FOREST ENCOUNTERS

Edited by
Urška Jurman and Mateja Kurir

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LEARNING OTHERWISE WITH THE FOREST
Introduction

Mateja Kurir
and
Urška Jurman

The *Forest Encounters* book invites you into the forest and its many meanings. It brings together voices from different disciplines, geographies, and cultures. Artists, foresters, art historians, philosophers, anthropologists, wildlife researchers, landscape architects, and writers all participate in this collective reflection on the diverse meanings, challenges, and perspectives related to the forest.

Forests cover approximately forty percent of Europe's land mass[1] and are among the most essential ecosystems for life on Earth. They are crucial for biodiversity, climate stability, and the overall health of our planet. As recent studies on planetary boundaries show, climate-resilient forest landscapes are central to the fight against ecological collapse.[2] Yet forests are also places of symbolic meaning, memory, and identity – cultural landscapes shaped by human imagination and intervention as much as by natural processes.

The goal of the *Forest Encounters* European cooperation project (2023–2025), of which this book is the final publication, was to examine the forest and the human relationship to it through art, science, and the humanities. The project approached the forest as a site of interconnection and also as a space of conflict where environmental concerns confront diverse political, social, and economic pressures. By acknowledging both the human and more-than-human perspectives, the project explored how forests are crucial for the mitigation of the climate crisis and the preservation of biodiversity, and how they function both as sources of livelihood and cultural heritage but also as places of regeneration, healing, and reflection – something made especially apparent during the recent pandemic. The forest is also important as a value in and of itself, and yet forest ecosystems are increasingly threatened by the effects of climate change, urban expansion, and profit-driven deforestation.

The *Forest Encounters* project is rooted in the recognition of both the rights of humans to nature and the rights of nature. Through artistic research projects, storytelling, workshops, lectures and discussions, publications, and exhibitions, the project and this book contribute to imagining and shaping a future of and for the forest that is more inclusive, based on interdisciplinary collaboration, and rooted in nature-based solutions. We ask the following questions: What can we learn with and through the forest? How can we face the challenges of forest management in the era of climate and biodiversity crises? What do stories of forest disasters reveal about contemporary

1 European Environment Agency, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/forests-and-forestry (accessed September 10, 2025).

2 Friedrich J. Bohn et al., "Reviews and Syntheses: Current Perspectives on Biosphere Research 2024–2025 – Eight Findings from Ecology, Sociology, and Economics", *Biogeosciences*, vol. 22, no. 10, May 2025, pp. 2425–2460, https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-22-2425-2025 (accessed September 10, 2025).

society? How has artistic engagement with forests evolved? What kind of forest do we wish for and what kind of forest do we need for the future? What do we need to make that happen?

A wide range of contributors respond to these questions from their unique standpoints. In the essay "The Forest in an (Un)certain Future", social and cultural anthropologist **Agata A. Konczal** reflects on how contemporary societies relate to forests. Drawing from field research on forest disturbances in Central and Eastern Europe, including windstorms, bark beetle outbreaks, and the social narratives they generate, she considers how people navigate both wanted and unwanted changes in relation to forests and how this is connected to our search for an (un)certain future.

In the interview with **T. J. Demos** "The Forest Continues to be Colonized Today", the art historian and theorist discusses the critical role of contemporary art in responding to the environmental crisis. He reflects on a wide range of artistic practices that address ecological collapse, extractivism, and climate injustice. He also emphasizes the importance of a decolonial approach, resistance, repair, and systemic change, and the impact both art and activism can have in these much-needed endeavours.

In the interview "The Forest: Not Only a Source of Raw Materials, but an Ecosystem", forester and then director of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation **Teo Hrvoje Oršanič** emphasizes the importance of the environmental and ecological value of forests. Based on the case of Slovenia, where close-to-nature forest management enjoys a more than century long tradition, he advocates for an approach that prioritizes ecological sustainability over economic exploitation.

Landscape architect and professor **Ana Kučan**, in her essay "The Forest as Cultural Landscape: Silent Potentiality", discusses the forest as a complex element of the cultural landscape. Through a spatial and semiotic lens, she explores how forests shape Western cultural identity and perception, and, to support this perspective, includes examples from literature, art, and landscape design.

In the essay "Remembrance and Recovery: On the Fragility and Persistence of Nature", art historian **Giovanni Aloi** uses examples of artists such as Otto Marseus van Schrieck, Wifredo Lam, Cecilia Vicuña, and Abel Rodríguez to explore how depictions of the forest in art have changed across time, from Renaissance paintings to contemporary artworks. In the interview "Art and the Forest: Finding our Way through the Trees", Aloi expands his views on the shift in artistic representations of forests as sites of loss and mourning toward remembrance and recovery.

In the interview with **Miha Krofel** "The Only Chance for the Survival of Large Carnivores in Europe: Coexistence with People", the wildlife researcher and scholar discusses the challenges of the conservation of large carnivores in Europe. Drawing on field research, he emphasizes the importance of coexistence, and outlines a range of strategies for ensuring improved methods of coexistence between wolves, lynx, and bears, and human beings.

Art historians **Maja and Reuben Fowkes**, in their essay "Arboreal Activism in the Age of Climate Breakdown", discuss the arboreal focus in recent ecocentric art, while focusing on artistic engagements with trees that are channelling feelings of ecological grief into acts of solidarity with endangered trees.

In the essay "Forest-Thinking: From the Feared and Forgotten to the Sublime", philosopher and researcher **Mateja Kurir** explores the historical absence of forests in Western philosophy and examines how recent developments in philosophy and culture are beginning to focus on the forest as a meaningful space for imagining a post-anthropocentric future.

Finally, four artistic research projects present diverse ways in which artists can engage with forests. **Polonca Lovšin** focuses on the transformative power of mushrooms and the relation between women and forest in the case of Slovenia. **Dušica Dražić** centers on two reforestations of the Pešter Plateau in Serbia (1978–1988 and 2024) in order to explore both the forest and art as sites of collective labour. **Marjolijn Dijkman** explores the consequences of World War One and the climate crisis in the context of the Verdun forest in France. **Nayarí Castillo** explores human and more-than-human encounters in the context of the forests in and around Graz, Austria. In addition, selected contributions from the *Forest Encounters Glossary* offer personal, playful, and engaged perspectives on the forest and forest-related topics. All of these works were exhibited at the *Forest Encounters* final exhibition in Antwerp in spring 2025.

The book also includes poems, short stories, and essays by **Felicita Medved**, **Katharina Flich**, **Titta C. Raccagni**, **Lea Hartmeyer**, **Zoe Jo Rae**, and **Alex Schuurbiers**, selected through an open call of the *Forest Encounters* project.

Borut Peterlin's photographs featuring forest and tree motifs from Slovenia and created with 19th century photography techniques provide a visual accompaniment to the diverse contributions in the book.

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The forest is a living demonstration that strength arises from diversity and resilience from interconnection. Thus, this book invites you to explore the forest as a space with which we can learn otherwise.

AGATA A. KONCZAL

THE FOREST IN AN (UN)CERTAIN FUTURE

Stories with(in) a Forest

Tatra Mountains between Poland and Slovakia

I wonder, with the millions of tourists visiting every year, if you can ever can be alone in this mountain forest. We are lucky. The end of May is the last quiet moment before crowds from both sides of the border, and from all across Europe, descend on the Tatra Forest and mountain trails. We walk in a small group following our guide. It feels like we are on a special mission – we are going to see the forest left to itself. Or should I say – left to bark beetle infestations and the strong wind that is known by the locals as *halny*?

"A forest left to natural processes is not a pretty forest", a professor of forest ecology once told me. "We keep forgetting that the natural forest is very different in comparison with the managed stands we are used to." It is also not always good for people to wander around in a natural forest. Looking at the forest in this mountain valley, I understand what he meant. A maze of spruce branches and roots prohibits us from entering. We remain on the edge of the forest. From the margins, we look into the wild heart of Europe.

Tuchola Forest, Northern Poland

Today I will see a forest that is gone. We drive through barren areas. There are no trees here anymore. Is this still a forest then? The forester who is driving me around says it will be a forest again very soon. I just need to give it two or three years, and small seedlings of Scots pines will be everywhere around us. But for now, I try to find a point on the horizon beyond which I can spot survivors – standing trees. Instead I see abstract compositions of twisted roots and dry branches. Most of the stands damaged by the storm have already been cleaned up. New trees are planted each day. There is no time to waste. A forest grows slowly. I turn back to take one last look at the gone forest. The local foresters would call it the disaster of the century.

Białowieża Forest between Poland and Belarus

I grew up in Northern Poland among Scots pine monocultures planted in even, straight rows. A perfect example of the German model of forestry. The Prussian heritage embedded in the landscape shaped my forest aesthetics. There are only a few forests in Europe that are as drastically different from my home forest as the Białowieża Forest. Sometimes called the last primaeval forest of Europe, it is a kingdom of pristine nature and European bison. We get up at four in the morning in order to spot the king of the forest. It stands in a meadow, shrouded in the morning mist and dew. For these few moments of silence and stillness, I forget that this forest is a battleground. Bark beetles fight with spruces, foresters fight with ecological organizations, and local people fight against each other. Everyone wants to have their say.

King of the primaeval forest, Białowieża Forest.

The following three short vignettes from my ethnographic fieldwork draw on stories of a windstorm in the Tuchola Forest, bark beetle infestations in the Białowieża Forest and the High Tatra Mountains, and other disturbances. These and similar phenomena that have been increasingly observed across Europe are described variously as calamities and natural disasters, forest crises and the collapse of the nature management paradigm, sometimes as the end of traditional forestry. Depends on where you ask questions and who answers them. What is the forest in an era of rapidly changing climate conditions? Where is the forest? When is the forest? And, finally, who decides about forests? These are the themes that been leading me through my work in forest anthropology during the last ten years. Forest anthropology explores how the social worlds of people are connected to the natural landscapes of forests. It uses forests as mirrors to understand societies, but also allows us to follow the multispecies and the multidimensional entangled relations that constitute a forest. But first: let me explain why we need forest anthropology.

The Forest of our Futures

In this essay, I would like to invite readers to reflect on the relationship contemporary societies have to forests, and also to look carefully at changes in this relationship, both desired and not desired.

The question of the future is fundamental for thinking about both societies and forests. The only thing that is certain is that our future is uncertain. Our future is uncertain because the future of our planet with our forests in the era of climate change is uncertain. There is no future for society without a future for forests. I am not thinking of forests as merely sources of wood, providers of oxygen

and nature-based solutions (for the problems we created). We need forests to have a society not only for our physical survival but for our symbolic survival. To be well. To be well begins. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, we could say that forests are good to think with.[1] So let us try to think with them.

Save a World, Save a Forest

Forests are at the centre of contemporary global discussions about climate change, environmental crisis, and biodiversity loss, as well as debates aboout equality, responsibility, power dynamics, and neoliberal capital. An ongoing shift in global and European environmental policy places forests at the centre of many environmental agendas. *The European Green Deal* – the document which sets the foundation for a new "green economy" – requests that EU members engage in "urgent restoration efforts for damaged ecosystems at sea and on land to increase biodiversity and deliver a wide range of ecosystem services".[2] Launched in early 2020, the *EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030* makes forest restoration one of its four pillars with the goal of planting three billion trees by 2030. It was accompanied by the *EU Forest Strategy* outlining unprecedented efforts to protect the forests – both in and outside of Europe.

These new actions are occurring on top of already existing global commitments such as the Bonn Challenge (with a goal to restore one hundred and fifty million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes around the globe by 2020 and three hundred and fifty million hectares by 2030) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The potential role of forests in climate mitigation has shifted typical debates about forestry (to cut or not to cut, for example) to more complex discussions that include the potential contribution of rewilding, afforestation, reforestation, and restoration. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, for forests to be understood as local phenomena. Instead, they are increasingly imagined as a collection of global goods and affordances.

At the same time, conflicts around forests are increasing and their character is changing. These conflicts are the result of increasingly diverse societal demands on forests. The controversies regarding forests have become more complex and add to the uncertainty of the future. In many parts of Europe, discussions about forests have become more intense, especially those that concern natural disasters, such as fires, bark beetle infestations, and storms. In such situations, the question is not if the forest should reappear but how, when, and what kind of forest should it be. And who should make decisions that effect it? As a result of complex local situations and the environmental shift in global and European policies, forests are seen as an easy fix for long-standing issues. We want forests to become a

1 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

2 European Commission, *The European Green Deal*.

remedy for our problems. We want to believe that a forest can be the cure. But can forests deliver that much?

Fight for the Forests

Different answers to the questions posed by the hows, whens, and whos of forests has led to a new wave of forest conflicts. And so we fight. But what do we fight for when we fight for our forests? Forest researchers Daniela Nousiainen and Blas Mola-Yudego[3] show that conflicts around nature and forests in particular are often conflicts about (the vision of) forest management and conservation as well as a vision of the relationship we wish to have with forests. Central Eastern Europe is the region with the highest number of conflicts related to forests during the last twenty years, with Germany and Poland being on the top of the list of countries with increasing forest disputes.[4] In the search for what is behind these conflicts, it can surprise us how simple the answer is: namely, that we see and understand forests in many ways. Different people in different places want different things from forests. Research keeps revealing that there is great variety of social expectations toward forests. For example, a recent pan-European survey highlights discrepancies in views on forests between urban and rural residents, with the former valuing forests mostly for their aesthetics, their capacity to enhance air quality and health benefits, while the latter values them for higher provisioning forest ecosystem services such as wood for fuel, timber for construction, and sites for hunting.[5] European countries also vary in their appreciation of unmanaged forest landscapes as well as their understanding of what a wild forest should look like.

Thanks to the development of the so-called information society in which news travels faster than thoughts, these varied and often competing expectations of forests serve as unifiers for many groups. New media provide societies with platforms to express their hopes for and demands of forests and their management. Many new communities are built around these claims on forests.

Place also matters. We do not fight for all forests. Our imagination is of key importance in the forest fights we chose. Society has a tendency to react especially strongly to the development of the places it considers iconic or fundamental for their understanding of nature or human-nature relations. In Europe, this often translates to memories of old-growth forests. Society wants to keep the remains of natural forests wild. The Tatra and Carpathian Mountains and the Białowieża Forest have become places of heated conflict about forest

3 Daniela Nousiainen and Blas Mola-Yudego, "Characteristics and Emerging Patterns of Forest Conflicts in Europe: What Can They Tell Us?".

4 Ibid.

5 Dennis Roitsch et al., "Societal Perceptions and Demands towards Urban Forest-Nature Based Solution in China and Europe".

protection. These conflicts are not only symbols of the forest but also drivers in policymaking and discussions about forest protection and societal imagination of what forests in Europe are, and what they could or should be. In recent years, these forests have also become the sites of intense discussion about what is "natural" or belongs to the "natural order", and if a place doesn't, then what is it? What belongs and what is foreign? Where to draw the line between us and others? Forest narratives have become spaces of the struggle for power, dominance, resources, and identity.

Green Frontiers

Now let me take you back to the Białowieża Forest. This time not to meet the bison, but to tell you a story about this forest. Or rather a very small part of its story, the last chapter of its twelve-thousand-year story. The Białowieża Forest (Puszcza Białowieska in the Polish language) is located on the border between Poland and Belarus. It is the last, large, temperate, close-to-natural, lowland forest in Europe with a twelve-thousand-year continuity of tree cover.[6] During recent years, it has become a place of societal clashes involving the national forest service because of the outbreak of a bark beetle infestation, or it could just as well be said over the definition of what this forest means for Poles and what role it should play in contemporary society. But now, I would like to put aside bark beetles and dying spruces, and even the climate change triggering these so-called "natural calamities", and tell you another story – a story about a wall on the green frontier of Europe.

In autumn 2021, the planned and systematically organized action of bringing refugees and migrants across the northern and northeastern borders of the European Union began. Poland was one of the countries on these borders, and the Białowieża Forest an entry point to the European Union for thousands of people. Refugees and migrants (the definition of these categories depend on whom you are talking to) from Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Ethiopia, and other countries were "encouraged" to travel via Russia and Belarus to the borders of the European Union. Thus they became the victims of a so-called "hybrid war" planned by Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko and Russian president Vladimir Putin to destabilize Western countries.[7]

For the then ruling right-wing government of Poland, the ancient, old-growth Białowieża Forest became a synonym for national

6 Malgorzata Blicharska et al., "Between Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Forest Management: A Multidisciplinary Assessment of the Emblematic Białowieża Forest Case".

7 Human Rights Watch, "'Die Here or Go to Poland': Belarus' and Poland's Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses"; and Daniel Tilles, "EU Council President Visits Poland to 'Express Solidarity in Face of Hybrid Attack' by Belarus".

security. Simultaneously, the forest became (again) a synonym for the nation. The threat to the forest and the nation this time was not bark beetles, dying spruces, or even climate change. The new threat was the so-called illegal migrants and refugees, and not any refugees, but others who were non-European, Muslim, who were too different to fit the carefully crafted definition of the nation and forest understood as national heritage. According to the right-wing Polish government, such people did not belong to the forest or to the natural order of the country.

What was the result of the belief that the migrants did not belong? It translated into the policy of so-called "pushbacks" – pushing back thousands of people who crossed the Polish borders into Belarus, knowing full well that Belarusian state forces would do the same on their side. This meant scared, cold, and hungry people wandering hopelessly through the forest with no possibility of applying for asylum. For some of them, it meant that the Białowieża Forest became their grave.[8]

In 2022, the Polish government built a wall to stop unwanted refugees and migrants from entering the forest. The wall, built with fifty thousand tons of steel and equipped with more than two thousand cameras, is one hundred eighty-six kilometres long. Approximately thirty-five million euros were spent on this structure[9] that cuts the forests in half, prevents the migration of wildlife, and impacts both the pristine forest and local inhabitants.[10] Thus it has a negative impact on people and animals, society and the forest itself. The presence of army trucks along the wall not only has a negative impact on the very spirit of humanity as shown in Agnieszka Holland's film *Green Border* (2023), but also kills animals such as the bison.[11]

Białowieża Forest and the wall was one of the main issues during the last parliamentarian election in Poland (2023). The question of the wall and migrants was even the subject of a national referendum. Poles were asked if they were in favour of "admitting thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa as part of a forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy" and in favour of "removing the barrier on the border between the Republic

8 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "Situation on the Polish-Belarusian Border".

9 Maciej Chołodowski and Wawrzyniec Święcicki, "186 kilometrów, 50 tys. ton stali, 2,5 tys. kamer, 1,6 mld złotych: Poznaj nową atrakcję Puszczy Białowieskiej".

10 Bogdan Jaroszewicz, Katarzyna Nowak, and Michał Żmihorski, "Poland's Border Wall Threatens Ancient Forest"; and Katarzyna Nowak et al., "Threats to Conservation from National Security Interests".

11 Rafał Kowalczyk, "Zginął żubr: Puszcza nie może być traktowana jak poligon wojskowy".

of Poland and the Republic of Belarus?".[12] The wall divides not only the Białowieża Forest, but is a great chasm that divides all of Polish society into two clear camps. If you are one side, on the other are those who think, feel, and understand the world differently than you.

The Bialowieża Forest debate not only divides the Polish people and the European Union from the non-European Union, but also functions as a strong demarcation line for the "right" and "wrong" definition of nation and identity, and of what is natural and wanted. The wall creates a border of belonging, and the conflicts and negotiations that emerge from the wall transcend the forest itelf and define our societies.

Past, Present, and Future

Are these new phenomena? How did it look like in the past? In the European context, forests in Central Eastern Europe have played an important role in shaping national identities.[13] The history of these forests was and still is used as an important component in national myths, for drawing lines between belonging and otherness, right-wrong versions of the past and also the future. The question that remains unanswered is what should we learn from the history of forests for our current time and society? Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein gives us a hint by highlighting the importance of the historical work that allows us real remembering based on tracing the lines that brought us to where we are today, and seeing patterns that repeat over and over again in our histories – patterns of othering, exclusion, and discrimination.[14] These are patterns that are shaping forest landscapes all over Europe.

When pondering the question of what is happening in contemporary society and how to describe its dynamics, it is worth pausing to look not only at what is seen and portrayed as a forest, but also what is seen as a natural disaster. Forest disaster narratives are not neutral or naïve. On the contrary, they reflect power relations; they are related to complex discourses and become exemplifications of specific worldviews. Definitions of natural disasters and questions about what climate change is, when and where a disaster takes place, whether something is "natural" or belongs to the "natural order" have become integral parts of the social debate. Various and competing meanings constitute a platform for social conflicts in which polarizing and binary opposition-based language divide reality into nature and culture, natural and manufactured, native and foreign fail to fulfil the dialogical function. Disaster narratives have become spaces of the struggle for power, dominance, resources, and identity. They are

12 National Electoral Commission, "Referendal Questions".

13 This includes German, Polish, Finish and Latvian national identities in various historical moments.

14 Naomi Klein and Yanis Varoufakis, "The Wrong Lesson from History".

situated somewhere between the "old Earth"[15] and alternative visions of the future. They are part of our search for (un)certain futures.

What kind of future can all of these forests and the conflicts about them bring? Conflict includes a call for change, a perspective of change. American author Leo Buscaglia wrote about change being the end result of all true learning.[16] Currently in Europe, in the so-called Western world or the Global North, we are at a crossroads in terms of our relationship with forests and more broadly with nature. The disconnection between nature and humankind causes the Anthropocene – the epoch of "man" in which we are forced to live with all the consequences of the unprecedented impact of humans on the planet. We need to learn again – or rather we need to unlearn what we know about nature and forests, and stop seeing them as separate from us, endless, unlimited resources for our economies and consumptions, demarcation lines, borders of belonging, places for chosen identities and separation. But we can only do this together. We need to move from the perspective of "I have the answer" to the perspective of looking for an answer together. This change can only come through collaborative, true, and open-ended learning. For now, we do not have the answers, not for forests or for society. Maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Still, there is hope that the forest holds the answers to the questions we have yet to ask.

City forest, Ljubljana, 2023.

15 Bruno Latour, "Europe as Refuge", in Heinrich Geiselberger, ed., *The Great Regression*, pp. 78–87.

16 Leo Buscagila, *Living, Loving and Learning.*

Post Scriptum

I believe that today's world and its societies need to give more attention to forests. Forest anthropologists are useful in this endeavour. I would like to refer readers to a quote from an interview with Thomas Hylland Eriksen, one of the most influential contemporary anthropologists. In 2016, when commenting on the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe, he said:

> I even think that doing anthropology makes you a better person: just like reading novels, it enables you to identify with others. When you then see the refugees in the Mediterranean, at least you know, it could have been me. You think that because you relate to people in all parts of the world. I think the main sort of moral message of anthropology perhaps is that all human life has value, no matter how alien, no matter how strange they might appear. So yes, I think the world needs anthropologists, just as it needs novelists and poets.[17]

Eriksen believes that doing anthropology makes us better people, but also obliges us to deliver a message to the world starting with the credo that all human life has meaning and value. Almost six months after my talk in Ljubljana during the *Forest Encounters* symposium (December 2023), we are still witnessing wandering and lost people in the Bialowieża Forest and they are still being portrayed as strange, different, not-belonging.[18] Although the Nature Restoration Law which could provide a European answer to rapidly changing climate change and the dying ecosystem was accepted (by a narrow majority and with the new Polish government voting against it), its implementation remains unclear and it could still be sacrificed in the name of political interests. Society and forests are waiting for both the right questions and the right answers, and we are waiting for true learning and change. So today I echo Eriksen – I believe that today's world needs anthropologists. It needs anthropologists who see the forest beyond just trees, those who listen to the stories about uncertain forests in uncertain futures, and giving a voice to what is hidden in the forests.

17 Daša Ličen, "A Conversation with Thomas Hylland Eriksen: On the Anthropology of Climate Change".

18 Grupa Granica, post from April 17, 2024 on their X profile.

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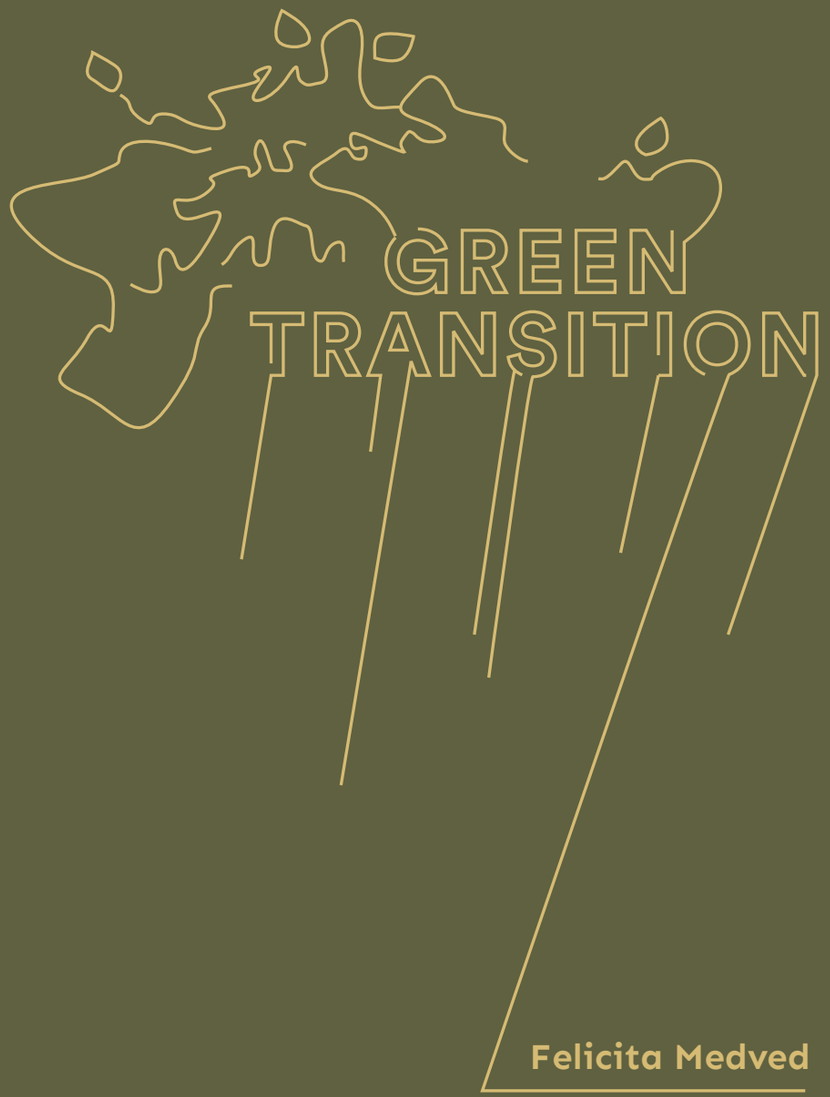
Photographs by Borut Peterlin.



Felicita Medved

In autumn winds,
old spruces smile
to slender birches' dance of youth.

Beneath the forest slope
awaits machinery of wild greed
already counting green bills.

Forest, do you hear?

You are to be felled,
your roots mined
for alien species to be planted in concrete.

Environmentalists of the new farms
will be hugging the trunks of wind turbines.

Even winds will howl.

Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

AN INTERVIEW WITH T. J. DEMOS,

author on contemporary art, global politics, and ecology, and founding director of the Center for Creative Ecologies at the University of California, Santa Cruz

MATEJA KURIR and URŠKA JURMAN: In your work, you have emphasized that art has the ability to extend across disciplines and create new imaginaries and knowledge, and also that it can have a central transformative role as you wrote in *Decolonizing Nature*.[1] Can you present the main tenets of your understanding of the role of art in the environmental crisis?

T. J. DEMOS: Art has the power to play a transformative role in how we understand and respond to the environmental crisis. Throughout modern history, art has continuously evolved, challenging its own boundaries and redefining what it can be – it remains an unstable, dynamic, and multifaceted force. When it comes to the environmental crisis, there are several distinct yet overlapping artistic approaches I would call attention to. One is art as a critical and analytical tool for examining environmental issues. Take, for example, the work of Forensic Architecture or Ursula Biemann's experimental documentaries. Such projects push us to ask: *What is the environment?* Perhaps the very concept needs to be dismantled and reimagined in a more expansive and complex way. This is an urgently necessary epistemological shift because the environment as a category is under immense political pressure. Competing interests seek to define and redefine the environment, particularly within technoscience and engineering where it is often reduced to a rigid,

1 T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016.

depoliticized notion of the "non-human" or "natural world". But artists and collectives like Forensic Architecture, Ursula Biemann, and Black Quantum Futurism challenge this reductive framing. Deploying experimental artistic forms, they present the environment as an intersectional space where biogeophysical systems are inseparably linked to sociopolitical, technological, and economic structures. The refusal to isolate the environment as a purely technical issue is itself a political act, one that resists the depoliticization of the environment and reclaims it as a site of critical inquiry and expansive conceptualization.

Another artistic approach could be described as interventionist in which art becomes a means of directly challenging dominant power structures that define, exploit, and reshape the environment, often in service to economic interests such as fossil capitalism and large-scale extraction. The key question here is: how can art, as a critical practice of disruption and direct action – one that exists beyond galleries and traditional art spaces – actively disrupt the flow of economic and fossil fuel interests, and help forge an alternative future? Many artists working in this way engage in activist struggles alongside Indigenous communities, environmentalists, and climate justice advocates. Their actions often incorporate artistic elements: for example, Cannupa Hanska Luger's *Mirror Shields* at Standing Rock in the US, which were used to deflect police violence in 2016, or the powerful agitprop prints of the transnational Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, which visually amplifies resistance movements, acting as a form of social movement aesthetics. These interventions aren't easily confined to conventional definitions of art. They extend into direct action: resisting the construction of pipelines, building barricades, shutting down fossil fuel infrastructure, blocking deep-sea mining, and halting deforestation. This blending of art and activism marks a significant aesthetic and political shift, an expansion of artistic practice into spaces of urgent, collective resistance.

Artistic practice can also take on a speculative, world-building ambition, one that taps into poetry, representation, and the deeply felt, non-conceptual realm of emotions and sensations. This is particularly powerful in reshaping our sense of time, allowing for the reimagining of pasts, presents, and futures in ways that disrupt the constraints of the present. Consider, for example, the Indigenous futurism of Toronto-based First-Nations artist T. J. Cuthand who envisions a post-colonial world where settlers have departed, leaving Indigenous survivors to reclaim the earth and restore its life-giving forces. Through such speculative narratives and cosmovisions, artists like Cuthand open portals to new onto-epistemological possibilities, offering imaginaries of a world at once representational and affective that isn't defined by economic exploitation but instead thrives as an interconnected web of life, a place where multi-species kinship and alternative ways of knowing and being take center stage.

Lastly, the arts can function as a vital space for social organizing and solidarity-building, both of which feel especially urgent right now. Artists like Black Quantum Futurism in the US, Jonas Staal and Jeanne van Heeswijk in the Netherlands, and many others around the world are creating projects where art is not just a means of aligning with social movements, but an active site for reimagining how we come together. Staal's concept of "assemblism" speaks to this effort, using social aesthetics as a way to experiment with new forms of social composition, forging collectivities across differences, generating the infrastructure to sustain relationality, and inventing new ways to enact solidarity across difference. The following are a number of crucial questions in this context for the arts today: how do we build collectives in this period of social disorganization? How do we organize ourselves differently within a world of atomizing social media and surveillance capitalism? How do we move beyond anthropocentrism and imagine solidarity with the more-than-human world? What would that look and feel like? These are essential considerations if we are to break free from the competitive individualism of the art world – an extension of neoliberal subjectivity – and generate the collective power needed to transform our present reality.

In all these ways, art plays a crucial transformative role. Of course, it's not enough on its own; I don't believe art will save us. That's not what I'm suggesting. But art creates space to think differently, to feel in new ways, to speculate across disciplines, and to resist being boxed in by rigid structures and institutional silos. Its power lies in its ability to exist beyond strict categories, especially when it pushes back against efforts to enclose it within commodified, institutionalized spaces. Art is present in shaping the world in ways we may not even fully grasp yet.

In *Decolonizing Nature*, you enumerate the arguments for the need to decolonize nature. Can you present the main points of this position and its relevance?

T. J. DEMOS: My perspective is rooted in the understanding of colonization as a form of non-consensual domination, an assertion of ownership over people, communities, and their land. This process has unfolded over the past several centuries across the Global South, Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America, and also the US, where I am based. Over the last five hundred years, settler colonialism, alongside transatlantic slavery, has been the defining force in shaping the Americas. My analysis contends that, in addition to the colonization of human labour for financial gain and sociopolitical control, there has also been a systematic colonization of nature. The more-than-human web of life, in all its richness and diversity, has been consistently subjected to extraction and commodification for economic interests. In her discussions about the Plantationocene, my colleague Anna Tsing illustrates how colonization transforms sovereign natural ecosystems into regulated, commodified production sites that essentially function as factories

exploiting the natural world to serve the interests of industries and corporations. This dynamic continues to shape the relationship between humanity and the natural world. However, it is not humanity as a whole, but rather – and as I argue in my book *Against the Anthropocene*[2] – dominant economic and political elites which drive the overarching social, political, and technological systems that subjugate nature and reduce it to a commodity. My understanding of "decolonizing nature" is deeply critical of capitalism as a system that transforms and subjugates the natural world. To decolonize nature is to liberate it from capitalist domination – including as an ongoing project that confronts the mutating and differential forms of neoliberal, authoritarian, racialized, and lawless frontier capitalisms in historically and culturally specific geographies – and broadly to move away from a framework of ownership and exploitation toward one that embraces nature's radical heterogeneity, autonomy, intrinsic non-capitalist value, and the capacity to thrive beyond human instrumentalization.

Another form of nature's colonization is the dominance of anthropocentrism. This perspective is crucial for understanding today's environmental and climate crisis, as capitalism – operating as the dominant logic – prioritizes profit above all else. As an economic system, capitalism has no inherent interest in ecological sustainability or biodiversity or mitigating climate breakdown. Instead, it functions through relentless profiteering, converting everything of value into a commodity and extracting its worth without regard for long-term consequences. This extractive logic moves in only one direction, leaving pollution, destruction, and loss of life in its wake. Viewing the current ecological crisis through this lens, I argue that it is essential to develop a political analysis rooted in decolonizing nature, that is in helping the more-than-human world break free from the grip of capitalist economic dominance. For me, this aligns closely with the broader decolonization movement, which involves the return of land and sovereignty to Indigenous communities.

We are witnessing the intensification of what Naomi Klein terms "disaster capitalism",[3] a system in which crises – whether military conflicts or environmental catastrophes – become opportunities for profit. One stark example is warfare in which entire environments are transformed into arenas for techno-scientific experimentation. Gaza, for example, functions as a testing ground for Israeli weapons development, as a site for experimental research into robotics, drones, armaments, and AI-driven facial recognition and surveillance methods. These new technologies are being battle-tested in real-world conditions, allowing corporations to market their weapons

2 T. J. Demos, *Visual Culture and Environment Today*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2017.

3 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Picador, New York, 2007.

to neoliberal markets around the world, including some of the most repressive regimes. In this model, disaster – including ecological destruction – becomes a mechanism for wealth accumulation, and environments and human lives alike are sacrificed in the pursuit of profit. This is the reality we face today: an era of unprecedented global inequality, death, and devastation, all serving the interests of capital. Moreover, this systemic inequality is directly linked to the ongoing mass extinction crisis. The critical analytical challenge is to draw connections between localized forms of environmental destruction – such as Israel's ecocide – and broader global patterns of ecological annihilation.

Is there any direct analogy between nature and forest in your conception of colonization?

T. J. DEMOS: Absolutely. In *Decolonizing Nature*, I examine a case in India where forests have become sites of conflict. In regions such as Northeast India, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, Indigenous tribal communities have maintained a deep, reciprocal relationship with the forest for generations. The connection extends beyond material sustenance; they see rivers, trees, and mountains as ancestors or kin, forming part of an Adivasi cosmovision that animates their entire world. For decades, the Indian state has sought to displace these communities, clearing land for extractive industries such as aluminum-bauxite mining, the timber industry, and chemical-based agriculture. Similar patterns of displacement and environmental destruction are unfolding in Brazil, the Congo, and Indonesia, regions that are home to some of the planet's most biodiverse and expansive forests and are now under severe threat from extractive capitalism's insatiable demand for resources. Communities that have lived sustainably within these ecosystems for millennia face displacement, state repression, and even violence and murder. The assault on forests persists, a stark reminder that colonization is not a relic of the past but an ongoing process.

Many artists give voice to these struggles and the crises they expose. In India, filmmakers and artists such as Sanjay Kak and Amar Kanwar create powerful films and installations in solidarity with Adivasi communities, while writer Arundhati Roy critically documents and analyzes ongoing conflicts. Similarly, in Brazil and the Congo, grassroots social movements, including Indigenous communities, are fighting to protect forests, often collaborating with artists to resist the destructive forces of extractive capitalism. Consider Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares' mixed-media art project *Forest Law* (2014), set in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the conflicted territory of the Serayaku people (divided between Indigenous lands and rights claims and Ecuador's extractivist resource nationalism). When we reflect on these issues, it becomes clear that our very survival depends on the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human worlds, including forests and their oceanic counterparts, underwater kelp forests. The production of oxygen – so vital to sustaining life – is

directly tied to these ecosystems. Yet, corporate industries continue to designate these crucial environments as sacrifice zones – despite rights of nature discourse, which often lacks accountability and is most often subordinate to property interests – putting our entire planet at risk. Recognizing the self-destructive nature of this process reveals a stark truth: extractive capitalism ultimately amounts to collective suicide. In this sense, forests stand at the heart of the global struggle for life itself.

You highlight the role of the arts, especially experimental visual culture, new media aesthetic practices, and social movement formations in supporting and enabling the new post-capitalized horizons which are crucial to change the current political and social critical conditions. Can you explain why art has such a crucial role given the fact that it is also deeply embedded in the capitalist system?

T. J. DEMOS: We must move beyond the myth of art as an inherently emancipatory or radically distinct space, independent of the dominant economic system in which it operates. Nevertheless, while art is not automatically a site of liberation, it is undeniably a site of struggle, constantly threatened by institutional enclosure, commodification, strategic defunding, and the discursive constraints that shape what societies expect art to be. This is played out in what artworks are rewarded, what projects receive funding (or don't), which artists are given the opportunity to participate in shaping artistic knowledge through magazines, books, catalogues, and exhibitions. In this context, emancipatory, ecological, and anti-capitalist artistic practices remain precarious and persist under constant pressure. This makes it all the more essential for those of us on the left to amplify art's radical potential, especially where it resists complicity with capitalism and refuses to serve as a mere instrument of legitimization. When I speak of radical ecological practices as necessarily anti-capitalist, I draw in part from recent currents in eco-Marxism that argue precisely this point: that true ecological transformation requires a fundamental break from capitalist logic.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the histories of authoritarian communism in Central and Eastern Europe were also marked by extractivism, violence, oppression, and colonialism. In my research, it is crucial not to uncritically embrace an anti-capitalist socialist project without recognizing these histories of domination and tyranny. However, the lived experience of 20th century communism does not mean we should abandon anti-capitalist politics altogether. Instead, we must envision a form of socialism that has perhaps never been realized before, one that moves beyond the destructive logic of extractivist capitalism, or what some are calling an emergent techno-feudalism. What would a truly democratic socialism look like? This is a pressing question, including in the US, where many on the left are engaging in this discussion. How can we reclaim the term "communism" as a horizon of political possibility, one that does not

revert to the authoritarian Soviet or Chinese models but instead points toward new, emancipatory alternatives? These questions are particularly urgent when thinking about environmental crises and the need for systemic transformation, a process toward something that might be called eco-socialism.

But let's get back to the point: why bring art into the fight for climate justice? The reasons, despite any lingering scepticism, are overwhelming. Art doesn't just illustrate problems – it dissects them, exposing the tangled, interdisciplinary mess of the climate crisis with a critical eye. It breaks through the suffocating jargon of policy and science, delivering urgent truths in ways that resonate beyond elite circles. Art shakes people awake. It cuts through the cold, clinical data, injecting raw emotion into issues that are too often reduced to numbers and projections. It tells stories that make the crisis personal, immediate, and impossible to ignore.

What's more, art is not just reflection – it is intervention. It challenges the master narratives of institutions propping up or legitimizing ecological destruction. It disrupts the status quo, reconfiguring power and perception. Art shifts how we see, how we feel, how we value the world around us. It reshapes our very subjectivity, fostering compassion, forging solidarity, and expanding our capacity to imagine alternatives. In a world suffocating under capitalist logic, art is a battleground, one where resistance, transformation, new possibilities, and even new worlds take shape. Art weaves the fabric of community, forging connections not only among people but with the more-than-human world. It becomes a space of shared creation, where relationships take shape in colours, sounds, and forms. Art is the practice of imagining otherwise, a work of "creative world-building" (as the scholar Jennifer Ponce de Léon argues), sketching possibilities that do not yet exist. And yet, it moves without certainty, unfolding in the gaps between action and consequence, echoing Jacques Rancière's reminder that no direct line runs between art and transformation – only the persistent flicker of potential.

In your most recent book, *Radical Futurisms*,[4] you advocate for eco-socialism as a political system for the future. How do you understand this term and how could it support the defeat of the current system and bring a political change?

T. J. DEMOS: That's a great question and the answer unfolds in two parts, the first being easier to tackle than the second. Eco-socialism, as I understand it, fuses ecological consciousness with the principles of socialism. Socialism envisions a world beyond capitalism,

4 T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2023.

grounded in radical equality, democratic participation, and an economy that serves the many rather than the privileged few. When we weave ecology into this vision, we confront the shortcomings of past socialist movements, which often remained anthropocentric, failing to recognize the deep interconnections between human societies and the natural world. Eco-socialism, emerging from underrepresented aspects of Marx's work and evolving through recent eco-Marxist thought, reimagines justice not only among humans but across species and ecosystems. It poses urgent questions: how can we, as a society, centre well-being in a way that acknowledges our entanglement with the more-than-human world? How do we create collective ways of living that don't disrupt natural metabolic systems? Holding onto such a horizon is essential. Without it, we risk becoming trapped within the enclosures of the current system, unable or unwilling to imagine alternatives. This is where art's radical potential becomes vital. At its most transformative – and as I address it in *Radical Futurisms* – art envisions new ways of living beyond capitalism, offering a glimpse of possibilities that challenge extractivism, exploitation, and the ecological devastation of the present.

The challenge of how eco-socialism can help dismantle the current system and drive political change is proving to be formidable. At the heart of the struggle lies the immense power of entrenched economic interests, especially fossil capitalism, which is deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. In the US, political governance is thoroughly compromised, with corporate power fusing seamlessly with economic interests to the point where the ruling class serves donors and industry elites to the exclusion of all else. Far from improving, this crisis is accelerating, particularly under the Trump administration where even the pretence of democracy as a space for challenging the system is being eroded. Political dissent is increasingly met with suppression, and the avenues for genuine systemic change are being systematically shut down.

This is the challenge before us: how do we strategically confront these forces while holding onto the vision of a different world? For those of us committed to imagining and fighting for systemic transformation, the question isn't just what to do, but how to build the power to do it. In the absence of large-scale transformative movements, how can we cultivate new forms of social organization that centre environmental justice alongside anti-oppressive politics – anti-racism, anti-sexism, and a broad-based vision of political emancipation? A crucial piece of this puzzle is uniting social movements with labour struggles. The ruling class has long worked to pit environmental concerns against workers' rights, promoting a false "jobs versus the environment" divide. Overcoming this divide is essential. We need a movement – or a coalition of movements – strong enough to challenge the structures of imperialism and fossil capitalism, capable of reshaping political conditions and reclaiming collective resources. This is the core question: how do we build the kind of power necessary to dismantle entrenched interests and their militarized protection? The answer won't come all at once – it will be

built step by step – but finding an answer to this question is the most urgent task before us.

Many thinkers are grappling with these questions. Swedish author and professor of human ecology Andreas Malm,[5] for example, explores militant resistance, examining strategies such as sabotaging fossil fuel infrastructure and questioning the limits of strictly nonviolent protest. How do we engage in civil disobedience and direct action without allowing the fetishization of nonviolence to weaken our power? How can the left become more strategic? And what role can art play in these struggles? Scholar Matthew T. Huber, in *Climate Change as Class War*,[6] makes a compelling case for building a majoritarian, labour-centred movement capable of confronting fossil capitalism at its point of production. These arguments, along with those for smart degrowth, are critical contributions to both environmental political thought and movement strategy. Climate change isn't just a crisis; it's an active class war, waged by corporate, economic, and political elites against the rest of us. Understanding the climate crisis in class terms sharpens our analysis and clarifies the path forward: organizing labour. Workers make the world run; they have the collective power to disrupt and reshape it. It's through that power that we reclaim governance, not in service of capital, but in defence of life itself. In the arts, too, this gives us much to think about.

Going from a political struggle and a new political horizon to a different topic: in your opinion what is the relationship between art and the term abolition ecology that you also use in *Radical Futurism*. How do you understand this term?

T. J. DEMOS: Abolition in the US has deep roots in anti-slavery and anti-racist movements. Sociologist, historian, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept of "abolition democracy", arguing that the end of slavery was incomplete because it failed to establish true racial, political, and economic justice for Black people. Abolition, in his view, was not just about ending slavery but about building a just and democratic society. Similarly, scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore developed the idea of "abolition geography",[7] which extends abolitionist thinking beyond prisons and policing to challenge racial capitalism and carceral violence. She emphasizes that abolition is not only about dismantling oppressive institutions but also about creating new spaces of care, solidarity, and life-affirming infrastructures.

5 Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*, Verso, London and New York, 2021.

6 Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*, Verso, London and New York, 2022.

7 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, Verso, London and New York, 2022.

I seek to extend abolitionist thinking to the ecological realm by examining how state violence shapes our relationship with the natural world. Capitalism mobilizes nature to enforce spatial divisions. Consider, for example, how hedges and rose bushes are used to separate zones of economic privilege from defunded public spaces where the unhoused struggle to survive. Natural landscapes themselves have become instruments of control: deserts and oceans are weaponized by border regimes to deter and endanger migrants. The natural world is often conscripted into carceral and security logics. Artist Susan Schuppli highlights this in her *Cold Cases* project (2021–22), revealing how weather and temperature serve as tools of punishment and deterrence. Similarly, *Forensic Oceanography* (2011–), a project within Forensic Architecture, has exposed how Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency manipulates the Mediterranean as a deadly border through calculated non-assistance, leading to mass migrant deaths at sea. These examples underscore how nature is actively weaponized in service of capital and state power.

In opposition to this, abolition ecology is a politics of liberation that extends beyond human communities to the more-than-human world, breaking free from the carceral grip of state control, property regimes, securitization, and financialization. It is a framework for decolonizing nature and releasing it from its enforced role within security infrastructures and state violence. This concept is particularly relevant to contemporary social movements like Stop Cop City in the US, which unites environmentalists and abolitionists in resisting the expansion of policing at the expense of environmental conservation and ecological well-being. In an era of climate collapse, scholars like Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò remind us that the climate crisis is also a policing crisis, reinforcing the view that climate change is class war.

How do you interpret the connection between movements like Stop Cop City that are advocating for social change and are at the same time deeply rooted in an ecological struggle? And how do you understand the tensions in the US starting from this movement and its ecological agenda?

T. J. DEMOS: Stop Cop City is a grassroots movement in Atlanta, Georgia, that has become a flashpoint for the intersection of environmental and abolitionist struggles. It exposes the deep ties between policing, state violence, and environmental destruction. At the heart of the movement is opposition to the construction of a massive police training facility, a hundred million dollar project that has cleared a significant portion of Atlanta's forest under the false premise of improving policing and public safety. This plan emerged in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, during a time when policing had suffered a legitimacy crisis. And yet, dozens of corporations financially invested in the project, profiting from the expansion of surveillance infrastructure and the protection of private property interests at the expense of both communities and the environment.

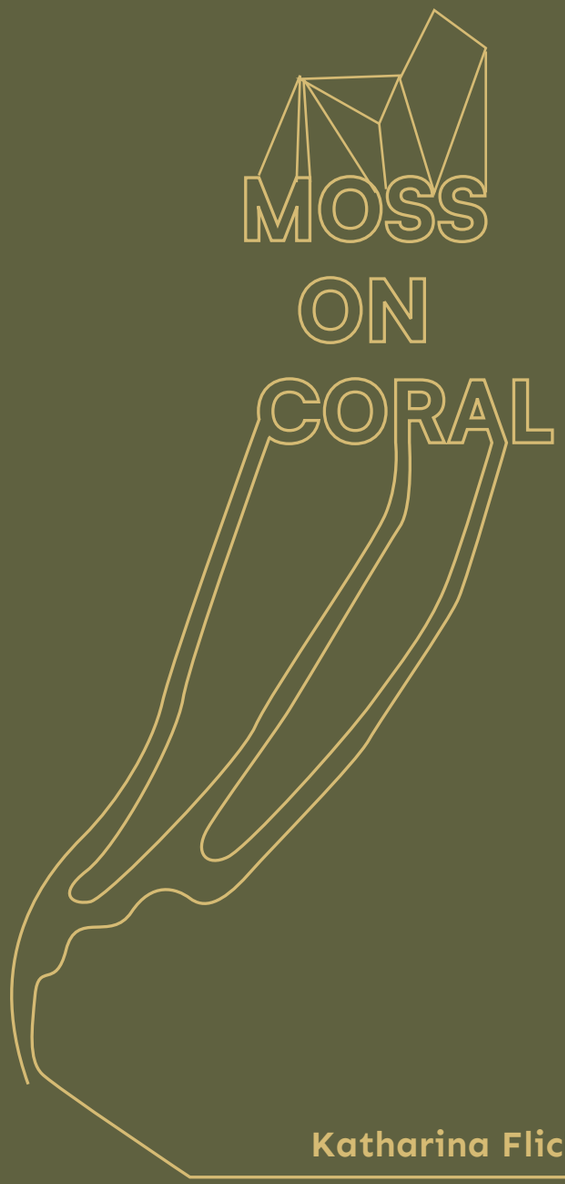
The Stop Cop City movement has fiercely opposed this project, but despite resistance, the facility has now been built. However, the underlying logic of expanding police infrastructure at the expense of communities and the environment threatens to spread to other cities across the US. The facility is located on land that includes one of the largest remaining urban forests in the country, the Weelaunee Forest. This movement brought together environmentalists, abolitionists, Black communities resisting gentrification and police expansion, and the Muscogee people, whose ancestors were forcibly removed from this land in the 19th century.

This intersectional movement has also drawn in artists – media practitioners, socially engaged creators, filmmakers, theatre groups, and agitprop collectives – who have helped build an aesthetic front of resistance. In addition to artistic interventions, the struggle has used civil disobedience and more confrontational tactics, echoing Andreas Malm's call for direct environmental action. The site has become a testing ground for contemporary resistance against policing as an enforcer of racial and colonial capitalism, and its climate-destroying logics. As the climate crisis intensifies, economic inequality deepens, and mass desperation spreads, we can expect these forms of brutal social control to be imposed on ever-growing segments of the population. The repression of the Stop Cop City movement is just one unfolding example of this larger trend. I've written about it in the essay "Counterinsurgent".[8]

It is also noteworthy that Georgia police have a history of training with the Israel Defence Forces and Israeli security forces, reflecting a broader structural relationship between numerous US police departments and Israel. Israel, within its larger apartheid, genocidal, and ecocidal context, functions as a testing ground for methods of state control that are then exported to governments worldwide. This dynamic aligns with what the Progressive International calls the "Reactionary International", a post-democratic authoritarianism rooted in ethno-nationalism seen in figures like Trump in the US, Orbán in Hungary, Modi in India, Erdoğan in Turkey, Le Pen in France, and the AfD in Germany. These reactionary forces are escalating in dangerous ways, and the Stop Cop City movement represents one crucial front of resistance against this global trend – one of many more to come.

March 2025

8 T. J. Demos, "Counterinsurgent: Cop City, Abolition Ecology, and the Aesthetics of Counterreform", *e-flux Journal*, no. 143, March 2024, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/143/590415/counterinsurgent-cop-city-abolition-ecology-and-the-aesthetics-of-counterreform/ (accessed March 31, 2025).



Katharina Flich

In the midst of soft hills and wide fields
we move along an almost overgrown path
a woodpecker drums on a tree – ticks cling to us
and we bend down and dig into time.

A foreign world below our feet
eroded to stones, scattered in the bushes
overgrown with moist moss
snail eggs and spider webs hidden beneath.

A spider escapes me as I lean over a stone
into which life has written its signature
in faint and broken patterns.

Look closely:
Sea water bubbling out of the stone
flooding the ground and
from the wet stone emerge
strange sponges and corals sprouting out
a cephalopod swims by.

They who have not known a human being
I dig them out of time, I pick
up the threads of their histories
and weave them into mine.

Photographs by Borut Peterlin.

THE FOREST: NOT ONLY A SOURCE OF RAW MATERIALS, BUT AN ECOSYSTEM

AN INTERVIEW WITH TEO HRVOJE ORŠANIČ, director of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation

MATEJA KURIR: The starting point of our conversation is your presentation at the *Forest Encounters* symposium, which took place in Ljubljana at the end of 2023. Let me start by asking you what the forest means to you?

TEO HRVOJE ORŠANIČ: The forest is not only a source of raw materials – especially of wood, which we use for various purposes – but above all an ecosystem. In order to preserve life on Earth, forests should be an absolute priority: forests help to mitigate the negative effects of climate change, they store water, preserve soil, and are essential as an ecosystem for the survival of various life forms. The forest is dynamic – it changes by itself in space and time according to its natural laws. The forest is also a primaeval habitat – an ecosystem that once stretched across the whole of Europe, but which people have cut down for their own needs. But it is the laws of nature – in particular, what we call natural succession – which ensure that the forest always returns.

The attempt to describe the forest depends on how you personally perceive this phenomenon and how you then put it into words. For me personally, the forest is an obsession – I love it very much and also respect it deeply. I am also a photographer and am particularly fascinated by photographing the ever-changing aesthetics of the forest. I also use it as anti-stress therapy: there is no place I feel more at ease. I'm not afraid of the forest, not even at night. I've had encounters with bears, a female bear, bear cubs, a wolf, a lynx, just to name some larger carnivores. These encounters were truly magical. The forest is always a positive thing for me. But a fear of the forest has been implanted in our society in the past, and that fear can be harmful for the forest as it affects decisions regarding it.

URŠKA JURMAN: You mentioned that the spread of forests is determined by natural laws. What are the main reasons for the expansion of forests today?

ORŠANIČ: As I said before, forests have their own natural mechanisms for expansion. An important reason for the expansion of forests today is the abandonment of agricultural use. Forests have long been cleared for agricultural purposes. That is the basic premise since the invention of agriculture: to cut down forests in order to make room for agricultural land. Later, we also cut down forests to make room for urbanization, infrastructure, etc. According to my rough estimate, more than sixty percent of the primaeval forests in Europe were cut down. These forests once covered more than eighty percent of the continent.

In this sense, Slovenia is a rare exception in a positive sense. Almost sixty percent of Slovenia's surface area is forested, which provides excellent conditions for a healthy future. The forest is an integral – inevitable and fundamental – part of the ecological processes in an environment.

Returning overgrown areas to agricultural use is not difficult with today's mechanization. The problem is that these overgrown areas are also ecosystems. Nature adapts and uses what it can, what is still available to it, including overgrown areas. A meadow overgrown by forest becomes another ecosystem with many life forms using it as a habitat. Everything is interconnected. That's the key point.

JURMAN: Increasing food self-sufficiency and preserving forests are goals at odds with each other as agriculture and forestry utilize the land in different ways. How can we deal with this?

ORŠANIČ: This is a difficult and complex question. The challenge is to find sustainable solutions and a balance between the needs of food self-sufficiency and the protection of forests. Unfortunately, in my opinion, we will only achieve this balance – if ever – when humanity is already severely affected by the ecological crisis. We live in a time in which various interests are intertwined, and people are prepared to do many things to serve these interests, unfortunately to the detriment of nature above all.

We are hypocritical about nature when it comes to existing paradigms and our lifestyle. We continue to overexploit it, even though we know that the natural environment is being severely damaged as a result. We indulge in flights on low-cost airlines, treat ourselves to a weekend package overseas, etc. We lead a very consumerist life. The consumption of fossil fuels and raw materials – energy consumption in general – only continues to increase. Nature conservation is virtually non-existent in the political discourse.

Climate change is on the agenda, but even there decision-makers don't know exactly what to do because the problem is so complex and they quickly lose the will to make necessary major changes. People have also become apathetic because the systems we live in are so complex and difficult to manage – the legal system alone is extremely complex – and this complexity prevents us from addressing the most important question we face in the present: how can we preserve natural resources for future generations? It seems that, as humanity, we are on the side of destroying life to serve certain interests. Because of this, we have serious problems ahead of us. At the centre of this tangle of different interests, the lack of will and information among people – including many forest owners –, and the lack of interest among decision-makers in addressing climate change and nature conservation – there is the forest, which unfortunately is perceived by a considerable part of the forestry profession primarily as wood, as raw material, not as an ecosystem. And that is a problem.

KURIR: What are currently the biggest challenges in forest management?

ORŠANIČ: The biggest challenge is climate change, which has a huge impact on forest ecosystems and the consequences of which are unpredictable. The unpredictability of climate change and the associated presence of non-native species (not just trees) present a major challenge to forests and their management. Flora and fauna are changing considerably due to climate change. We could also say that this is an adaption to new conditions. But, in any case, we have a lot of problems with pollinators and new diseases. Some traditional tree species, such as the common oak, and other species as well, could disappear.

The next challenge is the economics of forestry, which in Slovenia has always been subordinated to the wood-processing industry, and forested areas have been adjusted to this priority. The economics of forestry teaches us that it is no longer economical to keep beeches in a stand after eighty years and oaks after about one hundred and thirty years, although oaks have a lifespan of up to seven hundred years and beeches up to five hundred years. Considering the potential natural age of forest trees, Slovenian forests are on average very young – which can be a problem for certain cavity nesters that need old trees to survive. Old-growth forests are the key to preserving biodiversity. In Slovenia, there are about one hundred and seventy forest reserves with a total area of 9,500 hectares, which can be considered a contribution to the conservation of old-growth forests, but this is only 0.8% of the total forest area in Slovenia.

Another challenge for forest management is the modern introduction of mechanized logging, and adapting forests to its needs. The impact on forests include the creation of access routes for mechanization and the planning of forest development according to the desired diameter of trees for mechanized felling.

So we have a problem: we have forests that are managed in accordance with a forestry doctrine that is largely tailored to the economy. In the future, more attention should be paid to maintaining the appropriate proportion of old-growth forests and preserving biodiversity. Of course, we must remain realistic, we cannot survive without a functioning economy. But in the modern world, economic aspects tend to be overemphasised in all areas. I have always seen the forest as a whole. I conceive of timber harvesting as the felling of trees that have no describable ecological function or whose removal does not significantly affect the ecosystem and biodiversity. Such an approach is possible, but is not considered economically optimal. But times are changing, and it's no coincidence that my career is now in the field of nature conservation.

JURMAN: You are a trained forester and are currently in your second term as director of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation. How do you see the relationship between forestry and nature conservation?

ORŠANIČ: Nature conservation and forestry are "natural" dialogue partners and can be compatible. The beginnings of nature conservation in Slovenia were largely linked to forestry. Here I mention the exclusion of forest reserves from the system of economic management, the recognition of the multifunctional role of forests, the introduction of studies on the protection of natural heritage, and the significant research and contributions of forestry experts to the development of more ecosystem-based forest management. In forestry, there are a certain number of foresters who think in terms of nature conservation, just as in agriculture, for example, there are agronomists who try to align agriculture with more environmentally-friendly practices and policies.

In addition to the various functions of the forest – recreational, economic, aesthetic, etc. – some in forestry also recognize its ecological function, and its function as an ecosystem, being aware that forests are home to many species and contribute to our quality of life in a variety of different ways. As a side note, increasing our quality of life means nothing if we do not live in a healthy, biodiverse environment that functions as an ecosystem. As long as GDP growth is the dominant paradigm, nature and the natural environment will suffer. The paradigm of endless growth is not sustainable because natural resources are limited. People are becoming more aware of this, but we are waking up too slowly. For many species, it is already too late.

KURIR: You are in favour of a policy of degrowth and strengthening nature conservation in forestry. Slovenia has a long tradition of sustainable and close-to-nature forest management. At the end of the 19th century, Dr. Leopold Hufnagel, a forester who managed the forests of Count Auersperg in the Kočevje region, proposed exempting certain parts of the forest in this area from management in order to preserve the primaeval forest for future generations. Close-to-nature forest management was also introduced in the independent Republic of Slovenia in 1993 with the Forest Act. What are the key elements of this kind of forest management – that was introduced in our country – and how should it adapt to the new climatic conditions?

ORŠANIČ: Leopold Hufnagel was a progressive forester who created an important primaeval forest reserve in the region of Kočevje called Rajhenavski Rog. It consists of fifty hectares of beech and fir forests and is the first nature reserve in Slovenia.

The introduction of so-called nature-based solutions in forestry is certainly a step forward. This approach is actually a response to analysing the consequences of past mistakes in forest management and involves primarily focusing on naturally occurring species. Attempts to introduce economically more interesting tree species – such as eastern white pine, larch, spruce – in areas that are not suitable for them have ended badly. It has been shown that it is economically better to manage species that occur naturally in a particular area, and this, of course, is also environmentally more favourable.

The idea of nature-based solutions also supports keeping minority tree species in the forests, such as the wild cherry, the sorb tree, etc. These species are an essential component of our forests. They bear fruit and are an important source of food for forest animals. However, the wood from these trees is considered unusable and they are therefore undesirable in the context of economic optimization.

In the context of close-to-nature or nature-based-solutions forest management, so-called relaxed forest management is also important. This programme, developed by the late Dr. Dušan Mlinšek, has attracted the professional interest of other countries as well. It involves adapting forest management to the conditions of the site of growth as well as the growth characteristics of tree species, while also taking into account naturally present tree species and other ecological functions of the forest. In short, it is a selective method of forest management that does not follow short-term economic logic at all costs. I don't know how relevant this method still is today.

JURMAN: What are the current trends in forestry – especially with regard to the climate and biodiversity crisis?

ORŠANIČ: In recent years, forestry management organizations around the world have been confronted with a major dilemma in dealing with the consequences of climate change. What should be done if a tree species is severely affected or even becomes extinct? Should it be replaced by a non-native species? The Douglas fir has recently been the subject of a lot debate in this context. These are difficult questions and the answers could significantly change the way ecosystems function. Climate change in general will greatly affect our habits, our way of thinking, and the way we adapt. We will eventually realize that adaptation is essential for the survival of humankind. But climate changes are happening fast and our adaptation is too slow. Forestry also confronts this dilemma, as it increasingly faces the task of repairing major damage after natural disasters. Practically not a single year passes without wind breakage, ice breakage, and fires. Another problem is bark beetles, which attack trees affected by disease, drought, damage, and storms. Because beetles are adapted to a warmer climate, they thrive under the current conditions.

What does this mean for ecosystems? We all know the term "ecological balance", but we don't know exactly how to define it. Ecological equilibrium is supposed to be a state in which all ecosystems function optimally. This state can only be defined theoretically. In practice, it is much more difficult because it involves very dynamic relationships between and among species with variable abiotic factors, and even more dynamic interspecies relationships. This theoretical formulation – the ecological balance – was much appreciated in recent history as it formed the basis for the development of nature conservation and environmental thinking in Slovenia. However, because of rapidly changing climatic conditions, we have already left the possibility of ecological balance behind us. On a higher level, we can see that the ecological balance has been disturbed. That is why I say that climate change is changing many paradigms and professional orientations.

The aim of the EU Nature Restoration Law, which was narrowly adopted this year (2024), is certainly positive. The question is where to focus activities and investments in nature restoration so that climate change, with its highly unpredictable consequences, does not undo these efforts.

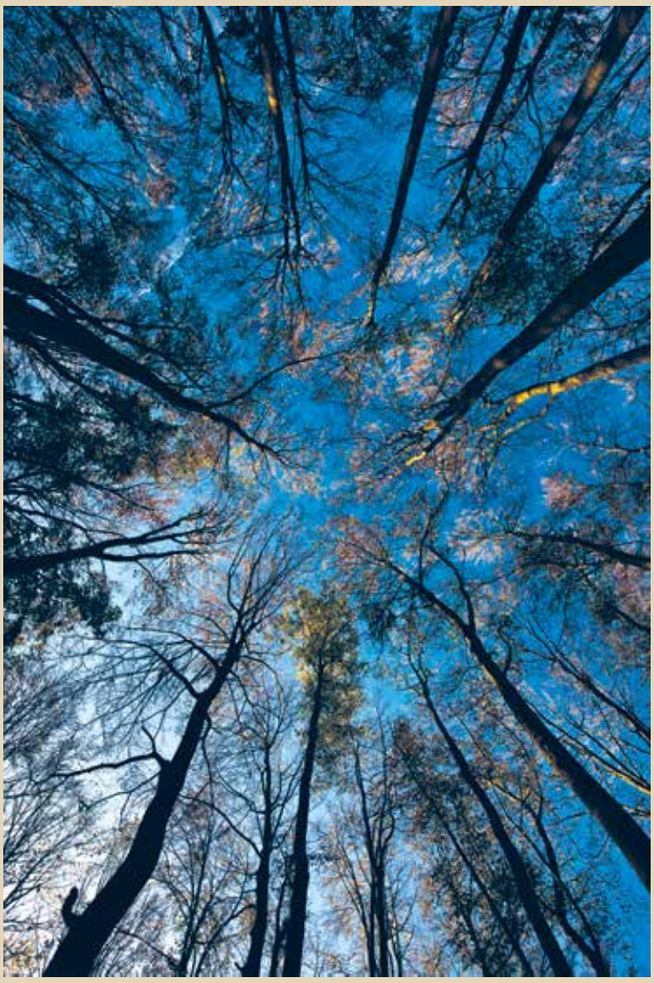
KURIR: We have spoken about the legislation and regulations at the European Union level, but how can an individual today contribute to preserving the forest for future generations?

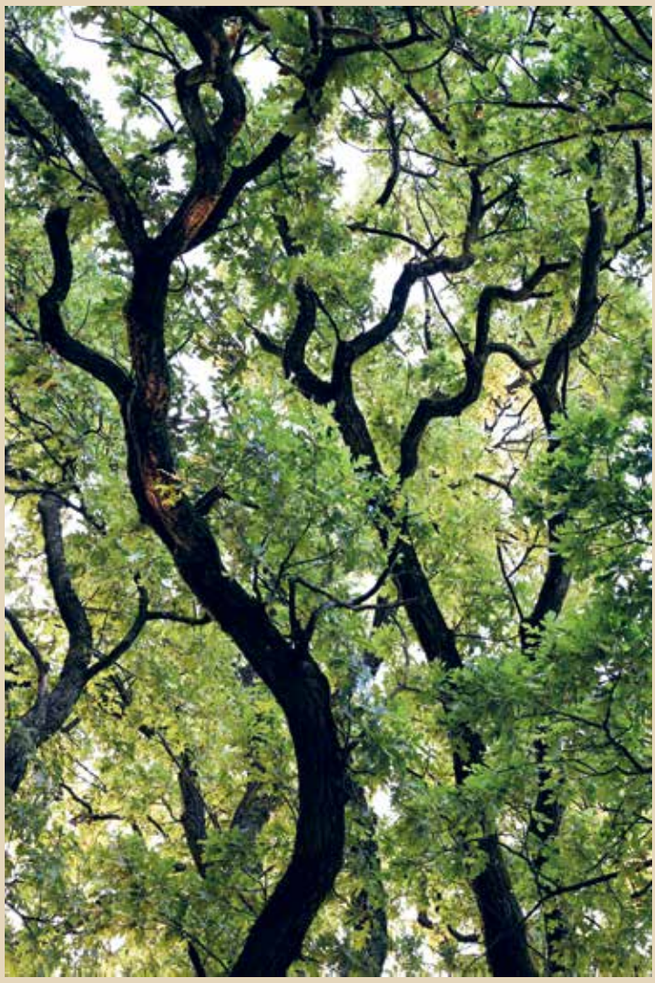
ORŠANIČ: We can certainly make a contribution by simply limiting ourselves from activities that are inappropriate. For example, riding motorbikes, quad bikes, or snowmobiles through the forests, littering, causing disturbance in the forest, overexploitation of forest fruits such as mushrooms, etc. There are many things we can do, but ultimately everything depends on the self-awareness and self-restraint of both individuals and society. This is what we must aim for, but, unfortunately, it is very difficult to achieve.

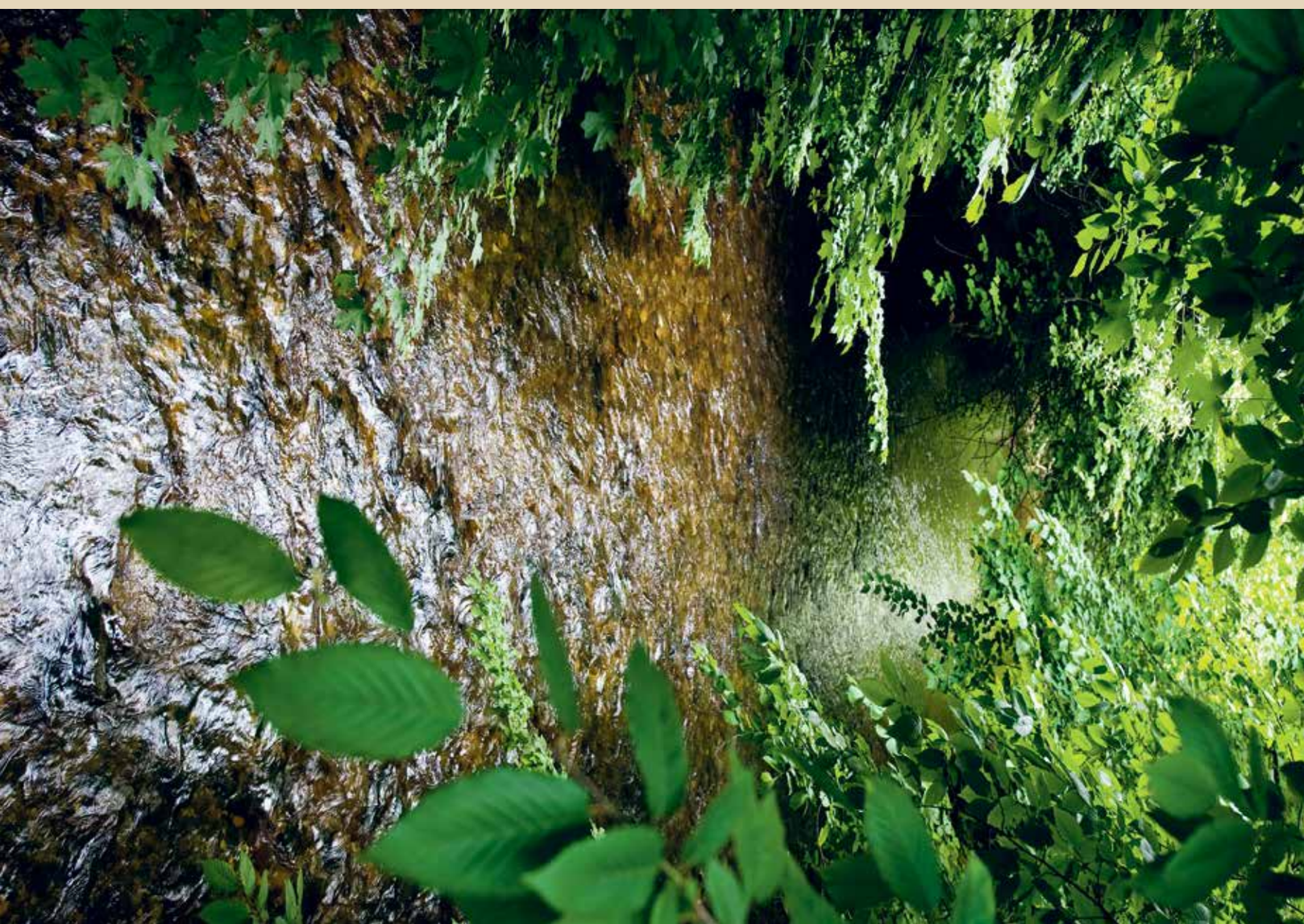
We have a crisis of values, which is also reflected in the fact that some people are illegally felling and stealing timber even in strictly protected primaeval forest reserves. Visitors should not enter primaeval forest reserves without a professional guide. These are the most heavily protected forest areas in the world, which are left to natural processes and where human intervention is forbidden. Of course, there are also negative environmental influences in these places such as acid rain, climate change, noise, etc. But primaeval forests remain the best forest classrooms, not only in terms of natural processes, but also in terms of how nature is adapting to climate change. Humans do not leave much room for natural processes. Primaeval forest reserves are one of the rare habitats of this kind. There are fourteen such areas in Slovenia, totalling 540 hectares, and they require special protection.

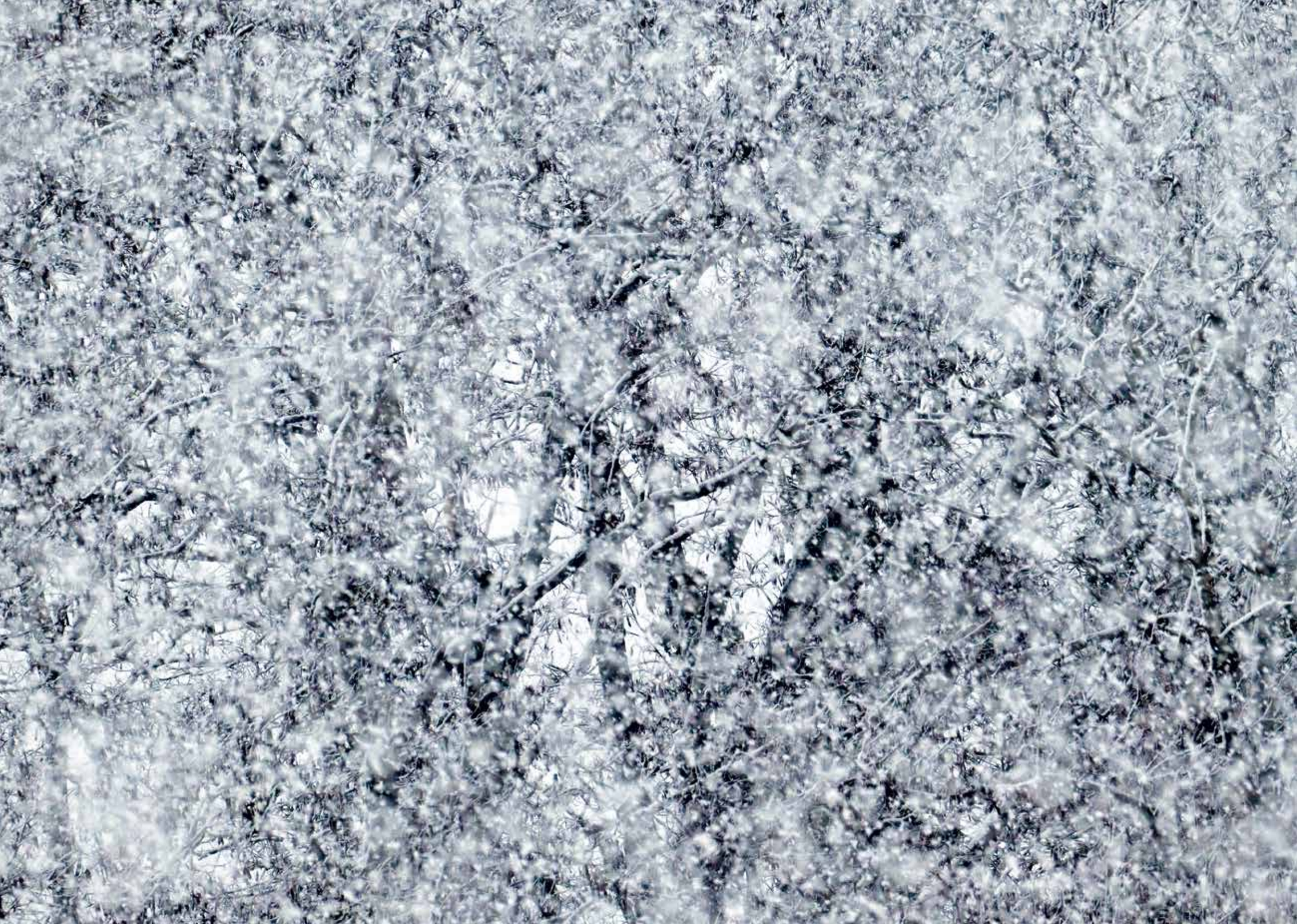
October 2024

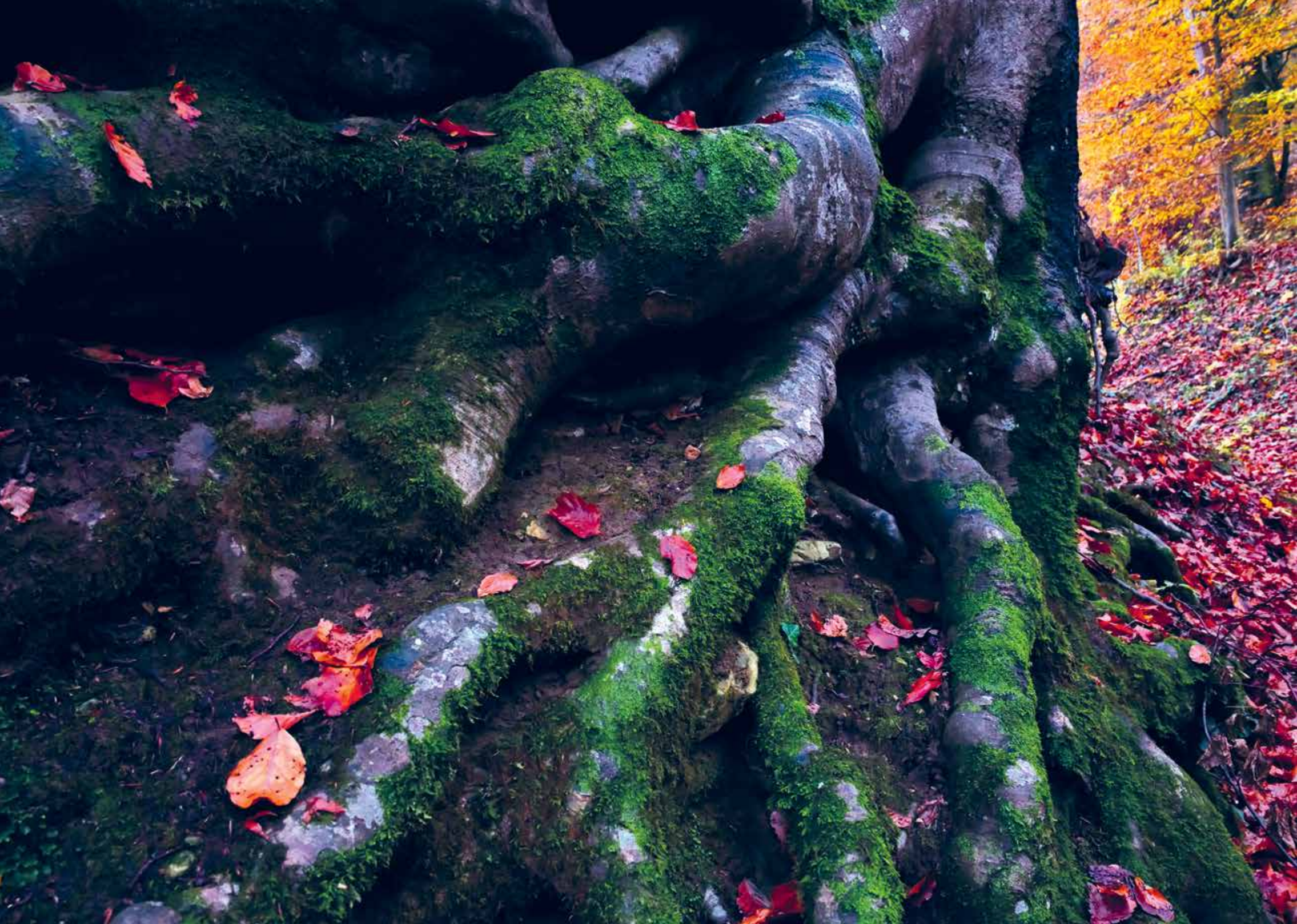
Teo Hrvoje Oršanič is the photographer of pictures accompanying the interview (pp. 54–65).











THE FOREST IN WOMEN'S HANDS AND MUSHROOMS AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Artistic Research by Polonca Lovšin

The Forest in Women's Hands **and** ***Mushrooms at the End of the World*** **(both 2023) present new works by the artist and architect Polonca Lovšin, who in recent years has focused on the topic of forests and their importance for the future of our planet.**

Spotlighting women foresters, hunters, and forest owners in Slovenia, ***The Forest in Women's Hands*** **examines our relationship to forests through the question of gender.** ***Mushrooms at the End of the World*** **is centred on fungi, which connect all life on earth and possess extraordinary transformative power.**

Pleurotus ostreatus and *Pleurotus djamor* decomposing human objects, 2023 (pp. 67–68, pp. 70–71).

Ganoderma lucidum decomposing a human object, 2023.

Woman forester 1: "Everything I know about forests I learned from my mother and father. Ever since I was a little child, I'd go into the forest with them."

Woman forester 2: "Parents should take their kids into the woods and tell them they can make a little house for a gnome. Then they should let them work on it, since kids know how to entertain themselves for a hours. I think it's important that we give them this experience of the forest."

Woman forester 3: "From the conservational perspective, fragmented ownership is not a problem, because there are a huge number of forests which nobody does anything with and in which all sorts of things grow and thrive, and that's great. From the income perspective, however, it's bad because there is no felling, no timber, and no taxes for the state.

Woman forester 1: "I'd be lying if I told you that in my job there are always birds singing, mushrooms growing, and rabbits hopping around. The truth is that these last few months I've been more or less sent up in an office, growing in paperwork, and deal day after day only with the most pressing issues. But even so! There are days and weeks when I work outside in the forest and say to myself: Fuck! Do I really get paid for this?"

Woman forester 2: "As a forester I love any work that let's me be in the forest on my own." - Some statistics: in Slovenia, 71.1% of forest land is privately owned; 20.6% is state-owned and 8.3% is owned by local communities. Nearly 40% of the private owners are women, which among EU countries puts Slovenia at the very top.

Forests in women's hands: Research shows that, on average, female forest owners have smaller landholdings and own less forested areas than their male counterparts; also, compared to male forestowners, they are more focused on the ecological and social aspects of their forests and less on the economic aspect.

Woman hunter: "All the hunters in our hunting family went once to inspect three boars that had been run over on the train tracks. They call hunters when they need to document such cases and inform the Veterinary Hygiene Service, which removes the animals. Later, people said that four hunters and a woman had been there, although we were all hunters."

Woman forester 1: "In our forest, everything they taught us at the faculty about bark beetles turned out not to be true."

Woman forester 2: "If we didn't manage the forests, all the spruce trees would be the first to go. The bark beetles would start on the fallen trees, and then move to the healthy ones. This would thin out the forest and make it easier for the wind to blow down the remaining trees. There would be a period without the forest, which would be catastrophic for both animals and people; there would be droughts and flooding. Later, however, the forest would probably re-establish itself as a stable ecosystem."

BOJANA PIŠKUR

IN TIMES LIKE THESE, WE MUST SPEAK WITH THE FOREST

When you are in the forest, you are not alone. Everything is speaking to you, but it speaks in its own language.

Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)

I.

My grandmother was a forager of forest herbs. Born at the beginning of the 20th century in a village at the source of the Krka River in southern Slovenia, she spent much of her life in the forest. As was customary in such places, her family "owned" a piece of forest land. Back then, the forest was seen not only as a source of income, but, above all, as a refuge that helped the villagers to make ends meet in difficult times. The forest also had symbolic value in the culture of the resistance struggle. It was a hiding place and a space of freedom, the setting where Partisans fought against occupiers during World War Two, and thus also a place where new forms of solidarity developed. Because of this, locals had a very special relationship to the forest and sold it only under the most difficult circumstances when no other option was available.

Only a few decades ago, foragers of forest herbs were commonplace in these parts. In our village, they were mostly older women who gathered medicinal herbs in specific forest habitats to use as medicine at home or to sell to agricultural cooperatives. Throughout history, women have played an important role in the traditional practice of herbalism, which was deeply rooted in folk medicine. Their knowledge of medicinal plants was often passed down from generation to generation. Mothers and grandmothers taught daughters and granddaughters which herbs were suitable for treating various illnesses and how to collect and prepare them. This knowledge was not mysterious and remote, but was an integral part of everyday life in the small village communities where people coexisted with nature. Practices associated with herbalism were often collective activities where women gathered together to share knowledge and experience and help each other prepare herbal medicines. They relied on what the forest offered them to survive, but also respected the natural balance of the forest. And they taught us, their children, that every species, even the smallest, has its special place in the forest, and that humans have no right to destroy this ecological balance.

After World War Two, economic hardship forced rural women with traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs to sell the plants for a meagre income to the agricultural cooperatives, which served as collection points for the purchase and sale of herbs, resins, and other natural products. These substances were then processed by pharmaceutical factories, and made into medicinal and cosmetic preparations such as teas, tinctures, ointments, essential oils, compresses, and other products. As a child in the 1970s, I used to

collect coltsfoot leaves in the forest with my grandmother. The leaves were used to treat respiratory diseases, relieve coughs and bronchitis. I remember walking along forest paths and listening to her instructions: "Pick the leaves carefully, only a few from each plant." Then we dried the leaves and sold them to the cooperative. As my father, Jernej Piškur, told me, the foragers in our village of Krka gathered plantain, nettle, sage, and walnut leaves, valerian, liquorice, barberry, and tormentil roots, dandelion, oak and beech bark, yarrow, chamomile, linden, and arnica flowers, blueberries and raspberries, hawthorn, chestnut, deadly nightshade, elderberry, beech masts, acorn cupules, spruce tips, and dried mushrooms. Herbs and forest fruits have been used as a source of food throughout history. During sugar shortages, for example, birch sap was used as a sweetener. But even in times of shortage, the herb gatherers respected the natural balance and resources and never overharvested the forest, utilizing it sustainably. The communities that live in close contact with forests know that the exploitation of forest resources destroys not only human life, but all life that depends on and is inextricably linked to the forest.

Against this background, a crucial question arises: how can the sustainable practices of the past be utilized and adapted to the needs of the present in order to preserve these natural resources for future generations?

In her work *The Forest in Women's Hands*,[1] the artist Polonca Lovšin draws on research by the Slovenian Forestry Institute showing that forty-one percent of private forests in Slovenia are owned by women[2] and that women tend to prioritize the ecological and social functions of their forest land over its economic value. The artist's conversations with female foresters and her own experiences reveal how important it is to pass on knowledge about the forest from generation to generation by visiting, working, and even playing in the forest. In this way, new generations can better understand the forest through affective experiences and develop more empathy for it.

It is also crucial to recognize that the forest is a complex and self-sustaining ecosystem and that human intervention is often harmful. The forest is not just a "collection of trees", but an extraordinarily complex system comprising a multitude of interconnected species of plants, animals, microorganisms, and many other organisms. The forest always speaks to us, but, to paraphrase the Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy, it speaks in its own language.

1 See https://forest-encounters.net/exibition-polonca-lovsin/ (accessed March 21, 2025).

2 In Slovenia, 75.3% of forests are privately owned, 20.5% of forests are publicly owned, and 4.2% are owned by local communities. Almost 41% of private owners are women, which puts Slovenia at the top of EU countries in this measure. See *Dejstva in številke o ženskah v gozdarstvu v Sloveniji: Gozdovi v ženskih rokah*, https://www.gozdis.si/f/docs/projekti/Fem4Forest_Brosura-Dejstva-in-stevilke-o-zenskah-v-gozdarstvu-v-Sloveniji.pdf (accessed March 21, 2025).

II.

Polonca Lovšin has been working on the subject of fungi and "the language of the forest" for many years now. Her work *Mushrooms at the End of the World* weaves together the ideas of symbiosis, the transformative power of fungi, and regeneration, which are key motifs for understanding the mushroom's role in nature. The artist explores how fungi transform everyday objects (trainers, bicycle helmet, ball, milk carton, etc.), buildings, and other urban structures into spaces of new life, where they help to create fertile soil that enables new beginnings. As one of the most important organisms on our planet, fungi symbolize the eternal cycle of growth and renewal with their role as decomposers and recyclers of organic and inorganic material into nutrients for other organisms. Microscopic fungal hyphae form a dense patchwork – a mycelium that creates underground networks connecting plants, animals, and other organisms. Lovšin's artistic approach considers these networks not only as a natural phenomenon, but turns them into a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all life forms and cooperation between humans and more-than-human beings.

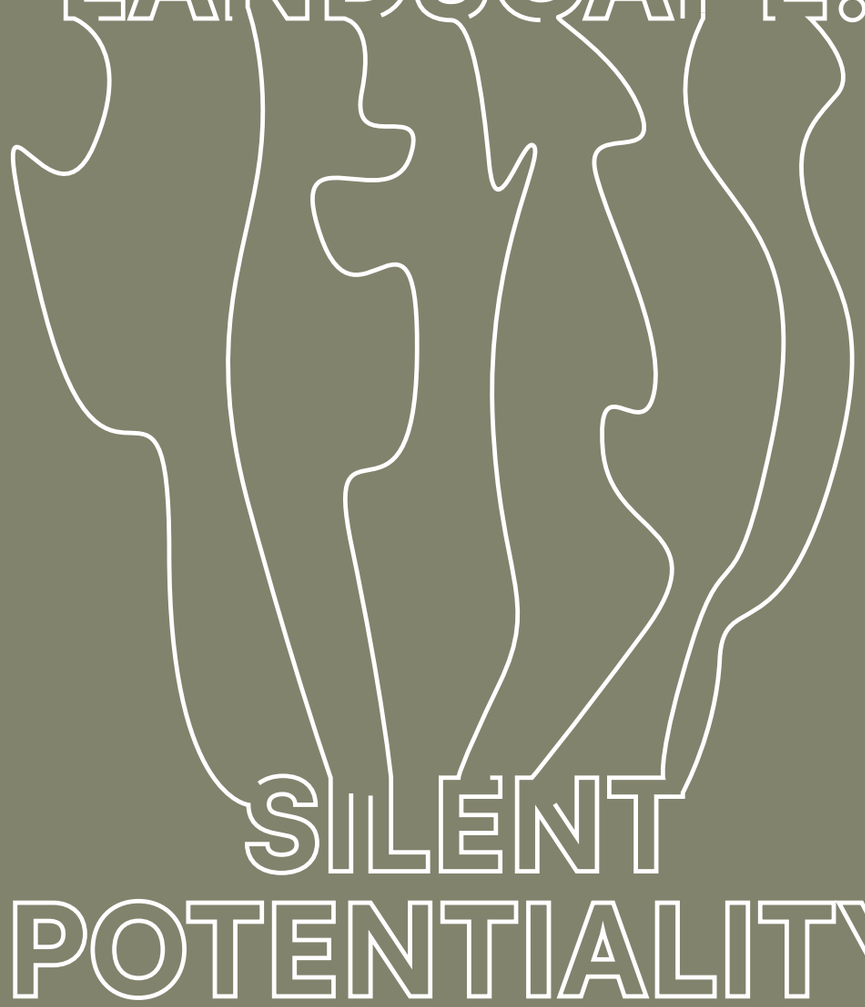
In her research, Lovšin confronts the central dilemma of representation or "speaking" for and on behalf of others – be they plants, fungi, or even ecosystems – as this is a form of colonization of nature interpreted through human perspective and knowledge. Can we understand the laws of nature and our connections to more-than-human beings without taking our own perspective as a starting point? How can we step out of the mindset in which fungi and other life forms are merely passive objects of study? How can we make them active participants in the process, in a way that their "voice" and their role are as important as our own?

These questions open an important starting point for the future: can art that depicts non-human beings like fungi ever transcend the boundaries of traditional representation, which is often understood as the human act of translating the world into a language we understand? Lovšin's work is about treating fungi – as well as other non-human creatures – as subjects whose existence does not depend on our language, but which have their own inherent agency and play a role in shaping ecosystems. It thus offers a new perspective on our relationship with nature, in which the natural world is not simply an object to be studied or utilized, but a dynamic ecosystem in which all participants, human and non-human, are equally involved in the process of growth, regeneration, and the maintenance of equilibrium. This rethinking is a fundamental step toward a future in which we will live in more harmonious coexistence with nature.

Photographs by Borut Peterlin.

ANA KUČAN

FOREST AS CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: SILENT POTENTIALITY



The forest is a concept so rich and with so many connotations that it is difficult to grasp. It can be described through the lenses of a singular interest, but as a landscape – or as part of it – it combines values, interests, aspirations, and cultural inscriptions that shape its complexity. The aim of this paper is to introduce the forest as a complex element of the cultural landscape and an important factor in our collective cultural identity. To acheive this aim, the paper focuses on the semiotics of our spatial perception of the forest, and also includes – in the form of a compilation of thoughts – examples from literature, art, and landscape design that have contributed to the Western (predominantly European) perception of the forest.

The assumptions upon which the Western relation to the forest lie – and which at least partially emerge from the structural characteristics of the forest (that it is pathless, not easy to survey, dark and unfathomable) – are filled with contradictions.[1] The forest is perceived as a space of freedom which evades control, and, because of this, it is also a space where laws do not easily apply. The forest is both a sanctuary and a place filled with danger. It is a space of the transcendent, the sacred, of delirium, and revelation, and also a space that has experienced profane exploitation. In addition to fear, awe, and not least scientific inquiry, these connotations continue to determine our relation to the forest and form the foundation for current imaginaries related to it. They also remain relevant in the context of contemporary ecological and social problematics.

A Multitude of Interests

The multitude of forest-related interests is well presented in the book *The Open: Man and Animal* by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben recounts how Jakob von Uexküll, an ecologist from the turn of the 20th century, set forth an infinite variety of perceptual worlds – a notion then contrary to classical science. All of these perceptual worlds, writes Agamben, are “as perfect and interconnected as in some sort of an extensive musical score”. To this Agamben adds:

> There does not exist a forest as an objectively fixed environment: there exists a forest-for-the-park-ranger, a forest-for-the-hunter, a forest-for-the-botanist, a forest-for-the-wayfarer, a forest-for-the-nature-lover, a forest-for-the-mushroom-picker, a forest-for-the-lumberjack, and finally a fable forest in which Little Red Riding Hood loses her way.[2]

1 For more on the history of the Western relation to the forest and its subsequent role, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992; and Simon Schama: *Landscape and Memory*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, pp. 46–48.

Polonca Lovšin's lucid collage from the series *We Can't See the Forest for the Trees* (2019–2021) depicts a multitude of contemporary forest-related interests.

All of these perceptual worlds, or interests if you like, persist as separate perceptions and constructions of what the forest is – or might be – and what its purpose is. This makes it difficult to grasp the complexity of the forest and determine how it should be approached as part of the landscape. Divergent perceptions tend to lead to exclusivist policies applied to the forest in terms of its management, exploitation, and use, and compete with each other to answer the following two crucial questions that derive from this context: to whom does the forest belong and for whom should it be preserved – if at all?[3] These differing perceptions often exist in stark opposition to each other, and also influence invested emotions regarding identity, patrimonium, property, heritage, conservation of nature, and the like.

The Forest and the Countryside

The forest is the land that is closest to nature with minimal deviations from its primordial stage. It is a complex ecosystem in which changes are slow and gradual, and it is a landscape unit that is largely self-supplied. Forest provides for its own needs and requires less maintenance than other parts of the cultural landscape, such as fields, vineyards, and meadows, which require constant human intervention and care to sustain their productivity. While most of the cultural landscape is structured in geometrical order, and thus easily comprehensible, forests are less orderly in this sense. They represent – and often also are to a great extent – pristine nature, complex, and unfathomable. In today's anthropogenized and geometricized world, this aspect makes the forest all the more important as a representative of authentic nature.

According to landscape ecologists Richard Forman and Michel Godron,[4] forests are the main eco-patches in ecological networks, and, dependant on their size, they also act as a matrix. Large and not-so-large patches of forest allow natural processes to take place despite discontinuities inflicted by human beings and those that emerge from natural causes. For example, they enable the passage of smaller and larger animals and the movement of seeds from patch to patch and/or to a matrix.

Without human population and related interventions, forests would cover virtually all of Slovenia. The Slovenian territory has been deforested for agriculture and other human needs, and this can be seen by how quickly the forest grows over abandoned farmland.

The gesture of clearing the forest – typically the first stage of agriculture – is not only pragmatic but also symbolic. As the British anthropologist Tim Ingold states: "What agriculture achieves through the practical operations of ground clearance and preparation is the separation of the land from its embodiment in the landscape."[5] However, Ingold also claims that "landscape is not 'nature'"[6]. He is aware that *nature* can mean many things and that a true understanding of the concept would require a discourse on its evolutional history. But what is most important for him is that its "ontological foundation is an imagined separation between the human perceiver and the world, such that the perceiver has to reconstruct the world, in consciousness, prior to any meaningful engagement with it. In this sense (literally) the world of nature is what lies 'out there'."[7] British historian Simon Schama makes a similar argument about this kind of separation which can be summarized as follows: "Forest is the newer word assigned to the woodland, and

3 See Philippe Descola, "Who Owns Nature", *laviedesidees.fr*, January 21, 2008, https://booksandideas.net/Who-owns-nature (accessed August 7, 2025).

4 See Richard T. T. Forman and Michel Godron, *Landscape Ecology*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1986.

5 Tim Ingold, *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social Relations*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1987, p. 154.

6 Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape", *World Archaeology, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society*, thematic issue, vol. 25, no. 2, 1993, p. 154.

7 Ibid.

it is etymologically derived from *foris*, being outside".[8] Landscape is, therefore, where we are "in here". The forest, as an epitome of nature, of *the other*, is "out there".

According to both Ingold and Schama, the forest is not only a symbol of nature, but is also de facto nature: wild, untamed, uncivilized. It stands in opposition to agricultural land, to the intricate, traditional, and pragmatic industrial patterns of the distribution of fields, orchards, vineyards, and meadows – all signs of civilization. But only together, in this dialectic opposition, do the forest and the countryside form the basis of our cultural landscape. Hence no matter how *foreign* the forest is, it remains an intrinsic part of the landscape.

A study conducted between 1992 and 1995 (just after the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the formation of the independent Republic of Slovenia), provided a great deal of information connected to the revived sense of Slovenia's national identity. Published in 1998 under the title *Landscape as National Symbol*,[9] it revealed, among other things, that although more than fifty-eight percent of Slovenia is covered with forests and these forests are freely accessible to the public,[10] the forest acts merely as a backdrop to the traditional cultural landscape in the overall perception of the national territory. The forest was thus not included in the image of the country as an integral, constitutional part.

If the same study were carried out today, almost thirty years later, it might produce different results. But in this particular aspect, the results would most likely be unchanged as the codes that define our perception of the forest are tenacious and old fears persist.[11]

8 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 83; Schama develops this idea further in the chapter "The Liberiteis of the Greenowood", p. 144: "The nomenclature 'forest' that now replaced the older Latin terms of *saltus* or *silva* was in all probability derived form *foris*, or 'outside'. It signified not a particular kind of topography but a particular kind of administration, cut off from the regular codes of Roman and common law."

9 Ana Kučan, *Krajina kot nacionalni simbol*, Znanstveno in publicistično središče, Ljubljana, 1998, https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-HXB-JWSAR (accessed July 22, 2025). See also Ana Kučan, "Constructing Landscape Conceptions", *JoLA – Journal of Landscape Architecture*, spring 2007, pp. 30-41; Ana Kučan, "The Modern Social Perception of Slovene Space" / "Slovenski prostor v sodobni družbeni predstavi", *Acta Geographica*, no. 37, 1997, pp. 111–169, https://giam.zrc-sazu.si/sites/default/files/zbornik/kucan37.pdf (accessed July 22, 2025).

10 In 1993, the Forest Act of the Republic of Slovenia restored the previously exercised public right to free access to forests, which had been in place before the change of the political system in 1991. The law was therefore a necessary and welcome corrective, which preserved the right of free access granted to the public under socialist legislation and ensured its continuation.

11 See also Marko Polič et al., *Spoznavni zemljevid Slovenije*, Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana, 2002, p. 381.

Poster from the series *On the Sunny Side of the Alps* (*Na sončni strani Alp*, 1988–1989) combines mountains, fields, and national costumes as the main signifiers of Slovenian national identity; the forest is placed in the background.

Structural and Visual Characteristics of the Forest as a Spatial Entity: Opaqueness

The question thus arises as to why the forest exists only in the margins of our cultural perception, or perhaps more accurately as a backdrop. Slovenian perception of the forest does not differ from the broader Western cultural context in which it is historically grounded. The semiotics of the spatial perception of the forest in Western culture at least partially emerges from the characteristics of the internal spatial structure of the forest and the relationship of the forest to other parts of the landscape. Forests are spaces that remain opaque, impenetrable. From an open, surveyable[12] part of the landscape, we enter the forest through a "wall", a thickness, the depth of which we cannot define from the outside. Inside the forest, the relationships between structural elements, mostly the verticals of trees but also the horizontal strata of the undergrowth, are difficult to read. They provide neither easily discernible visual contrasts or rhythms. Forests are structurally uniform in terms of texture and colour and their elements are repetitive; the repetition is ubiquitous, the space condensed and impassable. Thus, in comparison to other categories of landscape, the forest seems dark, pathless, structurally monotonous, compact, not easy to survey, and therefore unfathomable and frightening.

12 Here I mean "surveyable" from the human point of view without technical means.

Even beyond its physical characteristics, the forest presents a system of profound complexity. Our perception of the forest is overwhelmed by impressions: images, sounds, smells, touch. Ecologically, the forest is in constant creation and transformation, which only adds to this confusion. Of course, this quality of the forest has its advantages, and this is something that should also be explored, but in terms of structure, the forest is at the extreme of dynamic and varied relations between planes and volumes in the landscape: the relation between a simple flat surface, say a meadow or a pasture on the one hand, and a forest on the other, which acts as a dense volume not only from the outside, but even when we are inside it. There are simply too few visual contrasts or orientation points in the forest. In this respect, the complexity of the forest often seems daunting.

To better understand the problem of the opaqueness of the forest, we might consider how the limited possibility of surveying our path through it and predicting our future action in the landscape shapes our perception of the forest. These limits on our actions are a key subject of Janez Marušič's essay "The Garden as an Experience of the Promised World". In this essay, the Slovenian landscape planner draws on the example of Dante being lost in the woods (see fig. on p. 110), pointing to the Western fear of the uncertainty associated with the forest. Dante uses the forest as a metaphor for the crisis in life, and Marušič believes that it is significant that he chose this specific element of the landscape to do so.[13]

The structure of the forest.

13 Janez Marušič, "The Garden as an Experience of the Promised World", in Ana Kučan and Mateja Kurir, eds., *Garden and Metaphor*, Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel, 2024, p. 58. Marušič refers to the line in Dante's *Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto primo*: "I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! How hard a thing is to say, what was this forest savage, rough, and stern, which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more ...".

The contrast between the undulating plane of the mountain pasture and the dense volume of the spruce forest.

Antithesis to the Garden (The Dark Side of Arcadia)

In a further examination of the European typology of landscape, we discover that the forest is the opposite of the garden, the latter being a place safely secluded from the perils of the hostile world where man has far less control over nature. The idea of Dante's *selva oscura* (dark forest), the forest as a dangerous and terrifying place, differs from Arcadia, an early version of paradise known from ancient Greek mythology. In Arcadia, the forest is the locus of unspoiled wilderness, an idyllic vision of bountiful splendour and harmony among all beings, not only human and non-human, but also real and mythological, beastial and refined. This conception, originating in the (Ancient) forest, also differs profoundly from the more modern idea of a garden as a place of rest and self-indulgence.

Snow White, illustration by Marlenka Stupica (Mladinska knjiga, 1956). The forest here is both frightening and comforting at the same time (fig. up). Stupica brilliantly transfers onto paper the internal structure of the forest, its density and monochromy. She uses vertical lines and a palette of dark shades of green to which she adds spots of bright colour to emphasize both the forest's hazards and its wonders. The fence that encloses the garden of Snow White's new home with the dwarves further exposes the opposition between garden and forest (fig. below).

The bestial quality of Arcadia can be discerned in the instinctive, sensual joys that were subsequently excluded from the idea of the garden as it developed in the Western world. During the Italian Renaissance, this particular quality of Arcadia is reflected in a very specific Renaissance garden feature: the *grotto*. With the *grotto*, the Renaissance acknowledged the instinctive, the animalistic, the natural in the human that, along with mythological creatures, deviated from then dominant ideology, Christianity. It neatly secured and separated both the animalistic and the mythological from everyday life. In contrast, the Renaissance *bosco*, a forested and shady part of the garden, a descendant of the aristocratic hunting grounds, included mostly for climatic reasons, was almost as neat and orderly as the topiary, and certainly featured no beasts.

One example of the *bosco* stands out as its own antithesis: *Il Giardino dei Mostri di Bomarzo* (the garden of monsters) from the mid-16th century located in central Italy. The creators of the garden, Vicino Orsini (1523–1585) and Pirro Ligorio (1514–1583) deviated from the spirit of the times. Their garden is the antithesis of the accepted symbolism of the garden as an ordered universe. It is not only that the whole garden is a *bosco*, but that this *bosco* is not neat at all. It is like an inside-out *grotto*, a forest in which incredible and strange creatures and buildings are scattered about in no particular order, distorting the apparently immediate reality and transforming it into a field of discomfort.

Bomarzo, Italy, mid-16th century.

Referring to Marušič's idea about how the ability to predict our future action in a landscape influences our perception of this very landscape, Bomarzo is a protest against the enclosure of a human environment within the world as an earthly paradise, a protest against the idealized experience. In reality, writes Marušič, the world is cruel and unforgiving.[14] In Bomarzo, all possible monsters attack man:

14 Ibid., p. 61.

earthquakes, plagues, beasts, wars, floods, even Hannibal's soldiers with their elephants. Merciless time reigns, burying beneath the soil magnificent antique temples of which we only catch a glimpse here and there.

The historical symbolism of the garden – as a manifestation of humanized nature and human order –, to which the forest is a counterpart, continues to dominate and shape contemporary discourse. Yet, it is time to critically examine the relevance of this symbolic framework. "Can the symbolism of the garden – home, certainty, reconciliation with time – persist?" Marušič asks.[15] We might speculate that in light of current environmental and social uncertainties the perception and symbolism of the garden as a place safe from external threats will only be reinforced, and that the garden will continue to function symbolically (and actually) as a form of escape. However, it would also be reasonable to ask whether, by changing our perspective and accepting uncertainty as a potentiality, we could begin to perceive the forest – hitherto alien – as a garden. In many cases around the world, forests – or parts of the forests – are already protected as sanctuaries, guarded and displayed to the public through educational and other channels. What we need is the transfer of this perception into our daily spatial practice which would allow us to embrace the protection and conservation of nature not only in legally protected areas but also outside of them, thus bringing the forest as an epitome of nature closer to people.

Certainly the forest's complex structure has advantages. The forest as a space of freedom which evades control remains an attractive concept, especially in urban areas where control and guidance of behavior are omnipresent. But the instant we accept the forest as as space of freedom, we also need to accept that the forest might become a place for the outcasts of our times. In neither case does the forest escapes its contradictions.

The Liberties of the Green Woods

In the mythology of sylvan liberties that is known in countries across Europe, the forest acts as a refuge for outlaws as well as other outcasts of society. This myth still adheres in modern times. Take for example the *Kekec* stories for children and young people by the Slovenian writer Josip Vandot, which were turned into a series of extremely popular movies (1951–1968). The stories, written in the first half of the 20th century, recount the adventures of the main character Kekec, a bright, good-natured, and courageous mountain boy in his early teens who fights evil and restores justice in the relations not only between people but also between people and nature. These stories have an ambiguous view of good and evil with the forest at their centre. In addition to characters who are clearly either good or evil, the stories revive the morally complex female creature of the Alps in the character of Pehta – a female outlaw living in the forest. Pehta is portrayed as an ambiguous figure: good in some contexts and malevolent in others. Pehta is "the other" who does not conform to prevailing social norms but is not inherently wicked either. It is Pehta, who, because of her closeness to nature and knowledge of healing plants, cures the blindness of Mojca, Kekec's frail female friend.

Pehta in the film *Good Luck, Kekec* (*Srečno, Kekec!*), 1963.

15 Ibid.

The mythology of sylvan liberties was important for the English landscape movement of the 18th century. Indeed, it co-shaped a view of the forest that, along with revolutionary ideas of social restructuring, was exported during the 18th and 19th centuries to the European continent. Some of the reasons for the glorification of the liberties of the forest are connected to the quest for the true Englishness in 18th-century England.[16] Simon Schama explains this in his study on the relationship between physical environment and folk memory, which becomes enmeshed in the collective cultural consciousness. This subject is exposed in a true story of another contradictory outcast: Henry Hastings, the Earl of Huntingdon, who was one of the keepers of the New Forest. Hastings lived in the forest and therefore did not have to conform to social norms: "His house was called, aptly enough, a Woodland and he entertained his guests in a hollow of an oak tree. His manor was evil-smelling and untidy, half-gnawed marrowbones lying on the carpets, hawks and falcons sat on the scones on the walls, spattering the floor with their droppings, fox skins and polecat pelts hanging from the ceiling. Rude, lecherous, and emblem of English incorrigibility, bloody-minded, freely fornicating earthiness … Hastings became an emblem of the English Greenwood. A survivor of the ancient forest knighthood, a specimen of the tradition of wild men of the woods, an Arcadian prince of Panic, goatish and greedy."[17] But at the same time, Hastings was also the bearer of freedoms symbolically linked to the forest. Schama goes further: While "it is virtually impossible to disentangle myth from reality in this portrait of … the squire of the New Forest", it is because of its connotations with liberties that the "filthy *terribilitas* of Hastings, all crazed and blasted …, satisfied [William Gilpin's] picturesque demand for irregularity." For forest was for Gilpin, an active critic of the corruption of the true English picturesque, who

16 At the time the English landscape garden was being created and a new spatial order was being invented to demonstrate the new, more libertarian social order of the parliamentary monarchy also physically, in space, debates were raging among the English intelligentsia about what the essence of Englishness was, and what landscape best represented it. Architect William Chambers (1723–1796) advocated for affected pretentious landscape "improvements" that included exotic novelties such as Chinese pavilions, bridges, and the like. Chambers' ideas were fiercely opposed by the painter and clergyman William Gilpin (1724–1804) on the grounds that they were alien to Englishness. Gilpin argued for a forest, a "true English forest", a "forest of the New England" ("new" in the sense of the new social order that reflected the freedoms of the emerging social class of wealthy bourgeoisie and lower nobility, who had fought for political power in opposition to the old aristocratic order), as the heart of Englishness and thus the base of the true English landscape. For more on the quest for the Englishness of the English "style", the "true English picturesque", see Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pp. 135–139.

17 Ibid., pp. 136–137.

detested the "landscape improvements" in the spirit of chinoiseries promoted by Sir William Chambers, the embodiment of the true Englishness.[18] It is for this reason, says Schama, that Gilpin rejoiced in the splendidly horrible anachronism of Henry Hastings. Schama ties the lore of the free greenwood to opposition to the administrative measures applied to the forest by the Normans, which excluded the woodlands from the use of lay people and secured them for the aristocracy as their hunting and leisure ground.

In Slovenia, we can thank the aristocracy for the bits of the primaeval forest we still have.[19] Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind the social consequences of measures taken at the time: from the ban on poaching – which co-created the mythology associated with the forest – to the exploitation of forests for timber and game reserved for its aristocratic owners; from peasants being allowed to collect fallen branches, leaves, and forest fruits, to chopping and hunting being strictly forbidden. These restrictions on the use of the forest and the roles played by individuals depending on their class, coupled with the visual impenetrability of the forest and its alienation from the daily field work, stimulated the human imagination to create the powerful mythology of the forest.

Bears, Wolves, Partisans, and Migrants

The understanding of the forest in Slovenia offers no exception to the wide belief that the forest has been (or is) a place where real and imagined perils originate. In World War Two, the Partisan resistance was led from the forest, the forest being the safest hiding place for the guerrilla fighters resisting both Italian and German occupation and local collaborators. In Slovenia's common perception of the forest, this is still present as a historical fact, while at the same time acts as a mythical polygon with positive and – due to the continuous ideological distortion of the facts – also negative connotations.

18 Ibid.

19 In Slovenia, the aristocracy protected its estates, including extensive forests, from over-exploitation and from fragmentation by various measures including *fidei commissum*. This was mainly for its own benefit. And yet these forests – in particular the Kočevje forests (Kočevski Rog and Krokar) – were subsequently declared as nature reserves by state institutions. For more on the history of the conservation of nature, see Stane Peterlin, "Nekaj o zametkih in začetkih varstva narave v Sloveniji", *Varstvo spomenikov*, no. 20, 1975, pp. 75–92; Ivan Gams, *Pragozd Krokar*, ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, 1994; and UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe*, 2021, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1133/ (accessed August 7, 2025).

Illustration by Tomaž Lavrič for Janko Lorenci's column in the *Mladina* magazine, titled: "Gosh, I don't dare go into the woods anymore: Problems with migrants and ourselves."

Recently, forests in Slovenia, especially those on the border with Croatia, which acted as the European Union border until January 2023, became a transient refugium on the so-called Balkan migrant route. Once again, the forest proved to be a place that is never socially neutral. Not only is it seen as such, but ipso facto becomes a "home" for outlaws, only this time without any connection to the lore of freedom. The one constant is the perception of the impurity or otherness of those who take refuge in it. The forest is still the source and cause of wonder – and of fear.

Nika Autor's documentary *Here I Have a Picture* (2022) was filmed in unofficial refugee camps in the forests in Bosnia and Hercegovina along the EU border.

In the essay film *Red Forests* (2022), Nika Autor rethinks the installed razor wire on the EU border since 2015, as well as the forests along the EU border – as a geographical, natural, and political space.

The perversity of the (ab)use of this ambivalent status of the forest was problematized by Agnieszka Holland in her documentary film about the Belarus–Poland border in 2021, with the ironic, almost cynical title *The Green Border*.[20] During those years, Belarus used refugees as a live "weapon" in its tense relations with Poland. Namely, it allowed refugees from the Middle East to enter Belarus by plane and then dumped them in the forests along the Polish border. Poland responded in the same cruel way, and thousands of migrants were left to wander in the dark forest, dying in the cold and mud between two barbed wire fences. Again, the language of fear was employed in the propaganda on both sides, reinforcing old-fashioned perceptions of the forest as a place of perils.

A Step toward the Sacred Grove

In Slovenian culture, the persistence of the notion of the forest as a dark, uninviting, and even sinister place, is apparent in the perennial failure to introduce a new model of a cemetery that would draw on the concept of *the sacred grove* rather than *the city of the dead*. The first and thus far only attempt to introduce the concept of the woodland cemetery in Slovenia was initiated by the landscape architect Dušan Ogrin in the 1970s. The example closest to this model was Ogrin's cemetery Stara Gora in Nova Gorica, planned in 1971, but only partially executed. This was followed by his proposal for a new Rogoznica cemetery in Ptuj in 1975 and later by Niko Stare's and Dušan Moravec's plan for the Dobrava cemetery in Maribor (1980). Although implemented, neither woodland part was ever used for the interment. The inauguration of the Srebrniče cemetery near Novo Mesto[21] took place as late as 2001, although preparations for it started even before a related design competition was held in 1989.

20 The film was screened on Ljubljana Film Festival in November 2023, a good week before the *Forest Encounters* symposium took place in Ljubljana. The film serves as a significant point of reference in the context of the presentation of how the perception of the forest as the place of "otherness" is still at work.

21 Dušan Ogrin and Aleš Vodopivec, *Pokopališče Srebrniče, Novo mesto. Natečaj*, 1989. The project was realized in the years 1995–2001 by Dušan Ogrin and Davorin Gazvoda (landscape architecture), and Aleš Vodopivec and Nena Gabrovec (architecture).

Forest cemetery Srebrniče near Novo Mesto, Slovenia, realized in 2001.

All of this shows that the acceptance of a new cemetery model in Slovenia has been extremely slow, difficult, and that the efforts to introduce it were never completed. For example, a recent intervention in the wooded section of the Rogoznica cemetery involved the installation of a circular columbarium, which, among other things, is an unacceptable interference in Ogrin's integral work,[22] which was originally supposed to serve as a forest urn cemetery. It also indicates that our perception of the contemporary cemetery has moved away from efforts to establish nature as the carrier of reverence for the dead.

Dušan Ogrin's plan for the new, forested cemetery in Rogoznica near Ptuj, Slovenia, 1975; note the eastern section for the urn cemetery in the forest.

An aerial view of the same cemetery, with visible intervention from 2018 in the eastern section.

22 Ravnikar Potokar architectural office, the columbarium wall at the Rogoznica Cemetery at Ptuj (2018), https://outsider.si/ravnikar-potokar-arhitekturni-biro-zarni-zid-na-ptuju/ (accessed July 22, 2025).

The debate around cemetery design highlights a particular aspect of Slovenian cultural identity. In Slovenia, the relationship to the cemetery – and through it to death – is rooted in a persistent cultural model shaped largely by Catholicism. *Memento mori* evokes the fear of death. This is why any distancing from the dominant model takes place so slowly, hampered both by rigid legislation and the increased influence of the Catholic Church, which, after 1991, regained its political power despite the constitutional separation of church and state. In cemeteries, this increased influence is evident in the increasing number and size of crucifixes as well as in the decoration of cemeteries and individual graves. It should be noted that in Slovenia cemeteries are by law civil and thus must not be segregated by religious and other beliefs, which also means that they should not be dominated by the symbols of any religion.

Nevertheless, cemeteries – and death with them – are a subject that is extremely difficult to discuss in Slovenia. The shift to the woodland cemetery or more advanced burial in the forest would necessitate a change in the treatment of human remains, such as composting[23] and wrapping bodies in fabrics with fungal spores to speed up decomposition, but this deeply affects our most inner notions of *pietas*. The more widely accepted burial of the ashes in urns is neither sustainable nor does it accept the forest as a place for burial or the scattering of ashes. In most cemeteries, the stainless steel urns are placed in concrete chambers, underground, or in the columbarium walls. There is not even the possibility of interring ashes in a biodegradable urn, which would help introduce a looser, forested type of cemeteries, eventually allowing for the freer scattering of the ashes. Due to the shortage of space and the high carbon footprint of prevailing methods of burial and cemetery management, a change in the prevailing mindset is urgently necessary. To reach a social consensus on this matter, we would need to start openly talking about it as soon as possible. Not only do legislation and persistent beliefs coupled with prejudices act as impediments, but such a change is also blocked by the funeral industry. And yet such changes are already happening in many countries in Europe. In Germany, for example, burials have been allowed in the forest for more than twenty years, with the first location being the Reinhardswald near Kassel inaugurated in 2001. More and more people are choosing this option, and there are now more than two-hundred and twenty cemeteries or forests where biodegradable urns can be buried or ashes scattered. Burial customs are already changing in other parts of Europe and the US, where alternative, sustainable forms of interment are increasingly emerging.

23 The Ethics Commission in Seattle had in 2019 approved the composting which is by now the most environmentally responsible practice of the treatment of human remains. Since then, many American states have allowed this practice. People can donate remains as biomass for the revitalization of the depleted forest ecosystems. See https://recompose.life/ and https://returnhome.com/about-us/ (accessed July 22, 2025).

Luisenstädtischer Cemetery, Berlin, design by relais Landschaftsarchitekten, 2019.

Forest cemetery in Frelsdorf, Northern Germany.

As a professor of landscape architecture at the department of landscape architecture of the University of Ljubljana Biotechnical Faculty, I have introduced the idea of a forest cemetery as part of a learning process in how to design with primal means of landscape such as landform, vegetation, and water. Applying research through design when learning to design a landscape that links together pragmatic and symbolic issues, my second-year undergraduate students explore possible applications for a new model of a cemetery immersed in the silence of the forest.[24]

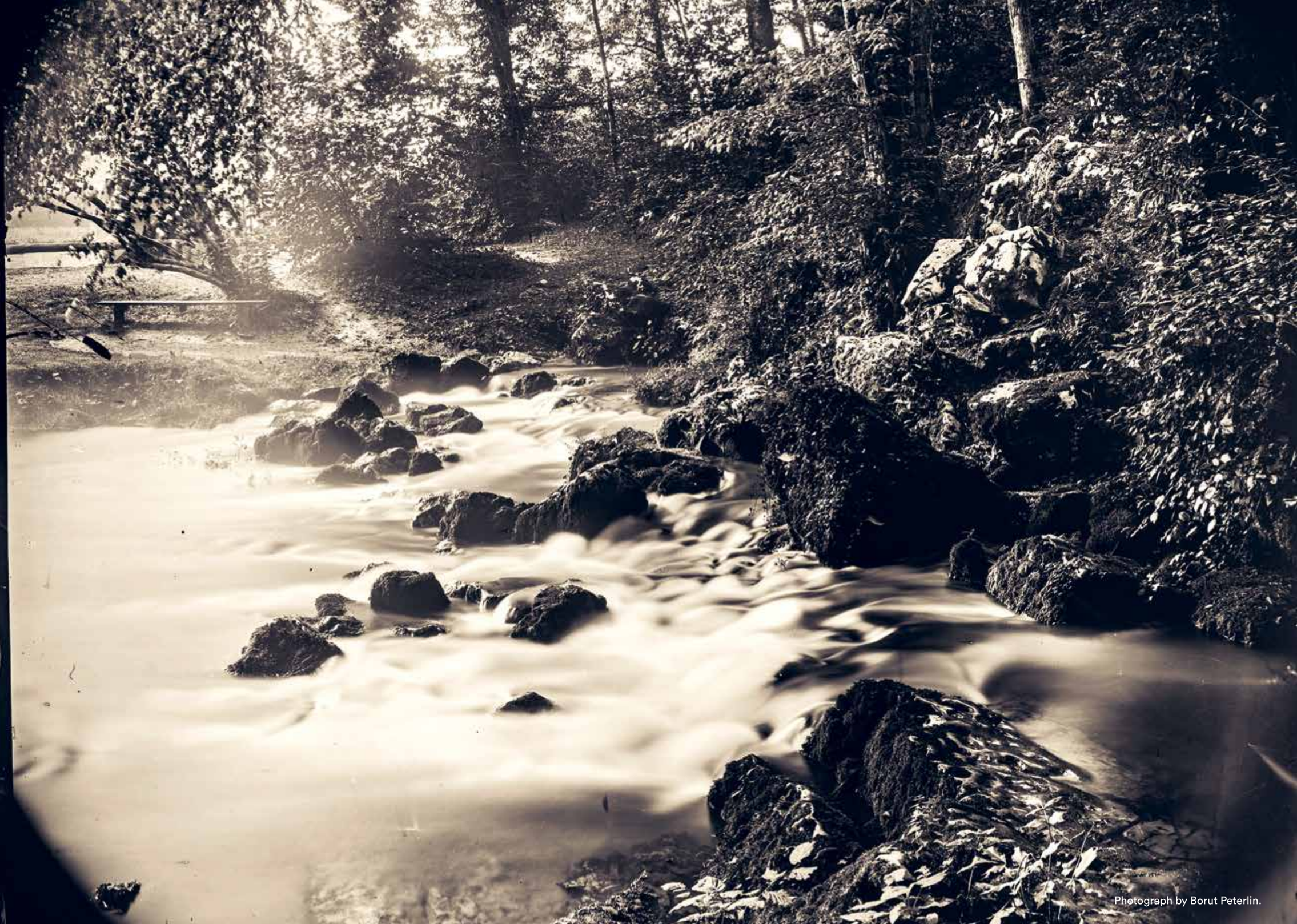
24 Students' research results are presented in Yearbooks of Landscape Acrhitecture Programme of the University of Ljubljana 2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2022, 2022/2024, etc., see https://www.bf.uni-lj.si/en/units/-landscape-architecture-/study/yearbooks/. The exhibition *Studies of Horizontality and Solitude* was held at the Bank of Slovenia's Mala Galerija from November 21 to December 13, 2019, with a closing discussion on the subject of the concept and form of the new cemetery.

Tim Gerdin, cemetery in the forest, student work at the department of landscape architecture, Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana, 2018–2019.

Inviting the Forest to Reenter our Lives

In light of the emerging sensitivity[25] to our fast-changing world, the cause of anxiety as well as of greater awareness of the consequences of our actions, it is the ideal moment to adopt a social consensus on necessary changes in the design and management of cemeteries and burial methods. Regardless of the codes that pose persistent limitations, it is surprising that we have still not managed to adopt new models of burial, especially in Slovenia where almost sixty percent of the territory is covered by forest. It seems unbelievable that despite the long-lasting tradition of public use of forests, the forest still makes us feel uncomfortable in general and especially in relation to funeral practices. The turning point in our attitude toward the new cemetery will be when we address in a new and meaningful way both the pragmatic and symbolic issues related to choices around burial and commemoration practices, use of space, logistics, reverence and, last but not least, climate change. If only we could succeed in inhabiting the forests with our beloved dead, no longer seeing "dust becoming forest" as a threat – it would indicate a more inclusive perception of the forest and thus a change of attitude where man once again embraces nature.

25 Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, Polity, Cambridge, UK, and Hoboken, NJ, 2022.



Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

Illustration by Giovanna Dun.

TITTA C. RACCAGNI

ON INFORESTING:

THE STORY OF ULTIMA BECOMING WOOD

Today we took the path that goes up from the church. It is a narrow path that immediately plunges into thick brush. We manage a few hundred metres when suddenly the walk stops. The leap of a deer makes us jump with joy and surprise. Then we hear a sound like a bark – it is a bark! Barbara and I look at each other with wide eyes because the barking sounds so much like Ultima's voice: a voice from a few years ago. Is it possible that she has regained strength and vigor and barks so loudly in the middle of the woods? Is it possible that ...? We remain immersed in the mystery for some time, then it begins to rain and we head back toward home.

I've just been texting with my mom. She says maybe Ultima turned into a woodland creature and came to greet us in her own way. My mouth opens into a smile.

Today we discovered that deer bark and howl just like dogs.
Dusk is falling. It used to be my favourite time of day with its ever-changing, melancholy but sweet light. However, now it has become the hour of despair, with the cold and darkness, and weariness descending, along with streams of tears that I can't hold back, that I can't hold back.

Meanwhile I fill the stove. The wood is from a big beech tree, Marino told me.

Today I also found out that the forest, every part of the forest around Topolò, belongs to some local family. "Belongs": in the all-human idea of everything being owned by someone. We must change the paradigms with which we think about the world.

What thoughts do other thoughts think ...?

It is four o’clock in the afternoon and today we have not moved yet. It is an uncertain day of clouds, and dappled sunshine. It rained heavily during the night and now everything is damp and wet. We don’t even have the right shoes to wear in this mud. My old boots, bought ten years ago to go work in Dharamshala, have split open and no glue has worked to put them back together again. But maybe that’s just an excuse and what prevails today is fatigue and the desire to stay home.

I get fewer and fewer messages. A couple of dear friends still call, and we talk about Ultima’s choice as something beautiful and important. We also tell each other that death for animals is not as taboo as it is for us who want to push it away all the time.

In contrast, another friend writes to me: the saddest thing was to imagine her dying alone.

In the woods, alone? I don’t think she could have chosen a better place in terms of biodiversity: the beeches, the poplars, the firs, the hornbeams, the birches, the chestnut trees. The deer, the boars, the foxes, the salamanders, the snakes, the vipers. Mushrooms. The insects that ceaselessly pollinate. The birds singing their spring. And the flowers, so many flowers that are born each day, that I can’t even name, except for a few of them like Forget-Me-Not. I won’t. I promise.

Milan as I imagine it: the emptiness in the house, in the city, at the park, in the car, emptiness perceptible with each step, each glance. I see some dogs passing by, hear dogs’ howling from unfamiliar houses. You are no longer with me. And yet. Since you left for the woods, each day, sometimes several times a day, when I accidentally pick up the phone or look at a clock, the time is always doubled. 10:10, 15:15, 22:22, 23:23, 16:16, 00:00, 17:17, 20:20 ...

You were so tiny when you were only a few days old, the last of the litter, born the day after all of the others. You opened your eyes for the first time while resting on my hand. It all begun in that moment. Next May 26 you would have been fifteen years old. On that day, there will be a total eclipse of the moon.

I found this drawing by chance in a gallery in Milan. Now I like to imagine you this way.

Topolò / Topolove, Italy
Spring 2021

GIOVANNI ALOI

REMEMBRANCE AND RECOVERY: ON THE FRAGILITY AND PERSISTENCE OF NATURE

In Renaissance painting, forests regularly figured as a backdrop, reminders of the darkness lurking at the edges of reason. The well-lit human characters in the foreground, by contrast, stood for rationality, the nature and culture dichotomy being subliminally reinforced by beautiful images that placed the human at the centre of the cosmos. The metaphorical and actual impenetrability of the forest in Western art have intertwined for centuries in representations designed to remind us (or convince us) that we no longer belong in nature; that we left it a long time ago; and that the forest essentially is, for us, a place of loss: losing our way, our faith, our sanity, our life. This text explores, through the work of artists as radically diverse as Otto Marseus van Schrieck, Wifredo Lam, Cecilia Vicuña, and Abel Rodríguez, the different ways in which artists engage with forests as sites of remembrance and recovery rather than of loss and mourning.

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It is no coincidence that Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* should begin at the edge of *la selva oscura* – the dark forest.[1] In essence, *The Divine Comedy* is a humanist literary masterpiece: originally written between 1308 and 1321, and completed just before the author's death, it reflects Dante's personal concerns for the afterlife and its relationship to earthly ethics and conducts. His long journey through hell and purgatory, accompanied by Roman poet Virgil, is marked by spiritual and moral disorientation. *The Divine Comedy's* opening verses make that clear:

> In the middle of the journey of our life
> I found myself astray in a dark wood
> where the straight road had been lost sight of.
> How hard it is to say what it was like
> in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled
> the very thought of it renews my panic.
> It is bitter almost as death itself is bitter.
> But to rehearse the good it also brought me
> I will speak about the other things I saw there.
> How I got into it I cannot clearly say
> for I was moving like a sleepwalker
> the moment I stepped out of the right way.[2]

Through Hell, Dante loses sight of what he calls "the straight road". Along the way, he encounters three capital vices – envy, pride, and avarice – in the form of allegorical incarnations: a leopard (lust), a lion (pride), and a she-wolf (greed): the bestial degradation of human integrity. The *selva oscura* is an impervious expanse in which nothing is what it seems. Dante describes it as the most frightening of places,

1 *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno*, translated with an introduction by James Romanes Sibbald, Emereo, Brisbane, 2012.

2 Ibid., p. 24.

bitter almost as death itself. And yet, despite all the perils, he finds something good in it: "But to rehearse the good it also brought me." And it's that good that I would like to hold on to throughout this text in the hope that it might lead us out of Dante's forest, not because forests are places we should depart from, but because his forest is haunted by an anthropocentric hubris that continues to entrap us. Each time we believe we've emerged from the obscurity of Dante's forest, we find ourselves again lost in its deepest darkness.

Gustave Doré, illustration for Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy. Inferno*, 1857.

Paintings, literature, theatre: very few other forests have been as influential as Dante's. The *selva oscura* was a primordial maze, the entrance to the classical Hades of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and a platonic image of chaotic matter in which the light of reason is clouded by the impenetrable depth of the vegetation. During the Renaissance, forests were represented as a symbolic domain: the antithesis of cultural rationality. They were spaces in which plants, humans, and animals could engage in a troubling fluidity, one enabled by the scarcity of light, the intricacy of tree growth, and the absence of human-made reference points. It is in this context, that I became

interested in the conscience of sleepwalking that Dante Alighieri foregrounds in the opening of *The Divine Comedy*. This sleepwalking has often been interpreted as a metaphor for the oblivion of reason. But could we conceive of Dante's sleepwalking as the result of humanist philosophies: our alienation from the rest of the non-human world, our loss, our feeling disconnected, our meaninglessness, the existentialist void that we filled with humanism?

The rise of humanism, the 15th century revival of classical Greek culture in Italy, reinvigorated Aristotle's reductionism of nature. Humanism was the response to the unprecedented devastation caused by the Black Death, a global pandemic that killed approximately two hundred million people in Eurasia and North Africa between 1347 and 1351, leaving humanity to confront a profound existentialist crisis.[3] Why would God inflict such a horrific punishment upon his most prized creation? In the aftermath of this tragedy, humanism emerged as a formidable antidote: a philosophical system of thought borrowed from Classical Greek philosophy and bolstered by Christianity, which reaffirmed the supremacy of human intelligence above that of all other earthlings. Humanity needed to regain self-confidence, and as the artistic output of the Renaissance amply demonstrates in its victorious aesthetics of positive grandeur and stability, humanism served Western civilization well up until the point that it degenerated into outright hubris. Under the false pretence of purity, perfection, and progress, humanism ultimately gave us a patriarchal world order that enabled colonialist atrocities, genocide, irreversible ecological damage, racism, misogyny, and endless conflict.

Dante could not possibly have contemplated the full extent of the damage to which Renaissance mentalities of the kind he portrays in *The Divine Comedy* would lead. However, the negativity and sense of loss associated with his portrayal of the forest were signs of the anthropocentric corruption that already pervaded our relationship with nature at that time. This is further emphasized by the "wood of the suicides" into which Dante stumbles during his journey. Suicide was then considered an immoral act, so it is telling that the souls of those who died by suicide were transformed into trees as punishment. There is a recurring idea in Western art that the transformation of the human into a plant implies a degrading transition, a subtraction, a loss. The transformation from human to plant reduces the softness and sentience of flesh to the cold, hard, and seemingly unresponsive substance of wood.

This generally negative conception became evident during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Italy as part of a progressive *worlding*. I use this term in reference to the well-known text "The Rani of Sirmur:

3 Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346–1353: The Complete History*, Boydell and Brewer, Suffolk, 2021.

An Essay in Reading the Archives" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[4] In this essay, Spivak foregrounds the pervasive role that epistemic practices of mapping and recording by Indigenous artists carried out under the close guidance of colonialist officers played in the production of a new cultural conception of the land during the British colonization of India.

Similarly, the very concept of the forest in Western art is the result of a persistent and pervasive form of worlding, which I argue is mostly perpetuated by Christianity. According to Spivak, through a range of Western-coded practices of recording and rendering, the natives' experience and cultural conception of their own land was re-encoded through the cultural coordinates of the settler's gaze. Over time, this process gradually replaced the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous populations with a colonial framework that denied their ability to materially and culturally own their land, casting them as others, as strangers in their own land. Spivak calls this process worlding, a concept originating from Heideggerian phenomenology, specifically from the work *Being and Time*, and adopted from his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art". To Heidegger, the world is not objective but is the whole set of connections and meaningful relations that generate our experience as human beings, which he termed *Dasein*.[5]

In the context of this understanding of Heidegger's concept of worlding, artworks – defined as cultural artefacts of all kinds – had the power to generate a persistent form of truth that is not primordial or given, but constructed by linguistic and discursive forces, that settle as sediment in realistic material entities such as maps, paintings, and representations of the land, its fauna and flora, and of the human cultures that inhabit it. Worlding, as operated by an ideological majority, thus produces meaningful worlds – worlds wrapped in meaning – in which objects and beings are brought into relations by precise epistemic lenses and logics. Worlding emerges from the nexus of the cultural and material frameworks; a form of normative representation that envelopes both the living and non-living, embedding all its parts into a woven tapestry from which nothing can be disentangled without destroying the weft and warp.

In landscape painting, for instance, the depth of field generated by the use of perspective metaphorically invites the viewer on a spiritual journey away from the dangers and temptations of the forest. We see this, painting after painting, between the 14th and 19th centuries. The foreground of such canvases are often dark and framed by shrubs and trees that allude to the edge of the forest. Through its perspectival structure, the paintings implicitly invite us

4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives", *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1985, pp. 247–272.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927, repr., Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, pp. 14–18.

to leave the forest behind for good and to cast our eyes toward the horizon, following hope, as we get closer to the light of God. It is no coincidence that the brightness of God's greatness in these landscape paintings often coincides with the distant sight of a town – a man-made reality, solid, rational – a castle, a mansion, a town, and the steeple of a church.

Unknown painter, *Italian Landscape*, 18th century.

In Western humanist imagery, the forest can only exist as the shadow of a Christian worlding, and as such is embedded with Christian references to an extent that even animals cannot help but become actors on the stage of this morality play.[6] There's no longer any real place for humans in the forest, at least not for good Christians.

Given this history, it is no surprise that humans are wholly absent from the hyperdetailed *sottobosco* (undergrowth) paintings of Otto Marseus van Schrieck's, in which plants, often different species of thistles, are used as symbols of Christ's passion, and animals symbolize either heavenly or evil characters. Predictably, evil presences are often impersonated by cold-blooded animals like toads, lizards, and snakes, while butterflies symbolize the human soul.[7]

6 This phrase is used by Donna Haraway to exemplify the semantic subjugation that animals undergo when they become embroiled in representational tropes grounded in anthropocentric biases. See "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936", *Social Text*, no. 11, winter 1984–1985, p. 24.

7 Gero Seelig et al., *Medusa's Menagerie: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the Scholars*, Staatliches Museum Schwerin and Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Hirmer Publishers, Schwerin and Enschede, 2017.

Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *Morning Glory, Toad, and Insects*, 1660.

During the Romantic period, the sublime in art reinforced a further figurative separation between humans and forests, portraying the forest as an ancient and remote environment from which we are implicitly and ultimately excluded. In their material essence, sublime paintings of forests, such as those by Caspar David Friedrich, incarnate the very essence of our modern relationship with nature: we observe its greatness as an elusive and enigmatic presence with which we can no longer fully connect. Therefore, the forest becomes an image: a flat representation worlded by Christian ideas.

Caspar David Friedrich, *Mountain Peak with Drifting Clouds*, 1835.

Other cultures have not been subjected to this type of worlding and, as a result, forests in their belief systems are very different places. The Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is a good example of this. Monks renounce a life of excess and luxury in order to retreat into the forest to experience discipline, renunciation, and meditation and fully realize the inner truth and peace taught by the Buddha. Living a life of austerity allows the forest monks to refine their mind. This refinement enables them to clearly and directly explore the fundamental causes of suffering as well as to turn inward to cultivate a path that leads toward freedom.[8]

This example, one among many, offers us a different path, one Dante could not know – a path that doesn't oppose darkness to light, but that is personal and intimate: a path of connectivity. Meanwhile, in the West, even the most experimental art movements of the century, such as Surrealism, could not find their way out of Christianity's worlding. The coordinates of the forest as a subconscious landscape, the land of unbridled drives and recondite desires, is apparent in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalú* (1929): one of the most thought-provoking and revolutionary films in the history of the movement.

The forest continues to look impenetrable, hostile, and forbidden in the works of Max Ernst, but when we look at Frida Kahlo, we see a different reality. In her painting titled *The Wounded Deer* (1946), the artist portrays herself as a haunted animal. Kahlo's self-portrait is part of a forest of interconnectedness and empathy. The arrows in the work clearly symbolize human intrusion in a space of harmony and continuity. A branch on the forest floor is broken. The vegetation is an analogy of the empathy between animal and vegetal form – an empathy that resounds in an even more positive way in Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle* (1943) where human bodies and plants formally merge into a fluid ritual; a coming-together that seems to express a fervent desire to live in the present. The work of artists like Kahlo and Lam points at a richer range of different opportunities – alternative ideations far from those proposed by Western optical realism and the sublime.

8 Ajahn Sumano Bhikkhu, *Questions from the City, Answers from the Forest*, Quest Books, Wheaton, 1999.

Frida Kahlo, *The Wounded Deer*, 1946.

Given that Westerners' conceptions of woods are still heavily shaped by Christian worldviews, how can realism and the sublime work together to portray forests in new ways today?

Abel Rodríguez of the Nonuya people began to work as a local Amazonian guide for scientific expeditions during the 1980s. By the 1990s, faced with loss and grief, as his community was displaced by political turmoil and environmental devastation, Rodríguez began to transfer his knowledge onto paper in the form of extremely detailed and dense drawings of trees, in which every leaf and living being is of equal importance. Far from the objectifying aesthetics of Western botanical illustrations and painted entirely from memory, Rodríguez's plants evince the forest as one living organism in which everything is interconnected. Rodríguez's work – a complex layering of memories and resistance – recalls the "thinking of forests" as theorized by Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think*.[9]

Perhaps new representations of forests could be more constructively based on vibrantly organic philosophical conceptions of dispersion, dissemination, and diffraction, which strive to inscribe a continuum between animals, plants, and humans. In this context, more recent art could remedy what old art has damaged and undo outdated

9 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2013.

tropes. Perhaps, this kind of art might initiate an unworlding of the forest? One that is not necessarily violent, but an unworlding that enables us to access new sets of code through which we can find our way back into a different forest. And most importantly, a forest that no longer is, Dante's.

The possibility of making our way back into a different forest through art led me to the work of Cecilia Vicuña, an Indigenous Chilean artist who recently received the public acclaim that she has deserved for many decades. During the 1970s, Vicuña left Chile because of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet who came to power in 1973 through a military coup. Pinochet's regime was known for its authoritarian rule and human rights abuse, which created a hostile environment for many artists and intellectuals. Vicuña, as a politically engaged artist, felt the need to leave the country to escape censorship and persecution. In the early 1980s in New York, she began creating *Sidewalk Forests*, focusing on the small, spontaneous vegetal realities that crack the pavement and burst through the fabric of the city. Vicuña finds a connective principle in the most disarming and poetic of ways, and subverts the anthropocentric scale that for so many centuries has dictated our relationship to the forest and the woods in order to transform it into something organic and resilient; something that requires our heightened attention.[10] This vegetal connective tissue breathes life into the city itself. It breathes beneath the weight of the streets and buildings, and it reaches the people who live in the city's core. Contemporary artist Jonathon Keats recently said that:

> cities are rife with biodiversity. Urban biomes often host far more species than surrounding areas, including suburbs and agricultural lands. Layers of infrastructure amount to a kind of artificial geodiversity. The sheer complexity of the land and the complexity of the built environment provide countless accidental habitats. Every sidewalk is a forest.[11]

In Keats' conception of Vicuña's work, we find a valuable proposition: the radical invitation to rethink from scratch what a forest might be, where it might begin, where it might end, and how this new conception (one not new to many Indigenous and other cultures) can come to play a productive role in ecological dimensions as well, therefore impacting the ways we preserve forests, or even contemplate the rights of forests to exist in the world.

10 Carina del Valle Schorske, "Cecilia Vicuña's Desire Lines", *The New York Times*, August 25, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/25/magazine/cecilia-vicuna-art.html (accessed October 5, 2023).

11 Jonathon, Keats, "Is Every Sidewalk a Forest? A New MoMA PS1 Exhibit Reveals the Unexpected Natural Habitats of New York", *Forbes*, June 27, 2022, www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2022/06/24/is-every-sidewalk-a-forest-a-new-moma-ps1-exhibit-reveals-the-unexpected-natural-habitats-of-new-york/ (accessed March 22, 2024).

In the autumn of 2022, I visited the Tate Modern in London and encountered Vicuña's monumental work *Brain Forest Kipu*. The work brought to mind a book by Ursula Le Guin: *The Word for World is Forest* in which the forest plays a central and multifaceted role in the overall narrative as it serves as a symbol of nature's power and resilience representing a harmonious and interconnected ecosystem.[12] In Le Guin's book, the forest is depicted as a living entity with its own language and wisdom that only the Indigenous Atsheans, the native inhabitants of the planet, deeply understand and respect. Through their close relationship with the forest, the Atsheans embody a sustainable and balanced way of life in stark contrast to the destructive actions of human culture. It is in this context that Cecilia Vicuña's *Brain Forest Quipu* captures the paramount need to reconfigure, expand, and take seriously our conception of forests. *Brain Forest Quipu* is a ghostly, sublime presence that subtly materializes, celebrates, and evidences trees as well as manifestations of Indigenous knowledge-loss. The solemn theatricality and intense empathic emphasis of this work suggests that there might still be productive opportunities harboured in the sublime as long as they are deployed in ways that can engage us to think more carefully and empathically about forests and about devastation, but also about the importance of forests because they are part of us, and we are part of them. The Quipu, in Indigenous Chilean culture, is first and foremost a communication system made of knots, hair, and fibers woven together.[13]

It is in wholeness, in the concept of entwinement, that we may eventually and enduringly leave behind Dante Alighieri's *selva oscura* to find ourselves not in a place of divine light, but in the quiet luminosity of interconnection – the light of a world we inhabit together.

12 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest*, Tor Publishing, New York, 2010; first published in 1972 as part of the anthology *Again, Dangerous Visions* (ed. by Harlan Ellison), and published as a separate book in 1976 by Berkley Books.

13 *Cecilia Vicuña: Brain Forest Quipu* exhibition in Tate Modern, London, October 11, 2022–April 16, 2023, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/cecilia-vicu%C3%B1a (accessed October 5, 2023).

Cecilia Vicuña, *Brain Forest Quipu*, Tate Modern, London, 2022.

ART AND THE FOREST: FINDING OUR WAY THROUGH THE TREES

AN INTERVIEW WITH GIOVANNI ALOI,
author on the representation of nature and the environment in art, and editor-in-chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*

URŠKA JURMAN: I would like to start this conversation with the last example mentioned in your presentation, Cecilia Vicuña's work.[1] What is your understanding of the meaning of forests in her artwork? Namely, in her *Sidewalk Forests*, she called the resilient, spontaneous vegetation in the cracks of the pavements in the city of New York forest. How do you see the connection in her artwork between the forest as a complex ecosystem and this, let's say, feral urban vegetation?

GIOVANNI ALOI: I think it is a very important contribution in the context of new conceptions of forests. In the humanities and arts, we are reconfiguring the conception of forests in ways that often become too metaphorical. So there is an interesting alignment, and perhaps also a misalignment, between the metaphorical and the ecological. But the two are always connected. I think the more we reframe the metaphorical dimension of what a forest might be in our minds, the more we might be able to engage with forests on an ecological level in ways that are more productive, respectful, and considerate of the rights of forests. For instance, what rights do forests have to exist and not be disturbed by us? One of the aspects I find very important in Vicuña's work is this very personal, intimate desire to expand the conception of forest in the urban context so that we can reconnect to it. It is, in a way, an opportunity to return to a different forest than Dante's, in whose *The Divine Comedy* the forest represents loss.[2] Recently, a lot of my work – since I began to work on *Lucian*

1 The conversation was conducted in connection with Aloi's lecture at the *Forest Encounters* symposium (Ljubljana, December 1, 2023). The conversation and his talk was recorded prior to the symposium. You can view recorded symposium on this link: https://forest-encounters.net/sym/ (accessed July 26, 2025).

2 For more on Aloi's interpretation on Dante Alighieri's understanding of forest in *The Divine Comedy*, see his text "Remembrance and Recovery: On the Fragility and Persistence of Nature", pp. 108–119. – *Editorial note.*

Freud Herbarium,[3] my book that came out in 2019 – revolves around the connection between the domestic sphere and what is near, the mundane, what is close to us on the one hand and, on the other, what is more remote or distant, the sublime. I'm aware, perhaps painfully so, that a lot of the theory that is produced in the field of critical animal studies as well as critical plant studies, and ecocriticism is produced in cities, in universities situated in urban settings where the very idea of nature exists as an abstract term because of the situatedness of the minds that are conceiving nature as something far away, as something over there. And we have to live with that. To quote Donna Haraway, I think it's one of the facets of "staying with the trouble". Those of us who have predominantly lived in cities all our lives can't pretend that we have an understanding of trees and the ecologies which trees establish away from cities that is the same as somebody who has lived up in the mountains for all their lives. But at the same time, I think both parties have something meaningful to bring to the table.

I recently talked to Vicuña, and, despite our very different upbringings – me in the south and north of Italy and hers in Chile – we found a common point. The artist talked to me about the forests, the sidewalk forests, and what they meant to her. It was about uprooting. It was about losing after relocating to New York the connection with the natural world that she was close to in Chile. I said to her: well, those urban forests speak to me a lot, because when I was a kid, I grew up in Milan, but my parents were from the south of Italy, Calabria. So we would spend the summer in the south and then travel back for school for the rest of the year. And to me, being away from the nature of the south was really traumatic. This trauma repeated each year. I just felt so disconnected when back in Milan. I felt like what I cared about the most was not the urban reality and what the city had to offer, but the beauty of animals and plants. And I began to look for them everywhere I could in places where people would say: "Oh, but there's nothing in that river." "Everything's dead in that canal." But if you look carefully, you'd actually see that there was life and plenty of it in these seemingly uninteresting spaces. But we have all been educated not to see. We were made "nature blind" to the point that nobody was even looking in the canal anymore. So, I said: "Well, look, there's newts, there's frogs, there's little fish." And despite its appearance, it's a micro-ecosystem that's valuable and precious.

I believe there's a kind of empathy that we can develop for the mundane, for what is out there on our doorstep in cities that is just as important as the forest "out there". There are micro-forests all around us. I think that if we nurture the ability to see nature everywhere then we will understand better why forests matter as environments, as ecosystems, and also as metaphorical entities that are valuable, and that we can also feel part of because we've kind of

3 Giovanni Aloi, *Lucian Freud Herbarium*, Prestel, London, 2019.

practiced on the small scale of the urban forest environment how to be part of larger systems, how to see, how to engage with them. It might seem like Cecilia Vicuña's sidewalk forests are not real forests in the classical sense of the definition that may apply in science or botany, but they are forests in the context of connectivity. They are microecological systems that burst through the concrete and sustain the urban microecologies of which we are part. So the invitation, I guess, is to try and reconfigure the idea of the forest, not to detract from the beauty or the ecological importance of places that must be safeguarded "out there", but to find a way to connect with them and be part of the forest in original ways, sometimes starting from small and overlooked eco-realities.

MATEJA KURIR: Do you think that in contemporary art, the forest is still predominantly perceived as a place of loss, loss of faith, loss of life, loss of sanity – as in the case of Dante's dark forest – or is this current already shifting?

ALOI: The title of my talk points to the idea that a shift from loss to recovery is taking place. The crucial demise of anthropocentric ideas that positioned us in an antagonistic relationship with the forest is slowly taking place. The forest no longer simply is a symbol of the unconscious, or a metaphor for letting go of human rationality. Artists are more consistently fascinated by the intricacy and complexity of these ecological spaces and the ways in which different earthlings communicate. Many cultures have retained and nurtured conceptions of the forest as a place of care, shelter, intimacy.

I think that European cultures also had that at some point before deforestation became a common practice of expansion. I'm thinking about the Roman Empire, of course, based on my heritage and how deforestation played such an important role in maintaining and expanding the empire. I find that in the US, ideas of colonialism seem to begin with 1492 in people's minds, and the Roman Empire never gets brought up as a precedent of colossal importance in the same eco-political processes and ideas that are associated with the colonialism of the US.

I think recovery is the difficult part. Recovery is where we need art to help us think of new models. Because the recovery of ecology, the recovery of science, is a recovery that can only imagine a certain direction. And the recovery of art can imagine different, non-discipline-bound directions that tend to be more holistic. One of the most interesting aspects of the so called "non-human turn in the humanities" that has changed our cultural panorama over the past thirty years is the way in which artists now think of themselves as active agents. Artists think about themselves as connectors between disciplines, truly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. And I love the fact that we have a range of artists today, many of whom I've

published in the *Antennae* journal[4] and elsewhere, who are not afraid, who are very brave when it comes to engaging with science or with other fields in which they are not authorities. Artists acknowledge that their engagement is that of outsiders who might help those inside the discipline to identify blind spots or see new directions. I know how hard that is – I have been collaborating in art and science projects for many years. It's extremely difficult to find shared jargon, a communal framework of references, to put mutual trust into what we do and say. It's really a challenge, but some artists do it really well. And to me, that is part of the recovery. We have to recover our humanity, our empathy from humanism. Humanism made us the opposite of humans. That's the paradox of humanism as a philosophy.

We ultimately need to initiate processes of recovery that might enable us to rethink the forest and other ecosystems beyond the dramatizations of humanist thinking. Indigenous Amazonian artist Abel Rodríguez, for instance, who has inherited his ecological wisdom from Muinane elders as well as from the tribe of his birth, the Nonuya, worked as a local guide for scientific expeditions during the 1980s. By the 1990s, faced with loss and grief as his community was displaced by political turmoil and environmental devastation, he began to transfer his knowledge onto paper in the form of extremely detailed and dense forest drawings in which every leaf and living being is of equal importance. Using memory to represent the forest that has been destroyed and representing it for others to keep the stories alive became his mission. This practice is part of a recovery process that foregrounds memory as something that the forest also is capable of. I'm thinking again about Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*.[5] These ideas are all interconnected in this ecological form of thinking that also, of course, Timothy Morton has done great work in mapping. And Vicuña, to me, does the same but through a very different range of media. It's a process of recovery. Both Rodriguez and Vicuña come from places of loss, different kinds of loss. I think we have to acknowledge that. The images that I showed in the first part of my presentation are representations of loss. They're beautiful because, over time, we have been trained to think of the forest as this beautiful, sublime place shrouded in mystery and darkness, a place of loss. We need to move through a range of recovery processes that engage other perspectives, because clearly the Western perspective has led us to a deep ecological crisis, into a disaster in so many ways that we must undo – that is the all-important recovery that we all need to focus on.

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4 *Antennae* journal, https://www.antennae.org.uk/ (accessed March 8, 2025).

5 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2013.

Abel Rodríguez's paintings at the 60th Venice Biennale, 2024.

Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

LEA HARTMEYER

A FOREST IN A TREE

In my work as a landscape architecture researcher, I conduct experiments on trees in order to measure their performance metrics and evaluate the ecosystem services they provide for us. This may seem like a technocratic and utilitarian approach to forestry and the forest, but the success of the experiments hinges in no small part on the wellbeing of the trees that are being examined. In a living laboratory setting, trees are not merely objects – means to an end – but participants and active agents. They require us to listen, respond, and perform the mundane yet vital tasks that safeguard their survival: for example, to protect them from storms and give them water in warm and dry months. Because of this, my experiments function as something more than a scientific method intended to gather data. They become acts of care, and through that they compel us to cultivate attention – attention not only to the unique needs and developmental stage of each tree, but also to all human and non-human beings connected through the tree; attention to other maintenance staff and researchers, and to the technology that gives us clues about the metabolism of a tree; attention to all life that assembles and emerges when water, soil, and plant material are combined, including ants, caterpillars, woodlice, spiders, and also forms of soil life that we cannot directly observe. Caring for a tree reveals the complex and fragile networks that make all forms of life possible. Even the singular tree in a pot that is the subject of my experiments is not alone, not isolated. It is a sustaining and sustained part of a larger community of beings and things.

Observing and also participating in the community that assembles around a singular tree led me to ponder how this additional context could change how we understand trees and forests. Officially, definitions of the forest often purposefully exclude cities, even though forested urban areas in many cases fulfill the more technical requirements of a forest. For the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), for example, a forest must be half a hectare in size with at least a ten percent canopy cover of trees that are above five metres high. Many urban neighborhoods around the globe, even densely populated ones, exceed these requirements regarding canopy cover and tree maturity. Other definitions of the forest emphasize another factor that is often absent in the planting of street and park trees. They distinguish forested areas from the forest by highlighting the ecosystem in which they are embedded:

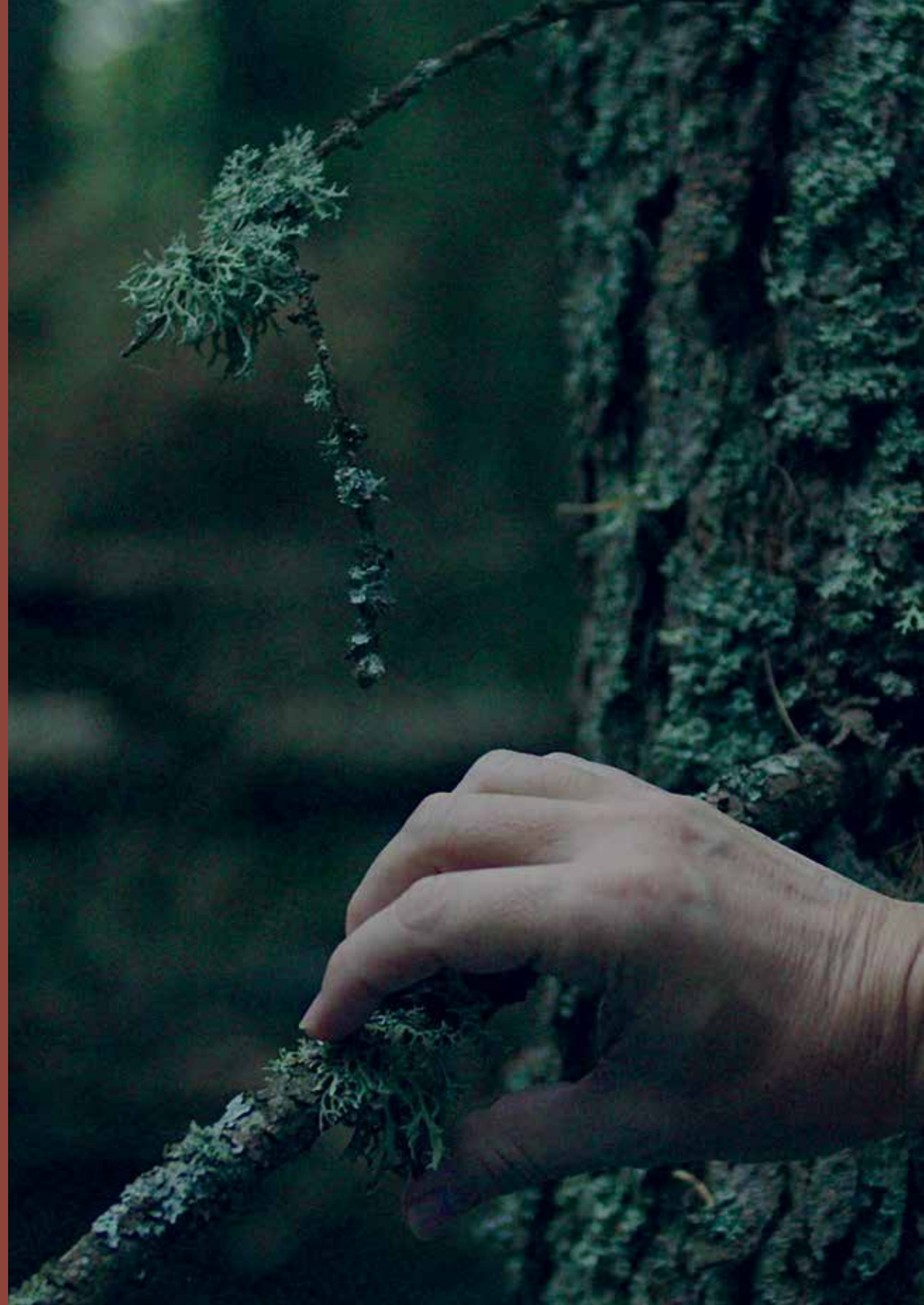
a specialized and resilient system in which woody and non-woody species form symbiotic relationships over long periods of time. Such ecosystems are vital to forest health and biodiversity preservation. In light of climate change and biodiversity loss, we desperately need to expand large scale and mostly undisturbed forest ecosystems. This version of the forest, however, does not necessarily align with how we define the forest. Namely, monocultural production forests are often defined as forests even though the larger forest ecosystem is absent or heavily damaged in such plantations. On the other hand, cities contain a multitude of at least partially connected forest and woodland spaces, such as interstitial spaces, brown fields, and forest parks, where diverse ecosystems can evolve and develop.

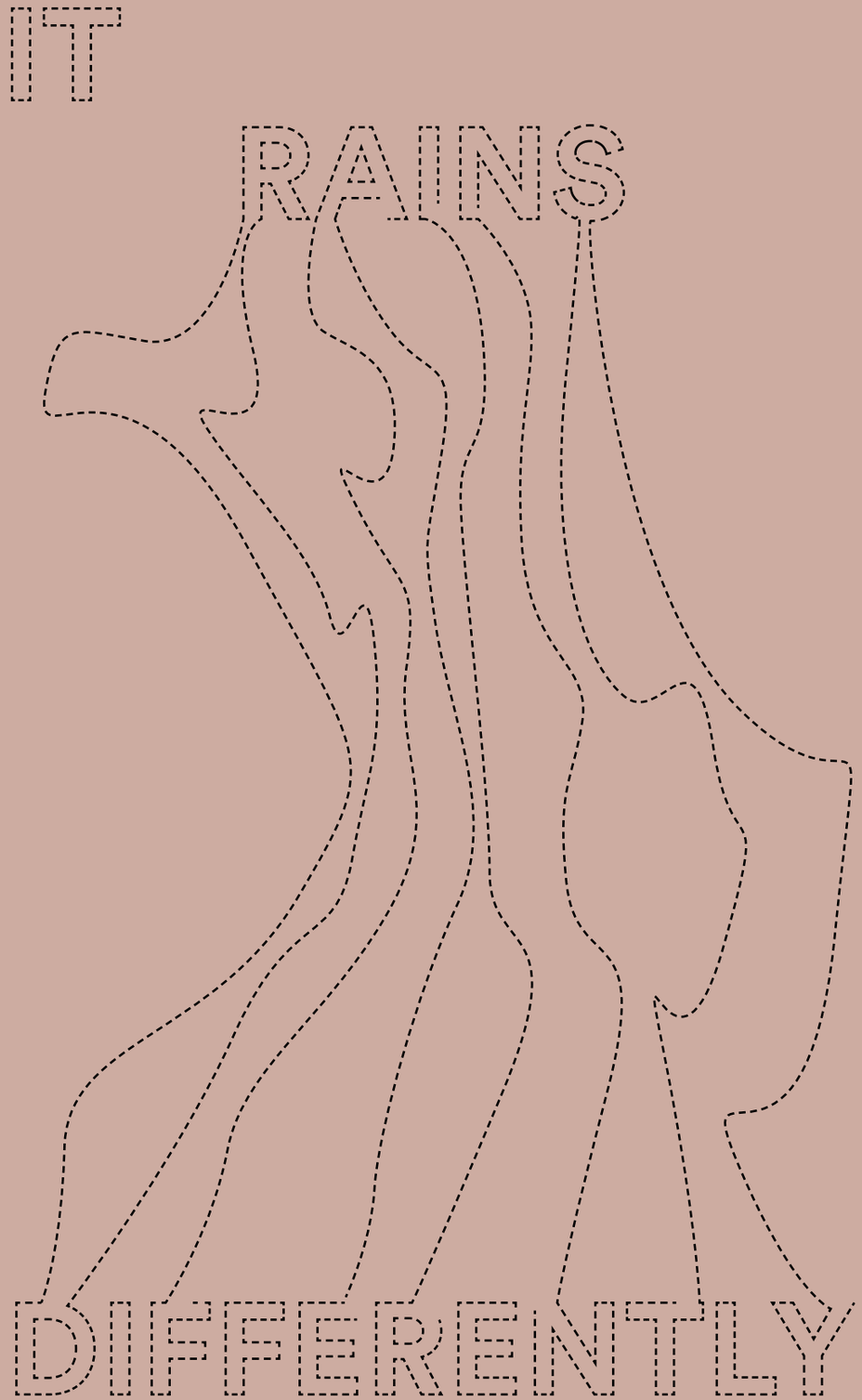
Therefore, I propose we make a place in our understanding of the forest for these communities, the novel ecosystems that accumulate around even a singular tree. This would not be an effort to greenwash numbers regarding forest cover and health, but to cultivate attention: attention to the needs and agency of trees and the organic and inorganic matter to which they are connected; attention to how the larger urban metabolism, but also our lives, are entangled with and connected to (urban) forests; attention to how urban trees exist outside the narrow requirements we inflict upon them in terms of space use, safety, and liability. When we talk of trees, we talk of singular beings or even merely of objects, but **a forest is always a community**. Understanding urban trees as communities, as forests, could help to protect and reinforce the actual and also the potential multi-species assemblages of which they are a part.

IT RAINS DIFFERENTLY

Artistic Research by Dušica Dražić

It Rains Differently **is a long-term and multifaceted project led by the artist Dušica Dražić that centers on the reforestation of the Pešter Plateau in Serbia where the forest was replanted between 1978 and 1988. In August 2024, the collective reforestation was reenacted with the participation of volunteers and local community members, and the complete process was documented.**





FOREST:
I was born in Yugoslavia. The countless hands of Youth Work Actions built the new country's transport infrastructure, its bloodlines; they planted the forest so that its young body could breathe, its blood circulate, to strengthen the heart, stimulate the body to grow, regenerate itself, rejoice. I came out of a notion of natural and social revival by using the power of the collective body that shaped the body of the new federal state.[1]

There she is, the evergreen *Forest*[2] on the karstic Pešter plateau in southwest Serbia. Dense and dark, and remote. *Forest* is surrounded by meadows. In summer, the grass dries, becomes yellow, blends with the colour of the soil from which *Forest* grows. Meandering dirt roads – stones and earth. The ride is bumpy and slow. We get out of the car and walk toward *Forest*. The trees form a wall, with neither beginning nor end in sight. The massive curved wall rises before us. It is as old as we are. Our gaze cannot penetrate its surface. It resides in the depth of its mass, deep within the darkness of *Forest*.

We drive away. The same road winds through a small mountain village toward a hill that faces *Forest*. We get out of the car again. The hill becomes a viewing platform from which we observe *Forest*. She seems more solid when regarded from a distance, presenting herself as an immense man-made structure. A collective monument to a country that no longer exists.

Forest is both known and new to me. I was here before, when I was a child. There was no *Forest* then. The hills were crowded with young people carrying pine seedlings. They planted and tended them.

History Writing through Ecology

My artistic research starts from a notion of *landscape* understood both as a political and social environment, and as a natural space. When we look at the aesthetic transformation of a landscape, we see traces of economic, social, and ideological changes of the times. Newly implemented policies and practices can be discerned along with residues of old ones, long forgotten, but nevertheless continuing to evolve. To *read a landscape*, we must understand its context and history. We can come to know it even more deeply by keenly observing it and gradually becoming a part of it. A landscape as an immense archive, storing traces of repetitions of civilizational

1 Dušica Dražić, Tanja Šljivar, and Mirjana Dragosavljević, "It Rains Differently", in Irena Borić, Mirjana Dragosavljević, and Dušica Dražić, eds., *Symptoms of the Future – Exhibition in the Box*, Onomatopee, Stereovizija, and Out of Sight, Eindhoven, Belgrade, and Antwerp, 2021, n.p.

2 In Serbo-Croatian, the gender of the noun "forest" (*šuma*) is feminine.

ruptures and movements. A landscape as forensic proof of a rhizome-like structure deep below the surface, linking seemingly disconnected historical events.

Now sink below *Forest*, below the ground. See the sediments of the past. Add layers of culture and all the different interpretations of history and beliefs. The law of nature and the law of man superimposed.

> FOREST:
> I, specifically, was born during the anthropocene.
> You thought such terms would be beyond a forest, that I was less educated than that. You knew I didn't have Latin in high school or university, like you did. When did you realise that I was smarter, more independent, that I didn't need you (anymore)? Or did you know that all along?
>
> I am *Anthropogenic*.
>
> I, specifically, was born through *reforestation*. Besides building factories, roads, railways, and in addition to soil improvement; *back then* sister forests were planted, too, and forest facilities were developed. The factory and I grew from the same idea. The railway and I grew from the same idea.[3]

During the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), state-organized reforestation actions took place on the Pešter plateau every summer from 1978 until 1988. The labour was organized through Youth Work Actions, a form of state-organized, voluntary labour. Young people were brought together in the spirit of *Brotherhood and Unity*, the slogan coined during the Yugoslav People's Liberation War (1941–45), which evolved into the guiding principle of Yugoslavia's post-war inter-ethnic policy. Forty years later, 150,000 hectares of forest still dominate the landscape. Despite all the societal changes that have unfolded since then – the collapse of the country, wars, privatizations, ecocides. Despite all the secrets buried in *Forest*. My late father, Milutin Dražić, was the leading forest engineer of the reforestation project. I observed and absorbed the methods and aspirations that nobody spoke about directly – the long-term dedication, (volunteer) labour, care and trust (or belief) in a social and political imaginary outside the conditions of consumption. Toward the end of his life, I interviewed him and my mother Dragana because I wanted to record their view on *Forest*:

> We call them [pines] pioneers because of their ability to grow in hostile environments. They are more resilient. They can endure drought and extreme humidity, very low temperatures, all the extreme conditions of Pešter. That is why they are used; they are worthy of first forests and only pines can fulfil the potential of land that has been degraded and become useless. Pine forests correct the microclimate. Once that task is accomplished, they retreat and make room for so-called permanent species that create permanent forests.[4]

Forest is not a peripheral context, but should be seen as a scale model of the world in which we live with all of its contradictions. The process of her creation resides at the centre of the artistic research in which I examine tensions between opposing, ideologically driven forces, transnational perspectives exploring historic (dis)continuities and how they affect the formation of contemporary class not only based on economic status, but also on origin, ethnicity, gender, and how these processes leave a long-lasting imprint on the land.

> I'm confused by all this. Because I'm beyond the concept of ownership, I resist it, I'm nobody's and everybody's. Who can and who dares claim the air I provide to all living beings that walk the earth around and inside me? Who dares to quantify our touches and intangible contacts, gazes, and green caresses? Who dares to cut me down and take me away, who takes care of me, regenerates me, and heals me? Who dares to use me for war and hatred, who absorbs and shares love in my glades?
>
> FOREST:
> And you are mine!
>
> Even though I resist the concept of ownership, my shape was still determined by it. If you look at a map, you will see that I was not planted in a contiguous area; instead, it looks like they chose particular zones for reforestation. In other words, what was reforested was primarily stateowned land. Am I a state forest? State-owned land could be reforested, no one could lay a step on private land. I'm a fragmented forest – cut into pieces – exhausted by all the ideas of ownership and dodgy privatisations.[5]

I have been co-writing *It Rains Differently* with Tanja Šljivar and Mirjana Dragosavljević since 2021. The script, part of the long-term artistic research and multimedia project with the same title, consists of two interwoven texts and presents two distinct perspectives: one

3 Dražić, Šljivar, and Dragosavljević, "It Rains Differently", n.p.

4 Unpublished interview with Milutin and Dragana Dražić, conducted by Dušica Dražić in Belgrade on January 18, 2018.

5 Dražić, Šljivar, and Dragosavljević, "It Rains Differently", n.p.

from *Forest* and the other from *Father*. The unpublished interview with Milutin and Dragana Dražić forms the crux of the play. However, during the research and writing of the script, we also incorporated folk tales, science fiction, archaeobotanical findings, published scientific papers, media archives, notes from assembly meetings of the Pešter reforestation stakeholders, different legal documents from the SFRY era, as well as current international and national laws and legal processes that govern the status, ownership, and rights of nature.

This text creates the complexity of the main character *Forest* by paying attention to her *contextuality* – recognizing the historical, geographical, and other situational facts of her experience and background, and also her *intersectionality and multiple identities* in terms of age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status as an essential element of valuing her as a living being, as a person. This approach also acknowledges her *multiplexity*, recognizing that she has several networks, commitments and relational bonds, e.g. identities, parental or carer obligations, community commitments, etc. Recognizing and supporting the multiplexity of *Forest* enhances her sense of belonging within the community.

Thus, the main voice is given to *Forest*.

> The language spoken by *Forest* is the authors' mother tongue. *Forest*, through no effort of her own, without having taken any language courses or passed any exams, is nonetheless fluent in and, when needed, speaks various human, Slavic, and Germanic languages.[6]

She, *Forest*, is: Mother, Daughter, Sister Forest, Great-grandforest, the State, the Witch, a Hanged Grandmother, the Authors.

> She, *Forest*, is joined by other voices. Voices that are undoubtedly human.
>
> One of them stands out – no doubt male, no doubt singular. (Even though he has bacteria in his intestines, with which he lives in symbiosis, even though he has fungi up and down his digestive tract, even though he has colleagues at the Institute, even though he has families.) We may agree about his nature and origins, but not necessarily about the way he engages in dialogue with *Forest*. It is clear that *Forest* speaks his language, that she has adapted to him. Sometimes he appears in order to correct *Forest*, in order to explain to her something about her genesis, and sometimes to tend to it.

6 Ibid.

> Incidentally, he certainly played a role in her genesis. He is *Father*, he is a forestry engineer. He is a recreational hunter and was an underage partisan fighter in World War II. They are working on a concept of summer reforestation and it is thanks to them that she is where she is now.[7]

The Re–enactment of Reforestation as a Rehearsal for Collectivity

In her 1959 essay "Amateur Versus Professional", Maya Deren writes that an amateur's work is done "for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons and necessity".[8] The word amateur derives from the Latin word *amator = lover*.

The position of the amateur, the volunteer, the autodidact was fully embraced and explored throughout the *It Rains Differently* project. As amateurs, we *perform* certain tasks, mimic the work, lean into intuition. We absorb and share the knowledge that professionals claim ownership to. As amateurs, we create complex networks and find allies along the way.

The artistic process behind the making of *It Rains Differently* mirrors the methodology of the reforestations conducted from 1978 to 1988. Namely, a participatory practice is embedded in the process. It steps away from the symbolic realm, collectively producing a new forest while also producing a work of art. It mobilizes diverse groups of people and acknowledges shared struggles in the ongoing demands of elementary universality and equality.

In August 2024, the re-enactment of the reforestations took place on Pešter over the course of eight days. More than forty people of a wide range of ages (from seventeen to seventy-two years old) responded to an open call launched in July in order to participate in the planting of a new forest and the making of a work of art.

The volunteers received one day of training by foresters and were divided into four *brigades*[9] comprised of approximately ten people each. The reforestation took place in Štavlje, a rocky terrain that was reforested first in 1970s but recently burned down in summer fires. The methodology of the training/workshop was based on the existing documentation of past reforestations.

7 Ibid.

8 Maya Deren, "Amateur Versus Professional", https://hambrecine.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/maya-deren-amateur-vs-professional.pdf (accessed October 10, 2025).

9 Brigade was the term used during the reforestations of the 1970s and 1980s. It derives from military vocabulary and means major tactical military formation.

> Hands shaped me, I shaped hands. Hands like roots and treetops, hands digging into the soil, fingers growing and touching each other and entangling underground. I let a twig or two land on your hair – whenever you're about to leave me, run your fingers through your hair, to check if there's a twig on your head, lest you accidentally take it home. Still, hands took that twig from your hair and, instead of returning it to me, hid it between the pages of a notebook, in a rucksack, in a drawer. Maybe you forgot about that twig, but you won't forget about me. We dream of each other – vengefully and lovingly: hands, twisted and gnarled, emerge from the darkness, plunging into the earth – fingers curve and twirl, already rachitic, hurting from the cold and excessive moisture – they grow, and we get tangled and untangled by ourselves – but still penetrating ever deeper into the dark – entwining, overgrowing, and branching – your roots and my hands keep the soil from washing away and collapsing in tomorrow's summer showers.[10]

The re-enactment of the reforestation could be seen as *reality directed*, a term used by the Polish artist Paweł Althamer about his participatory practice in works such as *Common Task* (2009) and *Motion Pictures* (2020). Partly scripted conditions of participation were written based on reforestation methodologies from the past, including having a clear structure for each day divided into strict time for work, shared meals, and rest; "planting" a flag into the ground to mark the goal of the day; dividing labour among volunteers with the possibility of self-nomination for certain roles; and chanting slogans in a choir led by actors Vladislava Đorđević, Željko Maksimović, and Milutin Dapčević while standing in spatial formations that resemble military patterns. Even though a clear conceptual frame was introduced, a space was left for participants' own input and improvisation, ensuring that the artistic process is open-ended. This methodology allowed and possibly even stimulated a strong sense of agency in each participant, and created the foundation for collective authorship of both the future forest and the work of art.

Documentation of the Artistic Process

The super-8 cameras used in the 1970s and 1980s were supplemented with the mobile phones of volunteers who were asked to enter *Forest* during their leisure time and record her state of being. They were joined by the audio-visual artists Hannes Boeck, Bojan Palikuća, Aleksandrija Ajduković, Igor Bošnjak, and Eitan Efrat who documented the interaction between *Forest* and the people. The

10 Dražić, Šljivar, and Dragosavljević, "It Rains Differently", n.p.

visual artist Siniša Ilić was invited to draw the reforestation process and the making of the film in a series of documentary drawings. His work evokes the tradition of landscape painters as well as social realist painters who documented labour. Ilić's drawings tend toward abstraction, transforming performative and labour actions into traces.

Informed by the protocols of historical reforestation, Monika Lang was invited to illustrate six flags. Each morning, a new flag was carried by the volunteers as they entered the landscape they were assigned to reforest that day. The flag was then planted on a steep hillside, marking the day's final goal. Serving both as signal and symbol, the flags guided the collective effort across the vast landscape of the Pešter plateau.

It Rains Differently, illustrations for the flags by Monika Lang, 2024.

The film and multimedia installation *It Rains Differently* is constructed from fictional, archival, and documentary imagery, blurring the lines among these cinematic languages. This approach creates not only an artistic language, but a political one – a tool used to mobilize and facilitate the participation of citizens and to create a collective, shared experience. It provides a framework in which the lines between artistic research, production, documentation, and reception are blurred. There is no clear distinction in the artistic process between the roles of artist, volunteer, forester, performer, and audience.

The structure of the narrative is non-linear, blurring the line between past, present, and future, perceiving time as non-linear as well. It is built around the multiplexity of *Forest*, around her many selves:

The Young Forest
Forest–Sister
The Haunted Forest
The Suicide Forest
The Silent Forest
A Forest of the Senses – The Sensory Forest
Gutavica[11] Forest
The Radically Passive Forest
Horror in the Woods
The Usurper Forest
Chorus of Trees
Parliamentary Forest
Pioneer Species
The Magical Forest
Forest As a Lover
The Caregiver Forest
Forests. At the End of it All.

> They came as often as they could, to spend time with me, next to me, and in me. To observe my body wasting away. Washing me, dressing and feeding me, they came to know me from upclose, my tender rough skinbark, which would break upon the smallest, most tender, most intimate touch and start secreting sap, which would then stick to their fingers. For days or years, their hands would smell of me. Watching me from up close, from inside themselves, their porous body would absorb my scars and those of my great-grandmothers and little great-grandsisters. On the eve of my death, I gathered all my strength and took care of them, made sure they got their oxygen, took their pills, tucked in their children, and patched up their little slippers. And then I remembered that we had already become one and that my death began before yours, and that you are already in me, while I'm still only (un)dying.[12]

The intention of *It Rains Differently* is to propose a process in which there is no clear break between cultural and artistic work, to entangle them with each other. This entanglement is a precondition for the rupture of social consensus and categorizations. What are the conditions that enable an artwork to co-exist within the realm of aesthetics while contributing to the common good? How do we resist privatization of culture and nature as a form of property? What is the relation to and responsibility of individuals within the collective in envisioning better futures?

***

It Rains Differently is a portrait of *Forest* as a fictional character. It is a meditation on collective labour, on an imaginary that fulfils itself through the form of *Forest* who is in constant re-making and only through that constant re-making persists through all changes; *Forest* as transnational, political, social, and cultural collective entity.

> EXTRAS:
> We're planting the forest. *Forest* is planting us.[13]

Written by Dušica Dražić.

The images accompanying the text are stills from the film *It Rains Differently*, 2024–2025 (p. 131, pp. 142–151).

11 The name Gutavica derives from the Serbo-Croatian verb *gutati*, to swallow.

12 Dražić, Šljivar, and Dragosavljević, "It Rains Differently", n.p.

13 Ibid.









Photographs by Borut Peterlin.

THE ONLY CHANCE FOR THE SURVIVAL OF LARGE CARNIVORES IN EUROPE: COEXISTENCE WITH PEOPLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIHA KROFEL,

wildlife researcher based at the Department of Forestry, Biotechnical Faculty at the University of Ljubljana

MATEJA KURIR: What are the biggest challenges we face today in Slovenia and Europe in the field of large carnivore management and what measures do you think are needed to respond to them?

MIHA KROFEL: There is no single answer to this question. We have to take into account the specificities of each species. In the case of Slovenia, the challenges and solutions for each of our three large carnivore species – the brown bear, the grey wolf, and the Eurasian lynx – are very different.

For example, the wolf is not dangerous to humans except in extremely rare cases of rabies or other exceptional situations. Wolves also do not cause damage to crops or orchards. Therefore, problems are limited to attacks on livestock, in particular on domestic ungulates. A lot of research has already been done on this topic in Slovenia and abroad so we have very good data on what works and what doesn't in terms of preventing damage caused by wolves. Livestock protection methods, especially electric fences and guard dogs, are definitely effective. However, fences must be properly installed and maintained, and dogs properly trained. When this is the case, data, including from Slovenia, shows that damage caused by wolves is reduced by 87–98%. Thus, it is clear that most, though not all, potential damage can be prevented by adequate protective measures.

In the case of wolves, lethal removal is another method used to prevent damage. There are numerous studies on this and they indicate that this measure is generally not effective. On the contrary, there are examples of an increase in damage after shooting wolves. This is probably due to the fact that the surviving members of the wolf pack are less able to hunt their natural prey (e.g., red deer, roe deer, and wild boar) and turn to domestic animals more frequently than before the shooting.

On the other hand, lethal removal may be a way to appease people who are not in favour of wolves, although this effect has not been documented scientifically. However, from a functional effectiveness perspective, the lethal removal of wolves is not a good permanent solution.

The situation is different with brown bears. With bears, damage to livestock can be a major problem, but an additional factor is that bears can also be dangerous to humans in certain situations. It is therefore crucial to keep bears away from human settlements. This is a difficult task because bears are omnivores and are very opportunistic in their foraging behaviour. They are strongly attracted to human food, which is usually relatively high in calories. Such food can be found in the form of rubbish, slaughter waste, corn, domestic animals, orchards, etc. If we want to reduce the potential danger to humans from bears, it is imperative that we prevent bears from accessing food in populated areas. Bears learn quickly and often return to settlements in search of food. Bear-proof rubbish and compost bins, for example, are effective. However, the most important aspect of such a strategy is to educate the public about bear behaviour.

Another important task is to ensure that bears do not lose their natural fear of humans. In Europe, there are no expansive protected areas that are fenced in and physically separate animals and humans as there are in North America or Africa. Therefore, bears can only survive if they coexist with people in shared habitats. In other words, the only way for these animals to survive in Europe – and this applies to all large carnivores – is coexistence with humans.

Such coexistence can be achieved, but it is not always easy. In the case of bears, an important prerequisite is that the bears retain their fear of humans. Fear of humans is innate to bears, but some bears gradually lose it. This usually happens when humans feed bears or otherwise make direct contact with them. In this way, bears learn that humans are not dangerous and even that they will be rewarded for approaching humans. It is therefore essential never to feed bears in the presence of humans.

The situation is different with lynx. Lynx are not dangerous to humans except in extremely rare situations. In addition, lynx attack livestock considerably less frequently than wolves or bears. The

biggest challenge in managing the lynx population is that the species is threatened with extinction in many parts in Europe. The biggest problem of lynx management in Slovenia – and in several other lynx populations in Europe – is the risk of inbreeding. At the beginning of the 20th century, the lynx population was completely exterminated in Slovenia. Hunters reintroduced them in 1973, but only six animals were translocated to Slovenia at that time. Although the population increased and spread beyond Slovenia to Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina, and even to Italy and Austria, it remained isolated, never coming into contact with any other lynx population in Europe. As they had no other options, the translocated lynx mated with each other and thus the entire lynx population in this region descended from these six animals. As a result, the population eventually suffered from serious health problems: heart failures, skeletal abnormalities, various diseases, etc. The solution to this problem was to either establish contact with other populations, allowing a natural gene flow, or to translocate new lynx from other population into Slovenia. As contact between the populations could not be guaranteed in the short term, an international translocation project was launched. Between 2019 and 2023, we captured several lynx from the healthy Carpathian population in Romania and Slovakia and released them in the Dinaric Mountains and Julian Alps in Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy. In this way, the drastic population decline was reversed and the lynx population gradually recovered. The number of lynx in Slovenia more than doubled by 2024 and continues to grow. The problem of inbreeding was solved at least for a few decades. In the long term, our vision is to ensure contact with one of the neighbouring lynx populations so that such expensive translocation projects will no longer be necessary. As a first step in this direction, we established a new lynx population in the Julian Alps in 2021 which is expected to connect with the Dinaric lynx population and later hopefully also with the western Alpine population in Switzerland.

URŠKA JURMAN: I would like to talk more about your statement that it is important that bears do not develop the habit of approaching human settlements. Hunters in Slovenia often claim that artificial feeding sites in the forests discourage bears from approaching areas inhabited by humans. And yet we also read that the artificial feeding of bears increases population growth and that ending this practice could lead to greater natural selection, which would make large-scale culling of bears unnecessary. What is your opinion on this?

KROFEL: Artificial feeding of bears is a controversial topic and opinions are divided. This is mainly because we don't have good local data on its effects. We don't know, for example, to what extent the reproduction rate is increased by artificial feeding. What we do know is that the brown bear population in Slovenia has the highest proportion of artificial food in its diet worldwide, with 44% of their

diet coming from artificial feeding sites. We also know that Slovenia currently has the highest known density of the bear population and the highest reproduction rates in Europe. At the same time, experimental research in captivity has shown that food is the most important factor influencing rates of bear reproduction.
In view of this, I believe that artificial feeding could be an important reason for the rapid growth and high density of the bear population in Slovenia. If the intensity of artificial feeding were reduced, reproduction would perhaps decrease so that the intensive culling of bears that is practiced today would no longer be necessary to the extent it is today. However, no direct study has yet been carried out to prove this.

The effectiveness of artificial feeding deterring bears from human settlements – which is ostensibly the main reason for artificial feeding – is also highly questionable. Although analyses have been carried out on this topic, they have not been able to clearly confirm the effectiveness of this measure.

Brown bear.

Indeed, despite the abundance of artificial food in Slovenian forests, bears still come close to settlements, particularly in times when natural food sources, especially beechnuts, are scarce. This shows that artificial feeding, even when practiced very intensively, is not enough to prevent bears from approaching settlements. The main exception comes during autumn when the number of bears approaching settlements decreases with more intensive artificial feeding.

Therefore, it could make sense to limit artificial feeding to this part of the year. And, it would be particularly advisable to reduce artificial feeding during the winter when the impact on reproduction appears to be the highest. Reduction of winter feeding would probably also extend the time bears spend in their dens as research has shown that bears in Slovenia often wake up for winter feeding, which is not observed in the neighbouring populations without artificial feeding. However, it should be noted that the topic of artificial feeding is also a sociological and political issue. In Slovenia, the tradition of artificial feeding wild animals is strong and regulating the practice would likely meet with resistance. For this reason, forest managers are generally not in favour of the idea of significantly reducing the artificial feeding of bears. It should be emphasized though that there is no suggestion of ending artificial feeding, but rather reducing it to a certain level as the amount of artificial food in Slovenian forests is large: on average over twelve tonnes of corn per every 100 km^2 of forest each year.

KURIR: Does a high reproductive rate in bears mean that a female bear gives birth to two or three cubs instead of one?

KROFEL: Difference in litter size is not that great. What is more important than litter size is the time interval between litters (i.e. does a female bear have cubs every two years or at longer intervals) and the age at which female bears start to reproduce. In other countries, females usually do not start reproducing until they are four or five years old. In Slovenia, in contrast, three-year-old female bears are already having cubs. This is significant because bears in Slovenia do not live long because of intensive culling. As a result, a large part of the population consists of young bears.

KURIR: What measures can we take to improve the coexistence of large carnivores and humans in areas where most conflicts occur?

KROFEL: In addition to the measures already mentioned, I would also add awareness-raising and education about appropriate human behaviour, especially toward bears. In other words, how should people behave when they encounter a bear in the forest, how should bears be prevented from accessing anthropogenic food, etc.
As mentioned earlier, protective measures are key, in particular well-maintained electric fences. Providing expert support for

farmers to keep livestock and beehives protected has also proven to be an effective measure. In Slovenia, this support is provided by services such as the Slovenia Forest Service and the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry, and includes regular contact with breeders and monitoring the situation on the ground, especially if attacks on domestic animals occur despite installed fences. In such cases, it is essential that a specialist visits the farm and determines the cause of the problem. It often turns out that the fence was not properly installed in certain places, or that the size of the electric fence was not suitable for the number of fenced sheep, etc. In most cases, the problem can be solved by an expert who assesses how to make protection more effective. Sometimes the motivation of the farmer or estate owner may also be the problem – for example, because of the reluctance to do extra work especially in remote locations or difficult terrain.

It is important that each situation is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, especially when problems recur. This system is well established in Slovenia, which is why, despite having fairly large carnivore populations, we have relatively little damage and fewer conflicts compared to other European countries.

KURIR: What do you notice about the environments in which conflicts most frequently occur?

KROFEL: It is simplistic to presume that more problems occur in areas where there is a greater number of wild carnivores. Analyses often show that the situation is not that straightforward. In the case of wolves, for example, it has been observed that the number of wolves in a pack has no significant influence on the level of damage in the area. Wolves are a territorial species, which means that only one pack lives in a given territory at the same time. In the case of bears, who are not territorial, some correlation has been shown between bear density and the frequency of problems, but many other factors can lead to conflicts. There are several areas with relatively few bears where conflicts are still very high. The attributes of the landscape can be a contributing factor: dispersed settlements and closer distance between the forest edge and settlements or pastures tend to increase the probability of conflicts. Another factor is the lack of natural prey and other natural food sources. The behaviour of local people can also be an important contributing factor, especially in terms of how protective measures are installed and how much access to anthropogenic food sources bears have. In this regard, we found big differences in the frequency of damage caused by wolves to domestic animals. In most pastures located in a wolf range in Slovenia, there is very little or no damage. The vast majority of damage occurs in a few pastures where the problems recur year after year. This phenomenon could not be explained by the presence of a specific wolf pack or by environmental factors (e.g., proximity to the forest). The occurrence of damage in these places seems to be mainly connected with the failure to properly implement protective measures for various reasons.

Grey wolf.

The tradition of coexistence with large carnivores is another important factor contributing to the occurrence and also the perception of conflicts. In areas where these species have been present for a long time or never became extinct (in Slovenia, for example, in Notranjska and Kočevsko), conflicts are generally lower than in areas where species have reappeared after a long absence, and where the experience and knowledge of coexistence has been lost. An example of this can be found in the Alps where wolves and bears are returning in greater numbers after a long absence. More needs to be done to introduce protective measures in such areas and to help local people regain the experience and knowledge that these species are not as dangerous to humans as is sometimes believed. An important element in the situation in the Alps is that domestic animals often graze freely in remote pastures. Such grazing requires the use of adapted protective measures, such as guard dogs and shepherds, a tradition that has been lost in the Slovenian Alps but is now being reintroduced with the help of good practices from other Alpine countries, such as Switzerland, where such practices have become quite successful.

Another reason for the rapid rise in conflicts in Slovenia in the 1990s and 2000s, is the fact that the number of sheep in the country increased during this period. In the 1990s, there were about twenty thousand sheep in Slovenia, while today there are seven times as many. Fortunately, the increased use of effective preventive measures since 2010 has caused the conflicts to decrease again.

JURMAN: Let's move on to the notion of tolerance, which is necessary for successful coexistence between humans and other species.

KROFEL: In this context, it is not only tolerance toward wild animals that matters, but often even more important is tolerance between different segments of our own society. The topic of coexistence, especially with wolves, is a major source of conflict among various stakeholders in Europe today, and public opinion is very polarized. On the one hand, there are people who do not accept any wolf being killed by hunters, and on the other, there are those who would prefer to see all of them eradicated. The saddest part is that politicians often fuel and abuse this polarization for their own agenda.

JURMAN: In a recent interview, you said that you see a gradient of tolerance toward large carnivores in attitudes and policies from the European north to the south. Can you explain this in more detail?

KROFEL: These are primarily sociological and political questions. As a biologist, I'm probably not the best person to answer them. But a trend can indeed be observed: the further north in Europe, the less tolerance there is and the more aggressive are the policies toward large carnivores compared to southern Europe. This does not appear to be related to the actual carnivore population numbers. For example, in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and also in Slovenia, people are much more tolerant of large carnivores. Until recently, Italy did not engage in lethal removal of carnivores at all, and a similar situation prevailed in Portugal. The Scandinavians, on the other hand, follow completely different policies. This can also be seen in the management of other species, for example, whales and whaling, which has long ceased in southern and western Europe but is still an industry in Norway. In northern Europe, I would say that the attitude toward nature in general is much more utilitarian than in the south.

KURIR: We recently read in the media that Romania has ordered the culling of five hundred bears this year (2024) after a jogger was attacked and killed by a bear. A similar cull of bears was carried out in Sweden although it was planned in advance. What do you think these numbers mean for the bear population and what impact do such interventions have on the population and the ecosystem from which these animals are taken? What do you think of such radical interventions?

KROFEL: If we just look at the numbers, both Romania and Sweden have quite large populations and the impact of killing that number of bears will not jeopardize the survival of the population. If we consider the percentage of the population represented by such a large cull, in the case of Romania and Sweden, it is still lower than

what we do in Slovenia. In recent years, about twenty percent of the bear population has been culled each year in Slovenia, which is about four times as many as in Romania. Even though such measures do not jeopardize the bear population in these countries, part of the public reacts strongly to these large-scale culls. It is therefore important to communicate the background of such decisions and to address people's different values and views on these issues.

When discussing the impact of culling on populations, we should bear in mind that the effects can vary greatly from species to species. With wolves, for example, the killing of a key member of the pack can have an impact on the pack as a whole, with side effects often being much more important than just the reduction of pack size (e.g., as already mentioned, effects on the behaviour of the pack, its success in hunting wild animals, and the resulting likelihood of attacks on domestic animals). In contrast, the culling of an individual bear, which is a non-territorial solitary animal, has much less impact on other bears. However, research in Scandinavia has shown that the culling of one bear can also influence the behaviour of other bears in the area. For example, the culling of a large male bear affects the movements of other bears and, more importantly, the mortality of cubs from infanticide increases after such a removal. Nevertheless, the culling of bears still has far less impact than of wolves. Therefore, much more caution and stronger reasons for culling is required for wolves than for solitary species such as bears and lynx.

Culling may also have broader ecological impacts as these species can have a significant influence on the functioning of ecosystems, especially those less modified by people. Bears, for example, play an important role in seed dispersal, which helps plant species, and they are also very efficient at finding and removing animal carcasses. If we apply this to the example of Romania, where five hundred out of about ten thousand bears were killed, it is unlikely to have a drastic impact on the ecosystem. However, the local extinction of a species or a drastic reduction in population density can have an impact on the functioning of the whole ecosystem.

KURIR: So are you of the opinion that culling alone does not reduce the number of conflicts between humans and wild animals and that other measures need to be used?

KROFEL: That also depends on the species. With wolves, we know that culling generally does not reduce conflicts and can even exacerbate them. With bears, culling can reduce conflicts to a certain extent. Bears are not territorial species like wolves that control their own numbers. Under natural conditions, the number of bears depends primarily on food supply, but today it also depends to a large degree on human management. Killing bears reduces population density, which can affect the number of problems people have with bears. However, this is not directly proportional, meaning that the percentage reduction in the bear population does not lead

to an equal percentage reduction in conflicts. It depends on which specific bears are culled. Namely, most conflicts are caused by a very small part of the population, while the majority of bears do not cause problems. Therefore, the targeted killing of problematic bears who have lost their fear of humans can be a very effective measure, while a generalized cull – such as the recent ones in Sweden and Romania – is unlikely to have a significant impact on the number of conflicts. The situation in Slovakia, where the new government has increased the shooting quota for bears by tenfold compared to previous years, is more problematic. Any bear that comes within five hundred metres of a house can be shot even if there is no conflict. As Slovakia has scattered settlements, bears will lose a lot of space because of this political decision. It is even more worrying that the culling is not accompanied by other measures to prevent conflicts. Much more would be accomplished if people were educated about the importance of not hand-feeding bears, which is a common practice in Slovakia as well as in Romania and has led to severe conflicts, even human fatalities. This component seems to have been completely ignored, the Slovak authorities having apparently opted for mass culls for populist reasons, which has already triggered international reactions from many expert organizations.

JURMAN: How do you understand the passionate "pro and con" reactions of the public to the culling of wolves and bears, which is something we have also seen in Slovenia? Are these reactions different in rural and urban populations, perhaps depending on the generation?

KROFEL: There has been a lot of research done regarding public attitudes toward carnivores in Slovenia and elsewhere, although I must emphasize that this is not my area of expertise. The studies have shown that both aspects you mentioned are relevant. In general, attitudes toward carnivores are more positive in urban areas than in rural areas, and younger generations are more favourable toward these species than older ones. The interesting thing about Slovenia is that, although the rural population expresses less acceptance of carnivores than the urban population, the vast majority of the rural population is favourable toward these species. For example, about eighty percent of the rural population has a positive attitude toward bears. Surveys in Slovenia also showed a high level of acceptance of large carnivores among hunters, especially when compared to data from other countries. In fact, the proportion of people who have a negative attitude toward these species is quite low, but this part of the public can be extremely vocal – also in the media. This often triggers strong reactions on the other side. I think it is important to listen to the voice of the majority, which – at least in Slovenia – is in favour of large carnivores, but whose views are not adequately reflected in a media atmosphere that clearly favours the portrayal of extremes. Media coverage often does not reflect the real problems on the ground and the actual state of animal populations. Interestingly, an analysis of media coverage revealed a marked

increase in negative reporting – particularly on the damage caused by bears – at regular intervals of every four years. These intervals coincided with local elections.

Large carnivores leave almost no one indifferent. There are probably only a handful of animal species that evoke such strong emotions and reactions. These emotions are often exploited by politicians for their own interests, including with the use of fake news. Of course, this is not the only issue that is exploited in this way. Something similar is happening with immigration and other topics to which the public reacts strongly.

KURIR: Is the European Union currently implementing appropriate policies and measures to preserve forests as habitats for carnivores and other species for future generations?[1]

KROFEL: In terms of large carnivores, I need to emphasize that all three species in Slovenia – wolf, bear, and lynx – are quite undemanding in terms of habitat requirements and can live in a variety of habitats. The wolf in particular is a very adaptable species and does not, as is often assumed, need vast forests and unspoilt nature to survive. It is true that in the past, after World War Two, wolves lived almost exclusively in remote large forests, as these were the only places where humans did not manage to hunt them to extinction. After the end of the 20th century, when the species was placed under protection in most European countries, wolves have returned to areas outside of forests. For example, in Spain they are giving birth to pups in cornfields, in Germany they have dens in motorway drainage ditches and so on.

The lynx and the bear also do not need a special habitat to survive, but they do need to be protected from excessive killing by humans. In contrast to these three carnivore species, there are numerous other forest species that are so-called specialists and have very specific habitat requirements. A large proportion of species in European forests have evolved under conditions where humans have had relatively little impact on forest ecosystems. They are therefore adapted to the conditions of primaeval forests, which have become extremely rare in Europe. From an evolutionary perspective, it was only relatively recently (a few thousand years ago) that humans began to intensively clear forests over such large areas, and many species have not been able to adapt and are struggling to survive.

1 In May 2025, after the interview was conducted, the European Parliament changed the protection status of wolves in the European Union from "strictly protected" to "protected", which reduces their level of protection. – *Editorial note.*

Eurasian lynx.

The main difference between a primaeval forest ecosystem and a managed ecosystem, which accounts for nearly all of the forests in Europe today, is the amount of dead biomass or dead wood – either standing dead trees or fallen tree trunks lying on the ground. Studies from abroad have shown that around a third of all forest species in Europe depend on the dead wood, and yet it is the part of the ecosystem that is most lacking in European forests. This is related to a form of materialistic thinking whereby a decaying dead tree trunk is seen as an economic loss. From an ecosystem perspective, however, such a tree trunk can be of much greater value than a young, healthy tree. As a result of this thinking, many species have already become extinct or have only survived in a few surviving fragments of primaeval forests where there is sufficient dead wood. The lack of dead biomass in forests is one of the most critical aspects of European forest ecosystems, including in Slovenia. If we want to support the conservation of biodiversity, we must first and foremost improve forest management in this regard, as this characteristic is connected to the highest level of biodiversity on the European continent.

JURMAN: You live in Africa at the moment. What is your current research focus?

KROFEL: I have been travelling to Africa for twenty years. Most recently, I travelled with my family to Namibia for a year, where I am working on three research projects. The main project deals with the ecological role of cheetahs and brown hyenas in desert ecosystems. Another project is dedicated to lions, a highly endangered species that has been already exterminated from 95% of its original range (in Africa and Asia), mainly due to livestock farming. In Namibia, we are currently monitoring the status and studying the ecology of lion populations in the areas where they have survived. My third focus is on the leopard – a species that has survived in areas with livestock farming. The situation of the leopard in Namibia is similar to that of wolves and bears in Europe. They feed mainly on wild animals, but occasionally attack domestic animals, especially calves, which leads to conflicts. As part of the research project, we are monitoring the patterns of damage occurrence and advising breeders on how to reduce livestock losses. Many farmers still rely on killing leopards as the main measure to reduce livestock losses. However, leopard culling and damage data reported to us by farmers shows that more leopard killing actually leads to more damage. We can see from this that general culling is not effective and that better herd protection is more effective – similar to what the data on damage caused by large carnivores in Europe has shown.

Leopard.

KURIR: What do you think of the trending concept of “rewilding” in Europe, which is about not interfering too much with natural processes and giving nature more room to regulate itself?

KROFEL: I think that communication with the public is very important in this context, because there are many misconceptions, even among experts. The concept of rewilding in Europe is not so much about creating wilderness, as often thought, but about management that utilizes processes observed in natural ecosystems. So, rewilding may include areas where livestock farming is still practised, but where a certain natural process has been lost because of the extinction of an important species, and the situation can be improved by reintroducing a keystone species. A good example of this is the reintroduction of vultures, which take over the removal of animal carcasses. The idea of rewilding is not to abandon the most productive agricultural land to nature, although it often focuses on areas where people are already abandoning agriculture and which has started to become overgrown. The people living in these areas are often in dire straits as their traditional activities are no longer economically viable. It is important to offer them alternatives that empower them. Suppose a charismatic animal species, such as the European bison, is reintroduced to such an area and ecotourism begins to develop in conjunction with it, and this provides new opportunities for the economic development of the region.
To sum up, the human component, that is the economic and social aspects, must be just as important in rewilding as the nature conservation or ecological aspect, so communication is crucial.

October 2024

Miha Krofel is the photographer of pictures accompanying the interview (pp. 158–171).

Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

MAJA AND REUBEN FOWKES

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 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.

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).

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.

NOTES FROM AN ARBORIST:

LOST STORIES

Zoe Jo Rae

Sometimes it's a takedown.

When decay and new life takes over, structure compromised and giants risk collapse, then. Sometimes, it's a takedown. Reduce dense winter rings and soft summer cells to dust.

Trees move differently when they die. Living wood dances, plays the wind, the twist, the give, the take. becomes rigid until the give, gives in. Our spikes sink in. soft or solid, on slick stem, or thick bark, loose, or frozen, deceptively hard but brittle. A fungus that turns oak to pulp. you adjust. sink your weight into rope. You learn to read the flex, the snap, the giving point, the holding wood, density, fibres, anchor points dead and alive, each different enough to kill you if not understood. If not respected. Precision. muscle memory and with time, second nature.

Wood that smells bitter. Bird cherry, so strong you taste it in the back of your throat, lift your body from a trailer full of chips, searching for fresh air. heady. Ash. subtle and earthy or distinctive elm. Ammonia.

Chain oil wiped on resin-caked fabric. hasn't been fluorescent in years. Wood chips prickle between woollen t-shirt and skin. Sweat, that chills in a pause in work on a November afternoon. Pressure, harness squeezing pelvis under your own weight, remind yourself – it's all in the positioning – you shift. You get used to the roughness. Blinking through March sleet, exposed twenty metres up. finger trapped between logs, thumb grazed over tooth on a newly sharpened chain, a misjudged swing – spine to stem.

But there is also softness. when the canopy holds you. You catch the wind together, limbs sigh and creak, summer light filtered through leaves, gradients of green. Moss. A motionless passenger on a beefy limb. Wetness running down a beech stem in a spring down-poor: The smell. A rope end coiled on the earth – to a passerby – the only indicator of your presence, your bird's eye view. There is also softness.

Bark: rough enough to free climb, or paper thin, translucent. The stuff that peels off in sheets – fleshy. Glossy with spring sap carried vertical metres, magic. or science. Mottled lichen or a park tree with decades of wound wood – unlucky enough to be deemed worthy of carrying engraved confessions of love.

This material, the growth rings, the layers, just another photograph, sound bite or smell that gathers us and asks us to remember. The days shared in the shade, you lost your keys, we drank too much, your brother called, bad news and you sunk your back against a solid trunk that held you as your world shifted. the branch we'd swing from as kids then teenagers, sheltered from a storm, walked your dog past every day. Part of the urban furniture, built into the backdrop of memories, silent witness to years and years of a city evolving until, one day, give way to rot. "Dangerous" or a successful planning application "Unsaveable" decides their fate. And we park up, assess risks over thermos coffee, unpack throw lines and today. It's a takedown. We leave you, and your years and years of summers and winters, diminished to a pile of rounds, as we blow away sawdust, collect fuel can, files, ropes, water-bottle and go home.

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But, who holds your story now?

Photograph by Zoe Jo Rae.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Artistic Research by Marjolijn Dijkman

The project explores the consequences of World War One, the industrialization of forest management, and the current climate crisis in the context of Verdun forests in northeastern France.

Background: Forest, War, and Climate Crisis

My recent artistic research[1] focuses on the catastrophic effects of drought and climate change in the forests of the *Zone Rouge* (Red Zone) around Verdun in northeastern France. This project relates to the ongoing struggle to deal with the aftermath of and physical remnants from World War One (WWI) in the context of the global climate crisis, which has impacted this particular landscape on a monumental scale.

After WWI, nine villages and their surroundings in the Red Zone were completely sealed off as they had become little more than death traps because of unexploded ordnance. They were also contaminated beyond habitation by the arsenic, chlorine, and phosgene that opposing armies had fired at each other. According to the Verdun Memorial museum, the remains of over eighty thousand soldiers lay buried in this ground, never recovered. The French Ministry of Internal Affairs estimates that twelve to fifteen million unexploded shells still lie in the ground and that a thorough demining process would take another three hundred to seven hundred years. The most dangerous ordnance are corroded artillery shells containing chemical warfare agents such as mustard gas. The unexploded pieces of ammunition are gathered by demining services that defuse between twenty to forty tonnes of unexploded ordnance each year. French farmers continue to find unexploded ordnance and shrapnel when ploughing fields located on former battlefields, an activity that is known as the iron harvest.

A few years after the end of the war, Germany donated spruces to France as post-war restitution in order to reforest thousands of hectares of polluted landscape in the Red Zone. As a result, Norway spruces were monocropped in straight rows in accordance with German scientifically supported and production-oriented forest management. These dense forests aimed to prevent people from entering the zone, thus creating a sort of living sarcophagus.

In the scorching summer of 2018 and 2019, a hundred years after the end of WWI, the European bark beetle (*Ips typographus*) invaded these monoculture forests. In response, the French National Forestry Agency (ONF) cleared most of the infected areas. The removal of infected and drying trees – a dangerous and slow process because of the unexploded ordnance – was also done to prevent forest fires in an area abundant with submerged munitions. In my work, the sanitized, barren, and reopened landscape symbolizes the consequences of the war, the industrialization of forest management, and the current climate crisis.

1 Two of the art projects presented here (*Between the Lines* and *Iron Harvest*), while not produced as part of the *Forest Encounters* project, were exhibited at the *Forest Encounters* exhibition in Out of Sight gallery in Antwerp (May–June 2025).

Between the Lines (2024–2025)

Between the Lines is a visual essayistic film accompanied by an orchestra of robotic drummers playing trunks from the protected, memorial forest in the Red Zone. The film consists of short chapters featuring black-and-white assemblages of contemporary film and drone images, recent aerial LiDAR images of the craters and trenches in the forest, and historical photographs of the devastated landscape following WWI. The chapters are interspersed with slow, panoramic shots of close-ups of bark from fallen trees that show traces of bark beetles.

The sound installation is a reference to the military marching bands and Morse code communication during WWI, as well as to the sounds bark beetles use to navigate under the bark. Electrotechnician Lukas Pol developed and built the robotic installation, and composer Henry Vega wrote the composition for the robotic drummers.

Marjolijn Dijkman, *Between the Lines*, 2024–2025.

Marjolijn Dijkman, *Between the Lines*, 2024–2025.

Iron Harvest (2024)

Iron Harvest is a sculpture made from shrapnel collected on the demined paths in the clear-cut forests that had been planted on former WWI battlefields in Verdun. These remnants of rusty metal welded and assembled on a large piece of shrapnel from a large bomb are strangely reminiscent of the bark of spruce trees ravaged by the bark beetle.

Marjolijn Dijkman, *Iron Harvest*, 2024.

Déja Vu (2023)

Déjà Vu is a permanent sculpture made from shrapnel collected in the fields and forests of Verdun. This artificial tree forms the replica of a dead beech standing next to it, echoing the camouflage and observation structures designed for the French army in 1915 in Toul in the studio of the paitner Lucien-Victor Guirand de Scévola. Sketches made by artists in the no-man's land between the trenches were then used to build replicas of bombarded trees in ateliers by sculptors and stage designers. The real tree would be cut at night, and the copy would be elevated on-site to create an observation post overlooking the battlefield.

The work is permanently installed in the public part of the forest on the former trenches of the Saillant de Saint-Mihiel, which were not actively engaged during the war.

Written by Marjolijn Dijkman.

Marjolijn Dijkman, *Déjà Vu*, 2023.

HONEYMOON

The beach was almost deserted, except for a few couples strolling. It was getting cold and the wind blew grains of sand into my mouth. I ground my teeth and swallowed, I swallowed–
the many footsteps,
seashells,
sunsets, and
sandcastles.

In the distance, I saw an old man walk into the surf. He stopped when the water hit his chest and looked straight at me. He looked like a bust, his white hair glistening.

One day they'll make my sculpture out of marble and I'll exist forever, or at least for a little while longer.

I looked back at what should've been the top part of a man, but he was gone. Every island I ever visited made me sad. I can never get past the scope of the sea. It's a lot.

I walked back to my cabin. It was a gorgeous cabin–
a bamboo roof,
a four poster bed, and
a rain shower in the middle of the canopy.

I turned it on until the mirrors fogged up, closed the curtains, took my bathing suit off and felt the wet sand drop to the floor. I let the rainwater caress me, a warm coat covering my sunburnt skin. I opened my lips and tasted the water, tilted my head back and filled up my gaping mouth until it splashed out like a fountain. I opened my eyes, they were burning, and stared at the ceiling.

I would go have dinner by myself at the restaurant on the shore. I felt my stomach growl. After drying my red skin with a soft cotton towel, I put on my orange dress to match. The path to the restaurant was long, swirling, snake-like. My flip flops clattered against the stone tiles. I began sweating again, the never ending tropical ooze. There was nobody at the restaurant, not even a cook or a waiter. I checked my phone – five past seven, normal enough. I considered sitting down and waiting for someone to show, but instead I was pulled back, back to the cabin. On my way back, a butterfly struck me and then landed on the flowerbed to my left. It had four devil blue eyes on its back,

looking straight at me. I closed my eyes to process, and a second later it was gone.

Back in my cabin, I put on the soft, white robe with matching slippers, soft as a thousand freshly sheared angora rabbits. Flat on my stomach: roomservice. I grabbed the phone and ordered–
the shrimp tagliatelle,
seafood risotto,
white fish curry, and
two chocolate mousses.

Yes ma'am, we'll be there in thirty minutes. I leafed through a magazine about the island's otherworldly underwater world. I spotted a nudibranch on a dive earlier that day, an orange one with purple dots on its back. It seemed barely alive, crawling around the bottom of the ocean at a glacial pace. The magazine said there are more than three thousand different species of nudibranch. Nudus Brankhia, naked gills.

One day, I'll have gills, too.

Exactly twenty-five minutes later, there was a knock at the door. A smallish man was holding a giant tray with three large plates and equally large silver bell jars. The man looked at my bunny slippers and said with a faint smile–
"Just you?"
"Just me." I said.
"Where should I put it?"

He gently put the tray on the four-poster bed, and with one last sheepish look walked out and closed the cabin door. I ate greedily and with great pleasure, stretched out on the bed, while watching my reflection on the dark television screen. After polishing off the three main dishes, I was very full, but figured I'd eat one chocolate mousse now, and one after. I reclined, cradling my swollen belly, and put my hand in between my legs. My hair was short and frizzy, coarse, like the sand. I smelled my fingers and spit on them. In between my legs, I wrote the names of past lovers on my clitoris as I kept watching myself on TV.

One day I'll be full. I'll be so full, filled to the brim, and so far from anything.

After I came, I heard a sound outside the sliding doors, behind the curtains. It was a crackling, a rattle, and it kept getting louder. I got up, thighs gliding over one another, belly full of fish, elated. I opened the curtains and saw hundreds, no, thousands of insects throwing themselves at the window. It was deafening, the beating of the bugs against the glass doors, trying to get in. They were inexhaustible, such a large number of insects throwing themselves at the window, falling to the floor and getting back up to try again and again. A

whole swarm–
flies,
ants,
beetles,
bees,
dragonflies,
moths,
spiders, and
cockroaches.

I wanted to join them. I opened the sliding doors and they surrounded me, in a circle, to crash up against me, all together. The living, beating swarm. I fell backwards on the wooden deck, opened my mouth, let the insects enter me and eat me.

The flies ate me.
The moths ate me.
The cockroaches and crickets ate me too, until there was nothing left.

The next morning I paid the bill at the reception and continued my journey along the stone tiles into the forest. Slowly, the beach disappeared from view and the sound of the surf evaporated. The mangroves collided with the ferns and the sky got darker, and darker, until it was completely gone.

I was met by a wall–
a wall of green I could now pass through,
deep into the darkness of the island,
deeper than the dark of the ocean or the deepest well
into which I would disappear

completely.

Photograph by Alex Schuurbiers.

OTHERNESS RITUALS

Artistic Research by Nayarí Castillo

Nayarí Castillo's artistic research explores human and more-than-human encounters in the context of the forests in and around Graz. As part of the *Forest Encounters* project, Castillo generated a multi-perspective body of work around otherness and communication rituals. These works include *Spells for Shapeshifting*, which opens a space for empathy with city forest fauna, *The Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild*, which summons magic and invisible spiritual forces, *The Rogues* (in collaboration with Hanns Holger Rutz), which explores communication between humans and technological beings, and *Stratifications* (in collaboration with Reni Hofmüller), which pays attention to invisible underground creatures, and, finally, *Forest Encounters Glossary*, a collaborative publication based on artistic strategies that explore the forest.

THE NEVER-ENDING CIRCLE OF EXPLORATION AND ITS COUNTERSPELLS

A Conversation between Daniela Brasil and Nayarí Castillo

DANIELA BRASIL: We have known each other for more than twenty years and have encountered each other in many constellations, geographies, and languages. We have both been based in Graz for more than a decade. Could you please share how you started to get involved with the Graz forests and how this relationship has evolved over time?

NAYARÍ CASTILLO: In addition to being an artist, I am also a molecular biologist and have always been interested in relationships in the surrounding world. However, my interest in the forest comes from nostalgia because I grew up in the megalopolis of Caracas in Venezuela. You could call it a forest of concrete.

BRASIL: A concrete jungle?

CASTILLO: Yes, but Caracas is full of animals, plants, and buildings. I do not know if it is among the greenest cities in the world, but it is very green. Since I came to Europe, I have longed for this close relationship with nature.

BRASIL: We have similar biographies. I also grew up in a concrete jungle in the tropics, in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. We both studied art at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany, and our sensorial experiences had to be adjusted and developed to this new climate because, in the tropics, exuberance explodes out of every crack. It permeates everything. If you do not clean your table after eating, ants and cockroaches, at the very least, will come.

CASTILLO: Yes, and birds and all kinds of other beings. My aunt lives in the east of Caracas, next to a mountain and a waterfall. Her house is full of "others" – animated and unanimated. In the tropics, you have to check every day if scorpions are in your shoes, be aware that an ape can get into your house and steal your food, so food needs to be covered. Trees abruptly interrupt the streets with their powerful roots. Everything is bursting in this lush, exuberant way.

BRASIL: We had to adjust to the European bioregion. Our bodies had difficulty feeling it, and yet, over time, we did learn, right?

CASTILLO: You start becoming aware of other natural rhythms. It may not be a gigantic root destroying the asphalt, but just a small shoot opening a space and growing through the rocks. There are other types of resilience in nature and different kinds of "openings". They may not

be as intense as natural phenomena in our latitudes, but they are there. There is not an overwhelming smell, but there is a smell that has to do with types of berries and herbs that are particular to different times of year in the city. Your body begins to understand because it is all about new bodily experiences you are collecting. After some time spent in the new place, it is possible to learn its particular ways of being with nature.

BRASIL: Here in Europe, we have changing seasons, the opposite of the constant, sensuous vibration of the tropics. This is how I became captivated by the realization that nature is both strong and fragile. For instance, in the calm wintertime, the light drastically changes. In the tropics, we have a homogeneous light throughout the year. Can you recall how those factors affected you?

CASTILLO: Yes, it could be felt as our circadian rhythms changing us, but also as new ways of capturing the poetry of the surrounding nature. However, I am careful when I use the word nature because it is often used in an alienating way – it can separate you from the other. Humans are also nature, and it is important to understand our space and relationship to the other creatures around us.

BRASIL: We can agree to use the word nature to facilitate the conversation because, after all, we grew up in urban spaces with a Western mentality that resulted from processes of colonization. We were socialized in an anthropocentric world that constantly posits that humans are separate from nature. We both want to reestablish connections that have been lost, and situate ourselves in an ecocentric system, but not with a romanticized idea of nature. This is what your forest-related projects and artistic research are all about, right?

CASTILLO: Yes, definitely. But the genesis of the *Forest Encounters* project lies in another project idea, developed in collaboration with partners and colleagues from the *Forest Encounters* project, called *Forest United*. It focused on the idea of dismantling state borders using the forest as an interconnected ecosystem. By learning from nature, we wanted to connect the territory from Albania to Germany that is currently politically divided. But then the idea changed. It lost its initial activist aspect and became something more focused on artistic research, observing the realities of participating countries – Slovenia, Serbia, Belgium, and Austria – in relation to the topic of the forest.
I picked the topic of the city forest. This interest emerged from the project you and I conceived in 2020 called *Homeostasis: Between Borders and Flows*. At that time, we were interested in how the built infrastructure of the city clashes with natural flows, how planners and decision-makers control nature within a city, and how nature resists that control.

BRASIL: Going back to your transition from the initial forest-related project – which aimed at a transnational approach to forests with a broader political-administrative focus – you decided to work more locally and search for personal stories, creating the idea of personal forest encounters. By bringing in storytelling and the subjective experiences of people living in the city, you focused on how "nature"

– and specifically the forest – is perceived in middle-size European cities. Is that correct?

CASTILLO: Yes. We both share an interest in participatory inquiry. For both of us, engagement strategies don't just mean involving people while seeking specific arty results, but instead allowing their voices to enter and reshape the artistic process. We also both believe in co-creation not only with humans but with other beings and elements as well. For example, in the *Forest Encounters Glossary*,[1] some of the voices are also from those beings – or at least from people's perspective on them. I also created two additional projects within the *Forest Encounters* project: *Spells for Shapeshifting* and *Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild* where I explore perspectives of other beings and forces in our interconnected world.

BRASIL: How do you let other voices enter the research process. How do you hear and sense the more-than-human world? Is there a spiritual component in your approach? While creating the *Forest Encounters Glossary*, for example, you had four ways of gathering stories that represent what other beings might be saying and feeling. Can you explain a bit about that?

CASTILLO: My research of the forest incorporates more-than-human voices in multiple ways. In the beginning, I had a more observational mindset, which was realized by developing technology of something called nature pods – physical structures where observers become aware of the presence of other organisms. The nature pods were planned as public explorations of their ever-growing "ancestors" called *Rogues*,[2] which were developed in collaboration with sound artist Hanns Holger Rutz. The *Rogues* are sensing tecno-organisms that communicate with themselves and their surroundings. In the project, *Stratification*, created in collaboration with artist Reni Hofmüller, we explored invisible gestures and beings of forest soils through deep-sound recordings and poetry. Then, I shifted to a more magical and activist approach in my research, developing artworks around shapeshifting and city forests where it is possible to absorb the perspective of others.

Lastly, I adopted a participative approach, exemplified by the *Forest Encounters Glossary*, a collection of stories – gathered through different writing workshops and contributions of visitors at the exhibition *Wild Spots* at <rotor> in Graz (2024) – about people encountering the forest and their relationship with it. But, of course, how to record the agency of otherness is always an open question.

Nayarí Castillo in collaboration with Hanns Holger Rutz, *Rogues*, 2022–2025.

Collecting contributions for the *Forest Encounters Glossary* at the *Wild Spots* exhibition, <rotor>, Graz, 2024.

1 The *Forest Encounters Glossary* is available on the *Forest Encounters* website: https://forest-encounters.net/glossary/ (accessed October 15, 2025). For some of the glossary contributions, see pp. 224–229. – *Editorial note.*

2 *Rogues* denote multi-sensory and multi-modal entities, sitting somewhere, in an exhibition space, or a private space, or outside waiting for the birds. They may appear in different forms, their size is about that of the human child. They emit sound and image. They take in the sensations of their surroundings. They are not surveillance devices. Their senses are touch, proximity, and light. They can make connections among themselves. They grow memories of place, accumulating sensory data, employing algorithms, adopting fragments of data from other *Rogues*.

BRASIL: You have concentrated on many different techniques for gathering information. There is the contemplative, silent, observatory mode. Then there is dialogical storytelling and the spoken approach where collective knowledge is produced – like in the *Glossary*. Finally, you explore the inner spiritual voice in projects like *Spells for Shapeshifting* and *Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild*. You're a sensitive person who can sense natural forces in very special ways. In this animistic world, not all things need to be verbalized – some things should remain opaque as the French writer, poet, and thinker Édouard Glissant suggested. How do you create what you gather and translate it into artistic output?

CASTILLO: Sometimes I have an idea about artistic outputs. For example, the idea of creating a glossary was a way to ensure that collectiveness would be present in a format that would include diverse voices. *The Glossary* has a lot of political ideas. The project reflects how things can be approached collectively. It was built over time through networks of love that emerged from previous projects and ways of coming together. It's not a coincidence that the project began with a workshop involving many of our common conspiratorial partners. The workshop took place during the *Habitat Graz* exhibition (Graz Museum, May 2024–February 2025) which you were curating at the time, bringing together people we had already connected with in previous projects – such as the Botanical Garden, the Waldschule (forest school), and the Grazer Grünes Band (Graz Green Belt).

Forest Encounters Glossary workshop at the *Habitat Graz* exhibition, Graz Museum, 2024.

BRASIL: I am interested in these networks of love and how your work evolves through such relationships. We could even extend these ideas and say it is about creating a family or making kin within the city's structures and institutions.

CASTILLO: It's interconnected. In the sense that we create emotional and intellectual connections with people with whom we work and create.

BRASIL: And it's constantly evolving.

CASTILLO: And changing and reshaping, but the underlying emphasis on interconnectedness has a lot to do with forest itself. As both a metaphor and an environment, the forest is a multi-layered structure interconnected on many levels, an intermingling of beings of all kinds.

BRASIL: Interconnected through solidarity and competition: nurturing and supporting each other but also competing for who will get more light, who will grow, who will die. The forest is a perfect metaphor for the art world where we're often put into competition with each other – because of the star system, funding, employment. Yet, beneath it all, there is a shared ground, a mycelium that sustains us.

CASTILLO: And that's part of the affective mycelium we're co-creating in the city. We each have different positions which change and are reshaped within the city landscape. Literal and abstract small forests permeate the city.

BRASIL: Could you explain how the process of reshaping the city landscape was significant for creating the *Glossary*, and how you designed, interpreted, and edited it?

CASTILLO: I've always wanted to publish a glossary of collective endeavors, a participative piece of collaborative ideas. Glossaries are a playful way of approaching information tied to a central idea. I wanted to make a very open one. During the first round together, with artists and co-editors of the glossary Polonca Lovšin and Dušica Dražić, we asked a group of fourteen people with different expertise – psychologists, authorities in charge of the greenery of the city, architects, dancers, artists, gardening experts, social workers, and biologists – to contribute glossary entries. We gathered twenty-eight of them.

BRASIL: Twenty-eight? Doesn't the alphabet have twenty-six letters?

CASTILLO: The English alphabet has twenty-six letters, but additional letters from other languages already appeared on the first day. That is why the glossary includes entries starting with letters like the Spanish ñ and š from Slavic languages.

BRASIL: What mesmerized you about the process used for the glossary?

CASTILLO: The accumulation of voices from different backgrounds, and also the expansion of the glossary through different writing workshops. The workshop with the Graz Feminist Reading Group, for example, incorporated the ecofeminist context and highlighted how silent resiliencies are interconnected. There are silent methodologies used by many in this group of interesting women that can be implemented as resistance. At the same time, it became clear that it is important to include contradicting views. Previously, much of the collected texts focused on the goodness of nature. This workshop – that streamed vibrant discussions – delved into political questions like forest co-modification, exploitation, and systemic issues related to forest. I remember one contribution in particular: "Xenophobic Forest" – namely, a forest that doesn't allow other voices.

Collecting contributions for the *Forest Encounters Glossary* at the workshop organized in cooperation with the NGO Danaida, <rotor>, Graz, 2024.

Collecting contributions for the *Forest Encounters Glossary* at the workshop organized in cooperation with the Graz Feminist Reading Group, <rotor>, Graz, 2024.

BRASIL: Sadly, it seems these types of violent and disrespectful foresting are expanding: like the monoculture forest. Did you talk about things like forests cultivated for paper production?

CASTILLO: Yes, we talked about many exploitative and even war-related forest practices. The workshop explored a range of discursive possibilities – both positive and negative – from ultra-capitalistic to anti-capitalistic interpretations of the forest. There were also other engaging workshops. For example, the seminar with students from the Sustainability, Communication, and Climate Journalism department at the FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences was also engaging because the participants were environmental journalists. I love pluralities and contradictions.

BRASIL: Maybe our subjective forests are a mix of all the forests we inhabit and those that inhabit us.

CASTILLO: I am always impressed by how the creative and collaborative process permits and enables open connections back to my former biology studies and memories. Like the concept of a cloud forest, or *selva nublada* as Spanish speakers call it. For them, a rainforest isn't just a forest in the rain but a cloud forest, because of the cloud cover. So, when I think of a could forest, I also return to my sensation at the Henry Pittier National Park, which has climbing platforms that are forty to sixty metres above the ground. From the platforms, you can see the entire rainforest from above the clouds.

BRASIL: I had a similar experience going up over the tree canopy in the Amazon. Your body is exposed to the weather and the sensation of being above the trees in the humid heat. We can now share these visuals from drones but recorded images can't capture the bodily experience of being there. I also remember the workshop "Unlearning Weekenders" in 2014, which we did with Catherine Grau and Zoe Kreye on the Schöckl – the mountain near Graz. They led various unlearning exercises, such as "the collective body", where we walked up a hill in a tight group, focusing on just one sense. I especially like to recall "the weather score" exercise. It went something like this: "Step into the darkness, find a nice spot and get naked, feel the cold, cloudy weather as long as you can." Afterward, we had an exchange with all the participants. We discussed how difficult it was to overcome our hesitation. Exposing ourselves to the weather was unusual for us urban beings. We rarely pay attention to how our bodies encounter the air. This fantastic exercise made us reconnect with our skin, and feel vulnerability and permeability with the surrounding forest.

CASTILLO: Connection with our surroundings is crucial. I had a conflicted personal position throughout the *Forest Encounters* project. Many of the researchers we worked with and many discussions focused on rewilding or "leaving nature alone" so that it could recover. But the truth is that we are part of nature. And as you say: we need to get

naked. The book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Tsing[3] discusses the relationship between human intervention and nature, arguing that humans can't simply withdraw from natural spaces and processes. The idea of leaving nature alone doesn't solve the problem. We need to change how we relate with other beings. Leaving nature alone often means that somebody else exploits it – and this must stop.

BRASIL: The never-ending exploitative extractivist cycles.

CASTILLO: There are legal and illegal extractions, but in the end, they are all forms of extractions. What needs to change is our human mentality of extractivism. We need to live more balanced lives.

BRASIL: Absolutely. And this also connects to the topics of collecting and displaying. Natural collections have fostered the extractivist mode. If you look at naturalist expeditions in the Americas, we see figures like Alexander von Humboldt and Johann Natterer. Their scientific expeditions and the collections they accumulated supported 18th- and 19th-century geopolitical competition. There was a global rush to collect fauna and flora "objects" for display in national museums, which went hand-in-hand with the legitimization of the formation of nation states. These expeditions were often highly destructive. A single field research day in a tropical forest might involve killing thirty animals and collecting fifty plants. Even when done for research purposes, the practice of collecting reflects the idea of ownership – a need to bring home a trophy. We can't undo this legacy, but we can reframe how we approach research, learning, collecting, and classifying.

CASTILLO: That's totally on point. That's why I try to introduce magic transformation spells – inviting people to become animals. For me, trying to transform yourself – becoming the eyes, the senses of an animal – isn't about extraction for study but about perceiving. It shifts away from purely aggressive physical taking toward an exercise in relating and understanding. It operates against dissecting the specimen, which is how biology operated for many years – taking, destroying, categorizing, and labeling.

BRASIL: Yes, and in doing so, we classify everything in a way that does not value relationships within our ecosystems. We place butterflies with butterflies, flowers with flowers, but rarely the butterfly with the flower. Our classification system still insists on separating rather than interrelating.

3 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2015.

Nayarí Castillo, *Spells for Shapeshifting*, one of several interventions in public space, Graz, 2024–2025.

Nayarí Castillo, *Spells for Shapeshifting*, site-specific installation, Lech Forest, Graz, 2024–2025.

CASTILLO: In my projects – and I believe we share this perspective – I am advocating for other ways of communicating with, classifying, and understanding nature. Ways that involve relating to nature, becoming part of it. These ways might come, in our case, from Indigenous imaginaries and epistemologies. This is an approach that is not about abolishing, killing, or dissecting, but rather about appreciating, communicating, and seeing.

BRASIL: It's about creating a more respectful, reciprocal relationship that does not prioritize human beings above everything else.

CASTILLO: And I am increasingly interested in hidden knowledge – hidden because of being peripheral, vernacular, quiet, almost underground. This is Indigenous knowledge from across the world. It is situated but not tied to a single location. It comes from the Sámi, the Wayuú, the Yanomami, ... There is something about engaging with "the other" differently that deeply interests me, and I want to explore it further.

BRASIL: Yes, and I think this different way touches on another dimension of the sacred. It opens up forms of enchantment or embodiments that pluralize and decentralize the individual being, acknowledging that we can never be complete but are always in relation, ecological and unfinished. I guess this is the path you and I are trying to follow: restoring or reconnecting with the world's enchantments without falling into the trap of becoming commodified.

CASTILLO: Commodification is also another form of extractivism. We commodify and extract. My work, particularly within the shapeshifting narratives, centers around re-enchanting the world – recovering magic. In this sense, magic is a resilient methodology for attuning and connecting. In Latin America, for example, there are methods of resistance rooted in absurdity that are woven into our stories. We've had many external elements imposed on us, such as hegemonic religions. Instead of just accepting them, we resisted by combining and infiltrating them into our own beliefs. Hence, syncretic systems are not just a way of connecting to the supernatural but also a methodology of resistance.

BRASIL: It's a methodology of resistance that embraces plurality and ambivalence. That is one of the difficulties I have with living here in Europe – there is often a particular kind of purism. You must belong to this or that, but not to both, plus something else. This linear trajectory, this singularity, is always expected, even in academia. The mixed, the *mestizo*, and the trans-(gender / disciplinary/ cultural) are systematically marginalized, exoticized, and even expelled. I love that we can be syncretic, that we can re-signify our contradictions, and allow ourselves to be "okay with being multiple".

CASTILLO: The idea of being "okay with being multiple" is so beautiful.

BRASIL: We should not have to justify ourselves for being multiple. We can be this and that, and we can also change our minds. We can evolve in *becoming*. I discussed this recently when my daughter's new school requested a baptism certificate. Well, my daughter was born on the day of Yemanjá (the Orixá of the salted waters), and for me, the Atlantic Ocean is part of our spirituality in a broader sense. I am a creature of the Atlantic with all the incongruities and systems of belief that these waters carry. Yemanjá and her waters blessed my daughter. So, I made a certificate of this blessing with the image of Yemanjá, a cowrie shell, and waves to submit to the school. Some colleagues said: "But you are making a false document." And I replied: "I am not. I am registering this blessing

on paper because the state needs papers." For me, a paper can be an act of violence.

CASTILLO: Yes, bureaucracy can be very violent. It is systemic violence.

BRASIL: So, if I make a document myself, it is an act of resistance because it validates the act of blessing while at the same time names and vocalizes it within the language of coloniality.

CASTILLO: That is the beauty of using different methods we have learned or things we have picked up from other places. You mentioned coexistence, which ties into the history of syncretism – a way of being multiple. Like you said: "I am the Atlantic. I am water." My water is the Caribbean, and my Caribbean comprises multiple influences. This makes me think of the idea of the archipelago. Glissant says we are not just accumulations of separate stories but rather interconnected ones. This idea of constant interconnectedness, of being plural, is a key part of the strategies discussed. We are essentially collective.

BRASIL: We use the vocabulary of migration, the language of nature, and, at the same time, we reject it – because we acknowledge we are all mixed, that we exist within chaos, and that chaos itself is interconnectedness.

CASTILLO: I would love to dismantle purity. It is something that, within our political framework, we both have been trying to do since we arrived here – not through combative projects, but through smaller ones that carry this idea of blurring cultural boundaries and identities. We should not only mix but accept that we are a mixture.

BRASIL: As you mentioned, it is important to enable transcultural spaces of conviviality – spaces of positive exchange, joyful learning, and playful interactions.

CASTILLO: Yes, we should advocate for conviviality, commonality, collectiveness, and the co-creation of knowledge. This is about the pluriversal – not just the multiplicity within us as human beings but different ways of being together and standing side by side in the same space we share.

BRASIL: Our roots may have been elsewhere, but they are still growing today, here in a different soil, too. Everybody's roots are looking for nurturing spaces, aren't they?

CASTILLO: That is the forest humus. The forest is a good metaphor – it includes coming together and interconnecting layers. It is connected from ground to sky.

BRASIL: Some plants extract contamination from the soil, they even regenerate it for others. That also is a role within the collective: to remove toxicity and create fertile ground.

CASTILLO: Both of our work has to do with collectivism. In a sense, we bring together a way of being that is deeply connected, an interconnection of the multiple, and these processes also relate to the forest. I believe more and more in each person and each being.

BRASIL: Maybe we can agree with the personification of nature, not only for the sake of the rights of nature but also through the lens of Amazonian perspectivism: when we say "person", we might also be referring to a jaguar, a river, a rock, a tree.

CASTILLO: All beings have individuality. The idea of a coalition – coming together and standing together in solidarity – is very important to me. It is not about becoming a collective by destroying individual essence. I do not believe in collectivism as a single voice – that idea is killing us. Instead, I advocate for a forest of multiplicity where individuality is preserved, or as Judith Butler calls it: "bodies in an alliance" – a collectivity of individuals bringing their unique elements together.

BRASIL: They exist in relation because you can be unique without dissolving into others.

CASTILLO: Yes, but this is somewhat flexible. Sometimes you act as an individual, sometimes you become another in a collective, and sometimes you are "bodies in alliance" preserving individuality within the group. That's why mycelium is so important to me. It represents an intelligent form of collectiveness – something invisible yet profoundly interconnected. Mycelium can act, decide, gather, and separate. It functions as a collective force, much like how we attempt to understand and shape collectivity in society through our projects. The mycelium of the forest is such a good metaphor – it provides the collective power that holds everything together.

BRASIL: I would like to ask one final question. I love the space of the shrine. How does your need to create a shrine – for example, in your work *Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild* – fit into what we are talking about?

CASTILLO: For many years, I denied the spiritual part of myself – not in the sense of belonging to a specific religion, but in recognizing that there are other forces to which I am attuned. Lately, I have been exploring my animistic part. I believe the wind and the mountains have souls that need to be heard. But I also long for something spiritual that ties into different forms of knowledge. I have spent years immersed in the artistic and academic worlds, leaving behind something very present in my childhood – that syncretic belief system we discussed. I am starting to reintegrate aspects of that in my art practice – artifacts, methodologies – and ways of being in the world. Synchronicity and magic can appear in anything. Shrines, specifically, make these connections material. Creating them is an exercise in nakedness. It is scary to confess that you have this spiritual part, but I am becoming more open. I see these beliefs as a way to better relate to the forces that bind elements together.

BRASIL: But the arts can materialize and give visibility to the spiritual space. For many people, or within many spiritualities, the shrine can be a forest, a river, a waterfall. When you create a space for the spiritual and name it as a space for healing, is that not a way of saying that we need to reconnect and intentionally create a space for that?

Nayarí Castillo, *Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild*, Hoke Workhouse, Austria, 2024.

CASTILLO: Yes, for sure, and also a way of acknowledging magic. In the *Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild*, I worked with a version of an animal deity called *Potnia Theron*, a very ancient, somatic force of deity-related primal forces. Another one, *Ereshkigal*, is part bird, part human. I have been working a lot with these deities of transformation – beings in transformation. The idea of transforming into other beings is ancient in history. It acknowledges the importance of embodying spirituality. Also *Spells for Shapeshifting* deals with feminist epistemologies and advocates for subtle becomings – the possibility of becoming an animal by activation through a spell or a poem. This may have to do with the idea of *buen vivir*, acknowledging that there are different ways of being in the world – some that aren't about extraction or destruction but rather about deeper relations and conviviality.

BRASIL: So which animal are you? Within your project, I became a spider and was very curious to relate to it.

CASTILLO: I chose the spider for you because the spider is about making connections. I chose the bear for myself, knowing that a bear's quality is not strength but the incredible ability of knowing when to rest. In transforming you into a spider, I talked silently about your exceptional abilities: connecting things that are far apart and seemingly unconnectable. This ties back to our original discussion about networks of affection. These features are deeply connected to the individuals I selected as instances of transformation – they highlight specific qualities, almost like enhanced superpowers that these people already possess or could experience. In my case, it was more about a wish to embody that characteristic.

BRASIL: So you work on empowerment. Empowering in the sense of recognizing your superpowers and using them to make society better.

CASTILLO: Yes! It's about superpowers. Moreover, I wish us superpowers and I want them to connect with good magic – features for constructing a feminist better world.

Nayarí Castillo, *Spells for Shapeshifting* at the *Wild Spots* exhibition, <rotor>, Graz, 2024.

Nayarí Castillo, *Spells for Shapeshifting* at the *Bodies in Revolution* exhibition, Neue Galerie Graz, 2025.

BRASIL: Superpowers that aren't superheroes fighting wars but superpowers that create symbiotic relations – like in the forest.

CASTILLO: Yes, the ability to create connections – to save, to care, to connect, to make things familiar. These are the superpowers of the animals I call upon. In the piece, for example, my mother is the chamois – an animal that shouldn't be naturally in the territory of Graz, yet it is here. It is a quadruped, like a deer, with an incredible ability to adapt, move across land and stones, and climb almost vertically despite coming from arid spaces. I see that same flexibility in my mom – her ability to navigate space to find commonality even in places where she might not naturally belong. That is the quality I call upon for her.

BRASIL: It is a beautiful project. I hope it continues to evolve and even brings more magic to the regeneration of Gaia!

CASTILLO: I hope so, too. Right now, I am focusing on keeping these lines of research growing. *Forest Encounters* for me aligns well with other collaborative projects I am involved in such as *Simultaneous Arrivals* (www.simularr.net). All my work seems to revolve around this same theme – whether it's collaboration with others, more-than-human entities, artists, invisible forces. It is all about coexistence.

FOREST ENCOUNTERS GLOSSARY[1]

Asylum-Seeker Plant

Botanical and legal language often uses military terminology – like pioneer plant, invasive alien species – to describe when a plant is "colonizing" a land. Often people use the term "plant migration". In many cases, plants appear in an area because of human-made climate change. That living being is not invading / not pioneering / not migrating but seeking asylum. And in many cases facing green xenophobia. – See *Xenophobic Forest*.

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 12.

1 The *Forest Encounters Glossary* is a collaborative bilingual (German–English) publication that includes entries by more than two hundred contributors. The glossary project was led and co-edited by artist Nayarí Castillo, who, in collaboration with artists and co-editors Dušica Dražić and Polonca Lovšin, developed a specific collection strategy and guidelines for contributions. Published by Reagenz, Graz, 2025.

Atmung / Inhale

I walk through the forest and breathe in deeply.
I let the smells take effect on me.
It allows me to calm down and heal.
This is the time for me. The time to enjoy nature.
You can smell the coniferous wood, the moss,
the earth, the plants that are blooming, the forest.

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 13.

Forestress: Forest + Fortress

Entering a forest is always frightening for me.
The huge organism is so protective of itself.
Moving so tense and still.
The edge of the forest is a barrier.
If you are inside, you are part of it,
you are protected.

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 52.

Moss Ass

When you sit in a forest on a soft green moss
feeling comfortable,
but after a while
you feel your trousers are wet
and you have an itchy bottom.
Before I was able to walk
my grandmother left me sitting on moss
while she was picking blueberries.
When she returned, my skin had turned black since
I was covered with hundreds of ticks.
They took me to the hospital and I changed colour again.

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 99.

Phytomass

The extent of the root system often exceeds the
above-ground part of a tree.
Then imagine a forest, how gigantic the size of the
underground phytomass
must be compared to what is above the ground.
And the number of biocenosis that the roots form
with soil microorganisms is immeasurable.
Not only does the plant thriving and its entire living
environment depend on this,
but also the lives of people. The root is the anchor point
of our existence.
(An excerpt from the original contribution.)

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 120.

Potentiality

**Fire is an uncontrollable force.
It can take down a forest in minutes,
destroy everything, displace animals, damage years of growth.
The forest nevertheless resists, and below there is, after the fire,
still some potentiality. Seeds that will grow again to be giants.**

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 123.

Quelpos / Kelp Forest

**There are also under-water forests. When you are visiting them you feel truly alive …
At night they appear bioluminescent blue,
in daylight they are red, almost brown.**

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 128.

Šuma / Forest

**When we started dreaming for this project, we thought of an untamable forest,
borderless, where animals roam around, laughing at human political frontiers.
A long and connected territory that would link a gigantic part of Europe.
We thought it would be necessary to rise, to react, to protect the forest.
The idea was to scream, to use our voices, and our art in an action for our forests.
We still think there is a way, to stand in solidarity for a territory that is connected, a place
that, from Norway to Albania, shows us how to live better.
We still dream of a forest united.**

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 151.

Xenophobic Forest

**A monoculture forest that excludes other species of trees.
E.g.: Austrian pine forest (Pinus nigra); Norway Spruce forest (Picea abies); Serbian Spruce forest (Picea omorica)**

* *Forest Encounters Glossary*, p. 182.

Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

MATEJA KURIR

FOREST-THINKING: FROM THE FEARED AND FORGOTTEN TO THE SUBLIME

Forests remain conspicuously absent from philosophical discourse despite their immense environmental, social, and economic importance. Forests are taken for granted, rarely acknowledged for the vital role they play in sustaining life, serving as public spaces in many countries, offering refuge for retreat from society, and carrying charged symbolic values.

This paper seeks to explore the reasons why such a crucial space has been largely neglected in philosophical discussions. It examines key meanings and connotations of the word *forest*, investigates the historical absence of forests in Western metaphysics, and highlights emerging philosophical directions over the past three decades that are beginning to reframe the forest's significance.[1]

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I have walked in the forest almost every day since I moved to the countryside in the southern part of Slovenia. For me, the forest is a space of calmness, introspection, and illumination. Our village is surrounded by extensive fir-beech forests that foster biodiversity, provide sustenance for wildlife, and are home to large predators. Hence, I need to be careful not to interfere with the wild animals – especially the brown bears – when walking our dog in the woods. I try to be loud. I whistle and make other noises to announce my presence to the forest's inhabitants and give them time to retreat. So far this tactic has been successful as I have never encountered a bear in the woods. However, I have often seen paw prints in the snow or mud, left by both small and large bears.[2]

Due to Slovenia's characteristic of dispersed settlements, human and natural habitats are often closely connected, making the coexistence of humans and animals delicate and sometimes strained. With almost sixty percent of the country covered by forest, the forest is not only one of the crucial elements of identity in the Slovenian landscape but is also among the most popular public areas for recreation and retreat. By law, forests in Slovenia are publicly accessible. Thus, there are no fences designating private property in Slovenian forests. According to the Forest Act (1993), forests serve not only an economic purpose but also recreational and social functions. Hence,

1 The theme of the forest has been increasingly explored in recent theoretical and philosophical literature. I make no claim to comprehensiveness in this paper. I merely make an attempt to grasp some of the essential issues. As a beginner in this field, I approach the topic with humility, fully aware that what follows can only be a partial engagement.

2 According to the latest expert assessment, around a thousand bears currently live in the forests in Slovenia. See Klemen Jerina, *Rekonstrukcija dinamike številčnosti rjavega medveda v Sloveniji za obdobje 1998–2024. Ekspertiza*, February 2024, Ministrstvo za naravne vire in prostor Republike Slovenije, Ljubljana, 2024, https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MNVP/Dokumenti/Narava/Velike-zveri/dinamika_medved_1998_2024.pdf (accessed July 24, 2025).

forests are an important public space. The same law also mandates sustainable and close-to-nature forest management.

Forests in Slovenia are largely designed and managed by humans. However, close-to-nature forest management ensures biodiversity, fosters the regenerative capacity and vitality of the forest while maintaining its ecological function. In the southeastern part of Slovenia known as Kočevsko, some parts of the forests have been managed with the close-to-nature approach for over a century.[3] Moreover, fourteen virgin forests have been preserved in this small country. These areas remain largely inaccessible, as their primary purpose is to provide space for natural processes to take place as freely and as unhindered from human intervention as possible.

Experts and enthusiasts from around the world visit Slovenian forests to study good forestry practice and experience their wilderness – proof that such landscapes can still exist in the heart of Central Europe. Yet, when I started to read more about the forest, I also realized how difficult it is to think philosophically about this unique space.

A bear paw print in the snow.

3 Bojan Kocjan, *Živeti z gozdom: Gozdnogospodarsko območje Kočevje. Zgodovina gozdarstva na Kočevskem*, Pokrajinski muzej, Kočevje, 2010, p. 41.

Forest in winter.

On the Margin: Forest as the Outside and the Foreign

The etymology of the word forest reflects its meaning as something external, alien, and foreign to the human. The earliest recorded use of the word in English dates back to the 1200s or 1300s. This coincides with one of the largest periods of deforestation known as the Great Clearances,[4] which took place in Europe from 1000 to 1300, driven by agriculture and population growth.

It seems that the first use of the English word forest during the Middle Ages refers mainly to an "extensive tree-covered district", especially one set aside under the protection of the king for hunting by members of royalty. The term likely traces back to the late mediaeval Latin phrase *forestem silvam*, meaning "the outside woods" denoting "the royal forest".[5]

The origin of the first word in this phrase comes from the Latin *foris* ("outside"), which closely aligns with the meaning of *foreign*. Coming from the same Latin root *foris*, the mediaeval term for "foreign" was *foraneus* – meaning "on the outside" or "external". This etymology points out that in the Middle Ages the forest was understood as a space that is outside, that is literally "beyond the park" – the central, fenced woodland.

In this mediaeval meaning, the forest held a specific cultural significance,[6] as it was defined within a class structure: the privileged had the right to use the forest for activities such as hunting, while the peasants or those without such privileges could be punished – even killed – for trespassing in the forest. In this sense, the word forest was originally also and foremost a juridical term that delineated the line or border of social distinctions. The notion of the forest as a threshold of difference was present also in mediaeval literature.[7] In everyday life, forests were regarded as a border area between different entities, groups, nations, and systems of values.

4 Michael Williams, "Dark Ages and Dark Areas: Global Deforestation in the Deep Past", *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2000, pp. 28–46, doi:10.1006/jhge.1999.0189 (accessed July 24, 2025).

5 "Forest", *Etymonline*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/forest?utm_source=app (accessed March 28, 2025).

6 Dan Handel, *Designed Forests: A Cultural History*, Routledge, London and New York, 2025.

7 Robert Pogue Harrison, "There is a Fundamental Connection between Poetry and Forests", *The UNESCO Courier*, no. 3, 2023, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385929_eng (accessed March 28, 2025).

According to this mediaeval meaning in English, the forest was thus a place that was off-limits to some, as it was used primarily by the aristocracy, but was also something foreign and mainly outside of cultured and civilized land, which was associated with human settlements and cultivated fields. The connection between the forest and the foreign is still evident today in the Italian word *foresta*, which shares the Latin root *foris* ("outside" / *fuori*). And in the Italian word – which is still in use – for a stranger or foreigner, *foresto*, as it literally means "one who comes from the forest".[8]

In Western societies, the human impulse to distinguish culture from nature has shaped the relationship with the forest since antiquity. Forests were cleared to make way for settlements and fields for food production, marking the beginning of the long-lasting effort of humans to domesticate the natural world. This process was particularly evident in Greek and Roman societies, which were among the first to both physically and symbolically step out of the forest. It was within these civilizations that an ambiguous relationship with the forest began to take shape: the forest as both a realm of myth and mystery, and a threatening space associated with wildness, danger, and the untamed animal world. During antiquity, and particularly during the time of Ancient Rome, the first large deforestations in Europe took place to clear land for agriculture and urban development, and to harvest wood for ship building.[9]

As human beings increasingly distanced themselves from nature, anthropocentrism emerged as the dominant worldview. It placed human beings at the centre of existence and regarded nature primarily as a resource to be used. Whether its origins lie in Ancient Greek civilization, Roman thought, or Christian theology may be less important than recognizing the lasting impact this perspective has had. Thus, within the dominant view of Western civilization, the forest could be exploited to any extent as human beings were regarded as the masters of nature. When Christianity became the prevalent religion in Europe, the symbolism and attitude toward the forest narrowed even farther as the Catholic Church was suspicious of paganism, the worship of forest gods, and thus had a hostile stance toward the forest where different kinds of beasts lived and God did not reveal Himself.[10]

8 Nicola Zingarelli, *Lo Zingarelli 1996. Vocabolario della lingua Italiana*, Zanichelli editore, Bologna, 1995, pp. 701–702.

9 Jed O. Kaplan, Kristen M. Krumhardt, and Niklaus Zimmermann, "The Prehistoric and Preindustrial Deforestation of Europe", *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol. 28, nos. 27–28, 2009, pp. 3016–3034, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2009.09.028 (accessed March 29, 2025).

10 Pogue Harrison, "There is a Fundamental Connection between Poetry and Forests".

Dante Alighieri opens the *Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia*, 1321) with a verse about a dark forest in which he loses himself, a literary moment that manifests all the negative connotations of the forest that were present at the time: the forest as a place to be feared, a space of the profane, an allegory for sins and the absence of God. Only when Dante emerges from Hell and Purgatory into a different forest, an Earthly paradise – one without animals, where God rules – is he in a safe place, in culture and civilization.[11] And although Western societies also passed through the Enlightenment and later Romanticism, both of which were periods that remystified the forest as a place of deep spirituality, the meaning of the forest today remains deeply ambiguous and multivalent.

For more than a thousand years, from classical antiquity to the modern era of the 18th and 19th century, the forest served as a sanctuary for those not allowed into society: "the outlaws, the heroes, the wanderers, the lovers, the saints, the persecuted, the outcasts, the bewildered, the ecstatic."[12] As such, it again manifested as a space with a double meaning: for some, it was a safe place where they found refuge; for others, it was a site of primordial fear, where violence and bestiality ruled in unseen ways.

The argument could be made that Western societies have, in many ways, been shaped by stepping out of the forest. Indeed, the history of the West can ultimately be seen as a continuous effort to establish this distinction – a sequence of legal, cultural and physical attempts to separate humanity from nature, and especially from the forest, the terrifying "other". The drive to conquer the forest, to cut it down and expand spaces deemed more suitable for human habitation, is particularly evident in Western societies. Some countries have nearly eradicated their forests by treating them solely as a resource.[13] For many, the forest represents an unwanted, marginalized, and often frightening space – a source of all manner of anxieties and fears. This notion, I would argue, is visible not just in the cultural or juridical relationships toward the forest but also within philosophy.

11 More on the notion of freedom and paradise in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, Seagull Books, London, 2024, p. 96: "Freedom and happiness are indissolubly connected in human nature – in origin and, thanks to the incarnation of Christ, even now. The 'divine forest' of paradise is the place of the full restitution of justice and originary beatitude."

12 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, p. 247.

13 The UK and Ireland are such cases. See European Forestry Institute, *Forest Map of Europe*, https://efi.int/knowledge/maps/forest (accessed March 31, 2025).

The Overlooked Forest

In Western philosophy, the forest has rarely been a subject of discussion. While plants and animals have occasionally been considered in Western philosophy, they, too, have been largely overlooked. The history of forest philosophy remains unwritten,[14] as philosophers have largely focused on human-centred topics. In the past thirty years,[15] a critical shift has emerged within philosophy – one marked by a profound critique of humanism, a turn toward perspectives beyond the human, and a critical analysis of the philosophical understanding of plants and animals. Crucial first steps were taken to examine the history of Western philosophy and trace the roots of its philosophical denial of vegetal and animal life. Michael Marder in his book *Plant-Thinking*, for example, claims that Greek philosophers associated life with motion; therefore, plants, which are rooted in the soil, were seen as beings at the bottom of the "teleological ladder", unfit for metaphysical categories and philosophical discussions. According to Aristotle in *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), plants had no soul, as the soul was defined as the principle of animal life. A similar stance can be found in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* in which Hegel argues that plants have no soul and their growth is purposeless since a vegetal soul cannot attain any higher capacity. This view justified a purely instrumental approach to plants and consequently also rationalized deforestation.[16] Hegel, in this regard, held the same position as that proposed in the Cartesian paradigm.

14 More on this also in Galen A. Johnson, "Forest and Philosophy: Toward an Aesthetics of Wood", *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 4, nos. 1–2, 2007, pp. 59–76, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26167141 (accessed March 23, 2025).

15 The discussion of the significance of nature in philosophy, including the role of animals and the human–animal relationship, long predates the last thirty years. It was present from the very beginnings of philosophy and intensified in various philosophical currents of the 19th century, in particular the strong anti-Cartesian movement which developed arguments against the Cartesian position of the animal as a machine incapable of suffering. Anti-Cartesians such as Réaumur, Condillac, Larousse, Michelet, Hugo argued precisely the opposite: that animals are capable of suffering, that they feel, and that they possess intelligence. Interestingly, Jeremy Bentham, mostly known for the concept of the Panopticon, is also widely recognized as a pioneer in moral philosophy regarding animals, since he argued that the crucial question is not whether animals can reason or speak but whether they can suffer. Debates on the rights of the world as a living biosphere, as well as on the rights of animals and plants and the legal status of other living beings, have been frequent since the 1970s. Because of the prominence of this discussion, which has come to the forefront of philosophical debates in the past thirty years, I deliberately simplify this complex history in order to highlight the growing relevance of these debates in recent decades, while recognizing that such a temporal boundary is necessarily approximate. For more on this topic see Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995.

16 Here I summarize one of the points in the wonderful book by Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, p. 23.

The Cartesian paradigm, rooted in the philosophy of René Descartes, played a key role not only in shaping the understanding of forests and, more broadly of nature, but indeed all Western thought. This paradigm, which formed one of the key aspects of the Enlightenment, reinforced the strict division between humans and nature, positioning humanity as separate from – and dominant over – the natural world. The Cartesian paradigm serves as a unified framework for the overarching civilizational orientation of modernity, asserting human dominance over nature through technology. In this perspective, human beings are regarded as the unlimited masters of nature, entitled to exploit it fully. The environment is subordinated to human needs, and animals and plants are viewed as *automata* – self-operating machines without consciousness, let alone rights. Within this framework, plants and animals exist solely to fulfil human needs.

Although it is difficult to find works in Western philosophy that discuss the forest, there are a few notable instances where the forest appears as an influential philosophical metaphor. In the seminal Enlightenment work, *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes uses the forest as a metaphor for a place where one can easily become confused without a clear guiding principle.

> In this I would be imitating travellers who, finding themselves lost in some forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, nor, worse still, stop in one place, but should always walk in as straight a line as they can in one direction …[17]

Just as a lost traveller becomes disoriented by following random paths, so too can a thinker without a clear method get lost in the mass of human opinions. Descartes' forest metaphor illustrates his break from the authority of religion and God as the absolute, favouring a rational path over tradition. It underpins his epistemology: to doubt all and rebuild a new system of reasoning from the ground up and expand the disciplined use of reason.

A century after Descartes, the Enlightenment took a new turn with the movement embodied by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who emphasized emotion and natural experience. Rousseau advocated a return to nature, suggesting a need to re-evaluate and reform the structures of society, which had hitherto imprisoned human beings. In one of Rousseau's last works, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776), the forest appears as a space of personal freedom.

17 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, translated by Donald A. Cress, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1998, p. 25.

> I scale rocks and mountains, or bury myself in valleys and woods, so as to hide as far as I can from the memory of men and the attacks of the wicked. Deep in the forest shades it seems to me that I can live free, forgotten and undisturbed as if I no longer had any enemies …[18]

The forest here is a space of solitude and reflection where Rousseau finds freedom from social constraints and reconnects with his inner self. It is important to note that Rousseau also employs forest imagery in his earlier works. While rooted in 18th-century concerns, Rousseau's retreat into the forest may bear a resemblance to the longings and anxieties of our own time (although it is also significantly different as will be explained in the conclusion).

At the end of the same century, Immanuel Kant was developing his monumental philosophical system, which culminated in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790)[19] that focused on the field of aesthetics. While it cannot be claimed that Kant introduced any significant forest-related metaphors, he draws some notable connections between aesthetics and the forest which I think are important to highlight here. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant explores the human capacity to comprehend beauty and the sublime, carefully distinguishing between the two. Beauty, for Kant, is associated with the form of an object, whereas the sublime is immeasurable, awe-inspiring, terrifying, and immense. What unites the two is that both are primarily found in nature, not in artworks. Consequently, many of the examples of the sublime that Kant provides are drawn from natural settings, including forests – such as a powerful waterfall. He mentions the forest several times in this work, including once from a distinctly colonial perspective.[20] Kant's famous analysis of the sublime, one of the most well-known alongside Edmund Burke's, not only opens a new perspective on the aesthetic and its distinctive pleasure, but also brings up the notion of the transcendent in this realm. He ultimately concludes that the sublime does not exist outside of reason but exists precisely within it. Although Kant does not clearly define the exact source of the sublime, it implies that it always arises from within, from reason reflecting on an overwhelmingly beautiful and often terrifying natural phenomenon.

18 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, translated with an introduction by Peter France, Penguin Books, London, 2004, p. 127.

19 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated with an introduction by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1987.

20 "Or we might say that the mosquitoes and other stinging insects that make the wilderness areas of America so troublesome for the savages are so many prods to stir these primitive people to action, such as draining the marshes and clearing the dense forests that inhibit the flow of air, so that in this way, as well as by tilling the soil, they will also make the place where they live healthier." Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 259.

Following the Enlightenment, a decisive shift in the social consciousness in Europe took place along with the rise of science, the onset of industrialization, and the increasingly intense colonial exploitation of land, environments, animals, plants, and native communities. After two hundred and fifty years of Enlightenment dominance, the 20th century, as Gérard Wajcman describes it, became, despite the democratizations and modernization of many societies, the "century of destruction"[21] – the most intense period of horrors and widespread devastation, including the destruction of nature and the broader environment. The demand for infinite growth inherent in neoliberalism, which could be interpreted as the next logical step of the Cartesian paradigm, relies on the unlimited exploitation of nature, including forests.[22]

As human beings became increasingly disconnected from the natural world, mass migration to cities and explosive population growth further deepened this rift. This detachment from the natural world had many resonances in philosophy. Martin Heidegger, who believed that, in comparison to humans, animals and plants had no world,[23] wrote extensively on the notion of the *Gestell* as the essence of the technical, which dominates the position of the human being in regard to the question of Being. The dominance of the *Gestell* illustrates how the technical and scientific came to dominate everything, including the natural world.

Heidegger also emphasized the importance of being on the path, walking in the forest, as a way to open up to truth and being in the world. He later published a collected volume titled *Holzwege* (1950 in German, 2002 translated in English to *Off the Beaten Track*), which includes six of his papers on art. Despite the seemingly different approach of these texts, he wrote in the preamble that all forest paths are different, but that they all take place "within the same forest".[24] To explore additional forest-related concepts in Heidegger's

21 Gérard Wajcman, *L'objet du siècle*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 1998.

22 Some foresters proposed a theory that directly reflects this notion of exploitation of the forest and advocated the position that there are three types of civilizations: one dominated by forests, one that has overcome forests, and one that dominates forests, with the latter considered the most "developed". See Raphael Zon, "Forests and Human Progress", *Geographical Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1920, pp. 139–66.

23 "Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overness of beings." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in David Farrell Krell, ed., *Basic Writings: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, p. 170.

24 Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2002, front matter, https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/01140/frontmatter/9780521801140_frontmatter.pdf (accessed July 24, 2025).

Piko in the autumn forest.

philosophy, we turn to the uncanny, as Heidegger was the most influential thinker, in addition to Sigmund Freud, who reflected on the notion of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*. This elusive concept, which relates to the eerie, the horrifying, and the unknown, is tied to anxiety – a defining feature of modern man – and partly arises from a fear of the natural world, including the forest. Heidegger stated that man is the most uncanny being because he is the most fearful, powerful, and unhabitual being – one that has devastated the entire world, including nature.[25] On the other hand, in his famous text *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Freud also suggested that one source of the uncanny may be the repetitive, unstoppable nature of certain experiences, such as the feeling a person might have when lost in the forest.[26] The uncanny is strongly associated with fears arising from nature, including the forest, and could serve as a starting point for exploring the modern understanding of forest as a space of ambiguity – both sheltering and terrifying at once.

25 Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996, p. 64.

26 "So, for instance, when, caught in a mist perhaps, one has lost one's way in a mountain forest, every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot, which one can identify by some particular landmark." Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works by Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII, An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919)*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1971, p. 237.

The Turn toward the Forest

As planetary devastation loomed, the Cartesian paradigm began to lose its ideological grip. Nature, plants, animals as well as forests became more valued precisely as they were being lost, often irreversibly. In philosophy, this shift first turned toward animal life and was sparked, among others, by Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: The Human and the Animal*.[27] Shortly after this "animal turn" came a focus on plant life and mushrooms, explored by the already mentioned Michael Marder in *Plant-Thinking*, Anna Tsing in *Mashroom at the End of the World*,[28] and many more. These theories suggest that the perception of the environment is not singular or exclusively human, but rather that we should focus on a range of perceptions that consists of a multitude of worlds. Perhaps one of the most influential theories of this kind, one that is still widely discussed across disciplines, was introduced in the field of biology between 1910 to 1930 by Jakob von Uexküll. This work included the concept of the *Umwelt*, the subjective world unique to each organism. Agamben summarizes von Uexküll's insight as follows:

> Uexküll shows that there is no such thing as a unified world, just as there is no identical time and space for all living beings. The bee, the dragonfly, or the fly that we observe flying beside us on a sunny day do not move in the same world in which we observe them, and they do not share the same time and space with us or among themselves.[29]

From this perspective, the world is neither singular nor objectively given but is instead shaped by the subjects who perceive it. There exists a multiplicity of forests, each defined by different experiences. The human perspective, though diverse in itself, is just one among many – coexisting with the perspectives of non-human beings, from animals and plants to the forest itself as a living entity.

Today, the reflection on forests in philosophy and aesthetics in particular, is opening up to new horizons, shaped by new contexts and guided by those new theoretical perspectives. Thinking about the forest today requires more than a much-needed acknowledgment

27 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004; see also Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2007; Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2008; Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009.

28 Marder, *Plant-Thinking*; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2015.

29 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 40.

of its ecological significance. It also means engaging with voices within environmental aesthetics, which explore how humans perceive, represent, and relate to nature. These discussions invite us to reconsider the forest not merely as a resource – even if as a green infrastructure – but as a dynamic space where various forms of life, culture, and meaning intersect.[30]

The Forest as a Contemporary Spatialization of the Sublime

Following the turn in philosophy toward plants and animals, it seems the time has come for a turn toward the forest and *forest-thinking* to paraphrase the title of Marder's book. This need is also informed by Donna Haraway, who proposes the burning forest as the most powerful image of our time.[31]

A philosophy of the forest has yet to be written and it will undoubtedly emerge alongside a body of key theoretical works that address the ongoing turn away from the human and toward other entities – a shift that has marked the last thirty years.[32] Many of those works build upon a dialogue with artists who are also reimagining how to understand the forest of the 21st century. Art has been engaged with the plant and animal world, including forests, since its very beginnings. With the shift toward a beyond-the-human perspective, plants[33] and forests are increasingly being explored and positioned as a crucial subject within art, which can propose new imaginaries of how we understand and coexist with the forest. The forest remains an ambivalent phenomenon, difficult to fully grasp, in part because it is a complex and ambivalent symbolic space. Even describing the forest as a physical space is inherently incomplete

30 For more on the dispute in environmental aesthetics about the role of scientific knowledge in the aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment through the experience of forest, see Jukka Mikkonen, "Knowledge, Imagination, and Stories in the Aesthetic Experience of the Forest", *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2018, pp. 3–24.

31 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, p. 46.

32 In addition to the already mentioned works, it is also important to mention: Gilles Clément, *Le Manifeste du Tiers Paysage*, Éditions Sujet/Objet, Paris, 2004; Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003; James Corner et al., *The New Landscape Declaration: A Call to Action for the Twenty-First Century*, Rare Bird Books and The Landscape Architecture Foundation, Los Angeles, 2016; T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016; Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, and Medford, Mass., 2017.

33 For more on this topic, see Giovanni Aloi, *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, Brill | Rodopi, Leiden, 2019.

– there is always something missing.[34] The forest is a boundless, dynamic space where the landscape feels infinite. Regardless of where a person enters the forest or which part they visit, the experience remains the same: they were simply *in the forest* – a vast, continuous, and seemingly endless expanse. It seems that some aspects of the mediaeval understanding of the forest, associated with the foreign and the outside, are still largely present in our contemporary conception, along with the sense of the terrifying and mystical.

The renewed philosophical interest in the forest is not accidental. As Eva Horn observes, art and the aesthetic in the Anthropocene have become very specific. Namely, as she writes, art must confront an "uncontrollable, unmanageable intimacy with things" in a world that is "hypercomplex and multidimensional".[35] In our time, she suggests, we are facing a new form of the sublime, one that reflects a shift in aesthetic experience. As Horn specifies, this is the *aesthetic of the Anthropocene* – marked by a unique anxiety tied to the previously unseen scale of environmental devastation. Horn suggests, that in this specific aesthetics, which has also developed its own sublime, there is the returned presence of the uncanny – not as an unthinkable or metaphysical force, as in Heidegger or Freud – but as an affect embedded in everyday life and our experience with nature. For Horn, the uncanny today stems not from radical estrangement but from excessive closeness – an intimate exposure to a world that has fundamentally changed. Horn explains that forests, oil fields, supermarkets, and data centres have become ambiguous zones, suspended between the natural and the artificial. These spaces are too familiar to be observed with detachment, yet too vast, entangled, and infrastructural to be fully grasped. This unsettling proximity to transformed ecologies and invisible systems reshapes our experience of what once seemed natural. In this context, I would argue that the forest emerges as one of the crucial contemporary spatializations of the sublime. This is not the sublime of the 18th century or of Kant, but a form of the sublime particular to our present condition. As underlined by Horn, these spaces, including forests, are shaped by the environmental crisis and defined by feelings of uncertainty, overwhelming scale, and a profound loss of control. Nature, in Horn's understanding of our contemporaneity, becomes even more distant, elusive, and unthinkable. Yet it seems that precisely because of the growing distance toward nature, there arises a renewed need to return to nature and to re-mystify the forest – as a space of reflection, grounding, transformation, and wonder. Within this

34 For more on the description of the aesthetic appreciation of the forest, see Holmes Rolston, "Aesthetic Experience in Forests", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1998, pp. 157–66, https://doi.org/10.2307/432254 (accessed March 23, 2025).

35 Eva Horn, "The Aesthetics of the Anthropocene", in Gabriele Dürbeck and Philip Hüpkes, eds., *The Anthropocenic Turn: The Interplay between Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Responses to the Anthropocene*, Routledge, London, 2020, pp. 153–170.

changed realm, we are dealing with a specific version of the sublime, one in which its traditionally terrifying features remain powerfully present. Much like in the 18th century, when the sublime was a fashionable concept, it still seems capable of opening a path toward transcendence while simultaneously allowing space for negative and unsettling feelings. Because of this dual nature, the sublime has often been seen as the reverse side of the uncanny.

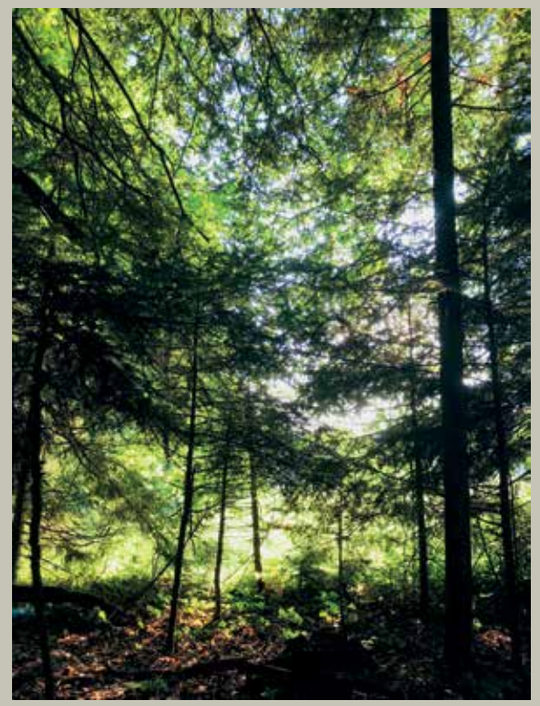
The forest, often imagined as infinite, mythological, and incomprehensible, continues to carry these sublime attributes today. In my view, these characteristics are revealed both through the direct, affective experience of the forest and through its representation in various contemporary artworks. In this sense, the forest emerges as a distinct site of the sublime and serves as a particularly potent space for reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of our contemporaneity for several reasons.

First, the forest is marked by a sense of transcendence because of its vast, unknowable materiality, which in some parts of the world still resists complete human mastery and domination. While large areas of forest have been colonized, commodified, and politicized, many expansive forests, including those in Slovenia, remain beyond the reach of total destruction brought about by necrocapitalism. They are one of the few spaces not fully dominated by neoliberalism, and are therefore among the last sanctuaries of the primordial, nature, and our own existence – places where an openness to transcendence, as part of our inheritance, still endures.

Second, in an age when everything is measurable and identifiable, and when Heidegger's concept of the *Gestell* is still valid for our perception and our way of *being-in-the-world*, the forest remains largely mysterious and terrifying in comparison with other spaces of the world. It gives form to a unique kind of anxiety and evokes an uncanny atmosphere that reflects the Anthropocene, an era marked by environmental degradation. Even with access to advanced technology, people can still get lost in the forest and even be injured or harmed. It seems that the forest still retains the power to dominate human beings.

Third, the increasing interest in forests within the art world is not a coincidence. It points to the enduring presence of its salvational character, which becomes especially visible in the context of the environmental crisis. Forests play a crucial role in maintaining planetary boundaries and also reflect the deep crisis of the Anthropocene. And yet they still provide a refuge from society, as evoked by Rousseau, in a time when society has become increasingly complex and is a source of immense anxiety.

Who knows if the forest of the future will survive both the crisis of humanity and the human-caused environmental degradation of the planet. Paradoxically, as has been noted several times in the ecological discourse, it seems that the only salvation for the forest from precisely these human-caused crises, is salvation led by human beings and developed within the human legal framework in order to protect the rights of nature.[36]



Forest in summer.

Forest in spring.

Mateja Kurir is the photographer of pictures accompanying the text.

36 In our era of necrocapitalism and extractivism, protecting non-human entities is more urgent than ever. Ecuador's 2008 constitutional reform, which grants nature – or Pachamama – the right to respect and protection (Article 71), marks a significant move toward legal recognition of nature as a subject of rights. Under this framework, the Los Cedros rainforest was shielded from mining in 2021. Over the past decade, nearly five hundred Rights of Nature initiatives have advanced similar recognition of natural entities within legal systems worldwide.

Photograph by Borut Peterlin.

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GIOVANNI ALOI, PhD, is an author, educator, and curator specializing in the representation of nature and the environment in art. He is the editor-in-chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*. Aloi is the author of *Art & Animals* (2011), *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018), *Lucian Freud – Herbarium* (2019), *I'm Not an Artist: Reclaiming Creativity in the Age of Infinite Content* (2025), *Botanical Revolutions: How Plants Changed the Course of Art* (2025), and *Lawn* (2025). He is also the editor of *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art* (2019) and *Estado Vegetal: Performance and Plant Thinking* (2023), and co-editor of *Posthumanism in Art and Science* (2020) and *Vegetal Entwinements in Philosophy and Art* (2023). He has contributed to BBC radio and PBS TV programmes, worked at the Whitechapel Art Gallery and Tate Galleries in London, and has curated exhibitions in the US and Europe. He currently is the US correspondent for *Esse Contemporary Art Magazine* and co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press series Art after Nature.

DANIELA BRASIL is a transdisciplinary artist, researcher, curator, and educator with a background in architecture, public art, and critical spatial practice. Brasil received an MFA and a PhD from the Bauhaus University Weimar, and has accumulated over two decades of teaching experience at the intersection of contemporary art, cultural anthropology, and urban studies in Austria, Germany, Portugal, and Brazil. Her academic and artistic work addresses questions of urban transformation, social and environmental justice, and decolonial and feminist pedagogies. She works on collaborative and site-specific projects to develop curatorial and artistic formats that foster situated knowledge and co-creative learning processes, and value the pluriverse.

NAYARÍ CASTILLO is an installation artist, activist, and researcher. She earned a MSc in European Projects at the FH Joanneum, University of Applied Science in Graz and an MFA in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies at Bauhaus University Weimar. Castillo specializes in art in public spaces, emphasizing site-specific contextual and participative installations that deal with political topics, feminism, posthumanism, memory, and social engagement. Castillo has been awarded with the Kunstraum Steiermark Scholarship of the Province of Styria (2021–22), the Working Scholarship of the Province of Styria for Contemporary Art (2019), the best cultural project for the House of Open Gates in cooperation with <rotor>, Graz (2017), the Working Scholarship for Visual Arts of the City of Graz (2015), and the CIFO Award Miami (2014). She has worked on many international art projects as an artist, coordinator, or curator. She is a research associate at the Institute of Spatial Design at the Graz University of Technology (TU). She teaches subjects dealing with conceptual art, spatial experiments, feminist collaborative art, and public space at the TU Graz, PH Styria, and AKbild Wien.

T. J. DEMOS is a professor in the Department of History of Art and Visual Culture, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, founding director of its Center for Creative Ecologies, and Distinguished Visiting Professor in the VIAD Research Centre at the University of Johannesburg. Demos is the author of several books, including *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (Sternberg Press, 2023), *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017), *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Sternberg Press, 2016), and *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013). He won the College Art Association's 2014 Frank Jewett Mather Award. He co-edited *The Routledge Companion on Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (2021), was a Getty Research Institute Fellow (2020), and directed the Mellon-funded Sawyer Seminar research project *Beyond the End of the World* (2019–21).

MARJOLIJN DIJKMAN is a research-based, multidisciplinary artist who works with film, photography, sculpture, and installation. Her practice explores the intersection of culture and other fields of inquiry, with a strong focus on the rapidly changing environment and its human and non-human interdependencies. She graduated from the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (2001), received an MFA at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam (2003), and was a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht (2006–07). Currently, she is part of the artistic research cluster Deep Histories Fragile Memories as a Ph.D. candidate at LUCA – School of Arts Brussels at the Leuven University (2023–27). She has participated in artist residencies and exhibited worldwide. In 2005, Dijkman and Maarten Vanden Eynde co-founded an interdependent art orga-

nization for experimental collaborative and cross-disciplinary research projects called Enough Room for Space (ERforS). She lives and works in Brussels, Belgium and Lahaymeix, France.

DUŠICA DRAŽIĆ is an artist, independent curator, and currently a researcher at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp. She works across various media including installation, video, film, sculpture, and performance. In her work, Dražić explores spaces of irregularity that carry strong political meaning, analyzing the transformation of such spaces and rethinking them within the context of cultural continuity. The history of a place and opposing interpretations of its past have always been central to her practice. Often, the complexity of the subject matter requires a combination of scientific and artistic approaches, and thus fosters transdisciplinary and collaborative work. Dražić's artistic and curatorial work contributes to the production of public space – public space that is contested, charged, and challenging, always open for negotiation. In 2018, she and Wim Janssen co-founded OUT OF SIGHT, a venue for contemporary art in Antwerp dedicated to audiovisual, experimental, and time-based practices, a space where the poetic and the political coexist.

KATHARINA FLICH is a freelance artist from Austria. She completed a MS in the field of biology and evolutionary anthropology at the University of Vienna. Flich turned her passion for painting and writing into a profession after receiving a regional fine art prize in 2021. She is intrigued by the sometimes surreal poetry of reality, made visible only through the lens of science.

MAJA and REUBEN FOWKES, art historians and curators, are the directors of the Postsocialist Art Centre (PACT) at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London. They specialize in the 20th century art history of socialism from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, and contemporary artistic engagement with ecology, climate, and the Anthropocene. Their publications include *Art and Climate Change* (Thames & Hudson, 2022), *Central and East European Art Since 1950* (Thames & Hudson, 2020), a special issue of *Third Text* guest-edited by Reuben on the "Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism" (2018), and Maja's monograph *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (CEU Press, 2015). Maja is the principal investigator of the *Socialist Anthropocene in the Visual Arts* (SAVA) project that received a Consolidator Grant by the European Research Council and is funded by UK Research and Innovation (2022–27). Their recently curated exhibitions include *Colliding Epistemes* at Bozar Brussels (2022) and *Potential Agrarianisms* at Kunsthalle Bratislava (2021). They publish extensively in peer-reviewed journals, edited books, exhibition catalogues, and on contemporary art platforms such as *Art Monthly*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Springerin*, and co-host the SAVA podcast *Left to be Desired*.

LEA HARTMEYER is a researcher and landscape designer. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Landscape Architecture at the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. Hartmeyer explores the urban forest as an infrastructure of care through place-based action research. She developed an interest in care-based landscape architectural research while working on her master's thesis "The Forest Formerly Known as ... Parkstad" for which she received the Archiprix NL and the Fritz Schumacher Young Talent Award.

URŠKA JURMAN is an art historian and sociologist of culture. She is active as a curator, editor, project manager, and writer in contemporary art. She works at the intersection of art, critical spatial practices, ecology, and active citizenship. She is a co-founder of the Obrat Culture and Art Association with which she co-authored many projects, including the community garden *Beyond a Construction Site* (2010–22). In 2021, she and Elke Krasny initiated the Ecologies of Care network. Since 2013, she has been the programme director of the Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory in Ljubljana.

AGATA A. KONCZAL is an Assistant Professor and a member of the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group at the Wageningen University. Before these positions, she was a researcher at the European Forest Institute. She has a background in humanities and social science, and holds a PhD in social and cultural anthropology. Her specialization lies in environmental anthropology, political ecology, and environmental history. She is currently working on establishing forest anthropology as a field of research and developing FORAGE – Forest Anthropology Working Group on Europe and Beyond. In her research, Konczal examines how forests are increasingly politicized as easy solutions for climate change, biodiversity, rural areas, and development issues. Her research delves into diverse perspectives

and strategies for addressing the forest crisis within the wider scope of climate change and the uncertain future of forests.

MIHA KROFEL, PhD, is a wildlife researcher based at the Department of Forestry of the Biotechnical Faculty at the University of Ljubljana where he leads the research group for wildlife ecology and management. Krofel's main research focus is the ecology, management, and conservation of large carnivores in Europe, Asia, and Africa. He also studies wild ungulates, birds, reptiles, and various species of scavengers. Krofel is most fascinated by the amazing variety of ecological processes that determine the functioning of ecosystems across the globe, especially when a new understanding of such processes helps people and the conservation of wildlife. Krofel also works as a visiting scientist at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research and a guest lecturer at the University of Oxford, the University of Porto, and the University of Primorska (Slovenia). He is a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission (Cat Specialist Group, Canid Specialist Group, and Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe Specialist Group), and the author of over 140 scientific papers and eighteen books or book chapters.

ANA KUČAN is a landscape architect and professor at the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana where she teaches landscape design and theory. She received an MA in urban design at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University (1992), and a PhD at the University of Ljubljana (1996). Her dissertation entitled *Krajina kot nacionalni simbol* [Landscape as National Symbol] was published in 1998. She is the director of Studio AKKA, a landscape architecture and urban design studio. She has designed a number of award-winning and internationally renowned projects, and has lectured at institutions in Europe and the US. She was the leading team member of the project *All Shades of Green* exhibited at the Slovenian Pavilion at the 12th Architectural Biennale in Venice (2010). Kučan also works as an editor and author. She wrote columns for the Slovenian daily newspaper *Dnevnik* (2015–21), recently co-edited *Garden and Metaphor* (Birkhauser, 2023), and was a member of *Journal of Landscape Architecture* and the *Landscape Architecture Europe* editorial team. She is currently involved in the LANDLABS project that focuses on research through design strategies to address the challenges of the loss of cultural heritage and climate change.

MATEJA KURIR is a philosopher, author, editor, and researcher, working primarily in the fields of architecture, spatial practices, and the arts. She received a BA (2003) and PhD (2014) in philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and has been an Associate Professor since 2024. She is the author of *Arhitektura moderne in das Unheimliche: Heidegger, Freud in Le Corbusier* (2018). She received the Plečnik Medal in 2022 for the edited volume *O oblasti v arhitekturi* (in English *On Power in Architecture*, Routledge, 2024), and again in 2024 as co-editor of *Garden and Metaphor: Essays on the Essence of the Garden*. She collaborates with various academic, research, and art institutions, and is currently a senior researcher at the Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia.

POLONCA LOVŠIN is an architect and artist with BA degrees in architecture (1996) and fine arts (2001) from the University of Ljubljana, and a PhD in visual art from Bauhaus University Weimar (2015). Her work explores alternative ways of living and acting in an age of planetary crisis. She has exhibited widely both in Slovenia and internationally, and participated in artist residencies across Europe and the US. In 2011, she received the Liberal Academy's Golden Bird Award. In 2018, she received the Rihard Jakopič Commendation, one of Slovenia's highest honors in visual arts. She is a co-founder of the Obrat Culture and Art Association, known for its long-term project *Beyond a Construction Site* (Ljubljana, 2010–22). Lovšin is an Associate Professor of visual arts at the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, and lives in Ljubljana.

FELICITA MEDVED is a human geographer from Slovenia interested in the history of geographic thought and European energy and climate policy. She also writes poetry and short stories.

TEO HRVOJE ORŠANIČ completed a BA in forestry and an MA in natural science in the field of nature conservation at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana. He worked for a short time at the Slovenia Forest Service, served as director of Kozjansko Regional Park (2010–18), and as director of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation (2018–25). Oršanič believes that the essence of nature

conservation resides in connection and cooperation. This is because so many fields intersect in nature conservation: economics, tourism, agriculture, education, culture, and social services. He emphasizes that the most important part of nature conservation is working with people. Oršanič is a passionate nature and landscape photographer whose work has been shown in local and international exhibitions.

BORUT PETERLIN graduated in photography at the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) in Prague (1998), and earned a postgraduate degree at the London College of Printing (2003). In 2000, he received a scholarship at Fabrica, Benetton's Research Center for Communication, and began working with Oliviero Toscani. In 2001, Peterlin started the Fotopub Festival of Documentary Photography in Novo mesto, Slovenia, and served as its artistic director for seven years. Recently, Peterlin is focused on the 19th century photographic techniques and is teaching about them across Europe and North America. Peterlin is also a master printer – his photographs are mostly printed as carbon prints on glass from a collodion negative. His work has been published in several books, among them three solo art books: *A Father's Tale, Light Mood*, and *A New Earth*. He has exhibited worldwide in venues such as the Konica Minolta Plaza in Tokyo, Japan, the Gropius Bau in Berlin, Germany, the Kaunas Photo Festival in Kaunas, Lithuania, the Duolun Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai, China, the Photo Fringe Festival in Krakow, Poland, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

BOJANA PIŠKUR is a senior curator at Moderna galerija in Ljubljana. Her research and curatorial work focuses on the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav context, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the evolving concept of the "East(s)" in relation to art, culture, and politics. In 2022, she co-curated the *Emergency Exit* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana that addressed the pressing environmental issues of our time. Since 2019, Piškur has curated and co-curated *Southern Constellations* exhibitions exploring the legacies of political and cultural resistance at institutions including the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the Asia Cultural Center in Gwangju, South Korea, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Montenegro in Podgorica, the Qattan Foundation in Ramallah, Palestine, and the Mosaic Rooms in London, UK.

TITTA C. RACCAGNI (she/he) is an interdisciplinary artist with a long path between political and community activism, poetic research, and exploration of different artistic languages: writing, cinema, video, performing arts, and installations. S/he graduated in history of cinema at the University of Milan and in filmmaking at the Cinema Academy of Milan, Italy. S/he has made short films, documentaries, experimental videos, shows and performances, collaborating with established artists, institutions, and international festivals.

ZOE JO RAE (she/they) is an arborist and designer-maker, currently living and working in Oslo, Norway. They create objects that tell stories, and create dialogue and action around cultural and environmental challenges. Working with city trees, both as living organisms and material resources, Zoe offers unique interactions with the concept of forest in the urban environment.

ALEX SCHUURBIERS is an audiovisual artist based in Belgium working predominantly with analogue media. Her practice focuses on trance-like, cyclical, non-hierarchical narrative structures in relation to the subconscious and remembrance, incorporating themes such as *Heimat*, intergenerational transmission, trauma, rage, and resilience. She is also a founding member of Ursula, a collective of women working with the moving image in Antwerp. Her films include *Handwerk* (2021), *En Vagues* (2022), *Where I Lay My Head to Rest* (2023), *Song of Homecoming* (2024), and *Placeholder* (2025).

CREDITS OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH PROJECTS

POLONCA LOVŠIN
The Forest in Women's Hands and Mushrooms at the End of the World
Multimedia installation (objects, collages, video, zine)
The works are based on interviews with women foresters, hunters, and forest owners in Slovenia (Katarina Flajšman, Marija Jakopin, Janja Lukanc, Lucija Odar and Veronika Valentar), and created in collaboration with microbiologist Primož Turnšek
Video editing: Olga Michalik, Elena Chirila
Zine cover printing: Leon Zuodar / Pivka House of Culture
Exhibition assistant: Elena Chirila
Exhibition venue: Gallery of Slovenian Forestry Institute, Ljubljana
Exhibition date: November 30, 2023–January 31, 2024
Producer: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory
Partners: Slovenian Forestry Institute, Obrat Association for Culture and Theory
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, Ministry of Public Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, Municipality of Ljubljana

DUŠICA DRAŽIĆ
It Rains Differently
Film and multimedia installation
Concept and direction: Dušica Dražić
Original scenario: Tanja Šljivar, Dušica Dražić, Mirjana Dragosavljević
Actors: Vladislava Đorđević, Željko Maksimović, Milutin Dapčević
DOP: Hannes Boeck
Camera 2: Eitan Efrat
Drone: Igor Bošnjak
Media archive research: doplgenger (Isidora Ilić and Boško Prostran), Dušica Dražić, Ana Panić, Simona Ognjanović
Photographs and mobile phone images: Aleksandrija Ajduković
Sound design: Bojan Palikuća
Voices: Vladislava Đorđević, Željko Maksimović, Milutin Dapčević, Paul Murray
Documentary drawings: Siniša Ilić
Illustrations: Monika Lang
Postproduction (image and sound): Wim Janssen, Dušica Dražić, Bojan Palikuća
Foresters: Ivan Kaličanin, Željko Kaličanin, Adnan Bajrović, Bojan Kaličanin
Volunteers (reforestation): Trifko Trifković, Jovanović Radiša, Milica Dukić, Ivana Marković, Marko Mitrović, Srđan Bojović, Vesna Pejović, Sarah Smolders, Marija Šević, Milutin Milošević, Darko Brdareski, Tatjana Staletović, Aleksandar Đorđević, Ana Milićević, Zoran Kostadinović, Nebojša Stanković, Andrijana Pajović, Cveće Miljković, Katarina Ćirilović, Nikica Jurković, Dragan Janošević, Teodora Simić, Svetlana Sentjakov, Vukoje Šiljković, Marina Maričić, Mihailo Veličković, Marija Daruši, Mihajlo Manigodić, Gavrilo Cabadaj,

Matija Gogić, Ibis Ćerimagić, Marija Ranić, Jugoslava Vladisavljević, Luka Knežević Strika, Mihajlo Milanov, Jelena Vukićević, Maja Ignjatović, Snežana Ivanovski
Production on location: Ana Vuković, Dušica Dražić
Volunteers' coordination: Katarina Nikolić
Doctors: Kenan Kučević, Aldin Alijagić
PR and communication: Ratko Rakin
English translation of the original scenario: Žarko Cvejić, Željko Maksimović
English proofreading: Paul Murray
Producer: Escautville
Co-producers: Out of Sight, Brina (ex-Stereovizija)
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Flemish Audiovisual Fund (VAF), Flanders – State of the Arts
Supported by: Institute of Forestry Belgrade, Museum of Yugoslavia, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Platform 0090, STUK, Morpho, KAAP, Vitalia
Thanks to: volunteers and collaborators, Milutin and Dragana Dražić, Wim and Marcel Janssen, Ljubinko Rakonjac, Ivan Kaličanin, Željko Kaličanin, Bojan Konatar, Rade Rakonjac, Hasim Bogućanin, Zlatna kap – Udruženje dobrovoljnih davalaca krvi Sjenica, Dražen Garapić, Miloš Janjić, Konačište Centar – Kej Tours Sjenica, H&A accommodation, Hotel Borovi
Date: 2023–

MARJOLIJN DIJKMAN
Between the Lines
Film projection with sculptural and sound installation
Duration: 30:05 (loop)
Sound composition: Henry Vega
Cinematography and editing: Marjolijn Dijkman
Assistant editing: Léo Ghysels
Sculptural installation: Marjolijn Dijkman and Wim Dijkman
Robotics: Lukas Pol
Tree trunks donated by: National Forestry Office (ONF) Verdun
Archival images: Documentation Center – Verdun Memorial and private collection
Aerial LiDAR images: National Forestry Office (ONF) Verdun
Supported by: Deep Histories Fragile Memories, Luca School of Arts / Leuven University, Mondrian Fund, National Forestry Office (ONF) Verdun, V2_Lab for Unstable Media
Thanks to: Orlando Aguilar Velazquez, Isabelle Bergot (Verdun Memorial), Wim and Els Dijkman, Sebastiaan Helbers, Wendy Morris, Rebecca Theeuwsen, Out of Sight, Guillaume Rouard (ONF Verdun), Maarten Vanden Eynde, Noël Varoqui
Date: 2024–2025

MARJOLIJN DIJKMAN
Iron Harvest
Sculpture (61 x 21 x 10 cm)
Welded by: Marjolijn Dijkman
Produced with the help of: Interministerial Service for Civil Defence and Protection – Demining Service Metz, National Forestry Office (ONF) Verdun, Vent des forêts, France
Date: 2024

MARJOLIJN DIJKMAN
Déja Vu
Public sculpture
Commissioned by: Vent des Forêts, France
Realized in collaboration with: Dominique Rennesson and Harald Demarthe, Cyril Renaudin (on-site installation)
Welding: Marjolijn Dijkman
Supported by: the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Paris
Thanks to: Interministerial Service for Civil Defence and Protection – Demining Service Metz; Douaumont Ossuary (Douaumont-Vaux); farmers who authorized the search for shrapnel on their land (Jerome Pierret, Dominique Biget, Yoann Philippot); Jean-Paul De Vries; Guillaume Rouard (ONF Verdun); Erna Kampman (Histoires du Saillant de Saint-Mihiel); Isabelle Bergot (Documentation Center –Verdun Memorial); Francis and Karian Marchal (Saint-Mihiel); Thomas Bee, Léa Delvallez, Axelle Grapinet, Elimane Sylla (Service Civique Saint-Mihiel)
Date: 2023

NAYARÍ CASTILLO
The Shrine for the Goddesses of the Wild
Public art installation
Venue: Hoke Workhouse Forest, Carinthia, Austria
Producers: Hoke Workhose, Simultaneous Arrivals Project, Gustav Mahler Private Music University, Klagenfurt
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Simularr (PEEK Framework – Austrian Science Fund FWF-AR714-G)
Date: September 2024

NAYARÍ CASTILLO
Spells for Shapeshifting
Installation
Realized as part of the exhibition *Wild Spots — Enforesting Ourselves in the Urban World.*
Venue: <rotor> Centre for Contemporary Art, Graz
Producers: <rotor> Centre for Contemporary Art, Reagenz – Association for Artistic Experiments, Graz
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project and the Art Space Unlimited Project), Simularr (PEEK Framework – Austrian Science Fund FWF-AR714-G)
Date: March 22–May 18, 2024

NAYARÍ CASTILLO
Spells for Shapeshifting Goes Public
Public art interventions
Locations: different sites in the city of Graz and Lech Forest, Graz
Producers: <rotor> Centre for Contemporary Art, Reagenz – Association for Artistic Experiments, Graz Forest School (for the Lech Forest)
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Simularr (PEEK Framework – Austrian Science Fund FWF-AR714-G)
Date: October 12–November 20, 2024

NAYARÍ CASTILLO and HANNS HOLGER RUTZ
Rogues
Interactive sculptural installation
Realized in the framework of the exhibition *Bodies in Revolution*.
Venue: New Gallery Graz, Joanneum Museum, Graz
Robotics and sound: Hanns Holger Rutz
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Simularr (PEEK Framework – Austrian Science Fund FWF-AR714-G)
Date: May 24–September 21, 2025

NAYARÍ CASTILLO and RENI HOFMÜLLER
Stratifiying
Installation and performance
Realized in the framework of the *Forest Encounters* exhibition.
Venue: Out of Sight, Antwerpen
Installation, text, vocal: Nayarí Castillo
Sound: Reni Hofmüller
Co-funded by: the European Union as part of the Creative Europe programme (Forest Encounters project), Austrian Culture Forum, Graz Culture, Vlaanderen
Date: May 29–June 29, 2025

FOREST ENCOUNTERS GLOSSARY
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Date: May 2025

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pp. 72–73. Polonca Lovšin, *The Forest in Women's Hands*, 2023.

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p. 82. Polonca Lovšin, *The Bear*, from the series *We Can't See the Forest for the Trees*, 2019–21.

p. 85. Poster from the series *On the Sunny Side of the Alps* (*Na sončni strani Alp*, 1988–89). Design: Jani Bavčer. Photograph: Franci Virant. Produced by: Studio marketing Delo. Published by: Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia and Centre for Tourism and Economic Propaganda. Source: Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

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OUT OF SIGHT


FOREST
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The forest is a living demonstration that strength arises from diversity and resilience from interconnection. Thus, this book invites you to explore the forest as a space with which we can learn otherwise.

Artists, foresters, art historians, philosophers, anthropologists, wildlife researchers, landscape architects, and writers all participate in this collective reflection on the diverse meanings, challenges, and perspectives related to the forest.

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