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instability

Suspended Treefall
Old-growth Hemlock Grove (Tsuga canadensis),
Huron Mountain Wildlife Foundation, Michigan

We sometimes ask our family or friends, 'What is a forest?' The first answer is always, 'Trees.' Probe a little further, and we might hear, 'Many upright trunks of various sizes and species… a green canopy of leaves above our head… a rather uniform forest floor… dirt beneath our feet,' and in our part of the world, 'black flies and mosquitoes.' Certainly not a fallen leviathan – whose presence stopped us short and demanded our attention – wedged between seven living trees, perched like the upper deck of an arboreal highway whose lanes of broken limbs, in contact with the soil, are feasts for the omnipresent fungi.

What is *really happening* in a forest – in front of us, behind us, under us, above us? If we slow down and, as Shari Tishman suggests, slow-look,[1] does the invisible become visible? If polypores and other fungi gnawing at dead trees and stumps worked more quickly, would the slow churn of wood into soil reveal itself as a forest fire's choking plume of smoke from which we'd instinctively flee? If we stayed, would we see the smouldering changes of the (r)evolutionary, chronically chaotic forest that appears stable to us only because of our comparatively short lives?

Nearly a century ago, Walter Benjamin wrote that 'the state of emergency in which

we live is not the exception but the rule.'[2] Rather than ask how art should react or respond to this state of emergency, this life endlessly out-of-balance, we – a collaborative pair of photographer-ecologists – wonder if and how art can reveal unstable affordances, the relationships inherent to living continuously on edge, and the possibilities for intentionally creating ways of living with uncertainty. In short, we seek an aesthetic of instability and work to imagine it, instantiate our mental picture of it, dance with the disorder of the uncountable interacting plants, animals, fungi and bacteria that accompany us in the forest, and find the sublime in the riot of its unfathomable chaos.

Our photographic interrogations of forests continually reveal their hidden ecologies – the relationships between organisms and their environments – yet revel in contradictions. Does the camera focused on a suspended treefall capture a decisive moment or hint to us that continuous ecological regeneration has a dual nature, combining imperceptibly slow change and unpredictable tipping points?

Suspended Treefall conveys an aesthetic of instability – an uncanny and unexpected strangeness. This image is also a panorama, created from multiple photographs taken over the course of several minutes that are then combined into one seamless strip of forest. The seamlessness made possible with digital cameras and post-processing software challenges a presumption of photography – that the image captures a single moment in time – leaving us with an invisible timelapse, a stilled motion picture. Can this kind of stretched reality help us see the constant dynamics of a forest?

Walking with forests also takes us between times. It may be centuries between tree falls or fires, and managed forests may be cut only once every other generation. Even though falling trees, windstorms, forest fires and loggers create empty spaces – what ecologists call 'gaps' – it takes scrutiny to see their remnants: moss-covered stumps, fire scars and 'pioneer' species competing for light. We value the seemingly stable now over ever-present change.

Yet, how strangely hopeful it is to consider the potential in the soil – the seeds and rhizomes ready and waiting for what an ecologist calls a 'disturbance' (but what the rest of us would likely call a disaster) to spur them into a burst of action when the canopy suddenly opens and the sun warms the ground. This potential is activated in an instant, yet there is no comparable drama in the seeds' waiting, nothing on which to fix our attention or our lenses. But when the chainsaws roar, the fires blaze, and the timbers fall, shutters snap and affirm the catastrophe. In the wake left by their images, we mourn the forest lost rather than celebrate the one emerging.

While living trees afford us a glimpse of life in slow motion, what does a dead one afford? To us, it presents as sculpture, a focal point, and a signifier of both permanence and temporality.

Charred Skin near Shagbark (*Carya ovata*). Monticello, Illinois.
Digital Collodion (*Ultraviolet + Visible Light < 550 nm*)

We normally think of sculptures as permanent objects created as monuments to an idealised past. But *Charred Skin* gets its power from the temporality it gives us an opportunity to behold. The helical form apparent in *Charred Skin* illuminates how a tree spins as it slowly grows; its *tour en l'air* frozen by the rapid movement of the flames and brought back to ground by filaments of fungi. To us, this transient sculpture signifies the sublime: the frisson of intense and painful loss coupled with the ecstatic release and freedom that comes from seeing the sculpture change or even disappear.

Trees seem stable and solid until we're caught in the woods during a storm. Their motion forces us to see their aliveness, while the piercing rain and howling wind rushing through leaves and branches make us question their permanence. Our cameras can easily record the one or two trees which did fall and left a striking mark. Harder are the trees in action. Such records memorialise the fallen trees and those still standing, resilient in the constant emergency of the ongoing present.

Notes

1. Tishman, S. *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*, Routledge, 2017
2. Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn; edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books, 1968, p.257

Eastern Hemlock Windthrow (*Tsuga canadensis*). Pellston, Michigan.
Glass-plate collodion.