

AMAZONIA

*And one man made a speech About the slaughtering of green
And while he was speaking a woman dug a pit in me placed within it
a green branch Laid it gently as though it were her daughter
And gave it water*

Mario Petrucci: *Amazonia*, Natural History Museum

A commission like this can chill the arteries. High stakes, brutal deadlines, and major jangles over delivering poetry into the full public glare of the Natural History Museum. The context was an important new exhibition by artists Lucy and Jorge Orta, incorporating photography, sculpture, ceramics and diaries from their 2009 Peruvian Amazon expedition. Their planned centrepiece was a stunning audio-visual experience involving rainforest sounds and video footage on vast split screens – with poetry driving the narration. Of course, the expeditionists themselves wanted to be fired up by my script, along with director David Bickerstaff. Then there was the average attention span of the visitor to consider. And maybe it could also be suitable for the young? So – *no pressure*.

That's where experience comes to the rescue. No matter how many eyes and ears are fixed on the outcome, you've learned that it's best to retire to the meditative cave where the ego is silenced, where you connect directly with the crackling heat of the creative act *per se*. It's so easy to be swept away by the mechanics and requirements of the commission: research, writing, structuring; gathering reliable reconnaissance from editorial colleagues who are themselves overstretched. I was reassured by having already worked with David on our Chernobyl film, *Heavy Water*. Even so, as with every commission, the thought still dug into my solar plexus: what if what I write just isn't any good? Striving towards your own literary projects suddenly feels like playing tennis up against a brick wall: no one need know if a sloppy backhand loses you a private point. But producing on cue for an important client is the Olympics 100 metres final on TV: trip up after the starting gun and it's game over – in a very public way. And this wasn't a game. Few subjects can be more serious than the destruction of rainforest and biodiversity, and this exhibition had to deliver something unforgettable for the International Year of Biodiversity (2010).

Lucy and Jorge found the rainforest arduous yet mesmerising; but the intensity of *their* experience was of little assistance to me. Kick-started, and with deadlines already imminent, I needed to conjure up a script, quickly, without having seen any footage or – for that matter – rainforest. Writing into that negative capability whilst generating a cogent message was as exhilarating as it was nerve-wracking. As guidance, Lucy had sent hundreds of quotes from all walks of thinking – a potpourri of relevant ecological fact and thought. I envisaged a poetic text dense with the mental weather of scientists, philosophers and writers: a kind of ecology of intertextuality, with all the references interdependent, interwoven into the entirety (some cyclically, as motifs). I managed to resolve various tensions in the remit by creating two voices: Gaia and 'Opinion-Fact'. These would offer, initially, texture and contrast, then merge as the piece progressed. I began to deploy poetic devices – rhyme, half-rhyme and subtle rhythmic suggestions of metre – in the more prosaic segments of the script (those focusing on fact and narrative), thereby codifying an ecological idea in the very structure and form of the piece. I even allowed the factual narrator, at one point, to argue with himself over the problems of catchphrasing.

Meanwhile, having only the broadest notion of what the visuals entailed, I had to keep the writing incredibly open, maximising David's scope for constellating the footage. It was crucial, then, for my script to generate unity and momentum, but for that drive and progression to accommodate a wide range of possible material. My approach was to allow the fracturedness of the script's many roots and shoots to mesh and evolve, like the rainforest itself, into something fiercely concrete and sensuous whilst reaching towards suggestiveness and beauty. Indeed, *Amazonia* – in its poetry and prose poetry – teems with a vast diversity of reference, from Gerard Manley Hopkins and TS Eliot ("I will show you fear in a handful of dust") to Blaise Pascal, Albert Einstein and the Dalai Lama. At times, composition felt like playing three-dimensional chess with text; but the subject matter kept grounding and simplifying me in organic clarities. Throughout, I had to believe that invention could transcend – even thrive on – the unavoidable task. With commissions, necessity becomes your (surrogate?) mother. And what greater necessity than the subject of this exhibition? If we can revere a literary manuscript solely for its antiquity, then ancient forests ought to occupy the heart of our artistry as well as our economics. Poetry can certainly learn from ecology. The way all her parts speak so powerfully to the whole makes Gaia, in a sense, the ultimate poem.

AMAZONIA. Natural History Museum, 6 Oct. – 12 Dec. 2010.

An exhibition by Lucy + Jorge Orta, with poetry by Mario Petrucci. Free entrance.
www.nhm.ac.uk/visit-us/whats-on/amazonia