



Jesús Fuenmayor is a curator based between NY and Gainesville.

Lothar Baumgarten Born in Rheinsberg, Germany. Lives and works in Berlin and New York. The work of the internationally renowned artist has focused since the late 1960s on themes such as the oppositions of culture / nature and self / other.

THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF THE TIME

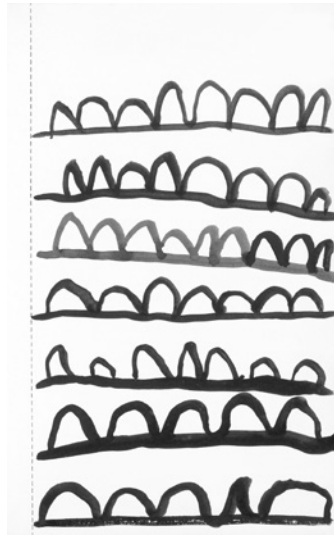
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
LOTHAR BAUMGARTEN
AND JESÚS FUENMAYOR

From his early photographic work of the 1960s through the eighteen months he spent living with the Yānomāmi population of the Orinoco region, Lothar Baumgarten talks with the curator Jesús Fuenmayor about the development of his interest in ethnography, his visual essays, the relationship between artistic and political engagement in his practice.

Opposite - *Tetrahedron, Stacked Pigment*, 1968. Part of the series "Culture-Nature, Manipulated Reality", 1968-1972. © Lothar Baumgarten. Courtesy: the artist

Bottom - *Haida Metamorphosis*, 1969. Image segment included in *Unsettled Objects 1968-69*, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, 1968-1969. © Lothar Baumgarten. Courtesy: the artist





Left - *Shipatawë, Kashorawë-theri*,
1979. © Lothar Baumgarten.
Courtesy: the artist

Below - *Reahumou Yānomāmi*,
1978. © Lothar Baumgarten.
Courtesy: the artist



Origins

JESÚS FUENMAYOR

In your early photographic work from the late 1960s and early 1970s, I find what many consider to be the first example of what later came to be known as the ethnographic turn in art in the late 1980s. How did you get involved in anthropology?

LOTHAR BAUMGARTEN

I got involved in the mid-1960s through friends, through Michael Oppitz, an anthropologist, and through the library at my parents' house. I became interested in the ethnographic eye. I then started a photographic essay on my observation about the display of objects in ethnographic museums throughout Europe: Copenhagen, Belgium, Cologne, Berlin, Oxford, Hamburg, Turin and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam—just to name a few.

It was very early on that I started to consider the technique of photography. When I was five, I found that I couldn't express myself clearly enough verbally to my father. I said to him, "I'd like to give you a picture from what I see. I'd like to show you something." So, he gave me his Agfa box. I started to express myself through nonverbal images. That's how I was introduced to the technology of making a picture. I learned to focus on something, to give it a frame, to exclude things around the moment you photograph or the object you look at. It became a way of producing discourse and also let the others know what kind of conversations took place, outside and inside myself.

JF

Since the beginning, then, photography was for you a way of speaking; it had a communication and not just an aesthetic value.

LB

I used the camera to look at something hidden I had discovered to express myself. Using the camera, I slowly started to develop my own formal alphabet, equal to handwriting.

JF

In the late 1970s, you stayed in the Amazon, living with the Yānomāmi for eighteen months. After that experience you participated in a series of exhibitions that are emblematic of your trajectory, including *documenta 7* (1982), the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1984), the Guggenheim [*America Invention*, 1985–88], and the Museum of Fine Arts in Caracas (1986). Even though you did these very important exhibitions after your travel to the Amazon, it was not until 2011 that you decided to show the films you made while living with the Yānomāmi. Why did you wait more than thirty years to exhibit these films?

LB

Ambivalence about the footage quality and the intense experience in the field made me reflect for a long time. You need to take distance to be able to approach yourself again and again. The open focus during observation avoids prefabricated, projected knowledge about an unknown context. Therefore, I think it is the most noble position for an ethnographic approach to be humble and silent at the site. You have to make use of your eyes. It is necessary to sit down and let things pass, you don't yet understand. This way it's maybe possible to have more complex insights about invisible circumstances. While running from A to B, you miss everything and lose yourself. I didn't like to expose the people to the public that fast, since I didn't exactly know what my experience was living for such a long time among them. I was still learning the language when I was back.

There is nothing I had discovered among the Yānomāmi that I have used at the time. For *documenta 7*, I made an epitaph engraved in stone, which was carved by David Kindersley, a famous British stone letter-carver and typeface designer, pupil of Eric Gill. The epitaph was made in the memory of 18th Century German ethnographer Georg Forster who taught natural history at the Collegium Carolinum in the Ottoneum, Kassel (1778–1784). For *documenta 7*, I also painted a frieze "Monument for the Native Societies of South America" (1982) into the dome of the Fridericianum. I didn't include the name of the Yānomāmi there because the experience was too fresh.

For the Venice Biennale I embedded the topography of the Amazon River System into the floor of the German Pavilion. Its title: *America Señores Naturales* (41. Venice Biennale, 1984). Beside

the river names—Amazon, Orinoco, Tapajos, Purus, Vaupés, Xingu—the piece included four abstract symbols for four American animals: the caiman, the turtle, the feather of the harpy, and the eye of the jaguar beside the name America. Those abstract figures were created after the pattern of the marble cover of the *tombini*, which are the drains where the rain disappears in the streets of Venice. In a city in which there works no wheel, you have to walk or go by boat like in the Amazon forest.

In 1985/86, Caracas became the platform for my presentation of *Wegwurf* in which I raised ecological questions after a five-month walk in some areas of Venezuela and Brazil. For the exhibition, I rebuilt the topography of La Gran Sabana from recycled wood from the harbor. We used the planks to recreate the shape of mesas (*tepitón*), the mountains of the area, and printed their names on them. The names of the trees were painted on the *onoto* walls (a red colorant obtained from the fruit of the shrub *Bixa orellana*). A statement in which I talked about the mess of the gold rush and the pollution of mercury, the destruction of the forest and the treatment of native societies in these areas, was too political and not published. In *Wegwurf*, which means "throw away" or to get rid of garbage, I referenced an area where people named themselves differently, like Arekuna, Kamarakoto, Taurepan and Ingariko—all Pemon speakers. My essay was later published by Vicente Todoli in Valencia, Spain in 1992 under the title "Requem para un Lugar sin Espíritu" (Requiem for a Place without Spirit).

Yānomāmi Films

JF

You went through a very long process to absorb the films and recordings that you did. This was out of the respect that you feel for the Yānomāmi, and the way you related to them; they even took care of your health. It wasn't so much a relationship between an anthropologist and his subject; it was more like a personal relationship. You were also trying to understand yourself in those films. Why do you think it took so long?

LB

I needed the distance to come to terms with the difference. It became also a question of money. The footage was shot in 16mm and is nine hours long. The originals are very fragile. I left the material stored in my studio in Düsseldorf for many years. Finally, I was asked by Hartwig Fischer from the Museum Folkwang in Essen to show the ethnographic material. This was a chance to get funding through Regina Wyrwoll from the Kunststiftung NRW to start the job. There's still six hours or more, which I haven't seen yet, to be copied. Digitizing frame-by-frame cost a fortune in those days. So far, I have only six films of 108 minutes and all are camera edits. I didn't exclude anything.

JF

When was the first time that you directly dealt with your relationship with the Yānomāmi in terms of your work?

LB

I had, of course, taken photographs after living first for months among them. This material needed to be classified. I did finally publish some images seven years later when Marian Goodman made it possible to print them. ("Makunaima," Marian Goodman Gallery, 1987).

JF

What happened to you once you started looking at the films again? How did you feel the first time you saw those films after so many years?

LB

The material was stunning in many ways. I was overwhelmed. Nobody is bothered by the fact that they're being filmed. This is only possible because I started to film only after eight months. Living their daily life I could communicate myself differently, even without being able to talk at length. To start, I had to learn the language through the children. Things became very natural, human, and normal. Surely not always, but most of the time. There were often scary moments, which I had to deal with, but there was also a lot of humor and laughter involved about my unconsciousness and limitation.



Lothar Baumgarten and Michael Oppitz, "Conquering the Southern Continent
in the Haze of a Sixpenny Cigar," Botanical Garden, Berlin-Dahlem, 1972.
Courtesy: Lothar Baumgarten







Hiima mi iporewē, ōni ēyēkēwē, Painted dog, 1979. © Lothar Baumgarten. Courtesy: the artist

I was moved to discover how I was received, and what comfort it gave me to share so much time with them. It also brought back the drama of war and peace. There were attacks and casualties—several times, for months we were on the move in the forest. I never knew where I actually was.

JF What did you learn from the Yānomāmi?

LB The main thing I learned was to share everything you have. Those in power possess the myth, since it's a non-writing society; they have to be able to tell all stories. Headmen and shamans own only their weapons and tools to inhale the hallucinogenic *yopo*. Their power is the spoken word; it protects the group. This way they guide and structure the activities of daily life. People can rely on them, since they possess nothing. There is no greed. The codex of behavior is embedded in the mythology.

JF Is it too difficult to find a way to communicate what that experience was about?

LB Every time talking about them, my encounter diminishes and they vanish in their presence. This experience is still an ongoing process of trying to understand the difference.

JF How do you feel the public should relate to these films now that you have released them?

LB They are documents but not documentary films. They are an acknowledgement of their world and a mirror of the status quo in those times, 37 years ago. They represent me among them, even if I'm outside of the picture frame. These films also give a lot of information aside from the ethnographic facts, which are never staged, about my behavior at the site.

JF But for most people who go to see these films, there is a certain kind of anthropological curiosity, right? How many people see you in those films?

LB The facts are hidden in the images and their flow, in the process of action in this animistic cosmos.

Commitment and time

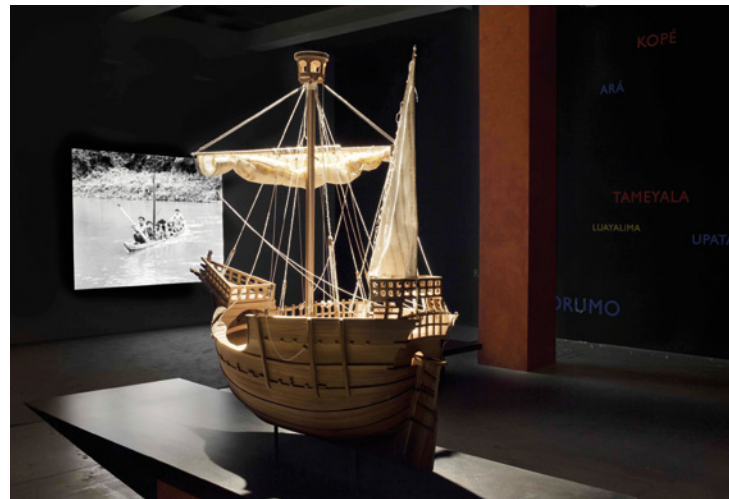
JF Let's discuss visual engagement and political commitment.

LB There is no separation between the two for me. As I said, very early on, I wanted to give with visual images an understanding of how I see the world. Besides thinking about things, this is also a process that shows how you care, and how you care after you have discovered something, which you suddenly understand. You behave differently. That's why there is no separation between aesthetics and ethics; scientific, political, religious, literary, or within the impetus of how one understands circumstances and how they look back to challenge a change.

JF I also wanted to delve into Alejo Carpentier's ideas about the materialization of a space and time.

LB There is a first publication of my photos on the Yānomāmi, which capture two and a half minutes in fifteen images of a moment when we came back from one of these hunting and gathering trips in the forest and had to cross the river. Crossing the river is very vulnerable since all people were visible and exposed. A classic moment when attacks can happen.

This series is called "River Crossing" (1979) and "Makunaima" (meaning "He Works By Night"). Makunaima, a hero—sometimes a twin—in the mythology of the populations in northeastern Amazonia, in the Guayana Shield, Venezuela and Brazil. I used *Los Advertidos* by Alejo Carpentier, in which he talks about Amalivaca, who is Noah in his parable. Carpentier makes us aware that there is not only one Christian Noah's ark.



Above - *Señores Naturales*, 1978, "Los Aristócratas de la Selva y la Reina de Castilla," 2011, installation views at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2014. Courtesy: the artist

Below - "Evening of Time—Señores Naturales / Yānomāmi" installation view at Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2011-2012. Courtesy: the artist



There are many Noahs and arks in all different mythologies, societies, and languages. I favored that text to show the movement of the Yānomāmi across the river. I found this brilliantly adequate since he considers other beliefs besides the Christian version of the universal deluge.

JF I think it's interesting how, for Carpentier, travel to the Orinoco River was about time travel. In your work I find that idea of collapsing times that Carpentier talks about. It has to do with the presence of yourself in that distant landscape, so there are extremes of times in one single image.

LB In early works I was always interested to make time visible. In the late 1960s I was not interested to produce things one could possess. These "manipulated realities" made you aware of moments, close to a gesture. I photographed their decomposing sculptural phenomenon and form and glued the c-prints to the wall, while after the show they were destroyed. Even with the material, which was exhibited in the Museum Folkwang in Essen (*Evening of Time - Señores Naturales / Yānomāmi*, 2011–2012), I photocopied the images and glued them on the wall, so they looked like silkscreens among the ethnographic objects. You have to keep the material accessible and alive, so that it is able to speak. The ephemeral represents the process of time.

Institutions and space

JF When you were studying at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, there was this particular moment when institutional critique became very important. How do you deal with that tradition?

LB In the late 1960s, we demonstrated against the Vietnam War. We demonstrated against the new law, of the *Hochschulgesetz*, which meant a new legal structure for study, introduced by the government. Everything was in question. Also, contemporary exhibitions were not as we thought they should be. I studied with [Joseph] Beuys, who was part of the faculty at the Düsseldorf Academy. He was driven to break the academic structure with his students from inside, to make clear how wrong certain procedures of the system were. Among this uprising, ecological questions appeared and the Green Party was coming to life. We wanted to break out of this context, to develop new forms of communication and engagement. This was of course institutional critique and a protest of beginning art fairs. The ephemeral was not commercial; it was suspect.

JF Even though we now see that as a historical moment, one can still see in your work this background. Your installations are made for very specific spaces and they're almost impossible to reconstruct anywhere else. In this context, I would like to ask you more specifically, what determines your relationship to space. I am thinking here about how you yourself painted the letters for your exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum (*America Invention*, 1985–1988, 1993), and how you personally installed the work in the skylight at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh (*The Tongue of the Cherokee / Sequoya's Syllabary*, 1987–1988).

LB It's about being within reference and proportion. If you don't experience the seasons of a landscape, and their use among people, plants, and animals, and their symbiosis—you don't understand the landscape or location. I need to be on-site to experience the space and that propels new insights and ideas: while you're on top of the scaffold, you still can change things.

For the Guggenheim, I decided to take my hammock and sleep over, to be in, to hear, and experience the space. It's a very complex process when you turn upside down a whole space into something else. Through mapping time I was able to transform the space into a globe and back into the political discourse of the time.

JF In the poster that you designed for the show in Caracas, there is this intriguing sentence in German...

LB *In Mir Wohnen Zu Viele Leute - Ich Brauche Den Platz Für Mich*, 1986. It means, "There are too many people living inside of me, I need space for myself." And that is exactly the point. When you're in museums, it's like being in a hospital. Everybody tells you what to do, before they pay attention to what you like to realize.

JF It also seems like a very philosophical question, in terms of being so many others. Is it a lesson learnt from the Yānomāmi?

LB This question is difficult to answer. The drawings (made by the Yānomāmi in a notebook of the artist) show how uncorrupted and non-speculative, non-strategic their approach to the white sheet appears. It is so honest and intriguing. It makes you speechless, it's just fantastic. You sense it immediately; it comes from somewhere you haven't been. It makes you curious: about their mythology with all those spirits and supernatural beings. How can one get there, to be so pure? It gives you a lot of comfort to see this. They allow you to be yourself, since they allow themselves not to change for now.

JF Do you think that's something that has become more important, the way you create a dialogue between what you want, and what people are expecting?

LB It is the right moment, the space, which has to be created to establish comfort.

JF Your work of course has a place for itself, but in philosophical terms, as a human being, are you still finding a place for yourself?

LB My place is not fixed at a specific location, activities move in time. I feel comfortable when I can communicate myself. And still I feel everywhere a bit uncomfortable.

The Tongue of the Cherokee / Sequoya's Syllabary, 1987–1988.
Courtesy: the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

