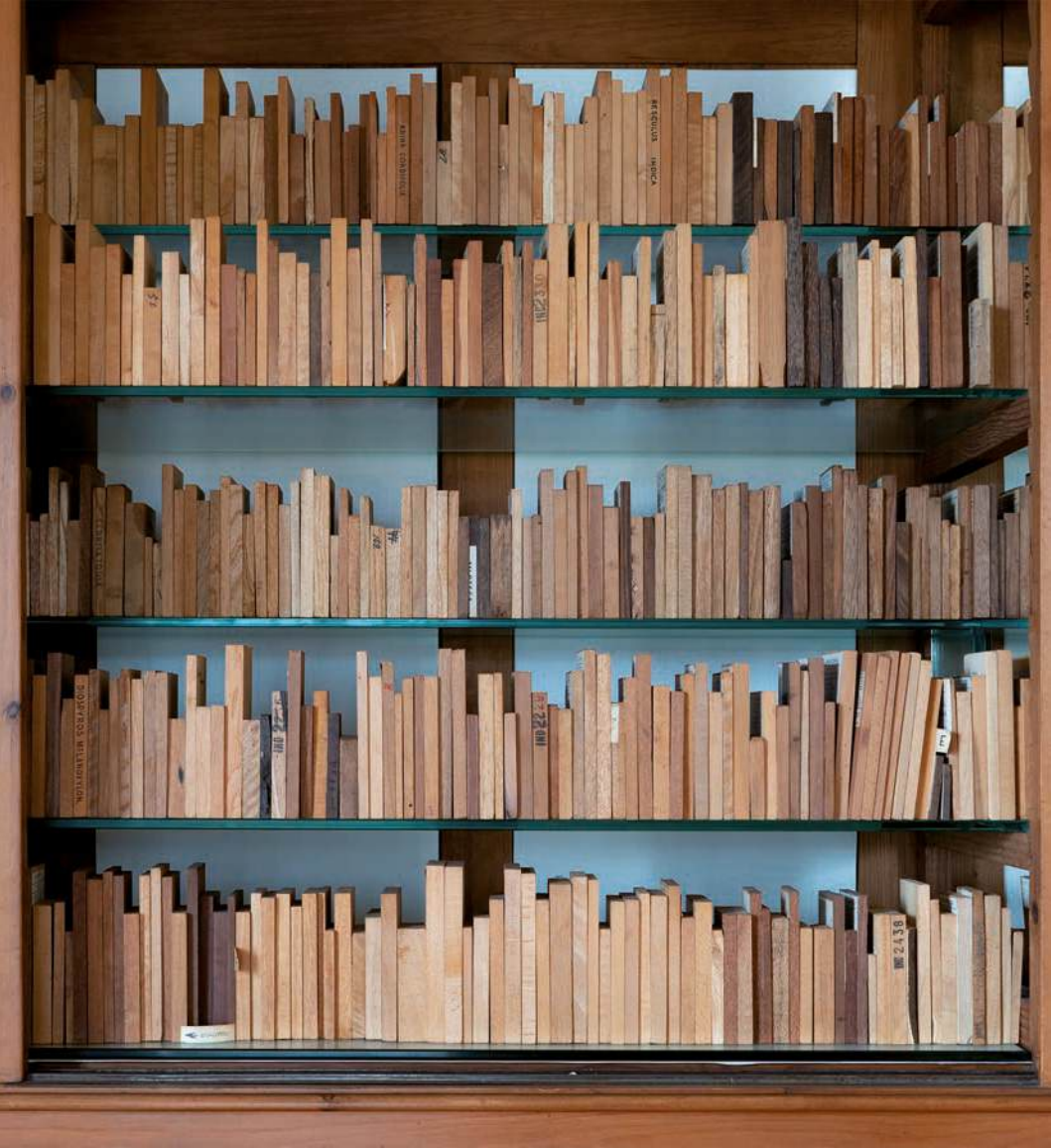



Uriel Orlow


Reading Wood (Backwards)



1937: The Botanical Mission of Angola



1953: The Botanical Mission of Angola and Mozambique

A photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, several large, dark logs are floating in the water, arranged in a line that recedes into the distance. The water is a pale, milky blue-grey color. The sky is a clear, light blue. The overall scene suggests a logging operation or a natural accumulation of logs in a coastal area.

1954: The Forestry Commission of Guinée

Did you know that the ancient Greeks only had one word for wood—hylē (haili)—without making a distinction between the growing forests and the timber used by humans?

Aristotle used this word to coin the concept of matter, the stuff of which a thing is made. Matter is stone, iron, bronze and everything else—simply materials before they are shaped into a recognizable form.

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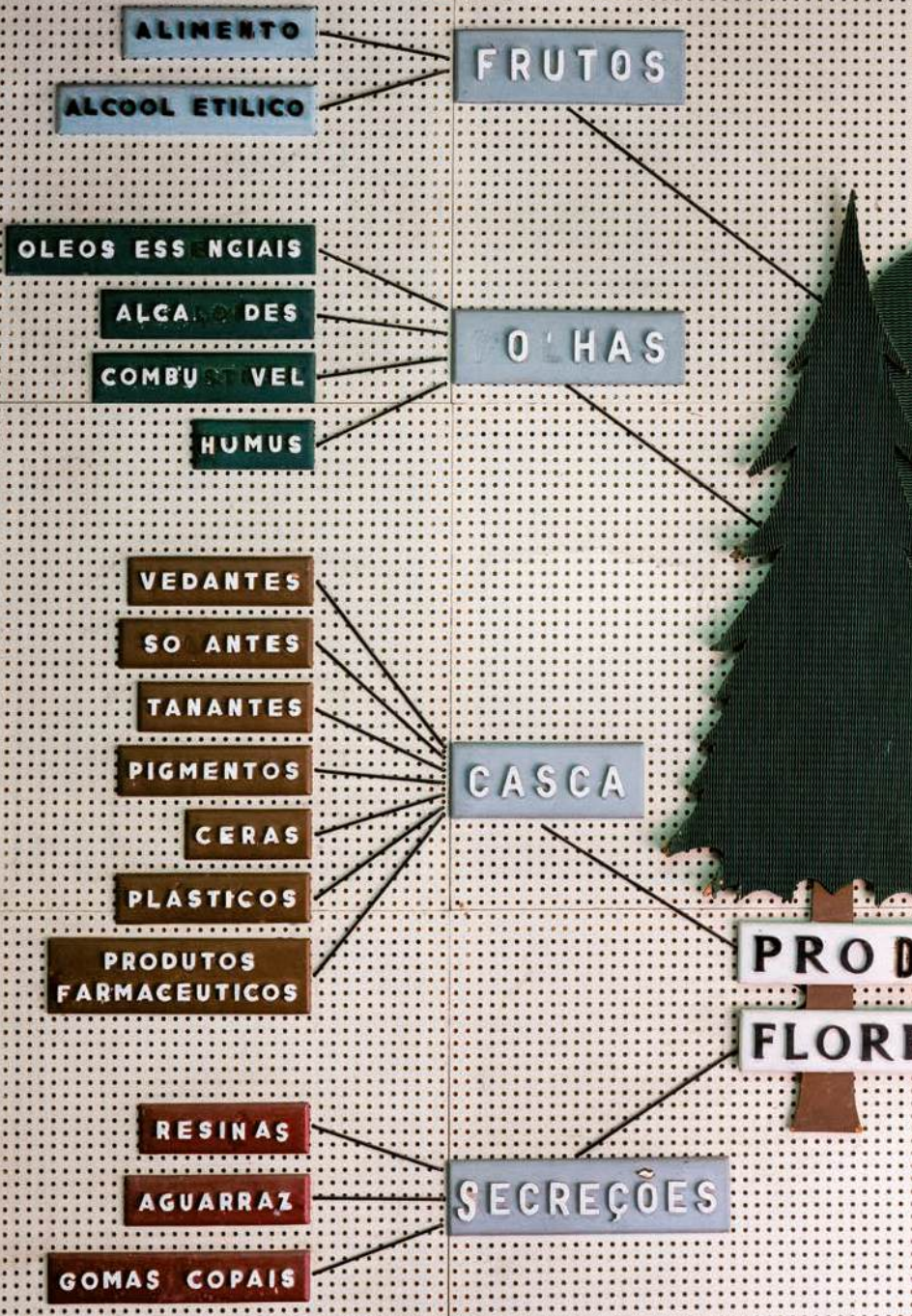
When capitalism took over the world, sooner or later everything began in the forest. Metallurgy, sugar cultivating, shipbuilding, construction—everything found its lifeblood in the forest.

It is hardly coincidence that the Portuguese name for the island, “ilha da Madeira,” literally means “island of timber.” The Portuguese settlers, encountering an impossibly dense forest landscape, progressively cleared the forest to make space for the cultivation of cereals, then sugar, and later wine.

And when the island was exhausted and the sugar production moved westward they built ships from Brazilian timber to bring slaves all the way across the Atlantic.



**Fig. 3** — A pilha de tanga-tanga vista de topo.  
Repare-se no fendimento de algumas tábuas



ALIMENTO

ALCOOL ETILICO

OLEOS ESSENCIAIS

ALCALOIDES

COMBUSTIVEL

HUMUS

VEDANTES

SO ANTES

TANANTES

PIGMENTOS

CERAS

PLASTICOS

PRODUTOS FARMACEUTICOS

RESINAS

AGUARRAZ

GOMAS COPAIS

FRUTOS

OLHAS

CASCA

SECREÇÕES

PROD

FLORE



**MEDIOS E GRANDES  
DIÂMETROS**

**CONSTRUÇÃO  
CIVIL**

**MARCEARIA**

**FOLHEADOS**

**CONTRAPLACADOS**

**MADEIRAS  
1ELHORADAS**

**ADUELA**

**CAIXOTARIA**

**POSTES . ESTEIOS**

**TRAVESSAS  
DE C F**

**PASTA PARA PAPEL  
CELULOSE**

**ACUCAR ALCOOL  
LEVEDUR S**

**LENHO**

**PAINÊS  
AGLOMERADOS**

**PASTA PARA PAPEL  
CELULOSE**

**GAS POBRE**

**REZ . ALCATROES**

**CREOSOTE**

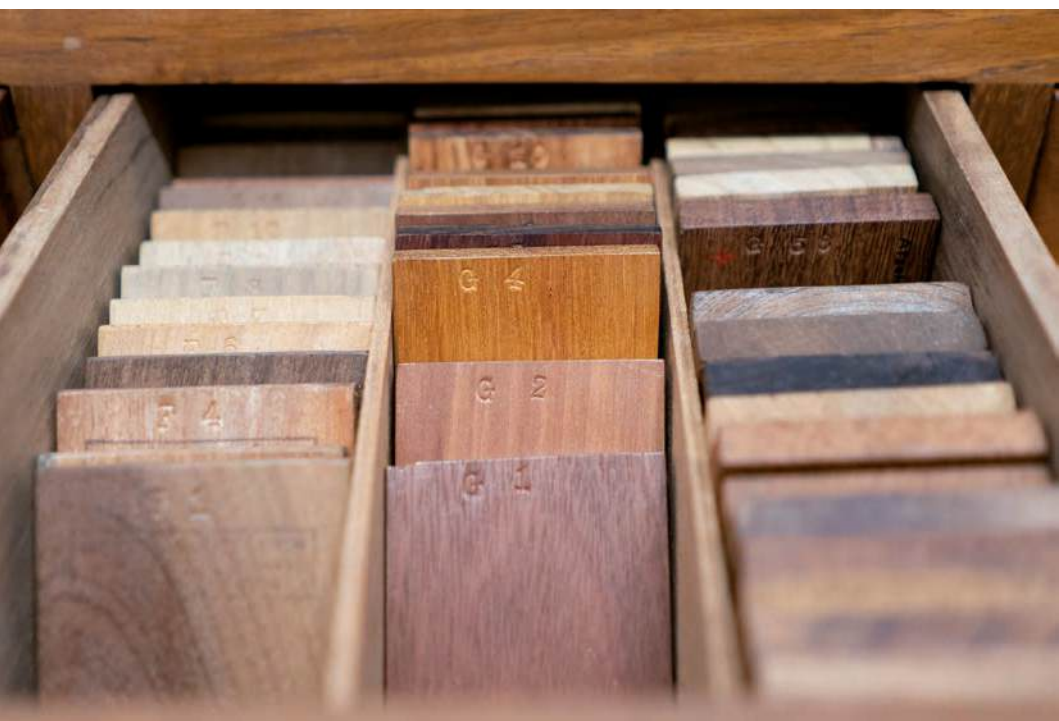
**ACETONA ETC**

**ALCOOL METILICO**

**COMBUSTIVEL**

**DESPERDÍCIOS**

**LITOS  
ESTAIS**





**Daniellia oliveri, Guinée-Bissau**





ucumbo in bijagó



tchéne in fula





bóbe in balanta



santam-um in mandinga





**Uriel Orlow, Dalida María Benfield, T. J. Demos,  
Fabienne Liptay, Lukas Brasiskis**

### **On Eco-operations and Decoloniality: A Discussion\***

**URIEL ORLOW:** With regard to our ongoing discussion on *eco-operations*, I was thinking about the hyphen in the word itself. In terms of my practice, I've been trying to combine decolonial thought and practice with an ecological one—I'm engaged in both practices. It also connects to questions of temporality as the decolonial engages with hauntings from the past, unfinished business from the past in the present. The repercussions of extractive colonial practices are also environmental. And the ecological question is, of course, grappling with the future and how we're going to live on this planet. A number of others have started to think along these lines. In the following I will address the decolonial and ecological in my recent work. I've also been thinking about collective speech as a way to bridge the two. And something we've been talking a lot about recently is the loss of knowledge—that's been my first line of thought. When I was doing research in South Africa I was interested in the obliteration of local knowledge and the continuing epistemic violence through the naming of plants, which was part of the colonial project. I spent about three years traveling through South Africa, recording plant names in a dozen Indigenous languages and made an audio dictionary titled *What Plants Were Called Before They Had A Name* (2018). It's essentially a collective recital of plant names, presented in different ways, one of which is a counterpoint to the written word—this knowledge, being oral, was easy to obliterate as it's not written down.

This piece arose out of initial thoughts on collective speech as a way to bridge the hyphen—as in *eco-operations*—that is,

\* Excerpt from the discussions of the *Eco-operations* working group during its inaugural meeting in Kassel, July 22, 2022.



Fig. 1: Uriel Orlow, *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name*, 2015–present. 5/6-channel sound installation, 22:40 min. Installation view Kunsthalle Mainz, 2019. Photo: Norbert Miguletz. © Uriel Orlow. All Rights Reserved.

the decolonial and ecology, where the ecology of knowledge is connected to how we live with the land and resources. I'm continuing this project in Guatemala, where I came across a publication by the Indigenous Institute of Guatemala. In 1974 the institute published a pamphlet on Mayan medicinal plants. Strikingly, all the plant names in the book are in Spanish. So I started to travel through Guatemala, meeting Mayan healers, showing them the book, and asking them, what the plant is called in their language and they added the names to the book. So over time the book became augmented with the Indigenous names. Eventually, it was presented as an installation with overhead projectors displaying the pages of the book with all the Mayan names added. For me the question is, how can we intervene in the archive, the document? How can we restore a diversity of knowledge? How can we connect linguistic diversity with biodiversity?

The second line of thought regarding collective speech isn't to do with knowledge obliteration, as in the two different versions of *What Plants Were Called Before They Had A Name*. It's more connected to knowledge extraction. The pharmaceutical industry has been doing a lot of bioprospecting in the Global South, where there's more plant diversity and unexplored Indigenous knowledge. I worked a lot with activists, healers, and lawyers in South Africa thinking about this, and then we staged a people's tribunal talking about this, shown in the film *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke* (2017), which was headed by a time-traveling healer who in 1940 was accused of stealing from the West, as shown in the earlier film *The Crown Against Mafavuke* (2016):

WORKER (*in Zulu*): So is this a real trial you are holding here?

MAFAVUKE (*in Zulu*): No, it's not really a trial, it's a tribunal.

WORKER (*in Zulu*): What does this mean?

MAFAVUKE (*in Zulu*): It's not a court with normal jurisdiction—it's something we set up ourselves. It's a people's tribunal—it takes its authority from us. [...]

ASANDA: Do you know what's really problematic? It's that the Khoi, who are the original users of Rooibos, make no money from this industry. They live in extreme poverty.

JACO: We're setting up regional documentation centers through which we're hoping to gather all local available Indigenous knowledge and to capture it in a central database. That way, anybody looking to do research or product development on a plant will have to go through us, the government, to get consent from the original knowledge holders and also to negotiate a benefit sharing agreement.

MAFAVUKE: If we give our knowledge without consulting with our ancestors or our fellow healers, our ancestors will be angered. And that will jeopardize the sacredness of our knowledge [...]

GOGO: A lot of what used to be common land is now privately owned. We no any longer have access to natural resources.

JACO: Okay, but this is exactly why we need laws to conserve biodiversity.

MERVIN: Conservation has always been a way to control the Indigenous population. Preservation becomes oppression.

Again we have the hyphen between the decolonial and ecology. This also becomes quite hands-on with a methodology that is more centered on more-than-human collectivities, namely creating gardens together. I had already made a medicinal plant garden with migrant communities in London and collaborated with mustard farmers in Nepal. In this case, I responded to an invitation from the Musée Théodore Monod in Dakar for the Dakar Biennial. We were invited to engage with the collection of the Musée Théodore Monod, which is a colonial collection now integrated into the University of Dakar but has basically ethnographic objects. I focused on the objects from the collection that were to do with plants and medicine, and collaborated with the traditional hospital outside of Dakar, l'Hôpital Traditionnel de Keur Massar. We tried to, in a sense, reanimate the de-contextualized artefacts in the museum. We made a film together in the hospital, and then I worked with local schools to create a medicinal garden in the gardens of the museum. We also ran workshops and then made a map which grouped all the plants according to their uses. The film was shown as installation inside the museum alongside the objects. Finally, we created a protocol for doing workshops even when I'm not there, so that the plants can continue to be used. The project is called *Botanique de la mort, botanique de la vie*, which is a quote from

a film by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Ghislain Cloquet called *Les statues meurent aussi* (1950–53) where at the beginning the narrator talks about what happens when statues enter the museum—they die a second death. And he says: “What do we do with this *Botanique de la mort*, with the botany of death?” What we have tried to do is revive it.

Thirdly, and lastly, the question of restitution has been really important to me in relation to the hyphen. I have been researching a wood library in Lisbon, which has more than 10,000 pieces of wood, mostly from the Portuguese colonies, collected in the twentieth century with the aim of exploring the potential uses and exploitation of the wood. In previous works I already focused on the restitution of artefacts, such as the Benin Bronzes. But in this case, it’s not just artefacts that need to be returned to another culture; these pieces of wood were also taken from nature. So what would it mean if we return these to nature, what would restitution to nature mean? How can we conceptualize restitution culturally and in terms of nature? Part of my research consisted of piecing together the whole cycle of this wood—from the expeditions in the former colonies to the different laboratories and departments. But I was also interested in the wood that returned with people when the Portuguese colonies gained independence in the 1970s, and the Portuguese came back to Portugal; with their furniture made from local woods. For the Berlin Biennale (2022), I made an installation at the Akademie der Künste called *Reading Wood (Backwards)*, which also included a performance and activation which engaged with this wood library. I recreated microscopic images of the structure of the wood as a wallpaper inside the exhibition space. And on the wall outside, I wanted people to encounter the tree itself—which is completely absent from all the archives. The performance, which was part of the work, acted as a kind of rehearsal of restitution, returning the wood to the tree, as it were. The performer dismantled the installation and returned the wood to the tree outside of the exhibition space.

**DALIDA MARÍA BENFIELD:** My question concerns the protocols in your collective work: How do you organize and activate those collaborations?

**URIEL ORLOW:** It's an interesting question because I guess I work as an individual artist. So, I'm not part of a collective, but I often work with other people. Structurally there is a collective aspect and I try to introduce horizontality. When we come together, I speak about the ideas and the research I've already done, and then I work with people to see what we can do together. For example, working with the kids in Dakar to plant the garden was a kind of after-school activity that engages them with that place. It's important that there is a kind of ownership that continues beyond my presence. This also happened with the garden in London, which has been continuing well after my involvement.

**DALIDA MARÍA BENFIELD:** It's interesting to think of collaborators as persons of different scales, as a kind of infrastructure of care, even, maybe of different durations.

**URIEL ORLOW:** I often see my role as a kind of catalyst, or as a mouthpiece for someone, working with and speaking to activists and healers in South Africa or in Guatemala. It's like: What resources have I got at my disposal to amplify their voices?

**T. J. DEMOS:** I have a couple of questions following up on that. We're all aware, I think, of the potential of arts and their economy itself to be extractive, especially when you're working with these communities all over the world that are in some ways on the front line. I know you're aware of that, and I am trying to think about how your practice not only leads to artistic production that benefits you, but also extends a kind of decolonial social justice to the communities that you're working with. So, I was going to ask something similar. Maybe you could speak a little bit more about that. Maybe in relationship to the tribunal:

What kind of political effects does it produce which reverberate or continue to exist beyond the artwork? And then the second question is about restitution to nature. I wonder if we can even use that term at a time when fossil capitalism continues to destroy conditions of livability in every way possible worldwide. So, is it premature or even inappropriate to bring up the issue of restitution when we're living in the conditions of ongoing global environmental violence?

**URIEL ORLOW:** I'll start with the second question. For me restitution is also connected to repair and restoration. To restore a forest can be a form of restitution, of course, which would be an action that counters the extractive economies that have destroyed the same forests. Restitution to nature for me is also a metaphor and a gesture pointing towards ecological justice. It feels important to address how extractive capitalism and the destruction it sows is connected to the colonial project.

Returning to your first question of how the stakeholder communities I work with can benefit. With some projects, such as *Learning from Artemesia*, where I worked with a women's collective in the south of the DRC, I introduced a circular economy model: So from the outset it was clear that financial benefits from the project will be shared. So whenever I exhibit this work the women get a royalty which is equal to my artist fee. But of course, it's not only financial. So for example, the film *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke (Mafavuke's Tribunal)* has been used by different communities and people that I've been working with in South Africa as an educational tool. We also run a workshop together with the school of Indigenous healers who are part of the film and now they continue to use the film to create awareness and discussion around bioprospecting. But the film for me also acts as a proposal or suggestion for a tribunal to hold the pharma industry to account.

**FABIENNE LIPTAY:** Connected to what we have been discussing, my impression is that creating a space with plants, or with

other ecological matter you are working with, is important for encounters. How to create a space for encounters? For Alexandra Gelis, it's about caring and healing, about other forms of exchange and sharing within an economy of gifts. And for you, as you said, it's about rehearsing. You set up the stage for an encounter, inviting the living and the spirits of the dead who speak from the past, from history, to envision a future. Even if you set up the stage, if you direct the scene and later edit the film on your own, it's this moment of the rehearsal when different voices and perspectives come together and when you step back.

**URIEL ORLOW:** Films are often made collectively—especially if there is a crew and cast. It's a collective process. Setting the stage is important—creating a situation where certain things can be said or done. We come together and try things and that creates its own dynamic which I don't fully control of course. But the rehearsal is more for me—it's acknowledging the need to do something again and again, the need to practice.

**LUKAS BRASISKIS:** Since we're talking about film, rehearsal, and working with actors, I found the non-representational attitude in that film particularly interesting. There is some kind of cinematic strategy or form you apply very consciously and intentionally to trigger discussion around the subject. I'd like to ask this question about the film medium itself, its form, and how important it is in certain situations when you have to find a way to use it beyond archiving, presenting, or documenting.

**URIEL ORLOW:** In most of my works I try to reflect on the form and medium. I couldn't really talk about it in this context, but in the film *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*, and also in the prequel *The Crown Against Mafavuke*, I have the actors switch roles between genders and ethnicities. The same actor might portray individuals of different genders and racial backgrounds, because again, I think about the violence of representation, of assigning some-

one a role—you are this kind of person because of your skin color or gender. *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke* is essentially two films in one: a black-and-white film, which is the making-of where we actually see the cameras, and the color film of the tribunal preparations. There's this Brechtian moment of stepping out of the illusion of representation. I'm usually scared of any medium I use, whether it's film or sculpture, like these wooden pieces in *Reading Wood (Backwards)*, which are almost like sculptures. I try to understand that fear and make it part of the work and how I make it. So the film also carries these questions about the medium itself. In other works, I use different strategies like stills, or voiceover. There is definitely more going on than representing something.

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Exhibiting Film

Challenges of Format

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the Río El Vacilón; Alexandra's fuchsia hair.

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