Viaggio al termine del pianeta
di Emmanuelle de Villepin

EW YORK, 20 febbraio 2017. Pioggia e il vento è soffrante. Anne de Carbuccia si stringe nella sciarpa e accelera il passo. Sta andando ad incontrare una curandera, una guaritrice peruviana che cura tutto con l’ayahuasca, la “liana degli spiriti”, un infuso purgativo che genera un potente effetto psichedelico. Gli sciamani dell’Amazzonia la usano per i loro rituali magici. La curandera ha una faccia che sembra di cera, sorride con parsimonia ma Anne sente che sarà lei la chiave per entrare nelle viscere della foresta amazzonica.

Anne de Carbuccia è un’artista ambientalista franco-americana che decide il ricavato delle sue opere alla fondazione One Planet One Future da lei creata. Quando il suo telefono squilla, sei mesi dopo, sa che la curandera le sta offrendo l’opportunità di penetrare nella parte ancora vergine dell’Amazzonia peruviana: il parco nazionale Sierra del Divisor, una delle più grandi riserve naturali del mondo.


Dopo circa cinque ore di navigazione, avvistano una casa con una parabola sul tetto. È guardata da uomini armati: narcos, i cocaleros. Li, nel cuore lacerato della foresta, coltivano la coca in pace. Ci sono 14 ranger per il parco che copre 1.354.485 ettari. Guadagnano tra 300 e 500 dollari al mese. Il loro lavoro è duro e pericoloso ma hanno fatto un patto con la foresta. Quando la truppa imbocca la diramazione del Cashiboya, è già calata la notte. La
Tagliatori di legna. Narcotrafficanti. Predatori senza scrupoli. L'Amazzonia è ormai allo stremo. La denuncia di Anne de Carbuccia, artista ambientalista

Anne de Carbuccia. A sinistra: il suo “spirit tree”

Per due giorni, l'acqua sale tanto da sommergere l'albero di Anne. Impossibile preparare l'installazione. I ranger li guidano nella foresta aprendosi il cammino coi machete. Anne me lo racconterà così: «Non abbiamo nessuna esperienza di luoghi che non appartengano all'uomo. La natura è molto più potente di noi ed è cercando di affrancarsene che l'uomo ha fatto del pianeta ciò che ha fatto».

I ranger tagliano delle liane che chiamano artigli di gatto. Hanno un liquido squisito, che rinforza il sistema immunitario. La presenza degli animali si avverte ovunque, in particolare quella del giaguaro. Lucio vuole presentare il suo albero: una pata. È in pericolo, come gli elefanti o i rinoceronti. Da un momento all’altro il governo peruviano può decidere di vendere questo Sector Ahuaya di 13.000 ettari per una concessione di legname di 40 anni. L'uomo li ha voluti lì per condividere il senso di minaccia: la lenta condanna a morte della foresta.

Calata la notte, la curandera prepara la cerimonia ayahuasca. Lei e Jahred fumano e cantano per evocare gli spiriti della foresta. L’atmosfera è intensa e anche se Anne non prende ayahuasca, sente palpitare il cuore dell’Amazzonia. La mattina seguente, Anne installa tra le braccia pensili del suo renaco il guscio di una tartaruga divorata da un giaguaro, dei fiori rossi raccolti al momento. È poi la lessidra e la vanitas, il teschio di gesso, che include nelle sue opere, come nelle grandi “nature morte” secentesche, come in un san Gerolamo fuori dalla sua caverna, al cielo aperto. Nei dipinti vogliono dire Memento mori, ricordati che devi morire. Per lei: “Ricordati della vita che verrà”. Il gran renaco sarà il suo nuovo Time Shrine, l’altare del tempo. È così che evocare espier mone l’urgenza di reagire prima che sia troppo tardi. Scatta le foto dalla pioggia che Lucio fa fatica a tener ferma, l’acqua ammonisce che sono ospiti provvisori ma l’abbraccio dell’albero assicura che sono ospiti graditi.

Il giorno seguente ritornano a Pucallpa per incontrare María Elena Díaz, la Jefa del Parco nazionale Sierra del Divisor e della “Zona Riservata”. È piccolo e grazioso, preceduto da una reputazione che la vuole severa e intrasgressibile. È a lei che si deve la creazione del Parco Nazionale, finora considerato solo “zona riservata”. La distinzione è fondamentale e per ottenerla María Elena Díaz ha subito pressioni inaudite, comprese minacce di morte. Il governo interviene poco su una “zona riservata” e non la difende quasi per niente dai loggers e dagli agricoltori. A Contamana la loro influenza è importante presso la popolazione: ambiscono ad avere le mani libere per le loro attività. Hanno dato vita a una campagna di disinfor- mazione tale che la Díaz si è sentita stretta in una cortina di odio per anni. Per fortuna varie Ong l’hanno sostenuta. Oggi, secondo lei, la situazione non è risolta. Fa il nome di Leovigildo Guzmán, potente signore dell’industria del taglio della foresta. Guzmán ha ottenuto concessioni e per raggiungerle ha costruito una strada lungo la quale ha deforestato a man bassa, finché non è finito in un processo mosso dal Parco Nazionale. La schizofrenia dello Stato è tale, osserva María Elena Díaz, da assumere gente come lei e collaborare con gente come Guzmán. Altro personaggio inquietante è Dennis Melka: società quotata a Londra, cittadino ceco ma residente nelle isole Caiman. Famoso per le sue piantagioni di cacao, detiene il record della deforestazione. Il Guardian ha pubblicato un’immagine della Nasa nella quale si vede dallo spazio la zona da lui rasata al suolo: 7000 ettari all’anno. Prima di tornare in Europa, de Carbuccia decide di andare a Santa Clara de Uchuna. Ma i locali, ancora scioccati dal tentativo di ammazzare il giornalista, non le lasciano fare l’installazione.

Si torna con un senso di innocenza perduta da questi viaggi. Una cacciata dall’Eden, non come all’inizio questa volta, ma come all’annuncio di una fine. Anne de Carbuccia vede nell’umanità e nella natura un tutto inscindibile. Per lei non c’è salvezza dell’una senza salvezza dell’altra. E ora c’è un albero laggli, che poggia le mani sulla terra e guarda passare il fiume. Si è scelto un’artista per raccontare al mondo la storia di un’apocalisse imminente. Ascoltiamola.
ENGLISH VERSION

Apocalypse Now

New York, February 20th, 2017. It’s raining, and a harsh wind lashes the streets. Anne de Carbuccia wraps her scarf around herself more tightly and quickens her pace. She’s going to visit a collector friend of hers to meet another woman: a curandera, a Peruvian healer who treats others using ayahuasca, the “liana of the spirits,” a purgative brew that induces a powerful psychedelic effect. The shamans of the Amazon use it in their magic therapeutic rituals. For the most part the curandera is stony-faced, smiling only rarely, but Anne instantly senses that the woman will be her key to entering the depths of the Amazon rainforest.

Anne de Carbuccia is a French-American environmental artist who donates the proceeds from her works to One Planet One Future, a foundation she established. When her phone rings in August, six months later, she realizes that the curandera is offering her a unique opportunity to penetrate the still-untouched realms of the Peruvian Amazon: the Sierra del Divisor National Park, one of the world’s largest natural reserves.

December 10th, 2017, the airport in Pucallpa, Peru. A nightmare of a city with no urban vision, Pucallpa is an ugly, noisy center of chaos in the heart of Amazonia. Along with Anne de Carbuccia and the curandera are Diego—a filmmaker who has great experience in this kind of mission and who, even more importantly, is well known among the local rangers—and his assistant Casco. During the flight they get to know one another and talk about the real journey they’re about to undertake. When Anne asks whether there’s any risk they’ll run into narcos, everyone is quick to reassure her.

After another flight to Contamana they reach the Ucayali River. They’ll need to journey up it by boat to Cashiboya. Waiting for them are two rangers, Lucio and Jahred, and an 8-meter pirogue with a 70-cm draft that’s piled high with provisions and drinking water. When they realize it’s going to be their means of transportation they all protest, in particular the curandera. Anne argues bitterly with the rangers. Loading six people onto such a small, unsteady boat is insane. The river is strewn with tree trunks and the risk of capsizing is enormous. Even if the crew came out of an accident unharmed, the photographic material would never survive. Lucio takes Anne aside, looks her in the eye and tells her, “Trust me, it’s the only way to get there. Just trust me.” This journey means a lot to Anne, and she senses it means just as much to Lucio. She needs to do this, so she climbs into the pirogue. The others follow her in silence, sitting down very close together, straight-backed, their legs tucked beneath them. They’re reassured by Lucio’s
determination the moment they see him skillfully steer the boat around the tree trunks with maneuvers only a pirogue could perform.

As they gradually make their way up toward the primary—or “old growth”—forest, a harrowing sense of desolation grows inside Anne. All around them are mountains of chopped-down trees, teams of loggers and barren, ravaged landscapes. The forest has been raped, maimed, tyrannized by brutal, unscrupulous hands. Trafficking used to revolve around caoba, precious mahogany exported legally or as contraband for luxury furniture in the United States. Today, instead, the wood most in demand is shihuahuaco, which is particularly solid and durable. It’s exported illegally now thanks to the new machinery capable of cutting through it. These trees, which can grow 50 meters tall, are worth between $9,000 and $11,000 each in the US. The great irony is that this country sells off its land without constraints for both conservation and deforestation.

Today many preconceptions have been proven untrue, beginning with the notion that Amazonian trees grow quickly. Unfortunately, just the opposite is true: it’s a very slow process. Trunks with a diameter of over one meter are at least two centuries old and up to 1400 years old. For the major species, scientific studies have concluded that the annual growth ranges from between one and, at most, under seven millimeters.

After around five hours traveling up the river they see a relatively comfortable-looking house with a satellite dish on the roof. It’s guarded by armed men. They’re narcos, cocaleros. There, in the forest’s heart torn asunder, they grow coca unimpeded. There are 14 rangers in the park, which covers 1,354,485 hectares. They earn between $300 and $500 a month. They carry neither firearms nor phones. Their work is rough and dangerous, but they’ve made a pact with the forest.

By the time the troop veers off into the Cashiboya branch, leaving the main course of the river behind them, night has already fallen. Lucio says they need to stop and make camp despite the fact that narcos don’t like having visitors around. Anne feels alarmed and possibly betrayed. She’s already dealt with narcos on past expeditions and knows they would have no qualms about butchering them all.

At five in the morning, as Lucio offers her some canned tuna and melba toast, he once again insists: “You need to come with us. It’s important that you come.” They set off again in the pirogue. Lucio is in back, handling the tiller, while Jahred reads the river. He’s of the shipibo, the water people, and his art is a mix of intuition and memory of the river. They pass by two capsized boats as the shore continues to offer them a desolate view of the devastated forest. For the poor, hungry people who arrive here from the north with many children, Amazonia is a sort of Eldorado. The government offers them forestland, which they chop down so they can plant palm trees for palm oil, or soybeans. Later on the dealers
step in, offering to buy everything at a good price. No one has enough money to turn them down.

After ten more hours of traveling they reach Monte Sinai, a buffer zone between the secondary forest and primary forest. In other words, it’s the last place where human beings are still welcomed. Beyond it, nature claims everything, shutting itself off entirely to mankind, as though beyond Monte Sinai the environment is entrenched in its fortress to plan its next moves in this ruthless war.

Anne de Carbuccia and her companions stop off in a village of mesticos, people from the north, whom the rangers try to teach respect for the environment. Lucio’s mother taught the little children here, and he still has a special relationship with them. The village is well kept and the school is well organized. The agreement between them and the rangers consists of their reporting any invaders in exchange for land. Instead of raising livestock, which would cause too much pollution, they grow cocoa trees.

The last three hours of navigating the river are exhausting. The troop’s impatience rises. So does the feeling they’re doing something foolhardy and their apprehension about the greeting nature may have in store for its intrepid defenders. Torrential rain pours down on them as though in a ritual purification before they leave behind every last trace of civilization. “Then I heard the birds and saw the butterflies,” Anne de Carbuccia says, on her face the radiant smile of a little girl who’s been swept up into a fairy tale.

And then she sees her tree. It’s on the riverside, formidable and majestic. With branches that look like two hands resting on the ground, it emanates an energy, a true presence. “It’s a spirit tree,” Lucio tells her, a renaco, el arbol del alma. “You’ll see, the spirits of the forest are so powerful that on our first night we won’t be able to sleep.” Anne senses that it’s welcoming her now. She’s exhausted but she’s found her tree and with it the location for her installation. The humidity is almost unbearable, as is the heat.

Their primary concern is protecting themselves against spiders, snakes and carnivorous ants that could devour those snakes. Then they fill two buckets with rainwater, but only for bathing, because it’s so rich in minerals that it’s unfit for drinking. Finally, inside a small wooden structure they settle down for the night with sleeping bags and mosquito netting.

For two days the water rises so high that it submerges much of Anne’s tree. It’s impossible for her to set up her installation, so the rangers guide them into the forest instead, clearing the way with machetes. Upon her return, Anne would describe it to me like this: “We have no experience with places that don’t belong to man. Nature is far more powerful than we are, and it’s by trying to do away with it that mankind has reduced the planet to its current state.” The rangers chop down some lianas they call “cat claws,” which
are filled with a delicious, powerful liquid that strengthens the immune system. The presence of animals is felt everywhere, in particular jaguars, but only the toads let themselves be seen.

Lucio wants to show them his tree, which is also a spirit tree: a puna. It’s in danger, like elephants and rhinos. At any moment the Peruvian government might decide to sell this 13,000-hectare Sector Ahuaya through a 40-year logging concession. Lucio wanted to take them there so he could share the sense of looming danger that’s burdening him. Anne understands the weight of responsibility she’s taking upon herself. She needs to return to civilization and describe the soul of the forest, its slow death sentence and the war that will ultimately destroy it all.

After nightfall, the curandera prepares for the ayahuasca ceremony. She and Jahred smoke and sing to summon the spirits of the forest. The atmosphere is intense, and though Anne de Carbuccia doesn’t drink any ayahuasca she feels the beating heart of Amazonia. She knows nothing will be the same as before; she’s met the forest and with it has made a pact.

The next morning, within the cradle of her renaco’s arms Anne places the shell of a turtle that was devoured by a jaguar and some freshly picked red flowers. Then come the hourglass and the vanitas—the plaster skull that she includes in all her works, as in the great seventeenth-century still lifes, like St. Jerome outside his cave. In paintings they signify Memento mori, “Remember that you must die.” To her they say, “Remember the life that is to come.” The great renaco will be her new TimeShrine. This is how she wishes to express how urgent it is that efforts be made before it’s too late. She shoots the pictures from the pirogue, which Lucio struggles to steady. The water warns them that they’re temporary guests, but the tree’s embrace assures them that they’re welcome guests. No, after this nothing will ever be the same again.

The journey back is faster and therefore less dangerous. They’re traveling downstream, and Lucio’s skill is phenomenal. Anna looks sad, but she tells the others she’s only tired. From time to time they need to use a chainsaw to cut through large tree trunks lying in the river, blocking their way.

Before continuing on to their next destination—a shipibo community in Santa Clara where Anne wants to create a TimeShrine to deforestation—they stop off to spend the night in Contamana. There they find a bed, a shower and—most importantly—internet and phone connections to contact their families. Clean and cheerful, they open some beers and watch the news. Diego receives a phone call in which he’s warned that the chief of the shipibo community, a reporter from the indigenous radio station and a few others crossed the river to visit their ancestral lands. Loggers greeted them with machinegun fire
and the reporter was wounded. This means the troop will need to forego visiting Santa Clara.

More news comes from the web, this time about the president of Peru, who’s been accused of taking $4 million dollars in bribes from a Brazilian company. None of them are surprised. They say corruption is everywhere and at every level—individual, local and national. Three-quarters of all business dealings in Amazonia are illegal. They seem to accept this sad fact but are shocked by how brazenly the president handled his dirty dealings. The money was deposited directly into the bank account of one of his two firms. He didn’t even bother to use a shell company.

The following day they return to Pucallpa to meet María Elena Díaz, the Jefa of the Sierra del Divisor National Park and the Zona Riservada. Petite and pretty, her reputation as a stern, intransigent woman precedes her. She’s the person to be thanked for the establishment of the national park, which until then had been considered only a “restricted area.” The distinction is fundamental, and to achieve this change María Elena Díaz had to endure unbelievable pressure, including death threats. The government intervenes little in restricted areas and barely defends them at all from loggers and farmers. What’s more, restricted areas receive little money from the central administration. The Jefa engaged in a relentless battle to have the statute changed. In Contamana the loggers and farmers have a great deal of influence over the population and they have a single goal: to continue doing business. They started up such a nasty disinformation campaign that Diaz felt she was trapped in a world of hatred for a decade. Fortunately various NGOs gave her their vigorous support. Today, though, she doesn’t feel the situation has been entirely resolved.

For example, take Leovigildo Guzmàn, the rich, powerful head of the logging industry. She explains that Guzmàn was granted concessions by the government and to reach the property he built a road, the area around which he gradually deforested. He carried on with impunity until he ended up in a lawsuit filed by the national park, which he had trespassed. Every time inspectors tried to visit the area they found the road blocked and had to turn back. Needless to say, nothing ever came from it. The nation is so schizophrenic, María Elena Díaz remarks bitterly, that it hires people like her to defend Amazonia while at the same time working with people like Guzmàn.

Another powerful, disturbing figure is Dennis Melka, a Czech citizen but a resident of the Cayman Islands with a company listed on the London stock exchange. Famous for his cacao plantations, he holds the record in deforestation. The Guardian published a photograph NASA took from space in which you can see the area razed to the ground because of his work: 7000 hectares a year. His company also aims to expand its palm oil plantations.
Despite the recent events, before returning to Europe, Anne de Carbuccia decides to journey to Santa Clara de Uchunya after all, but the shipibos are still shaken by the attempt to kill the reporter. Terrified by the possibility of further violence, they won’t let her set up her installation on their deconsecrated grounds. Melka’s company and the regional government hide behind poor Peruvians, claiming they’re doing good by offering them work and money, putting human beings first, before this massive, “useless” forest.

One returns from these journeys with a sense of innocence forever lost. Like being driven out of Eden, not as a beginning this time, but as the harbinger of an ending. All certainty falls to ash when facing reality. Anne de Carbuccia isn’t the kind of environmentalist who pits nature and the human race against each other. At the heart of her struggle are humanity and its survival, but she sees humanity and the nature surrounding it as an inseparable whole. There’s no saving one without saving the other.

Down there is a tree, a tree that rests its hands on the earth and watches the river flow by. It chose an artist to tell the world the story of an imminent apocalypse. Let’s listen to it.