# Searching for the Language. A Possible Dialogue between Artistic, Activist and Curatorial Practices

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#### Resum

Aquest article aprofundeix en el projecte *SILVER RIGHTS* (2020-2022), iniciat per l'artista italiana Elena Mazzi en diàleg amb el líder espiritual maputxe i argenter Mauro Millán i l'artista argentí Eduardo Molinari, i recolzat pel museu ar/ge kunst. Com a operadors culturals, artista visual i comissari, vam sentir la importància de compartir aquest projecte en el

qual portem diversos anys treballant, analitzant les complexitats i dificultats a les quals ens vam enfrontar. SILVER RIGHTS es desenvolupa al voltant del paper que juga la joieria de plata en la vida social, espiritual i política dels maputxes, els indígenes que habiten els territoris de Xile i Argentina. En aquest sentit, el nucli central del projecte consisteix en una sèrie de sis peces de joieria de plata elaborades per Mauro Millán i dissenvades en diàleg amb Elena Mazzi a partir de tallers sobre simbologies i lluites actuals, celebrats amb nombrosos membres de la comunitat maputxe. A més, el projecte qüestiona el Museu Leleque de Patagònia, establert per l'empresa italiana Benetton; un museu que defineix el poble maputxe com una cultura extinta i que "musealitza" la seva memòria i cultura material. Les joies, juntament amb una complexa instal·lació creada amb materials documentals i de recerca, s'han exposat a ar/ge kunst, Itàlia i altres museus internacionals. Basant-se en els escrits de l'antropòleg Viveiros de Castro (2007), l'article interpreta el diàleg entre Mauro Millán i Elena Mazzi com una forma d'inventar la cultura i practicar la política interètnica. Més en general, a través de l'obra d'Azoulay (2019), Acosta (2013) i Esposito Yussif (2019), l'article aborda com les institucions culturals contemporànies mantenen pràctiques separatives i neoextractivistes. En definitiva, pretén proposar maneres en què la política de creació d'exposicions i de visualització pot activar la mediació, la recomposició i la curació com a contramesures contra la perpetuació de les narratives colonials.

**Paraules clau:** neo-extractivisme; política d'exhibició; narratives anticolonials; recuperació de la terra; pràctiques socials; col·laboració.

# Abstract

This paper delves into the project *SILVER RIGHTS* (2020-2022), initiated by Italian artist Elena Mazzi in dialogue with Mapuche spiritual leader and silversmith Mauro Millán and Argentinian artist Eduardo Molinari, and supported by ar/ge kunst. As cultural operators, a visual artist and a curator, we felt the importance of sharing this project we have been working on for several years, unpacking complexities and difficulties we encountered along the way. *SILVER RIGHTS* unfolds around the role that silver jewelry plays in the social, spiritual and political life of The Mapuche, the Indigenous people inhabiting lands across Chile and Argentina. Accordingly, the central nucleus of the project consists of a series of six silver jewellery pieces crafted by Mauro Millán and designed in dialogue with Elena Mazzi following workshops on symbologies and current struggles, held with numerous members of the Mapuche community. Furthermore, the project confronts the Museum Leleque in Patagonia, established by Italian company Benetton; a museum that dismisses the Mapuche people as an extinct culture 'museumizing' their memory and material culture. The jewels, alongside a complex installation display with documentary and research materials, have been exhibited at ar/ge kunst, Italy, and other international venues. Drawing on anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's (2007) writings, the paper reads the dialogue between Mauro Millán and Elena Mazzi, as practice towards inventing of culture and inter-ethnic politics. More generally, through the work of Azoulay (2019), Acosta (2013) and Esposito Yussif (2019) the paper addresses how contemporary cultural institutions preserve separative and neo-extractivist practices. Ultimately, it aims to propose ways in which exhibition-making and display politics can activate mediation, recomposition, and healing as countermeasures against the perpetuation of colonial narratives.

**Key words:** neo-extractivism; politics of display; anti-colonial narratives; land recovery; social practices; collaboration.

# **Contextualising SILVER RIGHTS**

"Unfortunately, we have to speak the language of the conquerors. Let's make sure, at least, good words come out of it."

(Mauro Millán, 2020, pronounced at the opening of the Water Parliament at El Maitén)

"How can we weave the threads that slowly give shape and strengthen the social fabric? How can we organise the common task of building bridges that allow us to cross and make contact, come closer and—without losing our singularities—share stories, imaginaries, cosmovisions? How can we open paths towards new possible worlds that are inclusive, egalitarian, intercultural, respectful of the diversity of life?"

(Eduardo Molinari, 2020, extract from a conversation with Elena Mazzi during their traveling)

*SILVER RIGHTS* condenses, through an exhibition, a book, a series of actions and workshops, a long research process developed in Patagonia, a region for years at the centre of the Mapuche struggles, claims and land recoveries. It focuses on the ancestral bond between the communities and the land (*mapu*), a bond eroded and denied by colonising forces that have mutated over the centuries to gradually establish themselves in recent decades through neo-extractivist practices. This settlement process results from the convergence of investment policies and commercial agreements between South American governments and foreign multinationals, including the Italian firm Benetton. More specifically, the work responds to the narrative proposed by the Leleque Museum, an anthropological museum opened in 2000 in the very lands owned by Benetton. An ambiguous operation that dismisses the Mapuche people as an extinct culture rather than one that is alive and

active in the disputed territory, *museumizing* their memory and material culture.

Artist Elena Mazzi addresses this complexity by engaging in dialogue, supporting and expanding the dense network of relations that the Mapuche community has been consciously weaving for years. A way of understanding the art of diplomacy that, on the one hand, implies building and maintaining international relations between different political and cultural subjects, and, on the other, is implemented in their cosmovisions as a form of radical mediation between land, human and more than human beings.<sup>1</sup>

SILVER RIGHTS stems from a dialogue between Elena Mazzi and Mauro Millán, which began more than ten years ago and has been progressively enriched by various collaborators who enabled and strongly informed the various phases of the project. Starting from the research, through the production and up to the exhibition, these contributors have acted as sources of verification and have questioned and shifted the artist's perspective, as well as that of ar/ge kunst, the institution that supported Elena Mazzi's work in the last five years of this long process. Among them, besides Mauro Millán himself, it is important to mention from the outset the critical voice of the Argentinian artist Eduardo Molinari, who shares with Elena Mazzi the authorship of many of the works composing *SILVER RIGHTS*. In keeping with history and chronicle, it is important to explain that Mazzi learnt about the plight of the Mapuche people in Treviso in the context of another art intervention of hers. It happened thanks to the mediation of Ya Basta! Êdî Bese!, an organisation that has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Over the course of the three years in which *SILVER RIGHTS* was developed, we repeatedly stressed the importance of the project being supported by public funding. This conviction was based not so much on a more or less sterile rhetoric that sets public and private sectors against each other, but on the desire for the public economy to enable a "diplomatic operation" of this kind, which brought together very diverse stakeholders. Winning a call for proposals such as that of the Italian Council, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Culture thus legitimised a dialogue and work between "official" cultural institutions and the Mapuche nation, which is struggling to be recognised. Moreover, public support is essential because it guarantees the right to artistic research and institutional cultural work that is openly critical of economic and political concentrations of power, private or otherwise.

been supporting the Mapuche struggle against the occupation and privatisation of their ancestral lands by the Italian multinational Benetton for many years. As an Italian artist, the presence of the Benetton Group offered from the very beginning the coordinates to orient her journey through the land of Patagonia, and to structure her research and production process within the *SILVER RIGHTS* project. At the same time, the investigation expanded and revealed the numerous battles the Mapuche people are faced with daily and how the recovery of their ancestral territories is inevitably intertwined with the reclamation of their culture. In the words of Mauro Millán (2020, in Mazzi & Guidi, 2021): "In the 21st century we have set ourselves the challenge of recovering the land to reclaim our knowledge, our ideology, philosophy and spirituality... the art of silversmithing is no exception" (p. 301).

The statement by Mauro Millán leaves no doubts about the awareness of Indigenous communities in respect to the challenges that the actual process of *decolonisation* means and implies. Such a declaration also emphasizes the importance of forms of dialogues and cooperation between original people and *foreign* allies (artists, activists or institutions). In these terms the project *SILVER RIGHTS* is relevant within this debate in the making also because it articulated -from a specific perspective and through its own methodology- some questions that also other artists and institutions are addressing. It might be relevant for the purpose of this paper, to mention the numerous examples presented at the current Venice Biennale (2024) -among them, the Spanish, the US, the Brazilian, the Dutch and the Australian Pavilions. The latter was awarded with the Golden Lion for the work of Aboriginal Australian artist Archie Moore, who troubled the very idea of nation-state inscribed in the pavilion by celebrating First Nation People's sovereignty.

It is important to underline how the Spanish and the Dutch pavilions specifically worked with the dispositif of the museum display to unpack and challenge the colonial histories of the nation-state. With the due differences and having begun this process back in 2012, the project *SILVER RIGHTS* is moved by a similar urgency of the above-mentioned projects in Venice and operates within a Western institutional context both by acknowledging the violence of the exhibitionary complex



(Bennet, 1995) and by proposing, through different gestures of exposure, forms of counter-narrative based on dialogue and alliance.

# Forms of Dialogue

International activist **(I.A.)**: I have seen that you often do it as well...talking to things and nature, and not just to people, I mean.

Mapuche activist (**M.A.**): Yes, not exactly like that... it is difficult to explain, it is more a physical and energetic matter, I would say. When something goes wrong, the forces of the land make you weak... physically.

I.A.: I understand!

M.A.: Really?! I don't think there is any use in explaining to you thewaywetalktotheEarth.I.A.: Ok, maybe I don't understand, but I feel close to the way youtalk. I would like to share it with others.

**M.A.:** Audacious! He who does not understand speaks to those who do not know. What kind of knowledge of the Earth do you think you are spreading in this way?

I.A.: (...) No, sorry. Forgive my tone, compuche. I have nothing personal against you...
You are right, a few trips to the lake in the summer are not enough.
I will be more careful in my choice of words. But what about you?
Do you still feel like explaining yourself better in my language?
M.A.: Listen: we have suffered, and not only as a people, but we have also absorbed the pain caused to the land. That is why you, who have not experienced it, cannot understand.

(Mazzi & Camporesi, 2020, in Mazzi & Guidi, 2021, p. 391)

This is an extract from one of the dialogues artist Elena Mazzi created together with other voices, to stress and question the encounters of

struggles. A Mapuche activist and an international activist are meeting in a real demonstration, discussing visions and approaches. Could we find a shared point of view in a society where values and reference points have been completely reshaped by capitalism? This text is an artistic and editorial *technology* that identifies writing as a way to "induce resonance" (Ventrella, 2014, p. 284) among the subjectivities that meet and support each other in this common initiative. At the same time, this desire to intertwine voices, thereby creating a co-authorship that crosses different approaches and fields of action, is a further attempt to reduce the distance between political-activist and artistic-cultural practices. Likewise, the writing of a fictional dialogue -although based on first-hand experience and field research- is also a form to let misunderstandings and power relations emerge, as well as the risks of certain postures and easy forms of appropriation calcified within western attitudes. This dialogue is part of a constellation of audio recordings that articulate the whole installation, and that, through voices and storytelling, orient the audience(s) within the complexity of the research displayed within SILVER RIGHTS.

Such a choice is a sort of complementary gesture that helps problematizing the whole process of production and history that SILVER *RIGHTS* deals with - preparing the audience(s) to meet the *core* of the project, i.e. the silver jewellery, which is also the outcome of a further process of dialogue. Elena Mazzi has specifically proposed to think with, through and about the art of silverwork, as a language and technology that embodies the Mapuche people's history of emancipation and violence. As the title SILVER RIGHTS explicitly indicates, the question of Mapuche rights is indissolubly inscribed in the history of a land, transformed into geography through occupation, mapping and mining techniques since the XVI century. The planisphere in which Portuguese cartographer Lopo Homem (1554) designates that area of the world as Terra Argentea (later Argentina, since 1600) dates back to 1554. At the same time, the silver used to make Mapuche jewellery is a product derived from the raw material that had already been turned into coins by the Spanish rulers:

> "When I see an ancient piece carved from a silver coin, I also see a people who maintained their territorial autonomy—even in the context of economic agreements with the invader—because silver

coins would never be given to an enslaved and subjugated population" (Millán 2021 in Mazzi & Guidi, p. 280).

Thus, in their material culture, there emerges a willingness and ability to speak the language of the conquerors, transforming it into *good words*. Words in which there is no hesitation in announcing that the current claims and demands will be carried forward also through forms of mediation by consciously inhabiting the *Translation Zone* described by Emily Apter (2005), which can be a space and a language of war or of (re)construction.

For Elena Mazzi, it was immediately clear that the art of silverwork was the appropriate medium through which a dialogue could be established, without overlooking the contradictions the material produces. If jewels have become the founding objects of Mapuche identity, the silver that constitutes them has gradually been transformed into a commodity with a fluctuating value. Over the decades, its rising cost has forced Mapuche silversmiths to reduce the size of the jewels, to the point of having to employ other metals: "When I see a piece carved on brass, I think of a dispossessed people, who can no longer have access to *lien* (silver), but I can also see their resistance" (Millán, 2020 in Mazzi & Guidi, 2021, p. 281). Indeed, in 2020, the value of silver, a refuge commodity and a widely used industrial material, increased dramatically as a result of uncertainty in the financial markets caused by the pandemic.

The artist's proposal conceptually shifted the weight of the entire project onto the process that precedes the final, visible and definable result. Her intention was to recognise and build on the social and relational value that jewellery has always had for the Mapuche community. Starting from this value, *SILVER RIGHTS* has created a new constellation of stories that address the most recent challenges and make public the stance of a wide network of alliances. Beyond the jewels themselves, it is the process of their production that more truly represents the medium Elena Mazzi proposed to Mauro Millán as a possible way to materialise this collective construction. Numerous workshops were held with young women and men, as well as children from various Mapuche communities scattered throughout Patagonia. They were led on site by Mauro Millán and planned with Elena Mazzi, who could not be present in situ because of the pandemic. The workshops were a moment of listening and manual production, which made it possible for this disappearing art to be passed on and, at the same time, to reflect on the current challenges faced by the Mapuche people and the symbols that can make them visible to the world (Fig. 1). This is a practice that Elena Mazzi has always used, encouraging manual work that activates an organic form of mediation, since the body is the bearer of an ancestral memory that is difficult to verbalise. This exchange process took place first and foremost between Elena Mazzi and Mauro Millán as *representatives* of two communities facing each other, operating in close and neighbouring territories which, for this reason, can be either divisive or places of exchange.



**[Fig. 1].** Mauro Millán (2020). One of the *SILVER RIGHTS* workshops held in the Lago Rosario community. Photography: courtesy of Chino Leiva.

South Tyrolean environmentalist, author, politician and translator, Alexander Langer (1994) emphasises the importance of mediators, bridge-builders, wall-climbers, border explorers in section 8 of his *Tentative decalogue for inter-ethnic coexistence:*  Next to the identity and the more or less clear borders between the different ethnic aggregations, it is fundamental that someone, in such societies, be committed to the exploration and the overcoming of borders: this is an activity which in times of tension and conflict may seem like contraband, but which is decisive to soften rigidity, relativize borders, and favour interaction... This means that every ethnic community will need to give value within its ranks to the people and forces who are capable of exercising self-criticism, and criticism towards one's own community: real 'betrayers of ethnic compactness', who however must never transform themselves in deserters, if they want to maintain their roots and remain credible. (Langer, 1994, para. 16)

#### **On Display and Counter-Museum**

Through this polyphony of critical voices it is possible to understand not only the challenges related to SILVER RIGHTS, but also to situate the project of the Leleque Museum inaugurated by the Benetton company on its land along Ruta 40, the main highway that crosses Patagonia. A museum dedicated to the history of the region and of the Mapuche population, which inscribes its own narrative in this landscape, proclaiming itself as an institution, bearer of knowledge, science and, therefore, truth. The creation of such a museum can be interpreted as one of the many forms of consolidation of the neo-extractivist model, described by Eduardo Gudynas, which combines profit with redistribution in the territories. To do so, "the state collects (or tries to collect) a higher proportion of the surplus generated by the extractive industries... some of this revenue is used to finance significant and massive social programmes, thus ensuring new sources of social legitimacy" (Gudynas, as cited in Acosta, 2013, p. 72-73). The complicity between private companies and government administrations, from local to national, intensifies the complexity of relationships and interdependencies created between different sectors, which leave little room for alternative models of development, showing how "neo-extractivism of South America's own contemporary version part is of developmentalism, whereby the myth of progress and development is

maintained under a new cultural and political hybridity" (Gudynas, as cited in Acosta, 2013, p. 73).

In an attempt to avoid neo-extractive cultural practices, the exhibition that publicly presents the results of the *SILVER RIGHTS* project has been conceived as an installation that intends to respect the jewels in their composite nature as carriers of messages, rituals, knowledge, cosmovisions and, above all, demands. Pellino (2021) states that the artist and the curator conceive the exhibition as a counter-apparatus, where in question is not so much the recognition of the aesthetic value of the object, but rather its capacity to shape an act of mediation, to express the visual construction of the social and vice versa, as well as the tension between art and culture, between political activism and artistic practices. The installation creates a path that visitors must follow in its entirety in order to "earn" access to viewing the jewels. Elena Mazzi and Eduardo Molinari have produced a cluster of research materials, information and references that situate the pieces within the long history of colonization and expropriation that the Mapuche have had to and still have to face.



**[Fig. 2].** Elena Mazzi in dialogue with Mauro Millán and Eduardo Molinari (2021). *SILVER RIGHTS*. Installation view at ar/ge kunst. Photography: courtesy of Tiberio Sorvillo.

As explained by Giovanna Esposito Yussif (2019) in her essay *Condensed Speculations on Museums and Humanity,* "It is not only what is exhibited that counts, but also how. Display has been a language and a tool of power even before it took a prominent – now ubiquitous – position in the museum constellation" (p. 250). Recognising, as Dorothea von Hantellmann (2012) notes, that "the exhibited (i.e., ex-hibited) work of art is preceded by an act of separation that is constitutive of this dispositif, an act of extracting the work from its original context" (p. 549), the whole installation is conceived with the intention of dissolving the separation between work, exhibition and narration. It therefore identifies exhibition-making as a possible common language between artistic, curatorial and institutional practice through which we can begin to rethink the discipline of museography itself.

The whole installation is supported by a display system conceived in collaboration with designer Alessandro Mason (Studio GISTO), resulting from a sustained dialogue about the need to make the entire project autonomous from the institutional spaces in which it is shown. A yellow framework (fig. 2 and 3), with red and blue elements that recall the colours of the Mapuche flags, interposes itself between all the exhibited materials and the ceiling of the gallery space, thus distancing the installation from the rest of the architecture. An aerial structure that keeps all the elements that constitute SILVER RIGHTS suspended, also exposing them to the air flow caused by the visitors' movements. This choice can be interpreted as a further attempt to shorten the distance and embody the interdependence between the public and the exhibition. Textiles, flags, and orality anticipate with their material and immaterial lightness the presence of the jewels, which are also hung from leather strings. The decision to make the back of the pieces visible is also a response to the separation and objectification that often characterizes museology: such objects are usually placed inside display cases or museum vitrines and are therefore not accessible in their entirety but reduced to a two-dimensional form.

As Azoulay (2019) notes:

They [people and artifacts] are continuously produced as disconnected, as if it were the nature of artifacts to exist outside of their communities, to come into being as museum objects, to be out of reach of those who felt at home in their midst—as if it were the nature of certain people to exist bereft of the worldly objects among which their inherited knowledge and rights, protective social fabric and safety, bliss and happiness, sorrow and death are inscribed—as if these objects were not a source of worldliness and a fountain of liveliness for the communities from which they were taken. (p. 2)

The display is therefore an attempt to address the spatial confinement that historically defines this disconnection and eventually present such "objects" through the words of the spiritual leaders and silversmith Mauro Millán who produced them. The caption, as the dispositif through which information is produced and divulgated, is turned into a platform where a complex message can be conveyed into the western institution.



**[Fig. 3].** Elena Mazzi in dialogue with Mauro Millán and Eduardo Molinari (2021). *SILVER RIGHTS.* Installation view at ar/ge kunst. Photography: Courtesy of Tiberio Sorvillo



It is again Pellino (2021) who points out how:

With a gesture that, paraphrasing Claire Bishop, we could define as "radical museography", Elena Mazzi joins this request, questioning the institution, the category of art that it contains and the ways in which both question the spectator, the very notion of "contemporary": not a style or a period of works, not what comes after the modern and the postmodern, but an approach, a modus operandi that appeals to extra-Western epistemologies, and intersects different regimes of historicity and multiple instances. (para. 9)

#### Conclusions

The exchange process between Mauro Millán and Elena Mazzi can be compared to the dialogue described by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2007) between the Yanomami thinker and political leader Davi Kopenawa and the anthropologist Bruce Albert "in which the former presents Whites, in the person of his interlocutor-translator, with a detailed account of the world's structure and history; a narrative which also double as an indignant and proud claim for the Yanomami people's right to exist" (p. 153). The jewels produced for SILVER RIGHTS transcend those that are produced to remain within the community and thus become an act of communication towards those who will receive them in custody and the public who will have the opportunity to see them. The role of Elena Mazzi and of this project-and also of the institutions that support it—has gradually become closer and closer to that of the interlocutor-translator of this message. Viveiros de Castro writes about this dialogue: "we are presented with an 'inventing of culture' (sensu Wagner) which is also a masterpiece of 'inter-ethnic politics'" (p. 153). An inter-ethnic politics that reminds us of Langer's (1994) attempt towards coexistence.

Therefore, we believe the display and the museum need to be considered as places where to situate new forms of protests through alliances and collective work, as "to recognize, amplify and resonate the dignity present in the diversity of socialites, literacies, traces, cosmogonies, that are present in the vast cartographies of the world" (Esposito Yussif, 2019, p. 252). The project SILVER RIGHTS moves from the conviction that, as Esposito Yussif asserts, "It is exactly because museums have been sites of exclusion that they should be sites of contestation" (p. 253). Departing from this reflection, the project proposed a series of alliances that traverse all the process, from conceptualisation to its public presentation up to its final inclusion in a western museum's collection. The dialogue and work carried on by a European artist with an Indigenous spiritual chief and silversmith, with the director of a western institution (and curator of the project), with various other institutional bodies began with an acceptance of working within a system of cultural production that continuously runs the risk of reproducing power relations and forms of inequalities. The history of extraction and violence within which this project is inevitably inscribed, has been addressed continuously and repeatedly, a form to resist a paralysis and non-action, of criticizing while contributing to make space for critical voices to also enter that very institutional framework. Going back to the first quote of this text, the project acknowledges the position of being forced to speak the language of the conquerors, i.e. also the language of museums and exhibition-making, in the conviction that at least, they can produce *good* words thanks to those voices that so far had no right to speak.

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