

Postscript 75
Arboreal Allies

CAITLIN MAIN

**on “Maple Tree Spiral:
the pedagogy of a tree in the city”**
LAIWAN

I was taught to move quickly, without hesitation or heft, from A to B. To cut decisively; to optimize. To remember myself, to center myself, and to dissolve others. I was told that B knew the truth. That A was naive, an infant of the world. Only enlightenment begets wholeness as that is the pursuit of the individual. I must seek it out. And so, I go on.

The gallery space, or simply any space associated with the arts, elicits an array of cultural and social pre-conditions that shape human behaviour. The body recalibrates to fit a space marked by histories of elitism and cultural currency as well as rebellion and innovation — although neither quality diametrically opposed to the other. Often, we find ourselves in a beholden state. The senses sharpen, attuning themselves to slight details. Attention undivided. We notice the way an image flickers across a screen, or how easily a word may be re-signified by its surroundings. The body's movements become a dance, a negotiation between subjectivity, access, and value. The works consume us and we consume them. Enacting upon the other, a shared knowledge emerges between the work and its spectator. It remains with us, in our bodies, as we exit the space and into the everyday. In the gallery, hyperawareness of spatial dynamics is preeminent. But how does this knowledge translate beyond the walls of the gallery? What happens when we shift our attention further afield?

Over the course of Laiwan's studio residency and research project, *Maple Tree Spiral: the pedagogy of a tree in the city*, I found myself returning to these questions of space, subjectivity, and knowledge. Plethoric in nature, *Maple Tree Spiral* exists as an on-going installation, and a series of events, from tree walks to workshops, hosted by Laiwan and her collaborators: Egan Davis, Anne Riley, T'uy't'tanat Ceass Wyss, Melissa West Morrison of the Environmental Youth Alliance, Sepideh Saaï, and Daniel Negatu. Each event created an opening, a point of entry to *Maple Tree Spiral*. No single point served as the philosophical center, but rather enacted upon an ever-shifting web of ideation and contemplation.

Aptly subtitled "*pedagogy of a tree in the city*", Laiwan uses the maple tree, marked by its site-specific growth and history, to facilitate (re)imaginings of the relationship between humans and botanical species. In doing so, the existence of the maple tree, as a thematic thread and physical presence, disrupts neo-liberal values of anthropocentrism and dominance over nature. The spectator's "I" becomes decentered. *Maple Tree Spiral* is not an encounter with the self, but rather a stepping aside and looking towards our arboreal allies. It is a radical act of decentering, embracing the rhizomatic, the communal, and the non-human. Ultimately, *Maple Tree Spiral* attunes its participants to concealed, unspoken, and inarticulable narratives that defy linear logic — a touchstone of our modern society. In particular, *Maple Tree Spiral* asks us to shift

our attention to the maple tree that once grew at the intersections of Carrall, Water, Alexander, and Powell Streets, having also been known as, Maple Tree Square.

Maple Tree Spiral begins in the streets of Gastown. There, the architecture of tourism and capitalism obscures the laborious life of a city tree. Amidst the buzz of patio restaurants and gastronomic pubs, the city tree stands solitary. Almost unnoticeable, unremarkable to passersby. Its roots, encased by the cobblestone surface above, extend outwards in search of other non-human species. Yet, its energetic hum cannot be dampened. Filtering pollutants, reducing carbon emissions, and enhancing well-being — the city tree works tirelessly within an ever-shifting network of nourishment. I do not, however, notice any of these trees on my first walk to Artspeak gallery, the gathering point for *Maple Tree Spiral*.

Soon enough I grew wary of the path to B. Elusive by nature, a shape-shifter of sorts. Time and time again, I arrived at B, held her in my hands, and felt her comfort. To squeeze her tightly, only to be pricked by her newly-grown spikes. And to find myself recoiling again. Flushed with disappointment, I faded into feeling.

Upon passing through Artspeak's barred doors, I find myself disorientated, confronted by negation. The absence of didactics serves as a subtle reminder of my place within what I will come to recognize as a multi-vocal space. On my right, there is a wall littered with

superimposed haikus onto ashen-blobs. Words like 'monocotyledonous' and 'fusiform' stand out although their meanings are unfamiliar to me. I follow the spiral shape of the haiku, shifting my head with its curvature. Knees bent, neck craned. Dizziness washes over me as I embody the haiku. Finding my balance again, I turn my attention to the more stable objects in the room, a row of silver maple stumps¹. It is as if each stump had been systematically plotted into the ground like headstones. Paradoxically, indicators of negation; reminders of what once lived. I feel a tinge in my gut. Shook by my own morbidity, I try to contrive other meanings, but come up blank.

Behind me, a pastel drawing stretches itself to the edges of the wall. It is a map marked not by its human-centered utility, but rather the living histories concealed by the map-makers themselves. The predictable grid of city streets is left unrecorded, leaving the viewer to reconcile with the vast emptiness of our urban environment. Indicators of green space, bodies of water, and maple tree spirals, however, trace the radical existence of nature amidst urbanity. Negation becomes presence. My mind returns to the tree-lined streets of Gastown; I smile as if noticing their presence for the first time.

Over the course of Laiwan's residency, shared stories — such as the story of a young Indigenous girl's marriage to, and subsequent escape from the infamous Gassy Jack as well as the true story of the Great Fire shared by T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss — reconfigure

the map. These narratives are unfamiliar to me as a settler on this land. Speciesism, the othering of the ‘non-human’, is wrapped up in the same nature/society dualism that perpetuated and continues to create patterns of violence and discrimination in the form of settler colonialism. A web forms on the map, linking seemingly disparate events.

Narratives, however, are not the only elements re-shaping the linearity of the map. Chalk-drawn spirals trouble the grid-system’s orthogonal geometry. Constantly in motion, the spiral moves away from and towards itself, never settling on a direct route outward. Only once confronted directly with the spiral do I realize its significance. The philosophy of spiral unity is central to *Maple Tree Spiral*. Laiwan addresses the limitations of the individual by asking her viewers to look outwards in order to find and make meaning. This means looking outside the works, looking away to the city street trees, botanical glossaries, and the histories concealed by settler colonialism and neoliberalism. Spiral unity demands constant recalibration and re-contextualization. Giving into the unknown, the uncertain, and the unheard.

Amidst the overflow, I waited. Immobile. I watched the contours of B disappear in the distance. And for the first time, I found stillness and silence.

Laiwan’s tactic of diverting attention in a spiral pattern echoes visual culture theorist, Irit Rogoff’s notion

of ‘looking away’. That is, ‘looking away’ offers an alternative participation in culture wherein spectators resist the singularity of a work and the demands for all-consuming attention and thereby, rework cultural capital, didactic ideologies, and “auratic value” from the inside out (133). Instead of putting the onus on the spectator, Laiwan embeds ‘looking away’ into the works themselves. One must look to the trees outside to reckon with their traces in *Maple Tree Spiral*. In this sense, Laiwan models a space of possibility where ‘looking away’ is not only accepted but embedded into the rhizome itself, a response to the decentered and multi-vocal space Rogoff longs for.

Laiwan’s spiral unity, however, does not end with the closing of *Maple Tree Spiral: pedagogy of a tree in the city*. By nature, the spiral continues – it is infinite, moving outwards and around itself, growing larger, and encompassing all beings. In a workshop with the Environmental Youth Alliance, Laiwan spoke with a group young artists and activists about the transformative possibilities of artistic practice. We sat together in the Cottonwood Community Gardens facing an old-brick wall which would soon become something else, a mural created by the EYA members. We shared our histories, we shared our futurities. Amidst our anxieties, shards of optimism emerged. Laiwan captured these shards and pieced them together. Speaking about art and activism, Laiwan spoke to the importance of raising consciousness. For instance, the gardens, in which we gathered, were

transformed from a neglected dump site to a place of growth and resilience by community activists. Over the years, the gardens have grown to reflect the influence of the diverse Asian and Indigenous communities in the DTES through the creation of gardens with specific cultural and medicinal significance. By engaging place with an ethics of care and community rather than destruction and ownership, we can begin the work of raising consciousness. To do so, our attunement to the world must move beyond ourselves and extend to other beings, creating a heightened collectivity. Outwards movement doesn't mean the abandonment of our start. Instead, raising consciousness evokes the spiral motion, simultaneously wrapping around itself and expanding its circles. With this thought, Laiwan added another spiral to the map.

Becoming must exist in relation to other becomings. The center is never alone; it exists within a web of infinite others. Each already interlinked although invisible to the human eye. Feeling its connectivity, I danced in circles around myself and others, and relaxed into this forgotten pattern.

Note

1 The maple tree stumps are from a tree that lived at 164 Water St, around the corner from Artspeak. The tree was removed from this location, as its growth trajectory had started to obstruct neighbouring power lines. When the Harbour Centre (555 W Hastings Street) was built in 1977, this tree started to grow at a 45-degree angle in an attempt to access sunlight. This new growth angle gradually disrupted its desired vertical growth to align with the linearity of street, and was subsequently deemed hazardous, and removed by the City of Vancouver's arborist department. With the help of the City's arborists we managed to obtain a portion of the trunk. Upon completion of Laiwan's residency, the stumps were donated to ʘx"q"eləwən ct Carving Centre at the Britannia Centre.

Works Cited

Rogoff, Irit. "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture." *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, edited by Gavin Butt, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

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