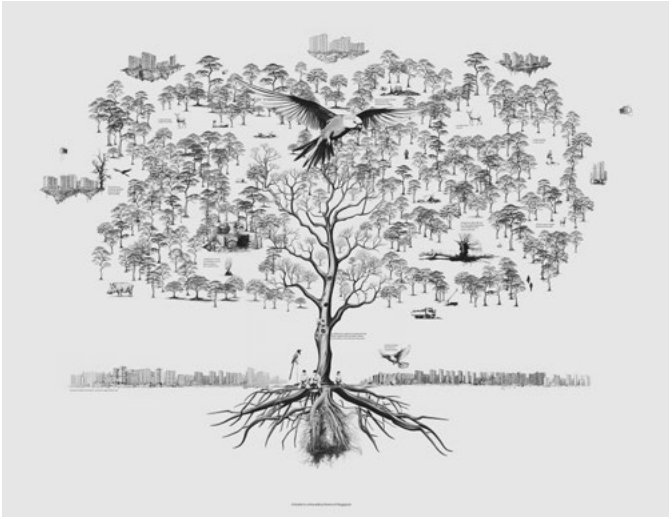
Afterburn

As we enter the Pyrocene Age, Maja and Reuben Fowkes ask what political lessons can trees teach us and how do artists act as emissaries of arboreal ministry.

The felling of a sycamore tree at a scenic spot next to Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland on 28 September 2023 caused 'an international outpouring of shock and dismay', setting in motion not only the wheels of justice but also the machinery of the relevant authorities in responding to public grief at the loss of a former English Tree of the Year. The BBC regularly reported on efforts of horticulturalists at a secretive 'rare plant propagation nursery' to graft cuttings in order to grow saplings from the felled tree, a tree native to Central Europe and Western Asia whose winged seeds 'helicopter' to the ground and germinate freely. A year on, and the National Trust has announced that 49 saplings will be donated to juried organisations to plant out in winter 2025/26 and that each of the UK's 15 national parks, as well as the King, will also each receive one. The trunk of the original tree has been exhibited in a nearby visitor centre, and memorial prints of its cross section are on sale as 'heartwood'. A commission has been awarded for an interactive art project asking visitors to the arboreal relic what 'promises, oaths and vows they could make that would make a difference to the Sycamore Gap tree's descendants'.

As brought to light by this still unfolding drama, trees are political plants with the power to insert themselves into the collective imagination, inflame emotions, reshape the cultural landscape and garner scientific and institutional support. Trees can also decide elections, as shown by the 'felling', as the headlines put it, of Conservative-run Plymouth Council in March 2023 in the wake of its ill-considered decision to cut down more than 100 arboreal dwellers on Armada Way in the city centre. Trees have the capacity to mobilise people in their defence, as was the case not that long ago in Sheffield, where municipal plans to destroy half the city's 36,000 urban trees were met by popular resistance, as a grassroots ethics of solidarity and care collided with the authorities' technocratic logic. When drawn into propagandistic machinery as protagonists of national sentiment, and decked with colonial and racist connotations, trees outgrow such ideological impositions, resisting with their biological lives, rhizomatic solidarity and migratory wanderlust.

Today, however, the political predicament that trees are increasingly faced with derives not from their symbolic appropriation, but from the enlisting of their metabolic system in the mitigation of anthropogenic climate change. Their ability to capture carbon is being instrumentalised not only for the removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, but also for trading as fungible assets in the shadow play of offsetting emissions in the net zero economy. Finding themselves



Robert Zhao Renhui, *For A Guide to the Secondary Forest of Singapore*, 2024, digital drawing

on the combustible frontline of climate breakdown, trees are also uprooted and severed by extreme storms, as well as exposed to floods, droughts, the salination of soil, unprecedented wildfires and rapidly shifting climatic zones. Yet with their more-than-human temporalities, ecosystemic intelligence and planetary wisdom, they operate on their own political plane of ecological resilience and climate adaptation. So, what political lessons can trees teach us and how do artists act as emissaries of arboreal ministry?

The starting point for Vienna-based artist Christian Kosmas Mayer's *The Life Story of Cornelius Johnson's Olympic Oak and Other Matters of Survival*, 2017, was an episode from the personal history of the African-American champion high jumper, who, as a winner at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, was awarded an oak sapling along with his gold medal, but spared a handshake with Adolf Hitler, who left the stadium to avoid coming face to face with the victorious black athlete. Mayer traced Johnson's oak to the LA suburb of Koreatown, where he discovered the majestic full-grown tree in the courtyard of a Mexican immigrant family. The fact that the oak – onto which myths of racial purity had been projected to propagate the expansionist ideology of Aryan superiority – ended up flourishing in an ethnically diverse non-native environment symbolised for the artist 'the victory of a reality that was diametrically opposed to everything the Nazis dreamed of'. Seedlings from the oak, genetically copied by scientists and preserved in vitro, were exhibited in an installation along with artefacts and texts about Johnson's life, which revealed that he and other black athletes were also left off the guest list for a ceremony for Olympic winners at Franklin D Roosevelt's White House.

Mayer's engagement with Johnson's Oak was pushed in a new direction when in 2022 he found out that it was threatened by a real-estate development, leading him to work with the California African American Museum to secure the tree's legal protection as a 'living

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Uta Kögelsberger, *Cull*, 2022, video installation

monument' to the victory of black athletes over the 'racist Aryan supremacist credo'. Emerging from decades of anonymity to become an anti-fascist memorial, the tree won protection from the bulldozers, although deteriorating environmental conditions in its adopted habitat due to persistent drought mean that the tree 'might already be dead'. The artist is now working with CAAM to transform the site into a 'place for art and education around the topics this tree embodies', an objective made more urgent still by the devastating Californian wildfires and the anti-migrant vitriol spewing from the West Wing in these early stages of President Donald Trump's second term.

The fires that raged in LA in January 2025 have complicated relations between people and trees in the transitional zone of the 'wildland urban interface', a densely co-habited environment made incendiary by climate change. Suspicion has (predictably) fallen on non-native species for fanning the flames of the conflagration, a recent editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* posing the divisive question: 'After the fires, must we get rid of our flammable eucalyptus and palm trees?' Referring to them as the 'most notorious of non-native plants', the opinion piece describes the city's emblematic palm trees as 'going up like Roman candles', while the peeling bark of the fragrant Australian eucalyptus turns into fiery embers that can travel miles 'like deadly missiles'. Resurfacing here is the militant rhetoric of invasion biology, with its roots in Cold War thinking, that transposes xenophobic sentiments onto the plant world. Such precepts have been discredited by scientists, who in an issue of *Nature* jointly demanded 'Don't judge species on their origin', and by artists, including those discussed here, who dismantle the distorting lens of the 'native/non-native' dichotomy and instead point to the role of human-made disruption to natural systems in driving the unstoppable resettlement of species. Ultimately, the tragedy of the LA fires cannot be put down to migrant trees; its deeper causes lie in anthropogenic warming, irresponsible encroachments into forest worlds, and the draining of aquifers to water crops and landscaped lawns.

The increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires in California has also dramatically impacted ancient sequoia trees growing on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Responding to the loss of 14% of these unique trees in the devastating fires of 2020, London-based artist Uta Kögelsberger set out through her long-term project 'Fire Complex', 2020–, to process the ecological grief from this extinction event of millennial proportions and to galvanise communities to take urgent action to protect the surviving sequoia groves. The five-channel video work *Cull*, 2022, records the clinical felling of burned giant sequoias left standing by the fire in order to protect human infrastructure, 3,000 years of continuous arboreal existence coming to an end with earth-shattering thuds. Alerting citizens to the trees' destiny through billboards in public space, the artist also collaborated with grassroots action groups to replant more than 6,000 trees and campaigned in support of a 'Save Our Sequoias' bill to enact emergency conservation measures.

As worshipped sylvan beings of the climax rainforest, giant sequoias could be seen as the polar bears of the Pyrocene, attracting more immediate emotional attachment than the regimented specimens of monocultural plantations. Kögelsberger's related work *Clearance*, 2024, demonstrates that industrial forests are however no less vulnerable to the ever more extreme conditions brought by climate change, as clearly shown by this video installation documenting the clear-up operation after a supercharged storm ravaged the managed forests of Central Europe. Through its focus on the Sisyphean labours of a small team of tree surgeons using a helicopter to remove broken trunks from an isolated valley, the film alludes to the colossal scale of climate disaster and the untenability of responding solely with technological measures.

The promotion of unviable geoengineering proposals as part of a fossil fuel-friendly scientific discourse around energy transition has been critically assessed by environmental historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz in his 2024 book *More and More and More: An All-Consuming History of Energy*. Fressoz notes that 'these days, projects to capture and store hundreds of billions of tonnes of CO_2, ranging from the bizarre to the impossible, and "net zero" 2050 scenarios that nobody believes in anymore, have the collateral effect of marginalising other futures or presenting them as militant utopias'. Given that even scientists in the IPCC are seemingly swayed by the reassuring prospect of technocratic panaceas, and that non-capitalist and degrowth proposals are virtually absent or unspeakable at COP gatherings, the result is that artists are among the few voices ready to point out the gaping holes in the depoliticising projects of green transition, net zero and carbon trading, and to revitalise radical eco-visions of 'other futures'.

The performative lecture and exhibition *Offsetted*, first realised by London-based artists Daniel Fernández

Uta Kögelsberger, *Clearance*, 2023, installation view, downtown Los Angeles

Pascual and Alon Schwabe of Cooking Sections in 2019, has become only more relevant as the mechanisms of financialisation of trees they describe in the context of New York City have, as the climate crisis deepens, come to characterise relations with forests globally. The project examines the use of a Tree Carbon Calculator by the authorities to put a price on their capacity for stormwater interception, air pollution removal and CO_2 reduction, valuing the 'environmental services' offered by the more than 600,000 trees in the city at close to $110m. The purpose of these calculations is to enable developers or industrialists, who are obliged to mitigate the ecological damage they cause, to pay to offset the harmful effects of their activities. Observing in the project publication that 'net zero is not zero' but only the illusion of action while doing nothing to change the system, the artist collective presciently points to the need for 'a new set of epistemologies, questions and possibilities', and a radical recodification of legal frameworks in order to recognise the right of trees not to be instrumentalised.

Currently on display at Singapore Art Museum, Robert Zhao Renhui's 'Seeing Forest' focuses on the diversity of a secondary forest on the outskirts of the hypermodern city state. Through a multi-layered installation of films, drawings, sculpture and assemblages of found objects, Zhao illuminates the flourishing of a spontaneously regrown forest world on a post-industrial wasteland against the backdrop of the ultra-urbanised landscape of Singapore, where the creation of parks, gardens and a variety of other vertical and horizontal green surfaces in the city is a highly controlled horticultural operation with vegetation fully employed in the service of the state. At the centre of the graphic print titled *A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore*, 2024, is an extraordinary Albizia tree. A recent arrival to the island, it is an appropriate choice as the cosmic tree of life for this dynamic, interspecies forest ecology in which pioneering plants and migrants thrive together under its canopy. The footage in *Trash Stratum*, 2024, captures an extraordinary number of migratory birds breaking their journey there and making use of a discarded metal bin as an impromptu water hole, testimony to the biodiversity and novel assemblages thriving in the 'new wild' of Anthropocene times. Namely, as Kohei Sajto puts it in his 2022 book *Marx in the Anthropocene*, the 'increasing uncontrollability of nature' is turning the outdated paradigm of the 'end of nature' into a 'return of nature', not just through its havoc-wreaking force, but, as Zhao's work also suggests, its resilience and restorative power.

Falling asleep under a tree in the world's largest walnut forest in Kyrgyzstan, as shown by Paris-based artist Saodat Ismailova's three-channel video *Arslanbob*, 2024, opens a doorway to other worlds not bound by the simplifications, calculations and rationale of modern forestry, but instead represents a foray into ancestral, mythical and spiritual realms of more-than-human entanglements. The multi-perspectivity of these entwined worlds is expressed through two parallel storylines with which the film begins, depending on

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whether the maternal or paternal grandmother's forest legend is followed: one delivers a dreamlike encounter with a tree spirit, the other a premonition of doom if you succumb to drowsiness under walnut branches. The healing power of the forest coexists with its hallucinogenic toxic vapours in Central Asian cosmologies that are endangered by the economic, political and ecological crises encroaching on its shady groves. The minority Uzbek population of the village of Arslanbob, whose traditional livelihood depends on the annual walnut harvest, finds itself in a temporal rift with chaotic processes of post-Soviet privatisation, including the unregulated expansion of cattle herding and the degradation of the habitat as a result of scorching climate-changed summers. The lush greenery and timelessness of the forest in Ismailova's footage stands in contrast with the instability of the present moment.

In his pertinent set of reflections on vegetal temporalities, *Time is a Plant*, 2023, phytocentric philosopher Michael Marder grounds his analysis on the observation that no part of 'our' world would exist 'were it not for the life activity of plants'. Noting the centrality of trees across planetary cultures and cosmologies, he argues further that 'cosmic tree time' is not a totality, but rather a 'set of budding, growing, reproducing, and decaying temporalities'. Drawing on the geological timescale of trees to comment on the rapidly changing climate, Uriel Orlow's film *We have already lived through the future, we just can't remember it*, the centrepiece of his recent project 'Forest Futurism', 2024, entrusts to a group of multilingual children the narration of the more-than-human temporalities of the forest in South Tyrol that is their playground and their school. They interrupt their barefoot play in ferns and branches to give voice to scientific insights, explaining that by consulting fossilised trees in stones we are able to understand 'the past climate and make forecasts for the future'. The knowledge imparted by ancient trees has radical implications: while the transformation of climate in the deep time of the forest took place over 4–6 million years, and resulted in warming of 3–4 degrees over a period of one million years, 'today we are talking about 2 degrees in 50–100 years'. Pointing out that plants don't depend on food but make their energy from the sun and that seeds can lie dormant until conditions are right again, the painful message of the young generation of humans is that 'plants can wait out climate change, they have patience', therefore we should be 'less worried about plants than ourselves'.

Although their seeds may carry the promise of future life, trees themselves are not immune to the troubles of climate disorder affecting current terrestrials. The ecological grief that reverberates across communities when faced with the cutting down of sylvan habitants is heightened by the presentiment that replacement saplings have diminishing chances of growing to maturity, which is also a subtext to the emotions stirred by the felling of Sycamore Gap Tree. The same, however, cannot be said for the cutting down of the two yew trees that grew in front of the British Pavilion in the Venice Giardini, which elicited barely a flutter of eyelids in the art world. Their sawing down in the weeks before the opening of the 2024 Biennale resulted in an unobstructed view of the giant video screens flanking the entrance. A sign displayed at the place of the cull informed visitors in technocratic speak that the trees 'had to be removed' because they had, bafflingly, 'outgrown their site', but the timber had been 'environmentally disposed of' and new specimens would be planted to continue the 'tradition of yews outside the British Pavilion'. It is beyond ironic that, on the outside of the nearby Slovak Pavilion, Oto Hudec was showing *Floating Arboretum*, a project memorialising collective acts of tree defence from across the world as pivotal episodes in the grassroots history of ecological solidarity with arboreal beings.

This is not to say that art activism in defence of trees does not have an enduring tradition in the UK. In fact, as Charlotte Yeldham has shown in her 2023 study *Art and Protest*, artists were closely involved in the first wave of modern environmental campaigning that led to the passing of the New Forest Act of 1877. Tate's 'Radical Landscapes' touring exhibition (Reviews *AM*457) displayed documentation of the Newbury Bypass Protests of the mid 1990s, when, as the 2022 publication precisely puts it, 'protesters risked life, limb and liberty trying to stop what they regarded as a senseless road that ploughed through nine miles of countryside and caused the felling of an estimated 10,000 trees'. Current activations of artistic solidarity with trees also include, for example, the programme of Orleans House on Cultural Reforesting as a curatorial response to climate emergency, the intergenerational project *The Word for Home is Forest* by Feral Practice, and the artist-led community initiative Walking Forest seeding the eco-feminist legacies of the Suffragettes, among many others.

In the era of climate overshoot, the political life of trees can no longer be sought, either in the ideological symbolism or the cultural associations projected onto them, with no regard for real arboreal existence; neither does it remain within a segregated realm of tree-to-tree exchanges and extra-human temporalities. Tree politics is gregarious and interspecific, carrying in its rings the wisdom of millennial presence and the forbearance of sylvan futurity, hugging other terrestrials with a restorative embrace and inviting us to reciprocate. Namely, amid the dense and spreading canopy of artistic responses, arboreal activism extends as far as asking, as one of the cards in London-based artist Harun Morrison's *Environmental Justice Questions*, 2023, pertinently puts it: 'Is taking a nap under a tree considered direct action?'

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