

The Forest is the Museum

IMAGE 1 (David Littler)

David Littler, an artist who worked with at Fermynwoods on several projects, said no idea comes about as an isolated thought, separate from the context we are working in, but is the result of a collaboration with present thinking.

In a similar spirit, the idea and name of this project was intuitive rather than the result of a conscious process, James Steventon has likened curating to being an artist and occasionally I agree with him

The Forest Is The Museum came about as a result of 8 years of walking and working in different parts of Rockingham Forest; alongside a wide range of artists, communities and experts, who all brought their own personal perspectives on the woods.

My ongoing interest in curating and working with contemporary art and artists is to draw connections between art and everyday life, how one influences or mirrors the other and what that means to us as observers or participants. Being invited to speak at today's event gave me the opportunity to reflect on the conceptual validity of comparing a forest with a museum.

IMAGE 2 (Ash Tree)

The International Council of Museums defines the Museum as a *permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment* (this was possibly a translation)

They also reflect on a wider context for museological activities, such as:

- *Natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites... that acquire, conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment;*
- *Institutions holding collections of and displaying live specimens of plants and animals; And*
- *Entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources;*

So in literal terms, the display of live specimens within a museum context happens for a specific purpose; to provide material evidence for conservation, communication, research, education and enjoyment.

As we all know, modern and contemporary art is well known for repurposing everyday objects, by using this title we have repurposed the forest so that it becomes a museum because we say it is.

But there are also many ways in which the activities taking place within ancient woodlands replicate museological activities, due to their longevity and lack of disturbance.

IMAGE 3 (Active Ingredient)

Fineshade Wood is part of the ancient Rockingham Forest.

Ancient Woodland is defined as *land that has shown a continuity of woodland cover* since at least the year 1600 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and since 1750 in Scotland (the different dates are due to the dates of the first reliable mapping of the woodlands).

There are 4 different categories; and Fineshade contains areas of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland and Plantation on an Ancient Woodland Site.

Around 19% of the UK's woodland area is defined as Ancient Woodland¹, which equates to just over 2% of the UK's land area

- Ancient woodlands contain highly diverse communities of plants and animals, in fact 80% of land diversity is held within forests.

The oak tree is the most diverse plant in the UK, due to its size and longevity; and one oak tree hosts a collection of 2,000 species of fungi and 300 species of lichen, providing nutrients, moisture and access to sunlight, in a sense caring for and conserving its collection.

In a similar way, soils in ancient woodlands preserve distinct species and natural ecological processes because they remain undisturbed, providing an underground store.

- In addition, soil and ancient trees are also important carbon stores and are living archives that document and reveal information about historical environmental conditions.

During a project with Active Ingredient at Fineshade, we learned that Carbon Dioxide was only measured and recorded from the 1950s. So to reconstruct the constitution of the climate before then, and estimate the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere, scientists analysed core samples from the trunks of mature trees

- Ancient trees can also be classed as archaeological relicts in their own right, due to the effects of human activity on their age and structure – eg Edwina Fitzpatrick's project, *The Archive of the Trees* looked at the effects of pollution and wounds on trees.

In terms of the specific cultural value of trees, during a talk at the Sainsbury Centre, Edwina Fitzpatrick said that images of the Haywain were put up in the trenches during WW1 to remind the soldiers what they were fighting for.

¹ In the 1980s, the Nature Conservancy Council, as it was (now the National Forest Inventory), instigated the Ancient Woodland Inventory

- The classification of both trees and objects can have far reaching consequences. At Fineshade, the Forestry Commission, under constant pressure from government to increase earned income, sought to build lodges in the north area of the Wood to increase tourism². The local Friends of Fineshade worked with experts to identify the important species found in the forest and planning permission was denied. Since then the area has been reclassified by Natural England as Ancient or Semi-Natural Woodland, which will prevent any future plans to build on the site. The reclassification was the result of researching old maps and observational studies, similar to the research carried out when accessioning and deaccessioning objects.

IMAGE 4 (Graeme Miller)

I mentioned that part of a museum's purpose is to communicate and educate, sharing knowledge and resources.

We have recently become more aware that a forest is so much more than a collection of trees and that they communicate for the purpose of conservation and protection.

When we took a view from below of the way trees moved, through an installation by Graeme Miller³ we noticed that some trees swayed back and forth, others in a circular motion, but none of them touched at the top. They were clearly communicating above ground to avoid knocking into each other.

However, last year research was published that discussed a subterranean communication network. Evidence gathered from around the world clearly showed that beneath every forest and wood there is a complex underground web of roots, fungi and bacteria that connects trees and plants to one another.

This has been nicknamed the Wood Wide Web.

It is a symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi that allows plants to communicate with one another to share knowledge and resources. Studies have shown that this network can share resources such as sugar, carbon, phosphorus, nitrogen, and water and an older tree that is dying will pass nutrients to younger trees or saplings. The network also allows plants to send warnings to one another. Eg If a plant is under attack from aphids it will inform a nearby plant so it can raise its defences before the aphids reach it.

Until recently scientists had assumed that each plant only communicated with its own species—but studies at the University of British Columbia have shown that mycorrhizal networks connect hundreds of trees across different species. Beneath a 30 m square plot of Douglas fir, they found that one tree was linked to 47 others.

It has been known for some time that plants communicate above ground by means of airborne hormones to share information, so that other plants can increase their defences.

² In 2012

³ Track, Lyveden New Bield, as part of Encounters

But the underground network is a much more precise form of communication in terms of both its source and recipient.

As a result of this new understanding, questions are being asked around whether a forest should be considered as a single superorganism, or organisation in human terms.

IMAGE 5 (Simon Heijdens)

There is also an interesting overlap between the relationships visitors have with museum collections and forests, which connects with Abigail and Lala's residency and resulting exhibition *Intellectual Property*.

The notion and significance of ownership is a vital one for both museums and forests. There are currently some very challenging questions being raised around the ownership and repatriation of objects in many national Museums, including the collection of Indigenous Australian art, the Benin bronzes and the Parthenon Sculptures, that are part of the British Museum's collection. Who owns what are very complex and politically charged issues, but it is clear that it is a matter of public interest and deep engagement.

This depth of feeling was in evidence in 2011 when the government proposed a bill that would allow it to sell off the forests managed by the Forestry Commission, which was eventually scrapped after more than half a million people signed the 38 Degrees' petition.

The sense of loss of both trees and valuable cultural objects has been made tangible by artists. They have used 3d printers to recreate objects destroyed by ISIS⁴, and have invited the public to donate books to refill a Baghdad library⁵.

Likewise Anya Gallaccio recently installed a sculpture of a London Plane tree in the park near the Whitworth in Manchester replacing one that had died. When the Council's Cube was built in nearby Corby, the space needed to create the building was far larger than the footprint of the building and many trees were cut down. The trees were part of Hazel and Thoroughsale Wood, which is the largest urban woodland in Europe. On the first anniversary of the building's opening Simon Heijdens projected this work, called Tree, onto the façade of the building to highlight the impact of the building on our environment.

Through learning more about trees and forests and how we relate to them, in a similar way to the objects we treasure and study in museums, we learn more about our history, our place in the world, and the development of a more sustainable society, which is a key to our future.

Yasmin Canvin, January 2020

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⁴ Artist Morehshin Allahyari has spent the last year working with experts in art history and museum staff to gather information on several statues destroyed by ISIS and recreate them using 3D printing and downloading.

⁵ Wafaa Bilal as part of an exhibition taking place in at the Art Gallery of Windsor, in Ontario