Sanctuary of Water

Tomás Saraceno in Collaboration with Red Atacama

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To speak of water is to speak of life. This reader speaks of the beginning of *The Sanctuary of Water*: a collective artwork, an act of resistance to extractivism, and a shared dream that has caused many sleepless nights. As we lie awake, perhaps listening to the slow drip of a leaking tap, *The Sanctuary of Water* is taking shape on the salt flats of the Salinas Grandes in Northern Argentina.

Conceived in dialogue between Red Atacama (Atacama Network), the Aerocene Foundation, Tomás Saraceno, and Indigenous leaders and activists, the artwork inhabits one of the most coveted territories targeted by the so-called 'green transition'. In a landscape defined by permeability and extraction, the sculpture is a monument to water, a protection zone, and a site that orients toward futures that sustain the communities defending it. It may not survive forever. It could be halted before it is completed, or destroyed once it stands. Yet the act of raising it together is itself an assertion: that another path exists.

This reader details the making of the sculpture that extends across lands, infrastructures, ecologies, and social relations appearing simultaneously in Salinas Grandes and at Haus der Kunst in Munich. Presented as part of the exhibition *Ancestral Futures,* it is guided by a thought by the Indigenous Brazilian philosopher Ailton Krenak: the future is not something to be invented; it already exists, woven into the landscape like a river. *The Sanctuary of Water,* named in recognition of water as a sacred and life-giving presence, makes these entanglements visible, inviting us to perceive the interdependencies that shape our worlds.

The book is conceived as an open document: free of copyright, available to be updated as the Sanctuary grows and its communities' stories continue to unfold. It belongs, like the water it speaks of, to no one and to everyone. Designed as a reversible volume opening from both ends, the texts in Spanish and English are mirrored, while the photographs gathered by Studio Tomás Saraceno move alongside them in much the same way a river runs beside a walking path: occasionally touching, following the same direction through different means.

The book opens with a text by Tomás Saraceno, charting his political and personal genealogy of *The Sanctuary of Water* across twenty years of engagement with the communities and the Salinas. As legal coordinator of Red Atacama, Miguel Casimiro maps the institutional frameworks through which communities defend their water, exposing the gap between recognised rights and lived reality. Andrei Fernández, artist, curator and researcher, and Celeste Valero, weaver and women's rights activist, contribute a travel essay emerging from a ten-day journey through the Lickana in February 2026 along the routes of the Atacama people geographies.

As a social worker and female leader of the Atacama Nation, Luisa Casimiro draws out a lineage of resistance from the Malones de la Paz of 1946 to the present-day struggle against lithium extraction. Turning to the conceptual and cosmological foundations of *The Sanctuary of Water,* educator and researcher Iván Arjona Acoria weaves together the Kunza language, Andean astronomy, and the spiritual significance of salt and water in Atacameño life.

Sarah Johanna Theurer, the curator of the exhibition *Ancestral Futures* at Haus der Kunst, situates Saraceno's practice within a Latin American genealogy of art that is relational, political, and rooted in collective process; Theurer imagines a path that runs from the Salinas Grandes through decades of land-based, community-embedded practice. A long-term friend and collaborator of Tomás Saraceno, Andrea Lissoni, the Artistic Director of Haus der Kunst, reflects on *The Sanctuary of Water* within the institution's recent trajectory as a space rooted in connection and shared authorship. Linking spiders' vibrational webs, Munich's architectural landscape, and the Salinas Grandes, Lissoni articulates his understanding of openness and interconnection as political principles. Following this sensibility, the reader becomes a point of departure, an invitation to join in moving toward futures that can only be made together.

The Sanctuary of Water was conceived by artist Tomás Saraceno, following a direct request by the Indigenous Communities of Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc, northern Argentina, for a permanent sculpture to facilitate community-based rural tourism. It is being constructed with the support of Studio Tomás Saraceno, The Aerocene Foundation, Red Atacama, Haus der Kunst in Munich, and many more, among them Lisl Schöpflin, Stefan Vilsmeier and Sergio Linhares, and Freunde Haus der Kunst.



Towards *Puri Nuckyumtur*

The Sanctuary of Water in the Territory of the Atacama Nation

TOMÁS SARACENO

For the eleven communities of Red Atacama, for the communities of the Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc Basin, and for all those who have extended their trust so that so many of us could learn to work, to think, and to dream together.

> *When the Llama Drinks from the Stars and the Spider Weaves Cycles of Life, Where the Sky Touches the Earth and Time Grows Like Salt, The Sanctuary of Water reflects Fair Clouds on the Horizon.*

The *Sanctuary of Water* is being built as we write this. It occupies, marks, and resists the mega-mining lithium pools in one of the most contested territories of the so-called 'green transition.' It resists the conversion of water into capital for the monopoly of intelligence; it resists the erosion of ancestral memory. This land was illegally sold, and sold again, to foreign companies, in violation of the rights of Indigenous communities who have always lived here and who continue to live and defend it. Together, we are building a sanctuary as a place of encounter, one that can further support their political, economic, and spiritual sovereignty.

'No es Sequía, es Saqueo'– 'It's not a drought, it's plunder'. These words can be read on a mural in San Pedro de Atacama. This political slogan, common across Latin America, argues that water scarcity is not a natural phenomenon, but the result of mismanagement, privatisation, and exploitation of water by corporations and governments. In short: people are being robbed of a common good.

But what exactly is being taken? Everywhere you turn, people share the exact same story: that lithium is being removed from beneath these ancient salt flats, just as gold, silver, and iron were taken before by the *conquistadores* in the long continuity of colonial plunder. Yet the communities themselves keep revising and correcting this narrative with a patience that itself speaks of exhaustion: it is not the lithium they are taking. It is the water. One tonne of lithium requires approximately two million litres of water during extraction. And that water does not simply disappear. It returns contaminated, laced with brines, reagents, and

heavy metals that seep back into what remains of the aquifer. What comes back is no longer Puri, no longer the living water the communities know and struggle to protect.

Such was the case in the early hours of 25 March 2025, when a truck carrying lithium brine from the Tres Quebradas project – operated by LIEX, a subsidiary of the Chinese conglomerate Zijin Mining – overturned near Fiambalá, in Catamarca, fifty metres from a rural home, and the spilled brine reached the Río Chaschuil, the main source of water for the people and animals of the area. According to locals, it was the third such spill in seven months.[1]

The communities of the Salinas Grandes have long had to fight for the most basic element of all: water they can drink. In January 2019, after the tap water of San Antonio de los Cobres was found to be fouled – carrying arsenic, and at times larvae and worms – and after the long-promised El Acay aqueduct still had not been built, some fifty residents from the Kolla and Atacama communities walked more than 160 kilometres over three days, from their town in the Puna down to the city of Salta, to demand that the provincial government finally guarantee safe water. The aqueduct was inaugurated months later. It was the march that made it arrive.[2]

So the communities of the Salinas Grandes tell those willing to listen: stop talking about lithium. Talk about water. Talk about what is taken and what is left behind. Everyone can live without lithium. No one can live without water. And what the Atacameña anthropologist Jimena Cruz Mamani tells us – it is a responsibility that belongs to the whole world: 'not only indigenous peoples have the role of protecting water and caring for nature; it's a responsibility of all humans on this earth.'[3] Also, as Dario S. Martínez of the Comunidad de Tipán has stated, we must not 'wait for water to run out to appreciate it.'

This is a truth so profound that no artificial intelligence or digital memory seems capable of absorbing it – it is, however, the truth of an ancestral future where such deep knowledge, we hope, might finally be heard. It is the reason why we have decided (and whoever might be reading this, and is willing, should feel invited), together with the communities of the Salinas Grandes, to try to give shape to the unshapable; to listen to the water's cycles and whispers, and to help us build together a sanctuary of water.

The mural in San Pedro speaks locally, 'No es Sequía, es Saqueo (It's not a drought, it's plunder).' Yet, the condition it names is planetary. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly formally recognised access to safe drinking water and sanitation as a human right – building on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which had been in force since 1966.[4] Sixty years later, around 2.2 billion people still lack access to drinking water. Three and a half billion have no functioning toilets. These rights exist only on paper.



Franz Xaver Jungwirth (after J. G. Günther), *View of the Ludwigsbrücke with the Roter Turm, Munich*, 1767. Engraving on paper.

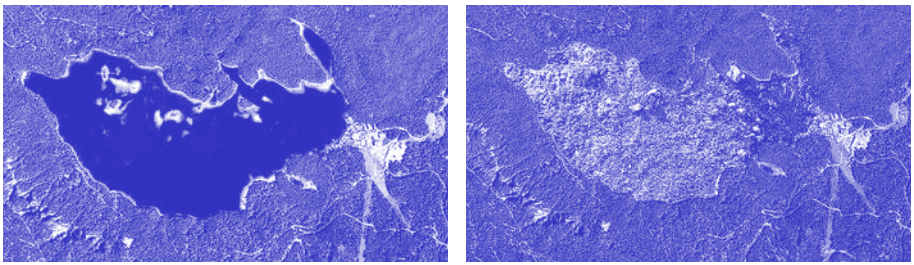
If you are reading this in Munich, you are reading it in a city whose founding is a water story. *München* – the name comes from the Old High German *Munichen*, meaning 'by the monks.' In the eighth century, Benedictine monks from Tegernsee Abbey settled on a hill above the Isar River, drawn there by fertile land and proximity to the Alpine trade routes. The city's formal birth in 1158, however, was not spiritual in nature – it was commercial and violent. Duke Henry the Lion destroyed a bridge belonging to the Bishop of Freising and built his own crossing of the Isar upstream, effectively seizing control of the most strategically important salt trade route in the region. Munich was founded on the control of a river crossing and the profit extracted from the salt trade.[5]

The Isar itself – whose name derives from the Indo-European root for 'flowing water', the same root that gives us the English word 'ice' – was for centuries the city's lifeline: drinking water, power for mills, transport of timber, the axis around which settlements grew. Until the 19th century, an entire network of artificial canals called Stadtbäche distributed Isar water throughout the city for drinking, commerce, and defence. The river was wild and seasonal, flooding regularly, depositing gravel across farmland, and changing its course at intervals. The city learned to live with its unpredictability until the 20th century, when the Isar was almost entirely canalised and diverted to hydroelectric plants, its flow engineered into compliance.[6]

Then, between 2000 and 2011, The City of Munich did something unusual: it partially gave the river back to the city's inhabitants. The Isar-Plan removed embankments, widened the riverbed, restored connections to surrounding floodplains, and built stone ramps so that fish could move upstream again. A city chose to re-hallow[7] what it had hollowed. The Isar-Plan is not yet complete. But it shows reversal is possible.

In Munich, as in much of Europe, salt was the gold of the past, and water the medium through which monopolies filled the vaults of empires.

Long before salt was traded, it was used to purify, to preserve, to bless. The crystals that empires hoarded were already, in every kitchen and every ceremony, doing work that money could not name. Today's 'white gold' is no longer salt, but lithium extracted from the same ancient landscapes – the same salt flats – and depriving the same communities who have always paid the price of other people's hunger for power. As a justification, mega-mining companies will say that mining generates jobs. But it doesn't. Throughout South America, mining regions are well-known to suffer under some of the worst poverty. Argentina is a clear example of this. Catamarca had one of the largest lithium mining projects in Latin America for the last 30 years, producing billions of dollars of wealth. Yet Catamarca is one of the poorest regions in Argentina, with some of the worst socioeconomic indices. The same thing happens in Chile, Brazil, or Peru – across the entire Global South: where there is mining, there is more poverty, because modern extraction barely requires people. The work is concentrated in the construction phase: building the plant, the roads, the brine ponds which generates a mirage of employment that mostly collapses once the site is operational. What remains is largely automated: the hazardous work of extraction performed by machines, with a small human crew left for logistics, transport, and maintenance. In Argentina only 10,000 people work in mining, less than 0.5% of the economically active population.[8]



Visualisation of Eibsee in Bavaria, aerial image of the lake before and after the hypothetical water drainage. Source: Aerocene Foundation, 2026

The extracted lithium does not stay in the region. It is shipped across oceans, refined, and eventually sealed into the batteries of electric vehicles produced by multinational companies operating far from South America. In Germany, manufacturers produced approximately 1.57 million such vehicles in 2024. Each one required, on average, eight kilograms of lithium. Together, they required more than twelve thousand tonnes. Behind those tonnes lies water – more than twenty four billion litres in total. It is a number too large to hold in the mind, so perhaps it is better understood contrasted against something familiar. Consider the Großer Alpsee in the Allgäu, its surface known to swimmers, its surrounding paths to hikers. Its volume could sustain German electric vehicle




No es
sequía
es
saqueo

production for just under two years. After that, it would be gone – drained entirely to meet the annual demand for lithium from a single industry. The Eibsee, cupped in the shadow of the Zugspitze, would last seventeen months; the Hopfensee, half a year. These are not abstract reservoirs. They are locations that form part of the region's collective memory.

The companies behind these numbers – BMW, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Tesla – are key players in the so-called 'Lithium Triangle', a territory that spans Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia, where around two thirds of the world's lithium is located.[9] These companies are present through contracts and partnerships, through sustainability audits and 'responsible sourcing' pledges. Their demand for 'white gold' continues a deeply entrenched colonial legacy in which ancestral lands are valued only for their resources. Devastating one landscape to serve a 'green transition' elsewhere is at the core of the Capitalocene's neo-colonial energy models, ones in which the top 1% of the world's population produce more emissions than the poorest 50%. This resource inequality deepens a climate debt that a minority in the Global North has been accumulating for centuries.

Germany itself is not only a beneficiary of this logic. In 2025, one of Europe's largest known lithium deposits was confirmed in the Altmark region of Saxony-Anhalt – estimated at up to 43 million tonnes of lithium carbonate equivalent and already under exploration licences. Three lithium deposits are now under exploration or development on German soil. Munich, a city built on salt-trade politics, forms part of a country that is rapidly becoming the next frontier of extraction. If multinational companies manage to overcome environmental protections far stricter than those in Argentina – and the pressure to do so is already intense – they may succeed in opening German soil to the same logic that has devastated the Salinas Grandes: the logic that says a landscape is only as valuable as what can be taken from it.

Over time, this logic leaves its own monuments. Monte Kali in Heringen, Hesse is a heap of mining waste rising almost 200 metres above the



Mount Kali, Germany. Photo: Uwe Aranas, CC BY 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

surrounding ground. A mountain made entirely of salt that no one will ever use. This salt leaches into the Werra River below, damaging the freshwater ecosystem.[10] Once, salt was worth as much as gold; today, when potash is the more profitable element, salt has become the waste product – too over-extracted, too contaminated to sell, piled into a mountain that visitors are now invited to hike for the view. The hierarchy is brutally clear: potash above salt, salt above water.

The communities of the Salinas have always made the inverse case. The same substance – sodium chloride – that piles uselessly in Heringen is what they cut, with patience, into the bricks for *The Sanctuary of Water* on their own territory. The difference is not in the material. The difference is in the relationship.



Aerocene Foundation protesting at Tesla Gigafactory, Grünheide, Brandenburg, 2025.

The most vivid proof of this continuity is already visible 600 kilometres to the north of Saxony-Anhalt. Tesla's Gigafactory in Berlin-Brandenburg, in the village of Grünheide, was built in a water protection zone located in one of the driest regions of Germany – a region that suffered consecutive droughts in recent years, and which continues to struggle with water shortages.[11] Since the factory began operations in 2022, the local water authority (Strausberg-Erkner Water) has imposed rationing on 170,000 residents of Grünheide. By 2025, residents were limited to 105 litres per person, per day (significantly lower than the average household in Germany), while Tesla's Gigafactory was permitted to use almost five million litres every twenty-four hours. The same water authority documented that Tesla had repeatedly exceeded its permitted discharge limits for nitrogen and phosphorus – in one instance by up to six times – degrading the quality of local waters, and moved to suspend the factory's wastewater service.[12] In a 2024 vote, over 65 percent of local residents rejected the factory's expansion plans. The municipal council approved it anyway.

In a protest camp that formed in the forest near Grünheide, earmarked for clearing – between the limbs and the suspended treehouses a banner at the entrance read 'water is a human right' alongside photographs of lithium salt flats in South America. The activists saw the parallels and understood what many governments do not want to openly acknowledge: that the same disregard for a territory and its inhabitants is being enacted in both places. The same companies draining water from the Salinas Grandes are draining the groundwater of Brandenburg, in the name of a 'green' transition, in both instances. But there is no green energy in this chain. There are only parallel extraction processes harming one community after another.

In 2025, together with members of the Aerocene community, I joined local and international demonstrators at Grünheide where Tesla's Gigafactory stands on sandy, drought-prone land. With the Aerocene community was the environmental and human rights activist Carola Rackete, and Verónica Chávez, the leader of the Santuario Tres Pozos community in Jujuy, Argentina, who launched an aerosolar sculpture outside the factory gates. Handwritten on its surface by Verónica were the words: 'We don't want to be a sacrifice zone.'

Growing a Dialogue

What companies refer to as the 'Lithium Triangle' is a territory I have been visiting and dialoguing with for over 30 years, a territory the communities themselves define as the Atacama Nation, a nation that does not follow the borders drawn by states but precedes them. I was born in that region too, though in a country I was not allowed to grow up in.

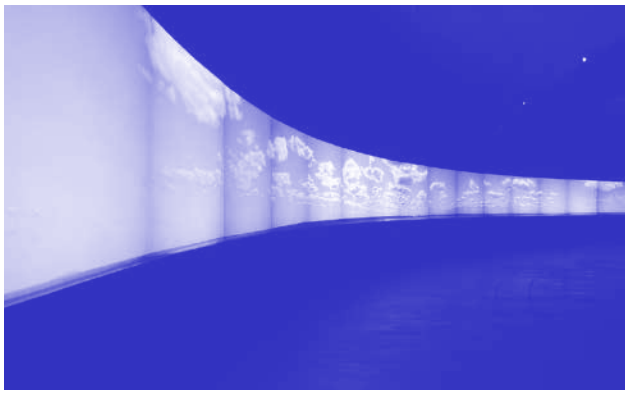
It was Tucumán, Argentina, 1973. My family were victims of the military dictatorship: at barely two years old, after my father had been detained and imprisoned, we were exiled to Italy. We were fortunate: my father held an Italian passport, and in those years, as for so many today, a passport was the difference between life and disappearance. During that time, more than 30,000 people were disappeared and killed. It is the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, searching so fervently for their children and grandchildren, who do not let us forget. It is the same matriarchal, life-defending persistence, that drives the women of the north of Argentina today, led by people like Luisa Casimiro, Verónica Chávez, and so many others who know that memory and water are the same thing: both are what life needs to continue.

My grandfather came to Argentina from Italy as a young engineer, to work for Techint – the company that, three generations later, through its energy arm Tecpetrol, would advance a lithium project in the very basin this text defends. I did not choose that symmetry. But I cannot pretend it away either. The same family arc that brought us to this country,

and that the dictatorship later drove into exile, is woven into the industrial history now pressing on the Salinas Grandes. To stand with the communities is not to stand outside that history. It is to stand inside it, and to ask it to turn.

After ten years of my family living in exile, democracy was reestablished in Argentina. In 1986, when I was twelve years old, we returned. For me, being back was something to which I could not relate – I had grown up somewhere else, 11,000 kilometers away. Yet this territory I had not been able to inhabit as a child became over time a place to which I felt an inexplicable connection.

I first visited Atacama at age eighteen, on a promise to meet a friend, carried by a tourist bus across the desert. Travelling through the region, I visited several salt lakes which became some of my favourite places on earth. When the salt lakes are covered in a thin layer of water during the rainy season, they reflect the sky. There are days when you feel as if you are floating among the clouds, and all borders are blurred. There are days when the horizon disappears entirely and you feel immersed in something else far greater. No above, no below. Only immersion in the great entanglement of the terrestrial and the aerial.



Tomás Saraceno, *Cumulus,* installation view at The Curve, Barbican Art Centre, London, 2006.

It was this memory that gave birth to one of my first exhibitions, in 2004 for The Curve at the Barbican Art Centre in London. A group of close collaborators and I spent almost a month in the middle of the salt lake – with little equipment and even less experience – and managed to film a 90-metre-long movie which we then projected onto the curved corridor wall of the Barbican. A film one could never see at once; one had to walk through the curved corridor screen to reconstruct or imagine the movie in one's mind. A bit like this text,and this project.

What we filmed in those weeks was the salt flat by day. The cameras we had then could not record what we were seeing at night. We slept in the middle of the lake, inside a canvas pool that protected us from the thin layer of water below. One night, one of us stepped outside the pool and woke the rest, calling 'come over, come over.' The temperature drops as much as thirty degrees between noon and midnight, and the cold at that altitude is severe – but we came out. What we saw, no film could capture: the reflection of the stars on the endless surface of the lake, the cosmos doubled, trembling gently in the water beneath. At every step, the universe rippling.

It was for this reason that we returned ten years later to film at night. When the surface of the lake ripples, the reflected starscape ripples too, making gentle time-space wavelets, bringing two distant stars or cloud galaxies closer together and then further apart. That doubling – sky and water, above and below – is the origin of *The Sanctuary of Water*. The reflective pond at its centre is built from this memory: a horizon that disappears, revealing a cosmos that continually unfolds and interweaves. A cosmos that the communities have been reading for millennia.



Tata Inti, performance organised by the Aerocene Foundation, Jujuy, 2017.

There we were, weaving together cosmic and terrestrial currents, with water as a medium for reflection on Pacha, the Andean concept of space-time as a living, relational whole. Perhaps reflection is the wrong word. The physicist and philosopher Karen Barad draws a careful distinction between reflection and diffraction: reflection assumes a mirror – a surface that represents what already exists – while diffraction produces something new at the point of encounter, two patterns meeting and making what neither contained alone.[13] What happens on the salt flat is closer to this: not a doubling, but a making: Pacha is the impossibility of dividing worlds. It is the entanglement of space and time, of here and now and then and elsewhere, a spatio-temporal interweaving that quantum

physics is still trying to understand. Of stars above and stars below. Of the living and the dead, the water and the sky, the ancestors of the generation to come. In Kunza, the language of the Atacameño people, the living earth is called Patta Hoyri.

There, where the sky touches the earth and time expands like salt, I began to wonder what it would mean to float at the bottom of an ocean of air, to float like a planet: held, drifting, in relation to the air, the water, and the earth we share – to belong to an atmosphere free from fossil fuel. It would take me years to see that the question was never only just about the air and the earth, but about the people who live in relation to them. That question has taken many forms, but it has never really left. For a long time, it appeared as a dream of *Cloud Cities* – habitable structures suspended in the aerial ocean, a different way of being on this planet. *Aerocene Pacha* (2020) was one answer: a solar flight above the Salinas Grandes that imagined what it would mean to drift with the air rather than burn through it. *The Sanctuary of Water* is another answer, from a different element. While *Aerocene Pacha* rose, *The Sanctuary of Water* stays – and reflects, with the water, with the people. Both are the same gesture, the same invitation to recognise that we are already on a planetary journey, already held by something vast and fragile, and that staying on board – truly staying, with attention and care – requires a completely different relationship to the world beneath our feet and above our heads. *The Sanctuary of Water* is not only an architectural structure. It is a point of departure.



Fly with Aerocene Pacha, human solar free-flight organised by the Aerocene Foundation, Jujuy, 2020.

Many years later, in 2020, I returned to Salinas Grandes, and together with the pilot Leticia Noemí Márquez, we lifted into the sky a sentence written by the communities living there: 'Water and life are worth more than lithium'. The Aerocene imagines liberation from fossil fuels, from hydrogen, from lithium, from the logic that calls living water a resource,

that calls a sacred salt flat a deposit, that calls a nation a desert. That solar flight above the Salinas Grandes set 32 world records and has been described as the most sustainable flight in aviation history. But these records were never really the aim. Making clear that the region is not a sacrifice zone, and not for sale, was always the motive – that crucial message rose with *Aerocene Pacha,* written by the indigenous communities themselves. Because water, as the communities teach us, is not a resource. It is a living being.

The flight had lifted the message into the sky; but the communities knew the struggle also had to be fought on the ground, in the language of the law. They had been confronting the advance of lithium mining for years, and what they asked was support on the terrain where that fight was decided: legal advice, strategies for making their struggle visible, a clearer reading of the energy transition being imposed on them. At their request, Aerocene – working together with the communities of Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc Basin – organised a gathering: two days in January 2023 in San Francisco del Alfarcito, Jujuy. The event drew lawyers, scientists, writers, and artists to the territory to work alongside the communities of the Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc. The sociologist and writer Maristella Svampa, drawing on her longstanding work on extractivism and the networks of Argentine ecosocial thought, helped shape the gathering. There were workshops on legal strategies and on the rights of the basin, practical sessions and conversations on what a just ecosocial transition might look like, and a screening of our film *Fly with Aerocene Pacha* (2020). Among those present were the environmental lawyers Enrique Viale and Alicia Chalabe – the latter a longtime legal representative of the communities – Gastón Chillier, Melisa Argento, Bruno Fornillo and Alejo di Risio of the Colectivo de Acción por la Justicia Ecosocial, Pía Marchegiani and María Laura Castillo Díaz of the Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, the writers Graciela



The Alfarcito Gathering, organised by the Aerocene Foundation, Jujuy, 2023.

Speranza, Claudia Aboaf and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, the curator Inés Katzenstein, Verónica Chávez, president of the Santuario Tres Pozos community, and members from all thirty-three Indigenous communities in the Salinas Grandes and Guayatayoc Basin.

Out of those two days came a collective document: the Declaration of the Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc Basin as a Subject of Rights.[14] Written together in the communities' own words, it affirms the basin's right to the integral respect of its existence and to the regeneration of its life cycles – its salt flats, its high-Andean wetlands, its water – and it names the communities themselves as the guardians of those rights, grounded in the Argentine Constitution, ILO Convention 169, and the Escazú Agreement.[15] To declare the Salinas a subject of rights was to say – in a language the law might finally understand – what the communities have long known and what Puri has always meant: that the land is not a resource but a living relation, and that water, salt, and sky carry rights that precede and exceed the claims of any corporation or state.

Puri, The Song of Water

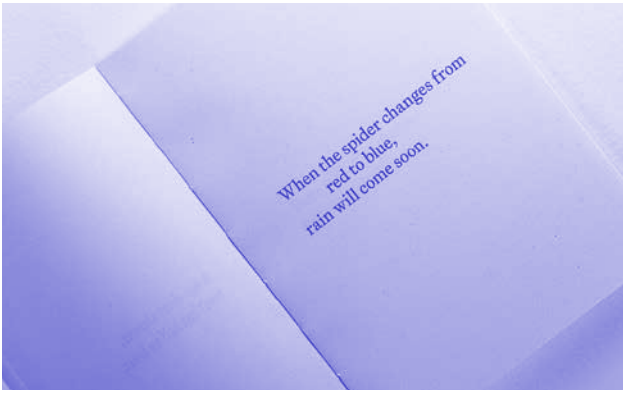
In the Kunza language, spoken by the Lickanantay people throughout the Atacama region, water is called Puri. Puri is the spirit of water, the song that runs through it, the memory it holds. When the elders say 'Puri is the song of water' they mean that every spring tells a different story. The salt flats of Salinas Grandes lie over 3,600 metres above sea level. As Miguel Casimiro of the Red Atacama writes in his text, the Salinas Grandes is an endorheic basin: a closed hydrological system, with no outlet to the sea. Everything that is extracted is permanently subtracted. Every drop pumped to brine ponds, every contaminant introduced, every alteration to the relationship between freshwater and saline brine modifies the system irreversibly.

At the centre of the Salinas, the salt opens. The communities call those openings 'eyes of the salt flat', turquoise pools of fresh water that break through the white crust, framed by glittering brine. They are sacred places – sites where Puri rises through the salt. The wells are sanctuaries. Not surface lakes, but openings onto a deeper system. Beneath the salt, the water eyes connect to each other through underground rivers that thread the basin like veins, carrying water between sites that, on the surface, seem entirely separate. The political theorist and writer Eduardo Galeano called them the open veins of Latin America[16] – the channels through which the continent's wealth has been drained outward for five centuries. Here the metaphor is no metaphor: the veins are literal, the draining is literal, and the plunder named on the mural in San Pedro, where this essay began, is the same wound, and it is still open.





At the 2023 Alfarcito gathering, Levi, a local writer, told a story his grandmother had told him. Long ago, the water eyes were wild, and would swallow the llamas of the salt caravans. There was one eye in the south of the Salinas and another in the north. The grandfather, the story goes, found a horse fast enough to outrun water: he would enter the northern eye at full gallop, the horse's legs beating the water until bubbles broke through in the southern eye. The stray llamas would emerge there, salt still on their backs. 'Now,' said Levi, 'the little eyes are tame.' The writer Claudia Aboaf, listening, replied: 'Of course. Now everything wild, everything alive, in this territory is at risk.'



Tomás Saraceno, *Spiders in Motion, Rainy Commotion.*
Ivorypress, 2023.

The story is older than its words. The salt crust of the Salinas is some six thousand years old; the aquifer that feeds them is believed to be more than five million years old. Puri predates the salt by orders of magnitude. The salt is the recent skin. The water is the deep ancestor. And the people are nearly as old as the salt. The Atacama Nation has held an uninterrupted presence across the Lickana for more than fifteen thousand years – long before the borders of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile cut a single people into three. The water is the deep ancestor; the communities are its oldest companions.

Aurelio Flores of the Red Atacama communities explains: 'Here we see water: what is water today, over time transforms into salt and rock. This salt flat is made of water that has been crystallising. Water circulates: sometimes it is more present in the salt flat, other times in the sky. It is a rotating cycle that we must care for.'[17] Soledad Quipildor of the Community de Esquina de Guardia names what is at stake: 'At the heart of the salt flat, water is a hidden treasure, a mirage that reveals the fragility of life.' Miguel Casimiro identifies the issue with a precision worth holding onto: water is a system of ecological memory – the *vegas,* the *bofedales,* the *vertientes,* the *salares* each holding records of herding, seasons,

ancient paths, and the equilibrium of fresh water and brine. To extract beyond the system's limits is not only to take water; it is to erase a memory the territory has kept for thousands of years. To defend Puri is to defend that whole web of relation.

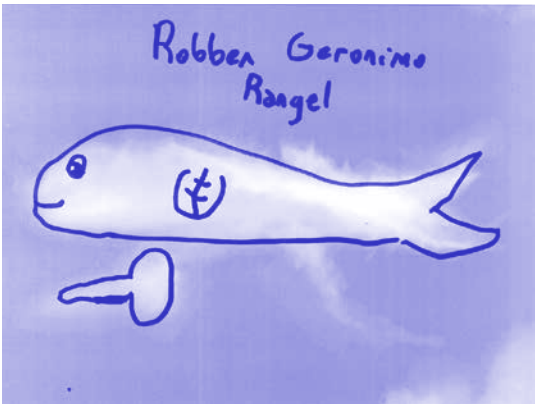
The Red Atacama, a confederation of eleven communities, is not only a cultural inheritance but a sovereignty in practice – governed by its own assemblies, its own customary law, its own authorities. It is recognised by Article 75.17 of the Argentine Constitution, by ILO Convention 169, and by the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. *The Sanctuary of Water* exists inside this institutionality.

The Kolla and Atacama communities continue to care for this cycle today, as they have for thousands of years. They read water in the movement of clouds, the changing of air pressure, the behaviour of insects and mammals. They also pay close attention to the cosmos: in the broader Andean tradition the celestial llama Yacana drinks from Mayu, the river of stars. When she drinks with gratitude, her gift falls to Earth as rain – a cosmic reciprocity that, in the Quechua tradition, feeds the water cycle. In the Atacameño tale, which Iván Arjona Acoria recounts in his essay, the black llama – the *atchi silla* – is not only a constellation but a single presence spanning Earth and sky: the llama on the ground and her reflection in the Milky Way are one and the same, binding the herder to the firmament. This is the same doubling the salt flat performs with water – above and below, not two things but one – read here through the body of an animal.

Living in a region as arid as the Salinas Grandes, the communities also know how to tell when it's going to rain. There's a black butterfly in Cobres that has a symbol – a nine or a six, depending on how you look at it – on its wings. It appears before the rainy season. When the moon is surrounded by clouds, it means rain will follow shortly. When the horsefly appears, it means the llamas and *vicuñas* (wild lamas), are going to give birth soon. The ability to read the weather – through the movement of clouds, the behaviour of animals, the shifts in air pressure, the cycles of the sky – is itself a form of knowledge that has changed profoundly. The signs are still there, but the climate that taught them no longer holds steady, and the patterns that read true for generations no longer read the same way. It was in this spirit that the practice of *Fairclouds* was born. At the Alfarcito gathering in January 2023, children from schools across the region were given photographs of clouds and invited to find what they could see within them: animals, patterns, premonitions. What emerged was not illustration but interpretation – a continuation, in children's hands, of the same sky-reading that has guided the communities for thousands of years.

What I have learnt from the communities of Salinas Grandes is that their knowledge is not mythology. It is a way of understanding relations. Water does not move through soil and sky – it moves through worlds, and





Fairclouds Workshop during *The Alfarcito Gathering*, organised by the Aerocene Foundation, Jujuy, 2023.

through us. The anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena has described the beings that inhabit the Andean world as 'earth-beings' – entities that are not inert resources but living, sentient participants in a territory composed by relations among people and the earth itself. She names the structural disappearance of these worlds the 'anthropo-not-seen': the way extraction systems reduce living landscapes to raw material value, making invisible the relations that sustain them.[18]

At this very moment, Argentina is under a government that has systematically dismantled environmental protections, pushed through a reform of the 2010 Glacier Law opening glaciers and periglacial zones to mining, and authorised the privatisation of the state water and sanitation company serving millions. The president has openly stated that a company can essentially pollute a river as much as it wants, because water, in his view, has no greater value.[19] This is the level of impunity we are facing.

Miguel Casimiro's essay points to something even more structural than any single administration: that across decades and across political parties, the rights of indigenous peoples have been formally recognised in law and then systematically failed in practice. The Constitution, ILO Convention 169, the UN Declaration, even the IFC's own Performance Standard 7 all require consultation and consent – and yet, as he writes, consultations are held *after* the decisions are taken, jurisdictions are passed back and forth, the structural question of water and consent remains unresolved. The Red Atacama has addressed this gap by exercising its rights anyway: through its assemblies, its own protocols of consultation, and the acts of self-determination this text returns to later. The recognition exists on paper. The Red Atacama is what makes it real on the ground.

In January 2026, The United Nations declared that the world has entered an era of 'Global Water Bankruptcy' – meaning humanity has permanently destroyed more fresh water than nature can ever rebuild. But this is not humanity's failure equally shared: it is the predictable outcome of a Capitalocene – a system that turned water into profit, and called the destruction 'growth'. Each degree of warming allows the air to hold seven percent more moisture. The atmosphere becomes a sponge that wrings itself out unpredictably – flood here, drought there, the same disturbed cycle in opposite extremes. This phenomenon has a name: water blindness.[20] We can see floods and dead rivers, but not the carbon dioxide in the air that causes them. The water crisis is the climate crisis made visible.

Perhaps this is why two practices have always belonged together. *Aerocene* tries to give a shape to air – to the rising temperature of an atmosphere thickening with what we have burned. *The Sanctuary of Water* tries to give a shape to water, to the Puri held under the salt, invisible to anyone who has not learned to perceive it. Both attempt the same impossible task: to render the imperceptible perceptible. Art, here, is what gives the invisible a form for defending.

While corporations and governments run water into debt, communities around the world have kept rivers alive, aquifers full, and wetlands breathing – not by accident, but by knowledge, discipline, and reverence. These communities are not only Indigenous peoples in the Global South. They are also the residents of Grünheide defending their groundwater from Tesla, and the Berliners who – drawing on Venezuela's *mesas de agua* (1999) and the Cochabamba Water War (2000) – formed the Berlin Water Table (2006), which helped drive a referendum that forced the disclosure of privatization contracts and paved the way for the remunicipalisation of the city's water utility (completed in 2013). The flow of solidarity has never gone only in one direction. There are water defenders everywhere who have never stopped treating water as sacred. These models are not relics of the past; they are the blueprint for future survival: living proof that another relationship with water is not only possible, but already here.[21]

Inside the Art Space, Inside the River

The exhibition *Ancestral Futures* at Haus der Kunst does not only bear witness – it seeks to act. Inside this Art Centre, several toilets have been transformed. Fitted with a system long used in Japan, the water visitors use to wash their hands flows directly into the cistern below, saving roughly 5,000 litres per person per year through a gesture so quiet it becomes embedded in everything around it. This is not plumbing. In the tradition of Magritte's pipe and Duchamp's urinal – objects that refused



Render of a toilet with a water-saving tank to be installed at Haus der Kunst, Munich.

to be only what they appeared to be – this toilet refuses to be only a toilet. It is a circular proposition. What if every museum, every public building, every home across Europe made this one small act of repair? What if the gesture of saving water became, itself, part of an artistic practice – a performance enacted millions of times a day, in silence, by everyone?

Beside the toilets, a small text reads: *Change what you can change at home. Do not export what you cannot solve.* In the Salinas Grandes, the Aerocene Foundation helped to build several dry toilets – water-free, returning nutrients to the earth. In urban housing, the gesture takes a different form: the small alteration of a tank, a cistern, such as the 8 different toilets we have installed in Italy and Germany; a model we are currently preparing to present to the European Union. The gesture changes with the place, but the principle holds: those who can change, do change. The shape of that change belongs to each place.

To drift is to let the mountain move you. The water carrying your body in Munich began as snow on the Alps. The same vertical logic of glacier, melt, river, aquifer is what has shaped the Pueblo Nación Atacama for centuries. The Andes and the Alps are doing the same thing. The water arrives here as a gift, freely. From there, it is being taken. These are not the same conditions, and they cannot be made into the same image, but the source is shared.

The invitation, then, is simple. The exhibition extends into the Eisbach canal, which flows through the surrounding English Garden, only metres away from Haus der Kunst. Visitors can bring their swimsuits, their towels, and reuse what they already have. We have built changing rooms for the metamorphosis. For visitors who come without one, swimming suits are available, printed with the drawings of clouds made by the children of Salta, embroidered by members of their communities in the textile traditions of the Pueblo Nación Atacama, patterns carried across generations. The garment is not a souvenir, and it is not new demand. One





The Eisbach next to Haus der Kunst, Munich and sketch for *Fairclouds Swimwear,* 2026.

hundred percent of every purchase returns directly to the Pueblo Nación Atacama, to support the defence of their hydrosocial cycle – the whole web of governance, ceremony, and care with which water is held in that place.

You will not be alone in the river. The Eisbach has its surfers, who have made the standing wave their own since the 1970s – returning year in, year out, through seasons and weathers, to read the river's mood, to feel the temperature of the Alpine snowmelt as it pulses through. They do not own the wave. They do not extract it. They arrive, they listen, they ride, and they leave the water as they found it.

To drift in the Eisbach, in the centre of Munich, wearing the clouds of Salta's children on your skin, is to carry – for a few minutes – a knowledge that has no border. Pause your phone – leave it asleep in the cabinet.[22] The Isar fed this city before the city had a name. The Eisbach is one of its veins; it is still flowing. Let the current move you. The songs of the birds will accompany you. Just feel the water. Be with it. The same question is being asked, in Munich and 12,000 kilometres south: what are we willing to do to defend the water that arrives here freely – and to protect the water that elsewhere is being taken?

The Apacheta

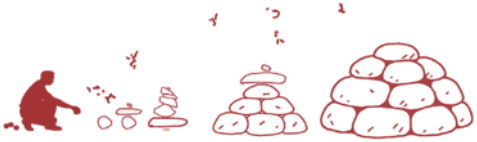
What Haus der Kunst enables is part of a larger action unfolding on the salt flats themselves. To situate the work that everything else grows out of, we begin with the form that gives it shape. The apacheta is not only a marker, but a structure of memory and a form of governance.

Across the high passes of the Andes, travellers have stopped for millennia at these growing cairns of stone. Each stone is an offering – to

the mountain, to the path, to those who came before and those not yet born. But the apacheta is also a way of deciding. In Andean territorial logic, it marks not merely a location but a relation: between the traveller and the land, between the living and the ancestors, between what is known and what remains on the far side of the horizon.

There is no chair at the head of an apacheta. There is no podium, no document that precedes the gathering. Decisions emerge from the act of being together in a place, listening to what the place itself is saying. This is what Adriana Guzmán, a Bolivian Aymara feminist thinker, calls *comunalidad*: not democracy in the procedural sense, but something older and more demanding – an ethic of the collective in which decisions are not made for a community but *with* it, where no single individual owns the conclusion.[23]





Apacheta, Northern Andes.

In the words of Red Atacama: 'The apachetas not only mark the paths; they bless them. They are our spiritual beacons.'[24] They are, at once, cartography and ceremony, navigation and governance, territory and time. To speak of *The Sanctuary of Water* is to speak of the apacheta – not as sketch, proposal, or institutional brief, but as something that grows stone by stone. Like an apacheta, *The Sanctuary of Water* emerges through accumulated acts of presence and repeated returns in which each encounter alters those involved. From this logic, *The Sanctuary of Water* takes form.

Land Art, and What Comes Before

IN CONVERSATION WITH YASMIL RAYMOND

Long before any artist claimed a remote landscape as a site, communities were building monumental earthworks together – not as acts of individual expression, but as collective acts of cosmological and social cohesion. The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks, located in what we today refer to as the Ohio Valley region, were built between 2,000 and 1,600 years ago

by dispersed, non-hierarchical groups. Squares, circles, and octagons, geometrically precise and aligned with the cycles of the sun and moon. Raised by communities who gathered periodically to worship and stay connected to one another. The Great Serpent Mound – 1,348 feet of effigy winding across the Ohio landscape – is so thoroughly communal in its making that archaeologists still debate which culture built it, and when. The authorship has dissolved entirely into the land.

Further south and west, across the Andes and the high Atacama plateau itself, similar practices left their marks: geoglyphs, terraces, water channels, ceremonial pathways built over generations by communities whose relationship to individual authorship did not map onto ours. Among the most striking are the Nazca Lines of southern Peru, traced between roughly 100 BCE and 600 CE by removing the dark, iron-rich surface stones to reveal the pale ground beneath. Birds, spiders, plants, and vast geometric forms stretch across kilometres of desert – figures so large they reveal themselves fully only from above. Archaeologists have shown they required neither forced labour nor centralised power: a few people, using only wooden stakes and cord, could trace even the largest figures over generations. Scholars increasingly read them as ceremonial pathways – walked in procession, oriented towards water and fertility, made by the same people who built the *puquios,* the underground aqueducts that still carry water through that desert today.

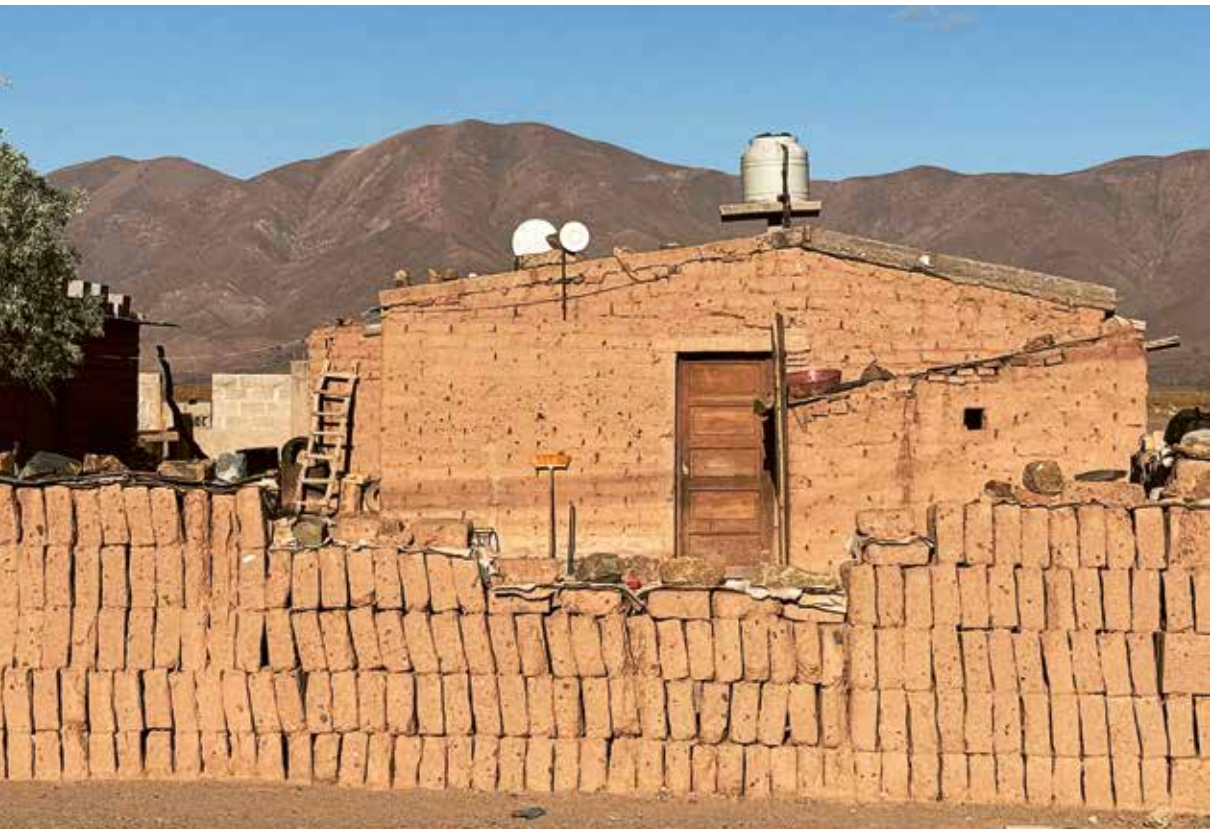
These were not artworks in the modern sense. They were acts of collective intelligence – cosmological, functional, and inseparable from the life of the people who made them. The impulse was communal long before it was authorial: from Stonehenge to the Hopewell mounds to the Nazca lines, people raised monuments together that belonged to no one among them. These earthworks lie flat against the earth, authored by no one and everyone – horizontal, not vertical, the architecture of the assembly, not the throne. It is this ancestral logic, not the heroic gesture of the lone Western artist, that *The Sanctuary of Water* reaches toward.

The canonical works of twentieth-century Land Art – Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in Utah, Michael Heizer's *City* (begun 1970) in Nevada, James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (1977–ongoing) in Arizona – were formative for me. I encountered them young, and they planted something that has not left: the conviction that art can reshape one's relation to time, to scale, to the non-human world. These works asked what it would mean to think at the scale of geology, of weather, of the cosmos. And yet they also carry questions that belong to this moment more urgently than they did then. The landscapes chosen were described as remote, even empty – and *Roden Crater* sits in the ancestral homelands of the Hopi and Navajo peoples, who were anything but absent. The works were conceived, built, and owned by their artists and institutional partners, the land treated as available for inscription. *The Sanctuary of Water* proposes the inverse: salt and earth left in place, on the territory that holds them, in the hands









of the people who live there. Scholars have noted the tension: that a practice positioned as a rejection of the commercialised gallery system could reproduce, in its choice of site, the very logic of territorial claim that it sought to refuse.

The Indigenous collective Postcommodity based in the U.S. Southwest named the pattern directly: the parachute model, in which an artist arrives, makes, and leaves the community 'holding the bag'.[25] This is the inversion we are proposing with *The Sanctuary of Water*: the community is not 'holding the bag' – they own the bag from the start.

I do not share this history in order to disown a tradition that has shaped me. I share it because of the questions it poses – *what comes after? how do we weave more threads?*. These are the questions *The Sanctuary of Water* is trying to answer. It does not begin with a sketch or a site visit. It begins with an assembly. It does not end with a completed object. It does not end at all.

If We Don't Grow Together, It Will Fail

WITH AEROCENE FOUNDATION

Building *The Sanctuary* has taught us something we could not have learned alone: that the only structures worth making are those you cannot make by yourself.



Red Atacama communities during the construction of *The Sanctuary of Water*, Salta, 2026.

One principle has emerged from the assemblies that I keep returning to: if we don't grow together, it will fail. When one community benefits from something – a residency, a commission, an international invitation – the question asked immediately in the assembly is: how do the others benefit too? This is not generosity in the philanthropic sense. If the communities are fragmented, the mining companies advance. If they are united, the water stays.

The Sanctuary of Water is not a solidarity built on the fiction that we are all the same. The Indigenous writer and philosopher Ailton Krenak has named this difference precisely. He describes how he stopped searching for confirmations of equality and turned instead toward what he calls affective alliances, which 'presuppose affects between unequal worlds.' This movement, he writes, 'does not claim equality; on the contrary, it recognises an intrinsic alterity in each person, in each being, introducing a radical inequality that forces us to pause before entering: you have to take off your sandals, you cannot enter with your shoes on.' He continues: 'I escaped the parables of the union and the party – when a pact begins to demand tribute, it has already lost its meaning – and went to experience the dance of affective alliances, which envelops me in a constellation of people and beings in which I disappear: I no longer need to be a political entity, I can be only a person inside a flow capable of producing affects and meanings.'[26]

This is what the assemblies on the Salinas have always practiced, long before any of us arrived with a vocabulary for it. The alliances that have built *The Sanctuary* bring together very different worlds – the eleven communities of the Red Atacama; the Aerocene community, thousands of people who have floated solar sculptures and gathered under a shared commitment to life without fossil fuels; the Arachnophilia researchers, who have spent years studying the social lives of spiders and confronting the narratives of fear that surround them; and thousands of Fairclouds contributors on every continent. They come from very different histories, with very different relations to water and to power. The dignity of the alliance lies in the pause before entering. In taking off the shoes. In recognising that the community knows things we will never know, that the spider weaves forms we will never weave, that the water has memories we will never hold. It is also, perhaps, what Krenak calls *mundizar* – a verb without a clean English translation, evoking the capacity to open oneself to other cosmovisions, to imagine pluriverses – the very thing the *Sanctuary* is built to make possible: not a tourist's encounter with a culture, not an extractive curiosity, but a relation in which the worlds themselves affect each other.

Perhaps the spider/web is where this becomes most vivid: The spiders who weave this project are not decoration. They are a more-than-human union made visible. They have been weaving complex, responsive, cosmological structures long before we arrived on the salt flat, and will continue to long after we leave. When the Llama drinks from the stars and the Spider weaves cycles of life, this is not only a poetic image, it is Andean cosmology and a love of spiders arriving by different paths to the same understanding: that the world is made of relations, not things; that intelligence is distributed, not centralised; that the web holds more than any single thread.

Just as the spider reads the trembling of its web, the communities have always read the sky. For millennia, humans have looked to the clouds to predict collective futures, finding messages of weather-presents and futures, forewarning of storms, floods, and pollution.

But what do clouds embody today? Most ubiquitously, a story of neo-colonial extraction, as physical clouds are drained, converted, and evaporated as fuel for the digital clouds of artificial intelligence – infrastructures that drink exhaustive quantities of water to keep their cores cool, while the world outside overheats.

The Aerocene Foundation is also part of a wider solidarity that has grown beyond what any of us anticipated. I think of the meeting we arranged in 2023, between the filmmaker James Cameron and Community leader Verónica Chávez, and how from that encounter something really shifted. Cameron had come to Argentina for a sustainability conference and was taken, together with the provincial governor Geraldo Morales, to the north of Jujuy to see a solar plant – into a setting where his standing as an environmentalist was being used to lend approval to the very lithium extraction the communities were resisting. As the author Graciela Speranza writes, 'In a typical greenwashing maneuver, the politician [Morales] sought to mask the province's unbridled extractivism by using Cameron, [but] in less than twenty-four hours Cameron was able to learn the untold story of Jujuy, give a press conference [...] acknowledge that he had been the victim of an "ambush" set up by Morales, and pledge his support to the communities of Salinas Grandes. The news reached the press all over the world. The efficiency and resilience of this extended community's webs [...] are extraordinarily tenacious.'[27] Cameron met with Chávez, listened to an Indigenous leader from the Salinas Grandes speak about her actual territory and her actual water, and afterwards committed his Avatar Alliance Foundation to supporting Indigenous communities resisting lithium extraction across South America. What could have



Verónica Chávez meeting with James Cameron, organised by the Aerocene Foundation, 2023.

become a photo opportunity for the mining industry became, instead, the beginning of a genuine alliance.

That same year, Aerocene also delivered a letter from the communities to Pope Francis. Their story reached the activist Greta Thunberg and the former German chancellor Olaf Scholz, and the communities' struggles were covered by Deutsche Welle and Al Jazeera. But multinational companies continue to exert pressure on the communities to give up their lands. And yet, the assemblies keep meeting, and the communities speak with a patience that is itself a form of power.

The same logic that treats a basin in the Puna as a resource to be drained treats a homeland as terrain to be emptied. In both, the rights of people and the rights of nature are denied at once, as if neither the living earth nor those who keep it were owed anything. We see this today in Gaza, where what is being destroyed is the limit itself: the conviction that a people and the ground that holds them can be spent entirely, that land, water, olive groves, the relation between a people and their place, are all terrain to be cleared. In September 2025 the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that Israel has committed and is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. The patterns do not end on their own. They are renewed, or they are refused. To stand with the communities of the Salinas is to stand also against that same disregard wherever it is enacted – to insist that land and people cannot be spent.

I cannot fully recount how we arrived where we are – because we have decided together, through assemblies and thousands of messages, to keep defining *as we go*: how to position ourselves, how each of us, with integrity and trust, can move without crossing the limits our conscience sets. Karen Barad writes that we do not pre-exist our relations – that existence is not isolated individuality but entanglement, that we come into being through the encounters that compose us.[28] What none of us could make alone, we are making together.

Building Something Permanent

I want to be precise about this, because the difference matters enormously. Yes, we proposed *The Sanctuary of Water* – but we proposed it because the communities asked for something permanent, and because they had taught us, over many years, how much the water matters. Ultimately, if they were not living there, there would be no water, and no life.

This understanding did not arrive all at once. It began in 2020 with Fly with Pacha, into the Aerocene, a twenty-eight-minute document of the historic aerosolar flight over the Salinas Grandes, first shared with audiences in Jujuy, Florence, and Buenos Aires. It grew through travelling together, through the gatherings, and a sustained process of listening.

Our film screened over thirty times across five continents and was translated into new languages with every iteration. It is a film in the making, continuously reshaped by the shifting struggle against lithium extraction, by everyone who joined its orbit and added their thread to the web.

It was out of this journey, after the Alfarcito Gathering, the panel discussions, the assemblies in community halls where the heat of the day gave way to long evenings of translation, consensus, and trust, that the communities came to us, the Aerocene Foundation, with an open request. Not specifically for an artwork. Nor for an installation that would travel between biennials and eventually be dismantled and stored. They asked for something that would remain: a structure they would own, on land they had always inhabited, that would generate income for their children and grandchildren – so they could stay, rather than leave, or end up working in someone else's hotel washing someone else's sheets.

The Sanctuary of Water resists easy definition. Perhaps that resistance is precisely its strength. As the critic and writer Graciela Speranza – a longtime companion of this project – has said: 'A remarkable project in its political, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions, *The Sanctuary of Water* stands out as a pioneering artistic milestone in the defense of nature, environmental justice, and Indigenous sovereignty – at once architecture, sculpture, monument, activism and land art.'[29] The difficulty of categorisation is not a failure of definition but a measure of ambition: a work that exceeds the containers we have built for art, precisely because it was built for life.

Because that is what tourism too often means in regions like this one. Communities watch the wealth of their landscape flow outward – the photographs taken, the experience consumed, the money spent – and are left with the seasonal work of servicing the people who come to look. The hotel is owned by someone else. The tour company is registered in Buenos Aires, Santiago, or Berlin. And, too often, the young people who might have stayed on their ancestral land leave instead for want of a structure that would let them build a life on their own terms. *The Sanctuary* cannot resolve this on its own – no single structure could – but it can be a beginning.

This is the other face of extraction: not only the lithium and the water beneath the salt, but the human future of the communities themselves, slowly drained away. What the communities imagined is different: a space where the land and its cycles would be honoured rather than consumed, and where any income would stay within the eleven communities of the Red Atacama.

To make this legally feasible has required lawyers and human rights advocates: Gastón Chillier, former executive director of CELS, Argentina's foremost human rights legal organisation, together with a brilliant team including Alicia Chalabe, Agustina Roca, Emilia Romero, Mariela Mortenssen, Jakob Braeuer and many others who are accompanying the entire

process, including how it will function in the years to come: consulting the communities on which legal form would serve them best, and drafting agreements that place ownership in their hands. Accountants modelling what a community-governed, long-term economic activity could look like over decades, in keeping with the communities' own protocols and the framework of Kachi Yupi. And a patient work of translation – not of language, but of form: finding how the communities' own assemblies, their ways of deciding and organising politically, could be carried into the terms of Argentine law without being flattened by it.

For helping weave dialogues with the authorities and plan futures in which rural community tourism could work, we have been fortunate enough to work with Luis Piri Macagno, and for their search for sustainable support models, Oscar Soria and Verónica Odriozola. Together with the geologists testing the salinity of the soil, the stability of the crust, and the weight the salt could bear, we are so grateful to the whole team, in particular Federico Borghini, Juan Alberto Fiocchetta, Azucena Natalia Flores, Paula Sosa & Joaquín García, Mario Javier Ponce, Álvaro Simón Padrós, Aurelio Flores, Liborio Flores, Aurelio Abalos, Santos Colque, Silverio Pablo Mamani and really so many others. And for the structural engineering that lets the whole thing stand: Klaas De Rycke, and the office of Bollinger+Grohmann, who, like so many others, took on the challenge pro bono, donating all their knowledge to make The Sanctuary buildable. Seven thousand cubic metres of salt harvested from local lakes, cut into bricks as has been done here for centuries, are being transported slowly across the flats. It required – and continues to require – the slow, unglamorous labour of making legal what is already true: that this land belongs to the people who have always known how to care for it.

In May 2026, when the seasonal rains finally lifted and a window of clear days appeared, the construction team drove onto the flat and began, as one must begin here, with a ceremony: a greeting to Pacha with representatives of the communities gathered together before a single machine turned over. What followed was eighteen consecutive days of collective ingenuity. And so many days still to come as we write this essay. A grader sank into the crust and was pulled free by a chain of trucks, hauling a cable two hundred and fifty metres long.

When the geomembrane billowed up in the wind like a dark sail, it was weighted down before it could tear. When the team needed a frame to hold the salt-bags open for filling, Flavio Calisaya (vice-president of Esquinas Blancas) welded one himself in two days and brought it to the salt flat. Natalia Flores, from Cerro Negro, coordinates the team. The communities chose their nine workers by lottery, as Red Atacama's own protocols require – equitable, collective, no village favoured over another. The community of Cobres continues to host and feed the team, charging half the cost and investing the rest in *The Sanctuary*'s future.



None of this would be possible without the countless individuals and groups who give so much of themselves – not because they were asked, and not because it is their job, but because this is their territory, their water, their future. The community members who are cooking through long days on the salt flat, who are opening their homes, who make sure that everyone is fed and rested, who hold the entire effort together, are not supporting someone else's project. They are building their own. Their care is woven into every wall of *The Sanctuary* as surely as the salt itself. What is being given here cannot be measured in tasks or hours. It is a living tissue of trust, accumulated over time, by everyone who has chosen to be part of this. To each and every one: this sanctuary grows because we are growing it together, and our gratitude is as deep and as lasting as the water beneath the salt.

The Sanctuary of Water, Puri Nuckyumtur

Just as ancestral apachetas are raised stone by stone, *The Sanctuary of Water* grows collectively through acts of memory and care. It is organised around a vast circular pond that reflects the sky, with orbital walkways tracing its edge, and four salt apachetas rising across the expanse, named after Andean cosmological bodies. When certain stars are reflected in its waters, the planting season begins. *The Sanctuary* reflects the stars, and this is related to the orientation of the sculptures in relation to constellations that are important to the communities. Built through the ancient practice of salt architecture, rising from the land and ultimately returning to it, it is an unfinished form, complete only when the water – mother, mirror, memory – returns its hidden half.

The Sanctuary of Water belongs to the communities and to their cosmovision, to the Kunza name *Puri Nuckyumtur,* and, at the same time, to the wider plural ecology that holds it. It is sacred in the Atacameño sense and a refuge in the ecological sense, at once. It is also a sanctuary for the more-than-human community of the Puna: *vicuñas, guanacos, zorros, pumas, quirquinchos,* and the great choir of birds – Andean flamingos, *parinas chicas,* crowned eagles, and the *monjitas de las salinas.* They drink from the springs the communities protect. They migrate, nest, rest, and pass through. *The Sanctuary* is conceived as a place where these visitors and inhabitants find space for coexistence, as a place where animals continue to do what they have always done, alongside the communities who have always lived with them. *The Sanctuary of Water* does not belong solely to people.

The orientations of *The Sanctuary* were chosen by the communities, in conversation with elders who carry the knowledge of how the stars move over the Salinas. The Chacana environmental observatory contributed technical assistance in refining the geometry. *The Sanctuary* is not

only a building but a celestial instrument. Its geometry follows the same principles that have guided Andean architecture for thousands of years and are still in active use today: the staircase that ascends the largest apacheta is aligned with the Southern Cross. The pond reflects the precise positions of Ckamur/Killa (moon), Ckapin/Inti (sun), Hoyri/Tiqsimuyu (Earth), Haalar/Ch'aska (Venus/lucero), Yollestur/Hawcha (Saturn).

This knowledge of materials and salt has been carried through generations, and Manuela Mazure Azcona, architect at Studio Tomás Saraceno, worked within this shared field of practice, alongside local masons who learned the craft from their grandparents. Andrei Fernández and Celeste Valero, in their text, describe how that craft is lived: the marking and cutting of the *panes de sal,* the *piletas* that turn turquoise as the brine clears, the long memory of *trueque* (barter) and reciprocity that organises Lickana. Andrei, who has worked for years alongside the weaving communities of northern Argentina, understands better than almost anyone how this kind of collective work is actually made. Her project *Unión Textiles Semillas* – Unión *Textile Seeds* – has grown into a union of some three hundred weavers from twelve groups across Tucumán, Catamarca, Santiago del Estero, Jujuy, and Salta, including the Wichí collective Silät, whose work she accompanied to the Venice Biennale. What she has built is not an exhibition of textiles but a living network: a way of weaving that treats technique and ceremony, territory and embodiment as inseparable, and that lets meanings be reassembled collectively rather than authored by one hand. The principle is in the name. A seed becomes a plant; a thread becomes a web; what one person begins, many hands carry.

The Sanctuary of Water is neither a gift nor a donation. It is established under the communities' own Kachi Yupi framework. Its purpose is the communities' *Buen Vivir* – Sumak Kawsay in Quechua – which Andean thinkers describe as a life in dignified relation with the territory, with the *communalidad,* and with the cycles of the land. *The Sanctuary* exists to make that life materially possible on the communities' own terms. As members of the Red Atacama themselves explained to us: 'We want our young people to have work here, in their own territory, so they don't have to leave to look for what has always been close. We have artisans, herders, weavers, shepherds... our richness is alive; it just needs space to flourish.'[33]

Responsibility becomes response-*ability*: the capacity to remain attentive to changing conditions, to the communities' decisions, and to the subtle language of water itself. In the words of Santos Colque of the Comunidad de Cobres: '*The Sanctuary of Water* leads us towards the future for our youth: by day, the immense whiteness of our salt; by night, the star-filled sky of our Atacameño nation.' To build a sanctuary here, with the communities, on these contested lands, is to make visible what has been systematically erased, and to continue the communities' shared





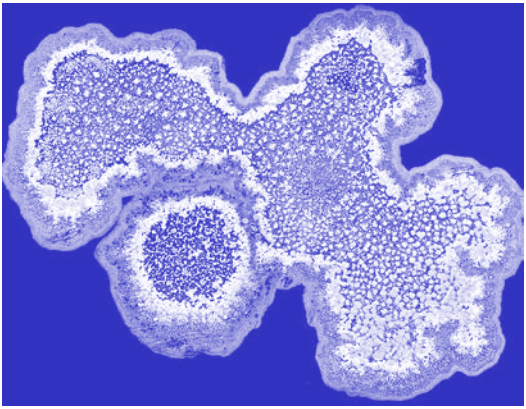




efforts to protect the lands against neo-colonial encroachment. As Miguel Casimiro writes: the region is not a sacrifice zone. The water is not a resource. The people are not a workforce waiting to be hired and discarded.

The Sanctuary is not alone, and it did not invent the path it flows. The Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc declaration – drawn up with the communities at the Aerocene gathering in Alfarcito – belongs to a wider family of the same gesture. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Whanganui River was recognised in 2017 as a legal person, the first river in the world to hold its own rights, after the long struggle of the Māori iwi who had always known it as an ancestor. In Colombia, the Atrato was declared a subject of rights in 2016, with community guardians named to speak for it. In Spain in 2022 the Mar Menor lagoon became the first ecosystem in Europe to be granted legal personhood, won by a citizens' campaign. These are not metaphors of care but legal-cosmological facts: the same insistence, in different waters, that a basin is a living relation and not a thing. What binds these is not a style but a direction of travel towards the assembly and the shared field. *The Sanctuary of Water* takes its place among them – one more apacheta, on ground that was never empty.

An Elephant in the Room or Swinging on the Spider's Web?



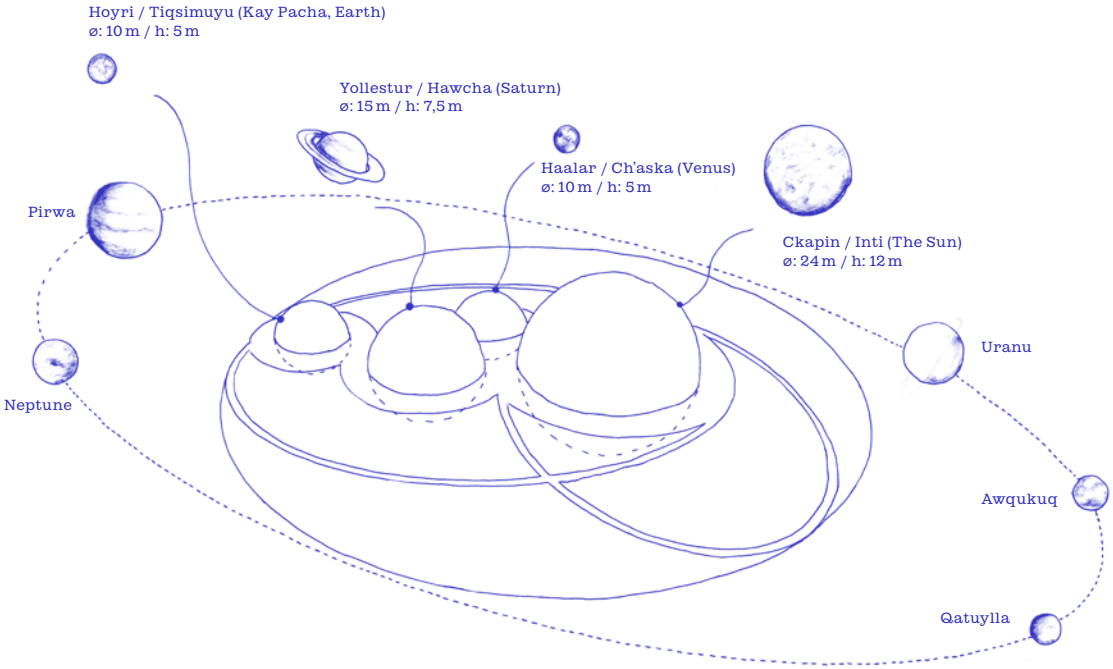
Tomás Saraceno, *Sal de Acá*, 2026. Salt, glass, matt lacquer, 75×75 cm

In Cerro Negro, during a Fairclouds workshop with the children of Primary School N.° 4698, the children were invited to look through a series of cloud photos and to see what they themselves could perceive within them – shapes, patterns, animals. One child saw an elephant, and drew it. The skies above the Salinas are wide enough to hold any animal – vicuñas, condors, llamas, the celestial Yacana drinking from the river of stars – but an elephant, which has never set foot in the Andes, seemed an unlikely

visitor. The child was sure. *Un elefante en el cielo.* The drawing now travels with the other four thousand skies, and an elephant has entered this exhibition through the eyes of a child who has never seen one outside of a book. There is a Spanish-language children's lullaby that begins: *Un elefante se balanceaba sobre la tela de una araña – como veía que resistía, fue a llamar a otro elefante.* One elephant balanced on a spider's web. And because it held, it called another. And another. And another. Children fall asleep to it, learning, before they have any words for it, that impossibility becomes possibility through collective weight on a single thread of silk. But the conditions have changed, Climate catastrophe is now testing every thread.

There is another elephant in the room. The economist Branko Milanović's 'Elephant Curve'[31], originally published in 2013, takes its name from the shape of its graph, which resembles an elephant when global income gains are plotted across the world's population. It visualises who has benefited most – and least – from globalization. It also shows, that there is no economic democracy, even where political democracy (nominally) exists. In 2018, the Indian scientist and activist Vandana Shiva, in *Oneness vs the 1%,* names the logic that underpins this system: the 1% sustain themselves not only through accumulated wealth, but through the active production of separation.[32] Separation of humans from nature, people from each other, the community from their territory, the data from the water that cools the server. Every act of extraction first requires the manufacture of a division – and every act of relation refuses one. The 1% impose what Shiva calls 'a monoculture of mind' that erases the diversity of the ways of living it cannot price. What is called 'growth' is the conversion of relations into monocultures; what the salt lake communities call Pacha is the refusal of that conversion.

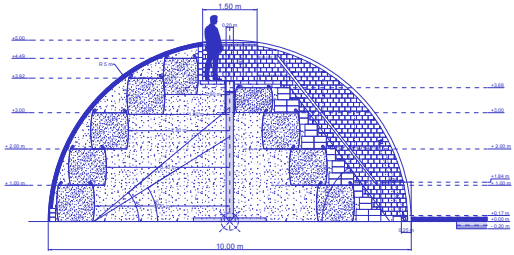
This is the elephant in the room of every green-transition pledge. Capital does not concentrate by accident. It concentrates because the lullaby's logic – the web holds, so call another – has been replaced by the curve's logic: the trunk holds, drains the rest. We are the majority of this world. The communities of the Salinas Grandes, the residents of Grünheide, the surfers of the Eisbach, the women embroidering clouds in Salta, the child in Cerro Negro who saw an elephant in the sky, the assemblies at every apacheta, the readers who feel something shift when they read the word Puri – we are not the exception. We are the rule. To extract is to subtract: the water that becomes a battery does not return. But the issue is not technology itself – what we build can serve life, when it is built to last and shared widely. The issue is the logic that designs obsolescence into every device, that profits from the cycle of replacement, that externalises its true costs of production onto the water, the worker, and the territory. The question is not the phone in your hand; it is who profits when it breaks, and who pays – in drained aquifers and geographical displacement – for the next one. We are the majority not because we



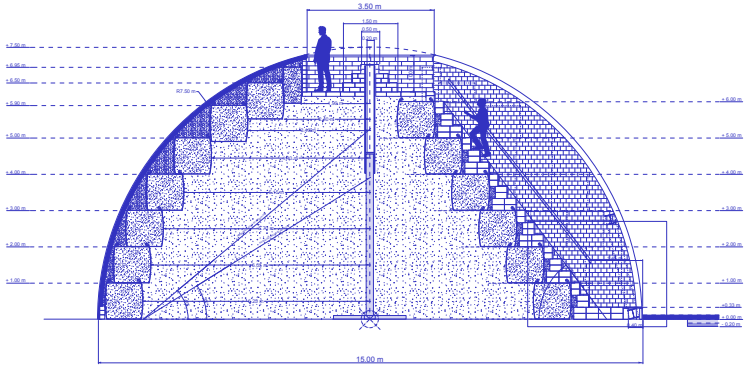
breathe but because we tend, return, add stones to cairns, because we are still, somehow, in relation.

The harm runs along the full length of the supply chain. Lithium leaves the Atacama, mostly directed to multinational companies in China and the Global North, while the toxic burdens of the electronics economy accumulate elsewhere – in places like Agbogbloshie outside Accra, where children breathe the metals that come off burning cables. Scholars name this toxic colonialism: the offloading of hazardous waste, and of pollution itself, onto communities with the least power to refuse it. As Max Liboiron argues, pollution is not a byproduct of industrial life but an expression of colonial land relations – the assumption that some land, and some people, exist to absorb harm.[33]

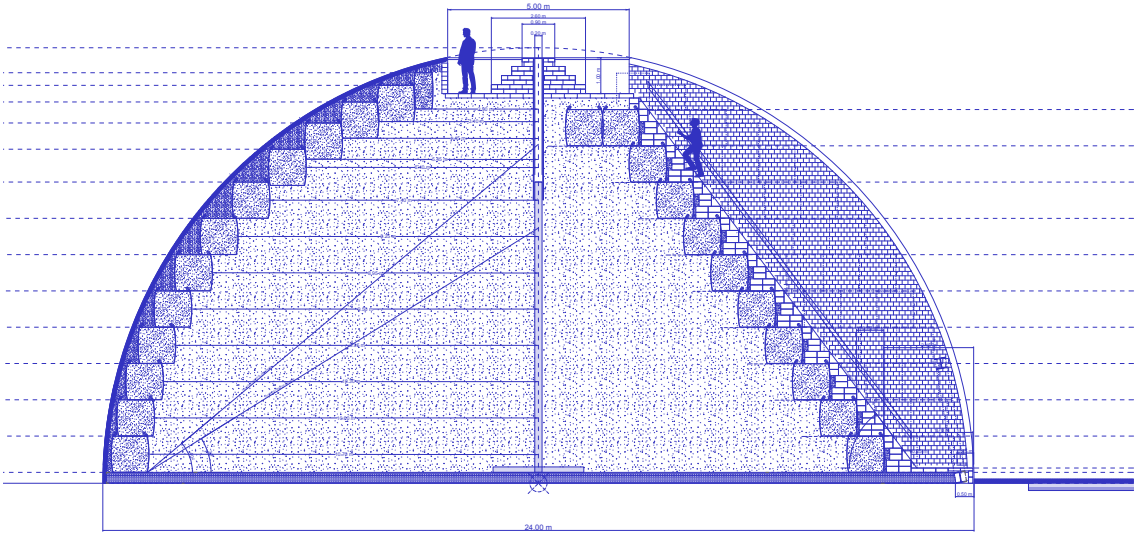
Globally, less than 3 percent of the lithium in batteries today comes from recycling. The salt flats are being asked to give it all, again and again. The European Union is now slowly writing a different law – batteries replaceable from 2027, spare parts available for seven years, repair scores on every label. These are the first steps. The alliance we need must follow the chain. One movement, the full length of the journey, refusing to let one part of the world be both the mine and the dump. Efficiency without sufficiency just enables more consumption.[34] The point is not to make the same SUVs greener, the same data centres cooler, the same phones more recyclable. It is to make fewer of them. And to use the same workers, the same factories, to make something else – trains, trams, heat pumps,



Tiqsimuyu and Chàska: Seccion 5 m



Hawcha: Seccion 7,5 m



Inti: Seccion 24 m

public infrastructure – instead. This is what Ulrich Brand and the *Konversion* tradition have been arguing for years: that without concrete plans for displaced labour, climate discourse loses to the right; with such plans, climate becomes a different industrial future, one that workers can defend, vote for, and strike for.[35]

Today we are told that artificial intelligence will change everything, just as we were told the same about the internet – which was supposed to democratise knowledge and instead concentrated power faster than almost any technology before it. AI is sold to us as memory: a digital cloud that remembers everything. But the cloud is not a cloud. It is a network of physical data centres whose cooling systems drink water at industrial scale. Google opened its Latin American hub in Chile in 2015. Microsoft followed. Both are building in a country that has been in unprecedented drought for fifteen years, where residents were placed on water rationing in 2022. In Cerrillos, on the outskirts of Santiago, citizen resistance forced Google to revise its plans after it emerged that a single data centre would consume 7.6 million litres of potable water a day. Activists in Uruguay name the same pattern: data colonialism. Argentina, as mentioned earlier, has dismantled the environmental protections that once defended its water – the 2010 Glacier Law was reformed to open glaciers to mining, the state water utility serving millions was authorised for privatisation. The same legal architecture that opens aquifers to lithium opens them to whoever else arrives next.

The Atacama region is one of the world's largest reserves of lithium, and in recent years has become a frontier for powering the neo-colonial data-centre industry. The salt lake feeds the brine that feeds the battery; energy extracted in one region and used to train AI models in another, models that promise to predict the weather already read by a black butterfly in Cobres. The communities are not against intelligence. They are against the conversion of intelligence into property, of memory into machines, of water into stock. They have always known that intelligence is distributed – between the spider and the web, between the llama and the stars, between the elder and the child not yet born. The web holds more than any single thread. The elephant rests on the web. The cloud above the salt flat is not data. It is Puri, in another form.

Ancestral Futures

The Brazilian Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak has said: 'The rivers – those beings who have always inhabited the worlds in different forms – are the ones who suggest to me that if there is a future to imagine, that future is ancestral, because it was already here.'[36] From another tradition, arriving at the same place, the writer Rebecca Solnit has written: 'What we dream of is already present in the world.'[37]

To create *The Sanctuary of Water* is to bring together peoples, cultures, practices, beliefs, and communities at a time when many governments working to deepen division. Through the commitment of many, a space has emerged for shared ideas, hopes, and dreams. These words return us to the deep wisdom held by the communities themselves – knowledge and ways of living that is too often overlooked by those who search for technological solutions, even when the sustainability they imagine is already present. The communities' knowledge, care, and resistance are not projections of the future, but ancestral futures already here.

TOMÁS SARACENO is an artist whose work devises platforms for ecosocial, participatory, and installative encounters that amplify regenerative forms of knowledge. His transdisciplinary communities – including Museo Aero Solar (2007–), the Aerocene Foundation (2015–), and Arachnophilia (2018–) build networks of reciprocity and attunement across species and scales. He has exhibited internationally at institutions including the Serpentine Galleries, London; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and has realised 21 permanent commissions worldwide.

AEROCENE FOUNDATION is a non-profit organisation founded in 2015 by Tomás Saraceno and a transdisciplinary community of artists, scientists, engineers, and activists. It develops open-source technologies and collaborative practices oriented toward fossil-fuel-free flight, ecological awareness, and new forms of collective sensing. Through the Museo Aero Solar project, community assemblies, and partnerships with Indigenous communities, the Foundation pursues a vision of shared atmospheres and planetary interdependence.

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© Studio Tomás Saraceno.

1 Laura Berisso, "Minera china Zijin-Liex provocó desastre ambiental en Catamarca por derrame," Economía Sustentable, published in Infoestación, April 2026, [online resource].
2 "Tras caminar tres días, llegaron a Salta para reclamar por agua potable," *Indymedia Argentina / El Tribuno,* January 21–24 2019.
3 Interview conducted during a journey across Atacama, 15–21 February 2026, organised in preparation for the exhibition *Ancestral Futures* and this publication. Interview conducted in San Pedro de Atacama, Chile on 17 February, 2026.
4 See UN General Assembly, Resolution 64/292, July 28 2010, building on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Articles 11 and 12.
5 See Richard Bauer, *Geschichte Münchens* (C.H. Beck, 2008).
6 See Christian Zapf, *Die Isar: Fluss der Stadt München* (Volk Verlag, 2016).
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8 See Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale, *El Colapso Ecológico ya Llegó: Una Brújula para Salir del (mal)Desarrollo* (Siglo XXI Editores, 2020). Viale has also represented the communities of Andalgalá and the Salinas Grandes and co-developed the Argentine critique of extractivism that informs this essay.
9 U.S. Geological Survey, Mineral Commodity Summaries: Lithium (Reston, VA: USGS, 2024) [online resource].
10 Existing since 1973, Monte Kali grows by approximately 900 tonnes per hour of mine operation. On the salinisation of the Werra river, see M. Bäthe and E. Coring, "Biological Effects of Anthropogenic Salt-Load on the Aquatic Fauna: A Synthesis of 17 Years of Biological Survey on the Rivers Werra and Weser," *Limnologica* 41, no. 2 (2011).
11 See Pohle, I., Zeilfelder, S., Birner, J., and Creutzfeldt, B, "The 2018–2023 drought in Berlin: impacts and analysis of the perspective of water resources management, Nat. Hazards Earth Syst. Sci., 25, 1293–1313, [online resource]. See also the Leibniz-Institute of Freshwater Ecology (IGB), which documents five consecutive years of negative rainfall anomalies across 2018–2022 in the region.

12 Wahmkow, Jonas, "Grenzwertüberschreitungen im Abwasser: Tesla das Rohr stopfen," *taz,* 27 February 2024. The Strausberg-Erkner Water Association (WSE) documented that Tesla had exceeded permitted limits for nitrogen and refractory phosphorus repeatedly since May 2022, in one case by up to six times; WSE prepared to suspend the factory's wastewater service. The Berliner Wasserbetriebe noted that these nutrients posed no direct threat to Berlin's drinking water, though they degrade surface-water quality by promoting algae growth.
13 See Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).
14 The declaration can be read in full via the *Aerocene Newspaper II*, free to download in English, Spanish and Korean via aerocene.org/library
15 The relevant instruments are Article 41 of the Constitution of the Argentine Nation (guaranteeing the right to a healthy environment) and Article 75, paragraph 17 (recognizing the pre-existence of Indigenous peoples and their rights to traditionally occupied lands); International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989), ratified by Argentina in 2000; and the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement, 2018), ratified by Argentina in 2021.
16 See Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent,* trans. Cedric Belfrage (Monthly Review Press, 1973).
17 See note 3, Interview conducted in Cerro Negro, Salta on 20 February, 2026.
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19 See *La Nación,* "Elecciones 2023: Javier Milei Dijo que Una Empresa Puede Contaminar Un Río 'Todo lo que Quiera'," September 2 2023, https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/elecciones-2023-javier-milei-dijo-que-una-empresa-puede-contaminar-un-rio-todo-lo-que-quiera-y-nid02092023/.
20 Heinrich Böll Foundation. *Water Atlas 2025: Facts and Figures about the Resource of the 21st Century* (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2025). The term water blindness appears throughout.
21 See Ailton Krenak, *Futuro Ancestral* (Companhia das Letras, 2022).
22 Tomás Saraceno, *Your Phone might Die, the Birds will Keep Calling You,* exhibited during Ancestral Futures, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2026.
23 Adriana Guzmán Arroyo, *Descolonizar La Memoria, Descolonizar El Feminismo* (Tarpuna Muya, 2019). See also: Julieta Paredes and Adriana Guzmán Arroyo. *El Tejido de La Rebeldía: ¿Qué es El Feminismo Comunitario?* (Comunidad Mujeres Creando Comunidad, 2014).
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25 Cristóbal Martínez, in "About Place: An Interview with Postcommodity," *Miami Rail,* Winter 2016. The remark – "it's a colonial model, very paramilitary, to parachute artists into a community for two weeks and then leave the community holding the bag" – is also discussed in Bill Anthes, "Decentering Land Art from the Borderlands: A Review of *Through the Repellent Fence*," *Art Journal Open,* 2017.
26 See Ailton Krenak, *Futuro Ancestral,* p. 26.
27 See Graciela Speranza, *Webs of Life: Tomás Saraceno at the Serpentine and Beyond,* in 'Web(s) of Life: Tomás Saraceno in Collaboration', Ivorpress, 2023).
28 See Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).
29 Graciela Speranza in conversation with Aerocene, 2026.
30 Interview conducted in Salta, Salinas Grandes, northern Argentina, February 2026.
31 See Branko Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).
32 Vandana Shiva and Kartikey Shiva, *Oneness vs. the 1%: Shattering Illusions, Seeding Freedom* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018).
33 Coined by Jim Puckett in 1992, 'toxic colonialism' describes the export of hazardous waste to the Global South; Max Liboiron later expanded the term to understand pollution itself as a form of colonial access to land.
34 Jason Hickel, and Giorgos Kallis, "Is Green Growth Possible?," *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020): 469–486.
35 See Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (Verso, 2021). On *Konversion* see the CON-LABOUR research project, University of Vienna, 2018–2020.
36 See Ailton Krenak, *Futuro Ancestral,* p.26
37 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, 2016). The quoted line also appears in: R. Solnit, "Grounds for Hope," *Tikkun* 32, no.1 (2017): 30–39.

The Challenges Facing the Red Atacama

Indigenous Institutions, Customary Law and the Defence of Water against Excessive Use by Mining Corporations

MIGUEL CASIMIRO

'Water is the lifeblood of the earth'
WISDOM OF THE ANDEAN PEOPLES

TERRITORY DOES NOT BEGIN WITH MAPS

Before any border, before any state, before any administrative record, the territory already existed, and, within the territory, water. Not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete presence: in the fertile plain that sustains grazing, in the wetland that feeds the animals, in the stream that marks the paths of the roads, in the salt flat that breathes slowly under the high-Andean sun.

As the Atacama Nation, our existence cannot be explained from the outside. It is lived from within the territory. We are part of a system where life is inseparable from nature, and where nature is not merely the 'environment', but a condition of existence.

La Red Atacama, established in 2007, does not inaugurate that world. It reorganises it in the face of a historical moment where that very Earth itself is beginning to come under pressure from new forms of power: the advance of large-scale mining, global financial capital and the expansion of states over the commons. This is why we say that La Red Atacama is, in a sense, a form of sovereignty in practice. It is not just another social organisation: it is an Indigenous institution that governs the territory according to its own customary norms, its own law and its collective memory.

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK: THE GOVERNANCE OF BALANCE

Our organisation cannot be understood without recognising that the Atacama People possess millennia-old political, economic, legal, and cultural institutions, and that our institutional framework is not a copy of modern state institutions. It is another way of organising collective life, underpinned by a central idea: balance.





- Balance between people and the land.
- Balance between communities and water.
- Balance between production and natural regeneration.

In this logic the assembly is the space where the territory thinks through its people. It is not merely deliberation: it listens to the community as a whole and to its surroundings. Community authorities do not represent individual interests. They are temporary custodians of balance. Their legitimacy does not stem from their office, but from collective trust and respect for their own law.

The land is neither private property nor a state resource. It is a living system. A network where every element has a function: the hill, the meadow, the water, the wind, the salt.

For this reason, our rights and our norms are not written in codes, but are inscribed in practice. They are passed down through oral memory, through the experience of herding, through community agreements, and through the collective resolution of conflicts.

This institutional framework is not informal. It is a complex form of territorial governance that has enabled life to continue under extreme ecological conditions for centuries.

WATER AT THE CORE OF THE INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

If there is one element that organises our entire way of life, it is water. At the heart of the contemporary dispute is water, and for the Atacama People water is not an economic resource: it is a living being, a relational entity that orders life in the territory. The wetlands, meadows, springs, and salt flats constitute a closed and extremely fragile hydrological system.

In the Puna de Atacama and the high-Andean salt flats, water does not flow as it does in the rivers of other territories. Here it accumulates, filters, concentrates, mixes with salt, is stored underground, and it emerges at specific points where life is sustained. The basins are closed. This means that everything that is extracted, everything that is altered, everything that is polluted, has no natural outlet to other systems. It remains within the territory. The Salinas Grandes basin functions as an endorheic system: it has no outlet to the sea. Everything that is extracted is not easily replenished. Every intervention irreversibly alters the balance of the groundwater.

That is why we say that water is not just a resource. It is a system of ecological memory.

- The floodplains remember grazing.
- The marshes recall the seasons.
- The springs recall the ancient paths.
- The salt flats recall the balance between fresh water and brine.

Our institutional framework was built to safeguard such balance.

THE TURNING POINT: THE RUSH FOR LITHIUM

Transnational mining corporations and international financial actors have turned the salt flats into strategic extraction zones, embedded within a new global paradigm: the lithium economy. In recent decades, the ecological and social balance of the region has been increasingly strained by the expansion of large-scale lithium extraction and the discourse of a green energy

transition. The issue is not mining itself, but the way its relationship to water is organised. The current extractive model is based on a simple yet deeply problematic idea: that water can be extracted in large volumes without causing structural damage to the land. In our regions, this premise does not hold true.

The extraction of saline groundwater (brine) and the intensive use of fresh water for industrial processes causes a profound alteration to the water system: a drop in groundwater levels, a disruption of the balance between fresh and salt water, a reduction in humidity in floodplains and wetlands, pressure on animal and plant species adapted to very specific ecological balances, and the progressive transformation of endorheic basins. This is not an isolated impact. It is a reconfiguration of the system of life.

EXCESSIVE WATER USE: A LOGIC OF UNLIMITED EXTRACTION

The crux of the conflict is this: water is being used beyond the ecological limits of the territory. Mining corporations operate with extraction volumes that respond to global scales of demand, not to local regeneration capacity. Whilst the territory functions through slow, fragile, and deeply interconnected cycles, industry operates through accelerated, expansive, and cumulative cycles. In this imbalance, water ceases to be a system of life and becomes an industrial input. When water becomes an input, the territory ceases to be territory and begins to be a 'deposit'. What is at stake is not just access to lithium, it is the very meaning of water.

- For corporations, water is a productive input.
- For the state, a strategic resource.
- For the global financial system, an investment variable.

For the Atacama people, however, water is life, memory, and continuity. This difference is not symbolic: it is structural. It defines two incompatible ways of inhabiting the territory.

THE STATE, CORPORATIONS AND FINANCE: AN ARTICULATION OF POWER

The excessive use of water does not occur in isolation.It is underpinned by a complex political-economic architecture where the following converge:

- States, which grant concessions and establish regulatory frameworks with the consent and protection of the judiciary.
- Mining corporations, which carry out extraction and organise production.
- International finance, which drives the expansion of lithium as a global strategic resource.

In this framework, water is translated into technical language: volumes, flow rates, projections, balances. But this translation obscures the fundamental truth: water is not merely a quantity. It is a relationship. And when that relationship is broken, so too is the life that depends on it.

THE CROSS-BORDER TERRITORY: CONTINUITY VERSUS FRAGMENTATION

The Atacama people are not confined to a single state.

The river basins, the roads, the exchanges, and the families span Argentina,

Bolivia, and Chile. State borders are recent in relation to the history of the territory. For this reason, our institutional framework maintains a crossborder logic that does not conform to modern political divisions. Trade fairs, cultural gatherings, extended assemblies, and traditional mobility practices are concrete ways of maintaining that continuity. Thus, the territory is not divided: it is administratively fragmented.

WATER AS A CIVILISATIONAL BOUNDARY

At the heart of the conflict lies not merely an economic or legal dispute. There is a deeper question: *what is the limit to water use in a living territory?*

For extractive logic, the limit is technical and adjustable. For Indigenous institutions, the limit is ecological, spiritual, and social. When water use exceeds the system's capacity to regenerate, we are not witnessing development, but a disruption of the balance of life. That disruption is not abstract. It manifests itself in the drying up of floodplains, the alteration of wetlands, the decline in animal populations, and the loss of community cycles.

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AS A FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Our organisation cannot be understood without recognising that the Atacama people possess political, economic, legal, and cultural institutions dating back thousands of years. These institutions were not created by the state, but were belatedly recognised by International Law. Within this framework lies:

- Community authority and assemblies as a form of self-government.
- Customary law as a living legal system.
- Collective management of water, land, and livestock as the economic basis.
- Barter and exchange fairs as an economy of reciprocity.
- Territorial spirituality as a principle for regulating ecological balance .

This framework is protected by § 75 (17) of the Argentine Constitution, which recognises the pre-existing ethnic and cultural identity of Indigenous peoples, the legal status of their communities, and communal possession and ownership of the land. Furthermore, ILO Convention 169 (Law 24,071) sets out clear obligations for states:

- § 6 prior, free and informed consultation;
- § 7 the right to determine development priorities;
- § 13 recognition of the special relationship with the territory;
- § 15 participation in the use, management and conservation of natural resources;
- § 32 cross-border cooperation between Indigenous peoples.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) reinforces this framework by establishing that peoples have the right to self-determination and to maintain their own political, legal, and economic institutions. On this legal basis, the Red Atacama is not merely a social organisation, but a collective legal entity in continuous operation.

THE STATE AND LEGAL ARCHITECTURE OF EXTRACTIVISM

This conflict is not solely between communities and companies. The state

plays a central role in enabling the extractive model. Through:

- Mining concessions;
- Fragmented environmental impact assessments;
- A lack of effective implementation of prior consultation;
- The judicialisation of territorial conflicts;

A legal framework is being consolidated that prioritises investment over collective rights. In this context, case law has been ambivalent. In the case of Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc (CSJN, Aboriginal Community of Santuario Tres Pozos, and others v. Jujuy, Salta, and the National Government), the Supreme Court recognised the complexity of the conflict, but returned jurisdiction to the provinces, leaving the issue of water and consultation without a structural resolution. Such decisions create a vacuum in effective protection, where right exists on paper but not in territorial practice.

PRIOR CONSULTATION: UNFULFILLED OBLIGATION, VIOLATED RIGHTS

§ 6 of ILO Convention 169 stipulates that consultation must be:

- Prior to any decision
- Free
- Informed
- In good faith
- Aimed at achieving consent.

In practice, however, consultation has been replaced by belated or merely informative administrative mechanisms. This results in a reversal of the right; communities are consulted only after decisions have already been made. The result is a structural violation of the principle of self-determination, also recognised in § 3 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, there is a vast gulf between formal recognition and actual practice. Consultation often does not take place at the time of the decision, but afterwards; or it is carried out in a fragmented manner or reduced to procedures with no real capacity to influence the outcome. This creates a situation where the right exists, but its effectiveness is limited in the face of the speed of the extractive model.

THE ATACAMA NETWORK AS AN INSTITUTION OF RESISTANCE

Against this backdrop, the Atacama Network has emerged as a form of territorial governance that brings together:

- Community assemblies as the highest authority;
- Cross-border networks within Argentina, Bolivia and Chile;
- Autonomous community justice systems;
- Collective management of water and land;
- National and international legal strategies;

Indigenous institutions are not a relic of the past, they are a contemporary form of governance that engages with International Law whilst, at the same time, challenging it. Our legal work has included:

- Collective environmental appeals;
- Submissions to the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation;
- Complaints to United Nations bodies;
- Coordination with special rapporteurs (experts) on Indigenous peoples;
- Application of Law 26.160 on territorial emergencies.

Each of these actions expresses a central idea: the territory is not the property of the State or of corporations, but a shared living space with pre-existing rights.

WATER AS THE FRONTIER OF THE DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The contemporary extractive development model redefines water as an industrial input. In this transformation, the salt flat ceases to be a living territory and becomes a financial asset. The influx of international capital and financing from multilateral banks reinforces this trend. Impact assessments become technical tools that rarely incorporate the Indigenous view of the territory as an integrated system. International standards themselves – such as Performance Standard 7 of the World Bank – recognise the need for free, prior and informed consent. The contradiction is clear: the right exists, but its enforcement is systematically deferred.

REMAINING ON THE TERRITORY

The Red Atacama is not fighting to integrate into a pre-existing development model. It is fighting to remain on its own territory under its own living conditions. Every wetland that dries up, every spring that dwindles, every salt flat exploited without consent, is not an isolated impact: it is a profound transformation of the very fabric of the people's lives. That is why our defence of water is not merely environmental or legal. It is political, cultural, and civilisational. International Law recognises us. The Constitution of Chile recognises us. But the real validity of those rights is played out on the ground. And on the ground, water remains the measure of all things. It is what sustains life. In the face of the excessive use of water by mining corporations, what is at stake is not merely a resource, but a way of life.

Water is not merely what flows beneath the earth. It is what sustains the possibility of a people remaining a people on their own territory. For this reason, this is not merely a defence of water; it is a defence of balance, a defence of the territory, and, ultimately, a defence of the continuity of life itself in the Puna de Atacama. For this reason, the institutional framework of the Atacama Nation is not a symbolic alternative. It is a real form of territorial organisation based on the continuity of life.

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A Dream Coming to Fruition

ANDREI FERNÁNDEZ

In north-western Argentina, I live and work in dialogue with communities that are constantly reinventing the ways in which they learn, imagine, and inhabit the land. It was during this journey that I came across the work being developed by Tomás Saraceno, who has been supporting water defence initiatives alongside Indigenous communities in this region over the recent years.

In mid-2025, Tomás asked me to collaborate on the project *The Sanctuary of Water*, named *Puri Nuckyumtur* in the Kunza language: the space of water in the territory of the Atacama people. It is a monumental work that Tomás is building with the Red Atacama in the Salinas Grandes salt flat. The anticipation it has generated among the communities of this territory, Lickana in Kunza, is deeply moving. Although conceived as an artwork, *Puri Nuckyumtur* transcends art: it stands as a space for connection with the territory and as a source of work for families defending their communities against the advance of industrial mining and other forms of extractivism.

In February 2026, I joined a journey through Lickana, starting in what is now northern Argentina, crossing the so-called 'Atacama Desert', passing through southern Bolivia, and returning via the Quebrada de Humahuaca. We had planned this trip in the preceding months together with Tomás and two key figures of the Atacama Network – Iván Arjona Acoria and Miguel Casimiro – and my partner in this collaboration: Celeste Valero, a weaver and Indigenous activist. Together, we have been working for years on the creation of a Women's Union in north-western Argentina, and on proposing ways of listening and understanding that are rooted in ancestral presence.

The final stop on the journey was the Cerro Negro Community. There, in the courtyard of Liborio Flores's family home, we encountered a prototype: a sort of unfinished salt pyramid, with various coating tests. During that visit, we also took part in an assembly of Red Atacama, where we heard people of different ages share in the joy and hope of creating – with salt, with strength, and through dialogue – a monument, a landmark in the space they defend: the space of water and of life. *The Sanctuary of Water* is a project that requires the commitment of many people: to build it, to ensure its longevity, to generate work, reflection and connection. In this space, art becomes a shared channel, a murmur nourished by voices – not only human voices – that converge and transform the world.

A Channel of Voices



ANDREI FERNÁNDEZ AND CELESTE VALERO



> *That is the purpose of building The Sanctuary: to remember that water must always be cared for. It sustains everyone's life. If we do not care for water, we break that cycle and we will face problems – those of us here, those living in the cities, the shepherd tending llamas and sheep, those working for the local council, and even those working in a mining venture. It is everyone's responsibility.*[1] AURELIO FLORES, CERRO NEGRO COMMUNITY

This is a journey of listening and, in a way, a journey to make incisions that help contain a great flow. Iván Arjona Acoria, Miguel Casimiro, Romualdo Fabián, and Justo Casimiro, members of Red Atacama, mapped out a route along which we accompanied them to visit people, mountains, lakes, salt flats, wetlands, and apachetas. As the journey begins, Iván drapes a beautiful chuspa around his neck, a sheep's wool weave known as barracán. He wears it as one might don a festive garment. Romualdo guides us with wisdom and tenderness; Justo keeps a watchful eye to avoid any mishaps; Miguel organises and shares the history of this place with us, providing precise details. Also travelling with us are Alex Puca, a young man from the community of Barrancas who works as a driver; Álvaro Simón Padrós, an audiovisual producer from Tucumán, who carefully handles the equipment attempting to register our encounters; and

Tomás Saraceno, whom these days they call an architect, a designer, a collaborator, and only on a few occasions: an artist.

Salt is ever-present. It is named, described, recalled, until we step into it and are dazzled. We tread upon it and it surrounds us; it alters our perception of space. The other constant protagonist, of course, is water: it is scarce, sought after, defended, taken away, and transformed. Water and salt are the pillars of the cultural memory and struggle of those who call themselves the Atacama nation-people, the Lickanantay people, and the Atacameño communities. Their presence extends as ancestral territory across three nation-states – Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile – but it transcends those borders and moves true to its own channels and causes.

The Sudden Journey

We set off at dawn from San Antonio de los Cobres and, around midday, crossed into Chile after lengthy formalities and checks at the Jama Pass. As we entered San Pedro de Atacama, large billboards appeared along the road announcing: 'Desert and Archaeology'. We travelled to this place to meet an astronomer, a cultural promoter, an architect, and an anthropologist from the Lickanantay people, but the state – in this case, the Chilean state – labels this space as if there were only arid landscape and the remains of a world that has ended, as if life itself had been reduced to ruins. On the other side of those signs, the communities insist on a different interpretation: this is not a desert, this is Lickana. This is not just the past, it is continuity and resistance.

We are so many metres above sea level that walking here feels strange to those of us who live at other altitudes in the region. The vital heartbeat of this territory carries a force that we feel constantly throughout our journey; we move attentively, listening to our steps, to the signals, to the recurring forms in the stacking of stones, to the choreographed gestures of gratitude and celebration, and to the embodied, material decisions about what is transformed and what is defended. From those days onwards, to enter Lickana is to enter the stories of Puri, as water is called in Lickana, the ancient relative. Puri is also the spirit of water, the song that runs through it, the memory it holds, and the way it relates to those who look at it, drink it, or dream of it. Every watercourse has its own voice, every spring tells a different story; there is no silent or neutral water: there is always an intention, a character, a response.

In San Pedro de Atacama we met the anthropologist Jimena Cruz Mamani; in our conversation she pointed out that the great wound in this territory is not only the amount of water extracted, but the rupture in the relationship with Puri and with Pachamama. The mining practiced by her ancestors was, in part, a form of offering: minerals were extracted to be returned in rituals, to be dedicated to the earth and the water,









to enter and leave the body of the mountain by asking permission and giving thanks. Today, the Puri is measured in litres per second, translated into 'water resources', and recorded in tables. The spirit becomes a figure; the song, background noise. She warns:



Today, mining has brought water problems and pollution. But, for me, one of the most serious effects is uprooting and internal conflicts. The major problem is how relations between community members have been severed. Mining arrives offering resources, scholarships, and vans; it negotiates with the community just a metre away, not the one two metres away. That has caused division. It has fostered a culture of dependency, where people expect mining to solve everything. The damage is both environmental and social.[2]

She also recalls that, when she was a child, her father had a habit which, over time, she came to see as a form of teaching. Every summer he would make her and her siblings sleep in the courtyard: they would lie under the stars and he would tell them stories that linked the sky and the earth. As they gazed at the stars, her father would point out a fox, a partridge, a llama, and explain that what they saw above was the shadow of what lay below; that at night, high up, the sky was a river that was both white and dark, wider than any riverbed seen by day, teeming with animals, tears, and travelling souls. He taught them that the sky is not only above, but extends like a slit of light across the darkness, and that this bright strip, which maps call the Milky Way, is for the Lickanantay people a river of suspended water, a stream that has not yet fallen.

The Long Memory of the Trails

We arrived in Quetena Grande just as it was getting dark. Earlier, we had been in Polques, taking part in the carnival's closing ceremonies and bathing in the hot springs. We are at an altitude of 4,700 metres.

We meet Ismael Saire who tells us that initially, Quetena Grande was a purely pastoral community; later, when it was declared a protected area within the Eduardo Avaroa Reserve, tourism began to develop. Eusebia Esquivel Bernal introduces herself as a magistrate. Her testimony begins by saying, 'Water is life, for every human being and every living creature, and even more so in the community of Quetena Grande.' Water sustains the wetlands and the grazing of camelids, allows some plants and grasses to regenerate on a plateau with little rainfall, and it organises the life and work of a community where each family looks after its own grazing land. Tomás Esquivel, standing beside her, speaks from

a place of deep-rooted connection: 'I was born here, I grew up here, I've grown old here, and I'll be laid to rest here, brother.' He recalls a childhood when the river had a greater flow, 'the place was more beautiful' and there were 'many more llamas'. Today, intermittent droughts, changes in rainfall, and a decline in livestock mark a more fragile landscape. His memories also open the door to rituals that have now almost disappeared. Eusebia recounts that 'a long time ago' there was talk of bringing 'water from the sea' from Tocopilla to San Pedro and from there to Bolivia, to carry it to the top of a hill and call for rain. Tomás points out that many families have stopped practising these 'very important traditions', which were also a celebration, featuring harp music, colours and community.

They tell us that the climate has changed: 'now it rains and shortly afterwards it's frozen, or a strong wind blows', and the cold affects both people and the pastureland. In response, the community is pursuing other strategies: bartering with San Pedro de Atacama, where the women take woven goods, and the slow construction of infrastructure to strengthen these exchanges. Salt, just as important as water, feeds the livestock and becomes an everyday remedy. This conversation also touches on the long memory of the trails: journeys on the backs of llamas and donkeys, herds crossing into what is now Argentina and Chile at shearing time to barter for wool, llama meat, maize, flour, carob, and chañar, the fruit of a native Andean tree. 'It was nice before, because when we had livestock we lived off everything and we never lacked for goods or anything,' says Tomás. That experience contrasts with the present, where the salt flats – Uyuni, the region's salt lakes – have become a disputed territory. Eusebia dreams of an 'industry without chimneys', capable of welcoming visitors and generating income 'without touching, without exploiting, without harming the wetland or the salt flat'. Tomás Esquivel also tells us how he and his brother refused to show a water spring to a businessman who came to their community. That decision was a concrete way of defending their land: 'If we'd been greedy, we'd be without water now.'

Water, Our Kin

> *This little water that flows through our bodies also flows through the world, the planet, reality. And this water that evaporates from the seas, forms clouds, and then falls as rain also absorbs all that information, learning everything that is happening, and then comes to us. And we then drink it and can also interpret it and learn from it as a living being. The salt flats, the hills, are living elements for our grandparents, for our culture. And that is what we have learnt since we were little.*[4]

After spending a few days between Uyuni and Colchani, we make a brief stop in Tupiza and return to Argentina via the Quebrada de Humahuaca, arriving at the Cerro Negro community to take part in an assembly of the Red Atacama. Gathered around a long table, more than thirty people representing the network debate, imagine, anticipate obstacles and dream – amidst minutes, and posters with handwritten names and topics – about how to build these great forms of salt, to eventually create the *Puri Nuckyumtur, The Sanctuary of Water*. There we hear Raúl Copa, from the Esquina Blanca community, say:

> *In my community we used to have springs on the hill, and in recent times some have dried up and others produce very little. At my house we had two springs on the hill: one we called El Frontón and the other Aguadita. In its heyday, Aguadita produced more than 150 litres a day. I knew it when I lived here; I used to get 70 litres a day, then it dropped to 40 and now it doesn't even reach 5 litres a day. [...]*
> *I live on the hillside and the water doesn't reach that far. It's a challenge I haven't yet resolved: getting the water to the house. Water is vital for us, very important, even though it has high mineral content; it's the only water we have. My ancestors, my grandparents, my great-grandparents used this water. The springs were very strong back then; they weren't in wells. We also draw water from the Las Burras River, which forms the border between Salta and Jujuy. From the Las Burras River, over a stretch of 8 kilometres, we used to carry the water in irrigation channels, which were used for drinking, for the animals, and for watering the pastures. Today we can't do that, because mining has filled the water with sediment and the intakes and channels are constantly getting blocked.*[5]

Puri reveals herself in the way the mist moves over the hills, in the persistence of the flies before a rainy year, in the ants that file out in a line before an earthquake. It is necessary to understand that Puri speaks, sometimes as a whisper in a ditch, sometimes as silence on a dried-up hillside, sometimes as a torrent that sweeps everything away so that it is taken seriously.

The Hills

We travel across the great Lickana along winding, high-altitude paths, guided by Romualdo, who shows us where and how to move. He does not know everything, but he has been to places that feel familiar to this landscape. It is this familiarity that we want to speak about – the recog-

nition embedded in the ways of addressing other people and other beings. He constantly reminds us that we are kin to this land. He tells us about Atacameño ceremonies that have resisted forgetting, such as those dedicated to water, respect, pauses, such as the apachetas, or the señaladas, livestock marking ceremonies.

That resistance to oblivion resonates today in the testimonies from the salt flat basin. Many people say that for years they hid their offerings or made them at night to avoid trouble with the police or with companies. 'Before, when they wanted us to believe there were no Indigenous people here, they also wanted us to stop climbing the hills, to stop practising Pachamama,' says Iván. That pressure sought to strip away three things at once: language, spirituality, and territory. This is why he insists that the Lickanantay heritage is inseparable from the hills where the spirits that sustain community life dwell.

In this tapestry of hills, water and plants, defending the territory is a daily practice. 'I spend my life planting trees so the rain doesn't go away, so there's moisture and oxygen. I look after the plants; I don't like them being burnt, my grandparents taught me that,' says Florentina Martínez, from the Rangel community. Florentina links this defence to a long history of exchanges and care centred on the salt flat. She recounts how her grandparents used 'that salt flat all their lives', how her father would cross it with pack donkeys to bring back salt bread and barter for dried fruit, maize or wheat. Salt and water shape routes and family economies. When she speaks of *The Sanctuary of Water* promoted by the Red Atacama, she does not present it as an external project, but as 'a very rich territory where our roots and our resources lie'. It is a place where stories of labour and exchange converge.

Macarena Geronimo, president of the Rangel Community, shows us the cardon cacti gathered among the houses of her community – green plants, some still in bloom – and explains which are for food and which for medicine. Amidst the laughter and bustle of children, using a stick taller than herself, she tries to reach the fruit of the cardon cactus, the pasacana – with its green skin, transparent flesh and black seeds – and says:

> *Sometimes we say, "this is how it's done"; it never occurred to us to ask why we do it [...] because the seed, we take it as something of our own. We think, of course: it's part of the fruit, and its part of who we are.*[7]



It's Sunday at midday. A little while ago we were in Cobres dancing with the Sikuris band *Ecos de Mi Tierra (Echoes from my Land)*, drawing on printed clouds with the children, and conducting interviews at the Cobres Site Museum of Ancient Mining and Metallurgy. We're driving along the dirt track. There's no mobile signal, but we've found the marker Flavio Calizaya left for us to show which way leads to his home in Potrero Grande – a white cloth tied to a pole stuck in the ground beside the turn-off we need to take. There's no doubt about it, we're close to the house. As we approach the foot of a mountain covered in shades of green and grey, Flavio is waiting for us there with his partner, Dominga Colque. We arrived thinking this would be just another interview. We'd charged our batteries to talk and wrap up in an hour, maybe an hour and a half. But they welcome us with a large platter of freshly barbecued meat. This couple has celebration plans for us. The table is laid. They have prepared a feast for eight people, including plenty of homemade goat's cheese, corn, bread, wine, and, above all, meat. After lunch, we take out our chuspas – the small bags traditionally used to carry coca leaves – and prepare to *pijchar,* to chew coca leaves. Flavio offers us a dessert: pasacana. He serves it very cold, almost frozen; it looks like ice cream. He watches us proudly as we enjoy the fruit from the cardon cacti that grow all over the place. We think it's time to conduct the interview, or at least to record the conversation and leave, but Flavio tells us that 'the corral is waiting for us.'[8] In summer, that can only mean one thing: the ceremony of the señalada. It had rained the night before, and that is always a blessing. Now it is sunny, with the scent of wet earth and vibrant colours. As we enter the corral, we are hit by the strong smell of guano and the mood of goats that have been cooped up all morning. All this suddenly mingles with the aroma of burning qoa[9] which smudges us and transports us to a new state.

Dominga and Flavio are getting ready to show us the ceremony. We've walked here carrying crates of drinks, a shovel, and everything else needed for the ceremony. They dig a pit in the middle of the pen. We place ourselves at the owners' disposal, and they guide us through the stages and procedures. They tell us which drinks are meant for offerings and which for sharing, and which are used for *chullanchar,* the blessing of the animals. Each drink preparation has a meaning and a purpose. There are drinks that are to be offered to Pachamama; for these, you give everything – the bottle must be left empty.

During a señalada, guests may remain in the house and within the corral for many hours; time is not measured in hours but in moments. The ceremony has many steps and stages that cannot be rushed. In another community, they are waiting for us to conduct more interviews, but our shoes are already full of wet guano, our clothes already smell of qoa, and the drinks have been served. We are moving through the moments of the señalada.

First, permission is sought from Mother Earth; a hole is dug in the middle of the corral and, in pairs, an offering is made. Next comes the mating of the female with the most offspring and the breeding male, followed by the ear-marking of every single member of the herd. The marking consists of a small cut on both ears, usually in the shape of a letter representing the family; this act is accompanied by presenting flowers made from coloured threads or wool, which also represent the family. At this point, the blood from the cut must fall to the ground and be smeared on the faces of those present. Flavio and Dominga's hands seek out our faces to tell us that we are family, that we now belong to this herd, that we are one in this pen, the animals and us. As kindred beings, we will ensure that they eat and drink well. Take care of these little animals, ensure their water is not polluted, that their grass grows, and that the rains come in due season.

It is a celebration; there is drink, songs with verses and cheerful conversation. Our time in the pen ends when Dominga begins to walk behind the goats, leading them to make three laps of the pen, chullanchando – a word we use to describe the act of sprinkling a drink specially prepared for the occasion, made from chicha,[10] in the direction of the animals whilst uttering words of blessing. The couple thank us for coming and remind us that they are alone, waiting for their children to return so they can continue with the ceremony and the farm work. The sun is almost setting; we head back to the house, open a can of cold beer, and now, yes, we switch on the camera to record a few words.

Working the Salt

In the early hours of the last day of the trip, we set off for Salinas Grandes, it's about ten minutes by car. We load the equipment and follow in the footsteps of Aurelio and Liborio, who are guiding us. The salt flat is a body of stagnant water, water that has hardened over the years until it has become a thick crust. Now, at the end of the trip, we wake up at dawn to witness the sunrise within the salt flat, where Aurelio Flores explains to us: 'Here we see the water: what is water today, over time transforms into salt and rock; this salt flat is made of water that has gradually crystallised.'[11] The cycle does not end there: 'The water is not only down here; there is water in the clouds too. Water circulates: sometimes it is more present in the salt flat, other times in the sky. It is a rotating cycle that we must take care of.'

When it rains in summer, the surface becomes damp and a delicate film appears, almost like new skin on the white body. Liborio Flores says: 'After the summer rains, a layer of about one centimetre remains. We say that the salt "blooms"; it's as if the salt flat were alive.' A period of growth is condensed into that wafer-thin layer: 'For us, the salt grows until it

reaches that thickness – a centimetre or a centimetre and a half – and we call that fleur de sel. The whole salt flat, when it's like this, is at its peak of generation.' Working with the salt means opening up that mass, marking it and cutting it. Aurelio describes the technique he learnt from his grandparents: 'To cut the salt loaves, first you mark out the dimensions, the size you want – larger or smaller, depending on the need. They are marked, then cut with the machine and afterwards removed with the *hilacha,* with the axe.' Beneath the crust lies a thick, salty mud, which is also removed to form a hollow: 'When that mud is removed, the pools remain. In those pools, granular salt is harvested every year.'

The pools are open wounds to the water. At first, says Aurelio, 'The pool is filled with muddy water; with the heat, the salt begins to crystallise and the mud settles. In eight or ten days the water becomes clear, even turquoise in colour.' The sun evaporates it, the water rises, the salt gathers again at the bottom. Each pool is a small scene of the cycle: what is water today becomes crystal again tomorrow. The freshly harvested salt is still soft; it can crumble in your hands. 'When the salt is harvested, it is gathered into mounds. At first the salt is somewhat soft, but over time – a year or more – it hardens like rock.' The young mounds have a gentle slope; with the winters and the thin layer of earth covering them, the angles become steeper: 'At first, the natural angles of the gathered salt are around 30–32 degrees, but over time, as it compacts. It can reach almost vertical angles, such as 90 degrees, which provides stability for building.' The salt flat grows upwards into mounds and pyramids that the wind smooths. But the salt flat also knows how to close up to start afresh. Aurelio describes it as skin that heals itself: 'In a pool, if no maintenance is carried out, over time it closes up; we say it heals. In three to five years it can close up again and become a salt flat surface once more, ready for new blocks to be extracted and the cycle to repeat.' Open, flourish, harvest, heal: the salt appears, allows itself to be worked, and merges once more with the crystalline white expanse.

The Economy as a Channel for Reciprocity

In the voices of the interviews we conducted during the trip, reciprocity emerges as a delicate system of give-and-take between people, animals, water, and the land. This back-and-forth of salt, fruit, wool, and meat is underpinned by an explicit ethic: 'Everything was communal – food, housing, everything. We have to remind our children and grandchildren that they must live that way, that they must not become individualists and that they must not care only about themselves,'[12] Mirta Puca tells us.

Rosa Choque extends this network of exchanges to the realm of our relationship with the Earth: 'In August we perform the challa to Pachamama. Before, we used to go and perform the challa at the spring where the

water flows. [...] In August, we didn't throw away any of the bones or food scraps that were left over; we gathered them in a bag and took them to the spring to offer them as food for the spring. We pour wine and perform the challa, giving thanks that we have water.'

In this context, reciprocity is not an abstract harmony, but a battleground. Mirta puts it bluntly: 'The great challenge we face is the struggle for territory. Looking after our territory is not easy. [...] Some have prioritised living well now, having wealth, having vehicles and cars, at the expense of environmental damage to our Mother Earth, to our Pacha. Those of us who prefer not to have those things have a different way of thinking, a different way of caring for our Pacha, of fighting, of asking.' At the same time, she insists that 'our strength lies in being able to pass on to our children the care of our Pacha, to leave a legacy of struggle. That is what our grandparents did. Otherwise, we would not have the salt flat today.' And also 'to set aside our differences and try to stop and think about what is good and what is bad for our community, not just for me.'

Vanesa Sarapura, president of the Cerro Negro Community, tells us that for the Red Atacama, expectations regarding the proposed construction of the *Sanctuary of Water* are high. They dream of becoming, through this project, a tourist powerhouse in the northern Puna, although today they feel a long way from achieving that. They hope the sculpture will attract visitors, drawing people to the site and encouraging them to stay in the communities. Vanesa explains that they have been discussing with other communities how to prepare and what services they can offer. She emphasises that the aim is for visitors to explore and stay across the various locations, support local businesses, and translate their presence into income for families. For Vanesa, however, the central concern remains water. The entire tourism initiative is underpinned by this question: how to conserve water, how to ensure there is enough for the community and for the animals, in a region threatened by industrial mining and lithium extraction projects that demand enormous volumes of fresh water and put the high-Andean wetlands at risk.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are taken from interviews conducted during a journey across Atacama territory, undertaken 14–23 February 2026, organised in preparation for the exhibition *Ancestral Futures* and this publication.

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CELESTE VALERO is a weaver from Casillas Community and indigenous activist for rural women's rights. She tends to ancestral knowledge of Andean weaving as a form of memory and continuity. Through Tejedores Andinos and Unión Textiles Semillas, she supports networks that give rise to exhibitions, talks, and workshops internationally. She is the author of *We Grow Because We Come Together,* produced with the Humboldt Forum, Berlin.






CANTÓN QUETENA GRANDE

1 Interview with Aurelio Flores conducted on 22 February 2026 in Cerro Negro.
2 Chuspa is a small bag, woven from sheep's wool, used to carry coca leaves.
3 Interview conducted in San Pedro de Atacama, Chile on 16 February 2026.
4 In Spanish: Corregidor/a refers to the highest traditional authority of Indigenous peoples, responsible for administration, community justice, and territorial representation.
5 All quotes in this and the following paragraph taken from interviews conducted in Quetena Grande 17 February 2026.
6 The algarrobo is a tree found throughout northern Argentina – so prevalent it is often simply called 'the tree.' Its fruit, the algarroba, is a pod containing seeds and an edible pulp highly valued for its nutritional properties; from it a fermented drink, aloja, is made, which plays an important role in carnival and arete celebrations. The chañar is a tree of the legume family, with a yellowish-green bark and a sweet, edible fruit.
7 Interview conducted on 16 February 2026 in San Pedro de Atacama, Chile.
8 Interview with Raúl Copa (from the Esquina Blanca community) conducted on 21 February 2026. Cerro Negro, Salta, Argentina.
9 In a conversation during the trip he made with the authors in February 2026.
10 Interview with Florentina Martínez, conducted on 23 February 2026. Rangel Community, Salta, Argentina.
11 During the visit to the Rangel community on 23 February 2026. Salta, Argentina.
12 All the quotations in this paragraph and the following two are taken from interviews with Flavio Calizaya and Liborio Flores, conducted on 22 February 2026 in Cerro Negro, Argentina.
13 Qoa, Koa, or *Coa* is an aromatic Andean herb traditionally used for smudging, performing energy cleansing, and for making offerings to Mother Earth.
14 A fermented drink made from maize.
15 Interview conducted on 23 February 2026 in Salinas Grandes, Salta, Argentina.
16 Interview conducted on 14 February 2026 in San Antonio de los Cobres, Salta, Argentina.
17 Challar is a Quechua word turned into a verb, used throughout the Andean region to signify that it is time for ceremonies and celebrations of reciprocity and gratitude.
18 In a telephone conversation on 27 February 2026.



Puri Nuckyumtur[1]

A Ceremonial Centre, a Work of Art and a Challenge for the Indigenous Community

IVÁN ARJONA ACORIA

> *The message is clear: look after the land, don't abandon it.*
> ALFREDO CASIMIRO

Art unites us in the face of new challenges of the present, as through it we can express our Atacameño Indigenous identity. Thus, the water ceremonial centre reflects joint work between the communities and the art – represented in the collaboration with Tomás Saraceno – which seeks to convey a clear message about the preservation of water, the salt flats, the high-Andean wetlands, and Atacameño culture.

The artistic project embodies a practical understanding of joint and intercultural work, drawing heavily on the intellectual, physical and organisational capacities of the members of all the communities within the Atacama Peoples Network, the ckantales (Indigenous community leaders), the construction workers, and every individual who has made a financial contribution to ensure the project reaches its final stage of completion.

With the clear aim of serving as an offering to Our Mother Earth, the Patta Hoyri, the Pachamama, for future generations regarding the importance and care of water, wetlands, and salt flats as crucial and fundamental elements of the existence of the Atacameño communities. In this way, it will chart a new path to be bequeathed to humanity through an artistic work deeply rooted in the knowledge, spirituality, culture and political stance of the communities within their own territory.

Consequently, the idea and artistic design emerged from the community assemblies as a contribution and a responsibility taken on by the community authorities in response to new challenges and needs. It was conceived as a practical way to help prevent young people from leaving and to create opportunities for them to build their futures in their own communities. This is the added value behind the magnificence of the ceremonial centre.

A Living, Ancient People

The origins of the Atacama Nation-People trace back to an uninterrupted presence of over 15,000 years across the entire Gran Lickana, the Kunza name for the vast territory of the Puna and Pre-Puna where, near the wetlands and fertile plains, the salt flats have given rise to an entire culture. It is, therefore, a culture that predates the creation of the states of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, which have divided it into a cross-border people with historical, spiritual, cultural, and political continuity.

The Atacama Nation-People is the result of a profound balance between territory, culture, language, spirituality, collective work, community organisation, and their own experience, achieved through the development of sophisticated techniques based on knowledge of the water cycles and the seasons, the care and cleaning of springs, the management of the salt flats, and the practise of barter for a sustainable economy with other peoples, which remains practical and efficient to this day.

Community governance throughout the territory over time has been centred on an organisation based on respect for self-management and customary law, free from external interference. With its recognition in the 1994 National Constitution, the Atacama Network Organisation – also known as the Atacama Network – has gradually transformed into a more structural and organic indigenous institution that brings together all the Atacama communities in the departments of Los Andes and La Poma in the province of Salta, serving as a means of political coordination with the national state and at the international level.

For this reason, indigenous political dynamics are governed by the value of respect for the spoken word as a central element and in correlation with spirituality in every assembly. In other words, the assembly has been and continues to be our fundamental political body for defending our identity, culture, mother tongue, intercultural bilingual education, territory, water, salt flats, and collective dignity in the face of interference from national states and corporate interests. In other words, the assembly is the sole representative body.

In this sense, the territory is a vital fabric, based on continuous and uninterrupted relationships with water, salt, and the mountains, which is embodied through spirituality, memory and community work within the territory.

Water as a Living Element

For the Atacama people, water and salt form a unified and indispensable reality. Water sustains all life – animal, human and plantary – whilst salt is an essential component of food, traditional medicine, hygiene, and trade. Thus, the importance of water is not merely that of water as a resource.

Water is a vital entity, a special being, a sacred condition of existence. In other words, water is a pre-existing right granted by the Patta Hoyri to inhabit our territory. It is a mother who nourishes her children. It is an extremely fragile space, and its availability depends on the care and self-sustaining management of the communities.

In this sense, misuse and waste constitute an attack on an ecosystem that has survived for millennia, seriously threatening the extinction of the wetlands, salt flats, rivers, and family-run livestock farming that make community life possible. Any alteration to the level of groundwater or surface water is a direct attack on our food sovereignty. The community way of life is based on a management of care, respect and preservation without depleting the resources available throughout the Lickana. This model stands in contrast to the extractivist approach, which reduces brine and fresh water to industrial inputs where governments and mining investors see profit and carry out the large-scale plunder of resources. To counter the onslaught of mining power, the communities have devised an original strategy: to highlight a ceremonial centre for water.

An Artwork and a Ceremonial Centre for Water and Salt

Puri Nuckyumtur is an artwork that seeks to bring global attention to the knowledge and spirituality of the Atacameño communities. It honours ancestral relationships to the territory, the transmission of knowledge to future generations, and the collective stewardship of cultural, economic, and human resources according to their own worldview.

The design of the artwork is being led by Red Atacama, with Tomás Sareceno acting as an advisor to ensure a truly intercultural project. Using the dome as a representation of the apacheta – so central to the spirituality of these communities – it will symbolise, on different scales, the chakana or krushpa, the Southern Cross and the constellations, serving as a place of cosmic communication with the ancestors.

Each salt dome creates a circular shape, a concrete representation of Patta Hoyri, who is present in every part of the communities as a guardian entity. The symbolic placement within the Ceremonial Centre's artwork is interconnected with the cosmos: Ckamur/Killa is the moon, and Ckapin/Inti is the sun. Hoyri/Tiqsimuyu is the Earth, Haalar/Ch'aska is the Morning Star or Venus, and Yollestur/Hawcha is Saturn.

The ceremonial site is a place where the Atacameño communities connect with their spirituality; it is a space for the cosmic communication of their indigenous wisdom with humanity, a legacy of the joint efforts of their ancestors. It is a place for reflection on the land in the face of the excessive use of natural resources. It is a place for personal and communal silence regarding the challenges ahead, and it is a space for

ceremony and a place for decolonisation from a foreign monotheistic religion.

The building materials for the artwork will be salt in its compact form and the water surrounding it. Projected in interconnected lagoons, it will reveal the two vital human needs. Without water we cannot exist as a species, and without salt we would lose our spiritual and physical health, whilst also losing a resource of exchange that has shaped our identity. The location in the Salinas Grandes, one of the last salt flats in the Province of Salta untouched by mining and so important to the communities of the Puna de Atacama, conveys a clear message about the importance of communities in the sustainable use of the natural and mineral resources so essential to our territories.

The site of the project and its functionality belong solely to the communities of the Red Atacama, situated within Lickana territory. It is a project managed by the communities within the parameters of co-management and self-sustainability, serving as a new contribution to humanity, indigenous knowledge, and spirituality, alongside an economy based on collective labour.

The communities themselves are responsible for its construction, thanks to their extensive experience in the use of salt and their in-depth knowledge of the terrain, supplemented by the expert guidance of civil engineering specialists providing technical support for the architecture and artistic vision that connect indigenous cosmic knowledge with character and value in the present day.

The Lickana region is home to a rich coexistence between wildlife – flamingos, condors, *vicuñas, guanacos* – and the communities' domestic animals: llamas, goats, sheep and donkeys. This coexistence is no accident; it stems from a philosophy of care and complementarity in which the wild and the domestic sustain one another. In this animal universe, no figure is more significant than the black llama – the atchi silla – whose silhouette also inhabits the firmament of the Milky Way as a symbol of cosmic continuity and protection of the community. It is this creature that gives rise to the legend of the Yakana.

The Atchi Silla or Yakana traverses the Lickana throughout the solar cycle, its silhouette emerging from the Pacific Ocean and crossing the cordillera towards the eastern Puna – bringing with it the moisture that dissipates as rain over the land. Like the sutar (the hummingbird), it represents the link between the material and the cosmic: the earthly llama and its reflection in the Milky Way are one and the same presence, uniting the herder with the heavens. The Andean communities possessed a profound knowledge of the cosmos – the constellations, the Pleiades, the planets – which served them both to find their way across the Lickana and to structure their ritual and communal life.

For the Atacama people, the figure of the llama with its young in the Milky Way is not merely a constellation – it is a sacred cosmic proportion

that guided communal practices and reflected the vital role of the camelid in high-Andean life: wool, meat, transport. This representation survives in the geoglyphs of Matancillas and Corralitos and in the rock art throughout the Lickana. In every Muckar (spirit) ceremony, the darkness of the black void becomes a bridge between the living and the ancestors – proof of a cosmic knowledge that is still embodied in daily ritual.

The sutar is a sacred bird in our worldview, as its presence heralds rain and, according to the herabum, also signals the departure of a spirit into the cosmos. For this reason, the legend of the sutar, which recounts the hummingbird's long journey to the Pacific Ocean to ask Mother Sea to send clouds to bring rain and water to the Puna, serves a purpose in the cosmic, natural, and rational understanding of community life. In this legend, the smallest and most insignificant beings in nature sometimes fulfill great roles, such as being messengers of distant lands and the cosmos.

In the immediate term, community-based rural tourism offers a concrete path forward: sharing with the world the ceremonial water centre, the salt flats, the surreal landscapes of the Puna, and community life as an embodied experience. It is through this practice – rooted in the care of water, the sovereignty of the territory, and the desire to build bridges between ancestral knowledge and the contemporary world – that the Ceremonial Water Centre takes form.

IVÁN ARJONA ACORIA is a member of the Atacama Nation, educator, writer, and researcher at the Universidad Nacional de Salta. His work centers on Andean languages, cosmology, and sacred knowledge, with particular focus on Kunza, his mother tongue. He lectured at Universities in Bolivia and Chile and currently serves as president of the Second Semmu Halayna, a forthcoming congress on Kunza language and linguistics in Argentina.

1 In the indigenous Atacameño worldview, 'ceremonial or ritual centre' is the equivalent of the Western concept of a sanctuary. Therefore, in the native Ckunza language, 'water' is 'puri', and 'nuckyumtur' is a compound word consisting of 'nuckyum' – meaning 'sacred', 'ritual', or 'ceremonial' – and 'tur', meaning space or place. Thus, the meaning of *Puri Nuckyumtur* is 'ceremonial centre of water' or 'ceremonial space of water'.

Striving to Make Dreams a Reality and Build the Future

BY LUISA CASIMIRO

Organisation is the means by which the impossible becomes possible
CORRALITOS COMMUNITY

The Voice of the Earth in the Bodies of Women

The voice of the women of our People is not an isolated voice; it is the harmony of voices, a fabric of memories centred, above all, on the defence of the land.

We do not speak of the territory as a resource, or a space for the extraction of value, but as the living heritage and continuity of the historic struggle of our ancestors. In the depths of our being, in both the practical and the spiritual, the Atacameño women understand that defending the territory and the water is to defend life itself, the culture, and the future of our people through the ages.

Our leadership does not seek superiority, but rather the balance of duality. It is a spiritual support that translates into concrete actions of constant support for the community and for one's life partner. By virtue of this, women have cemented their social and political recognition, becoming involved in recent decades in the most significant events of the indigenous struggle. Their role as protector and guardian is a function that stems from an ancestral matriarchal tradition.

Today, the Atacameño women are at the forefront of the defence of their lands against the voracious advance of mining and lithium extraction in the Salinas Grandes. We have decided to be part of this struggle, denouncing the environmental impacts on water sources, a sacred and

vital inheritance. We demand consultation. We demand participation. And, above all, we demand respect for the balance that has sustained the Lickana for millennia.

From the Government of the Andes to the Malones de la Paz

The path of struggle has been long, winding, and arduous. However, despite the systematic attempts by those who profit from the exploitation of our territories to silence us, they have not been able to divide us or extinguish us. To understand the current struggle of the Red Atacama, it is necessary to look back at the history of the 20th century, which is marked by the administrative fragmentation of our territory.

From the early 20th century until 1943 the Andes Governorate existed, a National Territory covering more than 60,000 square kilometres with its capital in San Antonio de los Cobres. That territory was the historic home of our people, a space where Atacameño identity was lived unconstrained by the borders imposed by today's provincial bureaucracy. With the national administrative reorganisation and the dissolution of the governorate, its territory was divided among the provinces of Salta, Jujuy, and Catamarca, marking the beginning of a sustained process of assimilation. National decrees of the time attempted to change our names, and provincial laws sought to make us lose our identity, but they failed to erase the presence of this ancestral people, the Atacameño people, known in our mother tongue, Kunza, as Lickanantay.

A key milestone in our political memory is the Malones de la Paz. That historic indigenous march of 1946, during Juan Domingo Perón's first government, saw our grandparents walk thousands of kilometres to Buenos Aires to request communal land titles. Those dreams were cut short by the actions of local governments. But the seed did not die. From 1946 to the present day, we have continued to demand our territorial rights. Community land titles are our ultimate goal; they are the only guarantee for caring for and protecting Mother Earth.

Red Atacama: Leaders Who Leave Their Mark

The struggle in the great Lickana does not fade or falter. It is stronger than ever, because it is fuelled by the instinct of a protective mother who does not abandon her ideals or her principles. We seek new horizons and strategies. We use our sixth sense to forge alliances with international and national organisations that join forces with us, such as the Indian Law Resource Center, the Aerocene Foundation, and the Environment and Natural Resources Foundation (FARN). Together, we form a united front against the plundering and the abandonment of our territory.


MUY FRAGIL




ESCUELA ME CREARON
Y U A ESCUELA QUIERO SER.
SER TU CA A Y OFRECERTE
UN LUGAR P RA CREC R.



Andean Worldview: The Balance of the Three Planes

Our political engagement does not stem from a Western ideology, but from our Andean Worldview. For the Atacama people, existence is organised across three planes that form a sacred and indissoluble unity. To understand these planes is to understand why we defend water and salt with our lives.

- The *world above:* the cosmos, the realm of the celestial deities and the stars that guide our lives. It is the reservoir of wisdom and the source of climatic cycles.
- The *here and now:* the earthly world where we humans, animals, and plants live. It is the realm of political action and daily care.
- The *underworld:* associated with the ancestors who have passed on and with the fertility of the earth. It is the depths from which life springs forth and where the roots of our identity lie.

These three planes sustain the life of the Atacameño people and ensure the family, cultural, and spiritual continuity of the new generations. Mirta Salomé Puca, from the community of Corralitos, states clearly: 'Our strength lies in being able to pass on to our children the care of our Pacha, to leave a legacy of struggle. That is what our grandparents did; if they hadn't fought, we wouldn't have the salt flat today. We have a salt flat because there was an ancestral struggle; there were even deaths. When we are organised, we can achieve anything, and so much more.'[1]

Water and Salt: Elements of Life and Sacredness

In the Atacama Desert, water is not a commodity; water is life. The salt flats are connected to lagoons, springs, and underground aquifers in a

fragile and unique water system. Historically, we have protected this resource as a vital and sacred element. However, today the water we consume in the *Puna* plateau is running out. Large-scale mining for lithium and other minerals has arrived in the region, and the environmental impacts are alarming: pollution, the displacement of communities and, above all, the drying up of aquifers.

We feel that water is a living being, a divine being. That is why the challenge for Atacameño women is to achieve sustainability and to ensure compliance with environmental protection laws. How can we address this reality when so many families depend economically on mining? This question continues to hang in the air, and the women's response has been action: reforestation and environmental education, sustained political pressure, and marches of over 170 kilometres towards Salta City along National Route 51. Organised by Ema Vázquez, Reyna Ferril of the Kolla people, and our young coordinator and spokesperson Ayelén Mercedes Sánchez, these walks sought to denounce pollution and water scarcity.

The women are also taking action through salt – a blessed and sacred resource that we consume and that serves as our medicine; it is the other pillar of our existence. Rosa Arcadia Choque shares her testimony: 'I live above San Antonio de los Cobres, in Tocomar. I follow in the footsteps of my parents and grandparents; I continue to work with salt. I have a few small trucks with which I go to extract salt from the salt flats, near where the Water Sanctuary is to be built. Salt continues to provide work; I live off salt and depend on the Red Atacama because it supports me greatly.'[2] For us, the salt flat is not a barren desert; it is a space linked to protective, healing and fertility spirits.

Ancestral Practices: Agriculture and Community Work

The Lickanantay people have always settled near oases and ravines. Atacameño agriculture has immense ecological value. We have inherited innovative techniques, such as the terraced fields built on the hillsides to level the surfaces, and the complex irrigation channels that carry the water. This is entirely community-based work.

Romualdo Fabián explains the importance of cleaning the canals:

> *It is a practice still carried out in Socaire and in the communities along the San Antonio de los Cobres River. In August, all of us who have land to irrigate or water for livestock get together. Men and women each have their roles; we prepare the food, the tools, the coca, and the alcohol to ask permission from the Patta Hoyri ('Mother Earth' in Kunza). We go as a family group to get the canals ready for sowing.*[3]

Tomás Vilca adds a historical, and a melancholic, note to these practises:

> *Our ancestors built terraces and pucaras. In the old days, the grandmothers would come with jugs to clean the canal; they would hold a ceremony where the water springs forth, a feast. In the past, labourers weren't hired. Once money came into the picture, the sense of community was lost. Today, with concrete and piping, we no longer see the toads that used to inhabit our irrigation channels. Modernisation has brought efficiency, but it has taken away part of our spiritual connection with the creatures that inhabit the water.*[4]

In October, villages from Atacama la Grande to north-western Argentina begin this cycle. Socaire is the southernmost village in the basin to hold the ceremony, which takes place between 20 and 23 October. It is a cycle of life that repeats year after year – a choreography of men, women, and water that sustains the fertility of the land.

For the Lickanantay, the seed is another vital element. Today, the Red Atacama has a seed bank run by the Matancilla Indigenous community. Every year, the Seed Festival is held, a space for agricultural competition, but, above all, for the exchange of varieties of maize, beans, and Andean potatoes. Rumualdo Fabián tells us that 24 July is the day for preparing for abundance. The seeds to be sown in September are set aside, and the surplus is shared at a communal meal for all visitors. Mirta Puca adds that in July, with the winter solstice, the year begins in the Indigenous calendar; it is the start of the life cycle. Encouraging the production of these seeds among the younger generations is an act of food sovereignty and cultural resistance in the face of genetically modified seeds and the globalised market.

Identity in the Details: housing, clothing and language

Our identity is manifested in every aspect of daily life. Traditional Atacameño housing is built from mud, straw, and plant materials. Although more sophisticated adobe bricks are used today, and circular shapes have given way to rectangular ones, we maintain a golden rule: doors and windows must face east, to receive the sacred light of the sun each morning.

Clothing is also a language. Designed to protect us from the extreme cold of the Puna, the fabrics, with their characteristic designs, are mostly woven by the women of the Red Atacama. Over the last thirty years, this activity has become the main source of income for many single-parent families. The textiles are not merely warm and durable; they are living history, artistic expressions imbued with both practical and spiritual significance.

The Kunza language is our most precious heritage. Although it went through a period of suppression, today we are in the process of revitalising it. Kunza is not merely a code of oral or written communication; it is a way of interpreting the world. To learn Kunza is to learn to listen to the sound of water, rain, wind, and stones. It is to understand the message in the song of birds, the crunch of salt, and the posture of flamingos. The connection with the sacred environment is the medium through which our traditions and values are transmitted.

Andean Astronomy and the Celestial River

The wisdom of our people looks not only towards the earth, but also towards the stars. Mirta Puca shares the teachings of her muleteer grandparents: 'They knew how to observe the sky. They believed that one must first walk among the stars before walking upon the earth. The sun was their cosmic clock.'[5]

The elders interpreted the 'Celestial River' (Camar Mayu in Kunza), which is the Milky Way. In the Atacameño worldview, water circulates constantly between heaven and earth. Earthly rivers carry water downwards, but the Celestial River recycles it upwards. The clouds and rain are the return of that water stored in the reservoir of Hanan Pacha. The existence of the community depends on this circulation.

The Chakana or Southern Cross is our guide. It is a ritual agricultural calendar that marks the cardinal points and the times of sowing and harvesting. It is not merely a symbol; it is an instrument of orientation that connects the celestial axis with the terrestrial one. At the zenith lies the unity of our existence.



Education and Collective Resistance

Education is the arena where the sustainability of our culture is at stake. Atacameño women are responsible for holistic education, safeguarding our identity in the face of a formal education system that often ignores us. We demand that the official system recognise and implement the teaching of Atacameño culture in the present day. Our culture is not a museum piece; it is an active way of life. We women play an active role in tending the herds, gathering medicinal plants, and managing production. We are not merely housewives; we are the heart of the community system. Based on a logic of duality and complementarity, men and women fulfil roles that are essential for social balance.

The Future of Lickana: guardians against extractivism

The Atacama people's struggle against lithium extraction is a struggle for survival. We understand that pumping large quantities of underground brine directly affects the high-Andean lagoons and the wetlands where our animals graze. Women are the first to notice these changes because their connection to water and the land is practiced and profound. Our resistance is not merely a political reaction; it is an act of faith. Through ceremonies, weaving, traditional medicine, and community education, we keep the Lickanantay identity alive; we are synonymous with perseverance. In the face of marginalisation and patriarchal violence, often taken for granted, we rise up as leaders who champion food sovereignty and local development.

Voices from the Territory: Jimena, Eusebia, and Florinda

It is vital to listen to the voices of those who inhabit the Puna plateau today. Jimena Cruz Mamani tells us:

> *When you are born on indigenous land, you have to do everything. I am involved in irrigation organisations and in my community. We have argued that the territory's water should not be used for mining. We demand that the aquifers be declared depleted. We need our water to continue living here.*[6]

Eusebia Esquivel Bernal, from Quetena Grande, shares her perspective from a community management standpoint:

> *What we want is for us to make the decisions about our resources, because we are the ones affected. We want to carry out an inventory of our natural resources, [to] register our springs and water sources so that our paperwork is up to date and to protect the planet's balance.*[7]

Florinda Martínez shows us the power of small, sustainable actions. Together with her children, she plants more than 100 trees year after year in the Puna de Atacama, raising awareness of the importance of caring for Mother Earth. Actions such as Florinda's, or the clean-up of the San Antonio River – a major tributary of the Salinas Grandes – led by Alfredo Lino Casimiro, are what mitigate the impact of pollution and demonstrate that our commitment to life is unwavering.

The Dream of a People Who Do Not Give Up

Making dreams a reality is no easy task in a context of extractivism and state neglect. However, the women of Atacama are the backbone of this struggle. We are the living memory, the hand that sows and the voice that demands justice. Our political participation stems from spirituality and takes concrete form in the defence of our territory.

The road is long, but we are not alone. We are united in the Red Atacama, connected by the invisible thread of the Chakana and protected by the Patta Hoyri. Our struggle is not just for ourselves, but for the generations to come, so that they may walk upon this sacred land, drink from its waters and gaze upon the same Celestial River that guided our ancestors. The Lickana is stronger than ever, and as long as an Atacameña woman raises her voice, the future of our people will be secure.

In the great Lickana, life follows its cycle, and we, its sons and daughters, are the guardians of that eternal balance. ¡Vito vito, Pueblo Atacama!

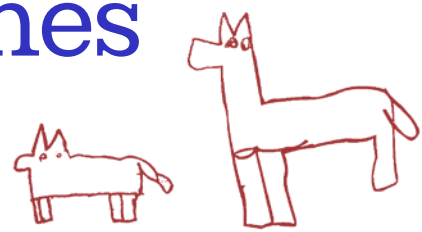
All interviews were conducted during a journey across Atacama territory undertaken with Tomás Saraceno and representatives of the Red Atacama, 15–21 February 2026, organised in preparation for the exhibition *Ancestral Futures* and this publication.

LUISA CASIMIRO is a social worker, Indigenous educator, and community defender from the Lickanantay Corralitos Community, Atacama People. A member of the Red Atacama and the communities of the Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc basin, her work combines professional practice with intercultural advocacy and territorial struggle – defending human rights, Indigenous women's rights, and the protection of the salt flats and their water.

1 Interview conducted on 14 February 2026. San Antonio de los Cobres, Argentina.
2 See above.
3 In a conversation during the trip in February 2026.
4 See above.
5 Interview conducted on 14 February 2026. San Antonio de los Cobres, Argentina.
6 Interview conducted on 16 February 2026. San Pedro de Atacama, Chile.
7 Interview conducted on 17 February 2026. Quetena Grande, Bolivia.

Desire Lines

SARAH JOHANNA THEURER



The paths worn into the ground by people who refuse the prescribed route and walk instead where their bodies tell them to go are older than the maps that ignore them. *The Sanctuary of Water* sits on such a path, at the crossroads of desire lines, in the terminology of landscape architecture. It was also within this discipline that the idea of planetary urbanisation first took shape.[1] This idea would make the salt flat, the desert, even the atmosphere legible as nodes of infrastructure and capital circulation. There is no outside.

And yet, from within this totality thinkers such as Sarah Ahmed mobilise the concept of the desire path as a metaphor for the possibility that if enough bodies orient differently, they might wear alternative paths into the world.[2] As often happens, unofficial routes get paved over, redirected, or are officially adopted, which can either legitimise the deviation or neutralise it. A long history of counter-cartography runs through the Global South, a spatial thinking that refuses the view from above or from outside. Macarena Gómez-Barris names what persists beneath the gaze from above 'submerged perspectives', a concept that, in the context of the Salinas Grandes, is not only metaphor.[3] It names forms of life that persist underneath extractive regimes without ever becoming fully legible to them. If they were drained, they would disappear. Whether running upstream or subterranean, deviant flows are quickly absorbed into the (globalised) mainstream, re-appearing worn and grainy like the geophotographs through which Robert Smithson registered landscape as something always already mediated, already partially lost.[4] Although Smithson grew up in the industrial ruins of New Jersey, the canonical story of Land Art is inseparable from the geological fantasy of the "unpeopled land" as data.[5] The aerial gaze of Land Art often mirrored the logistical gaze of extraction. The Salinas Grandes, however, is not an empty landscape. *The Sanctuary* marks a different path, a different genealogy of land and art.

Tomás Saraceno's work is inseparable from the social fabric in which it is made. *Cloud Cities* (since 2010) or *Aerocene* (since 2015) are ecosystems

of related objects and events, always embedded in political relations. His most recent endeavour, *The Sanctuary of Water,* continues this approach. Its sculptural form closely conforms to the Andean apacheta, itself accumulated evidence of a path actually walked, a threshold marked not by authority but by repeated acts of relation. *The Sanctuary of Water* exceeds the frame of a solo exhibition. Yet measured against planetary-scale destruction, it is small. But scale may not be the point. Contemporary ecological discourse often oscillates between paralysis before planetary systems and fantasies of technological totality. Against this, *The Sanctuary* insists on another register: the artwork is not a scaled-down version of a larger struggle; it is political, in a form that the human body can actually practise.

A desire line is walked, one step at a time.

Around the time minimal art was emerging in other countries, the self-taught Buenos Aires artist Rubén Santantonín began making what he called *cosas* – things. Conceived as a category rather than a formal designation, Santantonín's cosas were made from cardboard, wires and whatever was at hand. An object, Santantonín wrote, is "cold and inscrutable, shut away in itself"; a cosa is that same object "animated by inexorable human passion."[6] The difference is not formal but relational: the work does not exist prior to the relation it generates. In Rio de Janeiro, Lygia Clark's *Bichos* (1960–1964) extend the same logic into a different material register. The geometrically precise, hinged aluminium sculptures had no fixed correct form, only the form that emerges from handling. *Bicho* translates as 'critter' and Clark's *Bichos* were meant to come to life through motion and touch.

Hélio Oiticica, Clark's contemporary, made *bólides* – fireballs. Beginning in 1963, the series of works turned into an artistic proposition for artworks as energy centres that draw people physically and spiritually, like fire. The *bólides* were wooden boxes and glass jars filled with earth, gauze, and pigment, and they were made in Mangueira (a favela in the north of Rio de Janeiro) because Mangueira was where life was. Oiticica was not bringing art to the community. He was insisting that the community was already making a form of collective, embodied being-in-the-world, that no museum could contain. The earth in the jar was not a metaphor. It was the specific earth of a specific place, offered in a specific gesture of relation.

These works point toward a practice of giving matter space and attention, of making something *with* rather than *from*. In a similar vein, Saraceno's work frequently oscillates between the material and the spiritual. His most beloved of 'bichos', spiders, spin their webs without human instruction, extending threads into nonhuman territories. Like the environmental propositions of Hélio Oiticica, his hybrid spider webs shift from objecthood toward a form of inhabitation, where the work is no longer something to be looked at from outside, but a situation of which

one is part. Yet in the case of *The Sanctuary,* the environment is not constructed by the artist but rather is already socially, territorially, and cosmologically constituted.

Five years after the first *bólides,* on the other side of the Atlantic, Walter De Maria filled a gallery in Munich with earth. *Earth Room*[7] (1968) predates the better-known New York version by a decade. Fifty tonnes of soil, spread across the floor of a white-walled gallery to a depth of fifty centimetres. The *Earth Room* high-lights the strangeness of separating the human from the non-human, or the more-than-human, world: the earth is right there, but one cannot touch it, cannot walk in it, cannot know it with one's body. The way the work provokes alienation gives way to an uneasy comparison with what Oiticica had been doing with a handful of Mangueira dirt, which he reportedly collected in his own pockets. One is intimate, communal, made from a specific place by someone who belongs to it. The other is abstract, monumental, made from earth-in-general and land-as-concept.

That same year De Maria made the *Earth Room,* a group of artists and intellectuals from different parts of Argentina gathered to make what would become known as Tucumán Arde: one of the most radical political art actions in the history of the continent. The group traveled around to document the devastation of the military junta's economic policy: photographing, interviewing, and compiling testimony. They circulated their work through the union networks, rather than the circuits of the art world, because they proposed that the communities affected by the crisis were the primary audience for a work about that crisis, and that the form of exhibition should follow that logic. The Buenos Aires exhibition was closed by police on the same day it opened. In the ensuing years, within the wider art world, the methodological radicalism of the group has essentially evaporated.

Until the 1990s, when community-based art became a genre in its own right, art struggled to make these kinds of memories visible without reproducing the violence of erasure. Simultaneously, cybernetics seemed to open new ways of thinking: nature and technological systems as mutually entangled ecologies, sparking a wave of ambitious nature-culture assemblages in the 2000s. Writing about ecological art, T.J. Demos describes a phenomenon that seems to resurface in the methodological impetus of Tucumán Arde. Demos refers to it as 'art as research': a practice that constitutes a form of knowledge production irreducible to either activism or aesthetics.[8] Within this current, *The Sanctuary of Water* generates knowledge about the Salinas Grandes, about water rights, and about the world of the Atacameño communities that no scientific report, legal brief, or activist campaign could produce with the same completion. More than a representation of a struggle over land and water, the artwork becomes a situated practice in which land and water are cosmological and political agents.

This situated practice has a lineage. There are many historical artworks seeking a kindred relation with the land, searching for reflection on what it means to belong to the whole of a world, within ecological, humanitarian, and political emergencies. Among these Cecilia Vicuña's *Precarios,* placed at the water's edge and carried away by the tide,[9] and Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* pressed into the earth, then reclaimed by it.[10] These works entrust their memory of displacement and political sorrow to the landscape itself. Their paths have not only been under recognised, they have been actively destroyed. Beyond art history, extractive economies interrupt the material continuity between peoples and territories.

A desire line may be flooded, contaminated, or privatised but it figures memory not just as a cognitive or cultural phenomenon but an infrastructural one. In the Andean tradition, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues, past and present do not succeed one another but coexist. Memory is contained as a living territorial practice: by walking the territory, by making an apacheta, by building *The Sanctuary.*

The Sanctuary of Water is a memory infrastructure that refuses disappearance. Where Vicuña's idea of the artwork conceives acts of attention as being sedimented into it, Saraceno's work is positioned as an offering, a reciprocal gesture, not an artistic imposition.[11] This aspect of the work only becomes visible if one adopts a perspective that does not extend outward from the human, but instead starts from the presumption of entanglement and then asks what forms of coexistence entanglement demands.[12] While Tucumán Arde bypassed the institution almost entirely, *The Sanctuary* exists on multiple scales at once: it is both an artwork and a place. *The Sanctuary* does not represent the communities' relationship with water, its purpose is to create the conditions under which that relationship can persist.

The web of collaborators within and beyond the Red Atacama network, the project's legal documentation, and this reader are all elements of an artwork less concerned with representation or documentation than with becoming an infrastructure of relation. This is not an expansion beyond art but a return to an ancient path on which artists have repeatedly tested how matter, space, and sociality can be reorganised as conditions of common experience. And yet what is taken from the Salinas Grandes – the water, the lithium, the memory – cannot be returned. This is what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the unpayable debt: the conversion of a living world into extractable data leaves a remainder that no transaction can settle. This is why we have to keep walking, making new desire lines, not because the debt will be repaid, but because the walking itself is the assertion that the path exists.

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1 See Neil Brenner, ed., *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Jovis, 2014). Brenner reframes urbanisation as a planetary condition produced through infrastructural expansion and global financial systems, including institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and regional development banks, through which even remote territories are integrated into networks of extraction and circulation.
2 Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press 2006).
3 Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone* (2017); see also Walter Mignolo Local Histories / Global Designs (2000)
4 See Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments", *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (1966): 26–31.
5 See Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), where Yusoff shows that geology is not a neutral science of the earth, but emerges through the same epistemic infrastructure as racial capitalism and colonial extraction, in which strata are already coded as resource and property.
6 Rubén Santantonín. "Porque nombro 'cosas' a estos objetos." In *Cosas.* Exh. cat., Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1964.
7 The work appeared just before De Maria's move to outdoor sites, places beyond infrastructure's reach. These have since become Google Maps listed destinations. The work was presened at Galerie Heiner Friedrich and was originally titled *50 M³ (1600 Cubic Feet), Level Dirt.* The accompanying text on the exhibition poster, 'PURE DIRT · PURE EARTH · PURE LAND' implied the same substance could be seen as raw material, organic matter, or territorial location.
8 See T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Sternberg Press, 2016).
9 Dating back to 1966, the earliest of these sculptures were made on the Chilean coast and left entirely undocumented.
10 Mendieta moved between Mexico and Iowa, which is where these works were made from 1973 to 1980.
11 Cecilia Vicuña, *Unravelling Words & the Weaving of Water*, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine (Graywolf Press, 1992).
12 In *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (2015) de la Cadena gives political form to Isabelle Stengers concept developed in *Cosmopolitiques* (1996–1997).

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Shapes of Vibration

ANDREA LISSONI



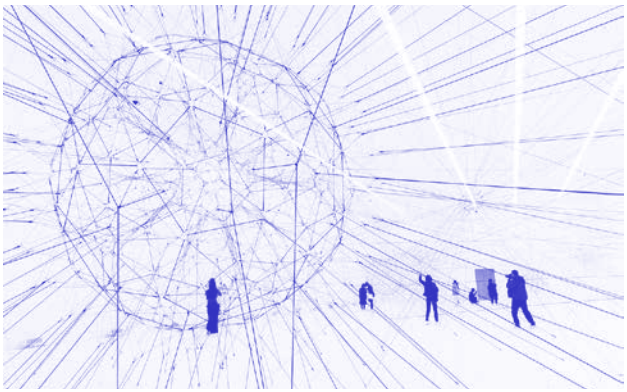
Exhibition view of *Fujiko Nakaya. Nebel Leben* (8 April–31 July 2022), Haus der Kunst, Munich. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

Ancestral Futures emerges from a trajectory that has shaped Haus der Kunst over recent years. A point of origin can be found with Fujiko Nakaya's exhibition *Nebel Leben* in 2023. During that show, fog fell down from the rooftop and snuck out from the open doors as a living material, connecting the galleries to the Eisbach and the Englischer Garten beyond. The world outside entered the building and the Haus der Kunst's internal worlds spilled out. Water became literally atmosphere. During the preparation of that project, our local spiders became a relevant part of the conversation. What began as a practical exchange – finding spiders living in the building for the installation *Ride a Wind and Draw a Line* (1973) – developed over time into a broader dialogue with Tomás concerning webs, vibrations, permeability, and the possibility of conceiving an exhibition as systems of relations rather than an architecture of artworks and information.

The encounter with Tomás arrived at a moment when we were already rethinking Haus der Kunst's role. Increasingly, the team had begun to understand itself through connections rather than boundaries, trusting that visitors, too, come to know the institution through experiences that accumulate over time and remain active long after a visit ends. If a traditional art collection preserves objects, the programme of Haus der Kunst attempts to build something more intangible: a collection of experiences and memories, carried by visitors as they move through exhibitions, concerts, performances, sounds, conversations, spaces, and returns.

In this sense, memory itself becomes a medium engaging with an architectural body that is presented as an archive but which in truth is a score. *Ancestral Futures* enters this conversation at a particularly significant moment. Few artistic practices have returned to the relationship between memory, transmission, and interconnectedness with the persistence of Tomás Saraceno's.

Ancestral Futures begins from a simple proposition: everything is connected. For more than two decades, Tomás Saraceno has explored webs (literal and figurative), atmospheric systems, aerosolar structures, and collective forms of organisation as ways of understanding how relations produce meaning. The exhibition's title itself suggests that futures are not invented from nothing: they emerge from inherited knowledge, from existing connections, and from our ability to recognise forms of coexistence that have often remained overlooked. Whether working with spiders, scientists, architects, environmental activists, or, increasingly, Indigenous communities, Tomás consistently returns to the same question: *what can be sensed when we shift our attention from individual entities to the relationships that sustain them?* Much of his work suggests that the most significant forces often remain unseen.

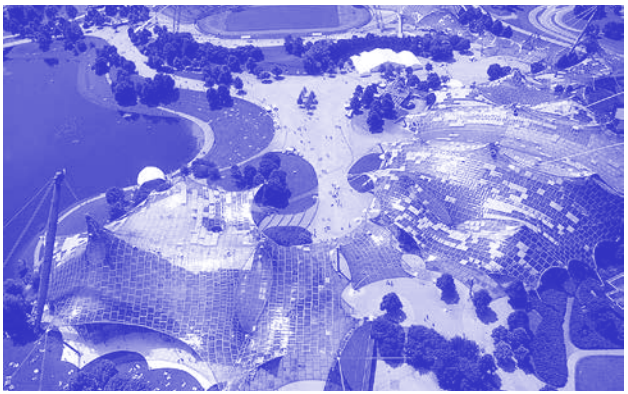


Installation view of *Algo-r(h)i(y)thms,* in Tomás Saraceno: *Complementarities,* Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing, 2024.

This exhibition finds one of its clearest expressions in *Algo-R(h)i(y)thms* (2019), installed precisely where Nakaya's fog once dissolved the distinction between architecture and landscape. Developed through long-term exchanges with researchers working in bioacoustics and animal behaviour, the installation is inspired by the sensory world of spiders. Visitors traverse a network of suspended ropes that functions as a vibrational environment. *Algo-R(h)i(y)thms* invites us to experience a world organised through vibration rather than sight. For spiders, vision plays a secondary role: they perceive through oscillations travelling across their webs. For them, the web is a sensory organ, a way to receive the world through

oscillation. *Algo- R(h)i(y)thms* translates this condition into a unique form of bodily perception, inviting visitors into a world where experience depends on resonance and transmission. *Algo-R(h)i(y)thms* also offers a key to reading the exhibition itself: every artwork, and every body of knowledge, acquires meaning through its connection to others. What appears separate reveals itself as interconnected.

In many ways, *Ancestral Futures* extends a wider trajectory that has shaped the programme of Haus der Kunst: it follows the atmospheric and collective worlds of Fujiko Nakaya (2023), the bodily propositions of Rebecca Horn (2024), the future-oriented imagination of Philippe Parreno (2024), and the reconsideration of engagement and embodiment explored through the group shows *Inside Other Spaces, Environments by Women Artists* 1956–1976 (2023), and *For Children. Art Stories* since 1968 (2025). Each of these projects aimed at expanding the field of what an exhibition could be. They challenged stable distinctions between artwork and environment, between visitor and participant, between experience and knowledge. Tomás pushes these questions further. The exhibition becomes a site for new forms of perception and collective learning.



Aerial view of the tent roof, Olympiapark, Munich, 1991.
Photo: AUTOR.4200. CC BY 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

This understanding resonates strongly with one of Munich's most visionary architectural propositions: Frei Otto's Olympiapark (1972). Conceived in deliberate opposition to the monumental architectural expression of National Socialist power, Otto's project proposed openness as a social principle. His transparent canopies stretch lightly across the landscape without defining rigid boundaries or forming enclosed interiors. The architecture and the park are part of the same continuous environment. The whole site functions as an interconnected terrain designed for free movement and encounter. Inspired by cable networks, soap films, and spider webs, Otto demonstrated how minimal structures could produce maximal openness.

Inevitably, the significance of the Olympiapark extends far beyond engineering. Otto imagined another relationship between architecture and society: rejecting the monument in favour of the landscape, privileging circulation over control. The stadium project reaffirmed public space as a place of encounter rather than representation. More than fifty years later, this trajectory remains powerfully contemporary, shaping not only the vision for Haus der Kunst, but also supporting Tomás's desire to return to many of these questions under different conditions.

At Haus der Kunst, this takes the form of an ongoing effort to democratise the arts as a horizontal cultural field. In Tomás's practice, this resonates in experimental forms create conditions for shared authorship. The interconnected forms of The Sanctuary of Water appear to grow from the landscape, as if absorbing and expanding the natural formation of salt crystals. *Algo-R(h)i(y)thms* transforms the galleries into a web of relations rather than containers for the display of objects. Both projects suggest that openness is not an aesthetic quality alone. It is a political one. The exhibition translates this proposition into spatial terms.

This dialogue manifests where the building encounters the landscape, where the East Gallery opens towards the Eisbach, exactly where Fujiko Nakaya's fog once drifted outside and where Koo Jeong A's sculpture *Haus der Magnet* (2023) has been inhabited by skaters who have transformed the architecture through evolutions, scratches, and wear. The exhibition draws energy from its surroundings: water, wind, architecture, and public life all enter into entangled and resonating relations.

Ancestral Futures also aims to experiment with a different exhibition syntax: artworks are interspersed with rooms devoted entirely to knowledge, so that scientific research, Indigenous knowledge, environmental realities, and community testimony inhabit spaces of the same scale and importance as the artworks themselves. These rooms do not provide background information or educational supplements, but function instead as interpretative chambers, with galleries functioning as extended wall texts. A certain room may illuminate an artwork encountered several galleries before, another may shift the meanings of what comes next. Knowledge is woven into the form of the exhibition itself.

This approach reflects a broader ambition at Haus der Kunst. Over recent years, we have worked towards forms of engagement that move beyond participation alone. The Mittelhalle has become one of the clearest manifestations of this vision. Through projects by Christine Sun Kim, Martino Gamper, and Ei Arakawa-Nash, it has evolved into a shared space shaped through encounter and use. *Museo Aerosolar* enters this context naturally. It is activated by visitors and sustained through collective action. It behaves like a living proposition in which the public encounters the artwork and brings it into existence through their engagement, accumulating the memory of every hand that helped to build it.

This vision of connection extends far beyond Munich. In Argentina, in Salinas Grandes, Tomás's collaboration with the communities of Red Atacama unfolds through long-term processes of dialogue, attunement, trust, and co-authorship. *The Sanctuary of Water* takes form through assemblies and collective decision-making. Its future belongs to those who imagined it together. From the beginning, the entire project has eschewed the limitations of institutional ownership. As Haus der Kunst, we contribute to a structure that remains in the hands of the communities who developed it alongside Tomás. Its centre of gravity remains where the knowledge originates – with the communities of the Salinas Grandes.

Visitors entering *Algo-R(h)i(y)thms* encounter a world held together by vibration. Ancestral Futures offers another way of attending to these connections. The exhibition asks what can be sensed when we stop looking at isolated objects and begin paying attention to the connections between them. In this sense, it resonates with the ongoing collective effort we strive for at Haus der Kunst: to imagine the organisation as an open structure, connected to its public, and to forms of knowledge that extend beyond its walls.

Here, futures happen because they are made together.

ANDREA LISSONI has been Artistic Director of Haus der Kunst München since 2020. His programme centres on transdisciplinary and transgenerational approaches across all strands of artistic practice. Previously Senior Curator for international art (film) at Tate Modern, London, he curated the 2016 Hyundai Turbine Hall Commission by Philippe Parreno and exhibitions of Joan Jonas and Bruce Nauman, among others. From 2011 to 2015 he was curator at HangarBicocca, Milan, where he also worked with Tomás Saraceno.













Cuando la caja resuena
se alegra mi corazón
porque sabrés va guardando
su cultura y tradición

— o —

Piedra miray de mi tierra
Testigo del caminar
entre cardones y hornos
Siempre te vuelvo a nombrar

— o —

Aguita del santuario
corre limpia al pasar
que tu canto del cerro
nunca deja de sonar

Salar blanco de Hipuni
brilla con el sol de Enero
Testigo de tantas huellas
del pastor y el arriero

— o —

Pachamama de mi tierra
cuida este lugar sagrado
que el santuario del Agua
sea siempre respetado.

Aguita que da la vida
en medio del salar
tu presencia en nuestra tierra
que debe siempre cuidar.

















