

# TERRITORY AS LIVING ARCHIVE

*The only way to have a larger vision  
is to be somewhere particularly*

Donna Haraway

For the past two years, Olaf Holzapfel and Sebastián Preece have undertaken a series of explorations in the Aysén region, in the extreme south of Chile, to collect material and produce site-specific interventions. Aysén is a vast territory located between Reloncavi and Magallanes, featuring huge mountains, an incredible mix of mountain ranges and rivers, fjords, highlands, islands, canals, glaciers, native forests, crazy gales, storms and the lowest population density in the country: one inhabitant per square kilometre<sup>1</sup>. Within this vast space, the artists have learned from the local community and have identified a particular form of architecture and dwelling in the homes of peasants, shepherds and cattlemen. Although they are precarious constructions, the result of the need for

shelter during a nomadic life, the techniques, materials and constructions are part of a local code, know-how that can adapt to different situations. The artists, like contemporary archaeologists, have worked together to trace the path of the material culture of the territory, approaching it as a living archive, something to be deciphered within the vast, challenging conditions of Aysén, Patagonia.

## ARTISTS AS CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGISTS

As producers of modes of contemporary archaeology, the artists have traced the path of material culture in several locations across the Aysén region in El Blanco, Cerro Castillo, Chile Chico and Coyhaique. While the word “archeology” is defined as the study of the “archaic”, deriving from the ancient Greek words for “ἀρχαῖος” *archaios* and “λόγος” *logos*, science or study,<sup>2</sup> Holzapfel and Preece are using updated methods; they have dedicated themselves to classifying and collecting samples, as well as reproducing current models of buildings in the region of Aysén. They collected materials still in use, both new and recently discarded: shingles, fences, wooden stakes and reconstructed a house and a gate.

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1. According to 2012 demographic statistics from the Bureau of Statistics (INE) the population density of Aysén is one person per square kilometer, whereas in Santiago, the region with the highest density, it is 455 people per square kilometer.

2. A science that studies the arts, monuments and antiquities, especially through their remains. In: *Diccionario de la lengua española (DRAE)*. 22<sup>a</sup> edición, 2001.

They also recorded several videos; together they formed a material “collection” that could be relocated for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago, Chile.

Matter, the final piece of evidence in the archaeological fieldwork, also holds the keys to a specific local material reading; “situated knowledge”<sup>3</sup> that contradicts official chronologies. While Aysén, the youngest region of Chile, was declared national territory only in 1927, the architectural practice of housing in amplitude precedes this institutionalization.<sup>4</sup> Before there was any public infrastructure, housing was developed for some time with a common grammar throughout the territory, taking advantage of local materials, freedom and solitude, beyond legally defined boundaries.

## PERCEPTIONS OF MATTER

The age of matter, its states and location, as well as the techniques used to work it, leave traces for a material reading. The wood, the main material used in the houses of Aysén, has been transformed and is transformative protagonist in the area. We can see this from the traces it leaves behind: in the rough wood one can see the blow of the axe and the gash

left behind; in a neat smooth cut, one sees the effect of the saw-mills which arrived in the 1930s. Burnt wood reminds us of the backburning fires that raged throughout the region, lit to “open fields”, a common practice of colonization in the early twentieth century. The different states of wood have been preserved in local and autonomous modes of production:

“Those who arrived at the various establishments found that nothing was done and everything had to be built with their own hands, usually with the most basic resources when it came to tools. Everything from clearing the land for construction and planting, to building dwellings. These were all built using wood that was abundant in the Aysén mountains.”<sup>5</sup>

The axe was probably the first transformative tool used by “pioneering settlers”.<sup>6</sup> The artists recognize the technique of fitting wood together so well that not a single nail was necessary. Augusto Grosse, a German explorer who travelled the most remote areas in the 1940s and contributed to identify unmapped geography, who is still a local legend,<sup>7</sup> left a detailed testimony of his visit to a house of this type in the Riesco lake:

3. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”. *Feminist Studies* 14, Nr. 3, 1988.

4. Mateo Martinic, historian, observes that Aysen, being hard to access and partially uncharted geographically, did not get registered on maps until the 1930. The institutionalization of the territory in 1927 (According to decree 8.582 by the Ministry of the Interior in Chile) established its geographic borders, although Martinic is clear that colonization had taken place towards the end of the 19th century and that indigenous populations had been in the region for at least 10 thousand years. 1927 marks specifically the date of the arrival of the political-administrative apparatus in the region.

(i.e.: Its incorporation into the electoral system in 1930). In: Martinic, Mateo. *De la Trapananda al Aysen: una mirada reflexiva sobre el acontecer e la Región de Aysén desde la prehistoria hasta nuestros días*. Santiago, Pehuén Editores, 2005, p. 261.

5. In Martinic. op. cit, p. 209.

6. Following Mateo Martinic’s term: “pioneering colonizers”, meaning those who arrived before territorial institutionalization in 1927.

7. A recent publication by Aumen has revealed the interesting family archives of the Grosse family, with presentations and

“The house that Mrs. Aguilar takes us to is low and is made of wood cut with an axe, so it is somewhat irregular. No windows, but the construction itself is quite practical. When you are alone and you have no planks, you have to cope with the axe, as Aguilar did. The external and internal walls consist of logs cut at the same height and placed next to each other. Moldings and dowels hold the entire frame, which did not use a single nail. Of course, the appearance of this type of construction is crude, but it is still comfortable”.<sup>8</sup>

With the advent of sawmills<sup>9</sup> in the thirties, manual work was gradually replaced by mechanical and industrial labor. Modern techniques for building houses began to appear and the landscape started to change more quickly. The sawmills contain a material history of these houses, providing the scenes for one of the videos in the exhibition. Trunks become planks, irregular surfaces become abstract, smooth planes. How many thick forests of mañiu, luma, cypress, beech, laurel, coigüe, huahuan, tepú, ciruelillo (plum) and raulí were left unaffected?

Holzapfel and Preece learned from the rural knowledge of Aysén and applied local techniques in the production of their own housing in Cerro Castillo. Unlike urban life, where knowledge of the means of production has been alienated, the artists entered in the chain of experiential knowledge as producers. They rebuilt the wooden structure that sustains rural homes in the area and they employed rapid construction techniques using lenga planks and nails. The artists erected a wooden grid in front of the vast landscape, as though adding to the territory as a living archive. For a moment, Holzapfel and Preece considered living in their house, and creating a studio for nomadic artists to work seasonally in the region. This site-specific work entitled *Housing in Amplitude*,<sup>10</sup> lends its title to the exhibition at the MAC. The house was dismantled, moved and rebuilt at the museum, in accordance with its original nomadic and artistic purpose.

The burnt forest is a memorial to struggles against matter. In *El Blanco*, the artists filmed verses by the popular poet Delino de la Hoz: while the lyrics refer to the work of loggers and daily life in that place, the camera scans across a broad valley covered

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films of the explorations: Augusto Grosse – Explorando Aysén, ONG Aumen, Aysén, 2010.

8. Cited in: Martinic, op. cit. p. 328.

9. In 1930 there were already two active sawmills in Aysén, in 1937 the number had increased to 14, and by 1950, there were 43. In: Martinic, op. cit. p. 310.

10. Created for the *Trapananda Project*, Aysén, 2013, curated by Alfons Hug.

in burnt logs. Video as historical record reveals the drastic changes that have taken place in the territory. Until the 1950s, large fires raged across Aysén, having been lit to “open fields” i.e. to clear them, especially for sheep farming. The Swiss geologist Arnold Heim, who investigated the Patagonian ice fields during his travels in 1939, saw the fires and described this battle with matter, “the landscape, covered with dead tree trunks, gave the impression of a battlefield”.<sup>11</sup>

## THE POLICY OF FENCES

Fences, political actors par excellence, date back to the early settlers and divide, limit, control and order the lives of humans and animals alike. The wooden fences of Aysén, built using local techniques closely related to the materials available, not only mark the boundaries of the property but also the border between Chile and Argentina. To “Jump the fence” had more than one connotation:

“Fences: to carry out the tasks you need to have some basic facilities that allow you to stop, herd, shelter, measure, control and feed livestock. These constructs are known by the

name of fences. In areas with a shortage of wood, wire fences predominate, built with wooden posts and wire strands between them. They parcel land and demarcate the boundaries of property, and they also function as a border with Argentina”.<sup>12</sup>

The “infinite” fences that extend through the vast territory, occasionally give way to gates, a doorway to entry and exit from the territory. The gates are also shaped by local designs and their maximum width depends, for example, on the length of the logs that can be obtained from the surrounding trees. Their forms result from an intrinsic relationship with the material of the place. The most common are the “blow gates” that can be operated from a horse.<sup>13</sup> In El Blanco, Olaf Holzapfel reproduced the basic model of a gate<sup>14</sup> using ñirre and typical wooden features in the shape of an X. The fences and gates reconfigure the space in the Museum of Contemporary Art MAC, inevitably disturbing the new territory.

## INDIGENOUS TRACES

The archaeological gaze of *Housing in Amplitude* restores contemporary value

11. Martinic, op. cit. p. 307.

12. Galindo, Leonel. *Aysén, voices and customs*. Santiago, Ed. Orígenes, 2001.

13. Galindo, op. cit.

14. ‘Having a Gate’, exhibited at the Coyhaique Cultural Centre, in the context of the *Aysén Island Project*, 2013, curated by Catalina Correa.

to the nomadic ways of life of indigenous communities, relegated to the past by the narrative of traditional historiography. Aysén has so often been described as a “lonely” and “uninhabited” area with complete disregard for the indigenous communities inhabiting the region, such as the Tehuelches, Alacalufes and Chonos. Indigenous communities that had neither fences nor private property, or nations. Their houses were temporary tents. Strictly speaking, these inhabitants were citizens of the expanse. When Magellan sighted them for the first time in 1520, he saw nothing but ‘footprints’.<sup>15</sup> Holzapfel and Preece recognize an indigenous heritage in the homes and ways of life of nomadic shepherds and cattlemen of Aysén. They note, for example, that the teepee structure operates as a constructive principle, similar to the current rural housing style of Aysén. Between 1935 and 1941 the Salesian priest, explorer, cartographer and chronicler Alberto María de Agostini travelled the region of Aysén’s Patagonian Andes, photographing and filming indigenous communities, collecting evidence of their presence. He published the book *the Patagonian Andes from where we extract the following description of nomadic Tehuelche housing:*

“The houses of these Aborigines consisted of an Aboriginal tent (*kuu*) formed by a large deck made of guanaco skins, sewn with the tissues of the same animal, placed on top of a series of cross sticks supported in two or three parallel rows of wooden supports whose height decreased from the outside inward. (...) Sometimes several awnings were placed together, usually belonging to relatives and friends, connecting one side of the cover and extending onto the adjoining tent”.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than peaceful co-existence, the indigenous people were displaced and removed from the territory, threatened by civilization, as Agostini wrote in 1945, probably referring to the impact of large livestock enterprises that settled there in the early twentieth century:<sup>17</sup> “Today civilization, with all its modern improvements, has rapidly invaded the vast Patagonian plains, populating them with thousands of sheep, laying roads, and building farms and villages, it is hard to remember that these same plains, a few decades ago, belonged entirely to those famous giant indigenous peoples [Tehuelches]”.<sup>18</sup>

15. Because of their large feet covered by Guanaco skins, Magellan referred to the Tehuelches as ‘Patagones’ (big feet) a name that would be used for the entire region inhabited by the race. In: Agostini, Alberto María de. *Andes patagónicos: viajes de exploración a la Cordillera Patagónica Austral*. 2a. ed. aum. and corrections and maps author. Buenos Aires, Tall. Gráf. Guillermo Kraft, 1945. p. 377.

16. Agostini, op. cit. p. 385.

17. The Industrial Society of Aysén, Anglo-Chilean Pastoral Co. and the Baker Explorers Society.

18. Agostini, op. cit. p. 377.

## TRANSLATIONS OF THE EXHIBITION SPACE

The exhibition as a “machine for perception”<sup>19</sup> operates as a means of translation and reflection and encourages us to perceive the material again. Just as meanings shift from one context to another, materiality is also transformed; it is unstable. The artists reposition the material “collection” of Aysén in the MAC and invite the public to explore the space and interpret the traces, actions and memory present in the material and its transfer to the Museum, conferring intellectual power to the physical elements and the context. Although expanse is what prevailed in Aysén, the houses within the walls of the museum are displayed in close proximity, which allows for a comparative assessment of the different building systems.

*Housing in Amplitude* allows the material to act, raw and free, close to the perception of the senses, as a living archive. Elements from a “difficult geography and nasty climate”<sup>20</sup> redefine the circulation and collection of the museum, transferring and translating its ways of living, contrasting the precarious materiality

with the neoclassical monumentality of the MAC: we enter a shelter and find the popular lyrics of the poet; we run into a fence; better go back; on the wall, hundreds of old shingles form large “pictures” to be observed; and here is a gate, where will it lead?

Unlike the historically smooth, impenetrable surfaces featured in abstract works from the fifties<sup>21</sup>, here the abstract forms embody a memory, they have layers, cracks, traces and age. Contrary to the search for a universal code, the key to entering *Housing in amplitude* is a local archive. A clear example is the hundreds of shingles forming abstract “paintings” on the wall at the MAC, showing their wear and tear; this is the life and memory of the material. The roof shingles belonged to the old school of Cerro Castillo, cut and carved by hand and by axe, by a logger—a *tejuelero*—now an extinct skill. *Housing in amplitude* exhibits concrete materials in relation to their production methods and grants museum space to popular art.

And if the property is linked to the construction and occupation of space in modern Aysén, artists dismiss the importance of “property”

19. Wilfried Kühn, “Raummodelle”. In: Architektur ausstellen. Conference, Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt, Germany, 15.11.2013.

20. Martinic, op. cit. p. 206.

21. Clement Greenberg, the American abstract painting theorist from the 1950s, emphasised formal characteristics such as smooth surfaces, without external references to paintings. In: “Abstract, Representational and so forth” (1954), in: Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1984. In the same period, Werner Haftmann in Germany declared its universal value: “Abstraction as a World Language”. In: Haftmann, Werner. *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*. München, Prestel-Verlag, 1954.

in the field of art to transform the individual signature into a collective name, such as collaboration, deterritorialization, production and sharing: Olaf Holzapfel/Sebastián Preece.

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Rather than being a nostalgic operation, Holzapfel and Preece's work brings contemporaneity to a region that is not only pristine and immutable (tourist discourse) but also contingent in nature. Although, historically, rural life precedes urban life, it does not necessarily confine it to the past; it is contemporary, and its conflicts are local and global (the exploitation of natural resources, for example). Seeing a territory as a living archive, as a cultural or "humanized" landscape<sup>22</sup> involves identifying material codes, modern land use, the underlying political structure for rural spatial order and, ultimately, the issues behind the distinction between nature and culture (critical discourse, according to "Anthropogenic" thinking). Given the virtuality of Google Earth, social networks and the homogeneity of global thinking, *Housing in Amplitude* exhibits the qualities of matter, affection, action, knowledge, memory and local roots. To adopt Donna Haraway's concept, we

can say that this project has met the challenge of exploring the "radical historical specificity"<sup>23</sup> of dwelling in Aysén and especially provides better evidence of the world. Instead of producing an instrumental knowledge (which is negotiable and can be a source of exploitation), *Housing in Amplitude* shows how rural space has been produced in the community of Aysén, intertwining modes of rural production and artistic collaboration.

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22. In: Martinić, op. cit. p. 457

23. Haraway, op. cit.