

Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay
Jordan
Flourishing

01/06

Since 2004, through the work of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, we have questioned how to radically transform and entangle art, activism, and everyday life amidst the horrors of the Capitalocene. A decade ago, we deserted our metropolitan London lives, rooting our art activism in a place that French politicians had declared “lost to the republic,” known by those who inhabited it as la ZAD (the “zone to defend”). On these four thousand acres of wetlands, turned into a messy but extraordinary canvas of commoning, an international airport project was defeated through disobedience and occupation. This is an extract from our latest book, where an art of life is populated by rebel farmers and salamanders, barricades and bakeries, riots and rituals.

– Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan

No Commoning without Commoners

Winter 2019. I feel like a clown slaloming between trees with my comically oversized orange boots and hard hat and my fluorescent thick trousers. I follow my friends, awkward and happy: today is the first day of the weeklong collective logging in the Rohanne forest and, equipped with the appropriate (albeit ridiculous) safety attire, I have joined the group of novices learning the art of taking care of this small but precious forest, to which we now belong. My dad, a lorry driver, would be surprised but proud to see his daughter confidently carrying a chainsaw on her shoulder. We are going to be under the guidance of a dozen experienced comrades who have come from collectives and forest-based struggles all over the country. As measured by the commercial timber industry, it is a patch hardly worthy of interest – eighty acres of sixty-year-old deciduous and coniferous trees. But to us on the ZAD, it is a whole world of its own.¹

This is the forest where some of the fiercest battles took place during Operation Caesar,² with its tree-house dwellers, mud slingers, and blockading pensioners. It has provided timber to build some of the most gorgeous cabins and buildings on the ZAD, as well as firewood for the cold winter days. It has been the source of highly heated debates about the ethics of human intervention in “nature” and the stage for theatrical candle-lit meanders by night. Left officially “unmanaged” for years in anticipation of being eradicated to make way for the airport, it is today the subject of an arm-wrestle with authorities, adamant that they should regain full power over it. No agreement has been reached with the National Office for Forests, whose agents are the only ones authorized to extract

e-flux journal #124 — february 2022 [Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan](#)
Flourishing



The construction of a lighthouse at the ZAD, Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France, 2017. Built by farmers, boat builders, artists, and activists, the lighthouse is on the same site where the French government wanted to put a control tower for a new airport. Photo: Jay Jordan.

wood in publicly owned forests. Walking in the footsteps of the commoners who came before us, whose survival was criminalized as “poaching” by those who wanted to force them off this land, we are about to do what we do best: disobey.

“If you fell this chestnut tree, it will give more light to that young oak tree there, which is what you are aiming for. But you are going to have to be precise in your cut so as not to damage this other one on the way down.” We spend more time with our necks crooked, staring at the canopy and discussing with our friends-turned-trainers how to go about cutting which tree than with our chainsaws in action. Our focus is put on taking care of the forest ecosystem, “not as in protecting something fragile” (although it might be), Carmine reminded us at the start of the day, “but in the sense of acknowledging mutual needs.” The aim is finding the right balance between our needs for timber and firewood *and* those of the forest, so that it can continue to flourish. Obviously, what constitutes this equilibrium is the topic of numerous passionate discussions among the members of the collective dedicated to taking care of the ZAD’s woodlands and hedges, Abrakadabois – a playful portmanteau pun on “abracadabra,” the magic formula, and the French word for wood, “*bois*.”

The first felling of trees for timber in 2014 gave rise to serious ethical conflicts as some inhabitants of the ZAD were adamant that the forest should be “respected” and therefore kept untouched. But for many involved in what would become Abrakadabois, this view of a nature so pure it should remain unstained by human intervention, separated and museumified, is only the flip side of the modern coin that sees it solely as a resource to exploit. Idolization and exploitation are rooted in the same notion of a neat, deep separation between humans and their “environment.” But “we” are in and with and of “nature.” Our greatest challenge is to learn to collaborate and participate with the living, rather than dominate it.

To move beyond these divisive conflicts, the group has committed to develop a shared vision and increased sensitivity through skill-sharing, collective learning and a common appreciation of the forest. Since 2016, it has brought together passionate amateurs, an ex-forestry engineer, a gaggle of tree surgeons, and lumberjacks, and has been organizing reading groups to share knowledge and questions about plant biology, the latest research about mycorrhizal symbiosis and the communication between trees, as well as anthropological texts on interspecies

collaborations developed by hunter-gatherer civilizations around the world. These conversations nourish the elaboration of a common (albeit manifold) perspective. This is enhanced by regular walks taken together to learn not only to recognize trees and identify possible diseases or specific behaviors, but also to analyze the impact that a previous cut has had on the growth and development of its neighboring trees, how it affects the lives of insects, the paths of mammals, etc. This same group determines each year which trees will be cut. Through attention and observation, we thus learn the web of interdependencies that is life, and progressively sharpen our ways of seeing.

I grab my chainsaw and get ready to fell my first tree. The deep thud of a tree being cut and hitting the ground nearby stops me in my tracks. It resonates in my chest. The unmistakable sound is at once heartbreaking and thrilling. My guide, Tim, gives me the last safety advice, reminds me to cut carefully but steadily. I am at once terrified and excited; although he is hardly a foot away from me and ready to modify the chainsaw’s direction if I go wrong, I feel under the weight of a responsibility and apprehension. Not only do I hold a lethal machine with which I could easily chop one of my limbs off, but I am also about to take down a living being older than me that is home to a multitude of other beings ... *and* the tree has to fall accurately, in order to protect its leafy neighbors, and not hurt any human in the process. The process of felling is meticulous; slowly adjusting the cut, observing the results, and adjusting again. It takes what seems an eternity and then the crown of the magnificent Douglas fir starts its descent, slow at first until it builds up speed and hits the ground. That crackle of breaking branches, that thud. I am elated, shaken, awed ... When I share my emotions with the group during the evening meal, even the most experienced lumberjacks talk about the strange mix of excitement, sorrow, and respect that they still feel with every tree they take down.

This profound sensitivity to our role in the forest makes this way of logging fundamentally different to what industrial standards impose. “A forest like this one is not interesting to the industry” explains Michel, who worked as a forest engineer before deserting seven years ago to live on the ZAD. “It is too small, the trees grow too close together because they were left ‘unmanaged’ for years. If they had it their way and took back this forest’s management, the most probable option for them would be a clear cut.” Clear-cutting has become increasingly common and violent: nowadays trees are not just cut down – stumps are dug out and the slash

03/06

e-flux journal #124 — february 2022 Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan
Flourishing

(debris) is taken away to turn into the supposedly “ecological” heating source of biomass, even though leaving it in place would protect the soil and the aquifer and aid in restoration. Then a monoculture forest is planted: rows of fast-growing trees on an impoverished soil needing fertilizers (copper, phosphorous) that end up in drinking water!

Synergies and Regards

Against this extractivist logic, Abrakadabois has been learning from and networking with folk throughout France also researching, practicing, and defending a silviculture that does justice to the inherent dynamics of the forest. As philosopher Baptiste Morizot describes, by taking the point of view of the forest, their practices are “full of regards for it.”³ This soft silviculture aims to work *with* the forest rather than against it, caring for its limits and ecosystems, extracting wood while preserving, even restoring, the soil and the tree health, and respecting the microhabitats with a careful holistic approach that recognizes we are not in the forest, we are part of it and it is part of us. It is all about progressively forging an “alliance of needs” between humans and more-than-humans, made possible by the diversity of approaches and ways of seeing: naturalists and lumberjacks, amateur tree lovers and professional foresters, sawyers and inhabitants. As philosophers Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot describe, “This ... changes the experience of the forest: by allowing everyone to go beyond one’s own identity, it multiplies the beings and relations to take into account.”⁴

Such an approach implies the careful observation of moon cycles and only felling trees during the descending moon when the sap is at its lowest. It includes observing traces of boars who like to rub on trunks and adapting the felling accordingly. It means experimenting with anaesthetizing trees using a string tied around the trunk and snapping it (like one would a banjo) before cutting. It means working toward plant and animal diversity on a plot with introduced ill-adapted Sitka spruce species that has acidified the soil and turned a corner of the forest into a dark island of monoculture. Away from the industrial obsession with straight and rapid growth for profitable harvest, regards for the forest mean making space for “nonrational” selection criteria. Aesthetics or collective history become as valid stewardship guidelines as biodiversity or wood production. For instance, particularly alluring or bizarre trees are being preserved for the love of observing them develop, and a part of the forest where intense fighting

took place in 2012 has been turned into a protected “sanctuary.”

It also entails using draught horses instead of tractors to haul logs. “It is not a nostalgic or backward move,” explains Steph, one of the handlers of the four huge workhorses that her collective has brought from the South of France to help out. She gives crisp, cryptic directions for her four-legged assistant to drag the tree we have just felled and pruned all the way to the forest edge where it will be sawn in a few months’ time, their actions a synergistic duet. “Horse skidding” is often more efficient than tractors. She adds, “It avoids soil compaction and also allows for keeping trees nearer each other than in industrial plantations that are designed for machines to get through. Besides it is so much nicer to be with than super noisy and smelly engines!”

The “adjusted regards”⁵ for the forest is not just about an exalted love of trees. It represents a holistic understanding of the ecosystem. For this regard to be coherent and genuinely “adjusted,” it must expand beyond care for the forest itself and take into account what comes next. This approach has been coined “from the seed to the beam”: applying the same attention every step of the way. This outlook privileges ultra-local uses of the wood from the forest, as well as an effort to adapt one’s practices to what is there. ZAD carpenters and architects have been learning to build and design on the basis of what the forest offers. Instead of using industrially standardized joists and planks, which mean lower quality wood and massive waste, the craft of using naturally shaped wood has returned, notably in the long-term work finishing the magnificent Barn of the Future that now holds a sawmill and a range of carpentry machines that shape the floorboards, joists, window frames, doors, and furniture of future constructions. This shared vision is precisely what industry has destroyed through fragmentation: those who identify the trees to be felled are not those who will fell them who are not those who will saw them who are not those who will utilize them as firewood or lumber ... This compartmentalization and separation degrade ecosystems and relations.

The forest is too small to provide timber and firewood for all 170 ZAD inhabitants. Choices are made through a customary yearly process that is a cornerstone of commoning. An estimation of the quantity of wood available is calculated, and people and collectives attend a series of assemblies to discuss wants and needs and determine priorities. Each construction project is

04/06

e-flux journal #124 — february 2022 Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan
Flourishing

carefully examined, and a carpenter helps to calculate the precise wood requirements. Collective projects that serve the whole community are prioritized. Some of the wood is systematically dedicated to support other struggles: bunk beds for a migrant squat in Nantes, a “combat” wooden structure in support of an anti-gentrification campaign in Marseilles. Sustaining material links of solidarity with other struggles far and wide has always been part of the heartbeat of the rebel bocage.

As we are writing these words, the battle with the authorities continues. Abrakadabois seeks to be able to look after the forest as an ally, rather than as a resource. Negotiations are ongoing to pursue our lives in ways that are congruent with what we have defended. Specific long-term leases, securing about eight hundred acres of farmland, have been signed by those initially referred to as “illegal occupants,” but this only concerns the land; housing remains unresolved. In effect, we are all still squatters. Our aim is to sign leases that acknowledge the territory as a commons. Crop rotation is organized communally and the Users’ Assembly sits every month in order to make the decisions affecting the movement and the territory. National campaigns of action against toxic infrastructure are launched from the zone. A specially designed mobile street apparatus enables meals to be served at protests. A regional network of farmers has been set up to provide food for striking workers. And on the zone, illegal buildings continue to rise when necessary. Even though the airport struggle is over, we continue to try and keep the “yes” and the “no” twisted together.

×

Excerpted from Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are “Nature” Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* (Pluto Press/Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2021).

Isabelle Fremeaux is an educator and action researcher. She was formerly Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck College London. **Jay Jordan** is an art activist and author, cofounder of Reclaim the Streets and the Clandestine Insurgent Clown Army. Together they co-facilitate the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination.

05/06

e-flux journal #124 — february 2022 [Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan](#)
Flourishing

1
ZAD is a French neologism meaning *zone à défendre* (zone to defend) and refers to a militant occupation intended to block development. The example discussed here is the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes which successfully stopped the construction of an airport when local farmers and people from all over the country took control of the land and built farms, screen printing and textile workshops, a dairy and tannery, a blacksmith's forge, and much more. – Ed.

2
Operation Caesar was a 2012 attack on the ZAD by the French government when thousands of riot police came to evict the commoners and farmers. Something like forty thousand people from all over France showed up to successfully help defend the ZAD from eviction. – Ed.

3
Baptiste Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant* (Actes Sud, 2020), 267. Authors' translation.

4
Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot, "Suivre la forêt: Une entente terrestre de l'action politique," *Terrestres*, November 15, 2018
<https://www.terrestres.org/2018/11/15/suivre-la-foret-un-e-entente-terrestre-de-laction-politique/>. Authors' translation.

5
Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant*.

06/06

e-flux journal #124 — february 2022 Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan
Flourishing