

# ACTING WITH TREES

↳ Anna Colin IN CONVERSATION WITH Thierry Boutonnier



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ANNA COLIN Let's start this conversation with how we met. It was at the Valence School of Art and Design (ESAD), in France, at the end of January 2023, where you were working and where I was giving a talk about the relation, both fruitful and fraught, between curating and horticulture in the context of *Weather Report*, a research project initiated by the art historian Johanna Renard and the filmmaker Florence Lazard. While I'm very new to this field, you have been working with arboriculture in your art practice for the past fifteen years or so, in particular in the urban realm through the creation of long-term collective planting projects, where you position trees as 'co-habitants'.

On the way back to Lyon, you introduced me to the book *La Troisième Voie du Vivant (The Third Way of the Living)* by the biologist Olivier Hamant<sup>1</sup>. Hamant sees in the characteristics and behaviors of biological systems models to rethink, for example, socio-economics and organizations in a time of resilience and necessary de-growth. He describes the components of living organisms as "imperfect", "sober", "under-optimal", and "counter-performing", yet able to remember for multiple generations. The idea of robustness, in contrast to performance, which Hamant puts forward in his book, is one you wanted to discuss in this dialogue. How do you understand that term? How does it connect to your arboricultural art practice? Or perhaps put in a more roundabout way, how can a situated understanding of trees and plants inform a public art practice?

THIERRY BOUTONNIER I understand robustness as an expression of our relationship with radical otherness, to paraphrase the botanist and biologist Francis Hallé. This is a simple way of describing what I have observed through the art of arboriculture. The robustness of living things emerges from variability, heterogeneity, slowness, delays, errors, randomness, redundancies and inconsistencies. Robustness is the path to

<sup>1</sup> Olivier Hamant, *La Troisième Voie du Vivant*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2022.

viability. As Olivier Hamant puts it: “One could thus define sub-optimality as the ability to evolve over time by using internal weaknesses, not as problems to be circumvented, but as a springboard for adaptability”<sup>2</sup>.

I’ve been working with trees for a long time. I tend to say that I don’t sculpt dead wood, but that the form follows the living wood with people. In this way, social plasticity takes form in urban tree nurseries. It gives rise to a diplomacy of the tree. Arboricultural art means harnessing the power of plants, extending the capacity to act, stimulating communities and overcoming injunctions – first and foremost, the injunction to achieve results. These complex practices remind us of our ignorance and urge us to be humble. So we have no choice but to maintain our curiosity and care for the Earth’s living creatures.

Arboricultural art gives form in the sense of the tree. In other words, the visible aspect is the fruit of complex interactions in which authority is shared with what helps us breathe. “We” act with trees. Arboriculture is the cultivation of trees. Most of the trees that make up our forests, hedgerows, and orchards are the result of thousands of years of experimentation and selection. Arboriculture brings together knowledge and practices handed down by different tree-dwelling species, including hominids, which predate sapiens by more than 7 million years. Living in trees, eating their fruit, growing their seeds, selecting leaves for one’s medicine cabinet, making arches for one’s bed – these are fundamental attempts by beings to live and survive in their environment. Inhabiting trees, being welcomed, inviting oneself, whatever the shape of our tables, the height of our frames... we continue this art of commensality. Thus, arboricultural art inspires many other art forms: from architecture to gastronomy, from circus to literature; its apparent, cryptic or filigree ramifications are infinite. My aim is to share these virtues with members of the public through practice. Is transmitting through the practice of a gesture a form of care?



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AC I would say it is safe to agree that virtuous transmission is care. Since you are raising the topic, among other things I have (like many cultural producers today) been grappling with in my work are precisely the ideas of care, legacy, and maintenance, which have been used and misused for some time now and are all too often misaligned with the everyday practices of cultural producers and art institutions, both mainstream and alternative. These ideas have a very different reality whether you are working on a garden, an allotment or a micro-forest, or are developing a public, participatory art project, looking after an art collection (or a herbarium!), or sowing the seeds of a collective, an organization, an institution. Whether or not we agree with these terms, their implications and their misuses, in these diverse contexts, care, legacy, and maintenance all connect to the broader notion of time. As the sociologist of time Barbara Adam puts it: “a vast range of time-spans ‘co-exist’ simultaneously” in the so-called ‘natural’ environment, extending “from the imperceptibly fast to the unimaginably slow, covering processes that last from nanoseconds to millennia”<sup>3</sup>. I think that, ultimately, if I have turned to gardening, it is not only to change my relationship to time (and the relentless clock and calendar time associated with working in

2 Ibid, p. 112.

3 Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 128.

and with art institutions), but also to be forced to let go of assumptions, to lose control, and to learn the much-needed art of patience and waiting. Is time robust?

TB If we talk about “commodity time”, about cutting costs, maximizing profits, about the quest for efficiency to optimize every moment... then our time is limited and we are missing out on life. If we are talking about *soft watches* and dendro-chronology, then the arrow of time is spinning. Relationships with radical otherness are infinite, and these life trajectories open up mixed durations, inviting us to a robust co-presence. Time measured by the rhythm of our needle-beats is an inversion of the experience of the living and the thickness of the present. Donna Haraway and Kim Hendrickx teach us to think about active pasts and possible futures in a thick present. So the time of our atomic clocks and our ways of ‘connecting’ to these injunctions of efficiency is not as robust as that of connecting to the unexpected. It’s a question of weaving ourselves into feedback loops to make space and



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time more complex. A living soil expresses well the thickness of the present and its deployment in space. Working with trees invites us to mingle with this thickness through touch and proprioception. They help us translate, pass on or invent names for these invisible beings who animate us through their proximity. It is as if the breath of our words became entangled in these bushy encounters. Through collective works such as *Prenez racines !*, *Eau de rose*, *Appel d’air*... we sense how relationships involve us and induce forms that are not really what we expected... Perhaps this is the stewardship of these tree-like presences: inducing the collective. An unspeakable difference between an *in-tension* of the plant towards light and the shaded *intention* of humans.

AC One of the specificities of the projects that you have just named is that they are mostly started collectively from the ground up (although they might at times be the result of a commission initiated by urban planners), and that they do not bear connections to art institutions. If art institutions – and by this I mean, possibly a bit simplistically, non-agile structures that might involve brick and mortar, a collection, having to bring a large number of people through the doors and be omnipresent on social media and the press to justify funding – are to take part in the debate and action around Earth care and the climate emergency, which they are clearly keen to do, then what part can and should they play, if any? Do we need ecocentric curatorial and production agencies? Or are we better off relying on grassroots, local, interdisciplinary initiatives and networks to best support the type of practices, thinking and action that you have been describing? Can art institutions join in the exercise of co-presence?

TB I’ll start with “*Prenez racines !*”, an urban tree nursery that was initiated in 2009 in a district, said to be peripheral, of the Lyon conurbation. Together with the Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture Laënnec Mermoz (a youth cultural center) and its artistic director Géraldine Lopez, we proposed to local residents, who were experiencing urban renovation works for the last seven years, to choose trees and plant them, first temporarily and then definitely, in their neighborhood.





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Thanks to the diplomacy of these trees, we have smoothed over the angles of real estate, introducing a sympathetic relationship with the earth. In this way, we collectively conceived and planted an orchard at the foot of a 750 m<sup>2</sup> edifice. From 2009 to 2015, these trees and the local inhabitants developed connections and to this day I am still in contact with them; in 2023, I was invited to join in for the festival “Vivant !” around artworks conceived by young adults in the district.

Since then, similar arboricultural workshops have flourished, as is the case of *Appel d'air*<sup>4</sup> in Nanterre, in the framework of commission emanating from the Société du Grand Paris (which looks after the infrastructural interlinking of Paris with its surrounding suburbs), to populate the forecourts of train stations with trees under the care of local residents. We chose to work with a particular tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*, and have been getting to know its vigor, robustness and the capacity of its roots in the face of pollution, water stress, ... Often, with the inhabitants who become co-authors of these forms of life, we surround ourselves with scientists to guide our observations. This was the case of *Eau de Rose* (Rose Water), where we collated fragrant and flavorful hydrolats from rose bushes planted in different districts. With LB-Vpam, the Laboratory of Vegetal Biotechnologies Applied to Aromatic and Medicinal plants in Saint-Étienne, we worked with chromatography to observe different olfactory signatures in the soil of Mermoz, Vaulx-en-Velin, Givors, Gerland, Rillieux-la-Pape... So, whether it is through air or soil quality, rose perfumes or crop trees, the participants get acquainted with a singular common.

To go back to your question about the role of institutions, these can have different missions, such as acquiring art objects and conserving them, or maintaining eco-labels such as national parks to look after cultural ecosystems of reference. In the face of ecological and technological disruptions, which are plunging into the great acceleration of the Anthropocene (or Plutocene) and its tragedies, whose disasters are so staggering

that we lack the words to describe them, the ‘institutions’ (which know how to make themselves heard by the most powerful) need to organize discussions with all sections of the population in the place where they are located. We need to question the propaganda at work, which consists of fabricating (social and ecological) denial. Institutions must not contribute to the appropriation and erasure of the works of humanity or the destruction of complex relationships with the living. What’s more, the cultural industries that contribute to chauvinistic, virilist, negationist, racist and ecocidal visions, such as the digital, film, sports or foodporn (= junk food) industries, should no longer receive any support from public institutions.

Finally, as you have intuited, I think that relations in an act of neighborhood – where artists act the most in the place where they are with the greatest diversity of alterity for indeterminate durations – transform these same neighbors in their relations to the milieu. These collective bricolages give us a capacity to make do and perhaps transform our relationships with our surroundings in a more lasting way. By trying to suspend time, aren’t institutions actually accelerating it? Aren’t they also helping to derealize the world? And is neighborliness possible in a world of massification of asymmetrical interactions?



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#### ↳ Thierry Boutonnier

is an arboricultural artist who sets up urban tree nurseries together with citizens to transform our relationship with ecosystems. Boutonnier works with neighbourhoods, local councils, and trees. He also works with COAL, Coalition for Cultural Ecology, a European organisation founded in 2008. Backed by the power of plants, the collective projects he has developed include *Et in Arcadia ego* (Lausanne Jardin, 2009), *Prenez racines!* (Lyon, since 2009), *Appel d’air* (Grand Paris, since 2016), *Eau de rose* (Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art, since 2013), and *Biodynamiser le parking* (far° Nyon, since 2019). He has exhibited in France and internationally, and his articles have appeared in *Les carnets du paysage*, *Sociologies*, and *Observatoire des politiques culturelles*, among others.

#### ↳ Anna Colin

is a curator, educator, researcher, and gardener. Her practice and research are engaged with social practice, alternative forms of pedagogy and modes of instituting, and critical and participatory landscaping. Anna was a co-founder and director of Open School East, an independent art school and community space in London, then Margate (2013-20), whose experience she is recounting in a forthcoming book published by La Villa Arson, Nice (2023). Colin trains in horticulture and permaculture design, works as a lecturer on the MFA Curating at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she is collaborating with Ros Gray on the development of an Art Research Garden, and is co-curator, with Camille Richert, of *Chaleur humaine*, the second edition of the Dunkirk Art & Industry Triennale (2023-24).