

PLEIN AIR

THE BREATH OF TREES



Tim Collins and Reiko Goto

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PLEIN AIR | *The Breath of Trees*

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PLEIN AIR phase 2, fieldwork with a large elm tree. Union Terrace gardens, Aberdeen Scotland, 2010.

Introduction

Tim Collins

Artist and researcher

We believe that art does not fix things, solve problems, or predict change. It has a very particular kind of agency, one that creates space for comment and discussion, producing surprising changes to extant concepts and experiences. It is within this realm of human discourse, related to aesthetic perception and value, that art has its most inspirational and significant impact.

Anthropogenic climate change has its root causes (and responsibilities) in centuries of greenhouse gases emitted by nations that have benefited from the first and second wave of industrial development. Climate change is a driving force in the social and economic changes of this current century. One way these changes can be understood is through a narrative of global carbon dioxide data and a record of forest loss. Trees are the largest living things on earth. Forests are one aspect of the range of approaches necessary to sequester carbon with the potential to reduce the impacts of climate change.

Trees have been a topic of creative inquiry for us for over twenty years. We began by thinking about forests and river corridors as public spaces. These interests mixed research in art and science for 'Nine Mile Run' (1997-2000),

and then expanded to a regional planning scale with extensive computer map analysis for '3 Rivers 2nd Nature' (2002-2005). These bodies of work were completed while research fellows in the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Upon moving to the UK, we wanted to refocus and think about aesthetic, empathic, and ethical relationships with specific trees. The results, 'PLEIN AIR | *The Breath of Trees*' and 'PLEIN AIR | *Silva Datum Musica*,' are discussed at length on the following pages.

This catalogue opens with 'Upon Meeting a Tree' by Wallace Heim. She begins by reflecting on how she might greet a tree, what it means to recognize a tree as a being that is worthy of attention, one with perhaps some potential to return that interest. Wallace then carefully considers the experience of PLEIN AIR and attempts to secure some meaningful relations through a series of performative reactions with the work, while also considering the philosophical implications of interrelationship with a tree.

The second article, 'Aesthetic Humility in PLEIN AIR', is by Emily Brady. She considers the artists' intentions, the experience of the work, and its effect on other people in the room. Writing about empathic attention, focus, and the boundaries of aesthetic contemplation, she suggests that the work draws the viewer outwards, toward the tree, then inwards, toward the self, creating an imaginative bridge across the gap between species. Emily closes with ideas about what cannot be known and the value of new ways to comprehend other species.

The third section, 'PLEIN AIR Plant Music,' is by Georg Dietzler. He describes the development of the recordings and gives a detailed account of the spatial

settings for the work in Cologne and Glasgow and their differing influences on the production of the sound. From his interest in bio-acoustic music, he offers insight about the quality and structure of the PLEIN AIR sound experience. He closes with thoughts about art, science, data, and the links to intuitive experience.

The last section of the catalogue includes 'PLEIN AIR | Trees and Empathy,' an illustrated history of the work that expands on previously published work and conference papers. Here, we set out our ideas about empathy, things-versus-beings, and the relationship between art, science, and perception. We also describe the four phases of the work, from the earliest days struggling with the sensors and technology, followed by the effort to conceptualize and craft a portable outdoor easel. The third and fourth phases were about refining the voice used to sonify the tree, attending to pitch, timbre, and intensity to get at connotative meaning. We recount how we refined and tested the system through seminars and exhibitions. In our conclusion, we put our intentions for the work into context and consider the final round of refinement including the production of the vinyl LP album with Georg Dietzler.

The final section of the catalogue provides biographies of the people directly involved in the development of the final phases of the project. We will also provide a list of the names of those that worked with us throughout the project, after the biographies. We would like to express our appreciation to everyone that supported this effort throughout the years.

As we were finishing this catalogue, Reiko reflected on the many trees that are now part of our lives because of PLEIN AIR. Some we live with, some we visit. But they are always with us in ways we never expected when we began this artwork in 2008.

The Final Project Team, our Biographies

Collins & Goto Studio: Tim Collins and Reiko Goto have developed long-term, socially engaged environmental research (SEER) that examines the cultural meaning of semi-natural ancient forest: *Future Forest* (2013-present); *Sylva Caledonia* (2015); *Caledonian Decoy* (2017); PLEIN AIR: *The Ethical Aesthetic Impulse* (2010); *CO2 Edinburgh* (2013); *Sound of a Tree: Cologne* (2016); PLEIN AIR | *Live at Glasgow Botanic* (2017); *Nine Mile Run* (1997-2000); and *3 Rivers 2nd Nature* (2000-2005). Outputs include artworks, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, and publications that embrace an arts-led dialogue method of research-and-theory-informed public practice. They have worked with other artists, musicians, planners, communities, scientists, and technologists as well as historians and philosophers to realize work for over thirty years.

Sound Programmer: Chris Malcolm is a Scottish computer programmer and software developer with over twenty years of experience writing computer code with vector graphics, sound and interactive systems for industry clients. He also has an extensive background in experimental music developing innovative tools and instruments for studio and live performance. Malcolm is recognized within the electronic music scene for his use of retro-computers and consoles to generate unexpected interactive audio and visual experiences. The work with Collins & Goto Studio is driven by a curiosity about human relationships to technology as a tool and as an interface to bio-events. The PLEIN AIR system and software opens up new programming challenges and levels of expression not available with traditional electronic instruments and methods.

Producer: Georg Dietzler is a Cologne-based artist, author, curator, and consultant. He is recognized as an active producer of cross-disciplinary cultural projects, exhibitions, seminars and conferences, audio-visual concerts, media, dance, improv-theatre, and more. As a socio-political and conceptual artist with an international reputation, he works on ecological future visions linked to social and political change. His latest art work is a concept for an inner-city citizens' heirloom orchard, introduced at 'Ecovention Europe' at De Domijnen, in Sittard Netherlands in 2017.

Artist: Reiko Goto Collins was born in Japan and has lived in both the US and UK. She is a principal in the Collins & Goto Studio. She has been a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. She participates in an international climate change network, Council on the Uncertain Human Future, and is currently involved in the working group 'Living Organisms and Their Choices' at the University of Edinburgh. She is a distinguished research fellow at the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Artist: Tim Collins is from the US, an artist, author, and planner; a principal in the Collins & Goto Studio; and an honorary research fellow in the School of Social Science at the University of Aberdeen. He works across science, technology, and philosophy to develop projects related to nature, culture, and to changing ideas about ethical duty and public space. In 2017, he was on the development committee for the 'Art and Artists in Landscape Environment Research Today' seminar at the National Gallery in London. He currently serves on the board of directors for the Landscape Research Group and Glasgow Sculpture Studios.

Exhibitions and Publications

- 2017 PLEIN AIR | *Live at the Kibble Palace*. (exhibition). At The Kibble Palace, Glasgow Botanic Gardens. Glasgow, Scotland.
- Goto, R., Collins, T. 'Imagination and Empathy - Artists with Trees.' *In Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds*. Eds. Bastian, M., Jones, O., Roe, E. Oxford: Taylor and Francis.
- 2016 Collins, T., Goto, R. 'PLEIN AIR at Common Ground.' (conference presentation). For the *Creative Commons: Common ground*, UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, University of York. York, England.
- 2015 PLEIN AIR | *Sound of a Tree*. (exhibition). Curated by Georg Dietzler. At *Visual Sounds: Bioakustische Musik*, ON-Neue Musik Köln. Cologne, Germany.
- 2013 *Eden3: Trees are the Language of Landscape*. (exhibition). At Tent Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art. Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.
- Goto, R., Collins, T. 'Imagination and Empathy - Artists with Trees'. (conference presentation). At *Landscape and Imagination*, Uniscape. Paris, France.
- 2012 Goto, R. *Ecology and Environmental Art in Public Places, Talking Tree: Won't you take a minute and listen to the plight of nature?* Thesis (PhD). Robert Gordon University. Aberdeen, Scotland.
- 2011 Collins, T., Goto, R. 'Emancipation and Freedom: Art with Living Things, People and Place'. (conference presentation). At *Making Meaning and Context: A Radical Reconsideration of Arts Practice* Goddard College. Vermont, USA.
- Goto, R. *Calendar Variations*. (installation and performance). Curated by Prof A. Douglas and Prof K. Coessens. At Lang Byre Gallery, Woodend Barn. Banchory, Scotland, UK.
- 2010 PLEIN AIR | *The Ethical Aesthetic Impulse*. (exhibition). Curated by Angela Lennon. At Peacock Visual Arts. Aberdeen, Scotland.
- 2009 Collins, T. 'Eden3 and the Ethical Aesthetic Impulse'. (conference presentation). The Arts and Forestry Commission Conference, London, England.



PLEIN AIR | *Live AT The Kibble Palace*, Glasgow Botanic Gardens, 2017.



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