GALLERY 101
November 13 - December 12, 2026

BROMELIAS: Currents Within the forest

By Alexandra Gelis.
Curated by Elwood Jimmy

Presented in collaboration with the Musagetes Foundation





Gallery 101 installation view

Cover: Still from *Thinking Verde,* 2026.
Video by Jorge Lozano and Alexandra Gelis.

Exhibition Statement

BY ALEXANDRA GELIS

BROMELIAS: Currents Within - the forest, is a new iteration of Alexandra Gelis's long-term project AGUA, developed through living and working alongside the Río El Vacilón, near Carara National Park and surrounding protected forest, Costa Rica.

Before the camera, there was a body learning how to walk again.

The dry bed of the Río El Vacilón became a path, but never a stable one. Alexandra learned to move slowly, listening with her feet and adjusting her body to stones, snakes, insects, sudden currents, humidity, and the changing breath of the forest. Walking became a way of filming before making an image. The camera arrived later.

Then the bromeliads became guides.

High in the tropical canopy, bromeliads grow upon trees and gather rainwater within the folds of their leaves. Water remains there, suspended above the river, forming small reservoirs where frogs, insects, and microorganisms live among sediment and decomposing matter. Each plant holds a body of water. Each body of water holds other bodies.

The river was not only on the ground. It was also above her.

Bromeliads are often mistaken for parasites and removed from trees. But what happens when we approach them as ecological infrastructures, as water keepers, habitats, and teachers? What forms of attention become possible when a plant is no longer reduced to scenery, symbol, or raw material, but encountered as a living participant in the work?

Across the exhibition, water appears as path, force, habitat, and co-maker. It cuts through terrain, gathers within leaves, transforms plant matter, and carries bodies, images, and sounds.

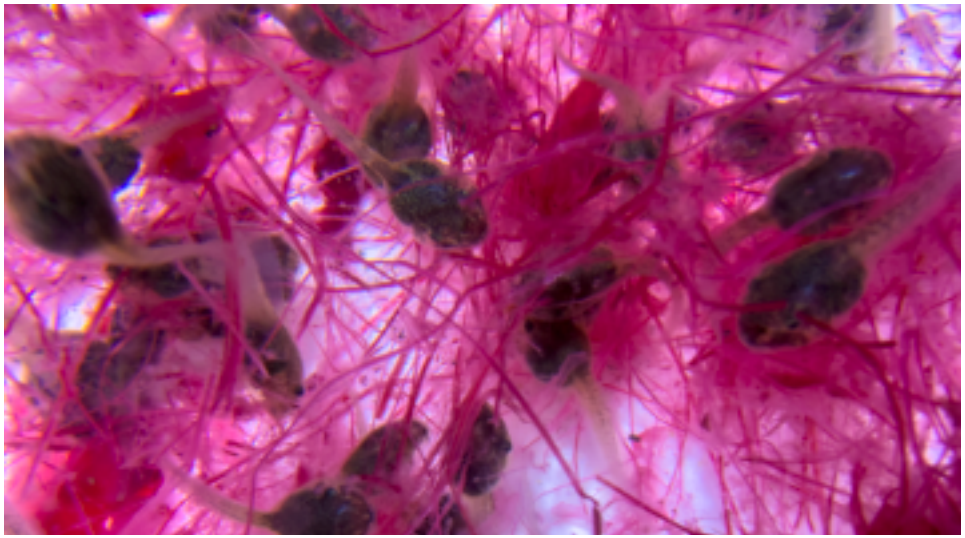
Moving images, sound, vibration, plant fibres, drawings, electronics, and sculptural structures carry traces of Alexandra's encounters with water and the forest. Images move between monitors, projections, fibres, and sculptural matter. They do not sit apart from these materials. They inhabit them.

Fallen and discarded plant matter is gathered, cooked, washed, separated, and transformed with river water. The resulting fibre surfaces are not supports waiting for an image. They are already images. Already stories. They remember plant tissue, heat, hand, sediment, weather, and time.

The bromeliads, the river, the forest, and its earthbound and airborne lives guide the work across different scales: visible and invisible, macroscopic and microscopic. Walking becomes a way of occupying multiple positions at once, thinking with different parts of the body, and allowing weather, critter companions, and remnants of life on the forest floor to participate in the making.

Worlds within worlds.

BROMELIAS: Currents Within - the forest, brings these encounters into the gallery as a sensory and multidimensional environment. Moving between riverbed and canopy, between water flowing below and water held above, visitors enter a field of relations already inhabited by many other bodies and forms of life.



Alexandra Gelis

Alexandra Gelis is a Colombian, Venezuelan, and Canadian media artist, researcher, and educator based in Toronto. Her practice grows through inquiry and process, spanning film and video, photography, drawing, sound, performance, and immersive installations incorporating interactive electronics and kinetic elements. She holds a PhD in Environmental Studies and an MFA in Visual Arts from York University.

Grounded in sustained fieldwork, Gelis investigates ecologies shaped by migration, colonialism, extractivism, and sociopolitical intervention. Her artistic research into the vegetal world approaches plants not simply as symbols or passive materials, but as political allies, environmental sensors, living archives, and agents of memory and resistance. Her concept Migrant Plants traces how flora move, adapt, and act within migratory, racial, and territorial regimes. Working with botanists, ethnobotanists, anthropologists, other scientists, and sabedoras (keepers of traditional knowledge), she brings scientific, ancestral, and sensory ways of knowing into relation.

Through moving images, sound, plant fibres, environmental data, and responsive systems, Gelis creates environments in which materials, technologies, and visitors enter a shifting field of relations. Rather than reproducing the places where the work begins, her installations carry the forest's sensory and material traces into the gallery, where signals circulate among bodies, media, and environments, allowing meaning to emerge across porous boundaries. Her work has been presented in exhibitions and festivals across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, including Walker Art Center, Nuit Blanche Toronto, Noor Riyadh, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, Images Festival, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Montevideo, and Kunst Merano Arte.

Gelis directs conSECUENCIAS Collective, helps direct Earth to Tables Legacies, and co-founded converSalón.

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Elwood Jimmy, Curator

Elwood Jimmy is a learner, collaborator, writer, artist, facilitator, cultural manager, and gardener. He is originally from the Thunderchild First Nation, a Nêhiyaw community in the global north. For close to 20 years, he has played a leadership role in several art projects, collectives, and organizations locally and abroad. In December 2015, he was hired as the program coordinator for Musagetes, and has also commissioned texts on social injustice for its online platform ArtsEverywhere.

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A Cinema Before the camera

BY FABIENNE LIPTAY

Alexandra tells me that her practice of a cinema before the camera took shape with my invitation. It was an invitation to contribute to a book, a collection of essays on forms of ecological cooperation in the arts. She did not want to write about her films, searching for other ways of bringing her work to the book. So, she went to her house in Costa Rica, doing something that she could not yet name. The house is an open studio in the tropical rainforest. She arrived there first during a storm. The water was so high that uprooted trees floated down the river. Unable to take the path across the Vacilón River to reach the house, she left her luggage behind, including her camera and all her devices, and crossed with only her body. Remembering that moment, wading through the water without her camera, she now recognises its significance—not as a shift in her practice, but as the emergence of what had been there all along.

Equipped only with her body, she began finding her way through the landscape. Her two dogs, Sky and Susie, guided and protected her along the Vacilón, always ahead of and beside her. From them she learned how to move through the place, attentive to the environment that was filled with the sounds of friendly and hostile life. Walking became a way of listening. As she gathered plant material that had fallen into or been discarded along the riverbed, her attention shifted constantly between the water below and the water held high in the canopy above her head. In the tropical forest, epiphytic bromeliads grow on trees, absorbing water from rain and moisture in the air rather than from soil. In the plant's centre, the leaves form reservoirs in which freshwater collects, becoming small ecosystems inhabited by a multitude of species and microorganisms. Organic matter decomposing in the water provides nourishment both for the plant and the life it shelters. Bromeliads are, in this sense, living architectures, like houses composed of leaves. When working with them, Alexandra had to open the leaves gently to release whatever had made a home inside: an insect, a spider, a little frog. Local inhabitants began calling her the "bromeliad lady", puzzled by her care for a plant they mistakenly regarded as parasitic and harmful to the trees.

On the terrace of her house, in an outdoor kitchen, she processed the bromeliads and other plants gathered from the riverbed. She cooked, washed, strained and formed them into lumps of fibre, identifying and labelling each one before liquefying them in river water, sifting, mixing and dyeing them with vegetal pigments until they became small patches in fringed rectangular shapes. She calls them esteras, the Spanish word for mats. Other matter found its way into them: the translucent skin of a snake, the iridescent wings of a blue morpho butterfly, strands of her own fuchsia hair.

Alexandra began making an individual piece for each copy of the book. Since the book was printed in an edition of six hundred, these eventually became "AGUA: Encounters for 600 Movements" [1]. I remember the moment she asked me for a call—her day, my night—to tell me that she could not provide the pieces for the book. They belonged together, she said, as a series of movements. They could not be separated. Still in the process of making them, she had already arranged the pieces in small piles, in sequences of movements. It was immediately clear to me that she was actually making a film. Not a film in the conventional sense, but a form of cinema taking shape through a multitude of practices. Each plant-fibre work is a record of a sustained moment, like a frame of a film, storing not an image, but more deeply sensed traces of her encounter with the riverbed.

What began as a constraint, the impossibility of including moving images in the book, became another kind of film unfolding across the entire edition. The printed edition eventually contained unique prints of the plant-fibre works, placed between the pages, while the original series remained with Alexandra to become a living, breathing and moving installation. Since then, "AGUA" has been exhibited in different iterations, becoming part of a growing body of work that includes large, more intensely coloured strips in horizontal and vertical displays, as well as sound and video, all resonating to create vibrant and responsive environments inspired by the canopy of bromeliads. Inviting us to inhabit water, her solo exhibition at Gallery 101, Ottawa, aspires to dissolve the separation between living organisms and their environment, a premise on which human architecture is built. As habitat, which stores and transmits information across bodies of water, sustaining a complex "hydrology of relations", bromeliads provide the model for imagining other forms of being in the world.

I think of Alexandra's work, borrowing a phrase by Pavle Levi, as a "cinema by other means" that materialises in multiple forms and states.[2] These other means are practices through which perceptions of the world, both interior and exterior, are registered and transformed in manifold ways before they become images. Among these practices are walking, listening, braiding, weaving, writing, drawing, performing, and yes, sometimes even filming, with the camera close to her body or flying around her, recording her bodily actions as she gathers plants and returns her works later, lays out and unrolls the plant-fibre works on the riverbed, draws lines with them in the waterfall, or embeds herself in the landscape.

Walking along the river is also a form of meandering. With the writer and curator Sofia Lemos, I understand meandering as a movement inspired by rivers, sustained by "an ethos of regenerative cultural practice—to leave more than is taken".[3] Meandering, Lemos writes, is a "transformative practice, working not only to remake particular 'visions' of the world, but to create new stories, myths, and rituals that expand what it means to be human as both a co-constituted life-force and a co-creative practice".[4] The region through which the Vacilón River flows, is slowly recovering from ecological disturbance caused by human activity, but also marked by recent events of flooding and drought. For Alexandra, it has been a place of mourning and retreat, both shelter and exposure, which she encounters through her work. The material memories of her mother, filmed images lost on her computer, must be somewhere there, held within the water.[5]

Alexandra's cinema before the camera is an embodied and spirited practice. In each of the plant-fiber works, there is a pulsing, a breathing, a beating of the heart. Fine strands of her fuchsia hair are woven into them like veins, or braids of a river, or beads of sweat. Rather than images to be looked at, they are vibrant matter to be sensed.[6] In her performances, Alexandra makes this material vibrancy audible through a camera-based sensing system that reads subtle variations in reflected light, colour and visual texture, translating them into sound. Inspired by the blue morpho butterfly, whose microscopic wing structures modulate reflected light into shifting colours, the system approaches colour not as a fixed property but as an encounter between light, surface and perception.[7]

In Alexandra's work, cinema expands beyond visions of the world to become receptiveness: a practice of deep affiliation and attention attuned to the environment,[8] which is itself participating in the making of the work. "What is seen, heard and felt", she says, "is always already a shared act of worlding."

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[2] Pavle Levi, Cinema by Other Means (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[3] Sofia Lemos, "On the Practices and Poetics of the Creative Imagination", in Meandering: Art, Ecology, and Metaphysics, ed. Sofia Lemos (Sternberg Press / TBA21-Academy, 2024), p. 14.
[4] Ibid., p. 15.
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[8] Ella Finer, "Acoustic Attention, Deep Affiliation and the Work of Listening", in Bodies of Sound: Becoming a Feminist Ear, ed. Irene Revell and Sarah Shin (Silver Press, 2024), pp. 111–118.

Fabienne Liptay is a professor of film studies at the University of Zurich and co-founder of the Institute for Performance and Film Expanded. She has published widely on the theory and aesthetics of the moving image, film exhibition, time-based artistic practice and cinema expanded. Together with Liliana Gómez, she edited the book Eco-operations (diaphanes 2024), published as an artist edition with works by Alexandra Gelis.



The Promises of the Bromelias

Porous Borders and the Politics of Coexistence in Alexandra Gelis's Bromelias: Currents Within - the forest

By alessia prati

We are adapting to circumstances that grow more alarming by the year, while our bonds with the living world are poisoned by a capitalism that draws value out of everything, even catastrophe. Looking elsewhere becomes urgent — not the imperial elsewhere, a territory made to yield, but epistemologies that never signed the treaty separating a substance that thinks from one that is extended and measurable[1]. We need a way of knowing that comes not from calculation but from enchantment, in which something catches us off guard and binds us to the world through feeling[2]. We are not the only creatures trying to survive the recklessness of our species.

The Promises of Monsters[3]

The Bromeliaceae are largely Neotropical monocotyledons comprising both terrestrial species and epiphytes that grow on trees; in tank-forming species their leaves make a reservoir collecting up to ten litres of rainwater and detritus, which houses a phytotelma: an aquatic community of algae, invertebrates and amphibians. In some institutional practices and among some local residents, bomelias are treated as parasites draining life from their host. But bromelias are epiphytes, they live on a tree without feeding on it, they do not pierce its bark, they take none of its sap. They gather rain and hold enormous quantities of it, and when a branch gives way, it gives way under that weight. Parasite, then, for whom? The category is relational: the one said to lose out is the tree — but the tree as what, organism, timber, shade? The attribute belongs less to the matter than to the order that classifies it; a weed is not a kind of plant, it is a judgement of position.

Talking with Alexandra, I think of the bromelia as a monster as that device by which a culture thinks its own limits, giving them a body just outside the fence and destroying it at intervals to check the fence still holds. An abject body, feminine, porous, oozing, harbouring other bodies.[4] What it gives shape to is

contagion, invasion, the border that will not hold. The standing water in its leaves is a nursery for larvae, and bromeliad-malaria has a name of its own: between the 1940s and the 1980s public health campaigns answered it by clearing forest and removing the plants wholesale. At Carara, in Costa Rica, the same verdict is smaller in scale: convinced that bromelias kill trees, people tear them out. The belief rests on something real — trees do fall — but puts it down to the wrong cause. The plant does not kill; it holds an entire ecosystem, and that has weight.

Downward Is a Habit

Into this ecosystem Alexandra walks. Around her house the only route is the dry riverbed, and it can be walked only by "learning to walk again". Along it lie bromelia leaves, single leaves arranged in a line. She gathers them, follows them, looks up. Above her a monkey is eating them, because bromelain helps it digest. The small gesture reorients everything, because until that moment the research had kept low, following the water beneath the rock. Descent is water's operational definition; here it stays above, held there by a monster whispering stories of futurity.[5] A fallen bromelia shows what is up there, layered like a building: at the base the smallest insects, then spiders, frogs, lizards and snakes. No contract, no negotiation: what the tenants discard feeds the plant, and when the weight snaps the branch, the fall opens paths that outlast their lives. What the bromelia teaches is an ethics of the spaces in which we live together.

In the Dry Riverbed

How does one inhabit an architecture like that? The observer's place, which modernist thought trained us to occupy at the centre of the world, has to go: where there is no contract, no one gets to stand outside it, uncontaminated. "Learning to walk again" is a method, and it is what Rough Terrain, a video made with Jorge Lozano, records: a body that bends, climbs, slips and crawls begins to think with its elbows and knees, and the slope rewrites gravity into hundreds of simultaneous directions where the city extends a single horizon. Set beside the snake reading heat or the bromelia feeling electricity, human exceptionalism looks monochrome, one sensory habit mistaken for reality.

Walking the riverbed, Alexandra takes what falls and what is thrown away: bromelias knocked down by wind or monkeys; banana leaves left after the harvest; and lianas and other plants cut by the electricity company as it clears its cables. Abject bodies, already declared waste, are summoned without being redeemed from that classification — the judgement of position is not overturned, it is inhabited. Living bromelias do not enter the fibre-making process: she keeps them

hanging upright so that they go on collecting rain and the animals inside them stay alive. The others she opens and boils for hours without toxic chemicals, in river water that leaves carrying the lignin, so much so that three enormous frogs have taken up residence where the outflow ends: the residue, too, feeds someone. The fibres are obtained by letting the matter give way, which turns decay into a medium that records multispecies cohabitations.

Hair and sweat end up in those fibres, until the material becomes the skin of the process that produced it: the skin continues inside the leaf, the leaf continues inside the skin, and the body comes out not swallowed but redistributed. The porous body we attributed to the bromelia becomes a procedure. Language too: in Thinking Verde, Spanish resurfaces exactly where the text speaks of care, cuidado de todos otrxs, the x refusing to assign a gender. Naming was the first colonial operation, and the herbaria arrived before the plantations with the promise that every living thing could be detached from its context and reduced to a Latin binomial.[6] Saying bromelias replaces the language that classifies with the language that calls, without pretending that Spanish is innocent — it is the language of the requerimiento. The gesture is ch'ixi, stained and never synthesised[7] choosing the proximity of bodies without promising absolution.

BROMELIAS: Currents Within - the forest

In the two rooms of Gallery 101, Alexandra builds a performative, editorial installation that carries to Ottawa the story the bromelias whisper along the Río El Vacilón. Performative, because rather than representing that relation it reactivates it through co-presence: the room asks of whoever enters what the river asked of her, to walk without a given path and make oneself ready to listen. Editorial, because it re-edits a conversation already under way between the bromelias and the water, the river below and the reservoirs above. Like the bromelia, and like the house that does not close in which the fibres are made, the room keeps what falls into it and gives back something other than what it received.

Asked what the promises of bromelias as monsters might be, Alexandra answers with a spare phrase: "the ethics of spaces". An ethics of spaces is also an ethics of contagion, resting on an idea of the body not as a sealed container but as a passage crossed by the matter of the world — nutrients, bacteria, metals, toxins — which composes and alters it without asking permission. From such a position there is no defending oneself; there is only exposing oneself. The bromelia calls us to a contaminated coexistence: not to stay intact, to live inside the discards of others and to let others live inside ours.

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3 The title takes up D. Haraway, The Promises of Monsters. A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others, in Cultural Studies (1992), where nature is called artefactual — at once topos and tropos, "figure, construction, artifact" — and monsters are Trinh T. Minh-ha's inappropriate/d others, whose promise is an elsewhere already under way, made of generation rather than reproduction.
4 J. J. Cohen, Monster Culture (Seven Theses), in Id. (ed.), Monster Theory. Reading Culture, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996, pp. 3–25; J. Kristeva, Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection, Seuil, Paris 1980; R. Braidotti, Mothers, Monsters, and Machines, in Ead., Nomadic Subjects, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.
5 J. E. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity, New York University Press, New York 2009. Futurity is not a forecast but an anticipated horizon, glimpsed in bonds already at work in the present: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality."
6 On grammar as a device of classification see R. W. Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis 2013, in particular Learning the Grammar of Animacy.
7 S. Rivera Cusicanqui, Ch'ixinakax utxiwa. Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores, Tinta Limón, Buenos Aires 2010. In Aymara, ch'ixi names a colour made of juxtaposed particles that looks single at a distance and stays double up close.

alessia prati (Pietrasanta, 1989) is a researcher and adjunct lecturer at Iuav University of Venice, where she has taught the Fashion and Performance Lab in the BA programme in Visual Arts and Fashion, and where she also completed her PhD with a project exploring the intersection of choreographic and editorial practices in the contemporary European art scene. She previously held a research fellowship at the University of Salento and was a visiting doctoral researcher at the Centre National de la Danse in Paris (2021–2023). She is a member of PerLa – Performance Epistemologies Research Lab, directed by Annalisa Sacchi, whose research addresses performance epistemologies, critical theory, and the aesthetic-political tensions of contemporary performance.



Acknowledgements

From Alexandra:
Before the artwork, there were the waters of Río El Vacilón. I offer my gratitude to these waters, to the land through which they move, and to the plants, animals, and people of Las Monas who live alongside the river. I am especially grateful to Sky and Susy, my companions and teachers, who taught me how to listen and how to walk with this place. These waters and lives are among the makers of the work.

To Sarita Bree Lozano, whose rebellious spirit opened the path and guided us here.

To the spirit and strength of my mother, Cristina Lombana, who taught me to work alongside communities with love and respect, an ethic that continues to guide this work.

Co-Presenter: Musagetes Foundation
Musagetes is a Canadian philanthropic foundation that works internationally to support artistic experiments at the faultlines of society. Through artist fellowships, residencies, publications, festivals, and other emergent programs, they focus on relationships rather than outcomes, creating spaces where art helps us question dominant systems and imagine more connected ways of living together. Cultivating the conditions for artistic inquiry is at the heart of Musagetes' relationships with artists and communities, especially in a time of converging crises. Together they ask: how do we want to live?

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