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Exhibition review

## 'Year of tilting': Gleaning the Leaning Xylarium

'Time, The Deer is in the Wood of Hallaig:  
An Exhibition on Forests, History, and Social and  
Environmental Memory' curated by Amy Cutler, The  
Belfry at St John on Bethnal Green, 6-11 June 2013

Featuring: The UCL Dendrochronology Lab; Gail Ritchie; Richard  
Skelton; Autumn Richardson; OOOMS; Peter Larkin; Carlea  
Holl-Jensen; Amy Cutler; Will Montgomery; Carol Watts and others.

Natalie Joelle



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*The girls a wood of birch trees  
Standing tall, with their heads bowed.*  
Sorley MacLean trans. by Seamus Heaney<sup>1</sup>

'TIME, THE DEER IS IN THE WOOD OF HALLAIG', insightfully curated by Amy Cutler, juxtaposes fine art with archival photography, rare poetic tree texts and specimens of dendrochronology, 'the science of arranging events in the order of time by the comparative study of the annual growth rings in timber'.<sup>2</sup> Leaning on stands, easels, bureaus, and against walls, these arboreal artefacts form a

wondrous xylarium, or wood collection, which explores cultural expressions of time and memory in the forest.

Installed beneath the now-digitally-automated chimes of the beautiful belfry at St John on Bethnal Green, designed by Sir John Soane, the exhibition measures time through two forms of ring: audible and dendrochronological. Tree growth rings can be seen in massy core samples. The tree rings promise an index of seasons that exists uneasily under the rush of clock time. Yet historical scars in the face of the slanted oak section, set at five past, seem to anticipate the shock of the bell's interruption on the hour (Figure 1):



Figure 1

The wounded cross-section becomes a diagrammatic motif for memorialising the trauma of those lost in battle in Gail Ritchie's *For The Fallen*, a drawing series of tree slices, themselves sliced into the paper in sharp 6H pencil (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: Gail Ritchie, *For The Fallen*, pencil on Hahnemühle paper, 30 x 30 cm, 2009-13.

Cutler's curatorial approach stimulatingly tilts the resonances of the dendrochronological slice several ways: tree rings are also suggested lexically in *Relics* by Richard Skelton and Autumn Richardson. Concentric circles of text chart linguistic change in the names of lost tree genera (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> The grooves of type that document phonological change are reminiscent of the gramophone record: the etymological memory ascribed to each tree recalls an obsolescent technology.



Figure 3: Richard Skelton and Autumn Richardson, *Relics* (Cumbria: Corbel Stone Press, 2013)

The notion of the tree as a recording technology is explored punningly in OOOMS's designer memory sticks. Part USB, part polished wood, the devices become a group of memory stick figures, placed in a playful anthropomorphic series (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> While much of the exhibit's archive of wooden artefacts is positioned on easels and bookstands to lean back as if in partial resistance from us, these figural pieces of wood wittily seem available to evoke an archival backup of us.



Figure 4: OOOMS, Wooden USB Stick, 8 x 2 cm, 2009

The wooden backup of memory is, to adopt a neologism from Peter Larkin's arborescent *Rings Resting the Circuit*, often a 'back-clusion': a word that does not resolve into inclusion or occlusion.<sup>6</sup> The externalisation of memory, a backing up, however inclusive, to the spinney, is perhaps complicit with the occlusion of internal memory, such as the memory of the spine. Memory logged in the forest generates its own backlog of occlusions: no log without obstruction or block. Indeed, rather than a celebration of woodland as sites of reliable logs of our memories, or of firmly rooted recollections, the exhibition often investigates the vulnerability of forest memory to blazes or improper felling.

The accident of remembrance is performed curatorially by a caption that at first appears to be missing its object. In fact, it documents the remaining wooden slats of St John on Bethnal Green following a late-nineteenth-century fire. Cutler lends light to the wood we otherwise would not see for 'her' trees: the walls become an exhibit in their own right (Figure 5).<sup>7</sup>

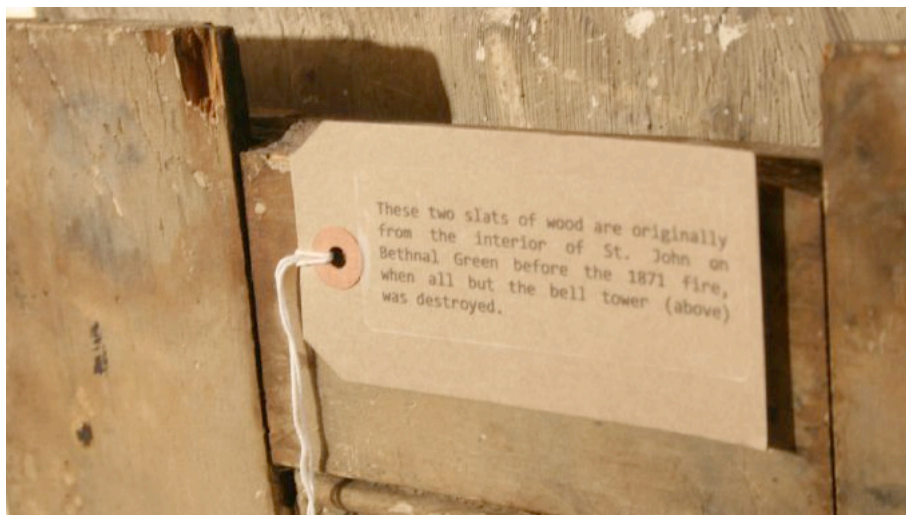


Figure 5

Carlea Holl-Jensen's *The Hollow* is a handmade book that conceals part of its narrative between uncut bolts and folded quires. The work is unavailable for reading unless dissected, just as the age of a tree becomes legible only when felled. 'The trees are just as tall as I remember, and they all seem to be leaning down to peer over my shoulder', the text begins.<sup>8</sup> The figure of leaning suggests the modern train passenger's space-encroaching reading of another's news; the attempt to access words at a remove. *The Hollow's* attempted readers share this sense of trespass.

Trespass is also part of the aesthetic of the exhibition. In the low-lit space, a canopy of tree-pieces lean down over visitors' shoulders as much as we lean inquisitively towards them. No forest clearing offers an unobstructed view, nor are there more landscaped prospects that offer the spectator scope to scrutinize without themselves seeming to come under scrutiny. Like *The Hollow*, the form of the exhibition stimulatingly performs the opacity and density of its forest subject. Cutler trusts the viewer to meet the challenge of concealment with commitment: to incline themselves as required by the tight space in order to cut their own path. The risk is that dim conditions and the pressure of proximity diminish some small press works. The interesting ambiguity of whether the reading stand or table display placement of works alongside *The Hollow* do in fact invite opening to read is also the logistical complication that these texts may be subject to either too brief a view or mishandled.

The inclusion of several works that explore Epping Forest, a concession in the decline of common land from which firewood could be gathered, encourages the viewer to reflect on the extent of public access to forest memory.<sup>9</sup> Use of paper luggage tags as the medium for the labels reminds visitors that the collection items are somebody else's property in transit: particularly as Cutler occasionally allows her text to compete with former catalogue descriptions. The artefacts seem evacuated, displaced from their origins. Lightly attached, the tags neither impose coherence, force agreement, nor completely immerse the pieces in the space. Rather than allowing the belfry to hold the artefacts in common, the luggage tags, often leaning on their pieces, hold something back. Cutler's own chapbook *Nostalgia Forests* (2013) collages diagrams from dendrochronology manuals with text from Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* to suggest the leaning of trees as an abstraction of the affective experience of paradox.<sup>10</sup> A figure that documents a tree's 'year of tilting' is juxtaposed with Ricoeur's words 'we have been forced to agree that that which is | not in a way is' (Figure 6).<sup>11</sup>

The 'year of tilting' is buckling under forced agreement, an arboreal contusion that traces the excess between 'is' and 'not'; or it is resistance to forced agreement, a tilt away from the discipline of this logic. For Cutler, the dendrochronological tilt is a cartography of cognition: a mental mapping of neurological dendrites in the experience of a 'difficulty' that hounds us, that leaves us stumped.

The tilt of Cutler's xylarium spatialises the tension of the act of collection in time: an arboreal archive without aspiring to permanence but, in the words of Beckett's recollector Molloy, of 'leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away'.<sup>12</sup> Tilt is also acoustic: Will Montgomery's enquiry into the 'sounding potential of trees', in collaboration with Carol Watts, makes tree tilt audible in low, resonant creaks.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 6: Will Montgomery and Carol Watts, *T.R.E.E.*, handmade book and audio recording, 2013

The untied cords of the labels, leaning upon their artefacts, remain open to other re-recordings, to other patterns of tree recording. Future installations of the current collection could productively continue to explore the form of the arboreal exhibition with the addition of judicious defoliation and dells; of spaces to support individual pieces that could otherwise be compromised by the overarching aesthetic of a woodland space slanted by shadows. Critical questions about the potential ecological or difficulties of forest memories, such as anthropocentrism or externalisation, would also be a welcome addition to the strong curatorial material on this excellent collection. The fascination of these tilting trees demands scope to branch out into new locations.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sorley MacLean and Seamus Heaney, 'Hallaig by Sorley MacLean, Translated by Seamus Heaney', *The Guardian*, 30 November 2002, section The Saturday Poem <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/nov/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview35> [accessed 18 July 2013]. The exhibition takes its title from MacLean's 1952 Gaelic poem, which appears as part of the exhibit in Heaney's recent English translation. I am grateful to Sarah Terkaoui, George Ttoouli, Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, Thomas White and Fiona Johnstone for comments on an earlier version of this piece and to Amy Cutler for permission to use catalogue images. All photographs © Amy Cutler, June 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> 'dendrochronology', *n*, *OED*. More information about the aim and scope of exhibition, including details of individual works, is available in the comprehensive online catalogue: Amy Cutler, 'Time, the Deer, Is in the Wood of Hallaig: An Exhibition on Forests, History, and Social and Environmental Memory', 2013 <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/> [accessed 10 July 2013], hereafter 'Time, the Deer'.
- <sup>3</sup> Gail Ritchie, *For The Fallen*, pencil on Hahnemühle paper, 30 x 30 cm, 2009-13. See 'Time, the deer', <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/17/test-post-2/>

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- 4 Richard Skelton and Autumn Richardson, *Relics* (Cumbria: Corbel Stone Press,  
2013), see 'Time, the deer', <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/richard-skelton-and-autumn-richardsons-relics/>
- 5 OOOMS, Wooden USB Stick, 8 x 2 cm, 2009, See 'Time, the deer',  
<http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/wooden-memory-sticks/>
- 6 Peter Larkin, *Rings Resting the Circuit* (Willowdale, ON: The Gig, 2004), see 'Time,  
the deer', <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/peter-larkins-rings-resting-the-circuit/>
- 7 'Time, the deer', <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/wood-preserved-from-fire-at-st-john-on-bethnal-green/>
- 8 Carlea Holl-Jensen, *The Hollow*, handmade book, [n.d.], see 'Time, the deer',  
<http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/carlea-holl-jensens-the-hollow/>
- 9 Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, *Terms of Use: Negotiating the Jungle of the Intellectual Commons* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 28–9.
- 10 Amy Cutler, *Nostalgia Forest* (Norfolk: Oystercatcher Press, 2013).
- 11 Amy Cutler, *Nostalgia Forest*, see 'Time, the deer',  
<http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/amy-cutlers-nostalgia-forest/>
- 12 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 38.
- 13 Will Montgomery and Carol Watts, *T.R.E.E.*, handmade book and audio recording,  
2013, see 'Time, the deer', <http://timethedeer.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/will-montgomery-and-carol-watts-t-r-e-e/>