

Protective Beings: The Superpowers of Nature. An Artistic Research Laboratory

Valerie von Stillfried

Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Stefanie Schien

Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Yorleny Cardozo Peña

Instituto Colombiano de Anthropología e Historia, Colombia

Abstract: This article describes a collaborative educational and artistic project developed by the Instituto Colombiano de Anthropología e Historia (ICANH) and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Protective stone figures from the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín, some of which are also in the collections in Berlin, were the starting point and inspiration for the resulting workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature'. This workshop promotes ecological awareness among children in Berlin and San Agustín Colombia. A central focus of this foundational artistic research is to develop methods to empower children not to feel powerless in the face of climate change and species extinction, but to build and strengthen their self-efficacy. Through the encounter with the stone guardians, the children are enabled to reflect on both the relationships between different species and their own position in the world. *[Colombia, San Agustín culture, collaboration, ecological diversity, education]*



Fig. 1 Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

Collaborating for Ecological and Cultural Awareness

'Protective Beings: The Superpowers of Nature' is a case study in participatory museum education and artistic research that has emerged from a collaboration between Colombian and German museum curators and artists. Yorleny Cardozo Peña and Valerie von Stillfried set up the project together to explore new formats of collaboration that respect cultural belongings and foster multi-perspective approaches to museum education amid ecological crises and negotiations over restitution. It asks how children can be encouraged to think about nature not in an overburdened or anxious role, but in a positive, self-confident and cooperative one. Through artistic research based on shared experiences, translocal encounters and site-specific knowledge, the project seeks to create a participatory space where ecological, historical and emotional connections can emerge. The workshop promotes awareness of biodiversity and provides a space where children can engage creatively with respect and care for other living beings. In this article, we share our experiences and reflections on the project – how its concept evolved, how it has developed in practice, and what effects we can already observe in its current phase. By doing so, we hope to contribute our perspective to the ongoing museological debates from within our own practice.

Project Context and Aims

Initiated in 2024, the collaboration has brought together Colombian artist and educator Yorleny Cardozo Peña and Berlin-based curator for education and outreach Valerie von Stillfried. Together, they have been developing a bookable artistic workshop for primary school classes, to be launched in Berlin and San Agustín from September 2025 onwards. The project is supported by Stefanie Schien, curator of the South American collections, and Margarita Reyes, coordinator of museology at the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia (ICANH). It is part of a long-term exchange in the fields of education and research within CoMuse, which stands for the Collaborative Museum at the Ethnologisches Museum und Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Ethnological Museum and Asian Art Museum) in Berlin.¹

The workshop introduces children to archaeological sculptures and ceremonial sites in the San Agustín mountains, while also fostering ecological literacy and emotional resilience. A central pedagogical concern is to counter narratives of human exception-

¹ We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the staff who contributed to the success of this project, including their comments, organizational efforts and logistic support. Special thanks go to Yannick Dreessen, Kai Patricia Engelhardt, Nadja Kabalan, Lars-Christian Koch, Ines Seibt, Anna Szöke, Ruti Ungar, the EM/CoMuse team, and Natalia Angarita, Alhena Caicedo, Fernando Montejo, Angel Galindez, Juan Pablo Ospina and Víctor Pizón, who worked at ICANH and the park.

alism by positioning all living beings – humans, animals and plants – as interconnected and interdependent. The workshop explicitly emphasizes the value of biodiversity and ecological balance, encouraging children to consider the functional roles of species in their habitats and to reflect on their own roles in protecting the natural world. Rather than presenting climate change and species extinction as overwhelming threats, the workshop invites children to reframe these issues through research, imagination and creativity. Through close observation, play and creation, participants learn to appreciate the ‘superpowers’ and complexity of nature and to recognize themselves as part of it: the creatures shape not only ecosystems, but also our cultural identity. The sculptures from San Agustín are no longer statues or museal objects, but stand for dialogue, empathy and deeper understanding.

The Statues of San Agustín

In the south of the province of Huila in the Colombian Massif Central, at an altitude of 1,730 metres above sea level, there are monumental tombs of the pre-Hispanic society known as the San Agustín culture, in front of which stand guardian figures made of volcanic stone. These impressive sculptures, which were created around two thousand years ago, bear animal features such as claws, teeth, or wings.

Some of these archaeological sculptures can be found today in the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. They came to the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde (today’s Ethnologisches Museum Berlin) through the agency of Konrad Theodor Preuss (1869–1938). Preuss began working at the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde in 1895 after finishing his PhD and successively filled various positions and functions. By 1908 he had become the curator of the North American collections. In the course of his career at the museum, he twice travelled to Latin America to do ethnological and archaeological research. From 1913 to 1919 Preuss was in Colombia commissioned by the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde. From the outset, he planned to explore the statues of San Agustín. He had known about them from the descriptions of various travellers such as Agustín Codazzi (1857), Johann Jacob von Tschudi and Alphons Stübel (Preuss 1920/21:91ff).²

In the three months he spent in San Agustín from December 1913 to February 1914, Preuss probed various sites in and around San Agustín itself. As part of this,

2 After his stay in San Agustín, Preuss also undertook ethnographic fieldwork and collected audio and text recordings of the Uitoto, Tama and Coreguaje on the north-west fringe of the Amazon basin and with the Kágaba of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast, as well as smaller archaeological digs near Bogotá (Preuss 1920/21:105 ff.). His original plans to return after one and a half years were interrupted by World War I. Unexpectedly halted, he spent the time in the small town of La Esperanza, preparing publications on his research (ibid. 128).

supported by his assistant Telésforo Gutiérrez and locals, he uncovered twelve statues, photographed 120 and made 39 papier mâché copies (Fischer 2019). As this constituted the first concerted digging and attempt at documentation, Preuss' work significantly contributed to the recognition of the importance of San Agustín's archaeological sites as an emblematic part of Colombia's historical patrimony. In 1935, an archaeological park was founded, which in 1995 was accepted as a UNESCO world heritage site (Reyes 2017:261f.). As a result, Preuss is still considered an influential person in Colombian archaeology (Reyes 2017:308). Preuss also assembled a collection meant for the Museum. Along with ceramics and stone artefacts, it also consisted of stone statues.³ Fifteen of these statues and their fragments have survived World War II and have since become a matter of public interest in San Agustín and later Colombia. Originally spurred by the initiative of the US American expatriate and long-term San Agustín resident David Dellenback (*ibid.*), an interest in the statues on the level of civil society in San Agustín and beyond has grown, and various stakeholders from around San Agustín have expressed a demand and desire for the return of the statues held in Berlin (cf. Fischer 2019; Clavijo et al. 2025). Apart from letters reclaiming the statues based on law 397 §11.3 of the Constitution from 1997, the Administrative Court of Cundinamarca ruled that the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and ICANH should take steps to facilitate the statues' restitution (Tribunal Administrativo de Cundinamarca, 14.09.2017). In the aftermath of the court decision, the ICANH invited the director of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Lars-Christian Koch, to Colombia. He visited San Agustín in December 2023. During his visit, and in the course of becoming acquainted with the park with its surroundings and meeting residents of San Agustín, he gave the impetus to deepening the collaboration between ICANH and the Ethnologisches Museum beyond the undergoing negotiations about restitution. In particular, he suggested collaboration in the field of museum education. He also met Yorlery Cardozo Peña and got to know her artwork in the park's museum. After returning, Lars-Christian Koch initiated the museum education project as part of CoMuse, the Collaborative Museum on which we reflect in this article. The idea was well received by ICANH, and steps were taken among the partners to facilitate the project by involving Yorlery Cardozo Peña and Valerie von Stillfried.

The CoMuse Fellowship

Yorlery Cardozo Peña grew up in the province of Huila, Colombia. She received her Master's degree in Fine Arts at the Universidad del Cauca in 2012 and in 2025 com-

³ See Fischer (2019:14) for a critical reflection on the context of appropriation and the public reaction to it in 1915.

pleted a second Master's degree in Cultural Management and Museology. She currently works as a mediator at ICANH and has been specifically involved in the redesign of the museum at the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín. In her work, she traces the collective memory of the communities around Pitalito, a town in Huila, capturing people, cultures and their relationships with plants and animals through drawings and paintings both in nature and while travelling.

For Yorlenny, the archaeological sites in the region of San Agustín are particularly close to her heart as vibrant research laboratories conveying artistic, archaeological and ecological knowledge:

The statues made of volcanic rock in the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín bear the animal features of fish, birds, reptiles and cats of prey that live in the mountains, humid forests, rivers and streams of the Colombian massif, representing not only the characteristics of nature, but also reflecting its strength, protection and power. The realization of the magnificence in living beings has stayed with me, and I have started to collect insects, seeds and leaves from the forest where the statues live. In my way of working, science and artistic associations go hand in hand. The workshop raises awareness of environmental protection, the preservation of cultural heritage and the importance of protecting forests as a complex ecosystem.⁴

Valerie von Stillfried has been working as a curator for education and mediation in the CoMuse project at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst since June 2022. She has worked as a freelance stage and costume designer for drama and musical theatre. In recent years, her focus has shifted towards creating participatory spaces and mediation formats in museum contexts.

Since April 2024, Valerie and Yorlenny have been in close contact via messenger, email and video calls, sharing insights into each other's working worlds, everyday lives and experiences. In November 2024, Valerie travelled to Colombia for nine days to experience the significance of the sculptures and tombs for those living in the region around San Agustín and the complex interplay of flora and fauna with the stone guardian figures at first hand. The visit to the Parque Alto de los Ídolos near Isnos, together with Angel Galindez, was particularly impressive, as was a night walk with Yorlenny through the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín to the Fuente Ceremonial, a riverbed made of carved stone that was used as a place for ceremonies. We (Yorlenny and Valerie) listened to the nocturnal sounds and let the park work its magic on us in its deserted silence and nocturnal sculptures.

During these days, we spent every minute exchanging ideas, conceptualizing and sharing experiences. It was particularly important for us to discuss these sculptures, their origins and their significance, but not to place them at the centre of the workshop for children of primary school age. It was more important for us to address the cur-

⁴ <https://comuse.org/en/fellowship/yorlenny-cardozo-pena>, accessed October 23, 2025.



Fig. 2 Workshop with Children in the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín,
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

rent challenges facing the children, like species extinction. COP16, the world's largest biodiversity summit, took place in Cali, Columbia, at the same time as the trip, which encouraged us to integrate the topic of biological diversity into the workshop.

Yorleny was very interested in focusing on the small creatures of nature, especially insects and the connection between humans and animals, 'ser humano, ser animal',⁵ initiated by Margarita Reyes, who had been working on this for some time. We researched animals and their special abilities, such as the special hearing of the male moth (night butterfly) and its incredible sensors that detect others of its kind over many kilometres or the special suction cup toes that geckos use to climb on ceilings or glass panes.

We planned the first components and prepared a workshop day with children from the local school, the Institución Educativa Yachaywasi runa Yanakuna. The children's reactions, questions and imaginative connections played a central role in refining our approach. We spent hours with the children in the archaeological park, where they im-

⁵ Margarita Reyes developed an unpublished concept paper for an exhibition on this topic.

provised scenes about superpowers, filmed animals and plants, and searched for leaves, bugs and seeds. Later they designed and collaged their own protective beings with the material they found, as well as with papery wings, paws, fangs and much more. Many children wrote down their wish for protection right next to their figures.

In February 2025, Yorlery travelled to Berlin for nearly six weeks as a CoMuse Fellow.⁶ During this time, we intensified our collaboration and developed the school workshop further. Yorlery worked on the artistic intervention ‘La Voz de la Montaña’ (The Voice of the Mountains) to integrate the San Agustín cosmos as a panorama into the exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum.

La Voz de la Montaña: Artistic Intervention in Berlin

Recognizing that children in Berlin cannot visit the park in San Agustín as their Colombian peers can, the idea emerged to bring the park into the museum in a sensory and immersive way. During her stay, Yorlery created and painted the approximately 2.5-metre wide and 1.3-metre high panorama ‘La Voz de la Montaña’ in the form of a multilayered theatre. She painted the wooden silhouettes with acrylic paints and created mountains, trees, plants, sculptures, animals, rivers and villages that form a harmonious whole and that are interweaved into a complex interplay. Yorlery passionately conveys a deep understanding of the power of the guardian figures in the context of their living, breathing landscape.

A sound installation complements the panorama, immersing visitors in the soundscape of the park, from the night-time chirping of crickets to the early-morning calls of the *guacharracas*,⁷ the daytime birdsong and the afternoon rainfall. Through light and sound, the installation invites viewers – especially children – to slow down, look closely and experience the forest as an animate presence.

On 19 March 2025, we ceremoniously opened the panorama ‘La Voz de la Montaña’ with an event called Gästezimmer⁸ (Guest Room) in the presence of the Ambassador of Colombia, H.E. Yadir SalazarMejía and the Director of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst Lars-Christian Koch. Despite the city-wide public transport strike, many visitors attended. Yorlery and Valerie introduced their project with the support of Julia von Siegsfeld, Restitution Coordinator, who translated their dialogue. From the Mechanical Arena in the foyer of the Humboldt Forum, the

⁶ Fellowship-Programm: Yorlery Cardozo Peña | Museum für Asiatische Kunst, accessed April 1, 2025.

⁷ The bird rufous-vented chachalaca (*Oreotaris ruficauda*) is called *guacharraca* in Colombia and is particularly famous and noticeable for its call.

⁸ Die Stimme der Berge / La voz de la montaña | Gespräch im Humboldt Forum, accessed April 2, 2025.



Fig. 3 'La voz de la Montaña' with the colombian artist Yorleny Cardozo Peña, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Foto: Pierre Adenis

event guided visitors to the second-floor exhibition space, where the panorama is now on permanent display.

During her fellowship, Yorleny took part in various aspects of the museums' educational program in Berlin. This included a guided tour in Spanish or a round table on accessibility and inclusion with Friedrun Portele-Anyangbe. Together with Sarah Klemisch and Roksolana Ludyn, we organized a workshop for Ukrainian women and children as part of the Erasmus+ project 'Come Together'. Yorleny also visited multiple exhibitions at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and immersed herself in Berlin's vibrant cultural scene.

The Laboratory of Superpowers

The workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature' is structured into three phases, designed to guide children through a process of discovery, reflection and artistic creation.

Part 1. Encountering San Agustín: Sculptures and Soundscapes

The first part introduces children to the San Agustín landscape through direct experience of the site (in Colombia) or via the immersive panorama of ‘La Voz de la Montaña’ (in Berlin). Children are encouraged to engage closely with the faces, forms and features of the stone guardians. They learn about the culture, its tombs and sculptures, and about the human, animal and vegetal forms embedded in the sculptures. Small stone replicas as hands-on objects, sound and light appeal to the children’s various senses. Through guided observation and dialogue, they begin to draw connections and situate the sculptures in a living environment.

Part 2. Exploring Natural Superpowers: Animal Skills and Ecological Roles

The second part of the workshop invites children to explore the extraordinary abilities of animals and their ecological functions. The workshop room is transformed into a small research lab. Digital microscopes, test tubes, real plants, seeds, skins, insects, stones and soil invite children to experiment. Observing the compound eye of a fly or the structure of a fern leaf at high magnification sparks curiosity and joy. Thirty different illustrated playing cards introduce species from Colombia and Germany, such as the Andean condor, peregrine falcon, ant, jaguar, dog and opossum, and it highlights their ‘superpowers’ – flight, strength, speed, teamwork, camouflage, hearing, or radar. Each card links an animal’s ability to its role in the ecosystem. These connections are crucial in showing that animals are not just symbols of strength, but active participants in our world.

Part 3. Creating one’s own Protective Being and Action

In the last phase of the workshop, children create their own three-dimensional protective beings. Using a printed craft sheet, they paint, fold and assemble a figure. The artistic process is supported by a collection of modular body parts: claws, wings, antennae, fangs and tails, that can be added and rearranged.

The children are invited to think about their possibilities in creating safe spaces for wildlife (gardens, feeders, bug hotels), in joining activities like tree planting and clean-ups, and learning how to reduce, reuse and recycle. Connecting with the superpowers of animals encourages children to speak up for nature and be active. The children take their colourfully designed figures home with them so that they can share their experiences with their families and thus deepen them.



Fig. 4 Material for the workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature', © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

Reflections on the Pilot Phase and Evaluation

The first trials of the workshop were conducted in San Agustín in November 2024 with pupils from the Institución Educativa Yachaywasi runa Yanakuna and in March 2025 in Berlin with Ukrainian children and their mothers. The children's enthusiasm, attentiveness and willingness to engage with the theme of interspecies protection provided us with valuable feedback. Many chose insects or animals that they had encountered themselves or that had particularly impressed them. Their figures often combined different natural elements, such as a protective being with bat ears, the paws of a jaguar, or the wings of a colibri. They responded positively to the work with microscopes and a focus on details. These observations contributed to the refinement of the educational material and confirmed the need to adapt the format to different learning spaces. In the Berlin context, special efforts were made to translate the visual and sensory richness of the Colombian forest into an accessible indoor format. A suitable location within the exhibition was found in a staircase foyer between the exhibition floors, which offered a quiet and concentrated space for the installation.

We are currently working intensively on the realization and implementation of the workshop in the educational programme of the respective museums. Texts are being translated into German, Spanish and Quechua, print data are being created, and animal specimens and plant materials are being organized and brought to the museum's disinfestation chamber so that we can start with the school classes in Berlin and Colombia by the autumn of 2025 at the latest.

Evaluation is ongoing and remains qualitative, relying on feedback from teachers, mediators and the children themselves. Nevertheless, early findings suggest the workshop has succeeded in opening emotional and cognitive pathways for children to explore ecological complexities, vulnerability and their own creativity and strength. Although the educational project does not focus directly on the restitution of the San Agustín sculptures, it is shaped by the ethical and political landscape of these debates. The museum's collections are not neutral holdings but carry with them relational knowledge and histories of acquisition and translocation as well as identity. In this context, education becomes more than outreach – it becomes a form of responsibility.

Institutional Exchange and Future Visions

As Yorlenny travelled to Berlin, Stefanie Schien undertook a visit to San Agustín. The purpose of coming to Colombia had been to explore the interests in and to expand the collaboration with ICANH by focusing on other fields of cooperation such as research, as well as to introduce herself as the new curator of the South America collections to various stakeholders in San Agustín. Within the week of her stay, she had the opportunity to visit various sites in the park and to talk to many individuals. As part of this, ICANH had organized a meeting with a school class in the community of Isnos and a discussion with the park's neighbours, that is, the families and individuals who own the land bordering the park area. Furthermore, she met up with members of the Veeduría de la Repatriación, a civil-society group that supports the return of the statues from Berlin, and participated at an event in the *maloca*, the communal house of the Yanakuna community. During all these meetings, members of various political, cultural and ecological organizations and associations of the municipalities of San Agustín and Isnos participated, sharing their opinions and emotions about the meaning of the statues in San Agustín and in Berlin, the latter's current absence and hopes for their return in the foreseeable future.

After Stefanie returned from Colombia, the three of us were able to meet for the first time in Berlin. Together, we reflected on the results and discussed future projects and close collaboration. We would like to develop further the artistic and ethical themes of the stone guardians and expand the focus to include young adults and issues of accessibility, hybrid cultures and global inequality. By involving young people in collaborative formats that deal with cultural heritage, environmental (in)justice and mu-

tual learning, our joint work contributes to the understanding of a younger generation. It confirms the museum as a place not only of exhibition, but also of negotiation and future-oriented dialogue. We believe that the collaboration has fostered a strong bond that has led to respect and understanding, as well as genuine friendship. Additionally, the relationship between our institutions (ICANH and the Ethnologisches Museum) has also deepened and strengthened. It was essential for us to create connections rooted in our shared history. We hope that we can reach many children and families with this work. The collaboration has left a lasting impression and will influence how we design future educational projects.

References

- Clavijo, Jaime, Sayari Campo y Rocío Salas. 2025: Ancestros en Cuerpos de Piedra, Sustento del Porvenir. Reflexiones en Torno a la Relación de la Comunidad Yanakuna con la Gente Piedra de San Agustín (Huila). *Maguaré* 39(1):169–202.
- Fischer, Manuela. 2019: Die Skulpturen von San Agustín (Kolumbien) im Ethnologischen Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Eine strittige Sammlung. *Baessler Archiv* 65:1–21.
- ICANH. 2025., <https://www.icanh.gov.co/index.php?idcategoria=11871#:~:text=El%20Icanh%2C%20autoridad%20nacional%20en.de%20Tierradentro%20en%20el%20Cauca>, accessed March 28, 2025.
- Preuss, Konrad Theodor 1920/21: Bericht über Meine Archäologischen und Ethnologischen Forschungsreisen in Kolumbien: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 2(3):89–128.
- Reyes, Gavilán, Lisette Aura 2017: *Ensamble de Una Colección. Trayectos de Konrad Theodor Preuss durante su expedición en Colombia (1913–1919)*. Dissertationsschrift, Berlin: Freie Universität.
- Tribunal Administrativo De Cundinamarca. 2017. Setencias, Ref. 250002341000201600892-00, <https://www.ramajudicial.gov.co/web/secretaria-tribunal-administrativo-de-cundinamarca-seccion-primer/notificaciones/Setencias/2017>, accessed September 2, 2024.