

Embodied Forest



How to Photograph a Forest through the Trees (or Representing the Wild): Notes on a Work-in-Progress

—
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Throughout our career, we have returned to seemingly simple how-to questions of representation. We began in 2007 with the question: how does one photograph climate change? Subsequently, we asked: how does one photograph (or film) a river in California; a science experiment masquerading as a nature preserve; an extinct species such as the passenger pigeon?, etc. More recently, we have been asking ourselves how does one photograph (or film) “The Amazon.”

Behind these how-to questions of representation are even more fundamental, and even more deceptive, what-is-it questions. What is climate change? What is a river in California? What is “The Amazon”? The act of representation always begins with the signified, the thing attempted to be conveyed, or more accurately, translated. It's never easy to say what something is precisely, even an object as simple as a hammer or a fork; it all depends on the relationship between the perceiver and the object. There is always something withdrawn in the object's ungraspable completeness. This observation, which has been developed and refined by object-oriented ontology, is particularly profound when the “object” of representation is not precisely locatable in time or space, such as a hyper-object like climate change; a disappeared object like the passenger pigeon; a flowing, ever-changing object like a body of water; or an object with disparate and often clichéd cultural associations that supersede its physical reality, such as “The Amazon.”

For this reason, the process of representation begins even one step before the most basic-seeming what-is-it question. We must first ask to-and-for-whom something is. What is the Amazon to the scientist? What is it to the tourist? To a given indigenous person? To a tapir? To a government? To an oil company? What is it to us, the ones seeking to represent it? And perhaps most importantly, what is the forest to itself? Anyone who has stepped inside knows the forest indeed is a being onto itself, withdrawn and real. It sees and thinks. It has an intention that cannot be fully understood.

Relatedly, there is also here a concealed “when” question. When—i.e., at what point in what continuum—is climate change, a river in California, the Amazon? We have written before about our sense of ourselves as historian-artists and our work as form historiography in which what matters, in the words of Walid Raad, is not so much the facts themselves “in their crude facticity” but rather “the complicated mediations through which [facts] acquire their immediacy.” (See our essay “Claims to Immediacy” in the journal *Memory Connection*). What's come to a head in our work on



Saylor/Morris, *Untitled*, 2021;
collage works from *How Forests
Think* series (work in progress)

the Amazon is our sense of our role not simply as historians but rather as *mytho*-historians. Meaning writers (imagers) of both myth and history, or rather a form of history that is also a myth, or myth that is also history; a richer and emotionally nuanced form of writing (and thus again more accurate). What myth means here begins with a sense of time not strictly governed by dates, unmoored from colonial referents; a sense of the past that is not tethered to a specific narrative continuum. What stories and organization of experience can come out of free-floating time when refracted through a specific point in space—a place, a territory, a land?

The Amazon means many different things to many different people. It is both an inhabited space, very real, and also a symbol. Perhaps, the way to represent it, then, and to make a case for its immediate and urgent relevance, is to attempt to collage or mosaic these different meanings and representations, including our own.

We begin with trees, as our project is an attempt to see a forest through the trees. The tree is the fact. And every fact has inexhaustible implications. (This

is the withdrawnness of which the object-oriented ontologists speak). The forest (both real and symbolic) is the mediation of those facts.

The tree is to the forest as an arm is to an octopus. It is a sensory organ, but also, in the bizarre way of an octopus, also a brain. The forest has a decentralized nervous system. There are many eyes and overlapping intentions. When you enter the forest, you are reacted to and watched. Before long, you are part of the forest. That happens in real-time.

Moreover, there are other humans amidst the forest. In the Indigenous cosmology, as many have pointed out (for example, Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think*), humans are not just the species we in the West recognize as such, walking erect with our sense of exceptional intelligence, alone in the condition of *Dasein*. In the Indigenous mind—the non-colonized mind—jaguars, tapirs, macaws, snakes, ants, and trees themselves are humans. The forest is human. Without a doubt, some spirits are not human. The dead are there in the forest too.

Even in a more down-to-earth sense, there are many variations of humans of the kind our Western

minds recognize in the forest: oil company workers; Waorani in one territory; Cofan in another; scientists are studying this and that, collecting data assembled as climate change and pharmaceutical drugs; there are eco-tourists in luxury huts; the many people are looking and reading about the forest in magazines and on the Internet—eyes brought to the forest via virtual space.

The one-eyed Francisco de Orellena, lieutenant of Pizarro and self-proclaimed conqueror of the Amazon, once passed through the exact locations we photographed. Orellena was the inspiration for Werner Herzog's *Aquarre Wrath of God*. Herzog famously called the Amazon obscene, seeing misery everywhere, conflict and fornication. Herzog embodied Orellena. What was conflict was simply resistance to being conquered.

The trees do not move but watch in the soil.

One day, we went out in the forest accompanied by a Waorani woman. She sang the entire time, at home. She said the name for different plants and demonstrated their uses. We became unclear about the time of the day. She wandered off while we photographed and returned with a palm frond, explaining that it was a roof.

Another day, we walked in the forest with the Cofan, who used iPhones and an app to record the trees, plants, and animals on their land. The Ecuadorian constitution gives indigenous people sovereignty over their lands and grants rivers, trees, and mountain rights. These rights are regularly encroached. The Cofan and others have successfully (so far) fought back. They use this app, drones, and motion sensor cameras to monitor oil and mining intrusions in the forest—more eyes in the forest—electronic eyes.

In the middle of the forest, there is an actual ruin in reverse, not ironic as in Smithsonian. A temple built in the form of an office park, the structure was sacrificed to the forest to celebrate its appetite. The trees break through the concrete floors and grow in the faux Corinthian columns. Rain pours through holes in the roof, spilling onto broken computers. Jaguars made from ceramic tiles guard the entrance. Vines embrace the façade.

The wild is in the cities of the jungle too. Half-finished buildings, with rebar sticking out of the roofs in clusters that themselves resemble forests. White

mannequins in storefronts selling whiteness. Streets and hotels are named Auca (a pejorative term meaning savage). A statue of Orellena is unfinished or has been smashed, another ruin in reverse; his hand is only wire. His mouth is chipped. Someone has stuck a party horn in his nose and written "pirata" over his name.

Today, as we write this, in the news: "Tropical Storm Grace forms as Fred approaches Florida;" "Antarctica is melting. Its future could be catastrophic;" "Evacuation order for 5 million people as rain batters Japan coast." The forest is this weather. The forest has known this was coming; each tree senses it.

The Amazon is the wild; it is the symbol of the wild.

The method of our project is collage—layering levels of signification, combining forms of representation, and trying to translate "the wild," in which the preservation of the world is said to lie.



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Many of the artists included in *Embodied Forest* are dedicated to documenting and representing trees and forests in their art practice; some have recently come to the subject. One hundred and ninety-one ecoartspace members applied to the call for artists, and ninety were selected by guest juror Lilian Fraiji, curator of LABVERDE based in Manaus, Brazil.

Countries represented by seventeen of the *Embodied Forest* artists outside the United States include Brazil, England, Sweden, Australia, Belgium, and Germany. The range of topics addressed is vast, including insects, breath, wildfires, birds, fungi, logging, growth rings, transpiration, mycorrhizal networks, canopy shyness, the cellular tissue of trees, forest immersion, reciprocity, trees as memories, rights of nature, trees as witnesses of history, colonial and capitalist extraction/white supremacy, the sonification of trees, symbiotic relationships, trees as bioindicators, tree as medicines, conservation and restoration, beetle infestations, migrations of tree habitat, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural burns.

