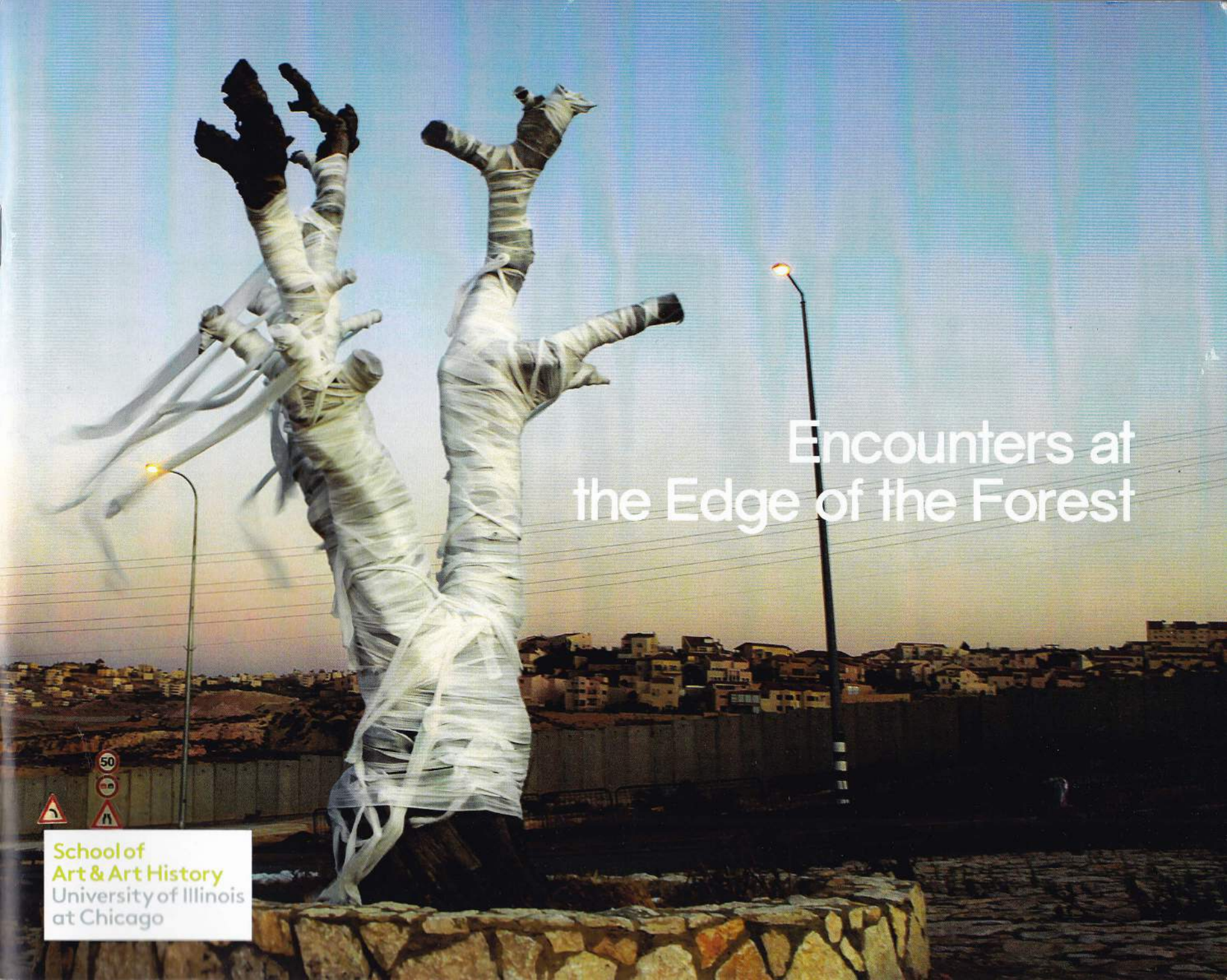

Encounters at the Edge of the Forest

School of
Art & Art History
University of Illinois
at Chicago

Acknowledgements

Curators: (From top left) Alejandro Acierto, Leonard Cicero, Jillian Green, Nancy Harmon, Jamie Luensman, Miok Lee, Brigid Maniates, Taryn Mason Sherwin Ovid, Rachel Shrock, Meghan Wingert
Faculty Advisor: Rhoda Rosen

We are privileged to be a part of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) community and the Museum and Exhibition Studies program (MUSE) in the School of Art and Art History, which has supported our learning throughout the semester.

A fairly new program, MUSE is characterized by the intellectual vibrancy of its leaders and their commitment to social justice. Special thanks to all staff and faculty who make this experience possible and particularly to Lisa Lee, director of the School of Art and Art History and Therese Quinn, Director of Museum and Exhibition Studies. Anthony Stepter and Tenesha Edwards were indispensable facilitators of this project.

The exhibition takes place at Gallery 400, a contemporary art space where the intellectual life of the university meets leading edge culture. Many thanks to Lorelei Stewart, director, for her guidance and to the remarkable staff: Anthony Stepter, Pinar Üner Yilmaz, Ionit Behar, Stephen Hess, Shane Ward, and Tim Johnson, as well as Gallery 400 interns: Alex Gordon, Mariah Beavers, Melissa Romeo, Joseph Horjes, Francesca Banks, Carrie Allen who backed our efforts.

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Our exhibition tested our fundraising skills and we thank mightily those who gave in cash and in-kind donations. For in-kind donations, thanks to: Jon Naghski and Goose Island Brewpub

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Essay Catalogue Design: Miok Lee

Gallery 400
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Artists: Vaughn Bell, Ori Gersht, David Goldblatt, Ken Gonzales-Day, Tim Knowles, Philippa Lawrence, Ariane Littman, Steven Rowell, Andreas Rutkauskas, Jennifer Scott

The Cover Images:
(Front)
Ariane Littman (Israeli, b. 1962)
The Olive Tree, Video; 12:52, 2012
Performance at the Hizma Checkpoint
Photo: Rina Castelnuevo
Courtesy the artist

(Back)
Ken Gonzales-Day (American, b. 1954)
Road Mid, Lightjet on aluminum, 2005-2012, 30 x 70 in
Courtesy the artist and Luis de Jesus Los Angeles

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Encounters at the Edge of the Forest:

Curating socially engaged and intellectually vivid art and conversation.

By Rhoda Rosen

Encounters at the Edge of the Forest, an exhibition surveying a far-flung and worldwide range of artistic responses to the strange and fraught ways in which trees and forests have often proved staging grounds for ideas about nationhood, nation building, and nationalist violence, was itself the product of an altogether different encounter, one that played out at the far edge of conventional curatorial practice. The product of and also one moment in a wider conversation hatched in an exhibition practices class in the Museum and Exhibition Studies graduate program (MUSE) of the School of Art and Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) it proved to be an utterly participatory, organic process that upended the traditional authority of the curator, and also that of the authority of the faculty position in the classroom. An entirely different kind of curatorial process was put in place out of which an entirely different kind of knowledge was produced, in the exhibition and programming itself, and through audience reception. But more on the curatorial process later.

First the back story to the exhibition and an overview of its theme. The original idea was a straightforward embodiment of research that I had completed on Israeli and Palestinian artists who work with the image of the tree. In that context trees have so much to do with rooting one population and uprooting another; with forests that conceal military bases; hide remains of destroyed villages; and, indeed, contested claims to trees make up 40% of land claims in the west bank.[1] Indeed, the title of the exhibition is excerpted from A.B. Yehoshua's "Facing the Forest,"[2] a novella about a student, in many ways a failed scholar who, unable to find meaning in his studies, assumes the position of watchman in a remote forest. His job is to be on the lookout for arsonists. The only other person he comes into regular contact with is an Arab farmer, whose tongue was cut out by the Israeli forces in the 1948 war. At the end of the story, it is this Arab farmer who starts the fire. The student does not intervene and watches as the ruins of a destroyed Arab village emerge from the destroyed forest, that was concealing it. But the connection between modern forestry and nationalism didn't begin in Israel/Palestine and its scope is much wider.

Modern scientific forest management, first established during the eighteenth century, functioned to connect all aspects of colonial power. Although its origins lie in Germany, it is no coincidence that Dietrich Brandis, whose name is synonymous with the birth of forestry, worked for a decade for the British colonial administration in India where, as Dan Handel shows, the widespread implications of forest management for the colonial agenda were first played out.[3] As Lord Dalhousie's superintendent of teak forests in the Pegu region of east Burma and, later, as his first inspector-general of forests, Brandis was directly implicated in Dalhousie's project to modernize India in order to bring it more efficiently under British control. Further, he was implicated in Dalhousie's expansion of the area of British rule through the largest-scale colonial land grab to date and to his endeavor to centralize communications in order to facilitate the military and economic exploitation of India's natural resources. By creating forest preserves, lands were claimed for the colonial government, disrupting local farming and either co-opting or displacing local farmers. By understanding and modifying teak growth cycles, the production of luxury products was optimized; and by using teak to lay telegraph lines, railways lines

and to build ships, natural resources reached British markets and soldiers and their weapons (made with wood) were brought back to India. As Handel has remarked of Dalhousie's 1855 Indian Forest Charter, introduced the year Brandis arrived in colonial India, "the charter made all teak the property of the state, regulated its trade, and initiated a new approach to forest management in which the private interests of both the British and Indians were made secondary to the rights of the state over "nature." To some contemporary historians, this moment marked the beginning of environmentalism, entangled from its naissance with the interests of empire."[4]

Persuaded by the power of this research, students and I hunted for artists and images that would demonstrate the complicity of trees with the nation state from a variety of geographical areas and time periods. We drew up a proposal for an exhibition of particular kinds of trees; those trees that are, in some way, in service to the nation.

A familiar example is the mass-produced, ubiquitous yellow ribbon tied around a tree to greet a returning soldier. But there are other examples. South African David Goldblatt's *Remnant of a hedge planted in 1660 to keep the indigenous Khoi out of the first European settlement in South Africa. Kirstenbosch, Cape Town* is a photograph of a hedge, transplanted to and which now flourishes in one of South Africa's most renowned botanical gardens located in the foothills of beautiful Table Mountain. This hedge, originally planted to separate settlers from the indigenous population centuries before the legal code of apartheid was introduced, is a powerful reminder of the work plants do to assert boundaries, which in turn, divide people one from the other.

Andreas Rutkauskas' *Cutline* series pictures the increased security along the Canada-U.S. border, since 9/11. Stanstead, Quebec and Derby Line, Vermont, are caught in a unique situation. Located across the border from each other, residents in the past routinely crossed between the U.S. and Canada, and it was typical for family members to live on both sides of the border without feeling any division. But with increased U.S. border protection, individuals and families are forced to negotiate around fences and a growing number of border security police. In juxtaposition to the carefully monitored border of Stanstead and Derby Line, Andreas Rutkauskas photographs the Canada-U.S. border in the wilderness just a few miles from the town center. Instead of fences and controlled checkpoints, a six-meter-wide cutline delineates the border. The cutline is man-made. Large swaths of forest were cut away by the U.S. government to create a visible border between the United States and Canada for ease of surveillance. The cutline creates a visible border on what would otherwise be an invisible division.

In a very different way, Ori Gersht and Steve Rowell both deal with European forests that conceal layers of powerful histories. In 2005 Ori Gersht traveled to the Ukrainian area of Kosov, the region from which his wife's family originated. *The Forest*, filmed in the Moskalovka forest, pictures a landscape layered with a tragic and paradoxical history. This serene forest, once one of the great forests of Europe, provided refuge for Jews during the early part of the war, but in 1942, when the Ukraine was declared Judenrein, literally free of Jews, the town's 2,108 Jews were murdered there. In the video, the forest itself, tree by tree, begins to collapse, as if to make room for the history rendered invisible for so long.

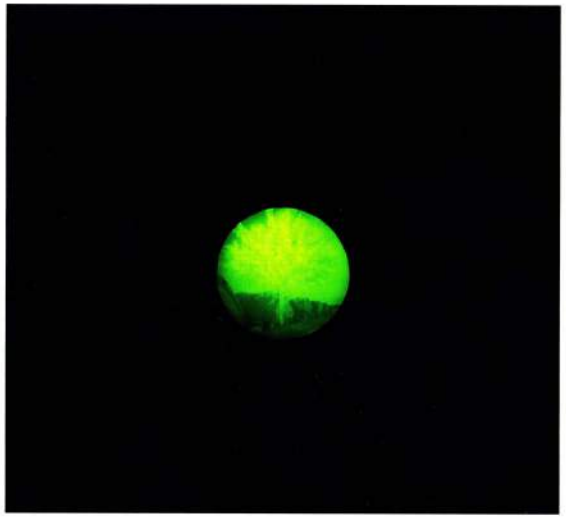


(Left) David Goldblatt (South African, b.1930), *Remnant of a hedge planted in 1660 to keep the indigenous Khoi out of the first European settlement in South Africa, Kirstenbosch, Cape Town*, 16 May 1993 (4_7667), Silver gelatin print on fiber paper, 1993, 15.75 x 19.69 in, Courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa
(Center) Andreas Rutkauskas (Canadian, b.1980) *Cutline #4*, Silver gelatin print, 2011, 20 x 24 in, Courtesy the artist
(Right) Ori Gersht (Israeli, b.1967) *The Forest*, 16 mm film, 2005, Courtesy the artist

Steven Rowell's series was photographed in the Brandenburg Forest on the outskirts of Berlin. The abandoned structures of the former military might of both the Nazi and Soviet military bases were in their turn located there. Because the Soviets warehoused nuclear weapons there, nuclear waste has permeated these sites making them uninhabitable and off-limits for pedestrians. Dense layers of European history are compressed in the forest. Today, the uses of the forest are no less complex and play out a different set of national dynamics: much of the forest has now been designated an official hunting ground for wild boar, a throwback to the days when this same forest was the hunting ground for the German emperors. Additionally, the labor practices of farmers on surrounding farms, who engage many Eastern European migrant workers to pick the luxury foods of Europe for criminally low wages, have been drawn into question. Finally, the mining industries have been a major contributor to the deforestation of the landscape itself and serve a corporate agenda on state lands.

Other artists also deal with trees being cultivated by and for corporate interests on state lands, and explore the way this poses a challenge to the limits of the nation-state in an age of rampant global capitalism, where even nature has been brought into the service of consumption and production and where nothing seems outside the reach of the market. Philippa Lawrence's *Bar Code* series is exemplary of this theme. She often addresses

Philippa Lawrence (British, b. 1968) *Barcode: FB814*, Giclee print, 2011, 12 x16 in, Courtesy the artist



Tim Knowles, *Fraxinus xanthoxyloides – HMNVS*, 2009, inkjet print, 15 3/4 x 15 3/4 in, Courtesy the artist

the importance of site by transforming the landscape. Trees frequently act as a medium for her work – she speaks of having a profound respect for them and for the important role they play in human existence. In *Barcode:FB814*, Lawrence wraps black and white cotton cloth around trees of Mortimer Forest with the barcodes of hardwood doweling. The four works in this series all bear the same title to underscore the sad harvesting of these beautiful individual young oaks, which in the process are reduced to uniform shapes and sizes for the market. Although these are state lands, in which forests are maintained for the

Evil I
Jennifer Scott
Mixed media on board, 2004
Courtesy the artist

public, the work exposes the trend toward multi-national corporations leasing public lands for private interests thereby eroding the autonomy of the contemporary nation state.

The lynching tree is represented in a number of works on exhibition. In his *Hang Trees* series, Ken Gonzales-Day researched and photographed the still living trees once depicted in historic lynching images that had been popularly circulated from the 1920s through the 1950s in the U.S. These trees, which so clearly defined whose lives would and would not be counted within the nation, now stand lonely and haunted, and sometimes implicated in the most unremarkable way, given their histories, as a backdrop to modern farming. Jennifer Scott also takes historical lynching postcards as her source material. She collages these images of lynchings onto life-sized board presented in the shape of a hanged figure. What characterizes her works, Evil I and Evil II, is that she whites out the lynched figure, turning attention from victim to the mobs in attendance at these lynchings.

While lynching trees offer insight into the mob performance of nationalism, determining who will count as a citizen, Tim Knowles' work reminds us of the way in which military power and nature are enmeshed. In his *Fraxinus xanthoxyloides – HMNVS* he places the viewer in the uncomfortable position of the soldier. This destabilization of position questions whether the viewer is witness or perpetrator. By contrast, the tree, *Fraxinus xanthoxyloides*, native to Afghanistan,

is a survivor of and witness to the nationalisms that various countries have played out in Afghanistan. The ominous glow of mutant green through which the tree is viewed reminds us that even at night, everyone is seen, every citizen visible to the military eye. There is no innocent view, but certainly not when aided by a mechanical in-line sighting system.

As artists struggle with a complex relationship with nature, they do so not with the intention of providing a dead-end critique, but as statements of other ways of being. The artists who most encapsulate an attempt to live differently are Vaughn Bell and Ariane Littman. Bell's playful biospheres are tiny plastic bubbles 2 inches in diameter containing soil and moss. These are on display but available for visitors to adopt. With this gesture, she insists that the care of a tiny piece of land can lead individuals to accept a more widespread responsibility for the land, beyond borders and beyond commodity culture. Ariane Littman's *Olive Tree* confronts a difficult conflict, yet with the hope and yearning that the landscape can be healed. Littman carried out a performance at the Hizma checkpoint, a checkpoint located at the Northeastern entrance to the Jerusalem area. On the Israeli side of the checkpoint lies the neighborhood of Pisgat Ze'ev and on the other side the Palestinian town of Hizma. In the proximity of the checkpoint, on the Palestinian side, there is a roundabout and in the middle of this roundabout stands an ailing olive tree. Littman planned a performance that would convey the existential 'dead lock' of the conflict through the absurd act of 'healing' the tree, by bandaging it, in a gesture as eloquent as W.S. Merwin's narrative poem, *Unchopping a Tree*.[5] In this work, she summons the emblematic power of the tree as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and as a universal and enduring symbol of peace. For her, "It stood, dead yet majestic in all its bareness, in between walls and borders, at the center of a roundabout where the traffic of Palestinian and Israeli cars incessantly flow in a kind of regulated dance devoid of violence."[6]

She says of her action:

> Early at dawn we started filming. The sun rising above the desert, all human activities dwarfed by its solemn presence, the tree personified a silent casualty in the midst of this contested landscape, its trunk and branches devoid of bark exposing its wrinkled and dried skin. At noon I started to bandage the tree. The heat was intense and the wrapping was a painstaking and difficult labor. Around us the traffic continued its circular motion. Curious onlookers stopped to exchange a few words with the photographer. Detached from the surrounding reality, I quietly carried on the dressing, trying to connect to the tree, speculating about its earlier life and mourning its present death. While I walked around the tree to wrap the trunk, thorns entered my bare feet and instinctively I bandaged them and embraced the tree. I pursued

> my work until sunset and as I stepped back to take a look, I held my breath; the tree looked magnificent in the reddish light of dusk. Dressed in white like a bride, with straps of bandages dancing in the wind, it seemed to resuscitate as it connected to the kites flying above Hizma. We continued to film into the night. As we drove away, I turned round to catch a last glimpse; the fleeting image of this ghostly dancing tree against the darkness of night will remain with me forever.[7]

By the next morning the tree had been stripped of its bandages, the futility of her attempt to doctor the tree, beside the point. The gesture was the point. As with Merwin: "But there is nothing more you can do/Others are waiting/Everything is going to have to be put back."

The visuals are accompanied by the voices of one Israeli and one Palestinian singer, both singing traditional songs, their soothing maternal voices yearning for peace in Jerusalem. Searching for another way of being in and with the landscape, these women's aspirations offer for the artist a hope beyond the death of this particular tree, beyond the conflict itself.

As intimated earlier, with this exhibition there was also the encounter at the edge of conventional curatorial practice. With an advertised focus on social justice, UIC's MUSE faculty promise that students will be taught about the "evolving social and political contexts of today's cultural institutions" and prepared with a range of professional skills for positions within the cultural arena.[8] With the program's commitment in mind, it is clear that to teach in this department demands more than skill sharing. It calls for a reflection on what it means to teach, and in this instance, to curate, in a way that appreciates, even cherishes, the notion of museum and curatorial access.

The labor, then, is to propose a curatorial practice that is open, and which allows for multiple partners to explore a set of ideas that permits numerous perspectives, and that builds communities of knowledge-makers – a deliberation that, ironically, unsettles the very act of teaching, of curating, of the authority invested in the positions associated with those titles. In turn, this allows for the emergence of subject positions beyond those typically addressed by the display or the various catalogue essays. Yielding to the challenge to surrender conventional skill-based ways of knowing, students and teacher made space for more generative knowledge(s). *Encounters at the Edge of the Forest* still incarnates an idea, but it does so through a series of prompts rather than through an authorized narrative. Part of an exchange that began in class and will have, not an afterlife — as if the exhibition were the "knowledge event" rather than a "milestone," – but a continued life within the longer process of actively seeking new ways of producing knowledge and, ultimately, different ways of being.[9] Inspired by recent theorizing of the curatorial, then, *Encounters at the Edge of the Forest* explores some of the ways in which the "projective imaginings of curators are modified in the planning, in the mounting, in response to the exigencies of available elements, to the limits, but also the

potentialities, of the time, space, and persons involved." [10]

And there were many exigencies or teaching moments as we lovingly came to think of them. Our initial venue, a fairly new space in Chicago attempting to establish itself in the gentrifying cultural neighborhood of Pilsen, fell through. An administrator there felt that the simple inclusion of an Israeli artwork and an historical postcard of a lynching tree from the Jim Crow south in the same exhibition automatically meant that an equivalency was being drawn between the two. The argument that images from as far afield as Afghanistan, England, South Africa, Canada, Poland, and Berlin were also being included, held no sway and the gallery withdrew its support, a powerful lesson in pursuing political work in the cultural world.

The lynching tree, carelessly pictured in popular postcards during the 1920s through the 1950s, represented a real collision with history; more than other pictures of violence that students are routinely exposed to in the media, these postcard images brought many white students face-to-face with the historical legacy of their privilege. Because students chose to confront boldly this inheritance, of sorts, they struggled with me, as well as with other professors, museum professionals, guests, and friends about both this legacy as well as the ethics of displaying the disciplining of the black male body, without the victim's consent.

In the end we opted for an evocative display. We projected the over 5,000 recorded names of lynching victims onto a wall and inserted into a small cut-out of this projection the verso of a historical lynching postcard. After many hours of deliberation, Rachel Shrock argued powerfully for the image to be included in her essay, embedded in context and lodged within an argument for an ethical concept of "seeing." This display was juxtaposed with a jaw-dropping 1937 newspaper article, the subject of Leonard Cicero's catalogue essay. Indeed, the very importance of the lynching tree as a site of decision about whose lives will and whose lives won't be counted by the nation is why the remaining essays by Cicero and Shrock in this catalogue are about this single theme within the exhibition. It caught them by surprise. The newspaper was displayed in microfiche form and on a microfiche machine. Together with the yellow ribbon, the newspaper and the verso of the postcard, because they were artifacts in an exhibition that otherwise contained fine art, further unsettled conventional curatorial practice. Some gallery staff were concerned that the microfiche machine and the projection of the names over the absent postcard read as fine art objects and confused what was curatorial voice with artistic installation. These concerns provided students the opportunity to think with gallery staff about the different conventions of curatorial storytelling and the different museum contexts in which they may be found.

One of the opening programs the students suggested and organized was entitled *From the Lynching Tree to Mass Incarceration: A Conversation with Harvey Young, Flint Taylor and Darrell Cannon*. It brought together Harvey Young, Associate Professor, Theatre, Performance Studies, African American Studies, and Radio/Television/Film, at Northwestern University whose research on the performance and experience of race has been widely published; Flint Taylor, a founding partner of the People's

Law Office in Chicago, an office which has been dedicated to litigating civil rights, police violence, government misconduct, and death penalty cases for more than 40 years; and Darrell Cannon, formerly incarcerated, who on November 2, 1983 was taken, as a murder suspect, by three charter members of Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge's torture crew to an isolated area on the South Side of Chicago and tortured. After he confessed — while being tortured — to a crime he did not commit, he spent 24 long years in prison. He was exonerated in 2004. The Illinois Prisoner Review Board finally rescinded a parole hold that was premised on the dismissed murder conviction and Cannon was released from prison in 2007. It was typical of the students' working philosophy that they would include voices from across a spectrum of experiences and with different vocabularies and put them in conversation with one another to allow for different kinds of knowledge to emerge through the interaction.[11]

To solve our venue dilemma, the School of Art and Art History— in which MUSE is located — and Gallery 400 stepped in to support our project with generous resources and professional role models. In addition, students took on a fundraising campaign and sought in-kind donations, in the compacted period of what was left of the semester. Together, we tapped our networks, and developed new ones. The catalogue and introductory vinyl text were printed by MidAmerican Printing Systems, Inc., the owner being an uncle of one of the students, Taryn Mason. Later, Taryn's father built frames for us. The International Studies Program and the Department of History both sponsored programs.

While we are very grateful for the in-kind donations and partnerships we established, this is not intended as the obligatory curatorial acknowledgement, but rather to point out that curating in this way, produced partnerships, co-curators and invested audiences. Perhaps this was most clear in the crowd funding campaign we launched on Indiegogo, which drew students into a circle of love and fellowship for their friends and collegial network, who donated to the campaign. In one case, a prospective student to the program who visited our class made a significant contribution to our Indiegogo campaign, no doubt because of the welcome, the camaraderie, the deep bonds and allegiances being spun in class.

Of course there were other challenges: time creeping up on us, as it always does, too fast, meant that there were works that will have to wait for another iteration of this exhibition, perhaps a larger one, in the future.

Just one example of this: we would have liked to include images of the so-called assassination of a tree in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1976. In a mission named the Paul Bunyon mission, armed U.S. and South Korean soldiers entered the DMZ to "assassinate" a poplar tree that blocked their view to an observation post close to the North Korean side of the DMZ. The mission resulted in the deaths of two U.S. soldiers. Later the tree was chopped down. Miok Lee found journal articles and some poor quality youtube video, but nothing visually powerful. She was hot on the trail of some fabulous lantern slides of the tree assassination when we had to call it a day. Knowing that there are different iterations of the exhibition, beyond its

present form, helps us project future possible conversations.

At its core, the curatorial, as it is currently being theorized, implicitly creates fellowship. It creates, perhaps for short periods of time, communities of like interest and ethics, and provides the participants the space to come together to learn as a community.

Both in content, then, and most importantly in process, *Encounters at the Edge of the Forest* enacts precisely the paradox to which Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski, point when they suggest that, curatorial practice is "embedded in the globalization of the art field, on the one hand, and the conditions of labor in the twenty-first century; on the other, the curatorial has also gained a specific sociopolitical relevance within contemporary society." [12] Students learned about shipping internationally, about borrowing from artists and galleries, about preparing objects and mounting a display. In this sense, they were embedded in the conceptual and material labor of the art market, but they also made decisions about their place in it. At the root, so to speak, of many of these works, while they ostensibly explore trees in service to nationalism, is the more insidious agenda of a capitalism that is so unchecked, it pays no attention to the borders that initially supported its aims. In our process, while implicated in this labor market too, as von Bismark, Schafaff and Weski suggest, this curatorial team opted to learn the skills of the art market while refusing the cycle of art world careerism, of art markets and competition and curated instead a circle of love. The curatorial practice was the radical political act.

Endnotes

1. See Shaul Ephraim Cohen, *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Irus Braverman, *Planted Flags: Trees, Land, and Law in Israel/Palestine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. A.B. Yehoshua, "Facing the Forest" in *The Continuing Silence of a Poet: The Collected Stories of A.B. Yehoshua* (London: Flamingo, 1990).

3. Dan Handel, "Into the Woods," *Cabinet* 48 (Winter, 2012-13).

4. Handel, "Into the Woods," 54.

5. In this poem, Merwin provides a set of instructions for the impossible and futile task of putting a felled and chopped up tree back together. W.S. Merwin, "Unchopping a Tree,"getnewvisions.com/teaching_stories/unchop.html, Accessed April 20, 2014

6. E-mail correspondence with artist, December 31, 2013.

7. See http://ariane-littman.com/2011/07/the-olive-tree/, accessed October 12, 2012,

8. See http://artandarthistory.uic.edu/muse. Accessed April 4, 2014.

9. "Knowledge event" and "milestone" are Irit Rogoff's terms. See her brilliant interview with Beatrice von Bismarck in Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski, editors, *Cultures of the Curatorial* (Sternberg Press, 2012)

10. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (NY: ICI, 2012) 36.

11. "Really useful knowledge" is what British labor historians dubbed the knowledge that was the outcome of their interactions with British laborers. Thanks to Dennis Gallagher for recalling the term and steering me to this concept.

12. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski, editors, *Cultures of the Curatorial* (Sternberg Press, 2012), 8.