

Our People Our Climate, Sophie Reuter, If Not Us Then Who?

## **The Word for World is Forest**

Fri 29 October - Sat 11 December 2021

The title of this exhibition refers to a short novel published by Ursula le Guin in 1972. The novel has a sci-fi plot in which humans colonise a planet and then set about felling trees, planting farms, digging mines and enslaving Indigenous peoples. Looking back in 1976, le Guin said the book's themes of colonialism, race, and exploitation of the planet's resources grew from her anger at the Vietnam War. Her response was founded in a realisation of how all of those themes were intertwined in the destruction of a complete ecosystem.

it was becoming clear that the ethic which approved the defoliation of forests and grainlands and the murder of noncombatants in the name of "peace" was only a corollary of the ethic which permits the despoliation of natural resources for private profit or the GNP, and the murder of the creatures of the Earth in the name of "man." The victory of the ethic of exploitation, in all societies, seemed as inevitable as it was disastrous.

Our exhibition draws on le Guin's eco-feminist perspective to highlight Indigenous voices describing the impact of climate change in various regions of the world today. It also documents the resistance to exploitation of natural resources through means ranging from protest and direct action to community solidarity and the promotion of Indigenous solutions for the protection and conservation of land.

**Our People, Our Climate** is a documentary film initiative, aiming to develop the storytelling skills of Nunavut youth and young adults. Inuit communities across Canada's Arctic are essential to current climate change discussions, and this project brings together a range of young people in those communities to tell important stories through a unique and distinct cultural lens. Beginning in early 2020, the project emerged as an international collaboration between West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, the Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow, ilinniapaa Skills Development Centre in Iqaluit and University of Minnesota Duluth.

William Huffman, with West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, explains, "From the inception of this initiative, it was meant to provoke new, grassroots perspectives on an environmental narrative,

a move away from predominantly Southern-driven storylines. We wanted young people from the North to create the discourse and illustrate it, with their uniquely Northern voices.”

The participants were Anna Irwin, Chelsea Qammaniq, Kendra King, Carmen Barrieau, and Peter Lucassie and their film footage and photographs form the spine of a documentary film which includes images from older artists in the Kinngait or Cape Dorset region. These works are a small element of the much longer process in which they developed new story-telling skills through the period of lockdown.

The other films in the exhibition share some elements of skill development with the West Baffin initiative. **If Not Us Then Who?** are an umbrella group organising a global awareness campaign that highlights the role Indigenous and local peoples play in protecting the planet. Working in partnership with communities, they facilitate the production of films and photographs that document the work of these communities and advocate for greater rights for Indigenous and local peoples to bring about positive social change. In *The Word for World is Forest*, there are seven films made in partnership with INUTW by Indigenous filmmakers. We have selected films from Indonesia and Brazil in particular, though the themes and challenges highlighted are common to many other communities globally. Mina Susana Setra, president of INUTW, has submitted the following statement for the exhibition, emphasising the importance of community, tradition and collectivity in the response to extractive capitalism:

Community is where collective decisions are made and deliberative democracy is learned from a young age, when our territories are free of extractive industries and we can live without fear of getting arrested or shot. It is where the connection between our peoples and nature is as strong now as a thousand years ago, a close bond that supports our Mother Earth. It is where elders pass their knowledge to children. It is where children come of age. Where forests provide food, spices and medicines, rivers are clean, fish are abundant, water is free and trees are happy. Where culture and tradition are part of our daily life. It is where elders are smiling and children are laughing, where hope for the future is internalised, and peace has its roots in peoples' hearts. That is where our people are willing to give their lives to guard the forests, rivers and mountains, a place we call HOME.

Setra is an Indigenous, environmental and land rights activist from Borneo who had worked as an activist for the Indigenous People's Alliance of the Archipelago and was instrumental in

securing a ruling from the Constitutional Court recognising customary land rights of Indigenous people.

That commitment to the conservation of land and environmental resources also resonates in the work of **Sophie Reuter**. In a sequence of twenty photographs, she documents a decade-long struggle in Europe to protect the ancient Hambach Forest located between Cologne and Aachen in Germany. The forest has been decimated over the past ten years by the extension of an open pit mine extracting lignite, which produces a third more carbon than more common coals. Activists began to occupy the forest as early as 2012 and there have been five occupations in total, involving the construction of a network of treehouses high above ground, linked by walkways. Conditions were always difficult and exacerbated by regular confrontations with the police who argued that the protestors' barricades and infrastructure for living would impede access in the case of a forest fire. In September 2018, there was a major attempt to oust the protesters using armoured vehicles with ploughs and a water cannon, evicting people from at least 50 treehouses.

When Greta Thunberg was awarded the Golden Camera Award in March 2019, she dedicated the prize to those protecting the Hambach Forest. She then visited the site, saying, "it makes me incredibly sad, to see all this destruction, in this area that used to be a forest ecosystem, and I feel sorry for the people who have to move."

Reuter decided to try to photograph the Hambach forest protests from the protesters' perspective and to create a body of images for a public that had not considered what was happening there. In an interview with *Monopol* magazine, she outlined how she lived with the protesters for several weeks, joining them, learning to help as an activist while gaining enough understanding and trust to take pictures they would agree to be shown. Anonymity was vital to them (one photo shows someone scratching their fingertip to make their prints unrecognisable) and so documenting their lives could only happen if photographers proved their trustworthiness:

Anonymity is very important. You take on a forest name that many also change regularly. Many are masked, some permanent - you may well have friends whose faces you've never seen. Taking photos was difficult: in every cast there are signs that photos are forbidden, people do not want to be photographed. You have to ask each person

individually every time people are in the picture. Even hooded people sometimes don't want to be photographed - in one situation I wasn't even allowed to photograph a person's dog. In the beginning people would leave the room when I came in with a camera. That's why it was so important to become part of the community. I dealt with the situation very openly, took people aside, talked to them, offered to photograph them from behind and showed them the pictures again at the end.

Reuter was keen to show how life was lived in the community based high in the trees where the police couldn't touch them. How that life was organised was important, not just for survival when under attack but also in reflecting an alternative political approach to living together:

It took me a long time to get an insight into it. Ultimately it is an anarchist occupation and they try to live with one another as free of hierarchies as possible. This means that everyone should have the same level of knowledge, which, however, is difficult in such a huge community and also not always possible for reasons of protection. Each line-up is self-structured, some have regular meetings and plenums, some tend to decline. There are information boards, but a lot of things are also passed on verbally and during police operations, communication is mainly carried out using walkie-talkies.

One surprising aspect of the forest occupation for Reuter was the prevalence of music in the situation:

Music brings people together. In addition, it was an important aspect, especially during the eviction, to simply switch off and get other thoughts. During the eviction there were also chants and chants from the people on the ground, who signalled to the people above: We are here and we support you. In the forest, where there is very little electricity, music was also one of the things I missed the most. Then you are acoustically dependent on your fellow human beings.

For Reuter, the direct action of the Hambach protestors is a vital element in the wider struggle to generate not just policy changes but a wholesale change in the ways in which we think about society, economics and living together. 'For me, the forest is a place of resistance that inspires courage because it shows that we can make a difference if we only take action. The forest gives me the strength to keep going.'

## CCA Annex

Indigenous peoples experience and react to change in diverse ways. Climate change is no exception, as it requires local communities to be more resilient, and not just simply adapt to the changing environmental circumstances. Experts and people from communities living and working in Brazil, Iceland, Berlin, Indonesia and Chile are asked to respond to the theme of 'transformation' in this online series. Their strong connections to the land can offer a unique perspective to discuss transformations, not just in their environment, but in their everyday life, customs, families and life experiences. What factors play a role in a community's capacity to adapt, survive and grow sustainably in the face of change? How do we react to a shock through art, journalism or activism and what kind of transformative processes can become acceptable in the face of the worst-case scenario for our planet?

Video, images and text interact on the online platform CCA Annex, in order to make the inputs more accessible with additional text, translations and imagery available on the website.

The platform allows for experimental formats and secures a higher visibility for the project and this theme as part of COP26. The project also fits in with the exhibition program of the CCA, presenting the photographic work of Sophie Reuter.

A collaboration between Goethe-Institut Brussels & Glasgow as well as the Center for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, part of the event series programmed to accompany the COP26 Festival, taking place in Glasgow 1-12 November 2021.



