

Coca, word-world: an exhibition to vindicate the sacred, political and cultural value of the coca plant

27 of October 2024



United Nations Headquarters, Delegates Entrance, New York.

November 11, 2024 - January 17, 2025

Open Society Foundations, 224 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019 Inauguration: Wednesday, November 13, 6 p.m.

New York, NY - October 27, 2024 - The Government of Colombia and Colectivo Liana present Coca, Palabra-Mundo, an exhibition co-sponsored by the Mission of Bolivia to the UN and supported by Open Society Foundations. The exhibition invites the international community to reflect on the benefits of the coca plant for indigenous and farming communities and to question the historical mistake made by the United Nations in 1961 in classifying it as a narcotic.

peasant communities in the Andean-Amazon region. However, this sacred plant has been stigmatized and criminalized internationally by being equated with cocaine. The 1961 Single Convention included the coca leaf in its list of narcotics, which led to decades of public policies focused on the persecution of both the plant and the communities that use it. This historical and colonial mistake has caused immense harm to millions of people, fragmented entire communities and caused irreversible environmental damage.

Coca, Word-World seeks to change the negative perception of coca, vindicating the right of indigenous peoples and peasants to use the plant. Beyond being a symbol of life, health and spirituality, coca represents a source of identity and knowledge for millions in South America. The exhibition invites reflection on the historical prejudices surrounding the coca plant and the urgent need to correct a mistake with profound consequences.

The exhibition presents the work of eight artists, most of whom were born or work in regions where coca cultivation is prevalent. Their works reflect ancestral and contemporary visions, shaped by personal histories and experiences of the indigenous communities to which they belong or with which they work closely. In these works, coca is recognized as a being with its own agency: a technology that facilitates communication, political organization, and community and territorial harmony.

In the exhibition, coca is expressed as the basis of diverse cosmologies. Through their dialogue with the plant, the artists invite us to reimagine its present and future, encouraging Western societies to rethink their perceptions of coca. Communities that use the coca leaf work tirelessly to free themselves from stigma, preserving its traditional uses while engaging in global conversations about new possibilities and futures for the plant.

Coca, Palabra-Mundo is curated by the Liana Collective, formed by Colombian artists and researchers Giselly Mejía (Támesis, 1990), Juan Pablo Caicedo Torres (Bogota, 1991) and Angélica Cuevas (Medellín, 1988). The exhibition includes works by Aimema Uai, Edinson Quiñones, Tatiana Arocha, Alejandra Delgado, Wilson Díaz, Andrés Domínguez, Miguel Ángel Rojas and the NOMASMETAFORAS collective (Julián Dupont, Clara Melniczuk).

This exhibition is part of COCAWORLDS, a two-year curatorial research initiative that brings together transdisciplinary artists, indigenous leaders and academics. Their shared mission is to reclaim coca as a plant of power, medicine and sustenance, countering the extractivist and punitive violence that has damaged its spirit, territory and the lives of indigenous and farming communities throughout Latin America.

Coca, Palabra-Mundo is a project of the Government of Colombia and Colectivo Liana, with co-sponsorship from the Permanent Mission of Bolivia to the UN and support from Open Society Foundations.

The exhibition will open on November 4 at the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, and then move to the Open Society Foundations headquarters in New York City, where it will be on display until January 15, 2024. A public schedule will be announced soon.

About the curators

Liana is a Brooklyn-based curatorial collective that explores plant-human interactions and the artistic practices derived from these connections. The collective facilitates public dialogues on the intelligence and wisdom of plants and advocates for their mystical, political, medicinal, and nutritional value based on the uses and meanings that diverse diasporic, indigenous, and peasant communities assign to them.

Producer: Laura Sánchez

Museographer: Diana Rodríguez

Miguel Ángel Rojas

Conceptual artist from Bogota whose work focuses on marginalization and drug trafficking. In his series Sueños Raspachines, he uses coca leaves to represent the basic rights that many peasant communities do not receive.

Work: Sueños Raspachines (2007): Coca plants on handmade paper.

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