

Into the Woods. Approaches to the Forest Ecosystem

6 April to 11 August, 2024

KunstHausWien. Museum Hundertwasser

As part of the Klima Biennale Wien, KunstHausWien is presenting an extensive group exhibition on one of the world's most important ecosystems - the forest. Sixteen contemporary artistic positions are dedicated to the forest habitat, its ecological processes, and its threats. The world's forests are more than ever a reminder of the imbalance of our planet: forests filter water and air, provide resources and food, are habitat for a large part of the land-living species, promote human health, and stabilize the climate of our Earth as important carbon stores. Their deforestation and profit-oriented exploitation are driving the ecological crisis forward, while, at the same time, global warming fuels forest loss.

Using artistic projects on a wide variety of forest regions around the world - from the Amazon rainforest to the Embobut forest in Kenya and the primeval forests of the Carpathians to pine forests in Switzerland and local forest areas - the exhibition addresses pressing questions about this sensitive ecosystem. On the one hand, the works on display explore the human influence on the state of the forests and their destruction, and on the other hand address the collective and symbiotic activities of the forest ecosystem. Reckless deforestation, the effects of forest monocultures, the tension between economic forest use and sustainable forest protection, the financialization of the climate crisis, and the endangerment of forests by global warming are also thematized in the exhibition, as are the ecological processes and complex interactions that underlie the forest ecosystem.

The artists of the exhibition illuminate the central role of the world's forests for the health and stability of our planet. The research-based, inspiring, poetic, and often collaborative works with scientists make the complex topic tangible and enable new perspectives on an ecosystem that is allegedly so familiar to us.

Sophie Haslinger works as a curator with a focus on contemporary photography and ecological topics. Since 2022, she has been a curator at KunstHausWien, where she develops the exhibition program of the house. Before that, she worked at the same institution as an assistant curator and for the Foto Wien photo festival. In addition, she has curated dozens of independent curatorial projects in galleries, off-spaces, and exhibition spaces. Sophie Haslinger holds a master's degree from the University of Vienna in Art History and Communication Sciences and was a Curatorial Research Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago. She regularly writes texts for exhibition catalogs, artist books, and magazines.

Artists and Works

Rodrigo Arteaga

The tree laid out in *Grid* is deadwood from the Vienna Woods that has been heated for the time in the museum to pause the decomposition process. After the end of the exhibition, the tree will be returned to the forest. For Rodrigo Arteaga, the sculpture is an observatory of natural cycles and a poetic attempt to visualize the contradictory relationships between humans and nature. In the series *Monocultures*, Arteaga declines the repetition of organic forms in monocultures. Burned out in meticulous handwork, traces of the absent leaves, needles, and seeds of the Monterey pine and the Blue Eucalyptus have inscribed themselves into the paper. These two tree species are grown in Arteaga's home country of Chile in formerly state-subsidized and water-intensive monocultures. Soil drying and heat contribute to the occurrence of forest fires, and conflicts over water are increasing.

In a poetic way, both works demonstrate how our resource needs, partly outsourced to other continents, affect even the smallest microbial structures of ecosystems. Even the forest, as a supposedly romantic place, is not exempt from the economic constraints of capitalist exploitation.

Anca Benera & Arnold Estefán

The starting point for the work specially designed for the exhibition is the Saliera - a salt cellar by Benvenuto Cellini with an allegorical representation of sea and land from around 1540-43. The goldsmith's work, stolen from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in 2003, was rediscovered in a forest in the Waldviertel after a major international search operation. Benera & Estefán produced a replica of the Saliera from a salt block and placed it as a salt licking stone in a forest. The planet shaped by humans is thus symbolically returned to nature. The artists thus pose the fundamental question: How can we rethink the world?

In the exhibition space, the project manifests itself as a tent-like installation with a video work. With the installation, you enter a kind of hiding place from which you can observe life in the forest. The video

documents from two camera perspectives how the salt Saliera changes and gradually disappears under the influence of animals and external conditions.

UnWorlding approaches the forest ecosystem and its relevance as a habitat from the perspective of the forest inhabitants. At the same time, the project addresses the (de-)colonization of nature and is thus also a strong gesture for cross-species justice.

The project was commissioned by KunstHausWien and realized in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Forests.

Eline Benjaminsen & Elias Kimaiyo

Footprints in the Valley is an exploration of the financialization of forests. The starting point for the research is a CO2 compensation program by a British emissions trader, which finances reforestation projects in Kenya. One tree is supposed to compensate for one ton of carbon each. This vague claim prompted Benjaminsen to have her own tree planted and to follow its trade route. Her research led her to the Embobut Forest, where a conflict between global and local interests prevails: Internationally financed reforestation projects claim the area as a nature conservation zone, leading to the violent displacement of the indigenous Sengwer population.

Using rendering methods and analog measurements, Benjaminsen calculated the compensable amount of carbon of individual trees. A video work illustrates a multitude of "tree wounds", inflicted by the indigenous population, for example, to collect material for medicine. Large-format photographs document erased places of the former Sengwer life. The project was created in collaboration with human rights activist Elias Kimaiyo, who himself was a victim of the violent displacement as part of the Sengwer community.

Alma Heikkilä

Many organisms live symbiotically. Mycelia, consisting of microscopically small threads that permeate the forest floor, spread out in a vast network. Water, soil microbes, and nutrients travel through these channels, exchange, and communicate with each other: forests are shaped by the social networks of the "Wood Wide Web". In the process, each organism changes the world of all others. With pigments, acrylic, ink, plaster, and resin, the Finnish artist unfolds an underground cityscape. Her interest lies in the smallest forms of life: bacteria, amoebae, worms, centipedes, crayfish, mites, fungi, lichens. Alma Heikkilä reproduces this world on a new scale, namely enlarged and temporally condensed. Thus, the slowness and the microscopic dimension, which elude human perception, become a work of art. Alma Heikkilä wants to open our eyes to a world without which ours would not exist. What seems to be just a rotting piece of wood is a breeding ground for insects and fungi. Where only earth is visible, she senses a ramified universe of living beings that can be found all around us, even if we are not always aware of it.

Monica Ursina Jäger

A forest changes in short rhythms like the seasons, but also in very long cyclical processes that cannot be grasped with the scales of human life. A forest wanders, expanding along heights and depths, dry and damp soils - if its space is not limited by humans as it is today. Monica Ursina Jäger has been artistically researching these multifaceted qualities of time - since 2019 she has explored several Swiss primeval forests.

The footage of *Transient Traveller* was taken in the Böldmeren Forest in the canton of Schwyz, whose status as a primeval forest is disputed because its special beauty has also been created through cultivation. The work explores the mood of the forest and its transformation processes. These are evident on leaves and moss, and the artist also incorporated charcoal and ink from spruce soot - as products of the forest. The film sequences were set to sound and music in a collaborative artistic process in the studio. In the text spoken by a female voice, which is based on scientific and mythological sources, facts and narratives about the forest are mixed. Images, sounds, and lyrical language create a feeling for time as an overarching dimension and also point to temporality as a factor in the Anthropocene.

Markus Jeschaunig

Markus Jeschaunig's *Mooshelm* [Moss Helmet] offers us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in a micro-forest experience in the middle of the city. A mobile shell construction forms a canopy that carries a forest

landscape with mosses and ferns inside. This space, accessible for one person, surrounds the sensory organs as a “climate cell” with forest scent. The messenger substances produced in the forest, the terpenes, are partly responsible for the positive effect on our mental and physical well-being. Mosses - there are about 16,000 different species - play an important role in the nutrient cycle, devour fine dust, filter water, and protect soils from drying out. They are so-called hygrophytic organisms, whose cell structure remains intact during long periods of drought. They react sensitively to air pollution and are therefore bio-indicators for environmental quality.

The artist displays processes for preserving nature in urban space and transfers a piece of forest as “nature to go” into the city to improve air quality there and reduce the “Urban Heat Island Effect”. The *Mooshelm* represents a mobile prototype of a forest and breathing space for the city - a place to take a deep breath, a moss-green oasis.

Susanne Kriemann

With *Forest, frst, t like teamwork*, Susanne Kriemann delves into the history of European primary forests and examines their endangerment in connection with “Fast Furniture”. The research began with the reviewing of the photo archive of the art historian Mihai Oroveanu in Bucharest. There, photographs are kept that, on the one hand, show untouched Romanian forests, and on the other hand document the wood industry and agriculture of the 20th century - witnesses of the deforestation of the Carpathians, driven by the demand for raw wood and the economic interests of the furniture industry.

Forest, frst, t like teamwork consists of four large-format screen prints, for which Kriemann used waste paper and a pigment extracted from discarded Ikea furniture. The graphic design is based on the formal language of the archival photographs: As in a landscape, words about the destruction of the Carpathian forests as well as poem passages and quotes from newspapers and academic articles find their way across the paper. The poem is accompanied by selected archival photographs, which are installed in the space with the residual material of former cheap furniture. *Forest, frst, t like teamwork* focuses on future-proof strategies to combat deforestation and calls for an end to the drastic destruction of our environment. The project was realized together with Isa Motz and Leia Walz (design), Christina Moreno Garcia (research), and Grigore Liteanu (print).

Jeewi Lee

The starting point of the installation *Ashes to Ashes* by Jeewi Lee is a landscape near the Italian city of Lucca destroyed by forest fires. There, the artist took ash remains and used them to produce unique soaps with natural oils. Each of the 340 soap sculptures on display was manually marred with the imprint of burnt tree bark. Paradoxically, destruction by forest fires always means a new beginning: After a forest fire, the soil is particularly rich in nutrients and provides the re-growing vegetation with energy for its revival. *Ashes to Ashes* is thus the farewell of a forest and at the same time its purifying new beginning. In the *Paths series*, Jeewi Lee examines the effects of the bark beetle infestation in the Harz Mountains forests. Already 90% of the local spruce population has died from the damage caused by bark beetles. To document the destructive paths of the insects as a time document, Lee used the Korean printing technique Takbon. She attached wafer-thin Hanji paper made from mulberry tree bark to the tree trunks and dabbed the “drawings” of the bark beetles with ink through the paper.

Isa Klee

The historically grown human-nature relationship in the Danube floodplain landscape in the Vienna Prater forms the starting point of the site-specific work *Shifting Ecologies*. The Prater is an area that has shrunk since the 17th century due to massive human interventions. The drying out of the floodplain forest is noticeable for a variety of living beings - whether reeds, water ferns, willows, wild garlic or kingfishers. They are all part of an ecosystem that was once shaped by fluctuating water levels and floods. Remnants of the original vegetation can currently only be found in the vicinity of the so-called Heustadel Water. As an artist and biodiversity expert, Isa Klee explores the question of which organisms have currently settled in the altered floodplain forest and on its banks. How can these species be documented, protected, and preserved in the long term despite climate change? Therefore, the participatory installation in the exhibition space simultaneously functions as a seed archive, art object, and snapshot of the floodplain flora. Three public tours make it possible to examine the area on site and identify species. As a result, the archive is continuously supplemented with newly collected findings and observations.

Antje Majewski

The paintings by Antje Majewski, newly created for the exhibition, explore the forest floor and the deadwood decaying on it. They prove to be aesthetically interesting motifs for the artist because, as they ultimately become humus in various stages of transformation, their shape completely dissolves. In the painting, the motif of the forest floor visually becomes formations that appear abstract but occur in nature. The organic outlines of the painting surfaces are reminiscent of the contour of tree disks. Through her painting mediums, Antje Majewski also addresses ecological dimensions of art: rabbit skin glue as a binder makes the picture objects painted on canvas and wood almost completely compostable.

Both the soil layers and deadwood are among the most precious factors in the forest ecosystem. The fact that their utility eludes measurability is a starting point for the artist to ask highly political questions: Can forest soil, can deadwood, can worms or birds belong to anyone at all, when the usual measurement in hectares only runs on the surface and neither affects the adjacent airspace nor the deeper soil layers?

Richard Mosse

Large-scale deforestation, industrial livestock farming, massive palm oil and soy plantations, and illegal gold mines are leading to the destruction of the worldwide largest and most biodiverse rainforest at a catastrophic pace. To capture the gigantic extent of environmental crimes, Mosse uses the technology of multispectral imaging and geographic information systems (GIS) in his series *Tristes Tropiques*. The artist flew over remote areas of the rainforest using a camera drone to then design detailed topographic maps from a multitude of images. The technique makes things visible that cannot be captured with conventional photography - such as underground fires (*Subterranean Fire*) or the clearing of primary forest for the construction of the Samuel hydroelectric plant (*Samuel Dam*). The triptych *Senador Porfirio* shows a collection of illegal sawmills near the Xingu River; in another picture, the straight palm plantations penetrate the natural order of the forest (*Palm Plantation*).

Mosse's works trace the signs of complex ecological narratives and make the incomprehensible size and drama of the destruction of this so important habitat at least partially tangible.

Katie Paterson

To Burn, Forest, Fire brings us closer to understanding planetary deep time: The work contrasts the scents of the first forest on Earth with those of the last forest in the age of the climate crisis. Together with scientists, Paterson translated the smells of forest biomes into the form of two incense sticks. The first, *First Forest*, refers to the 385 million-year-old American Cairo forest in the US state of New York. Some of the occurring aromas are still familiar to us today, including the scent of humus and clay, the sweetness of ferns, or the bitter note of grass. The absence of fruits, animals, or insects is also characteristic.

The incense stick *Last Forest* is dedicated to the far more uncomfortable question of the aroma of the last forest. Katie Paterson chose the Ecuadorian Yasuní Biosphere Reserve in the Amazon rainforest as an example, which is home to nearly 3,000 tree and shrub species, more than 600 bird species, and hundreds of amphibian species. Such a high biodiversity produces a wide aromatic spectrum: The fermented scent of sweet fruits combines with the green smell of algae, mosses, and lichens as well as with resin and nutmeg from trees.

On selected dates, the incense sticks are lit as part of collective meditation rituals.

Oliver Ressler

At the center of *The path is never the same* is one of the last primary forests in Germany, a symbol of the climate movement: the Hambach Forest. However, Oliver Ressler does not show images of political protest but lets the forest speak: After a look at the open-cast coal mine, the camera switches between close-ups and perspectives from above. In the forest, walkways between trees and tree houses become visible. The occupation is so much more than just resistance against a destructive mine: Two activists tell of the forest as a protective space and co-habitat, in which the interplay of human and non-human life organically and hierarchically reorganizes itself. The fact that the peaceful atmosphere is fragile is announced acoustically by the rumbling of the mining machines. Despite the cessation of deforestation decided in 2020, the Hambach Forest remains threatened because the mine still in operation pumps out the groundwater, thereby depriving the ecosystem, which has already been destroyed by 90%, of its basis for life.

A poster campaign in the center of Vienna carries environmental concerns into the public space: Two aerial photographs of a piece of forest and a coal mine intertwine the extraction of fossil resources with the finiteness of human existence. This also clearly shows the paradoxical circumstance that fossil fuels originated from past life, but the exploitation of this energy resource ultimately has a self-destructive effect.

Abel Rodríguez

As an elder of the indigenous Nonuya community, Abel Rodríguez passes on his knowledge through drawings and stories about plants in the rainforest and their mythological-spiritual meaning. Born around 1944, he grew up on the upper reaches of the Rio Cahuinarí in Colombia. His uncle, a sabedor (man of knowledge), imparted knowledge to him about hundreds of plant species.

In the 1990s, Abel Rodríguez fled armed conflicts in the jungle to Bogotá and began there to create illustrations of plants for the Tropenbos nature conservation institution and to systematically record them. From Bogotá, he had to draw the plants from memory without the actual plants, also providing information about taste, flowering time, and usage. With his “botanical panels”, which combine Western classifications with traditional indigenous knowledge, a freely accessible archive for everyone was created.

The four drawings in the exhibition tell of the tree of life and abundance, the origin of the Nonuya community, and the diversity in the animal kingdom. The filigree, detailed drawings analyze the life processes of the forest in bright colors. Just like the tree, humans live in a community and are thus part of this ecological system.

Diana Scherer has been studying root systems and the growth of plants since 2012. In her series *Interwoven* and *Hyper Rhizome*, she reflects on the dependence of humans on the nature surrounding them. The artist poetically translates the network of roots into a fabric-like material. The technique used for this harnesses the natural growth process, so that new structures and patterns are created together with the plant. These are based on construction and ordering principles of nature - for example, on the structures of honeycombs, crystals or leaf patterns. In addition, there are various references to wood: Microscopic images of wood cells, waterways in wood, and the annual rings of trees are combined with human-made structures, such as the traces of car tires.

Scherer's objects primarily question the meaningfulness of cooperation with nature: To what extent can humans collaborate with nature without dominating or appropriating it? Even the fact that natural processes are artistically claimed in Diana Scherer's project suggests that our interaction with nature is marked by ambivalence.

Rasa Šmite & Raitis Šmits

In *Atmospheric Forest*, we can move through a forest structure consisting of thousands of points without a body. This visualizes biochemical processes: the breathing of the trees. For this, scans of the Pfylen Forest, one of the largest pine forests in the Swiss Alps, were combined with datasets on temperature, humidity, and the emissions of the trees. These data come from a research project of the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. What the trees emit as volatile organic compounds is usually perceived by us as the typical scent of pine resin. The resin pressure decreases during dry conditions or produces higher emissions with a higher water balance. How exactly these exchange processes between plants and air influence the climate on the one hand, and change through climate change on the other, continues to be researched. The sound space of *Atmospheric Forest* consists of noises that are created when resin liquefies into turpentine or afterwards solidifies again into colophony. Rasa Šmite and Raitis Šmits have transformed a data cloud into a virtual experience with *Atmospheric Forest*, which provides us with new access to ecological contexts by integrating scientific data in an artistic language.

Atmospheric Forest, 2020 _ VR installation (point cloud and data viz), multi-channel video, sound
Courtesy: Rasa Šmite & Raitis Šmits