Arboreal activism in the age of climate breakdown

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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 for 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 provided scientific proof of this dread-inducing climate record. As the beyond-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.

The impact of the storm on the mountain forests of Austria, and specifically the magnitude of the clear-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 Tyrol, 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 visualises one of the perilous knock-on effects of climate change on trees, in the form of super-charged storms. It also opens up a wider set of questions, including around the sustainability of the model of industrial forestry practiced in a region in which only a fraction of woods are true wildernesses and the danger of the 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 micro-site, involving 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 made up of one-hundred-year-old spruce trees, although they too provide vital natural habitats, 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 14% of the global population of giant sequoia during the Californian wildfires of 2020. Her short film *Cull* (2020) documents the crashing to the ground of fire-burned sequoias, each with an earth-shattering thud, as up to three thousand years of continuous arboreal existence are brought to a sudden end to protect human infrastructures. 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.

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Kögelsberger's series of works *Fire Complex* (2020–2022), of which the film 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 as a spur to public action, through replanting campaigns and the exertion of political pressure, resulting 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, and neither is there any guarantee that the thousands of saplings planted will have the chance to grow to maturity in a rapidly heating world.

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The planetary crisis of climate breakdown is transforming artistic engagement with trees, which notwithstanding 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 decarbonise the atmosphere and solve the climate crisis, both scientifically and ethically, in that to do so could be seen as a continuation of the instrumentalisation 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?

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 derived from the fact that the lyrics originated in a pre-war Ukrainian Cossack folksong and the footage was shot on the borderlands between Romania and Ukraine at a time when armed conflict had returned to the country

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following the Russian invasion of Crimea. Through the sound of distant chainsaws, the work directed attention to the current wave of extreme deforestation in these Carpathian woodlands, where allegedly a timber mafia funnels illegally cut trees from old wood forests into the supply chain of a global furniture company. In the film, the poetic melody reverberating across ravaged hillsides crystallises 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", plant theorist Michael Marder has emphasised the function of trees in providing shelter in times of need and pointed to the severity of uprooting communities who are "prevented from seeking meaning and refuge (even) in the vegetal world." 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. More carbon is released back into the atmosphere when trees die through drought, forest fires or accelerating biological processes, which underpins the journal Nature's announcement on its cover in March 2020 that "the ability of tropical forests to sequester CO_2 is in decline." Smite and Smits's multimedia installation visualised 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. By visualising the data collected from observations of pine trees during the growing season, the artists revealed the connection between environmental factors and arboreal physiology. Evidence about the interaction between climatic conditions and pinetree emissions suggested specifically that stressful situations, such as extended dry spells, influence the production of resin and trigger the release of volatile organic compounds that are 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 distressed forests make for unwilling absorbers of our carbon debt.

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

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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 alongside 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 bitter-sweet 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, Cornelius's sapling survived the journey back across the Atlantic and was planted in his parents' yard, where some eight decades later it was in the care of Mexican immigrants, who until the artist's arrival were unaware of the tree's extraordinary history. Johnson had received a tree but not a congratulatory handshake from Adolf Hitler, who left the stadium to avoid the encounter, and on returning to the United States had also missed out meeting 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, ending with his death of pneumonia in the merchant navy at the age of thirty-two.

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 symbolised for the artist the "victory of a reality that is diametrically opposed to everything the Nazis dreamed of." 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. The return of the in-vitro 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 organise 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 organisations, including a community sports group founded in 1984 when

LA hosted the Olympics and the California African American Museum, to campaign for its protection. Their successful application to City Hall rested on the argument that the oak was a "living monument" to Mr. Johnson's Olympic victory and "a remembrance of a time when Black athletes from the U.S. symbolized victory over the racist Aryan supremacist credo of the Nazi government that sponsored the 1936 games." Official recognition that Johnson's oak, despite its ideological origins, had become a de-facto monument to anti-racism and multiculturalism is further 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.

In his work for the Slovak participation at the Venice Bienniale 2024, Oto Hudec was motivated by the urgency to protect trees and forests from the devastation brought by economic development and climate disruption. His *Floating Arboretum* memorialises collective acts of tree defence in a series of interactive 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. His 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 primeval Białowieża Forest in Poland to an indigenous campaign to secure refugee status for an endangered Jatobá tree in Brazil. At the foot of his painting of a magnificent Himalayan ash, which thrives in the dense forests of East Asia and grows to 40 metres in height, is a small circle of human figures. They 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 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 towards arboreal beings caught in the pincer of extractivism and shifting climatic zones. The acknowledged utopianism of the proposal demonstrates the impossibility of localised solutions at a time of climate breakdown, while the project as a whole seeks to draw lessons and inspire action by encouraging reflection on those moments when people act in harmony with nature.

A practice of daily immersion in the world of plants turns political in the work of Hong Kong-based artist Zheng Bo. His series *Drawing Life* (2020–2021) consists of 366 pencil drawings of plants made on daily walks into nature, which the artist began on the island of Lantau during the COVID-19 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, irrespective of the value judgements attached to individual species, such as whether they are considered to be weeds or invasive plants. After travelling to Berlin for a residency at the Gropius Bau in August 2020,

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Bo began for the first time to draw trees after his attention was caught by a canopy of trees that were visible from his studio window, growing up between the cobblestones of the art institution's car park. Countering the invisibility and neglect of this community of 100 plane trees, which are typically planted along city roads due to their supposed tolerance of polluted urban conditions, he declared this arboreal collective to be the Gropius Wood. He also invited fellow humans to join him in the wood every afternoon for *Ecosensibility Exercises* to reconnect with trees as planetary beings.

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One of the implications of another related work realised during Bo's Gropius Bau residency is that the ecological crisis of the era of climate breakdown demands a different, more ecocentric form of politics. *Wanwu Council* (2021) borrows the term *wanwu* from Daoist philosophy, in which it means "myriad happenings" or "ten thousand things", pointing to an expansive understanding of political representation that encompasses all forms of existence in the universe. In practice, 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 three days of interspecies convening was a manifesto calling 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", 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 consists in working with other species and in respecting plants "not only as social beings but also as political beings".

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For his recent commission at Somerset House in London, the artist chose to turn the neo-classical courtyard 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 amidst this unlikely bamboo forest, with sketching paper and pencils provided for "drawing life" exercises. That the point was not to create an artistic representation but to immerse oneself in the otherness of the vegetal world was underlined by the instruction to place the completed depictions in a recycling box to be composted and used to fertilise the garden, completing the circle from creativity to cultivation. The "bamboo method" of relearning a physical practice based on attentiveness and concentration could be seen as 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*, developed in Japan since the 1980s as an antidote to the health impacts of "technostress" on urban workers, with medical studies pointing to the benefits for physical and mental well-being of "taking in the forest through the senses". Forest bathing may also offer temporary respite from the anxiety triggered by climate breakdown although, even in the primeval forest, its escalating planetary impacts are ultimately impossible to hide or avoid. As Bo's practice clarifies, at a time of climate crisis, the act of spending

time with plants points beyond relaxation or therapy to open up a path to practical solidarity with more-than-human worlds and acts of ecological resistance.

Artistic engagements with trees at this critical juncture in the Earth's climate history reveal much about the magnitude of the crisis and the challenge in mobilising 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, and artists have sought to channel ecological grief into acts of solidarity with endangered trees. They have also illuminated 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 to adopt an attitude of care and respect for the elders of the world.