

Public Studio
What We Lose in Metrics



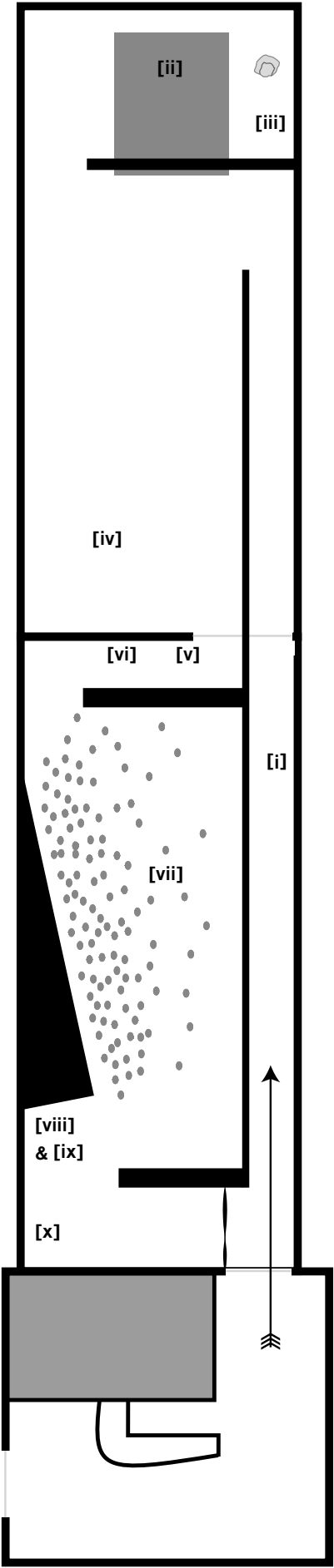
Curated by Emelie Chhangur and Philip Monk
Art Gallery of York University

April 13 – June 19, 2016



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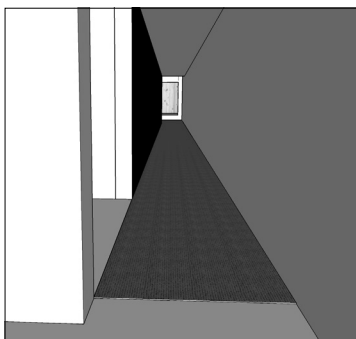
A Primary Exhibition of the
2016 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival



[i] The Tunnel

A popular colloquialism is that one “can’t see the forest for the trees.” And yet can we even see a tree for what it is? “The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way,”

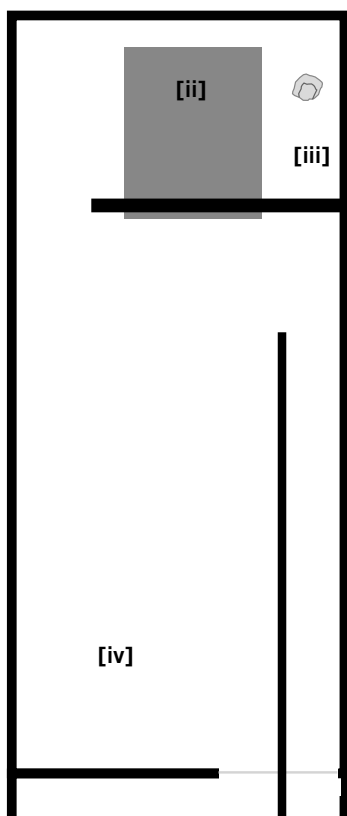
William Blake wrote in 1799. “Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature



is imagination itself.” Here at the origins of the capitalist era, Blake opposed imagination to the Enlightenment project where a deformed nature was to be demystified and corrected. No more deep dark woods of the Grimms’ fairy tales, in this utilitarian world that we have inherited, trees are meant for harvesting. Forests have been uniformly managed into columns of statistics.

In this exhibition, Public Studio asks us what we lose in such metrics, in turning forests into standing reserves for commodity exploitation. What has been given up and what needs to be regenerated in this pragmatic notion of the natural world in which we all participate? For millennia before we began to cultivate forests, they conditioned us psychologically. The word “forest” has come to mean a large wooded area, although etymologically it can be traced to the Latin word *foris*, meaning “outside.” Thus begins our complex relationship with the forest—something that at once is “outside” ourselves and something that sustains us. Metaphorically the forest symbolizes the part of our psyche that is unknown, and stands in darkness until we come to the “clearing”—more than fall upon the devastation of a clear-cutting. Given this lack of understanding of our place in the natural world, Public Studio speculate whether there is a possibility of alternate cosmologies of nature.

We enter the exhibition through a tunnel as if a path into the woods. It is dark but dappled with light, like the forest of Akira Kurosawa’s famous film Rashomon. At the end, already deep within, lies a cabin. We have to ask: Have we walked into a nightmare or a forest idyll?



[ii] *The Darkness Between Lives*, 2016

Video projection, wood cabin

Soundtrack by Anna Friz, 10:50

Within this cabin, to a soundtrack that hovers just at the level of our anxiety, or premonition, a cascade of images falls through the forest, all in black and white and collaged together in rapid pursuit of each other: *Apocalypse Now*, *Rambo*, *Deliverance*, *Bambi*, *Avatar*, *Rashomon*, and more. They are evidence, through all their genres, of the pervasive and profound symbol of the forest as a place of refuge or of ambush, of evil or enchantment—of hunter or hunted.

If we wander, behind the cabin we stumble upon the video game The Path, which rehearses the way we just took to granny's house.

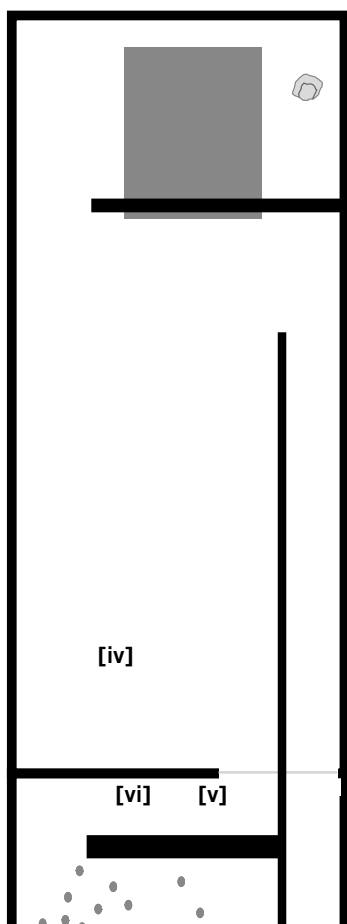
There are five video games in the exhibition, yet they are not quite the games commercially released. Public Studio asked various gamer girls, feminist game players, to produce “play throughs”—the phenomena of watching games played with voice-over player commentary. Each player has modified her game, subverting both the games’ violence and goal orientation. Each works against the rules of the game and contrarily introduces a pacifist mode, thereby reinventing the narratives and maintaining the environment of an “open world” that a character can continuously move through and explore without achieving any end. As well, each game is accompanied by a poem by a feminist poet, chosen either by the artists or player, that are counterpoint voices in the forest, underscoring the violence of the woods that women are taken to or abducted within, that we here sadly know through the tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

[iii] *I Have Been Her Kind*, 2016

Video, 14:43

Released March 2009 by Tale of Tales, *The Path* is a horror game loosely based on the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale. Here six sisters are sent one after another by their mother to visit their sick grandmother. They are instructed, “Go to Grandmother’s house and stay on the path,” because straying off the path inevitably leads to the Wolf. The Wolf is only a symbol for the sexual violence that might haunt these woods. The game is played by Nina Bakan, an undergraduate student in Literature and Critical Theory and Cinema Studies at University of Toronto. It includes the poem *Her Kind*, 1960, by Anne Sexton, chosen by Public Studio.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.



[iv] *Our Occupations a Breath of Wind*, 2016

Video projection, mirror

The journey begins again, this time in digital form, as we traverse the towering forest along what may be a logging road. This forest is imposing yet familiar, its image just shimmering out of stillness. We stand immersed in its grandeur and stillness. Yet this cedar forest is scentless. We are still in an abstraction of our making.

In the distance, another path beckons and leads to two video games, Skyrim and Dragon Age Inquisition. Have we figured out that we too are advancing in the stages of a real-life video game? But are we hunter or hunted?

[v] *The Sea is Another Story*, 2016
Video, 10:22

Released March 2011 as developed by Bethesda Game Studios, *Skryim* is an open world video game where a player combats a world-destroying dragon. The game is played by long-time gamer Kathryn Yani and includes the poem *Diving into the Wreck*, 1971-72, by Adrienne Rich, chosen by the artists for whom its themes of the isolation of life yet a shared community created through storytelling allude to that of women gamers. In the playthrough Kathryn has turned the fierce animals benign in order that she not be attacked in her existential meanderings.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.

[vi] *The Claw, The Leaf, The Twig*, 2016
Video, 11:05

Released November 2014 as developed by BioWare and published by Electronics Arts, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a role-playing video game where the player (the Inquisitor) attempts to settle civil wars on a mythical continent and repair a tear in the sky through which demons enter the world. The game is played by casual gamer Stephanie Dodge, who works in digital communications in Toronto. Dodge chose the poem *We Have Trees Now* 2013, by Prageeta Sharma for its representation of the forest as an unconscious space.

Are we awaiting cheerless ambivalence to greet us in
the West?
Cavernous and cloudless, unaffected by beauty. Let's
be petulant,
this is us now, we say. We can't help but find ourselves
lustful;
crying alligator tears with pails to our eyes, *we didn't*
know we were here
we kept saying, *we don't know how it happened*. We
thought and thought,
and finally we closed our doors on the trees
to hide what we grew temperate for
but resolve didn't find us,
not alive with force, *we flew out of their arms*.

We travel on. A clearing lies ahead, filled with the blazing light of a giant LED screen, the type found beside freeways. Advertising no product, instead it proclaims a Rights of Nature (see below), written for this exhibition by Haida lawyer Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson. Cleverly detoured, the screen is also now a giant grow light. The scent of fresh foliage fills the air, coming from a grove of saplings nurtured in the gallery, preparing there for their biodiverse planting based on the Bioplan devised by Canadian scientist Diana Beresford-Kroeger.

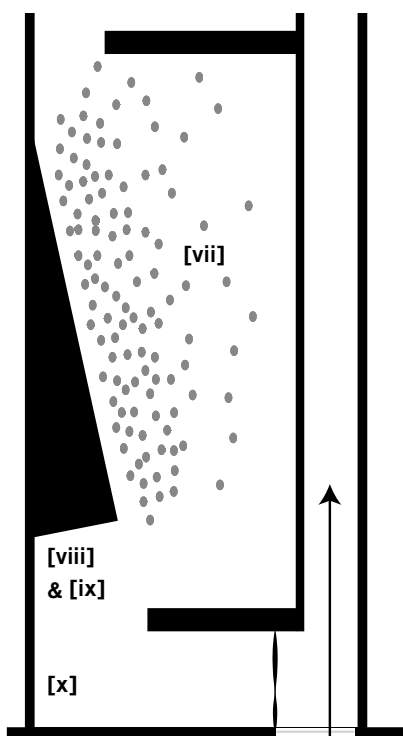
[vii] Everything is One, 2016

LED screen, saplings

In collaboration with **Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson**. Sapling selection with **Diana Beresford-Kroeger**.

Tree saplings: Basswood, Shag Bark Hickory, Burr Oak, Honey Locust, Tamarack, Eastern Hemlock, Eastern White Cedar, White Pine, Birch, Paw Paw

Beresford-Kroeger's influential books, *Arboretum America: A Philosophy of the Forest* and *The Global Forest: Forty Ways Trees Can Save Us*, served as the basis for Public Studio's research and process:



The Bioplan is a blueprint for all connectivity of life in nature. It is the fragile web which keeps each creature in balance with its neighbour. It is predation and prey. It is the victor and victim in a vast cycle of elemental life which is almost beyond our comprehension. It is the quantum mechanic of the green chloroplast without which we would all die. It is the domatal hairs on the underside of the deciduous trees harbouring the parasites for aphids. It is the ultraviolet traffic light signaling system in flowers for the insect world. It is the terpene aerosol S.O.S. produced by plants in response to invasive damage. It is the toxin trick of man, in his life and in his death, a divine contract, to all who share this planet.

Perhaps the forest is now a place of calling, together.

[viii] *My Body is a Temple*, 2016

Video, 11:37

Released May 2015 as developed by CD Projekt RED, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* is an open world game of quest and exploration where bounty hunting Witchers take on various contracts. It is played by Laura Onderwater and Natalia St. Lawrence, who have used moves within the game to disable its killing mode. It includes a poem by ineffable-hufflepuff. Laura Onderwater is a game designer who lives in Oakville where she currently is finishing her second year at Sheridan for Game Design. Natalia St. Lawrence, an illustrator from Winnipeg, is also studying Game Design at Sheridan.

[ix] *Narrowing the Sky*, 2016

Video, 9:08

Released in 2012 as developed by Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed III* is a story of rival groups of assassins during the American revolutionary wars and features a half-Mohawk, half-English character. As well as eliminating targets and exploring their environment, the characters can as well accomplish side missions apart from the main action. It is played by Karolina Baran, a game designer and student of Digital Futures at OCAD University and includes the poem *I was Sleeping where the Black Oaks Move*, 1984, by Ojibwe, Anishinaabe writer and poet Louise Erdrich.

We walked among them, the branches
whitening in the raw sun.
Above us drifted herons,
alone, hoarse-voiced, broken,
settling their beaks among the hollows.
Grandpa said, *These are the ghosts of the tree people
moving among us, unable to take their rest.*

We are safely through. In our passage through these dread woods perhaps we have recognized the reserve of deep memory the forest stands for—a psychic and symbolic archive we all share. We have been taken through this exhibition under the guidance of the inter-generational and cross-cultural collection of women collaborators assembled by Public Studio.

*Learn more about the Bioplan in *Arboretum America: A Philosophy of the Forest*, located at the front gallery desk or by visiting <http://dianasjourney.com>

[x] Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, Cedar Sister, 2016
Photograph, from the Supernatural Beings series.

In the Haida worldview, the cedar tree is known as “every woman’s sister”, providing for and sustaining our existence. This ancient sister lies at the root of Haida culture. She permeates every facet of Haida life, beginning in the cradle and continuing to the grave and finally, ending at the memorial potlatch and raising of memorial totem poles to commemorate and celebrate one’s life and contributions to the community.

The Haida perspective and Haida laws acknowledges the living spirit or power, of all beings, both animate and inanimate. It respects these beings for giving their life to sustain humanity. For example, each time we take bark from a cedar tree, Haida law requires that we first speak to the tree to learn how much of the cedar bark we may take. Similarly, each time we test the structural strength of cedar for the construction of canoes or totem poles, we “Look into the Heart of the Cedar.”

This perspective and these laws bring a holistic and respectful use and view of the forests—beginning at the roots, continuing up the tree to include the bark and the pitch, through to the species nesting in the gloriously dense, canopy of the old-growth forests; extending out to the streams filled with salmon and trout; and embracing the berries, medicines and 150 forest species that sustain Haida culture—and acknowledge the inter-relationship between the forests with the rest of the land and the surrounding marine environment.

This worldview has guided the development of Haida laws and millennia of sustainable management of the forests of Haida Gwaii—beginning with the nurturing of the first trees in Haida Gwaii and continuing into the present day. A worldview where the Cedar Tree is a Sister dramatically changes how we interact and manage human use of the forests.

– Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, 2016

CEDAR SISTER Image Credits

Cedar Sister: Farah Nosh Photography
Cedar Trees and Background Image: Jack Litrell
Photography
‘Spirit of Cedar’ Mask: Robert Davidson
Mask Image: Kenji Nagai Photography
Garment (burlap, cedar bark, metallic fabric): Pamela
Baker
Woven Cedar Headband (cedar bark, abalone shell,
leather): Robert Davidson private collection
Producer and Creative Direction: Terri-Lynn Wil-
liams-Davidson
Art Direction: Belanger Design Studio
Image Composition: Harry Bardal Graphic Design
Hair and Make-up Artist: Elizabeth McLeod

THE EARTH'S COVENANT

WHEREAS the Earth and her lands, forests, waters, coastal seas and atmosphere (the “Earth”) and the species she nurtures collectively enable humanity's existence and grow civilizations and indigenous cultures:

AND WHEREAS Canada and humanity's dominant patterns of development, production and consumption have caused, and are causing, environmental devastation, depletion of resources, extinction of species and the impairment of indigenous cultures:

AND WHEREAS the Earth and the species she nurtures have become fragile, and so too, Canada and humanity's future existence is fragile and precarious:

Declaration of Responsibilities and Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms

1. In trust and faith, the Earth hereby declares the responsibilities of humanity and guarantees the concomitant privileges and rights.

Fundamental Responsibilities

2. All people, regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, age or ability, have the following fundamental responsibilities:
 - a. the responsibility to recognize and respect that we are all one, that everything depends upon everything else, that we are all interconnected and interdependent and our fates are inextricably interlinked;
 - b. the responsibility to conserve and restore the Earth and the species and cultures she nurtures;
 - c. the responsibility to prevent environmental harm and to manage Canada and humanity's use of the Earth in ways that do not exceed the Earth's inherent limits and which maintain the Earth's natural cycles and interrelationships; and
 - d. the responsibility to consider and respect not only present, but future generations, thereby choosing our collective future.

Concomitant Rights and Privileges

3. Every human being, community and government earns the following privileges and rights when the fundamental responsibilities are fulfilled:
 - a. the right to clean water, clean air, a healthy environment and safe food;
 - b. the privilege of benefitting from the Earth and the species she nurtures; and
 - c. the right to maintain and strengthen the distinctive spiritual relationships with the Earth held by indigenous peoples.

What We Lose in Metrics features *Everything is One*, comprised of a collection of living saplings nourished by a 10 x 20' LED screen turned into a grow lamp. The saplings were chosen in consultation with world renown, Ottawa-based author and scientist **Diana Beresford-Kroeger**, whose life work has been dedicated to the development of an ambitious Bioplan for the future of the world's forests.

Public Studio is the collective art practice of filmmaker **Elle Flanders** and architect **Tamira Sawatzky**. Since 2009, Public Studio has employed a diverse range of media resulting in large-scale public art works, films, immersive installations, lens-based works and socially engaged projects. Public Studio was founded with the intent of exploring antagonisms that occur in and around public space and its disappearance; current instabilities; and the effects of globalization on our everyday landscapes. Their multidisciplinary practice has engaged topics such as war and militarization, ecology and urbanization and political dissent. With backgrounds in photography, film and architecture, the point of departure for Public Studio is an image that is often formed and informed spatially. Their photographs and immersive film installations consider the relationship between ethics and aesthetics through landscape. Central to their work is the role of aesthetic judgment and not just how to "make meaning," but how to "make meaning matter."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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