An Artifact from the Collapse:

a dendrochronological queer fantasia

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Introduction

An Artifact from a Collapse is an unauthorized video essay, open letter to a University president, and at-home quarantine Zoom meeting. It explores, through a polyvocal cast of characters played by the artist, the complex history and story of the University of Michigan's urban forest in a time of global crisis. It specifically critiques and examines wide-ranging but also specific histories surrounding iconic trees of the University's campus such as a tree dedicated to current President Mark Schlissel, the historic Tappan Oak, and the few surviving Ash trees of a 2003 infestation of Emerald Ash Borers.

The performance, which happened on April 22nd, 2020, is structured as a digital 'dendrochronological walk' from the artist's home to the Diag of the University, where one of the most public concentrations of urban trees in the University is. Originally developed with a theatrical performance in mind, the livestream format and medium of Zoom became an adaptive response to a crisis. *Artifacts* was developed after a year-long research-based practice utilizing theatrical devising techniques, site-specific footage, and appropriated University media to explore the urban forest of the University. Research took the fluid form of numerous ethnographic interviews, archival research, and an embedded practice with student climate activists.

Beginning from an interest in institutional critique, the specific focus in urban forests and a dendrochronological history emerged from

the initial conditions of the University's 2019-2020 school year. Upper tier University administration were dedicating a great deal of taxpayer-paid time to the continued prosecution of peaceful student climate activists arrested in the President's office that April. This brief PR flare had only gotten brighter as the year began and was now set against a grim backdrop of the global climate crisis and the student action movements.

How could performance, a medium derived of dialogue, be used to foster internal dialogue and embedded action within the institution of the University of Michigan? Facing an administration known for its stonewalling of demands for in-person conferences and actionable results, *An Artifact* sought to see what the trees of Ann Arbor might have to say about the whole affair, why they matter, and why we humans should care.

In this thesis I will start by mapping the current contexts surrounding the urban forests of UM and why there is a need for internal criticism of institutions and interventions. Then I will explore the context of trends in performance, protest and urban intervention tactics that have informed my process of site-specific methodologies. I'll then provide a brief overview of the content of the performance. I'll conclude by discussing this work's current iteration in the context of the COVID-19 quarantine, and the need for adaptive practices that can respond to such circumstances.

Contextual Discussion

In this section I'll examine current context of contemporary urban forestry at the University of Michigan. In addition, I'll be showing how other makers have worked towards similar aims involving appropriated media, interventions, and embedded practice.

To quote Jane Immonen, Forestry Specialist and Coordinator for the UM Grounds department, Ann Arbor is the place where "there is no other urban forest with so many secrets."[1] *Artifacts'* performance was defined by the physical limitation of a widespread quarantine, but research into these "secret" geographies of the urban forest utilized a widespread network of archival histories, ethnographic interviews and embedded practices, and contextual research.

Artifacts plays with a multifaceted metaphor in trees: they are living artifacts, messengers of misanthropy, and generally a little curmudgeonly. They're saddled by the history of their namesakes, but can do little to move and change this. This characterization was informed by two major factors: how the University has acted in regard to climate action and the specific biologies of an urban forest.

A brief look into the lifespan of a contemporary new tree on the Diag of the University reveals exactly why they would hold some grudges and be a bit misanthropic.

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[1] interview by David Forsee, February 19, 2020.

A new sapling begins its life far from the University in "some nursery in northern Ohio, if it's lucky."[2] Disconnected from the critically vital root communication networks – rhizomes – found in old-growth and natural forests, this sapling is shipped across state lines where it is likely exposed to ballasting lumber in the shipping process, possibly infested with an invasive species adapted for an entirely different ecosystem. Soon it's planted unceremoniously on a Quad or Diag (if lucky) and left to grow. While it would seem intuitive that trees would adopt one another into each other's rhizome, in fact all of these trees are rhizomatically isolated.

> *Because their roots are irreparably damaged when they are planted, they seem almost incapable of networking with one another. As a rule, trees in planted forests like these behave like loners and suffer from their isolation.*[3]

The only rhizomatic connection felt by trees on a Diag is incidental and they are only connected by hammocks saddling the trees' trunks – which cause stress damage.

My first question when trying to characterize the trees was thinking about them in their obviously confined context, and within a modern identity. What framework for their dialogic patterns, human-like qualities, or other traits could I start from? Jasbir Puar is a queer theorist working in fields of intersectionality and assemblage, questioning the discrete "identities" popularized as monolithic intersections in the 2010s. Puar

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[2] Ibid.
[3] *The Hidden Life of Trees,* Peter Wohlleben 2016, 15

purports a theory of "a queer assemblage that resists queerness-as-sexual-identity (or anti-identity)." Trees in this "queer fantasia" are queer because they are "a queer assemblage: a simultaneously repressive and perverse body vilified in exchange for U.S. exceptional interests." (2017, 130). The trees of Ann Arbor have experienced an Othering as a multivariable object: at once an expendable decoration and simultaneous place for veneration of a select few administration. We simultaneously holocaust thousands for new buildings while holding a paltry urban forest on the edge of life.

If trees truly could speak, like they do in *Artifacts*, they'd be especially interested in the embedded practice of local student groups such as the Climate Action Movement and the university's past treatment of such activism. With similar goals to anti-apartheid and tobacco divestment, the main goal of CAM is divestment of the University's endowment from fossil fuel industries along with clear, equitable, and just commitments and plans for carbon neutrality by 2030.

It was my time working with CAM (described in further detail in the next section), my new insights into the biologically extreme situation of urban forests, and troubling insights in archival research that crystallized the contextual content of the thesis: to create a brief performative look at how the trees might respond to our contemporary moment of climate activism.

In finding a way to bridge these various tangential narratives, I found myself looking towards a rich tradition of feminist and queer video essayists and video artists who have created multi-layered, non-linear

works. Their works often bridge isolated fields of performance art, theatre, community action, and video. Dara Birnbaum's simple manipulations and editing in "Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman" (1978) provide a beautiful example of frenetic visuals and an unpolished digital façade. The pop culture symbol of Wonder Woman is appropriated, looped, and edited into a critique of patriarchal confinement. Queer artists have often made work appropriated from heteronormativity – how could this same idea be transposed to trees and human-normativity?

Not only was I concerned with how the performance would look, but how it would be realized consciously of the environment it was made in. I looked to the socially conscious work of The Illuminators, a projection intervention collective, projects garishly stark text or provocative imagery onto architectures in order to illuminate more amorphous social currents. The direct tone of these interventions inspired the performance's own dialogic tone, while documents such as "A Manual for Urban Projection" demonstrate ways of understanding, ideating, and creating urban projections. The book also provides a framework for embedded community action, which is how I found myself teaching fellow protestors how to use video editing software, engaging with community members, and otherwise acting with more intentionality to "empower collective vision" on climate justice (2015, 15).

An important aspect of the creation surrounding this performance was an embedded practice, that is, one that actively participates in the community around which the work centers. I was inspired to pursue this

creative methodology by Marisa Moran Jahn, whose book *Byproduct: On the Excess of Embedded Art Practices,* documents how a practice embedded in institutions utilizes an "institution's own external mechanisms" (2010, 17) as an art medium. If one reads Jahn's *Byproduct* they'll also notice that while it is an anthology, it is edited so that the editors frequently critique, interrupt, and dialogue with the anthologized texts with texts and graphics. *Artifacts* is marked by similar self-interruptions and dialogues as a way of consistently reaffirming the digital artifice and emphasizing its central importance. The mass digital distribution, Zoom meetings, and leveraged PR of the University's climate messaging could become a medium to play with in making my work.

Through my work with the Climate Action Movement I was also an artist-activist: a very simple but pivotal framework change when approaching participatory performance. Performance scholar Claire Bishop has considered such work as designed "[not to just] offer an aesthetic or intellectual experience to an outside public but to facilitate the creation of a temporary community engaged in the process of solving a series of practical problems … [thus] any valuation of it should be at the same time artistic and ethical, practical and political." (2012, 19) This thinking became inherently tied to my work embedded with the Climate Action Movement. The practical engagement with the political merits of a piece encourages a more honest artistic ecosystem and methodology.

Methodology
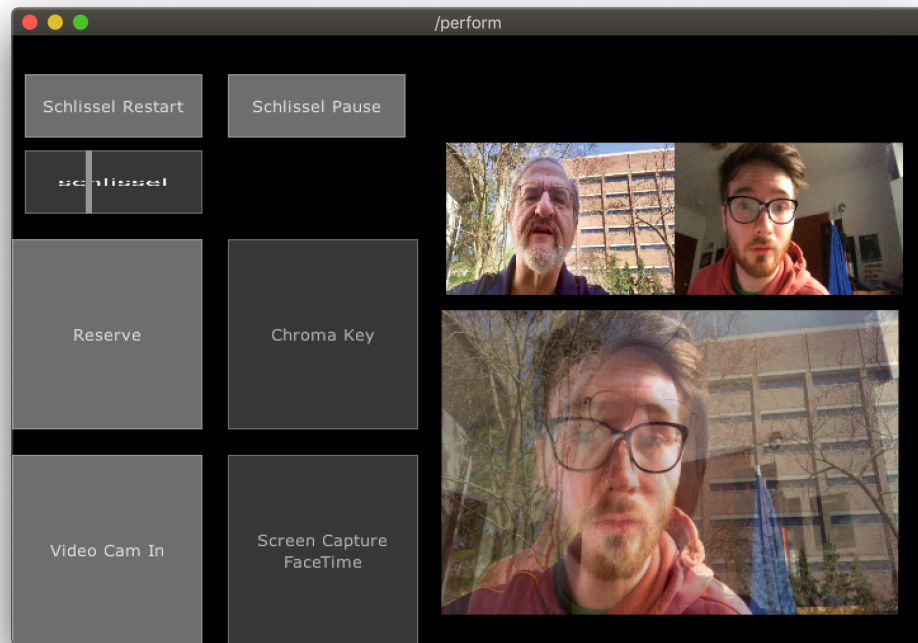
Artist rehearsing Mark Schlissel's mannerisms with

University video, webcam, custom TouchDesigner patch, April, 2020

In the following section I'll be describing the progressive nature of my methodologies and how they've been developed in response to the dendrochronological subject.

The central way *Artifacts* critically examines the landscape of Ann Arbor's urban forests is by repetition of the metaphor of the rhizome. Throughout the performance, trees allude to a network, a connection, an ability to communicate that humans simply cannot grasp. Is this cooperation, understanding, or power? It's intentionally ambiguous, and this metaphor of a rhizome extends to every aspect of the artists'

methodologies: video essays, non-linear monologues, embedded practice, and more which collided together in the final performance. Throughout the process I relied on digital media and performance as ways of either verbalizing hypothetical responses of trees to new insights in research or the continually developing situation of the global climate and COVID-19 crises. By progressively ideating, refining, and selecting these various "seeds" of scenes, often simply engaging ruminations on life from a tree's perspective, I could develop an entire set of isolated performances from the perspective of UM's trees.

How these media took form was informed by the context of the moment. For instance, before quarantine, my focus in digital media took the form of projecting onto the University's physical architecture, but after quarantine it become more important to communicate via the medium most in use, Zoom. Thankfully the technologies used for both only require simple translation, but this process emphasized the need for contemporary artists to be able to reflexive and adaptably reconfigure an entire "piece" – often only seen through secondary documentation – into new mediums for our highly in-flux contemporary moment.

A major component of my process was reaching out to individuals across the University, be they peers in my studio environment or staff in Forestry, about their experiences with the urban forest. This reaching out led to an extended collaboration with the Climate Action Movement here at UM that informed a great deal of the tone, focused criticisms, and content of the final performance. The way this collaboration worked was a

mutually beneficial exchange of ideas: by working with CAM leadership on developing performance intervention tactics, helping protestors with performance skills, conducting site surveys at protest sites I passively and actively gained a better representation of what on-the-ground activism for the climate looks like and needs.

The tactics of CAM have been adapted for our contemporary moment, yet so has the University's suppression tactics. Instead of using water hoses to dissuade anti-Vietnam protestors, now the University has largely switched to a torrent digital of (mis)information. Frequently paying for targeted digital advertising, banners advertising Earth Day, and other digital-media practices that mask other tactics that stall and delay commitments to carbon neutrality. Eerily similar to modern state propaganda tactics, these digital media artifacts feature the frequent parading out of the University's President's calm demeanor and soothing voice – which is starkly contrasted in *Artifacts*.

The interrelated and tangential scenes of video art, monologue, and live performance at once replicate the University's own tactics for distributing media while also contesting them. Just as a livestream audience connects to a global Internet to access the performance, the trees featured in performance actively are denied that connection to the rhizome by being in an urban forest. In the final performance, composed rapidly in response to a complex quarantine and crisis, these various performance scenes, monologues, and digital media artifacts are collaged together as a brief potential look at how the trees might speak.

Creative Work

A link to a Zoom meeting from a student you've heard of vaguely from a friend of someone else makes it way to your inbox. You might click it, you might not – like how you might glance or not at any tree on the street.

If you do click, and stay as the livestream begins, *An Artifact* presents the idiosyncratic performances of different trees in the urban forest. This section will feature key excerpts and photographed stills from various sections of *An Artifact*. The final performance of *An Artifact* is also available to be viewed on many video platforms and is linked in the bibliography.

Opening

This excerpt is from the opening of the performance, which begins abruptly after joining the Zoom meeting.

> *Before the show begins:*
> *A zoom meeting.*
>
>   *Fuck, not another Zoom.*
> *The logo twists and swirls through space, slowly.*

And then it begins.

A greenscreen.

David erupts through it like a sprouting seed.

Covered in greenscreenery, green scenery.

Wrestling it off.

Walking forward. Closer into frame.

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There's ---

There was supposed to be a show.

It was supposed to be -

All -

You know…

Insightful, world-changing, viral, controversial,

everything -

But -

Plans have changed,

Like always.
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Proceeding to tear down the rest of the green screen and explain what we're doing here in a Zoom meeting, the opening of *An Artifact* is meant to be about breaking a façade. In this case, it's a greenscreen, one of the hallmarks of digital media, PR, and institutional media practices.

Mark Schlissel's Live Q&A

Before trees have a chance to speak in the piece, "a message from the University" interrupts the flow of the video:

> *The camera pans down to an M logo, which cuts away, and Mark Schlissel (played by David) is on a back porch with a beer in hand, reciting* a *Mark Schlissel video sent to console, appease, and defuse students on April 8th, 2020.*
>
> I'm speaking to you from the back patio of the President's House here on South University avenue. Where my wife and I have…

After Schlissel delivers this speech the camera is left on, and we begin to hear various grumblings and Schlissel ranting about dealing with

University bureaucracy and other headaches – then he sees the camera is still on.

Schlissel glances over to the Camera, sees it. He rushes to adjust it.
Hello. It seems I'm still speaking to you from the back patio of –
ok – uh, full honesty, actually in front of a green screen. We were supposed to have a question and answer portion apparently but, uh, now that I don't have to pretend about anything, and I'm gonna lose my job probably soon… ask away I guess.

[Now there is a live section where the Zoom audience is encouraged by Schlissel (David) to ask questions and get live "unfiltered" responses from President Schlissel.

Examples of how Schlissel might respond to or prompt

questions –

"Just to start, yes, there is a non-zero amount of blood

sacrifice in our endowment, and that's the most I'll say."

"Blame the Alumni."]

Protest performance often features call-and-response, and chat features are predominant on video conferencing services. In a brief dialogue with the few attendees of the Zoom meeting, I as a performer get the opportunity to personally engage with and respond reflexively to the audience in this section.

Sapling Sam

The trees of the urban forest often speak next to and abutting each other; the Sapling Sam scene is a brief look into what a local tree radio station would sound like during the collapse. This is where *Artifacts* is at its most direct: the polyvocal cast of characters (represented only by the artist) switch characters rapidly while we watch abstract visuals derived from site-specific photography rush past us. This excerpt features the first part of the audio, cutting-off after things start to get "political."

Video still during Sapling Sam radio scene,
digitally manipulated video, taken from UM's Diag, Feb, 2020.

The sound of a switchover as we go to a radio station.

Let's take some callers. Caller number one, a feisty fungus
feasting on trash on State Street —

Bzzt.

YEAH, IT'S GREAT.

Bzzt.

We thought so. And our local shrubbery is looking
spectacular - save for one section with some squirrels that
is -

Bzzt.

OH GOD, HELP US, IT HURTS.

Chittering squirrel noises.

Bzzt.

Oops — not appropriate for air, folks -

Bzzt.

Hey, check itfact from the Collapse

I'm in the area code 734,

I'm a tree on the street row —

Y'all got some fucking w a t e r?

I'm thirsty.

Humans put me on this sidewalk, my roots can't get

nothing but concrete, and I'm out of crack!

I've started eating gum and stray dog shit.

The apocalypse isn't great for all us trees.

Bzzt.

Uhhh –

Bzzt.

Hey, listen, I hate humans as much as the next tree,

So I was thinkin' –

    Uh-huh, go on

What if we got a bunch of seedlings,

And put them on an edge of where the trees could be,

And where the humans could be,

And uh, we grew so many trees on that line

That the humans couldn't get over it?

    Huh?!

It'd be like a —

    A — wall

A wall of trees!

A tree wall!

Let's build that wall!

Bzzt.

Let's not get political now, callers —

Conclusion

An Artifact ends with an impassioned monologue about the simple act of connection and action, and the lack of it in quarantine. After seeing a disconnected network of performances and images, the performance abruptly ends as the host cancels the Zoom meeting – there is no post-show talk back, no applause; just your screen.

An Artifact employed the same techniques the University of Michigan has used to insulate itself from critique to subvert the institution from within. This was my way of realizing a response to the question of how to create an embedded, internally dialogic performance within an institution posed at the beginning of the year. Through mass digital distribution of the final creative process in the format of a livestream and archival recording, *Artifacts* resisted the quarantining of climate criticism experienced at the tail end of 2020.

Many student activists' endeavors have lost tremendous momentum due to the damage of COVID-19. A global pandemic cannot go unrecognized. By resisting the easy path of documenting a performance that didn't recognize the global pandemic, *An Artifact* utilized its reflexive process, medium, and broad creative tool kit to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. This was an unexpected benefit of an intentionally resilient practice; one where metaphors and imagery from research developed earlier on could be referenced in new, adaptive mediums. Performance

and digital media, which are inherently based on how they change over time, were thus particularly suited for this responsive practice. This is what defined the resilient, internally dialogic and embedded practice of *An Artifact*, which was inspired by those same trees that the process studied.

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The performance of *An Artifact from the Collapse is currently*

available on the artist's Youtube channel here:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCm4LtYhXmviORkIPiXVvXfA

For access to original files not through Youtube or traditional

streaming services, contact artist directly at dforsee@umich.edu