

Biographies

Maggie Groat is a visual artist who utilizes a range of media, including works on paper, sculpture, textiles, site-specific interventions and publications. Influenced by her Haudenosaunee and settler ancestry, and her roles as mother and environmental steward, her research surrounds site-responsiveness with regards to shifting territories, decolonial methodologies, and salvage practices. Groat earned an MFA degree from the University of Guelph in 2010. In 2014 she was the Audain Artist Scholar in Residence at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Groat has exhibited extensively across Canada including at Mercer Union, YYY Artists' Outlet, Art Gallery of York University (Toronto), Western Front, (Vancouver), and Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (Kitchener, ON). She lives and works in St. Catharines, ON.

Joar Nango is a Norwegian-Sámi artist and architect based in Tromsø, Norway. He holds a Master's degree in Architecture from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Located at the boundary between architecture, design and art, Nango's practice explores Indigenous identity through the oppositions and contradictions in contemporary architecture. In 2010 Nango co-founded the architectural collective FFB specializing in temporary structures and interventions in urban contexts. He has exhibited in Canada at Western Front (Vancouver) and Gallery 44 (Toronto), as well as internationally, including documenta 14 (Athens and Kassel, 2017); 43SNA, Medellin (Colombia, 2013); and the Norwegian Sculpture Biennale at Vigelandsmuseet (Oslo, Norway, 2013).

Leya Tess has lived on various islands on the BC coast, working as a kayak guide and illustrator. She holds a BFA from the University of Victoria and has exhibited at the fifty fifty arts collective (Victoria), the Ministry of Casual Living (Victoria), and the James Black Gallery (Vancouver). In 2015 Tess participated in the Listhús Artist Residency, Ólafsfjörður, Iceland. She is currently studying coastal ecology in Prince Rupert.

Laurie White is a candidate in the MA Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia. She earned a BA in Art History and Visual Studies from the University of Victoria in 2015. She has curated exhibitions at the fifty fifty arts collective (Victoria), Western Gallery (Bellingham, WA) and AHVA Gallery (Vancouver).

The Or Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, the British Columbia Arts Council, our members, donors, and volunteers. The Or Gallery is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist-Run Centres (PAARC). This exhibition is a collaboration between the Critical and Curatorial Studies Program at the University of British Columbia and the Or Gallery, with support from the Killy Foundation and the Audain Endowment for Curatorial Studies through the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory in collaboration with the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia.

The Or Gallery acknowledges its presence on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories.

Exhibition//April 7 - 28, 2018
Curated by Laurie White

We Built a House Out of the Things We Had Gathered

Maggie Groat

Joar Nango

Leya Tess

The troubling ecological times we live in call for new modes of thought and practice, not only to grasp the scale of the problems we face but to hold on to them long enough to formulate meaningful response. As Donna Haraway argues, “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”¹ This exhibition draws together works by three artists to consider assemblage as a conceptual and practical strategy to re-envision and re-assemble ecological relationships.

Assemblage is a concept for tracing the diverse material actors in an event, and for following the “unfinished configurations” of their combined agencies. Thinking of ecological systems as assemblages affords an expanded notion of what ecology can be. Instead of seeing evolution as the gradual refinement of forms, assemblage theory focuses on the imperfect, improvised solutions to problems, and the co-operations and compromises between organisms that ensure the continuity of life, rather than its perfection. This is not to downplay the severity of present environmental destruction, but it enables a shift in the point of view so that a horizon emerges on the other side. In facing the bewildering scale of planetary climate distortion, tactics and tools for navigation become essential. This exhibition focuses on specific assemblages in particular contexts in order to locate the effects of global currents in their real manifestations.

Maggie Groat's sculptural assemblages transform salvaged materials from her daily life into tools for connection with place and speculation for possible futures. *Moonlight Reflectors or a Proposal for Returning Moonlight Back to the Moon* is a collection of small silvery objects, chipped and worn, showing signs of use. Left outside on the night of the full moon preceding each exhibition, the objects absorb energy from the moon's light, which is then diffused into the gallery space over the course of the show.² The gesture implies an attempt to communicate with a celestial body and reminds us that the moon is but a reflector for the sun; the very experience of moon-light is the result of a sun-earth-moon assemblage.

In Groat's other works, the use of the objects is more open ended. Three neat shelves of colourful squares of cardboard meticulously arranged according to the colour spectrum is titled *77 Vision Cards: Marginal Psychedelics, Magnified Fields and Gathered Ineffables, for Directions, Wayfindings, Wanderings, Unseeables, Wonderings, Outsidings, Action Reportings, Future Findings and Interconnectivities*. The actions hint at travel, to orientation and navigation, both physical and cognitive. The exact arrangements imply that the actions these tools are used for are precise yet radically open, and suggest a collector taking stock of her inventory, or a traveller being careful about what she will carry. These rituals and the cultural artefacts that accompany them, however humble, are the operators for entering into assemblages with more-than-human entities, opening oneself to transformation. As Anna Tsing notes, "assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them."³

Joar Nango's project *European Everything* explores the raw edges of capitalist production and the communities who scratch a living from them. The project, originally produced for documenta 14, involved Nango and a small team making a 5,000-kilometre journey from Tromsø to Athens. A short film traces this journey through junk yards and workshops, where detritus of all kinds is processed into new products. The footage intertwines with the narrative voice-over, which meditatively describes the journey in reverse. Picking up things from the roadside as they travel, the narrator remarks, "we built a house out of the things we had gathered, to be upheld as a monument by others, or consumed by the ground it stood on."

Commenting on the recent years of economic hardships that have led to a flourishing of DIY approaches to construction and economy in Greece, Nango states, "the cultural potentials that lie in the peripheral, dark, shadow zones of Europe can exemplify new ways of solving problems or thinking about future economies and post-capitalist communities."⁴ These practices correlate with Claude Lévi-Strauss's description of the *bricoleur* as someone who draws on a broad range of skills and knowledge to make creative use of whatever materials are at hand.⁵ A form of assemblage, bricolage is an important method for staying with trouble because, unlike engineering, it seeks to solve problems with a new arrangement of what is available in the present, not what must be invented in the future. A crucial aspect of Nango's work is that it links bricolage to movement, revealing it to be an itinerant science, a nomadology.⁶ "For me," he explains, "the concept of mobility is really about improvisation, and in the end it's the ultimate form of site specificity."⁷

Leya Tess's meticulous drawings reveal the creatures who have made their homes in zones of constant change. These drawings subvert settler-colonial maps of the British Columbia coastline by repopulating the terrain with the plant and animal assemblages that define this region. Tess only re-works areas of the maps with which she is familiar, drawing from first-hand experience as a kayak guide and student of coastal ecology. Organic forms variously erase and highlight certain features of the chart, converting them into new tools for mapping the affective experience of being in a particular place and attending to its details. Alternative contours emerge, visualising the uneven topographies produced by assemblages as they aggregate and disperse.⁸ Relationships between individual organisms are indicated by proximity only, as one form accommodates another, emphasising the

multiplicity of relationships that make up an ecosystem.

The maps also serve to remind us that the BC coast is a border between Canada and the Pacific, a site just as much linked into the networks of resource exploitation today as it was a century ago, as recent debates around increasing tanker traffic demonstrate. In this light, the amorphous black ink shapes covering the maps could be read as oil spills. The works' titles also connote ambiguity. *In the Calm, In the Surge/Somewhere Between Paradise and Desolation* could refer to a specific geographic location on the map but it could equally refer to a state of mind, the complicated feeling of awe and terror at the sublime beauty of the vaulting coastline. At the interface of land, sea and sky an assemblage of lifeways collide: traditional, industrial, algal, microbial. Tess's work offers a way to visualise these entanglements and asks us to consider the even the smallest of actors.

Each in their own way, the artists in *We Built a House Out of the Things We Had Gathered* use salvage and appropriation to both strategically foreground the assemblage character of their work, and to comment on the larger ecological assemblages in which they are caught up. If we can observe assemblages at work more easily in peripheral spaces, it is perhaps because they are like the frayed edges of a closely woven fabric. Groat, Nango and Tess each use assemblage as a way to trace these boundaries, lingering on the banks, picking at the threads and unravelling the warp in order to experiment with forms of resilience and resistance. If we conceive of our passage through these troubling times as a journey, it is taking us to and through the periphery of what is knowable in the present. This is why, in Nango's *European Everything*, the house they build on the road is just a temporary shelter. Their destination lies over the horizon, and the film ends with the unnamed group setting out on an unnamed ocean, using all the tactics they know to find their way home.

¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

² The moon before this exhibition was a Pink Moon, on March 31st.

³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.

⁴ Joar Nango, in conversation with Candice Hopkins, "Temporary Structures and Architecture on the Move," *Mousse Magazine*, Issue 58: 174.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Letchworth, UK: Garden City Press, 1966), 16. Lévi-Strauss notes that, while engineering and bricolage are two different modes of production, both are equally valid forms of knowledge creation.

⁶ "The ambulant or nomad sciences ... subordinate all their operations to the sensible conditions of intuition and construction—*following* the flow of matter, *drawing and linking up* smooth space. Everything is situated in an objective zone of fluctuation that is coextensive with reality itself." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 373.

⁷ Nango, 174.

⁸ An assemblage produces "uneven topographies because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed evenly across its surface." Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 24.