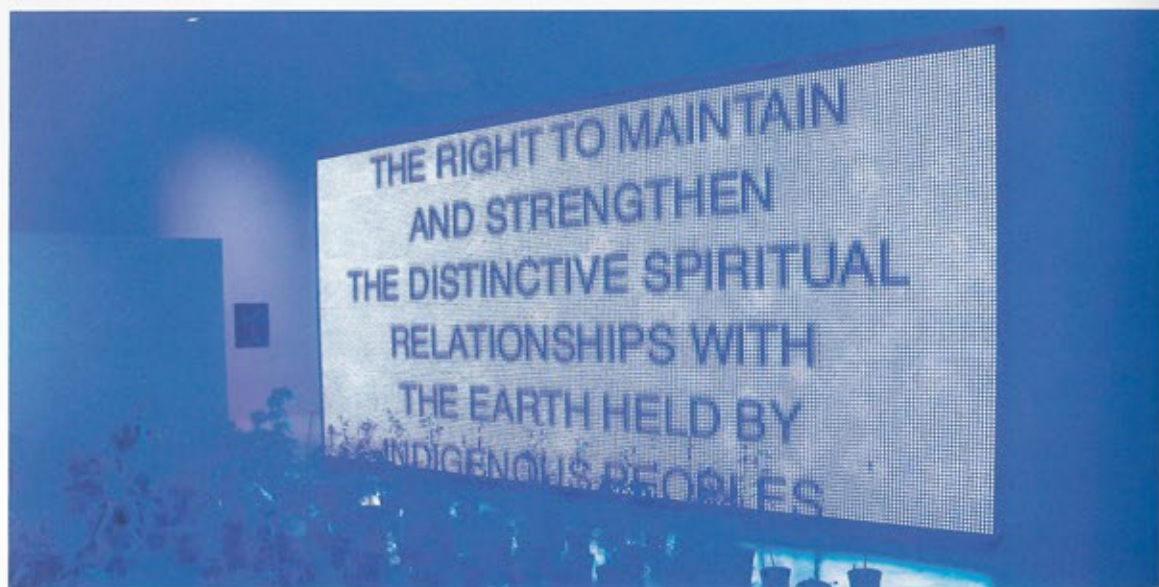


EXHIBITION REVIEW

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PUBLIC STUDIO, WHAT WE LOSE IN METRICS

Curated by Emelie Chhangur and Philip Monk,
Art Gallery of York University, Toronto,
13 April–19 June 2016

No longer simply places of intrigue and enchantment, forests have become increasingly integrated into the market system. Forests are mapped and analyzed to determine how much timber can be extracted from each square yard, or converted into clearings in order to meet other consumer demands, such as for grazing or plantations. In the less-frequent instance of re-forestation, the motivation is often future harvesting, which emphasizes replanting only the most profitable species, laying waste to wildlife and biodiversity. Public Studio's *What We Lose in Metrics* (2016) asked what is lost when forests are commodified. While the works included a number of video, installation, and built architectural components, the artists nevertheless transformed the gallery into a cohesive exhibition that emphasized an immersive experience.

Visitors entered the exhibition through a disorienting black corridor with a mesh ceiling scattered with tree branches. Faint lighting created silhouettes that gradually changed colour. Reaching the gallery space was a relief, though the comfort was short-lived. The gallery featured two towering works: *Our Occupations a Breath of Wind* (2016), a floor-to-ceiling video projection of a clearing in a forest, and a large wooden relief of an archetypal cabin constructed of raw sheets of plywood. The simple material and form of the cabin vexed the video of the forest clearing, making manifest the typically out-of-sight process of logging, lumber production, and construction between these two works. The calm of the clearing was disrupted by the reminder of plywood's disquieting origin. While a cabin in the woods can be a symbol of bravery and self-reliance, as in Thoreau's *Walden*, it can also be a symbol of evil, as in *Little Red Riding Hood*. This tension between tranquillity and a sense of vulnerability continued throughout *What We Lose in Metrics*.

Continuing deeper into the exhibition one discovered that the other walls of the cabin cut through the gallery wall into the adjoining space. Inside, this

work titled *The Darkness Between Lives* (2016) featured a black-and-white video of clips from films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Godzilla*, *Avatar*, and *Rambo*. The scenes, each taking place in a wooded location, progressed in rapid succession. A dizzying sequence of Hollywood tropes depicted the wilderness as a violent and threatening place. While the video had no distinct narrative, there was an overarching patriarchal power dynamic linking the scenes, where men were portrayed as courageous or hawkish and women as timid prey. By exploiting these persistent filmic stereotypes, the artists offered a critical reflection on the contemporary relationship to the forest, where "man" represents the colonizing force that seeks to dominate "mother nature." The exhibition's didactic material described the forests in the films as settings for the hunter and the hunted, an interpretation that resonated with my reading of the gendered dimension of the video.

While *Our Occupations a Breath of Wind* and *Darkness Between Lives* together explored the tension between tranquillity and vulnerability in the forest, *Everything Is One* (2016) expressed a tension between different value systems. In collaboration with Diana Beresford-Kroeger, a botanist whose writing served as one impetus for the exhibition, the artists scattered dozens of individually potted saplings throughout the gallery.¹ A massive LED billboard provided the plants with sufficient light for their survival and growth. The billboard, which typically functions as a platform for consumption by projecting advertisements to motorists, was thus appropriated as a support for plant life, and a platform for a text by Haida lawyer Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson that scrolled across the LED screen. Written for this exhibition, *Rights of Nature* articulated a constitution that embraced broad ecological concerns and accounted for the environmental rights of both humanity and the rest of nature.

While the exhibition focused on forests specifically, *What We Lose in Metrics* also participated in the emerging discourse of the Anthropocene, which attempts to highlight both the significance and urgency of the present ecological moment. The "forest" in the exhibition could easily be interpreted as a stand-in for the rest of nature, as the economic reductionism



FIGS. 1-2 Public Studio, *What We Lose in Metrics* (2016). Installation views. Photos: Cheryl O'Brien. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of York University.

and unfettered expansion of global capitalism sees no boundaries. As the long-held notion of what Jason Moore calls "cheap nature" continues to obscure the true cost of the systematic exploitation of the environment and of certain groups, *What We Lose in Metrics* opened up a vital space for thinking through humanity's extractive relationship with nature.² The pervasive "othering" of nature—a product of Enlightenment thought—has long provided justification for this exploitation while devaluing forms of knowledge that recognize the inextricable intertwining of nature and culture. Through cinematic language, multimedia installations, and diverse representations of the forest, Public Studio drew attention to the short-sightedness of current paradigms of value and offered a critical reflection on society's vulnerable and complex relationship with nature.

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1 See Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *Arboretum America: A Philosophy of the Forest* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), and *The Global Forest: Forty Ways Trees Can Save Us* (New York: Viking, 2010).
2 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).