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ARBOREAL ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

The apocalyptic storms that carved a trail of destruction through the fields, towns, and forests of Central Europe in summer 2023 coincided with the hottest temperatures in the northern hemisphere in the last two thousand years. Swathes of brutally downed trees were visual evidence of the extremity of the weather event, while the natural archive of tree rings revealing yearly growth cycles going back millennia provided scientific proof of this dread-inducing climate record.[1] As the more-than-human temporality of the arboreal world collides with the accelerating velocity of anthropogenic climate breakdown, trees and the panoply of artist-led actions in their defence find themselves at the epicentre of an intensifying struggle for planetary survivance. This essay considers artistic engagements with trees in this moment of ecological crisis, exposing the dramatic impacts of global warming on forests, and channelling feelings of ecological grief into acts of solidarity with sylvan beings. Countering extractivist attitudes toward trees that are manifest not just in the clearcutting of ancient woodlands, but equally in their reduction to a manageable timber resource by industrial forestry, such practices also cast doubt on reforestation as a climate panacea. At issue is how the entangled histories of ideological projection onto trees are overtaken today by the urgencies of climate breakdown. The artists discussed here explore the more-than-human agency of trees and the emergence of an ecocentric arboreal politics.



Uta Kögelsberger, *Clearance*, 2024.

1 Jan Esper, Max Torbenson, and Ulf Büntgen, "2023 Summer Warmth Unparalleled over the Past 2,000 Years", *Nature*, no. 631, 2024, pp. 94–97.

The impact of supercharged storms on the mountain forests of Austria, and specifically the magnitude of the clean-up operation in its wake, are the subject of London-based artist Uta Kögelsberger's three-channel video installation *Clearance* (2024). By focusing on the complex operation to remove fallen tree trunks wedged in a mountain gorge near Fügen in the Tirol, the artist communicates the scale of a transregional disaster that damaged more than three million cubic metres of wood in an area stretching from the Swiss Alps via Austria to Slovenia and Croatia. The work visualizes one of the perilous knock-on effects of climate change on trees in the form of supercharged storms. It also opens up a wider set of questions, including around the sustainability of the model of commercial forestry practiced in a region in which only a fraction of woods are true wildernesses and the danger of a feedback loop in which the destruction of forests by storms reduces their ability to act as carbon sinks. The level of human intervention required to clear a single microsite, including in this case the use of a helicopter and metal cables, is also a metaphor for the scale of the response required by climate breakdown and the limits of purely technological solutions.

The felling of industrial woodlands composed of one hundred-year old spruce trees, although they too provide vital natural habitats, generally does not elicit the same level of emotional response as the loss of ancient forests. Kögelsberger has also addressed the ecological grief caused by the destruction of fourteen percent of the global population of giant sequoia during the Californian wildfires of 2020. Her short film *Cull* (2020) documents fire-burned sequoias crashing to the ground, each with an earth-shattering thud. Three thousand years of continuous arboreal existence are brought to a sudden end to protect buildings and roads from the danger of falling trees. The extent of the damage reflects the growing intensity of forest fires, which as satellite photographs reveal, have more than doubled in frequency and intensity over the past two decades.[2]

Kögelsberger's series of works *Fire Complex* (2020–), of which the film *Cull* was one element, brought to the fore issues around the role of contemporary artists in not just documenting and reflecting on the destruction and the aftermath, but also becoming directly engaged in remedial efforts. Billboards were conceived and created by the artist as a spur to public action such as replanting campaigns and the exertion of political pressure that eventually resulted in the passing of a law in 2023 to protect the "gentle giants" of the Sierra Nevada. Clouding the horizon of such efforts is the fact that the law will not protect the giant sequoia from the transformation of its habitat by global warming nor is there any guarantee that thousands of newly-planted saplings will have the chance to grow to maturity in a rapidly heating world.

2 Damian Carrington, "Climate Crisis Driving Exponential Rise in Most Extreme Wildfires", *The Guardian*, June 24, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/24/climate-crisis-driving-exponential-rise-in-most-extreme-wildfires (accessed March 3, 2025).

The planetary crisis of climate breakdown is transforming artistic engagement with trees, which, despite their natural longevity, are endangered by the ravages of deforestation, reduced to an expendable resource by illegal cutting and industrial forestry, uprooted from dried out soil by violent storms, and consumed by unstoppable megafires. At issue here is the commitment of artists to take a stand in defence of trees and the means they have found to amplify the transnational struggle to protect forest worlds. What happens when trees can no longer be relied on to play the role of steady metaphors in anthropocentric politics, as the biological precarity of ancient trees cancels out their cultural status as identitarian allegories? And is it right to rely on the biological role of trees to decarbonize the atmosphere and solve the climate crisis, both scientifically and ethically, in that doing so could be interpreted as a continuation of the instrumentalization of arboreal beings in the Anthropocene? How does the defence of trees come together with an empathetic understanding of biocultural interconnectedness in ecocentric art practices?



Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan, *No Shelter from the Storm*, 2015, video still.

Vienna-based artists Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan's black-and-white film *No Shelter from the Storm* (2015) depicts two lonely figures traversing a mountainous terrain of scarred woodland while whistling the mournful melody of the popular American anti-war song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" The particular poignancy of the tune in this context emerged from the fact that the lyrics originated in

a pre-war Ukrainian Cossack folk song and the footage was shot on the borderlands between Romania and Ukraine at a time when armed conflict had returned to the country following the Russian invasion of Crimea. Through the sound of distant chainsaws, the work directs attention to the current wave of extreme deforestation in these Carpathian woodlands, where a timber mafia allegedly funnels illegally cut trees from old wood forests into the supply chain of a global furniture company.[3] In the film, the poetic melody reverberating across ravaged hillsides crystallizes the insight that, while in the past forests provided refuge in times of need, today they only stand as reminders, as the artists put it, of the "human condition of our age". Recalling ancient laws according to which the uprooting of trees was "a declaration of total war without a chance for reconciliation", philosopher and plant theorist Michael Marder emphasizes the function of trees in providing shelter in times of need, and points to the severity of uprooting communities "prevented from seeking meaning and refuge (even) in the vegetal world".[4] As the film underlines, the extractivist assault on forests is transforming landscapes, ecosystems, and communities, leaving no place to shelter from the planetary peril of climate change.

The accelerating devastation of arboreal worlds goes hand in hand with demands on trees to mitigate or reverse climate breakdown by exchanging carbon dioxide for oxygen. However, as Latvian artists Rasa Smite and Raitis Smits point out in *Atmospheric Forest* (2020), the panacea of reforestation is complicated by the fact that trees are not machines, but breathing organisms that also emit carbon dioxide.[5] More carbon is released back into the atmosphere when trees die because of lack of water, forest fires, or accelerating biological processes. Meanwhile, prolonged drought hinders growth thus reducing the ability of trees to store carbon, which underpins the journal *Nature*'s announcement on its cover in March 2020 that "the ability of tropical forests to sequester CO2 is in decline".[6] Smite and Smits's multimedia installation visualized and sonified findings about the relationship between forest and climate based on the research they conducted in Pfynwald, an ancient Swiss Alpine forest, where they analysed the effects of drought on weather conditions in the valley. The artists revealed the connection between environmental factors and arboreal physiology by visualizing the data collected during a single growing season by scientists from observations of pine trees in both irrigated and dry areas of Pfynwald. Specifically, evidence about the interaction between climatic conditions and the emission of volatile organic compounds by pine trees suggested that stressful situations, such as extended dry spells, influence the production of resin, and trigger the release of volatile organic compounds responsible for the characteristic scent of the forest. The intensity of forest fragrance reflects arboreal climate anxiety in the face of rising global temperatures, while at the same time distressed forests make for unwilling absorbers of our carbon debt.

Vienna-based artist Christian Kosmas Meyer investigates the history of the instrumentalization of trees as metaphorical projections and the counter-history suggested by their actual biological lives in *The Life Story of Cornelius Johnson's Olympic Oak and Other Matters of Survival* (2017–). The work, first realized for the exhibition *Natural Histories: Traces of the Political* at mumok in Vienna, has taken on new elements as the entangled history of the tree at its centre continues to unfold.



Christian Kosmas Meyer, *The Life Story of Cornelius Johnson's Olympic Oak and Other Matters of Survival*, 2017–.

3 See for example, Maia Bondici, "How Illegal Logging is Threatening Romania's Unique Virgin Forests", *Euronews*, May 31, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/31/how-illegal-logging-is-threatening-romania-s-unique-virgin-forests (accessed March 3, 2025).

4 Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2016, p. 119.

5 See "Atmospheric Forest" on the artists' website, https://smitesmits.com/AtmosphericForest.html (accessed March 31, 2025).

6 "Saturation Point: The Ability of Tropical Forests to Sequester CO2 is in Decline", *Nature*, vol. 579, no. 7797, March 5, 2020, front cover.

The starting point for this complex project was the artist's decision to search for an oak tree which had been given as a seedling to African-American high-jumper Cornelius Johnson with his gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Meyer's installation in Vienna incorporated a drone video of the tree, which he managed to track down to the courtyard of a house in the Koreatown suburb of Los Angeles, a series of objects as prompts to narrate the bittersweet life story of the athlete, and new saplings cloned from the original tree, kept alive but prevented from growing in a state of biochemical suspension. As viewers discover, Johnson's sapling survived the journey back across the Atlantic and was planted in his parent's yard, where some eight decades later it was in the care of Mexican immigrants who were unaware of the tree's extraordinary history until the artist's arrival. Johnson had received a tree, but not a congratulatory handshake from Adolf Hitler, who had left the stadium to avoid the encounter. Upon his return to the US, Johnson did not meet President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who did not invite him and other Afro-American athletes to a reception at the White House for participants in the Olympic Games. Meyer's installation highlights the Olympic record breaker's experience of racism and discrimination in pre-civil rights era America, until his death of pneumonia in the merchant navy at the age of thirty-two.

For the artist, the fact that the oak, onto which the Nazis had projected their ideology of racial purity and national hegemony, ended up growing to maturity in the midst of the multicultural melting pot of Los Angeles, symbolized the "victory of a reality that is diametrically opposed to everything the Nazis dreamed of".[7] The glorification of the Aryan oak itself belonged to the wider history of the projection of political agendas onto botanical realms, with an accompanying tendency to vilify migrating plants as non-native or invasive and subject them to public campaigns of eradication. The myth of native purity has been corroded not just by the success of multiculturalism, but also by climate disruption, bringing in its wake the unstoppable resettlement of species across the planet as plants adapt to the new climate conditions. The return of the in-vitro oak seedlings to Europe pointed to human-tree stories of interwoven destinies as yet unwritten, but in keeping with the climate and political uncertainties of the age, left open the question of what kind of future awaits us.

In what is more than a postscript, a further twist in the story of Johnson's Olympic oak saw Meyer return to Los Angeles five years later to organize the defence of the tree from redevelopment plans. Upon learning that the original Johnson house had been sold to developers to build luxury flats, the artist succeeded in putting together a coalition of local organizations to campaign for its

7 See the account on the artist's tumblr page, https://christiankosmas-mayer.tumblr.com/post/166784304810/the-life-story-of-cornelius-johnsons-olympic-oak (accessed March 3, 2025).

protection. The coalition included the community sports group founded in 1984, when LA hosted the Olympics, and the California African American Museum. The coalition's successful application to city government rested on the argument that the oak was a "living monument" to Johnson's Olympic victory and "a remembrance of a time when Black athletes from the US symbolized victory over the racist Aryan supremacist credo of the Nazi government that sponsored the 1936 games".[8] Official recognition that Johnson's oak, despite its ideological origins, had become a de facto monument to anti-racism and multiculturalism, is confirmation of the acuity of the artist's original insight. The ecological realities of terrestrial processes transformed by human actions overshadow these empowering histories, in that the tree itself, which should be at the height of its natural vitality, is suffering. With its roots buried under concrete and atmospheric conditions in its adopted habitat becoming less tolerable as a result of climate breakdown, the prospects for arboreal flourishing hang in the balance.

For his contribution to the Venice Biennial of 2024, Slovak artist Oto Hudec was motivated by the urgent need to protect trees and forests from the devastation brought by economic development and climate disruption. His *Floating Arboretum* memorializes collective acts of tree defence in a series of wall paintings on the exterior of the shared Czech and Slovak Pavilion in the Giardini as pivotal episodes in the grassroots history of ecological solidarity with arboreal beings. At the same time, the artist invites viewers to contribute their stories of tree protection through an online platform.[9] Hudec's monochrome portraits of individual trees on floating pedestals are linked to songs celebrating episodes of transnational environmental struggle from the protests against the logging of the primaeval Białowieża Forest in Poland to an Indigenous campaign to secure refugee status for an endangered Jatoba tree in Brazil. The artist depicts a small circle of human figures in the lower part of his painting of a magnificent ash tree that thrives in the dense forests of Garhwal Himalayas and has grown to a remarkable forty metres. The figures represent the women villagers of the Chipko Movement who in 1973 linked arms around the trunks of trees that were due to be cut down to make tennis rackets until the loggers finally gave up and went away. As part of the project, Hudec also put forward a utopian proposal to establish a floating tree sanctuary as a gesture of interspecies solidarity with arboreal beings that are caught in the pincer of extractivism and shifting climatic zones. The acknowledged utopianism of the proposal demonstrates the impossibility of localized solutions at a time of climate breakdown, while the project as a whole seeks to draw lessons and inspire action by encouraging reflection on the instances when people act in harmony with nature.

8 Quoted in Tim Arango, "In Los Angeles, A Tree with Stories to Tell", *New York Times*, May 28, 2022.

9 See the website of *Floating Arboretum*, https://floatingarboretum.sng.sk/ (accessed March 3, 2025).

The Hong Kong-based artist Bo Zheng makes the practice of daily immersion in the world of plants political. His series *Drawing Life* 寫生 (2020–21) consists of 366 pencil drawings of plants made on his daily walks in nature which the artist began to take on the island of Lantau during the Covid pandemic. Inverting the academic practice of "life drawing", in which people are depicted, the artist moved away from anthropocentric concerns to focus on the multiplicity of botanical life, regardless of the value judgements attached to specific species (for example, whether they are considered to be weeds or invasive plants). After travelling to Berlin for a residency at the Gropius Bau in August 2020, Zheng began to draw trees for the first time when his attention was caught by the canopy of the trees that grew up from between the cobblestones of the art institution's carpark which he saw each day from his studio window. Countering the invisibility and neglect of this community of a hundred or so plane trees, a species typically planted along city roads due to their supposed tolerance of polluted urban conditions, he declared that this arboreal collective would henceforth be known as the Gropius Wood. He invited his fellow humans to join him in the wood every afternoon for *Ecosensibility Exercises* to reconnect with trees as planetary beings.

A related work entitled *Wanwu Council* 萬物社 (2021), also created by Zheng during the Gropius Bau residency, suggests that the ecological crisis of the era of climate breakdown demands a different and more ecocentric form of politics. The term "wanwu" comes from Daoist philosophy and means "myriad happenings" or "ten thousand things", thus pointing the way toward a more expansive understanding of political representation that would encompass all forms of existence in the universe. The artist invited twelve scientists, activists, artists, and gardeners to come together to channel the voices of light, plane trees, water, bees, foxes, weeds, seasons, soil, histories, communities, spirits, and microbes. The result of the three days of interspecies convening was a manifesto that called on Gropius Bau to become *wanwu* and embrace a more-than-human future, one in which, in the artist's words, plants will no longer be treated as "dumb beings" but their intelligence would be respected and their voices heard. Rather than relying on human action alone to protect trees and the wider natural world from the impacts of climate breakdown, the way forward is to work with other species, and respect plants "not only as social beings but also as political beings".[10]

For his recent commission at Somerset House in London, Zheng transformed the neo-classical courtyard of the mansion into a bamboo garden. Entitled *Bamboo as Method* (2024), this public intervention entailed planting ten locally-sourced species of bamboo in a meandering pattern to create intimate spaces amongst the plants. Visitors were encouraged to put away their phones and sit down in the unlikely bamboo forest with sketching paper and pencils, and engage in "drawing life" exercises. The goal was not

10 Zheng Bo, *Wanwu I*, Walther und Franz König, Cologne, 2023, p. 32.

that visitors would create an artistic representation but that they would be immersed in the otherness of the vegetal world. This ethos was emphasized by instructions to place the completed drawings in a recycling box to be composted and used to fertilize the garden, completing the circle from creativity to cultivation. The "bamboo method" of relearning a physical practice based on attentiveness and concentration is a strategy to return intimacy to the alienated relations of humans and nature in the Anthropocene. It resonates with the therapeutic approach to forest bathing or Shinrin-yoku. This approach was developed in Japan in the 1980s as an antidote to the health impacts of "technostress" on urban workers, and responded to medical studies indicating the benefits of "taking in the forest through the senses" for physical and mental well-being.[11] Forest bathing may offer temporary respite from the anxiety triggered by climate breakdown, but the escalating planetary impacts are impossible to entirely hide or avoid even in the world's primaeval forests. As Zheng's practice clarifies, at a time of climate crisis, the act of spending time with plants is something beyond relaxation or therapy but rather the opening of a way toward practical solidarity with more-than-human worlds and acts of ecological resistance.

Artistic engagement with trees at this critical juncture in the Earth's climate history reveals much about the magnitude of the crisis and the challenge of mobilizing an effective response to our collective ecological predicament. The health of the living, breathing forests, as integral parts of the interconnected world system of self-sustaining natural processes, is a sensitive measure of overall levels of planetary well-being. Bearing witness to the ongoing destruction of woodlands through the direct and indirect impacts of industrial modernity induces climate anxiety. The artists discussed in this chapter are seeking ways to channel ecological grief into acts of solidarity with endangered trees. They are also illuminating the challenges of attempts to protect trees that are already caught up in the feedback loops of aggravating climate chaos. The arboreal focus in ecocentric art invites us to look beyond the utility of woods as a resource or even a carbon sink, and adopt an attitude of care and respect for the elders of the world.

11 See for example, Qing Li, "Effects of Forest Environment (Shinrin-yoku / Forest Bathing) on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention", *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine*, vol. 27, no. 43, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1265/ehpm.22-00160 (accessed March 31, 2025).





Photographs by Borut Peterlin.