

ENGAGEMENT – Skulpture

Skulpture is a facet of my project that emerged so gradually and improvisationally from the practice that, by the time I even started to think of it as “art”, a great deal of the work was already well developed. Each of this sculpture’s primary components were woven out of ongoing narratives in my forest encounters at the time. Its form evolved out of what was found rather than what was sought, and through a reciprocal relationship with its details.

Creative practitioners struggle not only against trained-in habits, but with the self-limiting nature of creative development itself. What begins from inspiration may soon find itself imprisoned in plans or trapped by its own execution. Anne Bogart writes of the violence of choice, how each decision shuts down possibility and funnels the artist quickly away from freedom and openness, risking a more mechanistic relationship with the work. In striving, one eventually encounters the inevitable adversary of expected outcomes, where the image of one’s goal obliterates opportunity.

But in the forest I have encountered far fewer risks of getting locked into routine movements or trapped inside a preconceived notion—or more and more freely presented opportunities for overcoming this danger. Nearly all of the outputs resulting from my grief-inspired forest-based practice emerged not as fulfilments of pre-conceived planning and intentions, but improvisationally and surprisingly.

Having played the meticulous architect for years, I found liberation in letting go and following the process. This does not mean eschewing detail; instead, the work becomes fractaline and recursive, wherein detail responds to form and form reshapes itself through emerging details. Results may vary, but no more so than in top-down projects. In fact, I’ve found myself far more surprised and satisfied by results and outputs—by certain elements and flavours that seem to have come not from me but from the forest itself, which enhances the sense of collaboration. The forest certainly contributes, with or without intention, and always (at the very least) by creating conditions from which one cannot afford to sidestep improvisation.

On 15/01/2023, I wrote:

“Young buck skeleton fallen off branch and hangs down now, upheld by the sides of the skull, similar to [how we found] his predecessor. I moved some items but left most as-is. Less certain of the value of my own contribution to the arrangement, and/or taking more interest in what the storms decide to do.”

The work I call “Skulpture” is a salient example of an ongoing, relational collaboration with forest processes. It still hangs on the branch of a willow Goblinwoode, and each day’s weather contributes to slowly emerging iterations of construction and entropy. I checked in there less and less, and I often wonder how much it has changed now. Has it been entangled by vines? Have insects made new homes of the brain cavity? Have birds removed pieces of moss for their nests? Or maybe the tree branch snapped and the whole thing has fallen to the forest floor and cracked open, fallen apart, its components threaded through with colonies of mycelia. Taking a process-oriented approach to creative practice does not diminish its products, but imbues them with a new kind of life and an ongoingness difficult to articulate in our highly categorical language. Timescales vary in the forest, and certain projects still feel like saplings after two or three years. There is little sense of beginnings or middles, and certainly no end—as in forests, where trees never quite die but transform into new sources of energy for others of its kind and scavengers alike, splintering into new habitats for myriad living creatures. Here, even the ossified renderings of product-centric work inevitably yield new opportunities for improvisation, as so-called “artefacts” invariably succumb to the flows of forest dynamics. Here, in the tenderness of uncertainty or the intense fractures of grief, one becomes easily infected by a youthful vibrance embedded in decay, where life and death both follow and precede one another, enmeshing affects of heartache and creative play.