

Pia Rönicke
Drifting Woods

We prefer to think of the forest as deeply and stably rooted. It has, however, never really been still. The forest has its own movements and the ability to follow the landscape's varied topography as it navigates in search of specific conditions for light and nutrients.

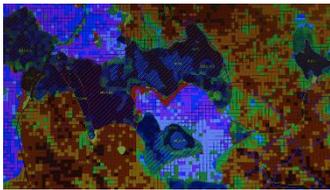
“It sleeps on genetic possibilities, not yet realised, although it has been many thousands of years since our country's rocky foundation melted forth from the ice and the first sprouts of pine, birch, and aspen *wandered* in and took root amongst the lichens and mosses.”¹

The forest's migration process, how different species have been able to find their way to the areas of which, today, are considered Sweden's woodland, has been long uninterrupted and is dizzying in its scope. Over thousands of years, without recognising geopolitical boundaries, but with a consistent sensitivity to shifts in climate and living conditions, the forest has been able to breed itself, spread out, and branch out across continents in order to form its own territories.

But the forest also contains the movements of others. All of the species which have, at some point, lived in it and all of the species which still live in what remains of the forest. The movements do not necessarily slow down because the forest is ravaged by fires or sees its trees buckle in storms. Often, it is quite

1
Kerstin Ekman,
Herrarna i skogen,
Värnamo 2007.
Italics mine.

the opposite because the forest's blaze of felled trees creates new possibilities as long as the debris is not cleared away. Even as dead wood, the forest can be a space for a throng of life; a throng which often consists of a close and symbiotic relationship of biological interaction. But not always. Sometimes the movements in the forest run the risk of being devastating in their self-absorption.



The exhibition, *Drifting Woods*, brings together a diverse collection of materials, references, and contradictory experiences from Gävleborg, which is one of Scandinavia's most densely forested counties. Through recurring field studies, wandering observations, and time-based notes in the form of both moving images and sound, the Danish artist, Pia Rönicke has moved in the forest and meticulously mapped different

signs of the changing forest landscape around Ockelbo and how it is spreading out over the municipality's boundaries.

Through Rönicke's artistic investigation, the forest emerges, and is regarded as both space and concept, in its fluid state. The forest is indeterminate: at times, so unilaterally ensnared and sadly fragmented; at times, so congruous and inscrutable that it is easy to get lost, that we mistake a collection of trees to be a forest or that the forest, with all its capacity, is something that we can assuredly comprehend the extent of.

Pia Rönicke
Drifting Woods,
Deserted Forest,
2021 (stills)

The forest drifts, but how, in which patterns and with what diversity of species it can move itself is far from given. The forest is, rather, something that we, humans and other species, create together; a vital negotiation, caught up between different needs, interests, and different interpretations. So, what do we make of the forest? With which voices can we talk about, from, and with the forest in a reliable way? Which perspectives and positions are represented in our languages and which voices are simultaneously hushed, which remain unheard or get lost in our ways of understanding and relating to our surroundings?

A methodically tentative eye has often guided Pia Rönicke's artistic practice. From this perspective – in relation to the forest's migration history, biological movement patterns, and various disturbances in the forest's scope of action – there is a way to unlearn specific assumptions in order to, instead, make oneself amenable to the unseen in otherwise neglected or systematically distorted narratives. By feeling her way forward through association and by walking several turns around the motif, Rönicke has collected and immersed herself in stories and events which are, in different ways, linked to the local conditions of the forest.



These stories, and how they manifest themselves in the exhibition's video work and installations at Wj Valsverk (an old and restored rolling mill, which was once a part of the iron works) in Ockelbo, weave in and out of the forest. The stories tell us about fossil remains and forests of the

past, which bide their time at the bottom of lakes, or about the forest that smoothly adapts to the displacement of entire ecosystems due to climate change. The stories invite us into historical border forests, naturally dense and mythologically impenetrable. They remember how this wilderness (uncultivated) has been colonised and utilised throughout different eras; as fuel in the iron ore industry, as timber or converted into pulp. Through Rönicke's work, we are able to follow guardians of flora and record keepers of key biotopes as they carefully read the forest through the smallest trace, but we can also feel their despair in front of the remains of a protection-worthy forest after insidious thinning. Here we can turn to a presence in the forest that has carried a particular species knowledge and local knowledge through their lives. It is a presence which has aged and is at risk of being lost for, now, the forest landscapes are almost deserted again.

"Out in the margins, where local scars cover up for global perpetrators, we live in a distorted mirror of the centre, which primarily perceives our 'nature' as a resource. [...] The gravel pits [... or the deforested rejuvenation areas of the forest] are the inverse picture of the urban landscapes which they contribute to."²

2
Lucy Lippard,
*Undermining: A
Wild Ride Through
Lands Use, Politics,
and Art in the
Changing West*,
New York 2014

In a layer of the exhibition's montage of voices, we meet the forest as a load-bearing factor in the establishment and development of the Swedish welfare state. We are led into a logger village, that was designed and planned as part of the modernist project and which carried the hope of creating a stronger

standard of living for workers in the forest industry.³

We can see how the work in the forest has been linked



to previous social rights movements, helped drive social reforms, forced improved working conditions, and contributed to a certain redistribution of capital. We have much to thank the forest for. Now, however, logger villages are almost ghost towns because the working

bodies in the forest have become fewer. They rarely still live here, in Sweden's depopulated rural areas. Much of the manual work still carried out in the forest is instead done by a migrant workforce who never get the chance to get to know the local forest conditions in any wider sense. It is a temporary and changing movement over the grounds, which first and foremost is refuge from social injustices and how these strike against other parts of the world.

Otherwise, the work in and the systematic use of the forest, which today comprises more than 90 percent of all so-called forests in Sweden, has fundamentally changed and become more independent of our physical presence, perception, and judgment. More and more often, the image of the forest is drawn from a calculating distance, through satellite monitoring and remote analyses that may or may not have the ability to perceive the presence of other species amongst all of the cultivated pine and fir. We are not there anymore, in what was once an expansive forest of biodiversity. Furthermore, today's refined machines can, soon enough alone, chop down and process more than 100 trees per hour. Clear-cut

³
The logger village in Jädraås was designed in 1952 by architect Ralph Erskine.

forest after clear-cut forest. Large portions of forest transported away.

But what will remain if the perspective on the forest is mostly limited to dealing with property and yield? Through the exhibition we can see a forest landscape that is transforming at a furious pace, which is on its way to being lost completely in measurable numbers and in long rows of one-dimensional growth resources. The economic benefits often follow in our centralization around different cities and are traded in a global market that does not seem to care much about the open wounds – ecological and social – that it leaves behind; for they cannot be seen so clearly at a distance. At this point, we are faced with a critical reduction of species due to lost habitats and changing climates; a mass-industrialised forest and expansive urban spaces which create a barrier against the free flow of wildlife and vegetation, against the migratory trees that would otherwise drift through more sustainable ecosystems and thus, manifest their particular dynamics and richness of species.

Often, the forest, appears to be severely exploited and fatally diminished; in urgent need of another kind of care. Yet the unilateral, simplified perspective of the forest, regardless of our intentions, can easily become skewed. So instead of sticking to a particular way of looking at and moving in our forest landscape, a presumably idealistic story that represents everything the forest could be, Pia Rönicke, in the exhibition, *Drifting Woods*, wants to open up for and invite a more nuanced perspective; a responsive and drifting

perspective of the forest that also recognises species other than human beings as subjects in the struggle for survival. This is what Rönicke sought when she



followed botanists, local historians, mushroom pickers, forest researchers, biologists, activists, artists, forest owners, and representatives of the industry, who, in various ways are connected to pine and fir, mosses and fungi; informants, who all in their own way are familiar with the

forest's local conditions and who have generously shared their experiences. Through this web of voices and the way in which they associate with one another and merge together in Rönicke's spatial installation, the exhibition never speaks from any particular



position. The exhibition gives us many different aspects of the forest and what is hidden beyond our own ideas about the forest. If we take our time, we may be able to see others aside from ourselves.

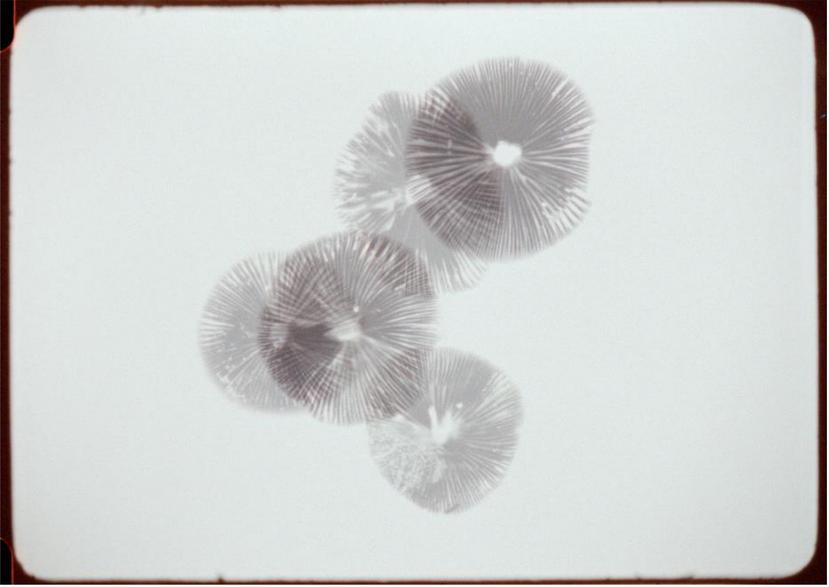


Perhaps we can see other species and all the complex relationships that are connected to the forest, without which we would not exist at all. Perhaps we can renegotiate the terms of our co-existence, find ways to safeguard a more circular

movement in the forest and reach a point where we can live more symbiotically?

Erik Anderman

*Regional Art Coordinator, Kultur Gäneborg
and the exhibition's curator*



Short Biography

Pia Rönicke (b. 1974 in Roskilde, Denmark) lives and works as an artist in Copenhagen. Her works have been exhibited at Overgaarden and Den Frie in Denmark as well as internationally at Heine Onstad Kunstcenter in Oslo, Apexart in New York, Tate Modern in London, and GIBCA in Gothenburg. Rönicke was educated at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen as well as at the California Institute of the Arts. Since 2019, she has been conducting research at the Malmö Art Academy (PhD).

Due to her artistic investigations of the state of nature and humanity's relationship to the environment, she often returns to the herbarium and the political significance that rests on this collection of flora. In her work, Rönicke invites re-interpretations of the pressed plants and shows how they can say something more about past assumptions in the sciences, about the definitions and conceptions of the system, about language and colonial conditions, but also about the ecological and social problems with which we live and are forced to flee from in contemporary times.

In connection with her participation in the exhibition, *Lilla domedagsvalvet* ("The Little Doomsday Vault", 2018) and the regional art project, *Orosmoln av obeskrivlig kraft* ("Storm Clouds of Unspeakable Power"), Rönicke began her artistic investigation of the forests around

Ockelbo. Pia Rönicke's recurring and weekly stays in the county were made possible through a close collaboration between Kultur Gävleborg and Wij Gardens, with support from the Swedish National Arts Council and the Danish Arts Foundation. The exhibition *Drifting Woods* is part of Rönicke's artistic research.

Thank you

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