to divide us and wreck our march, because it doesn't suit them.

They tried to divide us so we won't have strength, but 50 of us managed to set out even so. Over the days we came closer and closer together. We had problems. From our little village we

04 went through the town of San Miguel, then we reached San Rafael, but we had to go back to San Ignacio to solve the problem of the divisions that had been created within the communities.

And set off all over again.

Evo Morales's government was giving away our lands to buy votes. At this point we still don't have the exact figure. A survey is being carried out to find out how many hectares the government has given away to people in the interior. Those lands, Chiquitanía, have always belonged to our community. We belong ancestrally to the community, we live it as the perpetual age-old inheritance of our forefathers. Since the times without name we've been there.

They knew how to care for it. What most distresses us is that nature is perishing, it's being lost, only out of political interest, for money, for ambition.

I was taught to see the trees and the birds as part of life. It's a healthy and salutary life because through the trees, the rain comes to us afterwards. It rained all the time, there wasn't much drought, the animals fed off the fruit of the trees, and at the

05 same time, well, it's life, isn't it? The life of people, of the world. A world without woods has no view of the way forward.

Now everything is burnt. The idea we have is to recover and fortify all the burnt hectares so as to be able to carry on. Now we must heal what we have, for good or ill. We know it's going to take more than 20 years at the very least for the vegetation to thrive again. The trees have to be helped so that they can be recovered. We shall have to find natural fertilisers that don't contaminate the earth. We'll make manures with earthworms. With all the waste that can be used, provided it's not chemical.

Out there we grow banana, rice, maize, yucca and beans. Part of it we grow for business, to be able to subsist and get other things. We don't cultivate large amounts. Our parents taught us that way, not to harvest large quantities but only what we need. One or two hectares are cleared for the family, to support it for some 3 years, and after that they're left to recover. Then another area was cleared while the previous one was recovering. That's how our parents worked, and that's how we do too. We didn't have so many problems because we had water. Water ran through the gully. Now they use machines to clear a thousand hectares, five hundred hectares! Then the serious droughts came, because it has a direct impact on all the land.

06 How lovely it is, the forest! We regarded our forests as a paradise. It's a pleasure to be underneath some trees, in the shade, picking a fruit. The government has perhaps been confused in thinking that development involves degrading the earth, without realising that is not the correct way, as it brings very serious consequences.

We are defenders of the forest. If we don't defend our territory, our nature, who will? We know it's the lung of Bolivia, the lung of South America and – why not say it? – of the whole world. It affects us all. Now, with what's happened, it's going to harm everyone – us and our children, who are going to be born with some defect because of the pollution caused by the smoke. The old people are already starting to have respiratory problems as well. They're left suffering, so we think our government ought to have had foresight.

Those individuals are psychopaths. They don't think, they're sick with money. All they want is money and more money. When money isn't happiness. Money isn't life. Life is knowing how to preserve a part of nature. That's where the life of each of us comes from. A world without trees makes no sense. How can you live without plants? The mere idea of resting under a tree,

07 how beautiful that is! How good you feel under a tree!

And here in this plaza, what is there to expect from this? This cement is inert. The heat is dead. This plaza shouldn't have been like that. Our authorities are perhaps wrong in that respect. This ought to have been well planted with trees, and this cement should be removed because now, with the heat, the earth can't breathe. The sun heats up and the temperature soars. This is a cauldron.

I remember we had a very enjoyable and peaceful life. We collected bees' honey. There were lots of special places where you could go honeying. You had to go honeying by zones, as there were territories belonging to different types of bees. The black bee works very hard. From each one of those, we sometimes collected as much as 5 litres. And we fed on it, it helped us to be good creatures. Bees' honey is very good, and is curative.

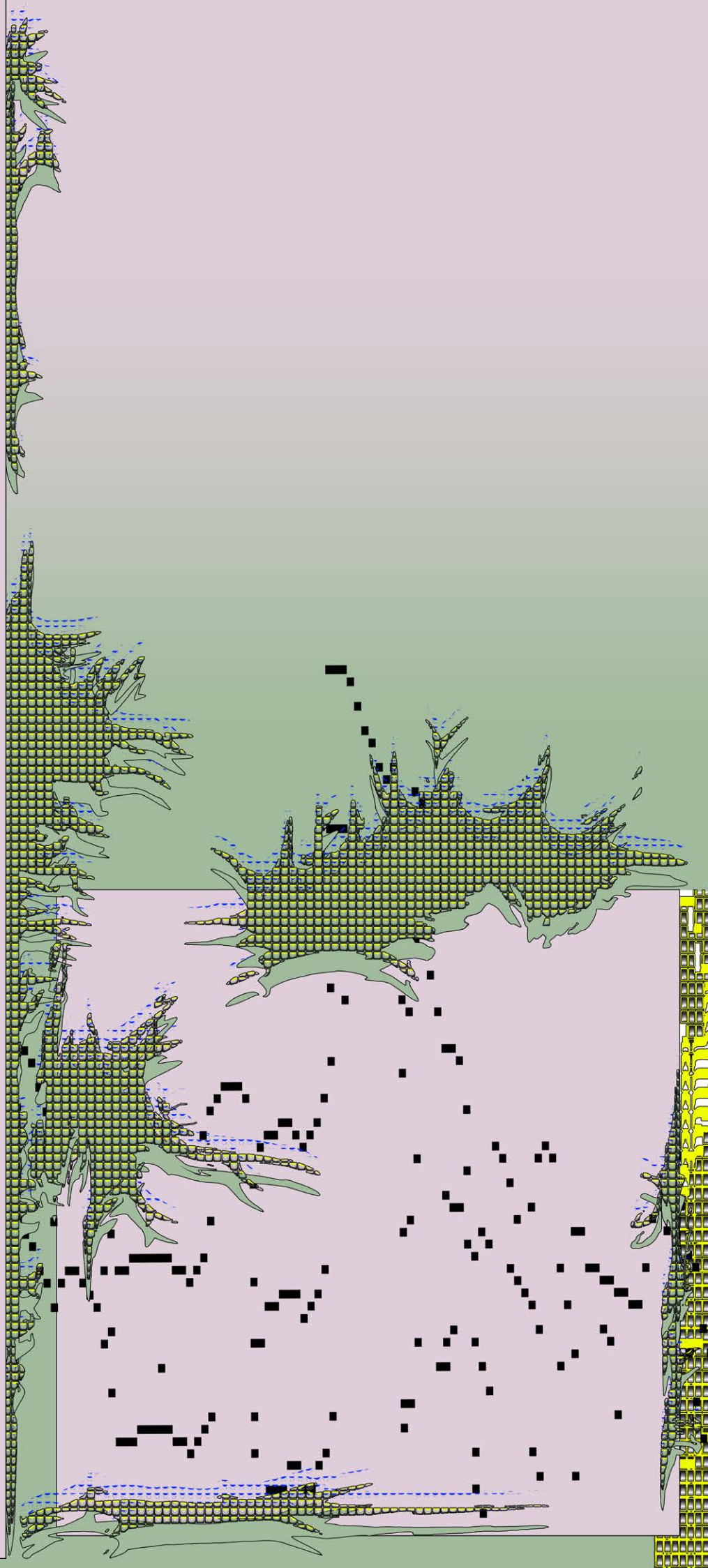
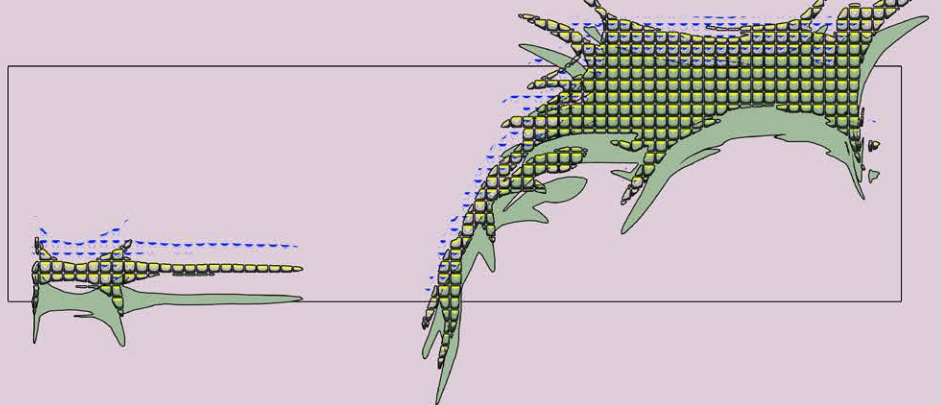
We cure one another with natural medicine. Nearly all the oldest people know about remedies and understand them. They know which tree is good for which illness, and that's the way people are cured. With this fire, they have now also killed part of our medicine.

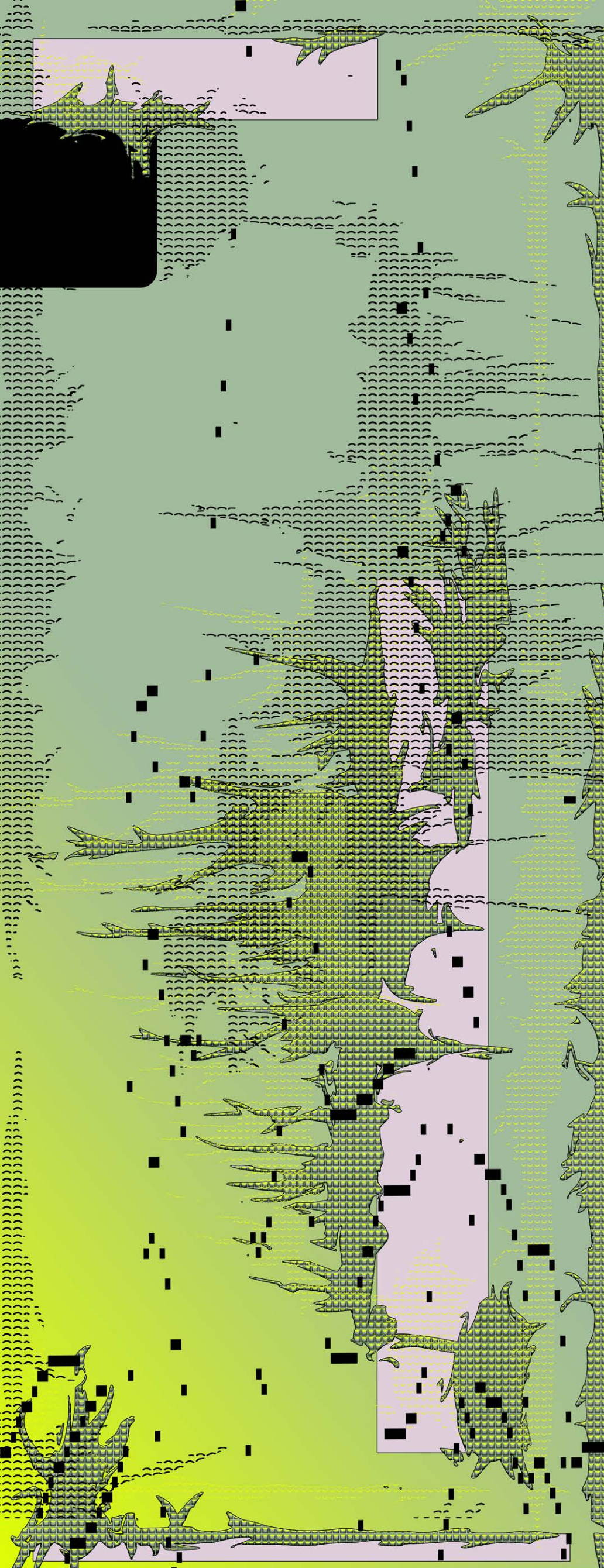
I learned from my grandparents how to use herbs. In those days, there were no doctors in the countryside, there was nothing. Then, they were the doctors, they did the healing. It took longer, but it was curative. However, chemical medicine, the one practised now, is good, isn't it? The pain goes away instantly, but it brings other kinds of problems with it, unlike natural medicine. The body takes it and it vanishes. It leaves no trace.

I've been teaching my grandchildren so that they will know all about trees. What they are for and how to cure different illnesses. So they will come to know which one is good for a headache, and which for a diarrhoea. There we have the cork oak, which we use for everything. For a strong stomach ache, you take the bark and it goes away. For that, you boil the bark, the crust, and take it so it will go. For women, to cleanse the vagina after childbirth, they used to take boiled corn chicha, drinking the liquor warm. And with that they never had vaginal pains, because they healed.

The women of my community still give birth at home. Some now go to the hospital, with the insurance they've got, but it's not very efficient. Most of them do it in the community. They give birth in the countryside, because in the hospital they feed them with medicines from the moment the children are born.

For some deliveries, we use the medicine of the toucan. The toucan is something special. Its beak is for stopping the woman's haemorrhaging. It's dried, burnt and given to her in tea so that the haemorrhage will be cut off. It's a medicine we use in very small quantities, and we kill it only to have the medicine. It is burnt and ground and put into the tea. My grandfather taught it to me. My grandfather was a naturalist. He delivered children when the woman couldn't give birth or the baby was the wrong way round. He would massage her and make her comfortable so that the woman could give birth, because there are times when the baby is the wrong way round and it's difficult. I do that work too.





08 When I was a boy, he taught me. He told me this is done like this and like that. Then it was my turn to have my 9 children. I helped my wife to bring our children into the world. That way, the child is born directly into the arms of the father, not the doctor.

I had to prepare the medicine of the toucan several times. I put the ash in the tea. Her tea is made, it's left to stew for about 10 minutes, and then it's given to her. She just drinks it, and someone also says the name of God, so that he will help too. If the bleeding doesn't stop with the first or the second dose, she has to keep taking it until it finishes. There's enough in a toucan's beak for several teas. You put in just a little, no more than you need for its use, and it's quite big, it goes a long way. It's used after women have had children or following a difficult birth. It could be a miscarriage, when the child comes before its time and sometimes they can't have it, and the bleeding remains. For that the ash of any tree can be used. The important thing is that it should be ash. You take a good handful and put it in a glass, you lay a cloth over it to filter it and get out all the bleach, and when it's well strained it's given to the mother-to-be. And soon after the bleeding stops. You take that ash, you put a little pile of it on a cloth, you add it to the hot water, you leave it about 10 minutes, and it's ready to drink.

In my community, we've managed to maintain and regenerate what we have. Until not long ago, we had 80 hectares of land, no more, for the whole of the community. There were not many of us, some 7 families. We were a small community that grew, the lands were good and could be cultivated 4 or even 5 times in the same area. Then we had no need of anything more.

Ever since we went to live in that place, we have had the forest in our thoughts. Since then, I have had the vision that one day this had to happen, because the population has grown and people migrate from one place to another. And back then we said: "It's going to have vast repercussions later." So let us be intelligent. Let us maintain, not dismantle.

Sometimes they would come and ask us: why are you working like that? Why don't you use machines on your land? We saw that it was inappropriate, that it's wrong, that in time we were going to have problems. We decided rather to maintain the forests, so that in future our children and our grandchildren can also see the beauty there is in the territory.

Our 80 hectares were not burnt, but they were dried out by the smoke. We have cleared land, a large pasture without trees on either side. What surrounds us is dead; more than 2,000 hectares here, 3,000 there. It all belongs to firms, so they haven't respected the wind breaks where the animals take refuge. They haven't done that. The government has given more powers to them, a law, a decree issued by the government, with which they took over the lands. They offered us 20 more hectares per family, but that's not our custom. We maintain what has been inherited, and at that stage we turned them down.

We look after what we have, we don't need any more. Why should we want to clear 20 hectares? Besides, to clear 20 hectares, you've got to do it with machines. That won't be done by hand. We then quickly realised that the government's

09 intentions were to favour the people coming from the interior, because with that permission they were given, and the permission to burn, they took control of the place. They cleared more by paying cash. They clear 20, which is legal, and pay to clear 10 more, so they cut down up to 30 hectares. They've progressed fast.

The forest is the most sacred thing. The forest gives us a great deal, if it's to get what we need to subsist. In my community, there are people who work. We set up workshops and make armchairs, and afterwards they're sold, and with that we've managed to cover our needs. While they cut down trees on one side, they're allowed to grow on the other. We consider that with no forest, there is nothing, it's part of everything. That's why we're indignant with this government, which was the promoter of it all. It was what brought change: I sell you my lands, but you vote for me in the elections.

... (his tale is interrupted by a coughing fit). "The smoke getting hold of me," said Don Manuel. We've had the smoke on top of us for the last 2 months or so. Here we've been seen by volunteer doctors. They've also joined the stoppage against the government.

10 Now that the woods have been cleared on all sides, the animals have all come down to look for water, but in our territory the gullies no longer flow with water as they did before because of the clearances carried out around us by the neighbours. They've cut off the whole current, because they've made large pools to divert the water. They've stopped our water before it gets to us. They've drawn their water from our basin, and so no water reaches our community. Before we had pumps to draw water from the well to give to the animals. There were some years when it dried up, but lately, because of the diversions, it got drier and drier until it dried completely. Now they take water to our community. It's brought in tanker trucks because there isn't any, we have no water. And so the animals have migrated to the pools in the land cleared by the firms. They have to look for it.

We know they've devastated your lands in Chile as well. You have to keep your spirit up. I stand by Chile too, and I say to the smallest villages where the forest is still maintained that they must stand firm and make sure rights are respected in the forests, because that is where life comes from. With no forest, our life would have no sense. That brings great diseases, respiratory problems, no more happiness. Everything would end

"THEY TELL ME YOU SHOULD SPREAD A PASTE OF DRY ASHES ON THE SOLES OF YOUR FEET, APPLYING IT LIKE A HAMBURGER," MARCO WROTE TO ME TODAY, AMONG DREAMS. THEY TELL ME YOU HAVE TO SPREAD THE ASHES ON, NOT TOO MOIST. DO IT SLOWLY, WITH NO RUSH. "WITH NO RUSH," HE STRESSES. IT'S IMPORTANT SO THAT THE ASHES WILL HAVE TIME TO ABSORB YOUR ACHES. THEY'RE NOT PHYSICAL ACHES, THEY TELL ME.

I DON'T KNOW WHO IS SPEAKING.

*I WILL BURN THE ORANGE FLOWERS HE LEFT ME AND SPREAD THE ASHES ON MYSELF.
PIXELS WILL NEVER REPLACE FLESH.*

11 there, broken up by money, wouldn't it? The big businesses, because where there's money, there's no life. It's just an ambition to possess, but that's not life, it's not happiness, it's wrong in that respect.

Money is inert. If there's no life, it's quite clear what's going to happen. Why so much? What's the point of so much accumulation? What's an 80,000-dollar car for? Why can't that money be used to maintain the forests instead? Because that's life. Man's intelligence is being used on spending, on destroying the world, not on constructing. Because if it were used to construct, he would sooner be helping to strengthen nature. That is our cause, the one we're marching for here.

We are sure we are going to be able to achieve our objective, because we're not doing it for ourselves. This isn't political. We're not playing politics, but defending a right of everyone's, of all South America, of the whole world. The lung of the world: we want to recover that. This march is for everyone, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, so that they will have the same right as we have had, to know and live under a tree, to breathe pure air, to rest beneath a tree. That is the greatest happiness we can have, that is life. What use is it for those people to have masses of money when they don't sleep easy? That is being sick in the mind. When you die, what do you take with you? Not even your memories, because you die and everything's forgotten.

From the ashes of the Amazon, I leapt to the fires of Chile in October 2019. That's how it is in South America, you jump from one conflict to another.