

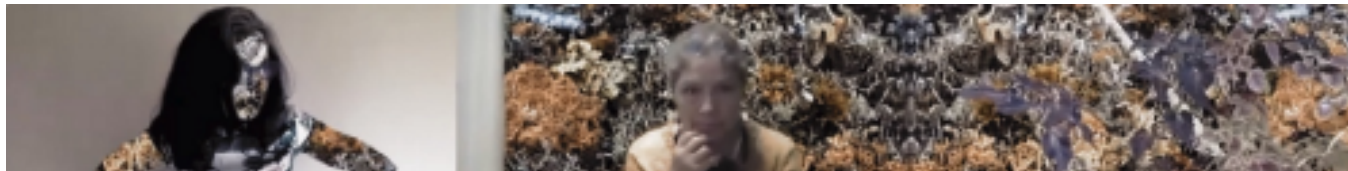


# Reflections on Cucú and Her Fishes



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How do creativity, care, and risk taking thrive in collaborations across geographic distance and difference toward a shared passion? For the past decade, an expanding group of international artists, scientists, and activists have considered the complex tasks of ecological conservation through the collective research practice Ensayos. Initiated in Tierra del Fuego in 2010, Ensayos has since expanded to include inquiries in Eastern Australia, Norway, and New York.





Still from *Cucú and her Fishes: Act I*, 2020, Video, sound, color; 41:31min. Courtesy of Ensayos

For the New Museum's first Digital Residency in the spring and summer of 2020, Ensayos practitioners in each of these locations collaborated to develop, write, rehearse, and produce the first act of their ecofeminist drama *Cucú and her Fishes* entirely online to reflect on their ever-evolving work. Ensayos practitioners are not professional actors, yet drew from their history of performative and playful experiments to devise characters and script inspired by *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977), a feminist work by Cuban-born American avant-garde director and playwright María Irene Fornés (1930–2018). *Cucú and her Fishes* begins at a country house partially submerged in a peat bog. As a group of women plan a fundraising scheme

for ocean advocacy, debates about ecological justice and interspecies ethics escalate.

Prior to global quarantine measures due to Covid-19, Ensayos conceived *Cucú and Her Fishes* as a project that would be developed and performed in the physical space of the New Museum, with both in-person and remote participation. After a decade of international collaboration, the process of shifting the performance to virtual space during a pandemic reaffirmed Ensayos' commitment to an ethic of care across distance.



The New Museum invited two scholars to review the work in process, speak with Ensayos practitioners, and contextualize this work in relation with both current scholarship and the broader cultural moment. Una Chaudhuri's critically influential work on "eco-theatre" and Olivia Michiko Gagnon's recent theorization of "closeness" as a research methodology each offers a new entry point into "Cucú and her Fishes," the culminating project of Ensayos's residency.

**Una Chaudhuri** is a Collegiate Professor and Professor of English, Drama, and Environmental Studies at New York University. She is currently the Director of NYU's XE: Experimental Humanities & Social Engagement. A pioneer in the fields of eco-theater and ecocriticism, her current research, teaching, and creative projects explore what she calls "ecospheric consciousness": ideas, feelings, and practices that attend to the multi-species and geo-physical contexts of human lives.

**Olivia Michiko Gagnon** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre & Film at the University of British Columbia. She specializes in performance studies, with research and teaching interests in minoritarian performance, cultural production, and multimedia aesthetic practice; critical race and

ethnic studies; feminist and queer theory; critical Indigenous studies; archival theory; and performative writing. She is currently working on her first monograph, which brings together a transnational cohort of feminist, Indigenous, and of color artists in order to theorize closeness as a feminist and decolonial method of doing history beyond the archive and through art and performance.



## **Ecospheric Experimentality: On Ensayo's *Cucú and her Fishes***

Una Chaudhuri

Cucú favors thought experiments, and hospitality. With infectious energy and good humor, she invites her friends to entertain unfamiliar ideas and outrageous proposals, so as to envision unforeseen possibilities. An ardent hostess — pouring whiskey, carrying luggage, serving lunch, fixing toilets — she also serves up a series of challenging propositions that are rooted in a double consciousness that she shares with her foremother, Fefu. This is the knowledge that the pleasing view of “nature” our civilization presents to us conceals another reality: “behind the scenes, below the surface, is a parallel world saturated with toxic substances, unable to repair itself, asking for attention.” In Fefu’s version, “that which is exposed to the exterior...is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not...is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life that is parallel to the one we manifest.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Cucú, the members of Ensayos are practitioners of experimentality, and they too are engaged in healing the violent disavowal that maintains those two lives as “parallel” instead of integrated. Their selection of Fornes’s

great play as the site for reflecting on their ten-year trajectory — a moment of celebration as well as for seeking new directions — is both inspiring and inspired.

It is inspiring to those who have long believed that the theater, with its dialogism and its embeddedness in the flow of reality itself — is an especially generative site for ecospheric consciousness. While more and more theater makers have been manifesting that potential, it is still rare to see activists, scientists, and other ecology workers do the same (an important exception is philosopher of science Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup>).

And it is inspired because, by casting themselves and their current collaborators — mostly people who've never acted on stage before — in the roles of the women who have gathered together to prepare a presentation on conservation, Ensayos have embraced the vast potential of Fornes's play to foster unease, difficulty, anxiety, embarrassment, laughter, courage, and discovery. They have understood that, when your home and your planet are sinking beneath you, you set aside self-limiting labels — who is an actor, who is a scientist — and try out new ways to speak and to listen. Out of that dialogue may come new voices, for example strange and stirring ones like Julia's, who is part guanaco and part ancestral memory, "able to navigate to the past and into other dimensions."

Like Fornes’s women, Cucú’s fishes measure their success by their ability to tolerate — even to embrace — difference. Cucú’s strange, playfully murderous relationship to her husband (renamed David, and thereby hangs a tale<sup>3</sup>) is seen by her old friend Cindy as exemplary of a bold embrace of differential evolution: “That’s *exactly* what LOVE is about!! IT’S PURE DIFFERENCE, PURE CURIOSITY. . . Their difference produces the energy they need in order to change, survive, evolve together.” Sparkling like jewels in their vibrant peat-bog setting, lacking certainty and forgoing mastery, Cucú and her fishes practice a world-building, ecospheric experimentality.

1. Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends*, NY: PAJ Press, p. 9–10
2. Bruno Latour collaborated with playwright Pierre Daubigny and director Frederique Ait-Touati on a play entitled *Gaia Global Circus*, and he discusses French director Philippe Quesne’s *The Theatre of Negotiations — Make it Work!*, a theatrical “preenactment” of the COP21, in the final chapter of *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Polity, 2017).
3. Camila Marambio, “The Go-Between.” *The Brooklyn Rail*.  
[https://brooklynrail.org/special/RIVER\\_RAIL/river-rail/The-Go-Between](https://brooklynrail.org/special/RIVER_RAIL/river-rail/The-Go-Between)





Still from Cucú and her Fishes: Act I, 2020, Video, sound, color; 41:31min. Courtesy of Ensayos

## The Work of Being Together

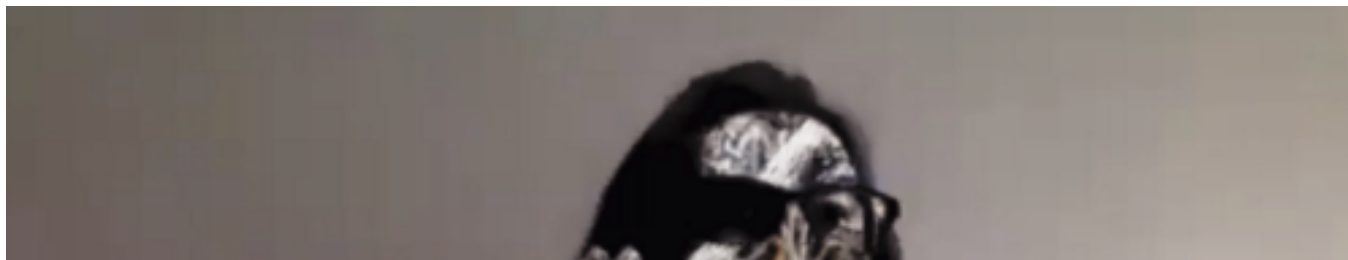
Olivia Michiko Gagnon

Early on in my conversation with collective research practice Ensayos, member Denise Milstein describes the group's commitment to what she calls *uselessness*<sup>1</sup>. By this, I don't take her to mean that the work of the Ensayistas has no value, but rather that their investment in a non-ends-based practice of meeting somewhere (first, it was the archipelago of Tierra

del Fuego in Chile<sup>2</sup>, but often it is necessarily in cyberspace), spending time together, building trust, educating themselves about local ecologies and community needs, inviting others to join them, moving and sticking with what founder Camila Marambio calls “the sway”<sup>3</sup> of their work — which entwines the arts, sciences, and social sciences to spectacular effect — is a profoundly political gesture and ethical orientation. Echoing, here, what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called *study*<sup>4</sup> — open-ended modes of intellectual engagement sited in quotidian social practices that move us far beyond the university — “ensayos” can be translated into English as “inquiry,” “essay,” or “rehearsal.” And how wonderful that all of these terms push back against a neoliberal insistence on easy quantifiable deliverables, in favor of a nonlinear drift through a collective sociality that works toward a deep, radical, and long-term reparative revisioning of the entangled human and non-human ecologies that colonialism, global capitalism, slavery, and extractivism (to name only a few) have nearly laid to ruin.

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, artist, and musician Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, “*how we live, how we organize, how we engage in the world — the process — not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation. How molds and then gives birth to the present. The how changes us. How is the theoretical intervention.*”<sup>5</sup> And so, staying in process, taking the time to be together and to know one another, learning from each

other and from the land, allowing oneself to be transformed by others and by these shared experiences is, for the Ensayistas, one crucial part of what is needed in order to transform society in service of ongoing political struggles for Indigenous sovereignty, global bio-conservation, and ecological — which is to say social, racial, and economic — justice. But being together with an eye toward such forms of transformation must be animated by an ethics of being together in and across difference. As such, Ensayos is comprised of activists, ecologists, legal scholars, anthropologists, curators, artists, ichthyologists, educators, art historians, sociologists, and dancers. Their members are based in the Americas and Europe and Australia. The group is made up of and holds various indigeneities and complex settler histories. Members bring their own knowledges, languages, histories, investments, disciplines, politics, relationships to land and territory. And through the slow and long-term work of being together, they enact what they describe to me as “a new weaving of [their] collectivity.”<sup>6</sup> *How* we work — *how* we come together — is not subservient to *why*. Because “the *how* changes us.”<sup>7</sup>





Still from *Cucú and her Fishes: Act I*, 2020, Video, sound, color; 41:31min. Courtesy of Ensayos

Watching *Cucú and Her Fishes*, I am struck by the performance's patience, its slow unravelling through careful conversation, the performers' measured words as they share, debate, change their mind, and ultimately reveal an urgent need to care for oceans and forests, to commune with peat bog and fungi, to articulate love as a kind of ethics that acknowledges how we are both together and always so different, to sit with complicity and dependency, to feel interconnectedness, and to resist and reckon with the ongoing violent colonial practices of exploitation, dispossession, and domination that placed Julia's<sup>8</sup> "ancestors' arrows" in museums and "their bones [...] in cardboard boxes."<sup>9</sup> In *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* — a queer, decolonial, ecofeminist text that is also deeply invested in "interspecies ethics"<sup>10</sup> — Julietta Singh asks us to imagine

“other modes of relational being”<sup>11</sup> beyond mastery, which undo or remake the human, but following Alexander Weheliye following Sylvia Wynter, from the perspective of those who have long been “excluded from the domain of Man as ‘the master-subject.’”<sup>12</sup> One way toward this horizon, Singh writes, might be to “become vulnerable to the voices — human and nonhuman, audible and muted — that are always sounding even when we have not been trained or allowed ourselves to listen: Listening, as opposed to voicing that which we ‘know.’”<sup>13</sup> And just like that, Cucú<sup>14</sup> insists that we must learn to “shake off our humanness,” and also, “listen to get free.”<sup>15</sup> Listening to Ensayos, I can’t help but feel that their complex ethical practice of being together — in person, in cyberspace, this digital performance — might offer one beautiful model of possibility, even in a moment where so many of us are being painfully kept apart.

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1. Personal Conversation between Ensayos and the author, 2020.

2. Where member Hema’ny Molina is president of the Selk’nam Corporation Chile, which fights against the Selk’nam community’s “stigma of ‘extinction’” (<https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1666/cucu-and-her-fishes-1>) and affirms that they are “un pueblo vivo y presente,” (<https://countercurrents.org/2020/06/selknam-victory-for-indigenous-recognition-in-chile/>); and member Bárbara Saavedra is the director of Wildlife Conservation Society Chile and is currently working in Karukinka

Natural Park.

3. Personal Conversation between Ensayos and the author, 2020.

4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

5. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 19.

6. Personal Conversation between Ensayos and the author, 2020.

7. Simpson, 19.

8. Played by Molina.

9. *Cucú and Her Fishes*, 2020.

10. See <https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1666/cucu-and-her-fishes-1>

11. Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

12. Singh, 3–4; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 9, cited in Singh, 4.

13. Singh, 27.

14. Played by Saavedra.

15. *Cucú and Her Fishes*, 2020.

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