

“And perhaps in me someone very old still hears... the living sound of ...wood¹”

-Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

In March of 2017 there was a late winter storm and strong gusts of wind rolled across the treetops of Gatineau Park. I was snowshoeing in the woods looking for old trees and stumbled upon a large white pine standing amongst a grove of maple, birch, and beech trees. The tree was the largest one I had found and measured nine feet in circumference.

On an impulse I decided to hug it. Pressing my ear against the bark of its wide base I inadvertently experienced a deeper listening of the tree. My mind traveled from the exterior world of the wind and rattling winter leaves to a lower resonance: the sound of the wood from the inside. It sounded like the creaking of a giant ship bolstering itself against the waves of an ocean.

The creaking of the white pine seemed to point to something deeper – a notion of time and communication that spanned centuries. The trunk and the sounds travelling up and down its height correlating with the idea of an electrical impulse and intergenerational connection across time.

In the 19th century the old growth white pine trees of the Ottawa valley were logged extensively and shuttled downriver for export. Driven by the British Navy’s demand for lumber, the wholesale extraction and shipment of ancient trees across the Atlantic Ocean was as a tangible manifestation of a colonial ideology that laid the foundation for Canada as a nation. This ideology and approach to land and resources is still in action today, with large scale logging enterprises continuing to have impacts on the environment and First Nations communities.²

Trees have a way of communicating with each other, forming communities and connections that stretch beneath the forest floor and across time. A four hundred year old stump can be kept alive through nutrient exchange with the roots of living trees.³ A mother tree can share nutrients with its offspring through subterranean mycorrhizal networks.⁴

“The electrical impulses that pass through the roots of trees...move at the slow rate of one third of an inch per second. But why... do trees pass electrical impulses through their tissues at all? The answer is that trees need to communicate, and electrical impulses are just one of their many means of communication.”

Flannery, Tim. Introduction. The Hidden Life of Trees. By Peter Wohlleben,. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2015. p vii.

1. Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), pg. 15.

2. As recent as 2012, the Quebec government granted logging companies access to unceded territory of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake. The community’s direct action forced the Quebec government and Resolute Forest Products to honour the Trilateral Agreement signed in 1991.

Retrieved from Francis, Annette. “Barriere Lake battling logging on Algonquin land.” *www.aptnnews.ca*. Published 13 July 2012. Accessed July 29 2017.

“WIN! Resistance by Barriere Lake and supporters results in Quebec concession over logging.” *www.barrierelakesolidarity.org*. Published 27 November 2013. Accessed 29 July 2017.

3. In chapter 1 of his book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben relates the story of coming upon a network of roots connected to what he had thought was a dead stump. Further exploration revealed that the surrounding tree network appeared to be keeping the root system of the ‘dead’ tree alive through nutrient exchange. Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate, Discoveries from a Secret World*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2015. pp1-2.

4. Scientist Susan Simard has also observed trees sharing carbon through ectomycorrhizal fungi. Simard, Suzanne. (2016, June). *Suzanne Simard: How trees talk to one another*. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other, Accessed April 12, 2017.

The removal of old growth trees forever alters the land – a cut or hole in the visual landscape also represents a loss of intelligence. The strongest and oldest trees are not able to pass on their protection, their nutrients, or their knowledge to a younger generation of plants.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes presents the *studium* and the *punctum* as two concepts that can be at work within a given photograph. The *studium*, according to Barthes, describes a photographic image that functions as “the extension of a field, which [the viewer] perceive[s] quite familiarly as a consequence of [their] knowledge”⁵ whereas the *punctum* “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow”⁶ and catches the viewer off-guard, unprepared.

The *punctum* is also likened to a wound or a cut, a “little hole”⁷ that in the process of “the chemical action...develops [that which] is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound)...”⁸ The absence of the old growth trees – though submerged or covered over with new growth – represents a kind of tangible *punctum* in the landscape, a wounded place.

The logging of the valleys around Ottawa began in the early 1800s before the invention of photography. There are no photographs of this place before it was deforested. The images within the exhibition are an attempt to bring together old and new trees through a photographic action.

At the bottom of the Ottawa River lie old growth trees from the 19th century, sunken relics of the giants that once stood on its banks. A local business named *Log’s End* has been harvesting the submerged trees from the bottom of the river and using the ancient timber to fabricate wooden flooring.

In April of 2017 I approached professional woodworker Oliver Drake to create two pinhole cameras made from salvaged old growth pine timber from the river. I then used these cameras to document the landscape surrounding Ottawa as well as Temagami – the site of one of Ontario’s last preserved stands of old growth white pine and red pine forest.

A camera is a kind of time machine – collapsing a moment of light, depth and time within the confines of a darkened chamber. I imagine the interaction between the contemporary trees currently standing on the land and the materiality of the old growth tree as being realized in the walls of the camera; an old growth tree looking at the new forest – a tree etched inside of another tree – intergenerational communication through light and artificial proximity.

The nature of a pinhole camera’s construction leads to film exposures that have an extended duration due to the size of the aperture. The large format pinhole images within the exhibition were created with exposures of between 1 and 5 minutes. This kind of duration, along with the layering of light upon

“For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches – and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinet making and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.”

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p 15.

“One of the reasons that many of us fail to understand trees is that they live on a different time scale than us... Creatures with such a luxury of time on their hands can afford to take things at a leisurely pace.”

Flannery, Tim. Introduction. The Hidden Life of Trees. By Peter Wohlleben, Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2015. p vii.

5. Barthes, Roland. p 26.

6. Ibid p 26.

7. Ibid p 26.

8. Ibid p 49.

the film, points to the extended duration of time inherent in lived experience of the tree itself and the multiple layers present within the contemporary forest.

Watermarks, camera aberrations, overexposures and dust were embraced as tangible markers of the materiality of the camera, the film, and the chemical process. The known longevity and archival qualities of black and white film relate to the historical use of the medium in record keeping and documentation, while also pointing to the archive of the forest itself as a type of marker or record keeper. At the deepest level this work attempts to bring multiple eras together simultaneously, bridging the gap between past and present.

This thought process is also part of the way I think about the video and sound work in the installation. A performative gesture realized in the present through my body and my observations leads to a meditation on a deeper sense of time and the creation of a fictional evocation of a ship (or tree) on the ocean. Sounds from the present day reach back to the fate of previous trees.

I think of those trees often. What did it feel like to bob down river and roll across the sea? What did they *look* like – what did this *land* look like with them in it? What a loss this is.

In this exhibition I use photography, video, sound and installation to create space to reflect on the trees that were once here, the fragmented ecosystem that remains, and the persistent mark extraction has left on the current landscape.

– Sarah Fuller