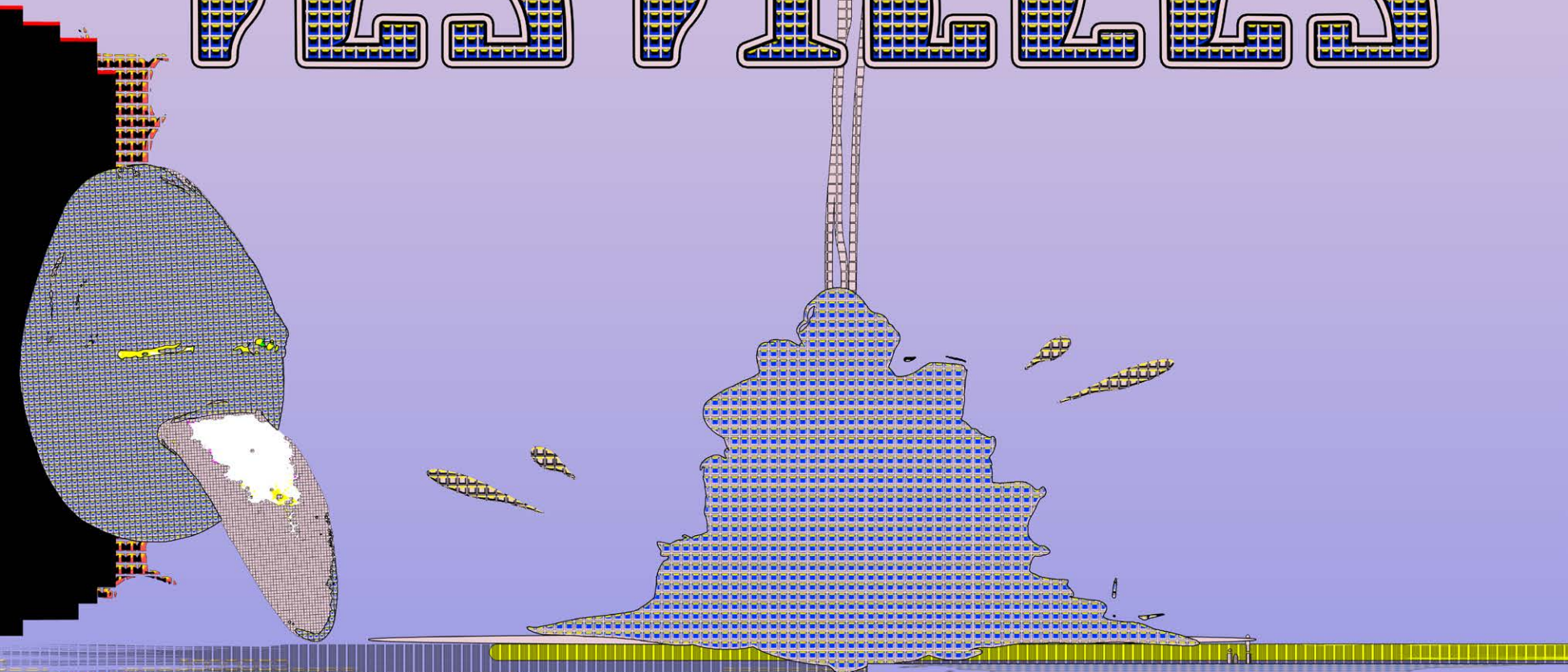


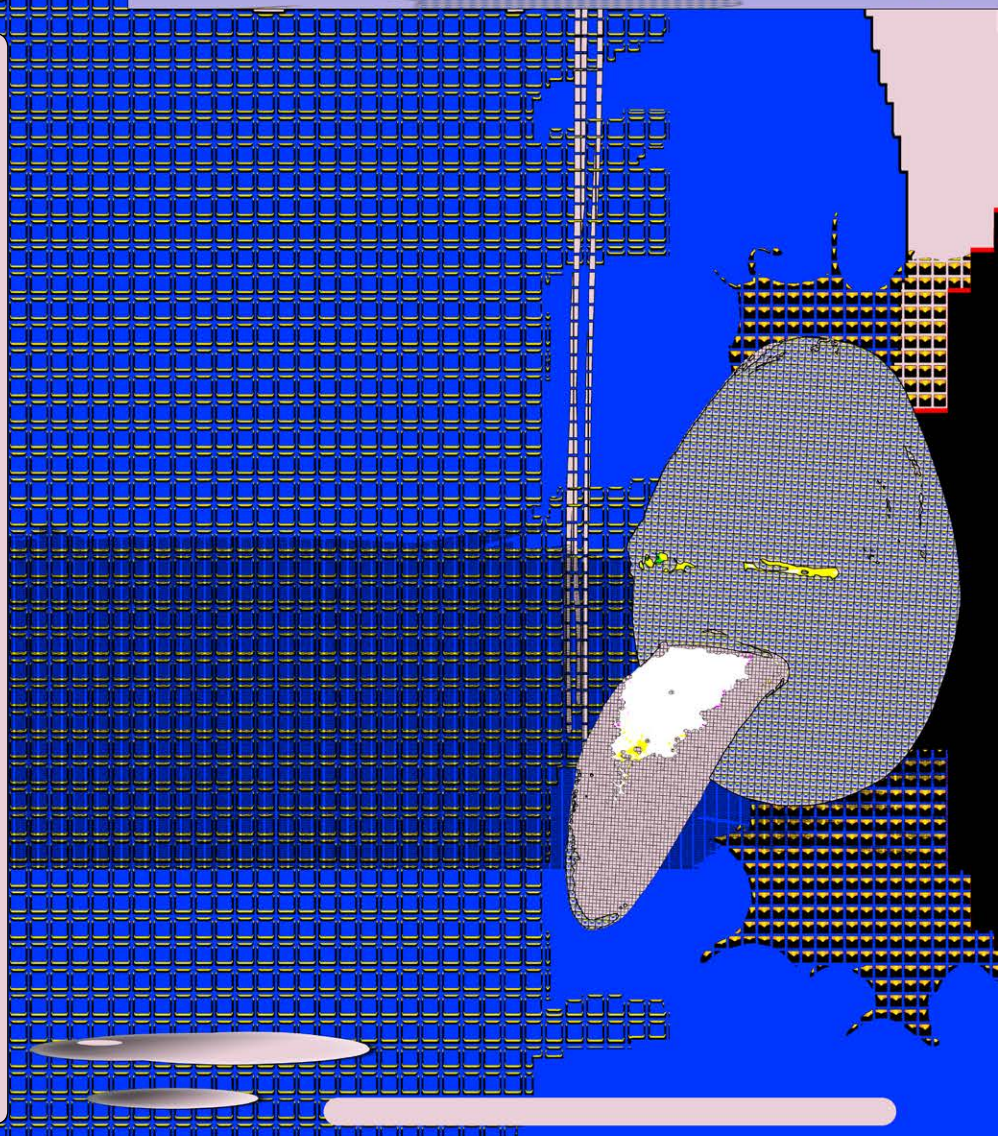
THE TREE OF TESTICLES

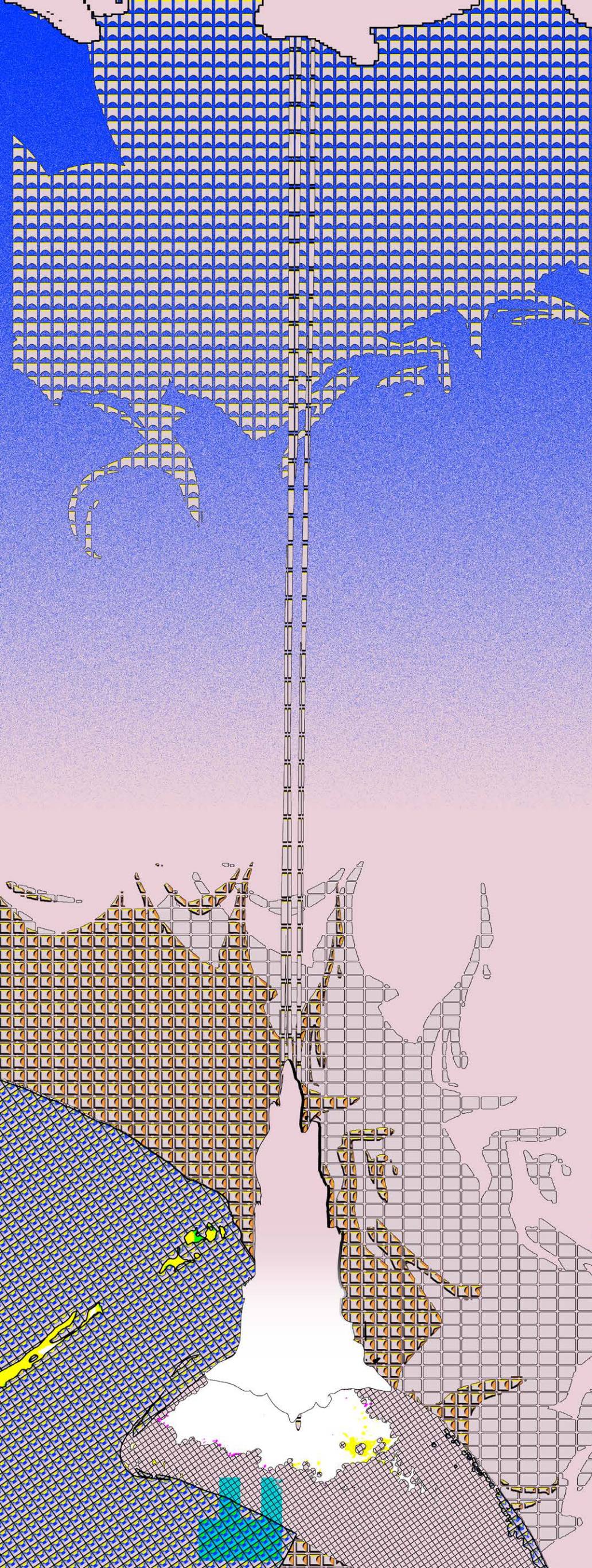


01 With eyes watering from the tear gas, we managed to reach the GAM. In January 2020, in the midst of the social outburst, I took part in a discussion with Rodrigo Mundaca, the national spokesman of MODATIMA, the “Movement for the Defence of Access to Water, Land and the Protection of the Environment”. Rodrigo heads the list of Chile’s threatened activists. He is one of the guardians of the few waters that remain free of privatisation. In Chile, we are suffering a *megadrought* that has been worsened by the hoarding of fresh water for industrial agriculture. The last few years have historically been the driest since rainfall records began.

As I sat by Rodrigo’s side, I imagined him with Darwin. One shone blue and the other green. *They are shining guardians of his dry, dusty, ransacked, hot, suffocating lands.*

In Chile there’s speculation with water. It is the only country in the world whose waters are almost completely privatised. “Although water is defined as a national asset for public use, Article 19 Clause 24 of the Constitution and the Code of Waters, both drawn up by the civil and military dictatorship in the 80s, permit the Chilean State to transfer its water rights to private parties with no time limit or restrictions on forms or priorities of use,” says the Heinrich Böll Foundation.





02 Water is trafficked on the market as “exploitation rights”, which are acquired free and in perpetuity, and can then be rented or sold. This has led to the concentration of water rights in the hands of the giant mining, forestry and agricultural industries, especially the fruit exporters. The ownership of the water was separated off from dominion over the land, so that there are owners of water who have no land and owners of land who have no water. In the meantime, access to water for basic consumption is not constitutionally guaranteed. The Suez group (France), Aguas de Barcelona (France), Marubeni (Japan) and the administrators of the pension funds of the teachers of Ontario (Canada) control 90% of the country’s supply of drinking water. *What’s required is an apocalyptic alchemy!*

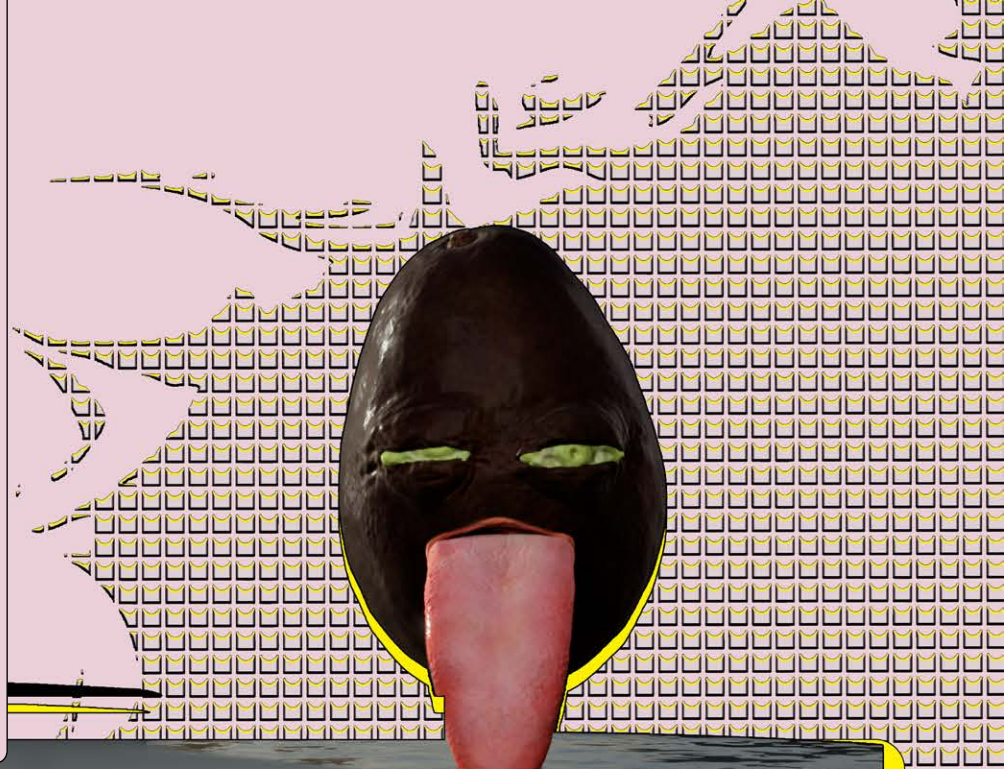
Rodrigo related his experience of living in the lands of the Province of Petorca, in the Fifth Region of Chile. Declared a zone with a scarcity of hydric resources, it has been suffering for years from violations of the human right to water. Petorca is one of Chile’s main producers of *paltas* (avocados), which are mainly exported to Europe, the United States and China. They have been called “green gold” on the international market owing to the high prices they fetch. The hoarding in private hands of the waters of that basin in order to irrigate avocados and other citrus trees has left the rural inhabitants of the region sunk in a humanitarian crisis. *Green gold and crystalline gold are the treasures of the lands inhabited by Rodrigo and his community.*

For more than 10 years, the government has been supplying the community of Petorca by using tankers to distribute drinking water. There is water in the region, but it has all been bought or illegally extracted for agriculture. The avocados are fed their drink while the rural communities around the plantations are left with no drinking water. The people wait week after week for the truck sent by the municipality, which counts off the litres “by head”. They do not have enough water to drink, cook, shower, water their plants or give to their animals. Now that we are in the middle of the pandemic, that global plague which has come to give us a good shake, the community of Petorca does not even have enough water to wash its hands. *Inequality floats in the air, like a virus.* Some say they don’t even have enough water to make tears.

*ALTHOUGH THEY DO WEEP THEIR DRY SOBS.
QUANTUM TEARS UNITE US.
WE ARE CROSSED BY A SEA
OF INVISIBLE LAMENTS.*

03 Last week I travelled through the area near Petorca, which forms part of the region I live in. There, the water goes against its natural channels. Instead of flowing down from the hills to the valley, it is brought up to irrigate the avocados that decorate the hillsides in green rows. They were planted there to protect them from frosts. *Those hills do shine green! I don't even have to imagine them.*

The waters that descend towards those lands, the Petorca River and the Ligua River, only manage to flow for a few kilometres before they are intercepted by huge reservoirs, leaving the whole valley downstream dry. The bridges stand like apocalyptic reminders of when they served some purpose. Now the water flows only through the subterranean water tables. *Above* the waters are accumulated for irrigation and profit. *Below*, only drops remain.



04 Everything is so dry and hard that even some avocado trees have dried up. Not the ones belonging to the firms, but those of small farmers who have had to let years of work dry out in front of their eyes. While I was travelling through those lands, I could feel the avocados sucking up all the water in the region and turning it into money.

"This is my cow," said Valentina, referring to one of the skeletons sprawling in the courtyard of her house. "That's my horse," she said pointing to another pile of bones. *A field of waste is where she lives. Like Mad Max.* They had to let the animals die of hunger and thirst.

The river has disappeared, and life with it. *The river comes with the water, it doesn't come on its own.* Now the government has people surviving on the minimum of water, 20 litres per day, a much lower figure than the 100 litres a day suggested by the WHO as the basic consumption per person. The filial relationship between water and humans has been cut off and replaced with dependence on the tutelage of the government. *From Mother Gaia to Father State.*

"This isn't just a drought, it's pillage." Look towards the hills. The avocado plantations are all green, while everything outside their limits is dry



05 and dusty. If it were a drought, everything would be dry! While we count the drops to wash our bodies limb by limb, we are surrounded by gigantic fresh water tanks that contain drinking water for irrigation. My three wells have gone dry. The big businesses use the subterranean water. If we dug a hole in the ground, we wouldn't find any water because there isn't any. *It hurts. It hurts.* This guardian of the water says to me.

The cultural identity of the Petorca Valley has changed owing to the environmental and human crisis. The rock paintings that decorated the stones of the valley have mutated into the urban graffiti clamouring for the liberation of the territory's water. *The singers to the divine*, who once sang in praise of the stars, now sing to the drought and the peasants' anguish.

Rodrigo and his community have organised themselves under MODATIMA. They have been victims of repression, and have appeared before courts and received death threats. Rodrigo won the International Prize for Human Rights in Nuremberg in 2019, an award he tried to use to gain visibility and a certain protection against the threats he has received. The companies have criminalised them so as not to have to hold serious conversations with the communities. "Although recent investigations clearly show that the illegal extraction of water in the context of avocado production for export is a continual problem in the Province of Petorca, Rodrigo was sentenced in November 2014 to 61 days in prison for supposed calumny. The sentence was later commuted to having to sign on every month at the police station (November 2014 to November 2015), and the fine was paid in one peso coins through the "Take a weight (*peso*) off yourself" campaign. Rodrigo told me emotionally how he had received bottles full of one peso coins from all parts of Chile, which he had used to pay his bail. The strength and conviction of Rodrigo's talk at the GAM ran through me like an electric wave as he delivered his holograms to the public and charged them with force. My radicalisation stepped up several levels after hearing him and feeling him release his *blue information*.

In the middle of the talk, Rodrigo paused for a drink of water.

*I felt the water enter his body, speak to him, through it.
I felt my own saliva. The well where my ancestors live.*

A kilo of avocados is more important than the lives of the simplest people in our country, Rodrigo went on. It's no longer a mere environmental issue but one of open discrimination against people who have to bear disproportionate levels of extraction, far bigger than in the rest of the country, solely because they live in forgotten places, they are poorer, and they have fewer networks of political influence. In the words of Paola Bolados, an academic member of MODATIMA, "it looks as though extractivism clashes in this case with a democratic limit."



*AND THAT'S THE WAY WE LIVE IN CHILE.
ON THE LIMITS OF THE DEMOCRATIC.*

*WILL THE GOVERNMENT BE ABLE TO HAVE CLOUDS
SOWN SO THAT ARTIFICIAL RAIN WILL FILL UP
OUR DRY WELLS?*

*WILL WE BE ABLE TO ASK THE DRONES TO POINT AT
THE AVOCADO TREES ONE BY ONE
WITH THEIR LASER POINTERS AND MAKE THEM
EXPLODE, TO BLOW HOLES IN THE IRRIGATION TANKS
TO FREE THE WATERS?*

*AND WHAT HAPPENS IF THE DRONES MAKE IT RAIN
AND LIGHTNING SETS FIRE TO MY TEMPLE?*

*WILL WE BE ABLE TO GATHER UP THE DRY TEARS
ONE BY ONE?*

*DRONE'S TEARS, IRRIGATE OUR LANDS!
IF THEY HAVE NO TEARS,
THEN WE ASK FOR DRONE'S PEE.*

06 The Chilean word for avocado, *palta*, comes from the Quechua *pallta*, which means a bundle that is slung for carrying. The word *aguacate*, used in Mexico and Spain for the same plant, comes from Nahuatl. It is a combination of *ahuacatl*, which means testicle, and *ahuatl*, which refers to a tree. In other words, *ahuacacuahuitl*, or "the tree of the hanging testicles". A male tree. Sexy. Creamy. Fleshy. *Its semen is produced with the sacred waters. It drinks and drinks, thirstily, sucking up water drawn from a depth of over 100 metres so that its offspring can drink too.*

While I investigate the word *aguacate*, Google offers me recipes for cosmetic face masks.

Masks of privilege. Face paint for the wars of the green gold. Nearly all the models who pose with the masks have one eye shut and replaced with an avocado stone. *I can't help seeing blind eyes. When a symbol is resignified, it is no longer possible to look as before. I see blind eyes everywhere.*

07 There are few things more delicious than an avocado. It's a superfood. Its stone is a seed containing 70% of the amino acids of the fruit. It can be eaten toasted, grated or ground. When drunk in tea, it reduces inflammation. *Ah! Reduced inflammation, that's what nearly all of us who share this world need: to be decanted, to be drained.*

Rodrigo paused one last time for a drink of water.

At the end of the discussion, I take leave of him. I scan him with my inner vision. He is blue. *Rodrigo does not come on his own, he comes with the water.* He comes with the liquid spirit of the amniotic fluids that form us and connect us from the watery centre of each of our cells. His integrity has accompanied me ever since.