

Trees: Memory and Loss

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When the Whitworth was founded in 1889 it was the first English gallery in a park. Think of the Whitworth today and you will think of greenery, outdoor sculpture and trees. The architecture of the building yields to the landscape that surrounds it, beauty exists both inside and out with the branches of trees including London Plane, Ash and Cedar punctuating the silhouette of the building. The Whitworth's extensive collection of art and design includes many depictions of trees and landscape, from watercolours by J.W.M Turner, drawings by Walter Crane, and woodblock printed wallpapers of leaves by William Morris. To look at a tree is to look at living history. The dynamic, breathing organisms that inhabit Whitworth Park have gradually established themselves in the scenery of Manchester.

Anya Gallaccio is interested in the relationship between nature and culture, and uses natural materials and phenomena as the basis of her artworks. In her new commission for the Whitworth, Gallaccio took as her starting point the absence of a tree that once stood in Whitworth Park near what is now the café. The London Plane tree had unfortunately died and became unsafe; it was felled in 2014 before a major building redevelopment.

Gallaccio has chosen to respond to its loss in the second permanent sculptural commission of her career, reimagining the tree as a ghostly, negative form. The sculpture is a departure from the artists' usual practice and is created in polished stainless steel to emulate the window mullions of the Whitworth's Café in the Trees. Gallaccio is well known for working with natural materials and the process of deterioration, how organic substances moulder and rot away. "Some people find it repulsive, but I think it's quite beautiful and fascinating how things decay over time." ¹ The use of stainless steel allows the sculpture to reflect the surrounding park, its hard material softens into the landscape, it spookily drops in and out of view, and it is enduringly present but repeatedly dissolves. Its outline is obliterated by changes of light, it is the ghost of a tree and a memory of what once was.

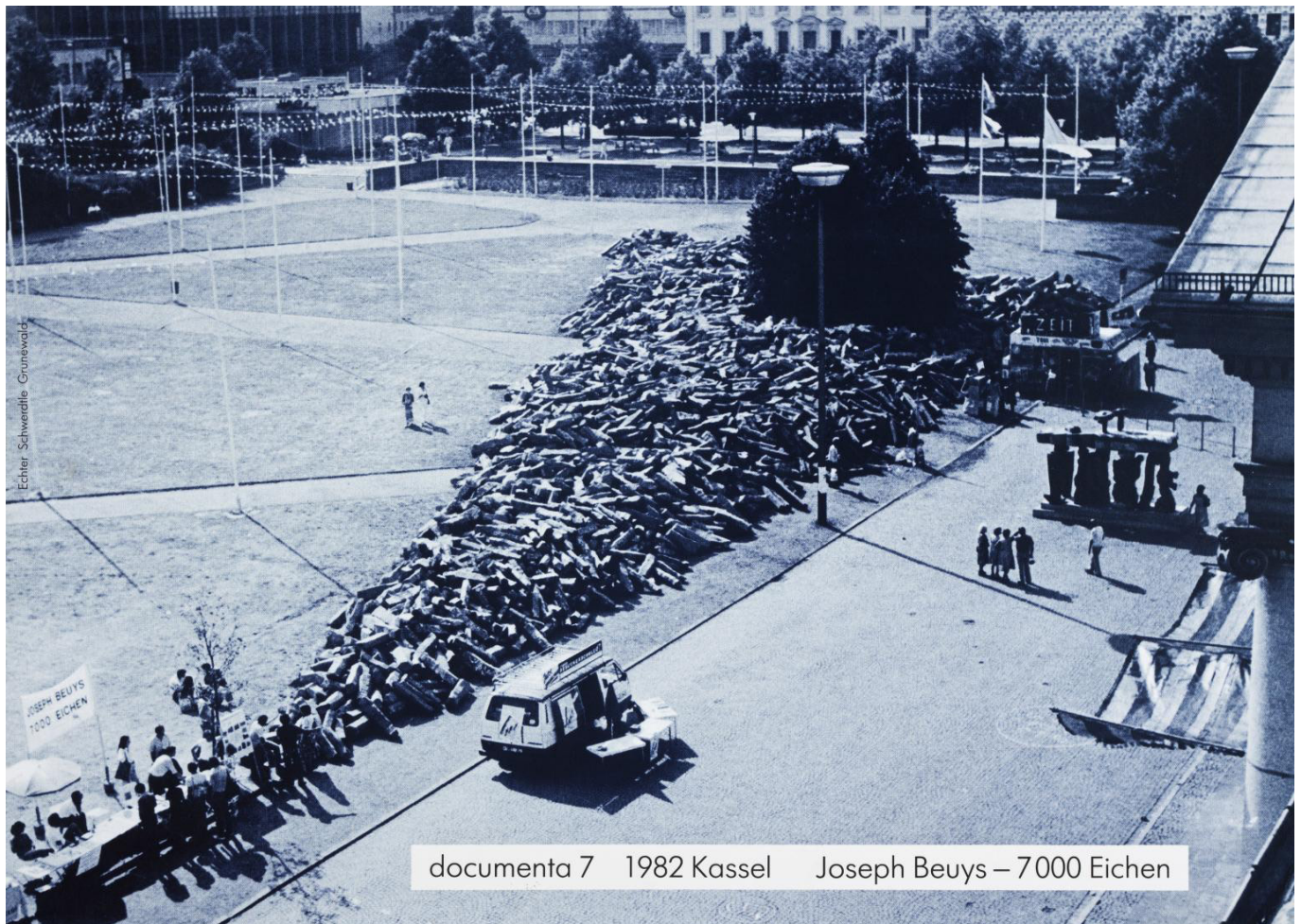
The idea of using unstable substances prone to degradation, and the creation of artwork in constant states of change was pioneered by German artist Joseph Beuys with his concept of Social Sculpture. His artwork *7000 Oaks (City Forestation Instead of City Administration)* was a project of Social Sculpture that had its origins in 1982 at Documenta 7. Documenta is an exhibition that takes place every five years in the German city Kassel. Social Sculpture was a practice developed by Beuys and looked at art and its potential to transform society. Over the course of several years, Beuys planted 7,000 oak trees throughout the city, each accompanied by a column of basalt, a stone that is volcanic in origin and seen by the artist as a direct link with the elemental and ancient energies of the earth. These oaks are now seen across the world through a succession of versions of the project.

"I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time." ²

His interest in trees and nature has its roots in Goethean science, the methodologies of which were developed by German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe took a phenomenological approach to understanding the world, looking at how human consciousness perceives reality through objects and events. Goethe aimed to understand nature through a process of participatory experience, using the senses and imagination to interact with trees and plants in an engaged and holistic way.

¹ Anya Gallaccio quoted in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art* - Bruce Altshuler, Princeton University Press, 2013 - Page 171

² Joseph Beuys quoted in *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945* - Claudia Mesch - I.B. Tauris, 2013 - Page 160



documenta 7 1982 Kassel Joseph Beuys – 7000 Eichen

7000 Oak Trees 1982 © DACS 2016. ARTIST ROOMS, Tate and The National Galleries of Scotland.

Beuys took Goethe's call to develop 'new organs of perception'³ and suggested that society should think about art and social issues as connected.

7000 Oaks was a project about green urban renewal, where art and ecology combine. The Whitworth is a green gallery set in a green urban park. The gallery's strategic plan looks at its energy consumption, water usage and recycling; and employs staff including a Cultural Park Keeper to look at how the organisation brings art, nature and people together through its programmes of wellbeing, regular outdoors activities and in developing local partnerships. Whitworth Park has become a place of recreation and re-creation for many Manchester residents. One of the Whitworth's slogans is 'Let's Meet Between the Trees' and in the summer months families enjoy a picnic, local residents sit in quiet contemplation, and students sit and read under the trees.

Goethe, similar to some of the students of the University of Manchester today, had a favourite tree under which he worked, a large oak in Weimar, Germany. It was here that he wrote passages of his celebrated tragedy *Faust*, published in 1808. That Oak, like the tree that inspired Anya Gallaccio is now lost, its absence has now become a symbol of adversity and memory. In 1937, the Nazis established a Concentration Camp at Buchenwald and its boundaries ensnared the tree that gave Goethe such inspiration. Goethe once stated 'as long as the oak survives, Germany will flourish',⁴ and because of this the tree was used by the Nazis as a symbol to reclaim German culture. On 24 August 1944 the tree was hit with an incendiary bomb dropped by allied forces and it started to burn. Prisoners of the camp tried to save the cherished tree, taking fragments of its bark, or parts of the trunk in a desperate attempt to preserve a significant part of German cultural history.

³ Goethe's Way of Science: a Phenomenology of Nature - David Seamon, State University of New York Press, 1998 – Page 262

⁴ Oak - Peter Young, Reaktion Books, 2013 – Page 128

One of these prisoners was the author Bruno Apitz, who secretly carved a death mask from one of the tree fragments, managing to hide his activities from the guards. This death mask is a haunting depiction of mortality, a face with an emptied expression: 'it symbolises the pain of suffering and death, and implies both the destruction of humanism and hopes of transfiguration.'⁵ The person depicted was Ernst Thälmann, leader of the Communist Party in Germany; he was shot at Buchenwald by order of Adolf Hitler five days before the Goethe Oak was destroyed.



Die Letzte Gesicht 1944 © Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.

All that remains of the Goethe Oak today is a concrete cast of its stump, a sculpture commissioned by the East German government to act as a memorial to the 56,545 people who died in Buchenwald. During the Second World War the Whitworth became a place of protection with its basement used as a refuge for the local families of Rusholme who had lost their homes in bombing raids. Whitworth Park in-turn became a place of solace.⁶

At the rear of the park, near Moss Lane East is a sculpture called *Flailing Trees* (2009). The artist, Gustav Metzger was rescued from Nazi persecution, moving to Britain as part of the Kindertransport⁷ rescue programme in 1939. Metzger was the founder of the Auto-Destructive-Art movement in the early 1960s where he studied the act of destruction, and its relationship to art and creation. The sculpture is formed of 21 dead Willow trees that have been inverted and trapped in a bed of concrete as a protest at human brutality against nature. Like the work of Gallaccio and Beuys, *Flailing Trees* is in a state of constant transformation, the Willow trunks gradually rotting away over time and being perpetually replaced. "It doesn't present a straightforward idea of death and renewal... rather it presents a meditation on the time of decay: the installation will continue to move and take shape."⁸ The sculpture was originally conceived for the Manchester International Festival's Peace Garden, but is now part of the Whitworth's collection.

⁵ Politics and Culture in Twentieth-century Germany- James Jordan, Camden House, 2003 – Page 6

⁶ <http://friendsofwhitworthpark.org.uk/introduction/history/>

⁷ The Kindertransport (Children's Transport) rescue programme sent 10,000 children, without their parents to safety in Britain from Nazi Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

⁸ The Persistence of Nationalism: From Imagined Communities to Urban Encounters - Angharad Closs Stephens, Routledge, 2013 - Page 103

Flailing Trees is among many works owned by the Whitworth that address the loss of trees. *Study of Four Men Felling a Tree* (1960) is a pen and ink drawing by artist Ivon Hitchens. It shows in a hurried and economical line the brutal act of felling a tree. One of the figures is frozen in mid-swing holding an axe aloft; the other three figures stand with heads bowed in what appears to be solemn graveside contemplation. Throughout his career Hitchens explored the landscape and trees, creating art that didn't simply document, but recaptured the emotions of a place. He once commented 'art is not reporting. It is memory.'⁹



Study of Four Men Felling a Tree 1960 © Estate of Ivon Hitchens, Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London. Collection of the Whitworth, University of Manchester.

In *Fallen Trees, Savernake Forest, Wiltshire or Swanage, Kent* (1933) by Paul Nash we see a group of trees lying forlorn, the cause of their uprooting unknown. The displaced trees appear to be slowly sinking into the landscape and will eventually rot into the earth in which they grew. 'He depicted wide-open landscapes... where ancient burial mounds struck him as England's very own version of the pyramids; he drew trees as if they were people, or perhaps guardian spirits watching over him'.¹⁰



Fallen Trees, Savernake Forest, Wiltshire or Swanage, Kent 1933 © Estate of Paul Nash. Collection of the Whitworth, University of Manchester.

⁹ <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/people/reference/ivon-hitchens>

¹⁰ Paul Nash: The Elements – Andrew Graham-Dixon, *The Telegraph* - 12 February 2010

This lifecycle of rebirth and a return to the earth is a reoccurring subject of Anya Gallaccio's practice. Much of her artwork emphasises the historic resonances of a given location; the commission for the Whitworth is not the first time the felling of trees has provoked an artistic response from Gallaccio. In 2002 she presented the installation *Beat* in the Duveen Gallery at Tate Britain. At the centre were seven trunks from large oak trees; towering, branchless and rootless to echo the stone columns that were surrounding them. This work, entitled *'As long as there were any roads to amnesia and anaesthesia still to be explored'* again demonstrated the artists' interest in the relationship between nature and architecture: "They should switch backwards and forwards between being trees and columns – between being formal structures and real objects."¹¹ Gallaccio has explored the subversion of architectural surface variously throughout her career, using materials such as graphite, chocolate and ice.

Harvest of the Winter Months (1996), is one such installation, with graphite powder rubbed into the concrete floor of Künstlerhaus Bremen. Like the commission for the Whitworth, the viewer is forced to query the integrity of materials they inherently know to be solid. The graphite coating makes the concrete floor unstable; its patina changes and fades as feet walk over it; the mirrored surface of the Whitworth's stainless steel tree tricks our eye through the reflection of its surroundings. In both artworks Gallaccio revisits the traditions of Minimalist art from the 1960s and 70s with nods to the Mirror Cubes of Robert Morris, and the dense graphite drawings of Brice Marden.



Harvest of the Winter Months 1996 © Anya Gallaccio. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2016.

Gallaccio, like Goethe and Beuys before her views the world comprehensively, she looks closely at the unique characteristics of materials and presents them in a way that enables an engagement with her artwork in connection with wider social and political issues. The commission for the Whitworth, although a departure from her usual practice has the familiar preoccupation with memory, the natural world, architecture, decay, death and revival. The commissioned tree creates a dialogue between the natural and the manmade; it is a focus for contemplation, for celebration and memorial, and importantly it does this for the people of Manchester and others who encounter it.

¹¹ Anya Gallaccio quoted in the article: *Landscape into Art* – Bruce Miller, Tate Etc, October 2002